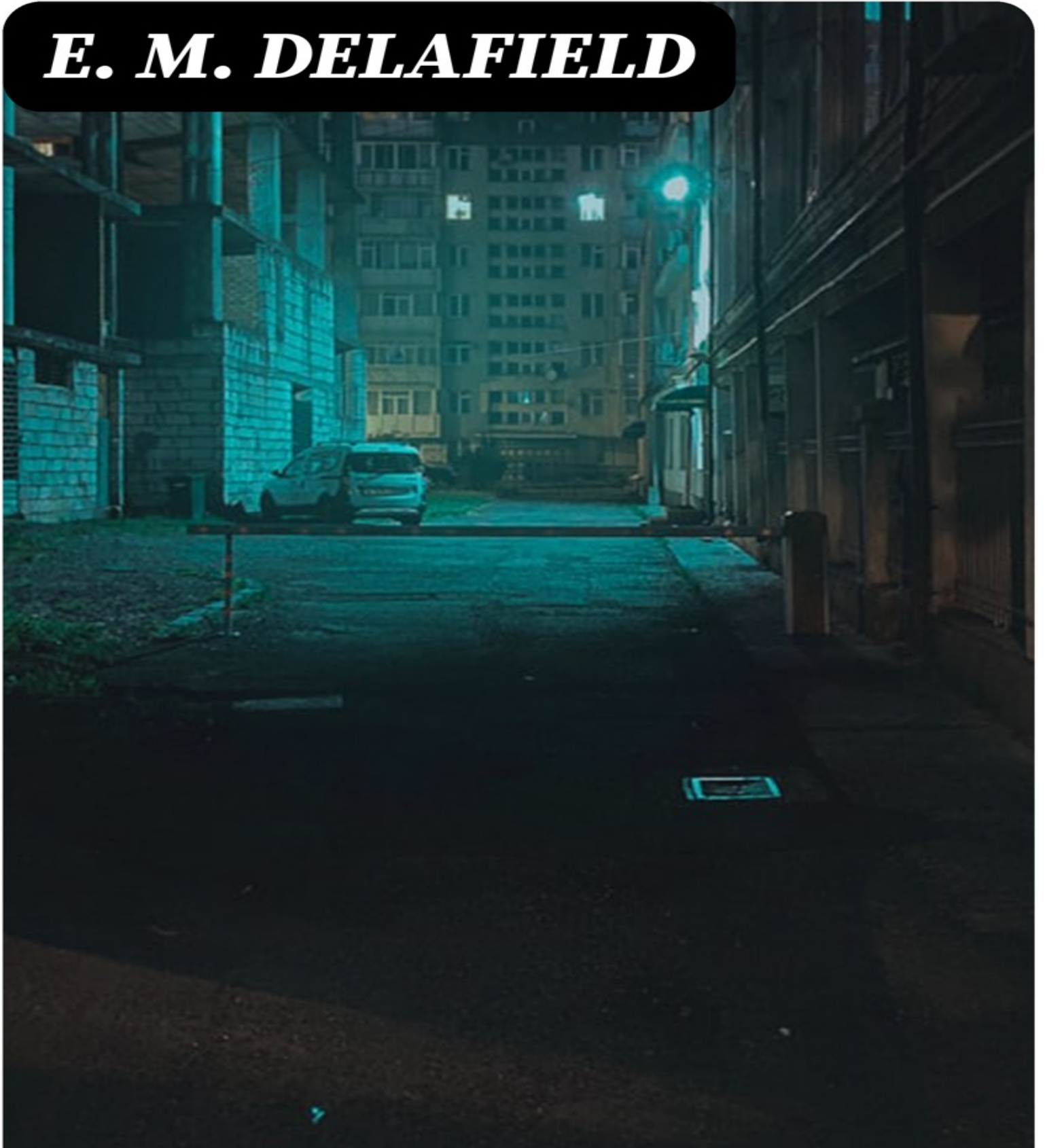
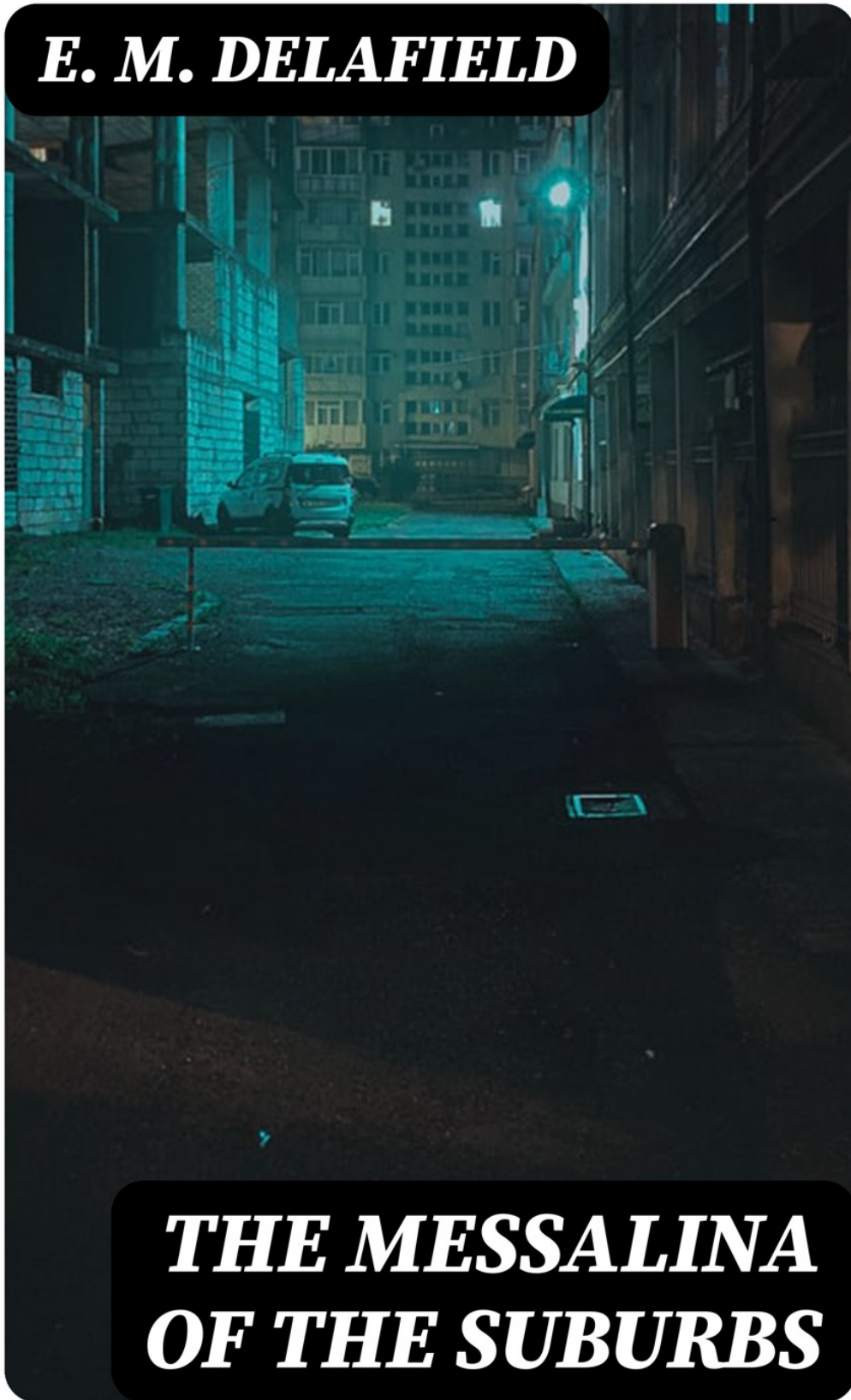


E. M. DELAFIELD



***THE MESSALINA
OF THE SUBURBS***

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The Messalina of the Suburbs

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DEDICATED

TO
M. P. P.

My Dear Margaret,

We have so often agreed that causes are more interesting than the most dramatic results, that I feel you are the right person to receive the dedication of my story about Elsie Palmer, in which I have tried to reconstruct the psychological developments that led, by inexorable degrees, to the catastrophe of murder. These things are never "bolts from the blue" in reality, but merely sensational accessories to the real issue, which lies on that more subtle plane of thought where only personalities are deserving of dissection.

For what it is worth, I offer you an impression of Elsie Palmer's personality.

E. M. D. August, 1923.

Part I

I

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"Elsie, I've told you before, I won't have you going with boys."

"I don't, mother."

"Yes, you do. And don't contradict. Surely to goodness you're aware by this time that it's the height of bad manners to contradict. I've taken trouble enough to try and make a lady of you, I'm sure, and now all you can do is to contradict your mother, and spend your time walking the streets with boys."

"Mother, I never."

"Now don't tell lies about it, Elsie. Mother knows perfectly well when you're telling a lie, and you don't take her in by crocodile tears either, my lady. Don't let me have to speak to you again about the same thing, that's all."

Elsie began to cry, automatically and without conviction. "I'm sure I don't know what you mean."

"Yes, you do, miss. I mean Johnnie Osborne, and Johnnie Osborne's brother, and Stanley Begg and the rest of them. Now, no more of it, Elsie. Go and give the girl a hand with washing up the tea-things, and hurry up."

Elsie went away, glad that it was so soon over. Sometimes mother went on for ages. Thank the Lord she was busy to-day, with two new paying guests coming in. As she went past the drawing-room door Elsie looked in.

"Hallo, Little girl!"

"Hallo, Mr. Roberts! Can't stay, I've to go and help the girl wash up or something."

"You've been crying!"

"I haven't, then!" She went further into the room and let him see the downward droop of her pouting mouth and her wet eyelashes. She had not cried hard enough to make her nose turn red.

"I say, what a shame! What have they been doing to

"Oh, nothing. Mother's on the warpath, that's all. It isn't anything."

"How rotten of her! Fancy scolding you! I thought you were always good, Elsie."

"And who said you might call me Elsie, if you'll kindly answer me that, Mister Impertinence?"

She shook her short, bobbing curls at him and laughed, suddenly good-tempered.

"You witch! Elsie, shall you miss me a tiny bit when I'm gone?"

"Oh, you're going, are you?" She pretended to consider. "Let me see, there's a single gentleman coming, who'll have your room, and a married lady and gentleman for the front bedroom. I don't really suppose, Mr. Roberts, there'll be time to miss you much, with the house full like that." She looked innocently up at him.

"Little devil!" he muttered between his teeth, causing her to thrill slightly, although she maintained her pose of artlessness without a visible tremor.

"Who's the bounder who's going to have my room after to-night?"

"Mis-ter Roberts!" She affected a high key of indignation. "He isn't a bounder. You know very well that mother's awfully particular. She wouldn't take anyone without he was a perfect gentleman in every way. Now I can't wait another minute. I should get into an awful row if mother caught me here."

"What's the harm? Don't run away, Elsie. Just tell me this : are you coming to the pictures to-night— for the last evening?"

"Oh, are you going to take me and Geraldine? I don't suppose Geraldine'll be able to—she's ill."

"Can't we go without her?"

"Mother wouldn't let me."

"Well, look here, Elsie—come without telling anyone. Do, just for the lark. I swear I'll take the greatest care of you."

"Oh, how could I? Besides, mother'd want to know where I was."

"Can't you say you're going somewhere with that eternal friend of yours—that Irene Tidmarsh girl, or whatever her name is?"

"I'll thank you to remember you're speaking of a friend of mine, Mr. Roberts. And the idea of suggesting I should do such a thing as deceive my mother! Why, I'm surprised at you!"

"Don't rot, Elsie. Say you'll come. Slip out after supper, and meet me at the bottom of the road. There's a jolly good programme on at the Palatial."

"I hope you'll enjoy the pictures, Mr. Roberts," said Elsie demurely. She sidled backwards to the door.

"I shall wait for you—eight o'clock sharp."

"Don't catch cold waiting," she mocked.

"Look here, kid"

"That's mother! She'll skin me alive, if I give her half a chance!" She flew out into the hall and down the passage to the kitchen.

The servant Nellie was there, and Elsie's sister Geraldine.

"Where've you been, Elsie?"

"With mother. I didn't know you were here ; I thought you were s'posed to be ill."

"So I am ill," returned Geraldine bitterly. "But as you were out, someone had to do some work."

Elsie looked critically at her sister. Geraldine did look ill, sallow and with black rims round her eyes, but then she had something altogether wrong with her digestion, and often looked like that.

"Bilious again?"

"'M. I think it was that beastly pudding we had last night. I've been awfully sick."

"Poor wretch!"

Neither of them paid any attention to Nellie Simmons, who went on plunging and clattering greasy spoons and plates about in the water that steamed from a chipped enamel basin.

"Can't you take this rag, Elsie, and wipe a bit, and let me get upstairs? I'm sure I'm going to be sick again."

"I suppose I must, then—poor me!"

"Poor you, when you've been out since dinner! I should like to know what for. If it was me, now Oh, Lord, my head!"

"Well, go on upstairs again. Have you tried the new medicine that Ireen's aunt did the testimonial for?"

"Yes, and I don't believe it's a bit better than any of the others. I feel like nothing on earth. I say, where were you all the afternoon?"

"Curiosity killed the cat," said Elsie, wiping the plates.

"I'm sure I don't want to know."

"That's all right then, we're both satisfied, because I don't mean to tell you."

Geraldine looked angrily at her sister and walked away, her thin plait of dark hair flapping limply between her angular, slouching shoulders.

"What is there for supper to-night, Nellie?" said Elsie presently.

"The 'am."

"Oh, goodness, that old ham I Why can't we ever have anything nice, I should like to know! And I s'pose the cold tart's got to be finished up, and that beastly cold shape?"

"That's right," Nellie said laconically.

"Well, there'll be no cooking to do, that's one thing."

"She wants some soup put on, because of the new people, but I've left it all ready. I'm off at six sharp, I can tell you."

"What's the hurry, Nellie?" asked Elsie amicably. She saw that Nellie wanted to be asked, and she felt good-humoured because there was no cooking to be done, and she could lay the supper and ring the bell earlier than usual, so as to be able to keep her appointment with Mr. Roberts.

"I've got someone waiting for me, I 'ave," Nellie said importantly. "Couldn't be kept waiting—oh dear, no!"

Elsie looked at the ugly, white-faced Cockney woman, whose teeth projected, decayed and broken, and round the corners of whose mouth and nostrils clung clusters of dry pimples, and burst out laughing.

"It's true!" said Nellie, offended. "And I'm off now."

She went to dry her chapped hands on the limp and dingy roller-towel that hung beside the cold-water tap.

Elsie laughed again, partly to tease Nellie Simmons and partly because it really amused her to think that her own projected diversion with Mr. Roberts should be parodied by this grotesque Nellie and some unknown, equally grotesque, companion.

Nellie pulled down her hat and coat from the peg on the kitchen door, put them on and went away, although it was quarter of an hour before her time. She knew well enough that none of them would say anything, Elsie reflected. Girls were too difficult to get hold of, when one took in guests.

As soon as the side door had slammed behind Nellie, Elsie flew into the scullery. A broken piece of looking-glass hung there, where she had nailed it up herself long ago.

She pulled down the thick, dust-coloured wave of hair that fell from a boyish, left-hand parting, until it lay further across her forehead, deepening the natural kink in it with her fingers, and loosening the black ribbon bow that fell over one ear. The soft, flopping curls fell to her shoulders on either side of her full, childish face. She rubbed hard at her cheeks for a moment, without producing very much visible effect on their uniform pale pinkiness, starred all over with tiny golden freckles. The gold was repeated in her eyelashes

and pale eyebrows, but Elsie's eyes, to her eternal regret, were neither blue nor brown. They were something between a dark grey and a light green, and the clear blue whites of them showed for a space between the iris and the lower lid.

Her nose was straight and short ; her wide mouth, habitually pouting, possessed a very full underlip and a short, curving upper one. When she showed her teeth, they were white and even, but rather far apart. The most salient characteristic of her face was that its high cheekbones, and well-rounded cheeks, gave an odd impression of pushing against her underlids, so that her eyes very often looked half shut, and small. Elsie saw this in herself, and it made her furious. She called it "a Japanese doll look."

She realised that her soft, rounded neck was really beautiful, and was secretly proud of the opulent curves of her figure ; but to other girls she pretended that she thought herself too fat, although in point of fact she wore no stays.

She thought with pride that she looked more like eighteen than sixteen years old, although she was not, and knew that she never would be, very tall.

Dragging a black velveteen tam-o'-shanter from her pocket, Elsie pulled it rakishly on over her curls, her fingers quickly and skilfully pouching the worn material so that it sagged over to one side. The hands with which she manipulated the tam-o'-shanter were freckled too, like her face, and of the same uniform soft pink. The fingers were short, planted very far apart, and broad at the base and inclining to curve backwards.

She wiped them on the roller-towel, as Nellie Simmons had done, only far more hurriedly, and then went quietly out at the side door. It opened straight into a small blind alley, and Elsie ran up it, and into the road at a corner of which her home was situated. Turning her back on No. 15, from which she had just emerged, she kept on the same side of the road, hoping to escape observation even if Mrs. Palmer were to look out of the window.

Very soon, however, she was obliged to cross the road, and then she rang the bell of a tall house that was the counterpart of the one she lived in, and indeed of all the other hundred and eighty yellow-and-red brick houses in Hillbourne Terrace.

Irene Tidmarsh opened the door, a lanky, big-eyed creature, with two prominent front teeth and an immense plait of ugly brown hair. Her arms and legs were thick and shapeless.

"Hallo, Elsie!"

"Hallo, Ireen. Look here, I can't stay. I only want to ask you if you'll swear we've been to the pictures together to-night, if anyone ever asks. Quick! Be a sport, and promise."

"What's up?" Irene asked wearily.

"Oh, only my fun. I don't particularly want mother to know about me going out to-night, that's all. If I can say I was with you if I'm asked, it'll be all right, only you'll have to back me up if she doesn't believe me."

"Oh, all right, I don't care. You're a caution, Elsie Palmer—you and your made-up tales. Don't see much difference between them and downright lies, sometimes."

"Well, what am I to do? I can't ever go anywhere, or have any amusement, without mother and Geraldine wanting to know all about it, and if I've been behaving myself, and 'cetera and 'cetera."

"Who is it this time. Elsie?"

"Only this fellow who's leaving to-morrow, the one that's been P.G. with us such a time, you know."

"Oh, Roberts?"

"'M. Well, so long, dear. Thanks awfully and all that. Ta-ta. Don't forget."

"Ta-ta," repeated Irene. "You'll have to tell me all about it on Sunday, mind."

"Awight."

Elsie turned and hurried homeward again, shrugging her shoulders up to her ears as the wind whistled shrilly down

the street.

It was September, and cold.

When she was indoors again, she pulled off her tam-o'-shanter and stuffed it once more into the pocket of her serge skirt. Then she went upstairs to the room at the top of the house that she shared with Geraldine.

"I wish you'd knock."

"Whatever for? It's my room as much as yours, isn't it?" Elsie said without acrimony.

"Have you been washing up all this time?"

"Nellie went off early."

"The slut! Whatever for? Did you tell mother?"

"No. It wouldn't be a bit of good. She won't say anything to Nellie just now, whatever she does, with these new people just coming in."

"Oh, my head!" groaned Geraldine, not attending.

She lay on her bed, her white blouse crumpled, and a machine-made knitted coat, of shrimp-pink wool, drawn untidily over her shoulders. Her black Oxford shoes lay on the mat between the two beds, and her black stockings showed long darns and a hole in either heel.

Elsie began to arrange her hair before the looking-glass in a painted deal frame that stood on the deal chest-of-drawers. Presently she pulled a little paper bag from one of the drawers and began to suck sweets.

"No good offering you any, I suppose?"

"Don't talk of such a thing. Elsie, I can't come down to supper to-night. Do be a dear and bring me up a cup of tea—nice and strong. I've got a sort of craving for hot tea when I'm like this, really I have."

"You don't want much, do you, asking me to carry tea up four flights of stairs? I'll see what I can do." Elsie began to hum, in a small, rather tuneful little voice. She let her skirt fall round her feet as she sang and pulled off her blouse, revealing beautifully modelled breasts and shoulders. Her arms were a little too short, but the line from breastbone to

knee was unusually good, the legs plump and shapely, with slender ankles and the instep well arched. She wore serge knickerbockers and a flimsy under-bodice of yellow cotton voile over a thick cotton chemise.

"Are you going out again?" asked Geraldine in a vexed, feeble voice.

"I may go round and sit with Ireen for a bit, after supper. I think she wants to go to the pictures, or something."

"How's Mr. Tidmarsh?"

"Going to die, I should think, by all accounts," glibly replied Elsie, although as a matter of fact she had forgotten to make any enquiry for Irene's father, who had for months past been dying from some obscure and painful internal growth.

"Why doesn't he go to a hospital?"

"Don't ask me. Ireen's always begging him to, but he won't."

"Old people are awfully selfish, I think," said Geraldine thoughtfully.

"Yes, aren't they? Look, I'm going to put this collar on my Sunday serge. That ought to smarten it up a bit."

She pinned the cheap lace round the low-cut V at the neck of an old navy-blue dress, and fastened it with a blue-stoned brooch in the shape of a circle. Her throat rose up, fresh and warm and youthful, from the new adornment.

"Isn't it time I put my hair up, don't you think?"

"No. You're only a kid. I didn't put mine up till I was eighteen. Mother wouldn't let me."

Elsie dragged a thick grey pilot cloth coat from behind the curtain of faded red rep that hung across a row of pegs and constituted the sisters' wardrobe, caught up the black tam-o'-shanter again and ran downstairs.

All the time that she was laying the table in the dining-room, which was next to the kitchen on the ground floor, Elsie hummed to herself.

The table-cloth was stained in several places, and she arranged the Britannia-metal forks and spoons, the coarse, heavy plates and the red glass water-jug so as to cover the spots as much as possible. In the middle of the table stood a thick fluted green glass with paper chrysanthemums in it.

Elsie added the cruet, two half-loaves of bread on a wooden platter with " Bread " carved upon it in raised letters, and put a small red glass beside each plate. Finally she quickly pleated half a dozen coloured squares of Japanese paper, and stuck one into each glass.

"Mother!" she called.

"What?" said Mrs. Palmer from the kitchen.

"It's ready laid."

"What are you in such a hurry for? Miss M. and Mr. Williams haven't turned up yet."

"Mr. Roberts wants his supper early, I know."

"You've no business to know, then. Well, put the ham on the table and the cold sweets, and he can go in when he pleases. This is Liberty Hall, as I call it."

Elsie carried in the ham, placing the dish on the table beside the carving-knife and fork that were raised upon a " rest " of electro plate. The glass dishes containing a flabby pink decoction of cornflour, and the apple tart, with several slices of pastry gone from the crust, she laid at the other end of the table.

"Supper's in, Mr. Roberts," she cried through the open door of the drawing-room, but this time she did not go in, and flew back to the kitchen before Mr. Roberts appeared!

"Geraldine's asking for tea, mother."

"There's a kettle on. She can come and fetch it."

"I'll take it up," Elsie volunteered.

"You're very obliging, all of a sudden. I'm sure I only wish you and your sister were more like sisters, the way Aunt Ada and Aunt Gertie and Mother were. There wasn't any of this bickering between us girls that I hear between you and Geraldine."

"You've made up for it later, then," said Elsie pertly. "The aunts never come here but they find fault with things, and Aunt Ada cries, and I'm sure you and Aunt Gertie go at it hammer and tongs."

"Don't you dare to speak to me like that, Elsie Palmer," said her mother abstractedly. (" Give me a spoon, there's a good gurl.") " What you gurls are coming to, talking so to your own mother, is more than I can say. What's at the bottom of all this talk about carrying tea to Geraldine? What are you going to do about your own supper?"

"Have it in here. I don't want much, anyway. I'm not hungry. Tea and bread and jam'll do."

"Please yourself," said Mrs. Palmer.

She was a large, shapeless woman, slatternly and without method, chronically aggrieved because she was a widow with two daughters, obliged to support herself and them by receiving boarders, whom she always spoke of as guests.

"Where are these what-you-may-call-'ems—these Williamses—coming from?" Elsie asked, while she was jerking tea from the bottom of a cocoa-tin into a broken earthenware tea-pot.

"Ask me no questions and I'll tell you no lies," said her mother.

She had no slightest reason to conceal the little she knew of the new people who were coming, but it was her habit to reply more or less in this fashion, semi-snubbing, semi-facetious, whenever either of her daughters asked a question.

"I'm sure I don't want to know," said Elsie, also from habit.

She made the tea, poured out two cups-full and took one upstairs. As she had expected, the alarm clock on the wash-stand showed it to be eight o'clock.

Almost directly afterwards, she heard the front door slam.

No. 15 was a narrow, high house, with very steep stairs, but Elsie was used to them, although she grumbled at the number of times she went up and down them, and she and Geraldine and Mrs. Palmer all kept numerous articles of toilet and clothing in the kitchen, so as to save journeys backwards and forwards.

She now went down once more, and sitting at a corner of the newspaper-covered kitchen table, drank tea and ate bread-and-jam deliberately.

"That's the bell!"

Mrs. Palmer hoisted herself out of her chair, from which she had been reading the headlines of an illustrated daily paper, commenting on them half aloud with : " Fancy! . . . Whatever is the world coming to, is what I say. . . ."

"That'll be the Williamses, and about time too. You'll have to give me a hand upstairs with the boxes afterwards, Elsie, but I'll give 'em supper first."

She went out into the hall, and Elsie heard the sounds of anival, and her mother's voice saying : " Good evening, you've brought us some wet weather, I'm afraid. . . . You mustn't mind me joking, Mrs. Williams, it's my way. . . . Liberty Hall, you'll find this. . . ."

Elsie ran to the back kitchen, donned the pilot-cloth coat and the tam-o'-shanter, and slipped out through the side door into the wet drizzle of a cold autumn evening.

"Ooh!" She turned up the collar of the coat, and pushed her gloveless hands deep into her pockets as she hurried along the pavement. It shone wet and dark, giving blurred reflections of the lamps overhead. Every now and then a tram jerked and clanged its way along the broad suburban road.

Only a few shops were lit along the road. Most of the buildings on either side were houses that displayed a brass sign-plate on the door, or a card with " Apartments " in one of the windows. Right at the end of the street, a blur of bluish light streamed out from the Palatial Picture House.

"I thought you weren't coming," said young Roberts, reproachfully. "It's long after eight." He wore a light overcoat and he, also, had turned up his collar as a protection against the rain.

"I had to help mother, of course. And if you want to know, I ought to be there now." She laughed up at him provocatively.

"Come on in," he said, pulling her hand through his arm.

II

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This was Elsie's real life.

Although quite incapable of formulating the thought to herself, she already knew instinctively that only in her relations with some man could she find self-expression.

In the course of the past two years she had gradually discovered that she possessed a power over men that other girls either did not possess at all, or in a very much lesser degree. From the exercise of unconscious magnetism, she had by imperceptible degrees passed to a breathless, intermittent exploitation of her own attractiveness.

She did not know why boys so often wished to kiss her, nor why she was sometimes followed, or spoken to, in the street, by men. At first she had thought that she must be growing prettier, but her personal preference was for dark eyes, a bright colour, and a slim, tall figure, and she honestly did not admire her own appearance. Moreover, her looks varied almost from day to day, and very often she seemed plain. She had never received any instruction in questions of sex, excepting whispered mis-information from girls at school as to the origin of babies. The signs of physical development that had come to her early were either not commented upon except in half-disgusted, half-facetious innuendo from Geraldine, or else dismissed by Mrs. Palmer curtly :

"Nice gurls don't think about those things. I'm ashamed of you, Elsie. You should try and be nice-minded, as mother's always told her gurls."

,A sort of garbled knowledge came to her after a time, knowledge that comprised the actual crude facts as to physical union between men and women, and explained in