

LADY AUTHOR

BY EVELYN SCOTT

THE light was teasing her closed eyes. She opened them on trees. Her sleeping porch at the rest cure had so many trees around it that she seemed to live in their boughs. There was a chaste, sweet excitement in pretending that this was her place, where unconcerned birds chirruped and flitted quick tails, where chipmunks galloped lightly up vertical roads, squirrels rasped their frantic angers, and the sky, hanging above everything, was a blue lake, high in the air. Then her own name, Stella, spoke of something as far off as the stars, which, before she had gone to sleep the night before, had threaded the pines with their rays. Stella was nobody's name. And what had happened to Stella Sommers in the last year could make no difference to Stella herself.

When she had arrived here, after a victorious acceptance of her defeat, there had been nothing in her bones but weariness, nothing in her heart but the ache Bernard had put there when, after supporting her ambition with his bold extravagance of praise, he had turned on her and had despised her aloud. I can't have you, so I'll destroy you! And that was what he had intended. He was that kind of person—a poet drunk on egoism. For a long while, she had hated his beautiful young phrases, because they were lies, and lied about her. He had meant to outrage her, and he had succeeded. Aghastness and deep incredulity still filled her when she recalled his fantastic, possessive eagerness, with its ac-

companiment of an irrational contempt for her—especially for what she wrote. He had actually believed that she loved him so much she would give up being everything which was really herself in order to become a woman stamped with his approval.

But at this hour of the morning, Stella shed the self that wanted recognition, and with an ache of extravagant expectancy, prepared to write again. She mustn't become too fixed in the idea that these weeks in the sanatorium put her to a test. She mustn't regard this period as time given her, after the mess of her divorce from Philip, to prove to him, and to her father, that she was neither wife nor daughter, but something the two, in their masculine self-centredness, had never clearly recognized. She was a grass widow, technically, who had assumed her maiden title, and her anonymity seemed to hang over her with the threat of extinction. Just as, once, being Professor Sommers's daughter, the radiance shed from her father's fame had almost obliterated her personality.

Professor Sommers's daughter! Professor Porter's wife! These descriptions had, in the beginning, spelled all she had dreamed of as attainments. She had grown out of them desperately, and forced others to discard them as she now discarded them formally. If she had not discovered, through the accident of Philip Porter's infatuation with her, that she could attract men, and had not been assured, by the

spectacle Bernard had made of himself, that she could be the cause of violent passions, she might never have accumulated enough conviction about herself to persist with her ambition. Through her slow recognitions of weakness in others—especially in men—her strength had increased. To see intelligent people turning to her and behaving like fools had reassured her quailing self-esteem.

But the story of herself as Professor Sommers's daughter and as Professor Porter's wife could not be written for a long, long while; and not, perhaps, until she knew the end. And when she tried to understand what Bernard represented in her mind, she seemed to look into an ugly chasm. At the bottom, somewhere, lay the deceptions Father had practised, when he had schemed to keep her at his side forever. At last, thank God, she realized his querulous old age, and knew that her rebellion, unsuspected when she was his docile companion, grieved him only selfishly. She was glad of the savage lust for survival which had sprung, untaught, out of her grief. From her conviction that none of those who had wanted her really loved her, came the new courage to stand up for herself.

In the first weeks here, her breakfast, brought to her room, had not been eaten to appease a healthy hunger, and the gush of energy which sent her out of bed today was like a sudden, unanticipated blessing. Only as her pyjama trousers slid from her hips and fell into silk nests surrounding her bare feet, did the consciousness of dreaded self return. For whenever she glimpsed, not quite advertently, the shocking, pale reflection of her nakedness, she thought helplessly of Mr. Gates, the new patient. His wistful admiration for her, expressed in glances of a shy bravado, though it was insignificant to Stella Som-

mers, the artist, dragged on her fancies as with binding, too familiar chains. Not that she would deny that she was vain. Even at thirty, she was still a woman—not the echo of a library! But she remembered Bernard, and regretted emotions which had slipped away and left no residue to be put in words. And Mr. Gates's fondness for her company produced, somehow, while she accepted it insatiably, a faint hostility.

Still, she was grateful for the disguise of mere prettiness. The low-backed tennis frock which she was slipping on dared more for her than she had strength to do. She gazed, with fretful absorption, into her own reflected eyes, blue, limpid, yet over subtle in their isolated sorrow. Some secret they were telling her eluded her. It was as if Mr. Gates, too often present, got in the way. This cluttering of her imagination annoyed her, made her obstinate; and it was like the signal for a war when she began to spread the lipstick on. The false impression she would make as ingénue seemed revengeful. With it, somehow, she would collect a debt—from *men*! A debt long overdue!

Ripe for the morning solitude, she snatched up her notebook.

II

Her notebook resting on her crossed knees, Stella sat on a stone bench in the Ridgetop gardens. Ahead of her a fountain spent a diamond murk across a slimed basin. When she turned her head and gazed from a certain direction, the mist loomed, sternly definite: a rainbow, all its dazzling colors purely stressed. Clouds had already begun to crowd on the early sun, and the light would glare for an instant, then become thoughtful and dire. Beyond the flower beds, seedling grass, languid

under its weight of dew, breathed mauve fog in its plumed tops. The windless air raced with insects: butterflies meandering on colorless, pale wings; bees hovering but scarcely buzzing at all; wasps floating around the stunning white shoal of spirea bushes: a thousand small things moving here and there secretly, preparing for a shower. The young day felt the shadow of an approaching mild disaster. And Stella felt it, with a rapturous dread, as if she were stealing it from other patients who were still receiving treatments and would not rise before noon. Every part of her body tingled with love for the chill of the hour; and this sound wakefulness of returning health seemed something preciously salvaged, after all that had happened to her, when, only recently, she had been like a corpse. It was as if Mr. Gates, arriving on Friday, meeting her at dinner, and *seeing* her, had supplied a needed reminder that she had not altered outwardly unless for the better. And his sober eyes, above his grin, had been a testimony to something which she would not have dared to hope. She had commenced, almost upon the instant, to feel her old self.

But she was unappreciative. Because, for the third time already, footsteps were smacking the gravel path (dying away, coming closer, dying away), she could spin no more than a few cadenced sentences from the skein of her mind; and she had tried futilely to link dramatically, in her writing, her impression of the morning and whatever it was that alternately depressed her and made her ecstatic. Mr. Gates, taking his purposed promenade, interfered as usual.

Though the details of the figure in flannels were not visible, as it passed, like a glow, into the rusty dimness of pines so dark under the pure stains of sky, she recognized it afar. And her pleasure in what

she was trying to do was startled out of her. It was as if the figure spoke to her some utter truth about herself which was unwelcome. This occurred over and over. Whenever Mr. Gates drew near, he was the landscape, robbing her of the greenest trees and most odorous flowers. And she would find herself, as the hand gripping the pencil trembled a little, regarding things of beauty which died in her eyes before they could reach her heart.

She had brought her handbag with her, and she snatched it up, and fumbled shame-facedly for the small mirror it contained. Mr. Gates was, at last, approaching frankly, though dawdling as he came, while every too-casual inch of him admitted him aware that he was nearing her. And Stella powdered her nose swiftly, feeling wildly a duty to preserve Mr. Gates's illusions. For the millionth time, the indignity of being a woman and bound to please overcame her. For not even with her sisters—not even with Beth, Helen, Freda and Joan, who were of her own sex—had she ever felt free of a defensive compulsion to look as pretty as she could. Her sisters, perhaps, had been worst of all, because their bouncing exuberance, demanding so much of her as the eldest, had really shattered her confidence, which she had regained only after becoming Mrs. Porter—poor old Philip's wife.

If women only had male complacency, what a different world it would be! The one consolation was that men, in the end, destroyed their own opportunities fatuously: And even Bernard, who had been welcomed as Professor Porter's favorite pupil, and had shattered Philip's home, would go on in blind conceit making love to girls and unwittingly teaching them to despise him.

Mr. Gates halted diffidently, while the sunlight, flashing in his eyes, revealed an

expression that was almost fond. "So there you are!" he said. "Your passion for getting up early is ahead of mine. How long have you been out here?"

As if he didn't know, when his steady, painfully anxious gaze seemed to say he had been searching for the one thing on earth and had found it at last! Stella smiled up at him, her glance insistent. "Ages," she said. "As if you hadn't seen me! Fraud!"

But she was uneasy. From the very beginning, each had recognized the other too deeply and had been uncomfortable. After five days of acquaintance, she realized that he was vain as if with an apology, wearing his expensive tweeds and flannels carelessly on purpose, because he was dissatisfied with himself. He did not seem ill, and the only clue to his being here at all was the peculiar humility and deep unhappiness behind those scrutinies of her when he pretended to boldness. Maybe he had come to Ridgetop to heal his nerves. Maybe he was recovering from a sorrow.

Her premature observation of each detail forming his personality was disconcerting. It gave her, she felt, a desperate right to require yet more of him in mute compliments. And to be certain of an attitude she need not dread, she made false promises with her own eyes. Though how she was ever to tell what he really thought of her—*this* way—she didn't know. And it was important to find out. Until she knew, he could interfere with her writing. Before she tried to forget him, he must seal her confidence with a tribute.

"It's a joke—you and me in this place, isn't it?" Mr. Gates said, with his modest grin which twisted his mouth a little to one side. "When I catch you out here, and remember the nuts and hypochondriacs around, I believe we're both fools."

"Why fools?" she said, ostentatiously

cool, though the smile played on her lips intermittently and she dared not relinquish it. "Speak for yourself. I'm not here just to be doctored. I'm a writer. I'm here to write!" (Mr. Gates had never inquired about her notebook, and this was irritating. It recalled Father, and even poor Philip, who had not taken her seriously at first. I'm *me*, she challenged silently, panic gripping her. And there are things about me *you* will never understand. A business man from Boston! How could he be expected —)

"You are?" he cried obediently, with faint respectfulness, astonished honestly. "*That's* why I've felt you were so interesting, I guess. Attractive women must have wits. I don't like charming female fools."

"Their mission isn't to amuse you *men*," she said, her sharpness contradicted sulkily by the persistent smile. Though, when he talked to her, exultance crept into her heady tones, his unimaginative view of her brought her a faint despondency. Men preconceived her prettiness as something limiting her character. Unless you got them quite alone, with their defences down, to *you*, the fools, the idiots, they never seemed to guess! But she saw she ought to fight her inclination to receive his flattery, which, afterwards, when she went back to write, would seem so cheap.

"I hate to be ungracious to a lonely man," she said, "but if you want me to like you, you'd better go away."

"Gee whiz!" he said. "Of course. Of course. I've been obtuse. I'm always interrupting you. I didn't realize a girl I took to be a dryad was deep in authorship."

"A *dryad*?" she mocked, with self-protective scorn. "I'd make the dickens of a dryad. For *goodness* sake!"

"But, among all these folks who seem to be getting ready to die, that's how you look to me," he said. "You still have quite

a breath of life in you—and I have, too, I hope, Miss Sommers, in spite of the depressing, contradictory signs.”

“I’ve had almost as much of living as I want,” she said unsteadily. “Almost *too* much.” She threw this out with sudden fierceness as a hint about herself that ought to wake him up.

“You have?” he answered, with a glance of lingering, curious sympathy. “A dryad can’t have too much life.”

“I’ll have too much of you unless you clear out pretty soon,” she said.

“That gets me!” Mr. Gates acknowledged, with a bantering ruefulness. “I can’t afford to lose the favor of the only woman I have found among these ghastly invalids. I’ll skedaddle.”

Again their interchanging gazes met, and comprehensions coalesced. In what? She shivered as he turned away. She hadn’t offered anything that he could hold her to. The tale his drooping shoulders told, as he marched off, was soothing to the unnamed dread; and yet she didn’t really want his admiration—very much.

Her thoughts returned to the garden, but she had to establish herself in it all over again. As the clouds snuffed the sun finally, the trees seethed greener, and she could smell the mellow delicate perfume from the rose beds. But some lost relevance to *her* in this was past recapturing. And Mr. Gates’s dwindling figure, all at once, had symbolized a villainy to which she could give no name.

III

Since luncheon, Stella’s confusion about Mr. Gates had been resolved. She had never been more relieved by the invention of a story. It was almost as though, writing of Mr. Gates, she had set right the troubles of years.

For an hour she had been sitting at her window, above the gardens and lawns of Ridgetop, which confronted her with an arresting openness. Sound had risen to her from the tennis court, where two voices echoed intermittently above a pattering of balls on rackets, which suggested small feet walking stealthily across the stilly air. She had glimpsed Mr. Gates occasionally, for he was having a game with young Paul Simpkins: a narrow-shouldered, frail, anæmic boy whom she could not abide. And she had felt gloriously powerful and in control of the new theme.

He had lost his mother. He was here on that account, she had resolved. A doting mother, who had been a semi-invalid. The mother’s fond dependence had made Mr. Gates a bachelor! Yes, Stella saw it plainly now. How Mr. Gates, idealistic, too weakly conventional, had spoiled his opportunities with his exaggerated sense of duty. And how for years—and ever since one tragic, very early episode—he had feared love! Until—while he was still under the morbid shadow of his mother’s death—a woman, strong, forthright, rebellious, almost primitively frank, had come into his life. The woman wasn’t Stella in the least, but big-boned, simple, handsome, tall, and almost peasantlike. Her personality was like a touchstone for some elemental truth; yet Mr. Gates, though moved by her and challenged by her unpretentious strength, in every situation which demanded he respond to her wholeheartedly, as man and lover, always failed. His mother held him even after death. Could it be possible that Stella made the thing *too* neat?

Fatigue was fretting her. The theme went dead. Her spent wrist flexed, the fingers on her pencil limp. But the disciplined invention of a history for Mr. Gates had done her good. It left her feeling she had risen above anything his pres-

ence here could do to her. The holy instant of that wakening moment on the sleeping porch was almost hers again. To lavish energy on scattered words across a page refreshed her. If only at this point the strong intoxication of surmounting what was actual had not eluded her and seemed to fail!

From the sanatorium building a maid had come out and was crossing the lawn. She halted deferentially beside the tennis courts. "They're waiting for you in the sun room, Mr. Gates," she called. Stella watched her distant lips.

He was suddenly visible, shuffling his bronzed arms into a blazer, snatching up his racket. So he had visitors!

IV

Stella had gone to the lower floor, to the common room, for tea, and had met them. He was married! The thin, dark woman with rouged cheeks and quick eyes was Mrs. Gates! And the great, iron-gray man, who looked like an heroic sheep, was a friend who had driven her up from New York, where she was staying for a while.

Mr. Nichols was the name of the iron-gray man. He had been attentive to Stella and she hadn't really liked him; and if she had felt self-assured enough to snub him thoroughly, she would have left the gathering better pleased.

Callers to the sanatorium were always attentive to Stella. She was in a very nervous state yet; descending to the lounge always made her uneasy, and recalled every agitation in the past, when she had been obliged to play the grown-up hostess to her father's learned friends. Then she had been surprised and somewhat disgusted to find that, when she met their scrutinies with fearful smiles, the ponderous, collegiate dignity would nearly always

melt. They had found her childish, foolish, she was half convinced, but liked her all the better so! Preparing for the sanatorium visitors, tumbling her hair becomingly or greasily enameling her mouth with rouge, would bring it all back. She had never owned a lipstick in those early days, and, somehow, now, that tracing of a gorgeous wound on her small face invariably made her feel more free.

Even after this ritualistic preparation, when she opened the door of her room on the still hospital corridor, she shrank in dread of the impression she might make. And the green afternoon, flung in the window by the stairs—the afternoon she had wanted to preëempt for her work—was lost!

As she tripped down the broad steps, Stella Sommers tripped with her. And Stella Sommers, eager, graceful, light and sure as the bees in the garden (yet so terribly *unsure*) walking proudly, head up, shoulders erect, with the free stride of a young girl on a Greek frieze—Stella Sommers accompanied her implacably, all the way to the solarium. Stella Sommers, cruelly persistent, could not be banished. And the best that could be managed by the nameless being of the sleeping porch was the air of wistful stoicism with which Stella Sommers went through such trials.

In the glass-walled solarium, made horrible by the number of persons there, Stella Sommers had her one certain satisfaction: she knew she was the prettiest woman present. Most of the invalids were so weakened and plain that Stella Sommers could count on eyes of newcomers, knowing they would never leave her for more than a second at a time. Today the sheep-faced man was almost reverently impressed, and Mrs. Gates paid a reluctant tribute with her attentive, quick examination of the charming costume and the lovely brow.

And still Stella Sommers (and the other one, as well) remained unhappy, gripped by panic. For not once did Mr. Gates's warm, sad gaze seek the confirmation she was suddenly ready to give him.

The encounter with his unsuspected wife had, for some reason, shattered Stella completely. Almost as soon as she could extricate her hand from that of the sheep-faced gallant who was loath to relinquish it, and immediately she had gulped a little from an uncomfortably hot cup of tea, she began murmuring excuses for her impetuosity, and rushed off. Her sense of anticlimax was so strong that she was very nearly in the mood of having nothing to live for.

What on earth is the matter with me? she wondered—afraid, as she flung herself shakily on her bed, that she might find the answer too humiliating to bear.

But *that* was Mr. Gates's wife! That brittle, bright, shallow, smartly faded little woman was his choice! He adored her!

O lord, will I be able to write the story as I've begun it? Stella thought. I've lost all conviction about it. He *isn't* the kind of person I thought he was. Very likely, he looks sad only because he's lost money on the stock exchange!

All the words which had been so crystal-line, revealing Mr. Gates, even as Stella had written them down, had gone dull. Her imagination had been duped. After this experience, she might actually dislike him. She felt bitter.

From where she lay, she could see nothing of the lawn; but she heard, all at once, Mr. Gates's voice and the baaing laugh of the sheep-faced gentleman, with an accompanying feminine trill. The callers were being shown over the grounds.

Soon a chugging came from the driveway—a car starting. So the visit was over.

Stella was relieved. As the chitter of the

motor engine, after thumps and chirrs of exasperation, became smoother and smoother, until it was smooth altogether, dwindling to the mere insect whirring which meant it was slipping out of the Ridgetop estate into the highway, she began to cry. She was so glad to have the sanatorium emptied of those two obnoxious people!

These were sweet tears, and they were appropriately accompanied by a sound which told her that the rain storm, impending since morning and withheld all these hours, had, at last, burst on the country. The trees around the sleeping porch, dreaming in their leaves, were all at once battered by drops. Splatters as large as dollars drooled from them to the porch balustrade. The pines, accumulating accurately, rows of jewels, rocked carefully like shifting towers; and, now and then, spent petals fell from the locust trees. The birds gathered in subdued colonies along the stirred branches. Away in the hills, thunder padded, thudding and bumping, with gigantic, stumbling echoes, crossing, at one stride, from horizon to horizon. Sharp fragrant air swept threads of silver over Stella's face, her outflung arms, and down the low-neck of her dress. Now the pines, steadily gathering diamonds, roared like the seas; and gray angelic hosts fled in a mist from the sky to the lawn. Under the accelerating vigor of the downpour, the foliage bounced and shook. To Stella, this was the passing of an illness. It was comforting to think of Mr. Gates, protected by the same roof, sharing with her consolation not afforded those two out on the road.

But she was purged and aloof. It might even be good to die like this, forgetting she had ever wanted to write.

Suddenly, she was electric with inspiration. The intuition came with a gush. His

wife's that awful sheep-man's mistress and he has accepted it! she thought. They've talked it out. He knows he doesn't love her any more. He's generous, and he's shouldering the situation for her convenience. That's why his nerves have broken down! That's why he's come to take a cure!

She sprang up and rushed into the darkling indoors, seeking her note-book. An unexpected tender pang of comprehension clutched her heart. She seemed to realize, with every nerve, what he was *really* like. There would be something to the story now!

V

Dinner was at seven. And Stella Sommers had dressed for it in a green muslin, almost as crisp and fresh as the drenched grass outdoors. She had done three hours' work since tea, and, in that time, had become so absorbed in her writing that the world had disappeared. Then Mr. Gates, obscurely vitalized by the play of her fancy, had been the whole of life, and she, god-like, creating him, a strange, divine nonentity. She was almost afraid to meet him. She felt as if she had been asleep, and had been roused to find herself dreaming of him.

When she met him, some victory she was building would be threatened with collapse. He was no genius like Bernard. He was not elderly and distinguished like Philip. And the stern honor she had done him was due to no special merit of his.

He was only a man from whom she had compelled an acknowledgment of what she was as a woman, because she found it comfortable to have those tributes as a background for what was more important. If men ever did stop noticing her and admiring her, the way, hard enough as it

was, might seem too hard. But he was probably conventional and petty, anyhow. She steeled herself with distrusts.

As she hurried downstairs and along the hall to reach the veranda, she prayed not to be overtaken by the fleshy figure with which her imagination had made itself incongruously intimate. If the story was spoiled, it would most likely be by Mr. Gates himself!

When she stepped to the garden path, air keen as dawn struck her full and composed her. The world looked pure as a sculpture. She was urged to walk rapidly, to tire herself out. The too-compelling impulse to let thought dwell exclusively on Mr. Gates must be exhausted. Then a necessary joy in grass blades and flowers might be reborn.

Following as it did on the boisterousness of the shower, this heavy silence was strangling. She was breathless before she reached seclusion. The blackness under the pines shocked her as if she had not expected it. A painted desolation colored the sky beyond them. As she proceeded over the damp needles, soaked, twinkling fields began to surround her. She gazed on them, and was homesick. They were near, but seemed remote. Long ago, this stillness, which lay on her with alien heaviness, would not have made her an outcast—not in the days when, goaded by the formulas her sisters used to describe her, she had read them bits from her first novel. That ought to have shown them! And they had turned her confidence into a family joke!

But Philip, when she had first timidly exposed her work for his criticism, had respected it! It was what had decided her to leave off being merely clever little Miss Sommers and accept the new, commanding status as Professor Porter's wife. He had made her feel ready to give him anything. Even herself!

But suppose he hadn't been, as everybody said, infatuated with her? In the beginning, Bernard had come almost violently to her support. And think of the cruelty later when he had ridiculed her in poems! If she should suddenly be stripped of all Mr. Gates delighted in, would her writing alone sober him to deference?

"Miss Sommers!" The arrow of the voice sped to her through the drenched dusk and she stopped short, like a paralytic, frozen there by her hostility. She could hear feet spanking on the gravel after her, and when he shouted out, "Miss Sommers!" again, her drear heart, in a strange commotion, made, unwillingly, a mute reply. But he hadn't even given Stella Sommers a glance for charity at tea! Besides—his wife—

And there had been, in this vast aloneness, out here by the woods, *almost* a rap-
ture.

Stella's eyes and ears tried to close, for everything was shrinking, everything was becoming commonplace. Instead of the quiet of stones and of the bleared fields the storm had left shrouded in water, there were footsteps. Instead of a dour, radiant heaven-without-end, there was the uneventful descent of night. Instead of the wonderful different objects which could be called trees and bushes, but had been, a moment before, accents for the exhilarating enigma of being alive, there was herself calculating how long it would take Mr. Gates to reach her and wondering whether or not her flight from the house had left her dishevelled.

"Gosh!" he said, jocular to cover his panting, "I saw you leave and I've been chasing you ever since. Afraid I'd lost you."

"Would it matter if you had?" she retorted with pert brevity. She was at attention now, and stealthily dismissed her

previous thoughts. She was possessed by another necessity altogether and had to find out something very quickly. There was a reckoning to be taken. Mr. Gates, having a wife to whom he behaved devotedly, was almost an enemy. For nearly a week his eyes had pretended. He had accepted all Stella had in her to bestow with a glance, and he had been unfaithful to her bounty. She no longer owed him even graciousness.

There was a despondent pause before he could answer painfully: "What's up? Have I offended you?"

The words, feigning ignorance, falsified their common emotion: but the unsteadiness of his voice revealed what he would have hidden. Stella despised him triumphantly. So he was *this* sort of traitor! He was self-conscious because she had seen his wife! He was ashamed of the meeting!

Her awareness of him, there before her, a taut black-and-white stroke on the dusk, was so intense that an agitated perception that he was actual—not just a character in her story—seemed all over her body. And she prayed she would never forgive him. Let him move one step toward her, let the sleeve of his coat brush her arm, and, out of this charged atmosphere, would emerge all she was so fiercely determined not to recognize. He should be served as he deserved! "Why should I be offended?" she asked him sarcastically. "Is your conscience guilty about something? What could I be offended about?"

He was nonplussed, and peered at her, trying to console himself with the sight of her obscure face. "I expect you had a boring time at tea," he exclaimed lamely.

Stella's breast heaved with disgust. His lack of gallantry would be a warning to her! "I had a particularly *nice* tea! I enjoyed meeting your wife and her friend!" she said, with thin, implacable emphasis.

"Did you?" he said feebly, as though he suspected a lie. "Ethel's a brick. I think she liked you, too." This was like a protest to cover his hesitation. "But I—I—I thought maybe strangers —"

The pause was too long. Something had to be done. It was cruel to embarrass her this way, Stella thought. It was deliberate. "I was surprised you'd never told me you were married—naturally!" she rasped, deriding him, her own helpless savagery repugnant to her.

"Hadh't I ever told you?" His words only echoed the fatuousness she felt. Fatuousness his cowardice was thrusting on both of them!

"Never!" she accused, and was humiliated to realize she challenged him.

VI

The darkness had suddenly become a curtain between them, and Stella, all at once, was achingly certain that their two lives were divided forever. That Mr. Gates, who never read anything weightier than Booth Tarkington, was nothing to her; she nothing to him. She had never shown him any of her work, but if she did, it would be just the same. She would die and wither in herself, and nobody would know it. Rejection slips from magazine editors were what she had to live for.

"Would it—would it—have made any difference if I *had* told you?" In the voice of Mr. Gates hope leaped, still forbidden, but confronting both of them undeniably. Before Stella retorted she measured his indecency. How should she reply? But she cruelly remembered his eyes fixed on hers naïvely, worshipfully. Such strength as she could command was in the memory of those looks! She *would* take toll from what they represented.

But Stella's smiles had never been any

lusty offering, and the prospect of risk left her small and dejected. "I don't understand you," she evaded, trembling vaguely. Her legs were like straw. And an hour before, while she had been writing, she had felt herself so preciously in control! The hardihood for such moments as this seemed hers no more. She turned with a rush and went swiftly toward the sanatorium, from which light fell extravagantly from many windows, and ploughed the dark.

He charged after her. "Have I upset the conventions?" he pled in a whisper, catching up with her, and humble, as he always was. "There's no use trying to hold it back, is there? I mean—all I've been feeling since I met you. You've seen it! I couldn't hide it, and I haven't wanted to. But you—you mustn't think I don't care for my wife—as another human being, I mean. I respect her like *hell*!"

The *underscoring* was insulting. Stella whirled about self-defensively, and, without premeditation, they were leaning together, supporting each other. He touched her hand dreadingly, as if he were afraid. Against the natural impulse of her whole being, she drew away. "Do I want to interfere with your matrimonial affairs?" she said, as though she pointed to something disgraceful. "Have six wives! Have *ten*! I'm not interested in your affairs, Mr. Gates." She sped off again, running toward the house, feeling little, as her French heels almost upset her.

"You're crying! Miss Sommers? Stella! Please! For the love of Mike, Stella, hold on! Don't go back for a minute! I've got to talk to you! You're *crying*! When I'd cut off my right hand to keep from hurting you." But the voice of Mr. Gates was ecstatically without repentance.

Amazed at herself, she *was* crying—and for the second time that day! Hadn't he

followed her around everywhere? Hadn't he looked at her as if she were the only thing in the world alive for him? And he knew nothing on earth about art—and she had to be adamant! After the wife! The exultance now in his voice scared her. He shouldn't lord it over her without payment. If you could ever be sure—but even Bernard, with all his genius, had been stupid and a traitor! And Philip, when she had confessed that she no longer loved him, had grown cold, rational, and hideously disinterested! He was too proud to retaliate, but he was not going to help her career any more! He had put his own self-respect before her talent—and there she was. Without anybody—practically—since Father disapproved of her. Though, anyhow, she had nothing to lose. She was not as she had been at home, a frightened little virgin. If she couldn't make them recognize generously what she was worth, she could get it out of them some other way. And *they* had no scruples. Bernard didn't. Calling her, first, a genius, because he wanted to have her, then describing her as a fake! When she would have done her best to help the self-belief of *any* man who would believe in her!

VII

Mr. Gates, just before they reached a naked stretch of glossed lawn lying brilliantly below the veranda, clutched her back into the cloistral shadows. "I won't be responsible for what I do next if you rush off like this, *crying*!" he said, husky and excited. "That wasn't a frivolous outburst, Stella! You understand that, don't you? Even if you can't—can't *love* me, don't blame me, will you—please? Being thrown with you every day, this way, I can't help falling in love with you. I realize you may respect the conventions more than I do. I've had

a rotten deal from life, Stella. I mean—I haven't got a gripe about it. But I've come here in pretty bad shape. You see, Ethel and I—I mean—we're awfully fond of each other. Anyhow—this is not the time to talk about that. But I'd almost given up—almost, Stella—when I met you. Only the thing is—I've been afraid I was too old for you. And, hang it all, Ethel and I haven't got a divorce yet. She's going to marry Nichols when she does get it, and it hurts like fun! Though we haven't been lovers or anything like that for a long time. And—and—I guess all this about me is pretty precipitate. It sounds pretty stiff to you, with your inexperience, doesn't it?"

She wanted to stop him. To hush him. She could have put her hand over his mouth. She didn't want to be anybody's consolation. If he let himself feel regretful because a woman like Mrs. Gates didn't want him, she would have no use for him. He *had* to be better than that. Better than being sorry for himself because that faded, shallow little Ethel was going to marry somebody else. He hadn't any pride. She couldn't *bear* people who had no pride. And if he overrated Ethel, how could he be expected to appreciate *her*?

"Oh!" she exclaimed, in a vexed, wailing anger, "I'm not inexperienced! If you understood me—if you could really appreciate me! If you realized anything about me! Do you think *I've* never had any tragedy in my life? Oh, this is too funny! When I'm here—here—because I've just come back from Reno, and from getting a divorce. Because I'd left my husband for another man!"

Speech came to an end, as her voice cracked, and the awful, gaunt hollowness of disillusioning memory was, all at once, more than actuality. Because she knew he was going to ask her about the other man,

and that she would tell him! Then Mr. Gates could do what he liked.

Pounding hearts, hers and his, filled an interval. Why didn't he say something? "What about—the—the other man?" he stammered, at last, flatly, as the deadness of his mood entered the arm he had suddenly, petitioningly, thrown about her. "Then I suppose I'm too late—you are going to marry him!"

Without having intended it, Stella found herself pressing his slackening hand which held her waist. She was intolerably longing to keep it where it was: a proof that this something different was happening! That things like this could still happen to *her*! Even if people didn't yet believe in her writing, she had, at least, won a freedom which hadn't belonged to Professor Porter's wife *respectably*, and had been only conjectured by Professor Sommers's daughter! To that extent, anyhow, she had struck off chains!

"No," she whispered. "I won't marry him. He doesn't love me." She might have been killing herself. Maybe it was a corpse Mr. Gates fondled in gratitude, saying: "Stella! Then you're not interested in anybody else? You've got to tell me before we go back into that Sing Sing, darling girl. I can't get through another horrible evening of being uncertain. I *must* kiss you, darling. You *do* love me a little bit? You'll let me love you, anyway, won't you, darling?"

She didn't really care all this much—all she was pretending, as she offered up her mouth, which, when his lips (unexpectedly gentle) touched hers, she saw plainly, looking as it did in the mirror, a greasy red enamel of lipstick on it. But it was almost a prayer to let herself be kissed. And she closed her eyes, shutting her lids tighter, tighter, tighter, trying to shut off the persistent impression of Stella Som-

mers, head up, shoulders erect, walking, with the free stride of a young girl on a Greek frieze, into the solarium made horrible by too many people.

"You're so *sweet*—so *fascinating*," Mr. Gates said, with ecstatic reluctance, freeing her. "I feel as if I'd never be able to let you go. And, my God, I never believed I was going to be so lucky."

"You don't understand me *yet*," Stella whispered hysterically. "I'm so afraid you mistake me for a conventional woman, and when you find out what I'm really like——"

"Can't I make it my business to understand you?" he begged. "Give a poor devil a chance, Stella."

"But you've never *read* anything of mine," she murmured, fighting to make him see that this comment was related to his embrace.

"But, darling, don't I want to? I'm ready to go nuts about anything you've written, darling. I wish I was a cocky guy, but if it turns out you're a genius, I'll try to live up to you."

"I'm afraid," she whispered abruptly. "We must get in to dinner, and I'm so *afraid*."

"What of, sweetheart? I'll kiss you again in a minute. Poor little Stella! Please don't insist on my self-doubts. Please try to believe I'm enough of a fellow to take care of you."

In her suspended uncertainty, she stood there, emotion blocked by his deference. "Feel my heart!" she said, snatching at his nearly invisible hand and laying it upon the green muslin. "You *must* feel it. The way it's beating, can't you realize—I'm not—I'm *not* like your wife? I'm not like any woman you ever knew. I *know* I'm not. I'm not like *anybody*. When you read some of the things I've written, you'll understand I'm not like anybody. And I want

to be liked the way I am—not just *your* way.” She felt half mad with obscure frustration.

The heavy fingers of Mr. Gates remained obediently over her bosom, but he seemed unable to move or to answer. Then, abruptly, he sank to his knees, amidst the bushes sprinkled with drops that were like tears on the faces of children. He hugged her knees and buried his face in her clothes, and her straying, unfriendly touch discovered the helpless roundness of his head. “Be lenient with me, Stella,” came his suffocated mutter, at last. He amazed her. He was sobbing!

VIII

And now she would do anything for him. Anything! With blessed outrage to propriety, she threw herself down beside him in the long chill of the grass, under the wet stars already beginning to shine over them. “Poor darling!” she whispered. “Poor Sydney! Poor dear!” She was stroking his rough cheek hungrily, appeasing an appetite which, an hour earlier, had threatened to devour her whole. When, as she crouched beside him, she drew him close, he became calmly desperate. As he hugged her dumbly, she began to believe in him. And, before she could consider, she was kissing him to comfort him, without waiting for his invitation.

“Stella!” The pained ejaculation showed humble astonishment and awe.

“What, my dear? What is it, poor boy?” inquired an overflowing voice.

“I didn’t guess you *could* be—like this! As wonderful as this!” The almost polite words were half stifled by the feeling that went with them.

“Don’t!” she begged quickly, in a sharp, awakened tone, as jealousy for her other self treacherously stabbed her, destroying

abandon. “You don’t *know* whether I’m wonderful or not. You don’t know me yet, I tell you! You don’t! You don’t!” Her pride, suddenly separating them, *dared* him to know her.

He was graciously offended. “From tonight,” he declaimed, “I’ll say I’ve known you ever since you were born.”

But she began picking her crushed skirts from the dripping vegetation. His attitude, so meant to be all she wanted, remained an indignity. She didn’t explain this to herself, but he was, suddenly, not quite the same person; and she thought how embarrassing it would be if, as she rushed to her room to primp before dinner, one of the patients met her while she looked so frowsy. She wasn’t going to *offer* Sydney anything of her own to read, but, if he asked for something, and she gave it to him, it was *he*, not *she*, who would be on trial!

In the glitteringly sprayed light from the sanatorium windows, they returned, carefully decorous, across the glistening lawn; and Sydney, striding beside her with vain diffidence, was a man whose modest ambition is gratified. “Couldn’t I nip another kiss before we go in the door?” he chuckled wistfully in her ear. “After the biggest experience of my life, I may be on short rations for a long time, Stella!”

She glanced backward at him, oppressed by a view of herself and him, in the glowing commonplace of the hall, as distinct personalities. Something cruelly steadying in the spectacle caused her chin to lift tauntingly, as, eluding his outstretched hand, she sent him a flashing, Stella Sommers smile—her best. “Maybe—when you’ve earned it!” she whispered, with the soft, fearful cajolery so familiar to her habit of self-contradiction. Though still triumphant, she was, all at once, obsessed by the desire to escape him. And she rushed,

pell-mell, along the sleek, waxed dimness of the corridor, to reach her room.

But when she entered, her haste halted, and she stood stricken by a privacy which had dispossessed her.

There was the sleeping porch, empty, yet too filled by the dark life of pine boughs and by the poignant stars wavering tentatively beyond. Against the hinted mist of screened walls, the black existence of the country seemed to beat steadily, dully, with a lethargic insistence on being recognized. She remembered the morning. She could feel, in recollection, that instant of opening her eyes on trees, and she recalled the galloping chipmunks and soundlessly cavorting birds, and the memorable wonder of her own glad feeling of not-being.

And her exultance about Sydney was, somehow, abruptly, inferior to something she had hoped for. As if she were being unjust to herself, she found a meanness in

her pleasure. And, when she began brushing her hair, she oddly preferred to do it in the gloom, though she had to fumble for the unilluminated toilet table.

As she stared forth into the blown, still sky and the quiet marked by leaves, and heard a brief, distant plucking of bass harp strings where there were frogs in some pond, she had a sense of loss. The night, so stunningly vast, so beautifully ambiguous, so rich in mystery, and so sternly to be known, by the coarse odors the rain had stirred, as of *her* earth—the night, like the room and the porch, in some strange way, seemed to reject her as unfit for initiation. And she was outside everything, and miserable. Because there seemed to be two people present: charming Stella Sommers, and a nobody of utter knowledge—who was bound, somehow, because she was too ethereal to last, to disappear. Without the usual mournfulness of funerals, and without tragedy, she felt a death imminent.

PRELUDE

BY CONRAD AIKEN

BUT how it came from earth this little white
this waxen edge this that is sharp and white
this that is mortal and bright the petals bent
and all so curved as if for lovers meant
and why the earth unfolded in this shape
as coldly as words from the warm mouth escape

Or what it is that made the blood so speak
or what it was it wanted that made this
breath of curled air this hyacinth this word
this that is deeply seen profoundly heard
miracle of quick device
from fire and ice

Or why the snail puts out a horn to see
or the brave heart puts up a hand to take
or why the mind, as if to agonize,
will close, a century ahead, its eyes—
a hundred years put on the clock
its own mortality to mock—

Christ come, Confucius come, and tell us why
the mind delights before its death to die
embracing nothing as a lover might
in a terrific ecstasy of night—
and tell us why the hyacinth is sprung
from the world's dull tongue.

Did death so dream of life, is this its dream?
Does the rock think of flowers in its sleep?
Then words and flowers are only thoughts of stone
unconscious of the joy it thinks upon;
and we ourselves are only the rock's words
stammered in a dark dream of men and birds.