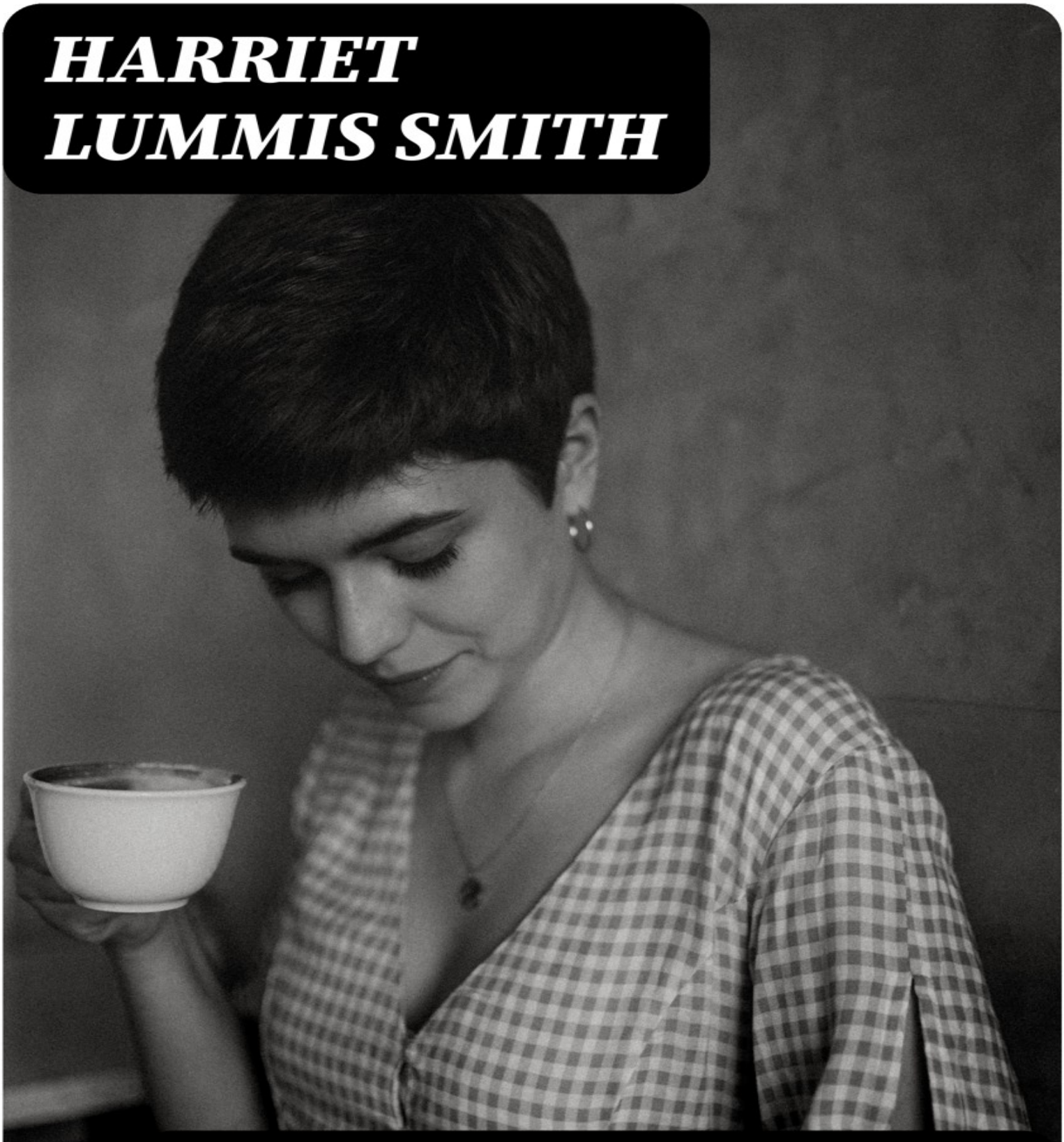
HARRIET LUMMIS SMITH



OTHER PEOPLE'S BUSINESS: THE ROMANTIC CAREER OF THE PRACTICAL MISS DALE

Harriet Lummis Smith

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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCING PERSIS

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The knocking at the side door and the thumping overhead blended in a travesty on the anvil chorus, the staccato tapping of somebody's knuckles rising flute-like above the hammering of Joel's cane. TO some temperaments the double summons would have proved confusing, but Persis Dale dropped her sewing and moved briskly to the door, addressing the ceiling as she went. " 'Twon't hurt you to wait."

The stout woman on the steps entered heavily and fell into a chair that creaked an inarticulate protest. Persis' quick ear caught the signal of distress.

"Mis' West, you'd be more comf'table in the armchair. I fight shy of it because it's too comf'table. If I set back into the hollow, it's because my work's done for the day. And here's a palm-leaf. You look as hot as mustard-plaster."

Having thus tactfully interfered for the preservation of her property, Persis cast a swiftly appraising glance at the chair her caller had vacated. "Front rung sprung just as I expected," was her unspoken comment. "It's a wonder that Etta West don't use more discretion about furniture."

Mrs. West dabbed her moist forehead with her handkerchief, flopped the palm-leaf indeterminately and cast an alarmed glance heavenward. "Gracious, Persis, first thing you know, he'll be coming through."

“ ’Twon’t hurt him to wait,” Persis said again, as if long testing had proved the reliability of the formula. “He called me up-stairs fifteen minutes ago,” she added, “to have me get down the ’cyclopedia and find out when Confucius was born.”

“I want to know,” murmured Mrs. West, visibly impressed. “He’s certainly got an active mind.”

“He has,” Persis agreed dryly. “And it’s the sort of mind that makes lots of activity for other folks’ hands and feet. Does that noise worry you, Mis’ West? For if it does, I’ll run up and quiet him before we get down to business.”

Mrs. West approved the suggestion. “I brought my black serge,” she explained, “to have you see if it’ll pay for a regular making-over—new lining and all—or whether I’d better freshen it up and get all the wear I can out of it, just as ’tis. But I declare! With all that noise over my head, I wouldn’t know a Dutch neck from a placket-hole. I don’t see how you stand it, Persis, day in and day out.”

“There’s lots in getting used to things,” Persis explained, and left the room with the buoyant step of a girl. She looked every one of her six and thirty years, but her movements still retained the ardent lightness of youth. Beaten people drag through life. Only the unconquered move as Persis moved, as though shod with wings.

The anvil chorus ceased abruptly when Persis opened the door of her brother’s room. She entered with caution for the darkness seemed impenetrable, after the sunny brightness of the spring afternoon. Joel Dale’s latest contribution to hygienic science was the discovery that sunshine was poison to his constitution. Not only were the shutters closed,

and the shades drawn, but a patch-work bed-quilt had been tacked over the window that no obtrusive ray of light should work havoc with his health. Joel's voice was hoarsely tragic as he called to his sister to shut the door.

"I'm going to as soon as I can find my way to the knob. It's so pitch-dark in here that I'm as blind as an owl till I get used to it."

"Maybe 'twould help your eye-sight if you was the one getting poisoned," Joel returned sarcastically in the querulous tones of the confirmed invalid. "I've 'suffered the pangs of three several deaths,' as Shakespeare says, because you left the door part way open the last time you went to the 'cyclopedia." For twenty years Joel had been an omnivorous reader, and his speech bristled with quotations gathered from his favorite volumes, and generally tagged with the author's name. The quotations were not always apt, but they helped to confirm the village of Clematis in the conviction that Joel Dale was an intellectual man.

By the time Persis had groped her way to the bed, she was sufficiently accustomed to the dim light to be able to distinguish her brother's restless eyes gleaming feverishly in the pallid blur of his face. "What do you want now, Joel?" she asked, with the mechanical gentleness of overtaxed patience.

"Persis, there's a text o' Scripture that's weighing on my mind. I can't exactly place it, and I've got to know the context before I can figure out its meaning. 'Be not righteous over-much, neither make thyself over-wise. Why shouldst thou destroy thyself?' That's the way it runs, as

near as I can remember. Now if righteousness is a good thing and wisdom too, why on earth—”

“Goodness, Joel! I don’t believe that’s anywhere in the Bible. Sounds more like one of those old heathens you’re so fond of reading. And anyway,” continued Persis firmly, frustrating her brother’s evident intention to argue the point. “I can’t look it up now. Mis’ West’s down-stairs.”

“Come to discuss the weighty question o’ clothes, I s’pose. ‘Bonnets and ornaments of the legs, wimples and mantles and stomachers,’ as the prophet says. And that’s of more importance than to satisfy the cravings of a troubled mind. If the world was given up to the tender mercies o’ women, there’d be no more inventions except some new kind of crimping pin, and nothing would be written but fashion notes.”

“I’ll have to go now, Joel.” Persis Dale, having supported her brother from the time she was a girl of seventeen, had enjoyed ample opportunity to become familiar with his opinion of her sex. As the manly qualities had declined in Joel, his masculine arrogance had waxed strong. The sex instinct had become concentrated in a sense of superiority so overwhelming that the woman was not born whom Joel would not have regarded as a creature of inferior parts, to be patronized or snubbed, as the merits of the case demanded.

“Do you want a drink of water?” Persis asked, running through the familiar formula. “Shall I get you a fan, or smooth out the sheets? Then I guess I’ll go down, Joel. I wouldn’t pound any more for a while, if I was you. ’Twon’t do any good.”

The sound of voices greeted her, as she descended the stairs, Mrs. West's asthmatic tones blending with the flutey treble of a young girl. "It's Diantha," thought Persis, her lips tightening. "I might have known that Annabel Sinclair would send for that waist two days before it was promised."

The young girl sitting opposite Mrs. West was perched lightly on the edge of her chair like a bird on the point of flight, and the skirt of her blue cotton frock was drawn down as far as possible over a disconcerting length of black stocking. Her fair hair was worn in curls which fell about her shoulders. Fresh coloring and regularity of feature gave her a beauty partially discounted by an expression of resentful defiance, singularly at variance with her general rosebud effect.

"Mother sent me to see if her waist was ready, Miss Persis." Diantha spoke like a child repeating a lesson it has been kept after school to learn.

"It won't be done till Saturday, Diantha. I told your mother Saturday when she sent the goods over."

The girl rose nimbly, the movement revealing unexpected height and extreme slenderness, both qualities accentuated by her very juvenile attire. She made a bird-like dart in the direction of the door, then turned.

"Mother said I was to coax you into finishing it for to-morrow," she announced, a light mockery rasping under the melody of her voice. "I know it won't do any good, but I've got to be obedient. Please consider yourself coaxed."

"No, it won't do any good, Diantha. The waist'll be ready about two o'clock on Saturday." Persis stood watching the

girl’s retreating figure, and the serenity of her face was for the moment clouded.

“Diantha Sinclair reminds me of a Lombardy poplar,” remarked Mrs. West. “Nothing but spindle till you’re most to the top. It does seem fairly immoral, such a show o’ stockings.”

“Annabel Sinclair seems to think she can stop that girl’s growing up by keeping her skirts to her knees,” returned Persis grimly. “A young lady daughter would be a dreadful inconvenience to Annabel.” Then the momentary sternness of her expression was lost in sympathetic comprehension as Mrs. West bowed her head and sprinkled the black serge with her tears.

“There, there, Mis’ West. Cry if you feel like it. Crying’s the best medicine when there’s no men folks around to keep asking what the matter is. Just let yourself go, and don’t mind me.”

“Of course you know,” exclaimed Mrs. West, her fat shoulders heaving as she took full advantage of the permission. “Everybody knows. Everybody’s talking about it. To think that a son of mine would stoop to steal a wife’s affection away from her lawful husband.”

“Don’t make things out any worse than they are, Mis’ West. Your Thad can’t steal what never was. And Annabel Sinclair never had any affection to give her husband nor nobody else.”

Mrs. West’s distress was too acute to permit her to find comfort in a distinction purely technical. “Thad always was such a good boy, Persis, but now I’m prepared for anything.

I think she's capable of working him up to the point of running away with her."

Again Persis proffered consolation. "I don't think so. Annabel Sinclair's what I call a feeble sinner. She reminds me of Joel when he was a little boy. He'd go down to the river, along in April when the water was ice-cold, and he'd get off his clothes and stand on the bank shivering. After his teeth had chattered an hour or so, mother'd come to look him up and Joel would get into his trousers and go home meek as a lamb. Well, Annabel's the same way. She likes to shiver on the bank and think what a splash she'll make when she goes in, but she hasn't got the courage to risk a wetting, let alone drowning."

Mrs. West, blinking through her tears, looked hard at her friend. "Seems to me you're talking awful peculiar, Persis. 'Most as if you'd respect Annabel more if she was wickeder."

"Maybe I would," acknowledged Persis bluntly. "Seems to me it's almost better to have folks in earnest, if it's only about their sins. Annabel Sinclair turns everything into play-acting, good and bad alike."

"I don't know why Thad can't see through her," cried the distracted mother, voicing an age-old wonder. "I used to think he was as smart as chain-lightning, but I've changed my mind. Any man that'll let Annabel Sinclair lead him around by the nose hasn't got any more than just sense enough to keep him out of an asylum for the feeble-minded, if he *is* my son."

"That's where all of 'em belong when it comes to a woman like Annabel," said Persis with unwonted pessimism. "And Thad's just young enough to be proud of having that

sort of acquaintance with a married woman. Men are queer cattle, Mis' West. The worst woman living likes to pretend to herself that she's as good as anybody, but a man who's been decent from the cradle up, gets lots of comfort out of thinking he's a regular devil. At the same time," she conceded, with a change of tone, "the thing ought to be stopped."

"Of course it had. But how are we going to do it? I've talked to Thad and talked to him, and so has his father. If I thought the minister would have any influence—"

"You just let Thad alone for a spell," Persis commanded with her usual decision. "And you leave this thing to me. I'll try to think a way out."

This astonishing offer was made in a matter-of-fact tone, significant in itself. Persis Dale earned her living as a dressmaker and pieced out her income by acting as a nurse in the dull seasons, but her real occupation in life was attending to other people's business. She had a divine meddlesomeness. She was inquisitive after the fashion of a sympathetic arch-angel. It appalled her to see people wrecking their lives by indecision, vacillation, incapacity, by poor judgment and crass stupidity. Her homely wisdom, the fruit of observant years, her native common sense, her strength and discernment were all at the service of the first comer. Responsibility, the bugbear of mankind, was as the breath in her nostrils.

"I wouldn't do any more talking to Thad," Persis repeated, as Mrs. West looked at her with the instant confidence of inefficiency in one who indicates a readiness to take the helm. "Don't make him feel that he's so awfully

important just because he’s making a fool of himself. Most boys attract more attention the first time they kick over the traces than they ever did in all their lives before. ’Tisn’t any wonder to me that the elder brother gets a little cranky when he sees the fuss made over the prodigal, first because he’s gone wrong and then because he’s going right, same as decent folks have been doing all the time.”

“What do you mean to do, Persis?” Mrs. West’s tone indicated that by some mysterious legerdemain the burden had been shifted. It was now Persis’ problem.

“That’ll bear thinking about,” Persis returned with no sign of resenting her friend’s assumption. “And while I’m turning it over in my mind, let Thad alone, and don’t wear yourself out worrying.” The injunction probably had a figurative import though Mrs. West interpreted it literally.

“Wear myself *out*. I can’t so much as wear *off* a pound. I’ve been too upset to eat or sleep for the last two months, and I’ve been gaining right along. Most folks can reduce by going without breakfast, but seems as if it don’t make any difference with me whether I touch victuals or not.”

She was rising ponderously when Persis checked her. “Your serge, Mis’ West. We were going to see if ’twas worth making over.”

“It’s time to get supper, Persis, and there ain’t a mite of hurry about that serge. Truth is,” explained Mrs. West, lowering her voice to a confidential murmur, “ ’twasn’t altogether the dress that brought me over. I sort of hankered for a talk with you. There never was such a hand as you be, Persis, to hearten a body up.”

Persis found no time that evening for grappling with the problem for which she had voluntarily made herself responsible. The preparation of Joel’s supper was a task demanding time and prayerful consideration, for as is the case with most chronic invalids, his fastidiousness concerning his food approached the proportions of a mania. Her efforts to gratify her brother’s insatiable curiosity on points of history and literature, had put her several hours behind with her sewing, and as she owned to a most unprofessional pride in keeping her word to the letter, midnight found her still at work. A few minutes later she folded away the finished garment and picked from the rag carpet the usual litter of scraps and basting threads, after which she was at liberty to attend to that mysterious rite known to the housekeeper as “shutting up for the night,” a rite never to be omitted even in the village of Clematis where a locked door is held to indicate that somebody is putting on airs.

Candle in hand, Persis paused before a photograph, framed in blue plush and occupying a prominent position on the mantel. “Good night, Justin,” she said in as matter-of-fact a tone as if she were exchanging farewells with some chance caller. As the candle flickered, a wave of expression seemed to cross the face in the plush frame, almost as if it had smiled.

It was a pleasant young face with a good forehead and frank eyes. The indeterminate sweetness of the mouth and chin hinted that this was a man in the making, his strength to be wrought out, his weakness to be mastered. Like the blue plush the photograph was faded, as were alas, the

roses in Persis' cheeks. It was twenty years since they had kissed each other good-by in that very room, boy and girl, sure of themselves and of the future. Justin was going away to make a home for her, and Persis would wait for him, if need be, till her hair was gray.

He had been unfortunate from the start. Up in the garret, spicy with the fragrance of dried herbs and of camphor, were his letters, locked away in a small horse-hair trunk. Twice a year Persis opened the trunk to dust the letters, and sometimes she drew out the contents of a yellowing envelope and read a line here and there. These were the letters over which she had wept long, long before,—blurred in places by youth's hot tears, the letters she had carried on her heart. They were full of the excuses in which failure is invariably fertile, breathing from every page the fatal certainty that luck would soon turn.

The letters became infrequent after old Mr. Ware's "stroke." Persis understood. For them there could be no thought of marrying nor giving in marriage while the old man lay helpless. All that Justin could spare from his scant earnings, little enough, she knew, must be sent home. And meanwhile Joel having discovered in a three months' illness his fitness to play the part of invalid, had apparently decided to make the rôle permanent. Like many another, Persis had found in work and responsibility, a mysterious solace for the incessant dull ache at her heart.

That was twenty years before. Persis Dale, climbing the stairs as nimbly as if it were early morning and she herself just turned sixteen, seemed a woman eminently practical. Yet in the changes of those twenty years, though trouble

had been a frequent guest under the sloping roof of the old-fashioned house and death had entered more than once, there had never been a time when Persis had gone to her bed without a good night to the photograph in the blue plush frame, never a morning when she had begun the day without looking into the eyes of her old lover.

The most practical woman that ever made a button-hole or rolled a pie-crust, despite a gray shimmer at her temples and a significant tracery at the corners of her eyes, has a chamber in her heart marked “private” where she keeps enshrined some tender memory. At the core, every woman is a sentimentalist.

CHAPTER II
THE LOVER

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Thomas Hardin, trudging through the dusk of the spring evening, his shoulders stooping and his hands thrust deep into his pockets, wore an expression better befitting an apprehensive criminal than an expectant lover. As he approached the Dale cottage where the light of Persis' lamp shone redly through the curtained window, his look of gloom increased, and he gave vent to frequent and explosive sighs.

The sense of unworthiness likely to overwhelm the best of men who seek the love of a good woman, was in Thomas' case complicated by a morbidly sensitive conscience and ruthless honesty. To Thomas, Persis Dale represented all that was loveliest in womankind, but he would have resigned unhesitatingly all hope of winning her rather than have gained her promise under false pretenses. "I can stand getting the mitten if it comes to that," Thomas assured himself with a fearful sinking of the heart, which belied the boast. "But I can't stand the idea of taking her in." When she knew him at his undisguised worst, it would be time enough to consider taking him for a possible better.

Unluckily for his peace of mind, confession was more intricate and protracted than in his complacency he would have believed. It seemed impossible to finish with it. Whenever he nerved himself to the point of putting the question which had trembled on his lips for a dozen years,

dark episodes from his past flashed into his memory with the disconcerting suddenness of a search-light, and further humiliating disclosures were in order before he could direct his attention to the business of love-making. Sometimes Thomas felt that his reputation for uprightness was a proof of hypocrisy, and that his friends and neighbors would shrink away aghast if they suspected a fraction of his unsavory secrets.

Persis was alone when Thomas entered. Not till the last lingering tinge of gold had deserted the west, would Joel venture to leave the room barricaded against the hostile element. But at any moment now he might think it safe to risk himself down-stairs, and knowing this, Thomas resolved to waste no time in preliminaries.

“How’s your sister and the children?” Persis asked, shaking hands and returning to her sewing. She offered no excuse for continuing her work, nor did Thomas wish it. There was a delicious suggestion of domesticity in the sight of Persis sewing by the shaded lamp while he sat near enough to have touched the busy fingers, had he but won the right to such a privilege.

“Nellie’s well. Little Tom’s eyes have been troubling him since he had the measles, but the doctor thinks it’s nothing serious. Look here, Persis, I was wondering as I came along if you knew that I *chewed*.”

Persis’ lids dropped just in time to hide a quizzical, humorous gleam in her eyes. The rest of her face remained becomingly grave. “I may have suspected it, Thomas.”

“It’s a filthy habit,” he said, inordinately relieved by her astuteness and yet with wonder.

She looked up from her work to explain. “It’s this way, Thomas. Sometimes when I go into the store I catch sight of you before you see me, and maybe one of your cheeks will be all swollen up as if you had the toothache. Then you slip into the back room, and come out in quarter of a minute with both of ’em the same size. It’s a woman’s way, Thomas, to put two and two together.”

Thomas’ face was radiant. That weight was off his conscience. He had a right to proceed to more agreeable disclosures, undeterred by the fear of practising deception on the noblest of God’s creatures. It contributed to his joy that Persis had known of his weakness, and yet had not crushed him with her contempt. She had not even expressed agreement when he had called chewing tobacco a filthy habit.

“Persis,” he began in his deepest tones, “I was thinking as I came along—”

The stairs creaked and Persis interrupted him. “There’s Joel. It makes it hard for him when the days are getting longer all the time. He’ll be glad when we have to light the lamps at five.”

Thomas was in a mood to wish that the village of Clematis basked in the rays of the midnight sun. He forced a smile to his reluctant lips as Persis’ brother entered and magnanimously put the question, “How do you find yourself to-night, Joel?” though he knew only too well the consequences to which this exposed him. There was no surer passport to Joel’s favor than to inquire about his health if one was also willing to listen to his answer. The people who said, “How do you do?” and immediately began to talk

of something else were the objects of Joel's detestation, while his grateful affection went out to the select few willing to hear in detail his physical biography since their last meeting. Joel experienced the same satisfaction in describing the pains in his abdomen or an attack of palpitation that a bride feels in exhibiting her trousseau.

"I've nothing to complain of, especially when you take into account that I'd have been six feet under the sod by now, if I hadn't discovered that sunshine was poison to my constitution. It sort of draws all the vitality out of me, same as it draws the oil out of goose feathers. I'd have improved a good ideal faster," Joel continued with sudden irritation, "if it hadn't been for Persis' carelessness in leaving the door open. You'd think that I had a good big life insurance in her favor, the way she acts. As the Frenchman said, 'Defend me from my friends, I can defend myself—' "

"I've always understood that sunshine was about the healthiest of anything," interrupted Thomas, reddening angrily at the criticism of Persis. "And if you want my opinion, you look to me a good deal like a plant that's sprouted in the cellar."

The last thing Joel wanted was another's opinion. He continued as though Thomas had not spoken.

"And besides that, I've been eating too much meat. Science tells us that the human body is pretty near all water. Don't that show that most of the needs of the body can be supplied by drinking plenty of water?"

Thomas shook his head. "I'd hate to try it. When I'm hungry, I wouldn't swap a good piece of beef-steak for a hogshead of water."

“You eat too much meat.” Joel, extending an almost transparent hand toward his sister’s caller, shook a bony forefinger in warning. “You’re undermining your constitution. You’re shortening your days by your inordinate use of animal food.”

“Me! Why, bless you, Joel, I never was sick a day in my life.”

“Well, that don’t prove that you never will be, does it? And anybody with half an eye can see that you’re not in good shape. Flesh don’t show nothing. A man who weighs two hundred is the first to go under when disease gets hold of him. Your color, as like as not, is due to fever. How many times a day do you eat meat?”

“Well, always twice, and sometimes—”

Joel groaned. “Rank suicide! Suicide just as much as if you put a revolver to your head. It sounds well to talk about prime cuts of beef and all that, but when you come down to cold facts, what’s meat? Dead stuff, that’s all. It ain’t reasonable to talk of building up life out of death.”

Persis’ quick ear had caught the sound of stealthy movements in the adjoining room. She wove her needle into the seam, a practise so habitual that probably she would have done the same if the lamp had exploded unexpectedly, and crossing to the kitchen door, opened it without warning. A small untidy woman, the shortcoming of her appearance partly concealed by the old plaid shawl that enveloped her person, dodged away from the key-hole with a celerity perhaps due to practise.

“It just struck me that there was more voices than two,” she explained with self-accusing haste. “And I didn’t want to

intrude if you was entertaining company. Sounded to me like Thomas Hardin's voice."

"Yes, it's Mr. Hardin. Will you come in, Mis' Trotter?" Persis' invitation lacked its usual ring of cordiality.

"Oh, I wouldn't want to intrude. But I says to Bartholomew this very day, 'I'm going to run over to Persis Dale's after supper,' says I, 'to see if she can't let me have some pieces of white goods left over from her dressmaking.' You're doing a good deal in white this time of the year, as a rule," concluded Mrs. Trotter, a greedy look coming into her eyes.

"Mis' Trotter, I always send back the pieces, even if they're no bigger than a handkerchief. If anybody's going to make carpet rags out of the scraps, I don't know why it shouldn't be the people who bought and paid for the goods."

"And that's where you're right," Mrs. Trotter agreed, with the adaptability that was one of her strong points. "There was Mattie Kendall, now, who kept up her dressmaking after she married Henry Beach. Well, she set out to dress her children on the left-overs, and it went all right while they was little. But Mamie got grasping. After her oldest girl was as long-legged as a colt, she'd send word to her customers and say that they needed another yard and a half or two yards to make their dresses in any kind of style. Of course it got out in time, and everybody who wanted sewing done went to a woman in South Rivers. I often say to Bartholomew that honesty's the best policy, even where it looks the other way round."

During the progress of this moral tale, Persis' thoughts had been self-accusing. She reflected that curiosity is not among the seven deadly sins, and that if Mrs. Trotter found in listening at key-holes any compensation for the undeniable hardships of her lot, only a harsh nature would grudge her such solace. Moreover ingrained in Persis' disposition, was the inability to hold a grudge against one who asked her a favor.

"I don't know, Mis' Trotter, but maybe I've got some white pieces of my own that aren't big enough for anything but baby clothes. I'll look over my piece-bag to-morrow. If there's anything you can use, you'll be welcome."

Mrs. Trotter expressed her appreciation, "With all the sewing I done when Benny was expected, I did think I was pretty well fixed, come what might. I didn't reckon on the twins, you see. And then when little Tom died, they laid him out in the embroidered dress I'd counted on for the christening of the lot. Not that I grudged it to him," added the mother quickly, and sighed.

This had the effect of dissipating Persis' sense of annoyance. "I'm pretty sure I can find you something, Mis' Trotter. And I'll speak to one or two of my customers. Some of 'em may have things put away that they're not likely to want again."

Mrs. Trotter received the offer with a dignity untainted by servile gratitude.

"Me and Bartholomew feel that in raising up a family the size of ourn, we're doing the community a service. So we ain't afraid to take a little help when we happen to need it. And by the way, if you should find some of the white pieces

you was talking about, maybe you wouldn’t mind cutting out the little slips and just stitching ’em up on your machine. The needle of mine’s been broke this six months, and anyway, something’s the matter with the wheels. They won’t hardly turn.”

“Need oil, probably,” commented Persis. She knew she was wasting her breath in making the suggestion. The shiftlessness which left the sewing-machine useless junk in a family of eight was a Trotter characteristic. If Bartholomew could have appreciated the value of machine oil, he would have been an entirely different man, and probably able to support his family. In view of this, Persis felt that she could do no less than add: “To be sure I’ll stitch ’em up. ’Twon’t take much of any time.”

“Now I’m not going to keep you a minute longer. I guess Thomas Hardin don’t come here to talk to your brother the whole evening.” Mrs. Trotter smiled pleasantly, but with a distinct tinge of patronage, the inevitable superiority of the wedded wife to the woman who has carried her maiden name well through the thirties. And indeed in Mrs. Trotter’s estimation, the hardships of her matrimonial experience were trivial in comparison with the unspeakable calamity of being an old maid.

After Joel was once fairly launched on the subject of hygiene, it was difficult, as a rule, to introduce another topic of conversation under an hour and a quarter. Persis was almost startled, on her return, to find the two men discussing an alien theme. More surprising still, instead of sulking over the curtailment of the dear privilege of self-dissection, Joel was plainly interested.

“It’s one of the games where you can’t lose, if you take their word for it,” Thomas was explaining to his absorbed listener. “The company begins to pay you int’rest on your investment just as soon as you hand over the money, six per cent. every year up to the time the orchard gets to bearing. Then it goes up little by little, and by the tenth year they guarantee you twenty-five per cent. Even that doesn’t cover it. They say that orchard owners in the same locality are making as much as a hundred per cent. most years. Anybody who could spare a few thousand would be sure of a good income for the rest of his days.”

“But there’s the off years,” objected Joel, a crackle of greed in his high-pitched voice.

“There’s not going to be any off years the way those fellows figure. They say that by thinning out the apples when the yield is heavy, they can be sure of a crop every season.” Thomas’ gaze wandered to Persis who had resumed her seat and taken up her sewing. “We’re talking of a chance to put your money where it’ll get more than savings bank int’rest,” he said, resolved that Joel should not monopolize every topic of conversation. “The Apple of Eden Investment Company, they call it.”

“I heard you say something about twenty-five per cent,” returned Persis, sewing placidly. “ ’Most *too* good to please me.”

“Now if that ain’t a woman all over,” Joel interjected excitedly. “The toe of a stocking is a good enough bank for any of ’em, and as for using foresight and putting a little capital where it’ll bring in an income for your old age, you’d think to hear ’em talk, that such a thing was never heard tell

of. If I'd had the handling of the money that's come into this house for the last twenty years, we'd have been on Easy Street by now. But Persis has the kind of setness that doesn't take no account of reason. And as the poet says:

> " 'He is a fool who thinks by force or skill
> To turn the current of a woman's will.' "

Thomas, purpling with resentment, addressed his next remark to Persis. "I don't s'pose our folks would take so much stock in all these fine promises if there wasn't a Clematis boy secretary of the company. I guess you remember him, Persis. Ware, his name was. Justin Ware."

"Yes, I remember him." An abrupt movement on Persis' part had unthreaded her needle. She bent close to the lamp, vainly trying to insert the unsteady end of the thread into the opening it had so lately quitted.

"I've been telling you right along you needed glasses," triumphed Joel. "And to keep on saying that you don't, ain't going to help the matter. 'When age, old age comes creeping on,' as the poet says—"

"I don't need glasses any more than you need a crutch." The denial came out with a snap. Persis Dale, patient to the point of weakness, enduring submissively for twenty years the thankless exactions of her brother, proved herself wholesomely human by her prompt resentment. "My eyes are as good as they ever were," she insisted, and closed the discussion if she did not prove her point, by putting her work away. Secretary of an investment company making such golden promises! That looked as if at last fortune had smiled on Justin Ware.

The two men had the talk to themselves. Persis' absorption was penetrated now and then by references to the miracles wrought by scientific spraying and pruning, or the possibility of heating orchards so that late frosts would no longer have terrors for the fruit grower, sober facts which the literature of the Apple of Eden Investment Company had enveloped in the rosy atmosphere of romance. Like many people who have never made money by hard work, Joel believed profoundly in making it by magic. His pallid face flushed feverishly, and his eyes glittered as he discussed the possibility of making a thousand dollars double itself in a year.

It was ten o'clock when Thomas again had the field to himself and in Clematis only sentimental visits were prolonged beyond that hour. Thomas' opportunity had arrived, but with it unluckily had come the recollection of a misdeed for which he must receive absolution before the flood-gates of his heart were opened.

"Persis, do you remember that old Baptist minister who lived opposite the schoolhouse when we were kids? Elder Buck, everybody called him."

With an effort she set aside her own recollections in favor of his. "Oh, yes, I remember. The one whose false teeth were always slipping down."

"His picket fence was all torn to pieces one night. He had a way of calling names in the pulpit, the elder had,—children of the devil and that sort of thing—and it got some of the boys riled. And to pay him back, they tore down his fence. Persis, I—I was one of those boys."

He looked at her appealingly and felt his heart sink. Persis' eyes were lowered. Her face was grave and a little sad as befits one who has been tendered irrefutable proof of a friend's unworthiness. Thomas gulped. Well, it was only what he had expected all along. A woman like Persis could not be asked to overlook everything.

"Good night, Persis," he said huskily, and he thought it more than his deserts when she answered him with her usual kindness, "Good night, Thomas."

CHAPTER III
A FITTING

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During the spring and summer Persis rose at half past five, and though she slept little the night following Thomas Hardin's disclosures, she refused to concede to her feeling of weariness so much as an extra half-hour. Her fitful slumbers had been haunted by dreams of apples, apples in barrels, apples in baskets, apples dropping from full boughs and pelting her like hail-stones, for all her dodging. There were feverishly red apples, gnarly green apples and the golden sweets, the favorites of her childhood, all of them turning into goblins as she approached, and leering up at her out of impish eyes which nevertheless bore a startling resemblance to those eyes in whose depths she had once seen only the reflection of her own loyalty. It was small wonder that Persis woke unrefreshed. "I declare," she mused, as she twisted her hair into the unyielding knob, highly in favor among the feminine residents of Clematis as a morning coiffure, "a few more nights like that would set me against apple pie for good and all."

But the developments of the day were soon to elbow out of Persis' thoughts the visions of the night. As she stepped out on the porch for a whiff of the invigorating morning air, her eyes fell upon a unique figure coming toward her across the dewy grass. In certain details it gave a realistic presentment of an Indian famine sufferer. In respect to costume, it was reminiscent of a bathing beach in mid-July.