THE DAY OF SOULS

a Novel of San Francisco

BY CHARLES TENNEY JACKSON

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CHAPTER XXII—Continued

After the old man had gone to bed, Arnold went to find Nella at her dishes. She was scarcely pleased at his telling of the position he had found.

"That's hard business, Hammy. It's a comedown for a fellow like you. I wish you could get away as you wanted to do. See here—when are you going?"

"Nel, you know I can't quit you and the Captain—and the old house—"

"But you'd better." Her blue eyes with their careless quizzing fell from his face. She went on in an altered voice: "You'd better—something may happen."

"What do you mean?"

"O, I don't know. Ham, yesterday the agent for some sort of society that takes care of stray kids was here—he was put on to us by that Wilson woman and those others in the block who look at me so. They have their suspicions of us, I suppose. That agent talked about taking the kid away if it needed a home or anything. He was polite, but I knew!"

His face was serious as she went on: "You see he came spying around, and he caught me bad—I was smoking, and I guess I looked the part. Maybe," she laughed, "I'm not the sort to have charge of a baby!"

"What did you tell him?"

"I told him to go to the devil, and backed him out the door."

The young man stared at a little sweater the waif of the woods had worn; from another room his breathing came through the silence. He looked about the hall. The old house had a sort of gypsy abandon; Nella was a happy go lucky housekeeper, a miserable cook; she idled most of her days over novelettes and theatrical magazines, rubbing her rings with her cigarette stained fingers, but she had been watchfully kind to the Cookhouse waif, playing with him in the halls and on the porch, dressing him fantastically, and laughing over his serious, childish perplexities.

"Ham, I shan't give him up," she broke out; "I'd go wild without something to do. Sometimes the old man upstairs talks so crazy, and I take Bill and skip down to the alley and sit in the sun. This house is spooky—and you're away so much!"

He watched the girl's restless hands. The third finger of the right was tied in a cloth. He caught her arm and drew her nearer and asked: "What's the matter?—another burn?"

"I just cut it a bit," she laughed, and the clumsy finger stall fell off, showing the red scar. The young man looked gravely at the finger, where, last night, one of her rings had been.

"Kid, you've sold the opal with the two diamonds, haven't you? You've paid some more of the bills, haven't you?"

"O, not much. Only that groceryman was here—I think Wilson got him excited about us—as though we were going to move or beat him some way. I just raised twenty on the opal—I have the ticket, and we'll get it back. And if we don't, it's all in the game. Who cares?"

He went down town without further comment, and she wondered if he was angry. She sat up late to see him when he returned, but he came back to his rooms by the outside stairs, and went away in the morning before she had risen.

At wharf 9 of the city front a small stern wheel steamer lay with a line of stevedores crawling up the plank from her forehold under a cluster of electric lights. Jute bags of potatoes and onions, crates of asparagus and produce from the island farms of the Sacramento delta, they brought out, wheeling them away to the recesses of the covered dock. A curt manager had explained Arnold's duties, and at 8 o'clock the same night he reported to stand by the plank and check off the stuff as it was unloaded from the Juanita.

It lacked a few moments of 8 when he arrived to relieve the other tally clerk, and he lounged against the sacked stuff on the wharf, watching the laborers trot in the dust from the hold, as the steamer slowly heaved on the tide—Italians, negroes, Hindus and Mexicans—a mongrel breed, dulled and sweat smelling. Among these he, a fastidious fellow of the town, had come to be—his world had easily forgotten him, and to the new way of life he was untried.

He looked at his watch and turned to go along the wall of sacks past the office to the boat. A man came from the office to pass him in the narrow way; then stopped, his shoulders stiffening, his eyes lightening with an intent challenge. It was Banway, the Humboldt woodsman whom Arnold had not seen since what was to have been his wedding day.

The big fellow watched him in silence for a time. Then with portentous quietness, he said: "I wonde'd if I'd eve' see you!"

"I'm working here," answered the other. "How are you, Louisville?"

"Don't talk friendly to me! I came down here a month ago to kill you."

"Yes? But you can't understand. And Sylvia couldn't explain. Do you see her up there?"

"Trinity? She's neve' been home."

"Never been home? I sent her back—where is she?"

"Where would she be?" The woodsman's eyes narrowed malignantly. "You threw heh off! Where was there fo' heh to go?—home, robbed, disgraced?"

"Where is she?" repeated the town man steadily. "Here, keep back—" the other was pressing on him—"I tried to explain."

"Arnold, I'd have shot you, only I promised I wouldn't! I been fumin' 'round weeks thinkin' how I could get at you—God knows, I give it up—short o' killin' you. It'd only be fool like to curse you!"

"Yes, there's nothing to say. I'm sorry—that's all."

"Sorry!"

"Banway, how is she—tell me!"

"She's gone insane here—in the city where you left heh! Mo', she'll die!"

They stared at each other, the one whitening to his lips; the other flaming, rubbing his hands together to still their desire.

"No," whispered Arnold, "you're fooling—she's not—" The other's misery convicted him. "Where is she?"

"At a good woman's—she was you' friend once. Maybe you know."

"Miss Wayne?" His swift thought went to the night she had dismissed him—had it all happened so long ago? "I know, now—" he said mechanically—"O, I know, now!"

The other advanced on him in inextinguishable hate. "What's it to you?" he cried. "Heh soul's dead, an' what's it to you?"

The town man turned aside. He wondered why he was muttering that he was sorry—what, indeed, could words do? The woodsman watched his face harden in the shadows—it seemed a cynic's indifference.

Arnold heard a step on the planking—a blow on the cheek sent him against the wall of sacks. From the impact he recoiled, crouched like a fighter and met the next rush with hammering lefts and rights, clenching and bruising the northerner's face with short arm jabs which the untrained man was powerless to avoid. But Banway burst through the boxer's defense; again they clenched and twisted in the narrow way between the wall and the dock's edge, silent, except for the strain and choking draw of their lungs, reeling, struggling nearer the water. Arnold's strength was spending. Though he had split Banway's lip and eye, the woodsman was lifting him mightily, shift as he would; and then, crushed in each other's arms, they went over the dock by the steamer's bow into the plunging flood tide.

Arnold had an indistinct recollection of striking an iron bound splicing of the head line as they sank. He struggled in the woodsman's grasp, and then felt the big fellow sinking limply through the water as the tide heaved them in the space between the dock wall and the ship. Down this space came the shouts of men running on the plank, and kneeling to look into the darkness. From the confusion of electric lights, rafters, men's faces on the gangplank a rope shot down; Arnold grasped it desperately until a mighty pull swung them against the piles, where he clutched at the slime and mollusk incrustations, still holding to the other man, who began to struggle as his bleeding head came above the water. Instinctively he, too, caught the rope, and with his enemy, hung in the swing of the tide. Men were scrambling down the piling.

"Got a hold?" some one shouted. "Ready up there—heave!"

They hauled the woodsman up until he stumbled bewilderedly across the plank to the dock. He beat the water and mud from his clothes as Arnold came after him, and grimly they watched each other with no softening nor approach.

"God's sake, Louisville," exclaimed the mate of the Juanita, "what you fighting about?—who started this?"

"It's the new tally clerk," whispered a young man from the office.

The mate, the manager of the shipping firm, and the stevedores, looked on the two wet and bleeding men, staring savagely at each other.

"Who started all this?" demanded the manager.

"I did," growled the woodsman. "I'd a-killed him sure—it's fo' a girl he knows!"

They looked again on the combatants. The mate spoke to the manager, who regarded Arnold, soaked, bruised and dirty, with rising suspicion. He was harassed, peevish, the hour late, and he had not been to dinner. "Who is he?—where'd you get him?" he demanded of the subordinate.

"Some bum came along," whispered the clerk. "Mr. Bacon hired him—I dun-no—he was kind of a well dressed bum."

Never in his dilletante theatricals had Arnold a better makeup. He looked the part. And the dockmen knew Banway of the lumber schooner trade.

"Here, what you got to say?" cried the manager angrily.

"Nothing—" retorted the young man, "not a word."

"You git off this wharf—we don't owe you nothing yet. I don't want no fighting around here. You git!"

Arnold glanced from the manager to the curious faces of the stevedores; he had a strange sensation of being thousands of miles away, in a foreign port—alien, friendless, alone—to him would be dealt an alien's justice. He looked over his clothes, the only decent suit he had had of late, now smeared with slime, dock dust, wet, torn and bloody, his hat gone, his collar ripped from the band—yes, he was the bum now, penniless, without a hand to grasp or a place to turn.

The friends he had had were the friends of debonair dressing, of the light ways of the town, the smiles of women of the cafes, or idling sunny afternoons on street or racecourse. But these he had given up in some foolish way or other—now, he was the ragged and hungry water front bum, out of a job, kicked off the docks. He turned from them and went to the street.

Through the deserted wholesale quarter, and then Chinatown, his steps led to the house on the hill. Above the turmoil of the fight, above even the bitterness of Banway's contempt, because of Sylvia Spring and her suffering at his hands, came the thrust of failure. Yes, he was down now; he had led the gray wolves of the town, dragging down their man here or there to the killing—but he had come to be the renegade, and the pack had leaped to throttle him. He had turned, seeking what might be fair or of worth, and these had rejected him; the city had requited his evil with evil.

When he reached the untenanted corner he leaned against the forlorn window of the store and wiped the slime from his face. The water drained from his clothes, but he did not feel the chill, even in the bleak wind; the tumult of blood and his thoughts racked him hot. He tried to visualize Sylvia as insane, dying; he tried to say, as he had said, that it did not matter, to brutalize his soul and smash out the picture—so much of mean and melancholy failure had since come that he must forget all together. But through the humility of his heart there shot a new suffering, a desperate grief. She seemed now the one actuality of light he had ever known, a soul peering at him through a veil, but in no reproach. She had loved him purely.

As he stood acute with this memory Nella called him and he did not answer for a time. When she repeated it, he said: "Yes, but don't come down—I'll be there."

His voice betrayed him; he was wont to come with a cheery greeting to them all. She appeared on the stairs and he must explain something.

"Nel, I've lost the job. I've had a fight, too."

She had never seen him so gripped from within, but she only said: "Boy, you're hurt. Come on home."

He shook off the touch on his sleeve and started away: "Don't wait for me. I'll be late."

But she hurried after him. "What's the matter? Have you killed some one?"

"Go back!" he retorted and roughly left her. But though he almost ran to evade her, to be alone with his remembrance, the girl followed and came on him across the street from the Albemarle. He looked at the yellow curtained windows of the cafe, the lights on the table, the clean people at this cheery affair of dining. A year ago he had been as well ordered to this tolerant life as they. And he looked about at her, at himself, wrecked, alone with this girl who clung to him, who had neither an understanding heart nor spiritual strength. She had become unkempt with the ways of the lodging house, unpretty with a pallor stealing on her, useless, weak—a leaf in the storm. And with a resurgence he saw her the symbol of all he had lived, made for himself, the satire of his talents prostituted, of ambitions crushed—failure he had made of it all and this girl was the symbol.

Her voice came to his fever: "Let's go. What's the use of this?"

"Nel," he muttered, "you know this and you never told me!"

"Yes. What good would it do? They were against you all—Miss Wayne and your friend who wears such stunning clothes—they're a thousand miles above it, and no matter what you tried they'd never understand." She took his arm again in her pleading: "But don't you mind—you can go—O, you must, and to the north, like you said." She tightened her hand: "See here—you must have loved her."

"No. It was something more than that. I caught at her, trying to get back. I never could raise myself alone. Well, you can't understand!"

No, she couldn't understand. He couldn't fight the city; he had been one to drift with its pleasuring, the lilt of young life through its amazing intricacies, eager for its adventures—he had lived it all and now was done, but it had broken his man's will, shaken his courage, beaten him. Yes, he had jested too long, uncaring of the better way; now the path was lost.

"No," he went on, staring at the lights, "what can you know? What can any one know?"

But with little inarticulate endearments, brushing the slime from his bruised cheeks, smoothing the hardness from his mouth, she clung to him, glad for this word after the terror of repression.

CHAPTER XXIII

Nella went about the small duties of the house the next week more silent, curiously watching Arnold's moods, more gentle in her haphazard caring for the moonfaced waif and the old man. But at length she could again laugh in her gipsy abandon to him when he came back from his fruitless answering of advertisements for mean clerkships and canvassers' positions in suburban towns for which he had neither aptitude nor experience. He had gone to the superintendent of the Mutual Bank building and asked for work, he told her one evening.

"You'll have to have better clothes in a bank," she said doubtfully.

He smiled. "It isn't built yet—merely a hole in the ground. I tried to get a job mixing cement and they said I couldn't—I didn't belong to the union."

She laughed, marveling at the thing, however. "We're in for it. Here's the soldier man coming back, and anyhow by the 5th we'll have to move. A big Chinaman has bought this corner to make it over into a gambling house."

The young man looked at the rooms crowded with stuff from his father's one time home and to which, in his years of army service, he had added the loot of Philippine towns and of Peking, along with the accumulations of later years.

"I think I'll sell the furniture—that sideboard is heavy stuff—it'll fetch something."

"It was your mother's, wasn't it?"

"Yes."

"And all those pretty things—the silver and china? No—no—don't you!"

"Nel, I'm broke."

"Well," with her elbows on her knees she looked at him, "I can do something. I know a girl at the White House store; maybe I could get in there!"

"No, you'll have to stay a while. Who'll take care of the captain and the kid?"

"That's the other thing I was going to tell you. That Wilson woman, who tells everybody I'm tough, got the officer of the Home Finding society up here again to look us over. He asked all about the kid and me, and where Granny'd gone, and he's going to make a report or something. He mumbled something about the court, and all the old hens in the block got around him on the corner."

"Don't worry. They can't take the kid. When Granny gets back we'll make some new arrangements—" he broke off, staring doubtfully at her puzzled face. If Granny did not return—what then? "Nel," he muttered, "what'll you do when the old establishment here goes to pieces?"

HE TURNED TO HER A FACE AS HARD AS HER OWN: "I'D KILL YOU"

She thrust out her small foot, twisting the brilliant beaded slipper so that it sparkled in the light. "I never bother—what's the use of thinking about myself? I've been funny lately, Ham. I've been just as happy here, trying to cook and listening to the captain growling away about the battles. He's getting so he isn't pompous with me, and thinking women are foolish—he's blind and can't tell whether I rouge my cheeks or not! Today I took his skinny old hand and put it on my face and asked him if I did. It made him laugh—the first time I ever made the old soldier man laugh!"

She swung her foot restlessly from the table top, still admiring the beaded slipper, and then looked with disdainful pity at the cuts on her hands. She had smiled through this disastrous experiment, her eyes burning, her fingers soiled in the greasy kitchen; through a thousand failures fretting her temper, dulling her youth.

"We're nearing the end," Arnold answered irrelevantly. "I'm broke. But, Nel, I've been offered a place worth a hundred a month."

She cried out with a child's joy, "Where?"

"Playing the piano at Sheehan's. I met Ferreri today—he can fix it."

The girl got from her perch and came to him with a hard grimace—a new, surly look, a cat cornered and feverish to fight his mates. "No," she growled, "no!"

"Nel, I'm drifting back. Something's taken the heart out of the fight. I thought things would help a fellow to be decent, but nothing does. I was with the old gang today—the race-track crowd—and they cheered me. I tell you, I've failed at trying to be decent."

She suddenly put her hand on his shoulder with a brilliant, intent study, her blue eyes narrowing. "A piano player in a dance hall? No, you don't. I'll go on the town myself first!"

He turned to her a face as hard as her own. "I'd kill you."

She relaxed seriously from his hands and stared down, her brow wrinkling. She bit one of her small scarred fingers, and then laughed joyously.

"O, boy, let's not care! I can drift, because things can't hurt me. But you—it's different. You got to be like I dream of the Captain Larry—the fellow who got the honor medal. Honest, Hammy, I'm in love with him!"

The dissembler started as he always did at the portent of this obsession in her and the captain. He drew Nel to him, holding her hands. "I wish you wouldn't talk that way. I wish there was a Larry—if there were only some one you would care for!"

"Yes," she muttered, "everything's different when there's some one to care for!" Then her old mood came back. "O, who the devil cares about our souls? We don't need to be happy. A man can just go on and be square as he can, whether there's any place like heaven or not. And for me, I'm almost happy. I'm changing. When Larry comes, maybe it will be a great thing for us all. Waiting for him has kept me straight and kind, maybe. O, it's wonderful to care for some one!"

The liar sat back, trying to clear the astonishing dilemmas of his creating, this confusion of real lives and phantom faiths about him.

"You got to go on!" Nel added, laughing in his somber face. But when he had gone, and the hours drew to midnight in the quiet house, with only the little clock in the kitchen, and the tired child's breathing, she went restlessly from room to room. At last, on the stairs below the captain's apartment, she sat waiting, shivering at times in the chill and drawing her frayed silken skirts about her.

"It's an awful tangle," she muttered, "he's beaten—beaten, everywhere. It's so still tonight—like when men kill themselves."

She sat two hours, crouched, staring from a window over the side balcony at the trades fog drift across the sky. The glow down town made of it huge, twisting ghosts above the city and the silence on the hilltop was acute.

At three o'clock Arnold came home. He had been drinking for the first time in months. Nella met him with no surprise. She went before him to his rooms, took his hat and the fine top coat which had concealed his shabby suit; and then, as he sat before the table, she pushed back the thin curls from his brow.

"Kid," she said, "what did you do it for?"

He smiled slowly at her from the confusion of his heated brain and took her hand from the table's edge.

"I struck a queer crowd tonight," he answered quietly. "Did you ever hear of Oregon Slim?"

"Is he that big con man who's doing time at Folsom?"

"He's out now and back in the old hang outs where Stillman and I used to have him line up some of the Pacific street vote. Well, I met him tonight. He was surprised to see me down and out—and he made me a proposition."

"Yes," Nella said, with the same intent.

"Do you want to know?" he demanded.

She was silent and he laughed briefly. "A holdup. He knows when his man will have the goods—and has planned a getaway. I told him I'd consider and let him know tonight."

"Well," she retorted, "the town's broke you—when you'll stop to listen to that!" She slipped from the table, came to him, clasped her hands about his shoulder, looking up attentively. "Yes, that's the way we go. You just drift down and nothing stops you. I knew you were ready for any desperate game—and I'm not straight myself and can't help you." She laughed with forced nonchalance. "O, well, suppose I just go my own way to the devil and you go be an out and out crook? Just suppose?"

"You can't do that," he muttered. "I didn't say I was either."

"But it's creeping on you. And, O, you're not a man for that! You got to keep on square, somehow. I've been sort of proud of you! Just proud, like you were my brother—only that!"

"Nel," he whispered, and put his arm about her slender shoulder, in his eyes a brother's gentleness. "I've never cared a deal for women—but they're all splendid, somehow!"

"Am I?" she answered, a curious hesitance to her laugh. "No one ever told me so in all the world!"

Then laughingly, in one of her wilful whims, she caught up the hand of the north woods waif and trailed the child from the room. "Come, babe, don't mind that man. I ain't afraid for him after all—he couldn't just for you and the old soldier man and me, he couldn't!"

That night at bedtime she hung about the child's neck the little silver crucifix that her young sister had sent her from Notre Dame—the sister she had not seen in six years and who knew nothing of her except that badly written and brief letters with money came at uncertain intervals to the convent's head.

Arnold discovered the trinket on the child's breast the next day and covered Nel with confusion by his query.

"What do I want with a fool cross like that?" she retorted. "Crosses and little gods made out of silver? It's all right for your religious friend—she used to be impressive in that black silk robe with the little gold cross on a little gold chain. Do you remember?"

"Let's forget," he answered quietly. "That's done, too."

His tone drove the lightness from her, but she went on. "I don't know. You're thinking of her, Hammy—of her and of all the decent women you ever knew—women who can laugh without fear of anything. Yes, you're in a sort of dream of them. And it's all a mystery to me. Sometimes I think you loved one of them—that Sylvia, or Miss Wayne. Or maybe it's just because they're different—something that might have helped and you think is lost to you."

"Yes, I think that's it. A man needs that. He's got to think of women that way if he's ever to get back a better way."

She looked at his introspective mood. "There were two good women," she went on. "And one or other of them—you can't forget—you loved her." And then she laughed in her old refusal to be held to a sober mood. "O, well, I can't help—I'm just careless Nel!"

She slipped away, leaving him with a sense of that meaningless pathos in women, the myriad procession who found nothing and as meaninglessly passed, their laughter echoing through the ages, hiding the inexorable tragedy, the infinite hunger of their souls.

Another night, after the captain was asleep, Arnold came to sit by the cleared supper table where the girl was sewing.

"What's that?" he asked presently.

She laughed flutteringly. "Oh, just a little spread for your dresser! To take the place of that dirty thing. I'm learning a new stitch from Kohamma, the Japanese shoe maker's wife, down the hill."

He took the linen, cheap, handsoiled, miserably worked—even his man's eyes recalled much better things in the tawdriest shops. The girl had pricked her finger, her red-brown hair was over the cloth, and he saw the net of lines woven below her lashes. Her hands were small, unequal to the clean gripping of the world of work. She suddenly laid one beside his own and laughed aimlessly. Then she lifted his; across the palm were purple abrasions.

"What have you been doing today?" she whipped out, keen as a fox. "This?"

"Got a job at the new bank building—I'm a cement mixer's helper."

The girl sprang up and away to survey him. "I noticed white on your clothes. Why, you dear old fool—I won't have it!"

But looking at him, she came again to lay her kitchen roughened hand on his; and suddenly, in a burst of laughter, she kissed his brow, the tears in her blue eyes.

"O, don't mind me! I'm just Nel, who's happy when it's sunny, and every one's good humored!"

Outside the night fog thickened, the hill was dull. After a time they heard a sound, a fumbling, and the captain, his coat open, showing his hairy breast, groped in. The old man's eyes were turned brightly to them in the lamp's glow, but Arnold sprang up with a cry—for four days the veteran had not left his bed for sheer weakness.

The soldier warned him with a prophetic finger.

"Hear that? The troop ship's in the bay!"

They heard the moan of the siren through the silence. The old man saluted.

"Sir," he added, "will you have my sword for me tomorrow? Will you go with me to meet the boy?"

"The Sherman will not be here until Thursday, Captain. That's only the fog horn off the point."

But the captain shook his head. "It's the troop ship's whistle. I have listened now, three days. Tomorrow we'll go meet them—those young fighting fellows who did so well at Bamboang."

He turned triumphantly and went to his room.

"Thursday?" muttered Nella, her eyes brilliant, to the younger man. "As soon as that? An officer with yellow cavalry stripes—what'll I wear for him?"

Arnold's face darkened; he was gripped with formless doubts. Night after night he had held them, raised them, creating the roles and playing the parts in the drama of Bamboang—first recklessly, ardently; then wearily, in confusion, before the old man's eagerness, the girl's absorption. The reckoning had come—the dream fortress where he had fought for them so long was crumbling. His mind was busy with futile inventions. What should he say when the troop ship lay at anchor in San Francisco bay?

Nella brought a letter to the table, tossed it to him. "What do you think?" she said idly. "Granny says her brother's laid up for a year and she can't tell when she'll be back. She said we'd better give up the house and sell everything for her and do just the best we could." He caught her eye roving over the familiar walls. "It sort of hurts me, Kid," she muttered. "This is more like home than I ever knew!"

He nodded. Yes, it had sheltered them, the grim ghost of a house on the hillside; around it the fogs and rains had battered since the town had stood. It seemed that of late no one came there, few passed the decaying block—they were cut off, clinging to the place as to a gray rock watching the menace of the sea.

"Home!" he said. "It's been like that."

The round faced infant waddled to Arnold's chair; he drew it up to the arm and sat it there. "You little devil—I wonder what the tough old game's got for you some day? Who'll play square with you and see you through afterward? Somehow, he likes me, Nel—he and the pup."

"Who don't?" she murmured apathetically. "It's like when you used to stroll into the old places, the gayest and the best dressed of them all—they'd all be glad just because you'd come."

He wondered at the sweetness of her praise; he wondered what faint ray he might have cast from his life to other lawless spirits in the darkness, what good he might have flung away that had found lodgment. "Just glad because you came." Perhaps that was something. In the silence the girl stretched the silly little cloth across the table. "I wish I had some clothes left," she said listlessly. "I'll be a fright to have a man like that around the house—an officer with the medal of honor." Then she threw her shoulders back and laughed: "Tell me, Hammy, am I as pretty as I used to be?"

"Prettier," he answered. "Seems like there's something new about you. Nel, it's strange we're here—you and I caring for an old man and a baby. Do you know what day this is—it's the Burns handicap. Just a year ago today I placed a bet for you and brought the winning ticket back to you in your red machine—sixteen hundred dollars—and that night you flung a thousand away on Kid Brannan's first big fight."

"Gee!" her old baffling laugh rang out, "and tonight we're broke! O, what a game! And it just seems like I'd been happy here!"

"That's the strangest thing," he answered, "just to watch you—to try to believe it's Nel Free—and yet I can't see you've changed. Good God, what a game! I wonder where we're drifting? Nel, if you only cared for some one!"

"I'm in love," she mocked; "that lieutenant with the medal. It's grand to care for some one—it's the greatest thing in the world!"

She looked over some waists and hats the next morning, musing in doubt. Some she threw aside, but one she studied over. "But it won't do. I wish I hadn't pawned so many things. If I only had one decent street gown!"

At 10 she went to Bernice Murasky's apartments at the Clifford. The Jewess had greatly changed, dressing indolently in an alcove off her sleeping room. She had never looked so well, so contented, wearing an elegant wrapper. On her table was a mass of wild lupine, smelling of the sea, lightening the clean wall tints and the pink and white bed.

Nella looked apathetically about this place, sweetened by the sun, perfumed; exhaling and completing the soft allurement, the daintiness that suggests to women's fancies the cupid arch over the ineffable presences of love.

Bernice was surprised; she had not seen Nella for weeks. She was suspicious, as women are, when their kind come with obvious, but inexplicable motives, concealing it with patronizing interest, but ferreting out surmises of each other.

Nella was ill at ease. She asked and replied to questions, each hovering about the other's furtive defenses, alert against reprisals. The visitor's eyes fixed on a jewel box of heavy silver; and then on a great beetle of diamonds against a black velvet bodice, which had been thrown over a chair from last night's wearing—a thing bigger than the pearl butterfly she had once owned, and which had been sold long ago from the house on the hill.

"Bernice, you've got some lovely things. I saw Mannie once, and he said you and Ferreri were going to be married."

"Maybe—this fall. Louis is making lots of money. He's got a new machine. His company has got the supervisors cinched, and the saloon men scared to death. They're all customers now. He and Stillman are pretty thick—that's it. You still living with the old lady? They say Ham Arnold's gone to pieces. He was a fool to quit politics when he did—just when Stillman got the town tied up. Where's Ham now?"

"O—home!"

"Some one said he was with the Mutual bank—down in the foundations," the Jewess laughed, "working from the ground up!"

Her inflection, the lift of her shoulders, the suspicion of a luxurious, cat like content were each lent to that subtle under wisdom of satire with which women bite one another. Nella turned restlessly away; she would have sold her soul if the chance had offered rather than broach her errand—another moment and it would be impossible.

She burst abruptly on Miss Murasky's solicitude.

"Look here, Bernie; I'm having a new gray suit made at Calleau's, but I can't get it until Saturday. It cost ninety-five, but that's all the good it does me now. I want to go down town today and I'm kind of short of things. Could I take that blue street dress for the afternoon?"

"It's gone long ago. But you need something? Kid, I've got pretty stout, but say—how's that etamine"—she was searching in the closet—"this is tight for me—it's old anyhow. Can you use it?"

The other girl examined the gown: "Yes—yes—can I? And if I had a hat—"

"Here's this black — you'd look good in it if you only had more—color. You didn't used to have to put on so much rouge. Now it sort of sticks out on you. What's up—got something on tonight?"

"O, I'm just going down town! I got a friend—an army fellow I used to know. Maybe we'll eat at Paul's."

"Kid, you're getting thin. You're a fool, Nella. You used to have everything you wanted. Now, what are you getting out of life?"

"I'm all right. You ought to see that swell gray I'm having made. Can I keep this until Sunday?"

"Sure. As long as you want. Do you need anything else?"

"No, I'm all right." The visitor was rolling her treasures in a paper, speaking with a difficult humility, for this subordination to her dependent of old days suddenly crushed her as no other revelation could have done. "Why don't you come over the hill and see us? It's awful quiet at Granny's."

"I'm pretty busy—I go somewhere with Louis' machine most every afternoon, or else some of the girls come in. I should think you'd just go crazy alone in that tumble down old house!"

"O, we have fun! When I get that tailor made—"

"Come over and dine with me some night. We'll go down to Green's and see if any of the old crowd hang out there now. Wally's got a new song published and he made a lot of money out of it this time. Everybody seems to have got on, of all that old bunch, except Ham Arnold."

Miss Murasky was shaking out the black velvet with the diamond beetle so that its gleams were in the other girl's eyes as she turned at the door. "Will you come over?"

"O, sure." But each knew that she would not—it would be too conclusive a triumph if Bernice could flout her shabby friend about the midnight cafes where once the shopgirl had been the dependent. "Bernie," went on Nella, "do you ever go to the shows and operas like you used to be so wild about in the old days?"

"Do I?" Bernice held the door as the other girl paused in the hall. "Nel, I'm as crazy as ever. I blow every cent I get on the theaters. I heard Melba last week in concert—every one of them. It was just like a silver string covered with pearls and diamonds falling from her lips. O, if I could sing that way—if I only could!" She smiled brilliantly from the door. "O, we'd be happy and we'd be good if we had everything we wanted!"

(To Be Continued Next Sunday)

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