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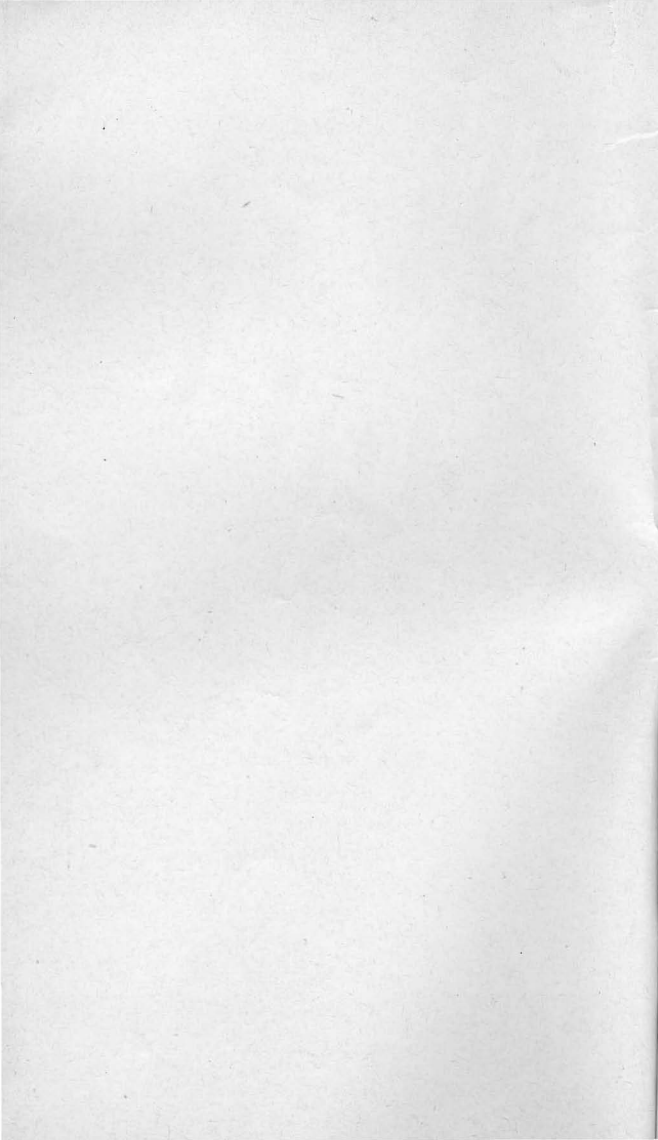
SHE was a HEROINE

by
Daniel A. Lord, S. J.



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She Was a Heroine

By Daniel A. Lord, S. J.

PERHAPS this is an era when heroism seems to be the common American characteristic.

Just now another booklet about a hero or a heroine may look almost like a waste of wood pulp and printers' man power. The war, as I write, is making heroes so fast that we have lost count of them. The women left at home are proving themselves possessed of the stuff of heroines, doing wonderful jobs licking loneliness and boredom and our munitions problem and rationing and our assembly lines of bombers.

Why then another book about a heroine?

Well truth to tell, this heroine died before there was any real threat of World War II. She never was awarded a medal for herself or a posthumous medal for some hero who belonged to her. When she died, she rated no feature story or headlines even in the second section of the metropolitan papers. Yet she is one of my favorite heroines. And even if no one ever reads about her, I find I want to write about her.

Herself

She was beautiful and brave. She could easily have been—under slightly different circumstances—a glamour girl; instead she became an unknown heroine. She might have crashed Hollywood or scintillated on Broadway; instead she did an unrecognized job in a small town, where perhaps two dozen people noticed her and a scant dozen applauded.

She is my kind of heroine, and I think she is your kind too. Certainly she is God's kind.

So I should like to tell you her simple story, if you happen to be feeling in a leisurely mood. Sometimes we feel more sympathetic toward and have a fellow feeling for courage without dash and brave deeds without glamour. Here is a heroine in a bungalow apron, afflicted with a consumptive cough that will not even slightly suggest the notorious Lady of the Camelias.

Dramatic Club

The story goes back to the close of the first decade of the century, which was not quite the gay nineties and yet no more the twenties or the thirties than the one-cylinder Cadillacs of those days were the smooth motorcars of a quarter of a century later.

I was at the start of this true story a college kid with a conflict in his soul. Broadway was fighting with the "streets of heaven." I was not as yet sure whether Saint Ignatius or young George M. Cohan was the most attractive man. I was Catholic enough in my breeding to think a priest a pretty wonderful person; but I wasn't sure that a theatrical producer might not be distinctly more fascinating.

So as the mild battle raged, I swung in my allegiance during that junior year of college from one side to the other. I applied myself fairly well in my classes, and I gave a devoted attention to our parish dramatic club. Of the two, undoubtedly the dramatic club was hot favorite.

You see, I was still young enough to believe that there was place for truth in the theater and that one might thread his way through backstage scenery at a musical show and not lose God someplace along the twisting path.

We used to rehearse down under our little frame church in the sparsely settled sector of west Chicago.

Leading Lady

I remember when she appeared for the first rehearsal of our parish musical show, and in five-minutes time she proved that she had everything that an amateur director could desire.

She was pretty, in that fresh, pink-and-peach, contrasting black-and-white beauty that is the heritage of a long line of Irish colleens. She had the kind of voice that needed no microphone, even had there been such distortions in that day. Her voice was rich in feeling that went down to the depths of a womanly heart and came out through lips shaped for laughter. She had feet that could not help dancing, that tapped when she sang, and that followed the playing of her second chorus with the instinctive grace of dance that never could have been called a "routine." No ballet dancing could ever have forced her into stereotyped lines.

Rose, she was called; and a rose she was in fact as well as name.

Our Community

I think the most characteristic thing about her was the fact that every girl in our compact suburban community promptly loved her. Every young man asked to take her out, not once, but as often as she would go; and he always brought her home without even attempting to hold her hand. The girls knew she was lovely to look at, and they didn't resent it. The boys knew she was lovely to look at, and they didn't presume upon it.

The combination of her qualities meant that in no time at all even in our community, which was surprisingly rich in talent, she was graduated from a short novitiate in our chorus to the lead in our musical show. That wasn't a far step, I grant, in our pretty simple little theater; but it was a step that she made gracefully

—and no jealousies left behind. The girls admitted she rated the lead. The boys were pleased to be in a show that centered around her.

In that closely intertwined town of ours we knew pretty much everything about everyone. Sometimes that wasn't too satisfactory for the people involved. Sometimes we wished that the neighbors didn't know quite so much about us. But all that we found out about Rose was to the good.

She had gone, we learned, to a west-side parochial school but had not progressed much beyond the eighth grade. One never would have guessed that. Her speech was pure and flawless; her tastes were natural and right.

Somewhere in her teens she had picked up enough bookkeeping to go from job to job in steady rise. It is my bet that one of the few sins about which she was asked at God's judgment seat was the white lie about her age when she applied for her first job. She must have been an infant. But she had a mother to support, and I imagine that the recording angel turned away when she added a few years to her age. Or—as someone has imagined in another context—he blotted out the record with a tear of regret that she had to earn her way so young. Maybe in those pre-social-legislation days the law was not too worried about the ages of youngsters who came looking for jobs.

The Young Men Appraise

By the time we came to know her, she had a splendid position with one of the city's important banks. Her mother was living in comfort, adoring the devoted daughter and keeping house for her in the delightful apartment that that daughter provided. We of the younger crowd soon came to know that apartment as one of our

parish "hangouts" (I use the word in only its pleasantest connotations). We soon had savored the mother's cooking and had listened to the daughter's singing—the perfect combination of dining and entertainment without cover charge.

Many of the young men cocked their hats at rakish angles and totaled up their savings accounts speculatively. For here was a girl of whom their mothers would approve and yet a girl whom they found delightful and desirable. They gallantly offered to take her home from rehearsals, and she accepted. They took her to the theater to see her lose herself completely in the world of makebelieve that was part of her deepest enthusiasm. They danced with her whenever they could find a vacant space on her crowded program. And they silently agreed that the fellow who would get her for forever and a day would be one of fortune's favorites.

The One Young Man

But it so happened that there was a young man who already had the inside track. Fortunately for him we all liked him.

Bill was one of the realest wits I have ever known. He had that low, soft, almost diffident but ingratiating voice that so often goes with subtle humor. It was the kind of voice that makes a joke seem irresistible, that utters the perfect comment in a blend of apology and perfect timing that calls forth the roar of laughter.

He was a cashier in the bank where she worked. He was spruce, dapper, well-groomed. He had a hand that went instinctively into his pocket. His gestures of generous friendliness made you recognize him as a fellow grand enough to be almost worthy of our Rose.

From the first time we saw them together, on the night he called for her after her star performance in our musical show, we felt that they were parts of a pattern of life carved by some special guardian angel.

Our Show

Wistfully and happily I remember that particular parish musical show. She wowed 'em that night—though the phrase itself had not yet been invented. She sang songs that had already been made popular by Nora Bayes, but she sang them in a way that made that synthetic colleen fade back into the atmosphere of east-side New York and her Jewish ancestry—and I say this as one who could well understand the Irishman who wrote to Nora Bayes to say, "Only a daughter of old Erin could sing an Irish song as you do." Rose had played the lead in a little show for which I had written a patch quilt of a book. With that gift which goes right down into an audience and shakes hands with hearts, she ran off with the show.

Author and producer of this minor masterpiece, I was happy and deeply content. As I stood in the wings, she, like the instinctively generous person she was, ran toward me, took me by the hand, and pulled me out onto the stage for an unrehearsed curtain call. Then she, who was an abysmal three years older than my salad nineteen, kissed my cheek before the audience—a sincere but dramatic touch that was theater at its most effective.

Bill came backstage after the show to take her home, and we met him for the first time.

Comrades

As I say, we all approved of Bill from the start. First of all she clearly liked him, and that was guarantee enough for any of

us. Besides she was obviously adored by him, and his good taste spoke highly in his favor.

She invited us to her apartment for the following Sunday evening. We sang the songs from the show and all the other songs of the day, and we ate her mother's delicious chicken salad, and we listened while Bill began that unending flow of high wit and good humor that were to be so characteristic of him for the next two years.

In the most innocent and wholesome fashion I doted on her. In the frankest manner I liked him. So when I, as a sort of younger brother, was lugged along with them, I found myself completely happy.

Then one evening during a lull at rehearsals she told me that he had proposed and that she had said yes. And immediately she added, "You will play the organ for our wedding, won't you?"

I nodded eagerly. It was a good world, and I was very happy.

They Marry

So Rose and Bill were married.

Our various clubs of that highly social community gave a round of parties and showers and entertainments. That spring for the last time she played the lead in our parish musical.

"An old married woman," she announced, "won't have time for such frivolity from now on. But I shall sit there in the front row and applaud my successor. Any one of a dozen can take my place."

That I doubted. But I never doubted the wisdom of her decision to concentrate on making a success of her marriage. I knew she would take her new career with tremendous seriousness, but I knew too that we would see much of her and Bill socially even if dramatically she went into voluntary eclipse.

She showed me the beautiful letter that the bank president wrote as with sincere regret he accepted her resignation. I slipped into the creaky organ gallery to practice on the wheezy organ the hymn that she had selected for her wedding day . . . and June was in the air.

So came the morning of her wedding, and we who loved them both agreed that it would be a long time before our community saw again so charming a bride. She was a dressmaker's dream of June and the June bride: white cloud of veil, and simple white dress, and a bouquet of flowers the perfume of which seems vaguely to linger though the species of flower is long since forgotten. He was customarily dapper in a white linen suit.

The Months After

With myself at the organ in our rickety loft, the members of our dramatic club formed her choir. I remember thinking that it was unfortunate that she could not lend her own lovely voice to her wedding music. The nuptial Mass was beautiful; we sang our hearts out to God and the new bride; the church was filled with her friends.

They honeymooned briefly and then returned to a larger apartment, into which her mother had already moved. Let me hasten to say that never for a second was there mother-in-law trouble in that home. The cynic is convinced that seldom does it happen that two women under one roof make for peace. These two never knew anything else but peace, and Bill never stopped loving both of them. Often, even in the worst days, I felt that he forgot that the mother was hers, not his. He called her mother, and his eyes matched his lips' forming the words.

Departure

That July saw me packing my bags for the Jesuit novitiate. He and she were among the few to whom I told my plans. On that last Sunday they came and sat on our hospitable veranda, and we talked and were silent by turns. I had written a little song for my final parish show, and perhaps somewhat sentimentally I asked her if she would sing it.

She did, and she sang it beautifully. When we came back to the porch, my mother was crying silently. Rose had sung it too well. I too had a sudden pang, a feeling that I was hearing her voice for the last time until heaven knew when and that in my selfishness to hear it I had been the cause of my mother's tears.

The life of a young Jesuit has a way of swallowing him up. It swallowed me completely and happily. There was little time for letter writing. Letters from outside are not encouraged, so one soon loses track of friends. But when mother and dad visited me, I checked briefly the litany of my old friends and learned what I could. A transfer of residence however had carried my parents to the far side of Chicago; and like typical city dwellers they soon lost track of the friends in the old neighborhood.

Ten years must have passed before the sullen, low echoes of already diminishing thunder reached my cloistered life. Even then the rumble was vague and indeterminate. Yet it meant a storm—I was sure of that—and I wished I knew more than this distant echo told me: It seemed that in his careless, lighthearted way Bill had first made money on the market and at the tracks and then tossed his winnings down the drain. That was bad for a bank cashier who found it quite too easy to borrow—with of course no intention to steal—the

cash that flowed so freely through his hands. He had made frantic efforts to recoup, but the bank examiner had come unexpectedly to make desperate his trouble. Yet how deep his default was, none of my informants seemed to know. He had not gone to jail. But he and Rose were living apart. She had taken her boy and her two girls, and they were living no one knew quite where.

Reunion

I said a youthfully fervent prayer and hoped for better news. Then once more the cloister of my life closed in as I looked down the tall and narrow way that was the years of preparation for the priesthood. The road is steep, and one concentrates as one heads through for the altar rail and the sanctuary.

Ordination and the summer that followed it sent me briefly back from the world of books and classes to the world of men and things.

As part of our young priestly experience we were sent to the various parishes to help on Sundays. This, particularly bright Sunday morning found me saying Mass in a small convent of semivacationing nuns.

Strange how the years can suddenly be compressed into a bright moment: Down the walk to the little convent came Rose in what had always been less a walk than a gay dance.

It was a bright mid-July day, I remember. Despite the interval of the years she could have been the relatively carefree girl of those parish musical shows, for she was still lovely to look at and was smiling that smile that was the breeze of spring. First she knelt and received my very recent priestly blessing. Then we sat in the little convent parlor and talked and talked and talked. It was that bubbling up of conver-

sation that rises when friends meet and try to fill in the years that have gone too swiftly and too unrecorded in each other's lives.

A Tiny House

Yes there were three children, one boy and two girls. She was living in a little town no distance at all from where we sat. I simply must not go back to the city without visiting the little house she had just bought. She was dying to have me meet her babies, though they were by no means babies any longer. And since the town was only a few miles away, and since some of her friends would gladly pick me up in the early afternoon, I must come that day to see her house, the children, and herself.

No mention of Bill.

That afternoon I found her waiting at the door of the smallest house—yes I am sure it was the smallest house—in the whole spic-and-span little town. She stood on the tiny porch to welcome me. Then she led me into the tiny living room. Her mother was seated in the room's most comfortable chair, all white and fragile and feminine as only sweet old ladies can be. She held out her hands in welcome, as she had done a score of times in my youthful days.

The children came in shyly, with that mingling of hesitancy and expectancy that blend when an old friend of the family appears for the first time and they try to match what they have heard about him with what they suddenly see face to face. (Usually their frank expression betrays that what they see is a disappointment.)

The boy was the eldest of the trio, tall, sturdy, brown from the out-of-doors of the suburban town, in the upper grades of the local parochial school, and plainly bored by

the fact that he had missed a sand-lot ball game in order to meet this unknown priest.

The Girls

Her little girls were very like her, which is high compliment. One of them, I learned from a photograph or two upon the wall, had been child model for advertising photographers in a simple day when calendars ran to pictures called, "Sweet Innocence" and "Sunbonnet Babies." The youngest of the trio was already developing into a tomboy, a career which she systematically pursued until the slow transition that took place during her days in a Catholic nursing school.

Unfortunately a biographer is not, like a novelist, endowed with an all-seeing, all-knowing eye. So I could not know, as I stood in the little parlor of that little frame house in that little town (the "little" is intentional and will always characterize the scene as I remember it), that this was already the climax of years of heroism. I could only piece the story together after much inquiry and much patient assembling of the jig-saw parts.

Now I can fit these parts together and make a complete picture.

After Marriage

With the serene confidence of love she had, it seems, accepted during the days of courtship the fact that Bill was a gambler. With love's eternal hope she had convinced herself that once they were married he would lay aside his vice forever. She argued logically enough that he might foolishly risk his own money; he loved her too much to risk the money on which would depend her happiness too.

I have always felt that there is a sharp transition in the life of any girl who has been accustomed to her own money when

of a sudden she finds herself dependent on money made for her by a man. Rose soon realized that she was dependent not only upon a man but upon one of those gamblers with whom, in the old Irish phrase, it was a matter of "chickens today and feathers tomorrow."

Yet love is always convinced that of itself it is the cure for the deepest-seated habits. All too pitiful is the fact that love seldom cures the drunkard or the gambler.

I later learned that during their courtship his friends had come to see her and had put the facts brutally before her.

"He is a grand fellow," they told her. "But the gambler's itch is in his palm. If you must marry him, be sure you realize his limitation."

She had smiled confidently—as love will—thanked them, lifted her head a trifle higher, and assured herself that he would never gamble once they were married.

Old Habits

Indeed for a brief time he didn't gamble. They had a few idyllic months; I knew this, for she referred to them often. During those months she had come to love him with a depth that survived the disappointments and collapses of the years that followed.

Then she noticed that he was coming home flushed with that easy money that bears the unmistakable brand of winnings. Someone someday will make a study of the strange trick that life plays upon gamblers in that they always win at first. "Beginner's luck" is the phrase for it. That curse it is that makes a man cash in the first time he bets on a race or walk out of his first poker game a heavy winner. We have often laughed at the surprised amateur winner who, when his winnings are piled into his

hands, cries out in amazed delight, "How long has this been going on?"

So he won at first. She recognized it as gambling money and told him that she did not want any part of it. But he assured her, speciously, that he gambled merely for the fun of it, bet only on sure things, and risked no money that he could not well afford. In other words he made a complete statement of whatever case there may be for gambling. Even this she brushed aside with the refutation of her common sense. She reminded him of his promise; and he, exhilarated with his winnings, laughed her off.

Luck Flies

But soon he did not come home with loose bills crammed into his pockets. Instead there came weeks when there wasn't even a pay check. He laughed gaily to cover his embarrassment, and more gaily still he laughed away her fears and indignation. Then in a sudden panic he promised her that he would never touch another gambling dollar—with a mental reservation: not after he had once recouped his losses. His wit was brilliant, and his smile somehow managed a confidence that cajoled her out of her worry . . . or almost.

When the little son was born, the father was all pride, all repentance—and all stony broke. She had the humiliation of leaving the hospital with bills unpaid on the sister cashier's desk. As he gaily headed straight for the taxi, she had to pause and explain to the sister in charge that never before in her life had she failed to meet an obligation and that she herself would bring the money back in a matter of days. (She did—through a loan on her engagement ring. She was never able to redeem her ring. Her finger remained in symbolic nakedness without an engagement ring for the rest of her days.)

As for Bill, he was impatiently waiting when she reached the taxi. He was in such a hurry to bring her and his son triumphantly home.

Visitors

The frightening part of it all was that when she tried to talk to him he answered by making love, by speaking with that soft persuasive voice, and by assuring her that he was already a reformed man. Why he was depending now entirely on his cashier salary . . . and he laid the uncashed check for the week's wages in her hand. She believed—or hoped—that he was speaking the truth. Her inner voice told her that she was fooling herself.

It was when she had returned, this time alone, from the hospital after the birth of her third child that the representatives of the bonding company rang her doorbell and asked for Bill. Her instinct and that unmistakable something that clings to men who track down men told her who they were and what they had come for. She let them in, asked them to be seated, folded her hands tightly, and looked at them with agony in her eyes.

"Of course," she said, starkly, "you want to see him about a gambling debt."

"More precisely," the taller of the two answered, "about muddled accounts. You see, the bank examiner came unexpectedly, and your husband's books . . ."

"He wouldn't steal!" she cried out, in protest.

Both men shrugged their shoulders with that helplessness that eloquently tells of disillusionment and disbelief.

"Well," said the taller again, "we'll agree to say that he didn't steal. We'll just say that his accounts were pretty badly short."

"How much?" she demanded.

The man consulted a slip of paper which he pulled out of a side pocket.

"Three thousand, six hundred and fifty dollars," he read.

Alternative

If it had been the national debt, it could not have sounded more appallingly hopeless to her. She twisted her fingers and struggled to keep her lips from quivering. She could hear her mother in the room beyond walk across to the baby, who was crying. She herself was terribly weak from her too short stay in the hospital; the doctor had said she was leaving too soon; she knew she could not afford even the days she had granted herself.

Yet she controlled herself as she faced the investigators.

"What does that mean for Bill?" she asked, though her years' experience in the bank gave her the answer, an answer that could only be reaffirmed.

Again the tall man shrugged.

"The bonding company takes over," he said. "We represent the company, not the bank. If he can repay, nothing will happen—that is, beyond losing his job. I suppose he has already lost his job. At least he was smart enough not to show up at the bank today."

She closed her eyes, which pained intensely. When he had left that morning, he had known what was ahead of him and had told her nothing. She remembered now that he had seemed very pale. He had left as usual, kissed her affectionately and patted the baby with a prideful hand. But he had not gone to the bank. Where was he now, and what was he doing?

This was the first of a thousand similar days to follow—days when he left for what she did not know; days that she was sure

he spent walking the streets in a kind of futile activity, as if he were walking away from troubles he could not face, walking aimlessly, without any clear purpose of finding a way out of his trap.

Decision

The taller man coughed in embarrassment. Old as he was in his pursuit, the faces of the guiltless women never ceased to torture him.

"Naturally," he explained, "the bonding company is not anxious to send any man to jail. That does no one any good. When the money is repaid, the whole thing is simply washed out. No publicity, though you could hardly expect any bank to hire a man who is black-listed with the bonding company."

She nodded bleakly.

"But of course," he hurried on, "he will not in that case go to jail."

His statement had all the elements of tragedy, threat, and sinister implication. The choice, as he stated it, was too simple: Either the debt was paid, or Bill went to jail.

"When do you think your husband will be coming home?" The investigator looked around the room as if he expected to find him. "We'll wait."

She stood up, feeling very weak and sick. But she faced the reality sternly, and she was strong enough to make her plea convincing.

"Please don't wait," she begged. "I promise you that every cent will be paid . . . every cent . . . perhaps not all at once, but very shortly. So if the company will be patient . . ."

She Faces Reality

The investigator's shrug seemed to have become almost chronic.

"I'll be back in three days." He looked at her with all the pity born of his years of experience with defaulting men and the women who suffer because of them. "I'm honestly sorry. It's tough on you. If you will take my advice, you won't sell yourself down the river . . . or the kids." He motioned with his head to the room from which the baby's muffled sounds could be heard. "No man's worth it. I know. This business is his own doing, and you're smart if you let him take the rap."

She thanked him with cold lips and a chilled heart. When the men were gone, she fought out her battle silently and tortuously. It was impossible to talk this over even with her mother. By the time Bill returned—the time he normally returned—she was ready with her decision. Indeed she was ready almost with a smile.

He came in bearing flowers and a huge box of expensive chocolates, her favorite kind of course, unsweetened chocolate around nut and fruit centers.

"Darling," he cried, and kissed her with that genuine love that never grew less genuine despite his deliberate thwarting of all that she wanted. "I'm sorry I'm a little late. But if you get dressed, we'll snatch a bite and catch an early movie. Mother can take care of the youngsters . . ." He was talking against time. She faced him very quietly.

"Sit down, Bill," she said, and he knew he might as well drop his debonair role. For just a brief moment he was deflated, and he sank heavily into a chair.

"I'm sorry," he hardly whispered. "I was so sure I could pay the bank. And really—" his face brightened suddenly with that intense light of inner conviction that never dies in the faces of habitual gamblers—"I still can. A little run of luck . . ." He bit

his lip too late to hold back that careless phrase. He saw that it had slapped her blank, tear-drained face.

"What will the run of luck be this time?" she demanded, with brief bitterness. "Third race at Hawthorne?"

There was nothing he could say. He had actually been thinking of the fourth race, not the third; she had hit too close.

What Now?

She was seated opposite him, leaning forward, twisting her handkerchief in her hands.

"What are you going to do now?" she asked. "What are *we* going to do?"

"I'll pay it back, every cent of it," he protested, sincerely. "You don't think I stole it, do you, darling? I took it just as a loan; and if it hadn't been for a sudden spell of bad luck and that confounded bank examiner who came ahead of schedule . . ." Again he lapsed into silence, struck down by the cold discouragement of her look.

She repeated insistently, "What are you going to do?"

He rose, walked to the window, slowly lit a cigaret, and stood looking out into the late afternoon.

"Here come Ellen and Bud," he cried, suddenly. "How those kids are growing. She's almost as big as he is, isn't she? In no time at all she'll be in school too . . ."

"And what will they think? What will we tell them? What can we possibly say if their father goes to jail?"

Her voice was a blend of pain and bitterness.

He was across the room in a flash, throwing himself on his knees before her—as he was to do a hundred times again.

"Darling," he wept, for tears were with him easy though sincere, "it was for you, truly it was. I always thought the extra

money would mean so much to you and the kids . . .”

Extra money, she thought, bitterly, when all she had wanted was the pay checks, which came now so rarely and so irregularly.

He lifted his face, moist with tears, to look at her in a plea for mercy.

“I’ll pay it back,” he cried, “and never again, before God, as long as I live . . .”

“How will you pay it back?” she demanded, starkly practical.

They had been buying the little suburban home in which they lived. It was pretty and modern in the then-fashionable bungalow type, in a good neighborhood, with convenient shopping district, church, and school. Though they had paid down only a small portion of the price, they regarded the home as theirs. Now she knew that the house must go and whatever they could get for the equity turned in on his debt.

She said all this before Ellen and Bud piled into the house and flung their things upon their beds. When she said that they must sell the house, she did not notice that he made no reply. Only later when she called the real-estate dealer through whom they were buying the bungalow did she learn the crushing truth. They had no equity. He had turned it in for a loan which (she did not need to ask) had gone kiting after the rest of the gambled money.

Another Child

“So I knew,” she told me, years later, “that I could never count on him for anything. He was just a child, a helpless child. I had three other children and my mother to care for, but he was the most dependent.”

Again his friends appeared, as friends briefly do with advice that comes too late.

“Divorce him,” they said. “He’s incurable. You can’t live your life with him

hanging around your neck. Get rid of him as mercifully as possible."

People talk like that, forgetting that they are adding pain to pain.

"But of course you didn't divorce him," I said, when she had told me all this.

She shook her head.

"I was his wife, and he was my child, and I had promised God that our marriage was to last until death do us part. Silly perhaps, but I took my part of the promise seriously."

So though she was still weak from having brought her third baby into the world, she visited the bank and talked with the president, who remembered her and sincerely liked and pitied her. He was most willing to be lenient and kind. After all the bonding company had made good the loss, so he personally could afford to be lenient. She trailed from his office to the offices of the bonding company. With them the whole thing was a matter of strict business. Here was the exact amount that they had paid to the bank. They merely wanted the money. If they didn't get the money, they would be obliged, as a warning to others, to prosecute, and that would mean a jail sentence.

Her Task

During her negotiations he came home every evening—to talk of the ball game he had seen . . . the movie on which he had dropped in . . . the wonderful opening he was considering with an electrical-gadget company

"I'd like to try my hand at selling," he said, boyishly. "I wonder if any firm could make things faster than I could sell them."

He even told her of friends he had taken to lunch. She knew very well that he had paid—God knows out of what strange source of money—their checks.

In the end she made a loan from another bank, paid the bonding company, and took away with her, to lay in the top drawer of her dresser, a promissory note that was tribute to her utter honesty and the bank's recognition of that honesty.

When the children had gone to bed and her mother had returned to her room, she faced him across the dinner table.

"You will not go to jail," she said, quietly.

"Great heavens, darling!" He laughed. "I never expected to."

She shook her head in bewilderment. "What was going to save you if I didn't save you?"

To that he had no answer

"But now we have a debt that it will take years to pay," she concluded.

"Years?" He was laughing again. "Why, darling, we'll have it paid in a matter of months. Once I strike out and get the kind of job I'm really suited for, we'll be swimming in money. You know I was never really meant to stand behind the bars . . ." —he had the good grace to blush at that slip and to hurry on with an explanation— ". . . the bars of a cashier's grill. I wasn't meant to handle other people's money. Darling, this time I'm going to make honest money, lots of it, and pour it into your lap so that you and the youngsters can have all the things a successful man's wife should have. Sweet, this whole thing is going to turn out to be our great good luck. I was in a rut. I needed this to jolt me out.

"Oh, my dear, I love you with all my heart. God was too, too good when He let me have you for my wife. In the end though you'll be glad He did. You'll be proud of me, and I'll make up to you for my mistake. Before heaven I promise you I will never gamble again."

They Part

Of course he meant it. Of course she struggled to believe him. Of course she knew very soon that the promise rested on nothing but good intentions, a weak will, and an incurable habit.

As she lay awake nights, she coldly faced the fact that she would have to pay off every cent of the debt while he flitted from job to job carelessly and critically, disliking a boss here or disdaining the salary there, refusing to work without a large commission or telling off one of the managers who spoke slightly of his abilities.

The tragedy was that he was a magnificent salesman; he could charm a sale out of a store owner whose inventory was bulging. It was just that making money by selling goods seemed so slow and unnecessary to a man who had known the quick transfer of easy money won on the turn of a card or the drumming hoofs of a thoroughbred.

So they parted, tears and promises on his part, despair and cold determination on hers.

"I told him, hurting him as little as I could, that I could not go his way. That debt was mine, even if he had incurred it. I felt the responsibility for it even if he seemed to feel none. I did not intend to leave him for good, but I was certainly putting him on probation. In the interval, while I was wiping out the debt that somehow, some time must be paid, he would have to prove himself. Until the debt was gone, I would not live with him."

The Big Move

Quietly and without dramatics she moved from the little apartment which she had rented in the cheaper section of Chicago and to the small town that was to be the scene of her heroism from that moment on.

She wanted to get away from those who knew her. She desired neither pity nor help. She was just determined to make with her own strength and her own two hands a living for herself and her children and to pay back the debt that had actually grown during the months of dallying.

Each afternoon for a week she took one of the suburban trains that left Chicago at regular intervals for the little towns that form Chicago's satellites. She walked up and down the business streets, searching with the eyes of a natural businesswoman for just the right location. She knew exactly what she wanted—a little shop big enough for her to handle alone and a flat above the shop for her mother and the children. It must be in a small community that made purchases from the local stores; it must be near a school so that the children would come in with their pennies and their nickels; preferably it should be close to a motion-picture theater that would give the shop a few extra hours of patronage.

The Shop

When she finally found the right location, she once more went borrowing, this time for the stock she intended to sell. Her transparent honesty was once more the endorsement for the loan she made. But she had to persuade flinty-hearted dealers to trust her beyond this small sum for money, for goods, even for the fixtures with which to equip her little shop.

“Why I got the sign painter to trust me for the name of my shop on the window,” she laughed, ruefully. “Yet somehow I never felt as if I were begging from any of them. What I offered them was a strict business deal, a partnership in an enterprise that had no slightest chance of failure. I think they knew this was so, even

when they hemmed and hawed and told me what a favor they were doing me."

There isn't much romance to a heroine behind a counter in a small shop that sells candy and tobacco, magazines and soft drinks, and the somewhat sketchy items of food that rescue the careless housewife or the bachelor in his little flat after the grocers and markets are closed. There isn't much glamour in a smile that wearily fades after the last customer is gone and the fragile little woman has to sit down to total up the day's sales and make the quick reckoning that sets aside a portion for frugal living expenses, a portion for store operation, and a portion for the payment of a debt that looms like a granite mountain between her and the sun.

The Trial

There were days that tested the strength of her soul and wore down the strength of her body. The three youngsters were developing; and though Rose's mother cared for them with the spoiling love of a doting grandmother, Rose was constantly obliged to run up and down the flight of stairs that connected her shop with the upper flat.

She was never the businesswoman sunk in business affairs and customers. She was always rather the mother. She heard every sound that came from the floor above; and after a sale had been completed and the shop knew a moment's quiet, she raced up to see the baby in its crib, the older girl playing with her toys, and the little boy back from the parochial school of the town. And if you don't think that the strain of being both manager and mother, saleswoman and nurse, operator of a small shop and head of a small home don't wear down the invisible strength of a woman, you have not listened to the doctors who talked to

me later about Rose and marveled that she stood the beating of those years.

And Bill . . .

Twice a month Bill came out for Sunday dinner. He took the suburban local, came swinging down the street, brought the children small presents, brought Rose flowers, ate his dinner, and returned to his own life in the evening.

"Returned to what?" I asked.

"That," she answered, "is what puzzles me more than anything else. I never could quite discover, and I never could figure it out. I knew only that he was completely faithful to me, that he did not drink, and that he looked forward to those Sundays as a soul in purgatory might look to heaven. Sometimes he brought me candy; he knew I would sell it over the counter in my little store. Sometimes he brought the children toys—purchased at retail prices, when I could have picked them up from the jobbers. Sometimes with a careless gesture he tossed money onto my living-room table—never anything above a ten-dollar bill, usually a five and a handful of ones." She smiled again in wry humor. After all a handful of dollar bills' falling makes a more dramatic gesture than a single twenty-dollar bill.

"Often when we were alone, he would say, pleadingly, 'May I come back?' I would only shake my head. 'You know the condition,' I would answer. 'When the debt is paid, we will talk of that.' Of course in my heart I didn't mean it. If he had only shown some eagerness to help me pay the debt . . . if just once he had got a job with a regular salary and sent me or brought me some fixed sum, however small, each week, each month . . . I know I should have held out my arms and cried, 'Come back!'

Then we would have done the job together. What hurt was that I must do it alone."

"He never offered?" I asked, feeling utterly bewildered.

"I don't think he ever thought of it. He was a gambler, and gamblers can't be bothered collecting a regular salary. Why be content with thirty, fifty, or even three-hundred dollars a week when some bland gesture of fortune is bound sooner or later to toss into your hands a lump sum of three thousand or four thousand . . . or a fortune to guarantee life on a country estate? He lived in his dream of the day that he would come into my flat a rich man and carry me off to some fabulous mansion. He seemed never to know that month after month I was paying off his debt in agonizing sums — sometimes fifty dollars and once or twice a thrilling hundred."

Friends Come and Go

"Where were your friends?" I asked, almost impatiently. "Surely they could have helped you."

Once more she gave me that quick and humorous smile that was her way of meeting life's queerer tricks.

"They came to see me, most of them; they were very sweet about that. They all told me that I was very noble, and secretly they considered me pretty much a fool. They made vague offers to do whatever they could for me. But I never embarrassed them by translating their vague offers into concrete requests. They were vastly relieved . . . and I wasn't accumulating new debts.

"Anyway social visits were a little complicated. People grow tired of calling on a woman who must leave her living room to run downstairs and stand behind the coun-

ter while first-graders lapse into brown studies as they choose between red lollipops and green. Even my friends were embarrassed when their visits dragged me away from my shop and kept me talking upstairs until a customer knocked on the counter with a coin and called up the stairs and demanded service."

New People

So quite too rapidly her early friends thinned out and were replaced, as they were bound to be in the life of this delightful woman. For in no time at all she was the best-known woman in her town. I walked down the street with her later; her way was something of a progress. Everyone knew her. Shopkeepers came out of their stores to speak to her as she passed. The policemen and the letter carriers, the newsboys on the corners, the garage attendants, the mothers wheeling their baby carriages, the well-to-do women leaning out of their station wagons—all called to her by name and waved to her as she passed.

"You see," she explained, simply, "I have always liked people."

"And so"—I stressed the inevitable—"they like you."

"When one is a shopkeeper in a small town," she explained, as if that were the only explanation, "one gets to know everybody and everybody gets to know one."

She looked into the near distance as if the walls of her little cottage were opening again on a panorama of her twelve laborious years.

"They were very happy years, even if I kept wishing he would understand a little the loneliness and labor of them—take up his part of the bargain—and come home."

The Children

During those years the three babies grew into sturdy children. They had her great good looks and his charming, offhand manner. They fitted themselves into the easy friendship of the small community and gave no one opportunity for criticism or complaint about them. In school they did well without being brilliant, played with the other children, and when they were old enough began to take small part-time jobs that helped to carry the family's mounting expenses.

"It would have been a comfort to provide them with everything," she said, a little wistfully. "But I don't think the experience of helping me did them any harm."

"Harm?" I recalled the sturdy little fellow who now at eighteen was grave and serious and self-possessed, intensely popular with the boys and evincing the makings of an excellent athlete. The paper route he had traveled had done him no harm—as he learned when he went out for the high-school team. The sense of money value he had acquired was in the tradition of successful Americans. He had a realistic attitude toward life that indicated that his own future would have none of the butterfly attitude that had characterized his father's life.

And Money . . .

The struggle for money, when it is not debased and groveling, can be a character-forming achievement. It was so with those children of hers as the years progressed. The older girl had, as I noted earlier, made money even when she was a baby. She must have been one of the world's most beautiful infants, and I know she progressed into one of the world's most charming children. Photographers paid for her services all the days of her preschool life.

Her grandmother went along with her to the studios, chaperone, dragon, and lady's maid all rolled into one.

Then when she was a little older, in the higher grades of grammar school, she became a baby-sitter, a profession more characteristic of modern times but apparently always a lucrative profession in small towns, where the young married couples need a reliable child to stay with their infants during the evenings that the couples take in a show or go to a bridge party. While she was in the local convent high school, she became part-time librarian in the town library . . . then saleswoman . . . then cashier . . . finally before her marriage secretary to the town's leading banker.

The younger girl, tomboy until maturity, gravitated toward outdoor work. It was a town of gardens long before there were victory gardens; and as she had a "green thumb," she was in demand among the neighbors who found work in their own gardens tough on their less flexible backs; it was easier to supervise this youngster who had a real love of flowers and a real way with a miniature truck garden than it was to do the work themselves. Oddly she suddenly developed a complete character change when after high school she decided that nursing was her profession. She went into training, came out a high-ranking senior in her class, and after a few years married a doctor in the hospital she served.

A New Home

But all this anticipates a little. For our reunion had brought me just to the climax of her life of struggle, her purchase of the little house into which she proudly led me.

His debt was completely and finally paid, the last big payment having been made when she sold out her shop to a buyer (he

still profits by the good will she had won and the trade she had built up).

Then true to her word she took Bill back—but not until she had first made the down payment on the smallest house in the town, installed her mother and her growing children, and sat her husband down for a long and serious talk.

I have always regarded it as a masterpiece of psychology that she withheld that talk until she could bring him into her newly purchased home, let him sit down to dinner in a dining room that was not over a store, lead him into a living room that was not disturbed by the clamor of customers, and there tell him the conditions under which she would reinstate him.

Of course he accepted them all with that reckless eagerness that characterized all his decisions and made him sound convincing and that made his promises less stable than even the normal vows of lovers.

She told me ruefully later on what the conditions had been.

Conditions

“I made him promise that he would get a steady job, one that had a weekly salary no matter how small. That salary he was to place in my hands, the check uncashed. I would give him a generous share of it, but not before I had first banked the entire amount.”

“What else?” I asked, when she prolonged too lengthily what I thought was a pause before the next condition.

“There was no use for any other condition,” she said, wistfully. “That was all I asked of him . . . and even that he has never fulfilled.”

He came in late that Sunday afternoon of our reunion, looking a little seedy, needing a haircut and dental work, but having

all the breeze and gusto that made him so naturally charming.

“Don’t you love our new house?” he demanded, as if he were showing me the mansion he had built by sheer genius and tireless labor. But then characteristically he added, “Of course it’s all her doing. She’s the most wonderful woman in the world. There is no one like her, and God knows why it was my good luck to find her. Heaven knows, I don’t deserve her.”

I wanted to say amen to that; but across his shoulder I could see her shake her head and smile in wonderment, so I let it go at that.

It still seems odd to me that though we talked much, he and I, never once did he mention the years of their separation. Apparently he preferred to put those years forever out of his mind.

Happy Years

I shared with her from a distance the years that followed. She was an excellent letter writer and kept me informed of all the ups and downs. Hers and the children’s were the ups; his were the downs. My constant traveling in my work and a kindly providence usually brought me to the vicinity of her town once a year for a restful afternoon. I always played the piano and she sang, her voice retaining throughout the years its pure, liquid soprano. I came to regard the children with the affection of a favored uncle. And I watched while, now that the shop was a thing of the past, she slipped back into the complete but simple social life of the town. She was soon quite the big woman in the parish, for she was the sort of person who turns to the parish for both religion and the happiest associations.

The children grew and blossomed. Her mother came to know a placid happiness

that must have given Rose deep joy. And Rose herself seemed to have found the secret of endless youth.

Tired

But Bill . . .

She sent the children off that afternoon with patently fictitious reasons. Her mother sat on the little veranda, rocking quietly. Rose sat me down to talk.

"I'm tired," she said, "terribly tired. I'm afraid I can't go on."

"The marvel to me is," I replied, "how you have stood up to it so long. You know my interest, so I hope I am not impertinent. But I should really like to know what you live on, what you pay your bills with, and how you keep the house going."

It was a miracle and a mystery. She shook her head ruefully.

"Bill has averaged less than five dollars a week," she said.

"Great heavens!" I cried. "Less than five dollars? And you with all the responsibility on your shoulders? How do you do it?"

"Mother has a small income, just enough to care for herself," she explained. "The children, bless their generous souls, have brought in money as long as I can remember—a little, but it always amounts to about ten dollars a week. You've seen my garden. It's hard work, but the soil is rich and the summers are bountiful. Besides we keep chickens and have our own eggs. So we live out of the garden in the summer, and I can and preserve a great deal. You thought the apple tree and the little cherry tree in the yard were beautiful when you came last spring; but they are more than beautiful, for they were dessert for us during the long winter.

"I can still make cakes that people like, so I sell them for parties and weddings;

that is a trifle, but it helps. Beyond that . . . well God, who multiplied food for the widow, must be multiplying it for someone who often seems more than a widow.

"I'm not complaining; you know that. But a woman doesn't like to feel that she hasn't had a new dress in ten years. There is a girl I worked with in the bank who married, not just well, but rich. It was embarrassing at first, for in the bank I had been her superior; but I grew used to the packages she mailed me, and I came to realize that she was sending me the dresses before she or her children had obtained even normal wear out of them. I don't think she loves her husband, and I know he doesn't love her any more. But God is going to pay her back somehow for her friendship and remembrance of me.

Break?

"But now I'm tired—tired of never having money to take the children to a show, tired of taking all their little earnings and giving them nothing for their own fun."

I denied all her self-accusations with a sweeping gesture. I had seen the popularity of her children with the older boys and girls of the town. To walk down the street with any one of them was to find their friends on every corner, to pass through a running file of laughter and greeting. Besides I knew the strength of their characters and the firm grip they had on the essential things of life. But she was hardly listening.

"The break came the other night. At least I think it was a break. You may not know that I bought the house in both our names, his and mine."

I had not known that, but this too was like her. To prove that he was really taken back, no longer on mere probation but

completely restored to her life, she had had the title made out to both of them. I told her how generous I thought her.

“. . . and foolish, it seems,” she replied. “You see I have been managing to make the tiny monthly payments regularly, and I knew that the house was more than half paid for. But the other night when I went to the bank, the official with whom I deal said, ‘I’m sorry that you had to borrow once more on the house.’”

His Loan

“If he had hit me, I could not have been so paralyzed. Borrowing? A loan from the bank? I had made no loan. He saw my astonishment and looked flustered. ‘Oh I took it for granted that you and your husband had talked it over’”

“I walked home that night in a kind of black, black fog. I had always pitied him. Now I felt I hated him. Every cent that had been paid on that house I had managed to scrape together with infinite conniving. He had given nothing, nothing toward it. And when in my generous folly I had written him in for a share in the title, he had used my credulity to borrow money without a word to me, without a suggestion that what he did was theft. To gamble . . . gamble . . . gamble . . .”

She was bitter now, fiercely bitter.

“It’s the end. When I charged him with it, he was humble—as always—and sorry. But the money was already gone, down where all the rest had gone. He hasn’t been home for a week. I’m starting divorce proceedings as soon as I can get permission from the bishop.”

I was giving a retreat at the gracious convent where her girls were high-school students, so I saw her again before I left.

He wasn't at home, but her black bitterness was gone, and she was able to smile.

I'll Stick

"Play one of the Irish songs that mother loves," she asked. Her mother, now growing steadily more deaf, sat and smiled while Rose sang to my accompaniment the Irish melodies that colleens had been singing for generations.

Then we walked into the kitchen, which was spotless, bright, a masterpiece of economy and of the art that makes a delicious meal out of the barest essentials and the sauce of love. As she worked at the stove, she talked.

"I'm not getting a divorce," she said.

"I'm glad," I answered. "But why not?"

She worked over a stew pan with that physical concentration that releases the mind for plans and decisions.

"He pleaded with me, promising all sorts of things, as he has promised a thousand times before. Oh"—she smiled at me over her shoulder—"don't think that I believe him. I don't. I never can believe him again. But as he talked, I knew once more with a growing certainty what a child he is, what a dear, helpless child. He's not bad. I honestly believe that in all his life he has never looked at another woman, never. I was ill last month, and he waited on me as if he were a nurse and a lover all rolled into one. He adores my mother and cares for her with a gentleness that no daughter could surpass.

"It's as if in him there is just something missing—what, I don't know. But I can't throw him off. He would die in the gutter without me. I have to hold him up on his unsteady feet as if he were learning to walk—yes as if he could never learn to walk.

"It would be utterly cruel to divorce him. Oh I talked with a lawyer who said I had a perfect case — nonsupport and all that. But . . ."

Besides

She went to the pantry for more ingredients, which she mixed in with whatever it was she was making, her provident hands working skillfully.

". . . but besides that, there is something else. I am a woman, and I am still not too old to love and be loved."

And indeed she was young. As the late afternoon came in through the kitchen window, it touched her skin, the peach-and-ivory complexion of a colleen; her features had scarcely been marred by a blemish, a sag, or a wrinkle during the long days of her labor and sacrifice.

"As long as he lives in my house, no other man is likely to waste time on me. Nor shall I think of another man. But suppose I were alone? Suppose I turned him out and lived as if I were a widow? How long would it be before I met a man who . . . oh I met them in the days of our separation, and they made their way of life seem easy and almost inevitable for me. How long then before I should find the temptations born of loneliness and opportunity too strong to be resisted?"

"You see, I am old-fashioned. I have the silly old idea that marriage is until death do us part."

"If that is a silly idea," I answered, softly, "Christ had it too."

"Probably I shouldn't bother with the idea if it wasn't His," she answered, simply. "So you see for a thousand reasons I will have to stick it out. My blaze of the other night has burned down to a warm pity. He needs me. But I am vain enough,

when I look into the mirror, to say, 'Maybe, my girl, you need him in that queer protective sense that only a Catholic wife or a priest could completely understand'."

Near Rebellion

But during the next two years there developed a new aspect of her trial, one that she must however have anticipated. Indeed she had hinted at it once when she had said, "The children love him now. What will they do when the novelty has worn off and they begin to compare him with those well-to-do, hard-working fathers of their friends?"

In a short time she had the answer to that.

It was the boy who first faced his father with a sharp dislike in his young face. Rose told me the episode without much comment.

"We were sitting at table one evening," she said, "when Bill, Junior, looked up (he had been talking not at all) and said, 'Dad, why don't you make an honest effort to get an honest job and take some of this horrible load off mother's shoulders?' It was stark and brutal as only the questions of youth can be. I know that I heard myself react in a gasp that came as from a stab. His father carried the loaded fork to his mouth without apparent interruption of its course. Then he looked at the boy and tried hard to smile. 'Someday,' he said, using the phrase that was his most monotonous, 'I'll make your mother rich'. The boy sneered. I had never seen such a look on his face before. 'Someday? How about tomorrow? How about this evening when we finish supper? How about getting a job digging a ditch or unloading coal down in the freight yard? I earned fifteen dollars last week after school and Saturday and Sunday after Mass. How much did you bring home last week?'"

Dislike

“ ‘Don’t talk to your father like that,’ I cried, less to defend Bill than to snuff out the dislike I saw in my son’s face.

“ ‘Maybe, mother,’ he said, ‘if you had talked to him a lot earlier as I just did, I would have been going to college instead of hustling out for a job. Maybe you might even have a new dress on Christmas or Easter. Maybe the girls wouldn’t be working evenings when the other kids are drinking cokes in the drugstore.’

“ ‘Who wants to listen to a lot of hens cackling around a soda fountain?’ my tomboy demanded. But my elder daughter didn’t answer. I saw that she too was regarding her father with a loathing she had never allowed to be apparent before.”

That was the first of a new series of incidents, incidents that made life that much harder for her. She set herself, as part of her job, to defend him against his children. The tomboy alone loved him, bullied him, went to the station to meet him when the interurban brought him home from his long, purposeless days in the city. She alone did not wonder why he went to town, what he did there, or how it was that he returned with so little sign of having done anything.

The other two leagued against him, failing to see that, instead of making it easier for her, they were making life far, far more difficult for their mother and creating around her a situation that was almost intolerable.

Things eased however when she continued to pull miracles out of her sleeves. She managed to send her boy to the city’s Catholic college long enough to qualify him for law school. She smiled when her elder daughter met the quiet young electrician

who loved her romantically and courted her with silent adoration. She was pleased and not surprised when her tomboy developed into a proper and efficient student nurse. With the adjustment, peace came again, and she knew that she had carried the family through another storm that might easily have wrecked their fragile little ship.

The Cough

That summer when I visited her she was coughing badly.

"You'll have to pretend I'm singing," she said. "But play all the old songs anyhow, and I'll hum along. It's just a nasty cough, you see, a cold that's hung on. The winter was hard, but a little work in my garden will soon cure this."

But I found out that a half hour's work in the garden was enough to send her staggering in exhaustion to her seat on the porch.

I insisted that she see a doctor, and she did. With a carelessness that sometimes characterizes terribly busy doctors who think that women are bound to have imaginary complaints, the doctor pronounced her cough bronchitis and told her to eat lots of good food—steaks, chops, and fresh fruit—ordering these things as if they were not so difficult for her to obtain as it would be to get slices of cheese from the moon. He commanded her to rest in the sun and do no heavy work—she who was taking care of her beloved house.

Great Year

Strange how in the gentle providence that watches over those who follow the hidden life of the Savior a single year may bring the triumph of Palm Sunday and the beginnings of the Passion. That year she choked back the annoying cough as she sat

and watched her son get his Bachelor of Laws degree and heard the dean announce that he was among those who had taken the early bar examination and been admitted to practice. That year she sat in the front pew of the little church, again holding back the cough, and watched her elder daughter marry the man who loved her with a dogged devotion and brought into her life all the realistic things that make romance endure and give to love its eternally youthful bloom. She made a third journey, to see her tomboy in stiff, starched white receive her bright pin and carry away the diploma that marked her an R. N.

Her three children were set in life, and she was deeply happy.

It was one of the doctors in the hospital who on the day of the graduation noticed that cough, spoke to her daughter, and insisted on a thorough checkup. The checkup said what anyone could have known without aid of X-ray or sputum test. She was already in the advanced stages of tuberculosis.

Trial

Her nurse daughter insisted that she go to the hospital. She obeyed, but hospitals were not to her liking. She was lonely for the little house over which she had suffered and sacrificed. She wanted none of the stiff, sanitary bleakness of a hospital; she wanted her own little room that opened onto her own little garden; she wanted the dear familiar things which, trifles all, she had accumulated during the years of her womanhood. She even missed the tree outside her window that cast its shadows over her bed and brought the songbirds close to her when she lay upon her side, smiling and strangely beautiful.

So they brought her back to her little

house, and she relaxed in resignation and content.

Her mother died that year, died with the effortless passage of an Irish Catholic grandmother who has used her rosary as a chain to lift her so close to heaven's gates that the final transition could be made without struggle or panting or groans.

Her elder daughter and the quiet, deeply beloved son-in-law moved into the house. For the next years this elder daughter was to prove that heroism can be inherited and that the spirit of sacrifice taught through a lifetime of example may leave its image even on what we carelessly call the thoughtless soul of youth.

Her nurse daughter wanted to come back and care for her. But the family wisely held a council of war, and she was assigned the task of continuing with her patients so that she could contribute to her mother's support—as did the generous son, who had found a place in a fine young law firm.

Only the elder daughter remained at home. Sometimes when she smiled, she seemed to bring back as in a mirror the girl I had known in our dramatic club; the devotion and loyalty of that girl had been handed on to her daughter.

The Passion

Though Bill each day continued to make his futile pilgrimage to the city and returned continuously empty-handed, he now began to serve her with a love and devotion that brought tears to my eyes, deeply as I resented his part in her tragedy and necessary heroism. He would pick her up and carry her to the dining table or to her chair, which was centered like a throne in the living room. He waited on her all through the night, scarcely seeming to

sleep, since her slightest movement woke him and brought him to her side.

There is no doubt that in his strangely ineffective way he loved her as few other men love women. I am sure that during those last years she loved him, perhaps as a mother loves a misshapen child she has begot, or as the sickly lamb of a flock is loved who comes to lie in adoration at its mother's feet.

Writers perhaps too often extol the purifying effect of suffering. Seldom do we who personally resent suffering and hate pain allow its full effects to be felt. We fight against God's effort to raise us to the level of Christ in His Passion.

With Rose pain and suffering were as they should be. About twice a year throughout her beautiful crucifixion I visited her. Her little room had become a place of pilgrimage. Out from the city came friends who she thought had long since forgotten her. They loved to sit and talk. They listened to her while, with that beautiful voice that grew weaker but never less clear, she spoke lightly of her suffering and with infinite sympathy of the troubles which her friends poured upon her.

Bill, Junior, married. When he brought her their first-born, she managed to sit up in bed, and with an unconscious repetition of the "*Nunc dimittis*" she smiled at her successful boy and then down at the grandson who rested trustingly against her and praised God for what life had brought her. When her tomboy married, she could not be present at the wedding. So the bridal couple went straight from the nuptial Mass to her bedside, and she blessed them almost as if she were a patriarchal mother out of the Old Testament.

Friends Come

Her children wanted her to move to a bigger house, but she laughed at the idea. Move her out of the place for which she had struggled? Move her from the house which was a concrete symbol of her triumph over all that life could hurl at her by way of discouragement and temporary defeat? Not she. Besides she had discovered that she still had much to do.

The young people of the neighborhood flocked to her. Three young men who had faintly heard the call of the priesthood came and sat at her bedside and let her talk to them of God. They walked away from her to the gateway through which they strode on their way to the altar of sacrifice. "My priests," she called them, and they smiled back to name her their "mother in God." One of them she even persuaded to give up a successful business career upon which he had embarked and to start back again among the kids of first-year high, to struggle with the Latin which eventually made possible for him the priesthood and heroic missionary work in the Orient.

Other young people came and went: boys who were a little glum over the women they had met, women whose virtue was too scalable and whose manners were too hospitable sat with her for a time, looked at her calm and glowing beauty, and went out with a new faith in womankind. Girls came to talk about the boys they thought they loved and to ask her what marriage should be and how they could make their lives "as successful as yours has been." They meant it very sincerely. She always laughed when anyone said that, but they continued to say it with even greater conviction.

God let her think she was a failure. She died believing that her life had had none of

the things that make for success. I never tried to shake her belief on that point. I preferred that the revelation be her glad surprise when she came to die.

Into the Darkness

Month after month she lay on her bed without complaint, without boredom. At first she loved to read. Then the germ reached her eye, and she lay in a darkened room—the pain of ocular tuberculosis making terribly empty her days and restless her nights.

On the counterpane of her bed was her rosary; on the wall near her head was a picture of the Sacred Heart; a small statue of Mary was on a table close enough for her to touch it in the darkness.

During each of my successive visits to her bedside I realized that she was growing thinner and thinner . . . until she weighed scarcely seventy pounds; her hands grew paler, and her hair—always glowing and beautiful—became in the alchemy of pain and age a white that was too precious for silver and too simply beautiful for platinum.

But her face grew younger and less marked with each year, and her voice took on tones that were like the soft and distantly-heard bells of Easter or the mellow notes of a convent organ, in its music something no composer will ever be able to transfer to paper or musician call forth from any instrument made by man.

End and Beginning

She died with a sigh that dismissed her soul in utter peace and confidence. Bill was with her, crying out of a heart that probably knew too well its own futility and that had yet been able at the end to offer her a love and a loyalty that she under-

stood and accepted gratefully in the face of a critical world.

Her fine son and daughters were with her, their children gazing in wonder at this grandmother, who had become like the saint that dwells in some mystic shrine.

As over the week end she lay in the little funeral parlor, a steady line of cars flowed to her as to a scene of pilgrimage. I knelt at her casket and looked upon her beautiful face and remembered the long and heroic years since she had danced in our little parish musical show. No doubt of it, she was already dancing down the streets of paradise. Her voice long hushed in the hoarse grip of her disease was echoing with the singing choirs of heaven. She would be forgotten — save by Bill, who stood and looked at her as if he were in a trance, and by those three children, for whom she had made life beautiful and to whom she had given everything that the noblest mother can bequeath to her offspring.

I had a letter from "her priest" in the mission fields. "She is with God, and I feel already what she is doing for me," he wrote. "How beautiful life seems when I remember the loveliness of her life and the wonder of the life of all those who came within the circle of what she was and what she meant and what she did."

So I think that she was more than a heroine. She was, though no official document will ever say so, one of God's lovelier saints.

