

Dear Annie

A STORY IN TWO PARTS—PART II

BY MARY E. WILKINS FREEMAN

MEANTIME, Annie Hempstead was travelling to Anderson in the jolting trolley-car, and trying to settle her emotions and her outlook upon life, which jolted worse than the car upon a strange new track. She had not the slightest intention of giving up her plan, but she realized within herself the sensations of a revolutionist. Who in her family, for generations and generations, had ever taken the course which she was taking? She was not exactly frightened—Annie had splendid courage when once her blood was up—but she was conscious of a tumult and grind of adjustment to a new level which made her nervous.

She reached the end of the car line, then walked about half a mile to her Aunt Felicia Hempstead's house. It was a handsome house, after the standard of nearly half a century ago. It had an opulent air, with its swelling breasts of bay-windows, through which showed fine lace curtains; its dormer-windows, each with its carefully draped curtains; its black-walnut front door, whose side-lights were screened with medallioned lace. The house sat high on three terraces of velvet-like grass, and was surmounted by stone steps in three instalments, each of which was flanked by stone lions.

Annie mounted the three tiers of steps between the stone lions and rang the front door-bell, which was polished so brightly that it winked at her like a brazen eye. Almost directly the door was opened by an immaculate, white-capped and white-aproned maid, and Annie was ushered into the parlor. When Annie had been a little thing she had been enamored of and impressed by the splendor of this parlor. Now she had doubts of it, in spite of the long, magnificent sweep of lace curtains, the sheen of carefully kept upholstery, the gleam of alabaster statuettes, and the even piles

of gilt-edged books upon the polished tables.

Soon Mrs. Felicia Hempstead entered, a tall, well-set-up woman, with a handsome face and keen eyes. She wore her usual morning costume—a breakfast sacque of black silk profusely trimmed with lace, and a black silk skirt. She kissed Annie, with a slight peck of closely set lips, for she liked her. Then she sat down opposite her and regarded her with as much of a smile as her sternly set mouth could manage, and inquired politely regarding her health and that of the family. When Annie broached the subject of her call, the set calm of her face relaxed, and she nodded.

"I know what your sisters are. You need not explain to me," she said.

"But," returned Annie, "I do not think they realize. It is only because I—"

"Of course," said Felicia Hempstead. "It is because they need a dose of bitter medicine, and you hope they will be the better for it. I understand you, my dear. You have spirit enough, but you don't get it up often. That is where they make their mistake. Often the meek are meek from choice, and they are the ones to beware of. I don't blame you for trying it. And you can have Effie and welcome. I warn you that she is a little wearing. Of course she can't help her affliction, poor child, but it is dreadful. I have had her taught. She can read and write very well now, poor child, and she is not lacking, and I have kept her well dressed. I take her out to drive with me every day, and am not ashamed to have her seen with me. If she had all her faculties she would not be a bad-looking little girl. Now, of course, she has something of a vacant expression. That comes, I suppose, from her not being able to hear. She has learned to speak a few words,

but I don't encourage her doing that before people. It is too evident that there is something wrong. She never gets off one tone. But I will let her speak to you. She will be glad to go with you. She likes you, and I dare say you can put up with her. A woman, when she is alone, will make a companion of a brazen image. You can manage all right for everything except her clothes and lessons. I will pay for them."

"Can't I give her lessons?"

"Well, you can try, but I am afraid you will need to have Mr. Freer come over once a week. It seems to me to be quite a knack to teach the deaf and dumb. You can see. I will have Effie come in and tell her about the plan. I wanted to go to Europe this summer, and did not know how to manage about Effie. It will be a godsend to me, this arrangement, and of course after the year is up she can come back."

With that Felicia touched a bell, the maid appeared with automatic readiness, and presently a tall little girl entered. She was very well dressed. Her linen frock was hand-embroidered, and her shoes were ultra. Her pretty shock of fair hair was tied with French ribbon in a fetching bow, and she made a courtesy which would have befitted a little princess. Poor Effie's courtesy was the one feature in which Felicia Hempstead took pride. After making it the child always glanced at her for approval, and her face lighted up with pleasure at the faint smile which her little performance evoked. Effie would have been a pretty little girl had it not been for that vacant, bewildered expression of which Felicia had spoken. It was the expression of one shut up with the darkest silence of life, that of her own self, and beauty was incompatible with it.

Felicia placed her stiff forefinger upon her own lips and nodded, and the child's face became transfigured. She spoke in a level, awful voice, utterly devoid of inflection, and full of fright. Her voice was as the first attempt of a skater upon ice. However, it was intelligible.

"Good morning," said she. "I hope you are well." Then she courtesied again. That little speech and one other—"Thank you, I am very well,"—were all that she had mastered. Effie's in-

struction had begun rather late, and her teacher was not remarkably skilful.

When Annie's lips moved in response, Effie's face fairly glowed with delight and affection. The little girl loved Annie. Then her questioning eyes sought Felicia, who beckoned, and drew from the pocket of her rustling silk skirt a tiny pad and pencil. Effie crossed the room and stood at attention while Felicia wrote. When she had read the words on the pad she gave one look at Annie, then another at Felicia, who nodded.

Effie courtesied before Annie like a fairy dancer. "Good morning. I hope you are well," she said. Then she courtesied again and said, "Thank you, I am very well." Her pretty little face was quite eager with love and pleasure, and yet there was an effect as of a veil before the happy emotion in it. The contrast between the awful, level voice and the grace of motion and evident delight at once shocked and compelled pity. Annie put her arms around Effie and kissed her.

"You dear little thing," she said, quite forgetting that Effie could not hear.

Felicia Hempstead got speedily to work, and soon Effie's effects were packed and ready for transportation upon the first express to Lynn Corners, and Annie and the little girl had boarded the trolley thither.

Annie Hempstead had the sensation of one who takes a cold plunge, half pain and fright, half exhilaration and triumph, when she had fairly taken possession of her grandmother's house. There was genuine girlish pleasure in looking over the stock of old china and linen and ancient mahoganies, in starting a fire in the kitchen stove, and preparing a meal, the written order for which Effie had taken to the grocer and butcher. There was genuine delight in sitting down with Effie at her very own table, spread with her grandmother's old damask and pretty dishes, and eating, without hearing a word of unfavorable comment upon the cookery. But there was a certain pain and terror in tramping upon that, which it was difficult to define, either her conscience or sense of the divine right of the conventional.

But that night after Effie had gone to

bed, and the house was set to rights, and she in her cool muslin was sitting on the front door-step, under the hooded trellis covered with wistaria, she was conscious of entire emancipation. She fairly gloated over her new estate.

"To-night one of the others will really have to get the supper, and wash the dishes, and not be able to say she did it and I didn't, when I did," Annie thought, with unholy joy. She knew perfectly well that her view-point was not sanctified, but she felt that she must allow her soul to have its little witch-caper or she could not answer for the consequences. There might result spiritual atrophy, which would be much more disastrous than sin and repentance. It was either the continuance of her old life in her father's house, which was the ignominious and harmful one of the scapegoat, or this. She at last revelled in this. Here she was mistress. Here what she did, she did, and what she did not do remained undone. Here her silence was her invincible weapon. Here she was free.

The soft summer night enveloped her. The air was sweet with flowers and the grass which lay still unraked in her father's yard. A momentary feeling of impatience seized her, then she dismissed it, and peace came. What had she to do with that hay? Her father would be obliged to buy hay if it were not raked over and dried, but what of that? She had nothing to do with it.

She heard voices and soft laughter. A dark shadow passed along the street. Her heart quickened its beat. The shadow turned in at her father's gate. There was a babel of welcoming voices, of which Annie could not distinguish one articulate word. She sat leaning forward, her eyes intent upon the road. Then she heard the click of her father's gate and the dark, shadowy figure reappeared in the road. Annie knew who it was; she knew that Tom Reed was coming to see her. For a second, rapture seized her, then dismay. How well she knew her sisters, how very well! Not one of them would have given him the slightest inkling of the true situation. They would have told him, by the sweetest of insinuations rather than by straight statements, that she had left her father's roof and come over here, but not one

word would have been told him concerning her vow of silence. They would leave that for him to discover, to his amazement and anger.

Annie rose and fled. She closed the door, turned the key softly, and ran upstairs in the dark. Kneeling before a window on the farther side from her old home, she watched with eager eyes the young man open the gate and come up the path between the old-fashioned shrubs. The clove-like fragrance of the pinks in the border came in her face. Annie watched Tom Reed disappear beneath the trellised hood of the door, then the bell tinkled through the house.

It seemed to Annie that she heard it as she had never heard anything before. Every nerve in her body seemed urging her to rise and go down-stairs and admit this young man whom she loved. But her will, turned upon itself, kept her back. She could not rise and go down; something stronger than her own wish restrained her. She suffered horribly, but she remained. The bell tinkled again. There was a pause, then it sounded for the third time.

Annie leaned against the window, faint and trembling. It was rather horrible to continue such a fight between will and inclination, but she held out. She would not have been herself had she not done so. Then she saw Tom Reed's figure emerge from under the shadow of the door, pass down the path between the sweet-flowering shrubs, seeming to stir up the odor of the pinks as he did so. He started to go down the road, then Annie heard a loud, silvery call, with a harsh inflection, from her father's house. "Imogen is calling him back," she thought.

Annie was out of the room, and slipping softly down-stairs and out into the yard, crouched close to the fence overgrown with sweetbrier, its foundation hidden in the mallow, and there she listened. She wanted to know what Imogen and her other sisters were about to say to Tom Reed, and she meant to know. She heard every word. The distance was not great, and her sisters' voices carried far, in spite of their honeyed tones and efforts toward secrecy. By the time Tom had reached the gate of the parsonage they had all crowded down there, a flut-

tering assembly in their snowy summer muslins, like white doves. Annie heard Imogen first. Imogen was always the ringleader.

"Couldn't you find her?" asked Imogen.

"No. Rang three times," replied Tom. He had a boyish voice, and his chagrin showed plainly in it. Annie knew just how he looked, how dear and big and foolish, with his handsome, bewildered face, blurting out to her sisters his disappointment, with innocent faith in their sympathy.

Then Annie heard Eliza speak in a small, sweet voice, which yet, to one who understood her, carried in it a sting of malice. "How very strange!" said Eliza.

Jane spoke next. She echoed Eliza, but her voice was more emphatic, and seemed multiple, as echoes do. "Yes, very strange indeed," said Jane.

"Dear Annie is really very singular lately. It has distressed us all, especially father," said Susan, but deprecatingly.

Then Imogen spoke, and to the point. "Annie must be in that house," said she. "She went in there, and she could not have gone out without our seeing her."

Annie could fairly see the toss of Imogen's head as she spoke.

"What in thunder do you all mean?" asked Tom Reed, and there was a bluntness, almost a brutality, in his voice which was refreshing.

"I do not think such forcible language is becoming, especially at the parsonage," said Jane.

Annie distinctly heard Tom Reed snort. "Hang it if I care whether it is becoming or not," said he.

"You seem to forget that you are addressing ladies, sir," said Jane.

"Don't forget it for a blessed minute," returned Tom Reed. "Wish I could. You make it too evident that you are—ladies, with every word you speak, and all your beating about the bush. A man would blurt it out, and then I would know where I am at. Hang it if I know now. You all say that your sister is singular, and that she distresses your father, and you"—addressing Imogen—"say that she must be in that house. You are the only one who does make a dab at speaking out; I will say that much

for you. Now, if she is in that house, what in thunder is the matter?"

"I really cannot stay here and listen to such profane language," said Jane, and she flitted up the path to the house like an enraged white moth. She had a fleecy white shawl over her head, and her pale outline was triangular.

"If she calls that profane, I pity her," said Tom Reed. He had known the girls since they were children, and had never liked Jane. He continued, still addressing Imogen. "For Heaven's sake, if she is in that house, what is the matter?" said he. "Doesn't the bell ring? Yes, it does ring, though it is as cracked as the devil. I heard it. Has Annie gone deaf? Is she sick? Is she asleep? It is only eight o'clock. I don't believe she is asleep. Doesn't she want to see me? Is that the trouble? What have I done? Is she angry with me?"

Eliza spoke, smoothly and sweetly. "Dear Annie is singular," said she.

"What the dickens do you mean by singular? I have known Annie ever since she was that high. It never struck me that she was any more singular than other girls, except she stood an awful lot of nagging without making a kick. Here you all say she is singular, as if you meant she was"—Tom hesitated a second—"crazy," said he. "Now, I know that Annie is saner than any girl around here, and that simply does not go down. What do you all mean by singular?"

"Dear Annie may not be singular, but her actions are sometimes singular," said Susan. "We all feel badly about this."

"You mean her going over to her grandmother's house to live? I don't know whether I think that is anything but horse-sense. I have eyes in my head, and I have used them. Annie has worked like a dog here; I suppose she needed a rest."

"We all do our share of the work," said Eliza, calmly, "but we do it in a different way from dear Annie. She makes very hard work of work. She has not as much system as we could wish. She tires herself unnecessarily."

"Yes, that is quite true," assented Imogen. "Dear Annie gets very tired over the slightest tasks, whereas if she went a little more slowly and used more

system, the work would be accomplished equally well and with no fatigue. There are five of us to do the work here, and the house is very convenient."

There was a silence. Tom Reed was bewildered. "But—doesn't she want to see me?" he asked, finally.

"Dear Annie takes very singular notions sometimes," said Eliza, softly.

"If she took a notion not to go to the door when she heard the bell ring, she simply wouldn't," said Imogen, whose bluntness of speech was, after all, a relief.

"Then you mean that you think she took a notion not to go to the door?" asked Tom, in a desperate tone.

"Dear Annie is very singular," said Eliza, with such softness and deliberation that it was like a minor chord of music.

"Do you know of anything she has against me?" asked Tom of Imogen, but Eliza answered for her.

"Dear Annie is not in the habit of making confidantes of her sisters," said she, "but we do know that she sometimes takes unwarranted dislikes."

"Which time generally cures," said Susan.

"Oh yes," assented Eliza, "which time generally cures. She can have no reason whatever for avoiding you. You have always treated her well."

"I have always meant to," said Tom, so miserably and helplessly that Annie, listening, felt her heart go out to this young man, badgered by females, and she formed a sudden resolution.

"You have not seen very much of her, anyway," said Imogen.

"I have always asked for her, but I understood she was busy," said Tom, "and that was the reason why I saw her so seldom."

"Oh," said Eliza, "busy!" She said it with an indescribable tone.

"If," supplemented Imogen, "there was system, there would be no need of any one of us being too busy to see our friends."

"Then she has not been busy? She has not wanted to see me?" said Tom. "I think I understand at last. I have been a fool not to before. You girls have broken it to me as well as you could. Much obliged, I am sure. Good night."

"Won't you come in?" asked Imogen.

"We might have some music," said Eliza.

"And there is an orange cake, and I will make coffee," said Susan.

Annie reflected rapidly how she herself had made that orange cake, and what queer coffee Susan would be apt to concoct.

"No, thank you," said Tom Reed, briskly. "I will drop in another evening. Think I must go home now. I have some important letters. Good night, all."

Annie made a soft rush to the gate, crouching low that her sisters might not see her. They flocked into the house with irascible murmurings, like scolding birds, while Annie stole across the grass, which had begun to glisten with silver wheels of dew. She held her skirts closely wrapped around her, and stepped through a gap in the shrubs beside the walk, then sped swiftly to the gate. She reached it just as Tom Reed was passing with a quick stride.

"Tom," said Annie, and the young man stopped short.

He looked in her direction, but she stood close to a great snowball bush, and her dress was green muslin, and he did not see her. Thinking that he had been mistaken, he started on, when she called again, and this time she stepped apart from the bush, and her voice sounded clear as a flute.

"Tom," she said. "Stop a minute, please."

Tom stopped and came close to her. In the dim light she could see that his face was all aglow, like a child's, with delight and surprise.

"Is that you, Annie?" he said.

"Yes. I want to speak to you, please."

"I have been here before, and I rang the bell three times. Then you were out, although your sisters thought not."

"No, I was in the house."

"You did not hear the bell?"

"Yes, I heard it every time."

"Then why—?"

"Come into the house with me and I will tell you, at least I will tell you all I can."

Annie led the way and the young man followed. He stood in the dark entry while Annie lit the parlor lamp. The

room was on the farther side of the house from the parsonage.

"Come in and sit down," said Annie. Then the young man stepped into a room which was pretty in spite of itself. There was an old Brussels carpet with an enormous rose pattern. The haircloth furniture gave out gleams like black diamonds under the light of the lamp. In a corner stood a whatnot piled with branches of white coral and shells. Annie's grandfather had been a sea-captain, and many of his spoils were in the house. Possibly Annie's own occupation of it was due to an adventurous strain inherited from him. Perhaps the same impulse which led him to voyage to foreign shores had led her to voyage across a green yard to the next house.

Tom Reed sat down on the sofa. Annie sat in a rocking-chair near by. At her side was a Chinese teapoy, a nest of lacquer tables, and on it stood a small, squat idol. Annie's grandmother had been taken to task by her son-in-law, the Reverend Silas, for harboring a heathen idol, but she had only laughed.

"Guess as long as I don't keep heathen to bow down before him, he can't do much harm," she had said.

Now the grotesque face of the thing seemed to stare at the two Occidental lovers with the strange, calm sarcasm of the Orient, but they had no eyes or thought for it.

"Why didn't you come to the door if you heard the bell ring?" asked Tom Reed, gazing at Annie, slender as a blade of grass in her clinging green gown.

"Because I was not able to break my will then. I had to break it to go out in the yard and ask you to come in, but when the bell rang I hadn't got to the point where I could break it."

"What on earth do you mean, Annie?"

Annie laughed. "I don't wonder you ask," she said, "and the worst of it is I can't half answer you. I wonder how much, or rather how little, explanation will content you?"

Tom Reed gazed at her with the eyes of a man who might love a woman and have infinite patience with her, relegating his lack of understanding of her woman's nature to the background, as a thing of no consequence.

"Mighty little will do for me," he said,

"mighty little, Annie dear, if you will only tell a fellow you love him."

Annie looked at him, and her thin, sweet face seemed to have a luminous quality, like a crescent moon. Her look was enough.

"Then you do?" said Tom Reed.

"You have never needed to ask," said Annie. "You knew."

"I haven't been so sure as you think," said Tom. "Suppose you come over here and sit beside me. You look miles away."

Annie laughed and blushed, but she obeyed. She sat beside Tom and let him put his arm around her. She sat up straight, by force of her instinctive maidenliness, but she kissed him back when he kissed her.

"I haven't been so sure," repeated Tom. "Annie darling, why have I been unable to see more of you? I have fairly haunted your house, and seen the whole lot of your sisters, especially Imogen, but somehow or other you have been as slippery as an eel. I have always asked for you, but you were always out or busy."

"I have been very busy," said Annie, evasively. She loved this young man with all her heart, but she had an enduring loyalty to her own flesh and blood.

Tom was very literal. "Say, Annie," he blurted out, "I begin to think you have had to do most of the work over there, now haven't you? Own up."

Annie laughed sweetly. She was so happy that no sense of injury could possibly rankle within her. "Oh, well," she said, lightly. "Perhaps. I don't know. I guess housekeeping comes rather easier to me than to the others. I like it, you know, and work is always easier when one likes it. The other girls don't take to it so naturally, and they get very tired, and it has seemed often that I was the one who could hurry the work through and not mind."

"I wonder if you will stick up for me the way you do for your sisters when you are my wife?" said Tom, with a burst of love and admiration. Then he added: "Of course you are going to be my wife, Annie? You know what this means?"

"If you think I will make you as good a wife as you can find," said Annie.

"As good a wife! Annie, do you really know what you are?"

"Just an ordinary girl, with no special talent for anything."

"You are the most wonderful girl that ever walked the earth," exclaimed Tom. "And as for talent, you have the best talent in the whole world; you can love people who are not worthy to tie your shoe-strings, and think you are looking up when in reality you are looking down. That is what I call the best talent in the whole world for a woman." Tom Reed was becoming almost subtle.

Annie only laughed happily again. "Well, you will have to wait and find out," said she.

"I suppose," said Tom, "that you came over here because you were tired out, this hot weather. I think you were sensible, but I don't think you ought to be here alone."

"I am not alone," replied Annie. "I have poor little Effie Hempstead with me."

"That deaf and dumb child? I should think this heathen god would be about as much company."

"Why, Tom, she is human, if she is deaf and dumb."

Tom eyed her shrewdly. "What did you mean when you said you had broken your will?" he inquired.

"My will not to speak for a while," said Annie, faintly.

"Not to speak—to any one?"

Annie nodded.

"Then you have broken your resolution by speaking to me?"

Annie nodded again.

"But why shouldn't you speak? I don't understand."

"I wondered how little I could say, and have you satisfied," Annie replied, sadly.

Tom tightened his arm around her. "You precious little soul," he said. "I am satisfied. I know you have some good reason for not wanting to speak, but I am plaguey glad you spoke to me, for I should have been pretty well cast down if you hadn't, and to-morrow I have to go away."

Annie leaned toward him. "Go away!"

"Yes; I have to go to California about that confounded Ames will case. And I don't know exactly where, on the Pacific coast, the parties I have to interview may be, and I may have to be away weeks, possibly months. Annie darling, it did seem to me a cruel state of things to have to go so far, and leave you here, living in such a queer fashion, and not know

how you felt. Lord! but I'm glad you had sense enough to call me, Annie."

"I couldn't let you go by, when it came to it, and Tom—"

"What, dear?"

"I did an awful mean thing: something I never was guilty of before. I—listened."

"Well, I don't see what harm it did. You didn't hear much to your or your sisters' disadvantage, that I can remember. They kept calling you 'dear'."

"Yes," said Annie, quickly. Again, such was her love and thankfulness that a great wave of love and forgiveness for her sisters swept over her. Annie had a nature compounded of depths of sweetness: nobody could be mistaken with regard to that. What they did mistake was the possibility of even sweetness being at bay at times, and remaining there.

"You don't mean to speak to anybody else?" asked Tom.

"Not for a year, if I can avoid it without making comment which might hurt father."

"Why, dear?"

"That is what I cannot tell you," replied Annie, looking into his face with a troubled smile.

Tom looked at her in a puzzled way, then he kissed her.

"Oh, well, dear," he said, "it is all right. I know perfectly well you would do nothing in which you were not justified, and you have spoken to me, anyway, and that is the main thing. I think if I had been obliged to start to-morrow without a word from you I shouldn't have cared a hang whether I ever came back or not. You are the only soul to hold me here; you know that, darling."

"Yes," replied Annie.

"You are the only one," repeated Tom, "but it seems to me this minute as if you were a whole host, you dear little soul. But I don't quite like to leave you here living alone, except for Effie."

"Oh, I am within a stone's-throw of father's," said Annie, lightly.

"I admit that. Still, you are alone. Annie, when are you going to marry me?"

Annie regarded him with a clear, innocent look. She had lived such a busy life that her mind was unfilmed by dreams. "Whenever you like, after you come home," said she.

"It can't be too soon for me. I want my wife and I want my home. What will you do while I am gone, dear?"

Annie laughed. "Oh, I shall do what I have seen other girls do—get ready to be married."

"That means sewing, lots of hemming and tucking and stitching, doesn't it?"

"Of course."

"Girls are so funny," said Tom. "Now imagine a man sitting right down and sewing like mad on his collars and neckties and shirts the minute a girl said she'd marry him!"

"Girls like it."

"Well, I suppose they do," said Tom, and he looked down at Annie from a tender height of masculinity, and at the same time seemed to look up from the valley of one who cannot understand the subtle and poetical details in a woman's soul.

He did not stay long after that, for it was late. As he passed through the gate, after a tender farewell, Annie watched him with shining eyes. She was now to be all alone, but two things she had, her freedom and her love, and they would suffice.

The next morning Silas Hempstead, urged by his daughters, walked solemnly over to the next house, but he derived little satisfaction. Annie did not absolutely refuse to speak. She had begun to realize that carrying out her resolution to the extreme letter was impossible. But she said as little as she could.

"I have come over here to live for the present. I am of age, and have a right to consult my own wishes. My decision is unalterable." Having said this much, Annie closed her mouth and said no more. Silas argued and pleaded. Annie sat placidly sewing beside one front window of the sunny sitting-room. Effie, with a bit of fancy work, sat at another. Finally Silas went home defeated, with a last word, half condemnatory, half placative. Silas was not the sort to stand firm against such feminine strength as his daughter Annie's. However, he secretly held her dearer than all his other children.

After her father had gone, Annie sat taking even stitch after even stitch, but a few tears ran over her cheeks and fell

upon the soft mass of muslin. Effie watched with shrewd, speculative silence, like a pet cat. Then suddenly she rose and went close to Annie, with her little arms around her neck, and the poor dumb mouth repeating her little speeches: "Thank you, I am very well, thank you, I am very well," over and over.

Annie kissed her fondly, and was aware of a sense of comfort and of love for this poor little Effie. Still, after being nearly two months with the child, she was relieved when Felicia Hempstead came, the first of September, and wished to take Effie home with her. She had not gone to Europe, after all, but to the mountains, and upon her return had missed the little girl.

Effie went willingly enough, but Annie discovered that she too missed her. Now loneliness had her fairly in its grip. She had a telephone installed, and gave her orders over that. Sometimes the sound of a human voice made her emotional to tears. Besides the voices over the telephone, Annie had nobody, for Benny returned to college soon after Effie left. Benny had been in the habit of coming in to see Annie, and she had not had the heart to check him. She talked to him very little, and knew that he was no telltale as far as she was concerned, although he waxed most communicative with regard to the others. A few days before he left he came over and begged her to return.

"I know the girls have nagged you till you are fairly worn out," he said. "I know they don't tell things straight, but I don't believe they know it, and I don't see why you can't come home, and insist upon your rights, and not work so hard."

"If I come home now it will be as it was before," said Annie.

"Can't you stand up for yourself and not have it the same?"

Annie shook her head.

"Seems as if you could," said Benny.

"I always thought a girl knew how to manage other girls. It is rather awful the way things go now over there. Father must be uncomfortable enough trying to eat the stuff they set before him, and living in such a dirty house."

Annie winced. "Is it so very dirty?"

Benny whistled.

"Is the food so bad?"

Benny whistled again.

"You advised me—or it amounted to the same thing—to take this stand," said Annie.

"I know I did, but I didn't know how bad it would be. Guess I didn't half appreciate you myself, Annie. Well, you must do as you think best, but if you could look in over there your heart would ache."

"My heart aches as it is," said Annie, sadly.

Benny put an arm around her. "Poor girl," he said. "It is a shame, but you are going to marry Tom. You ought not to have the heartache."

"Marriage isn't everything," said Annie, "and my heart does ache, but—I can't go back there, unless—I can't make it clear to you, Benny, but it seems to me as if I couldn't go back there until the year is up, or I shouldn't be myself, and it seems, too, as if I should not be doing right by the girls. There are things more important even than doing work for others. I have got it through my head that I can be dreadfully selfish being unselfish."

"Well, I suppose you are right," admitted Benny, with a sigh.

Then he kissed Annie and went away, and the blackness of loneliness settled down upon her. She had wondered at first that none of the village people came to see her, although she did not wish to talk to them; then she no longer wondered. She heard, without hearing, just what her sisters had said about her.

That was a long winter for Annie Hempstead. Letters did not come very regularly from Tom Reed, for it was a season of heavy snowfalls, and the mails were often delayed. The letters were all that she had for comfort and company. She had bought a canary-bird, adopted a stray kitten, and filled her sunny windows with plants. She sat beside them and sewed, and tried to be happy and content, but all the time there was a frightful uncertainty deep down within her heart as to whether or not she was doing right. She knew that her sisters were unworthy, and yet her love and longing for them waxed greater and greater. As for her father, she loved him as she had never loved him before. The struggle grew

terrible. Many a time she dressed herself in outdoor array and started to go home, but something always held her back. It was a strange conflict that endured through the winter months, the conflict of a loving, self-effacing heart with its own instincts.

Toward the last of February her father came over at dusk. Annie ran to the door, and he entered. He looked unkempt and dejected. He did not say much, but sat down and looked about him with a half-angry, half-discouraged air. Annie went out into the kitchen and broiled some beefsteak, and creamed some potatoes, and made tea and toast. Then she called him into the sitting-room, and he ate like one famished.

"Your sister Susan does the best she can," he said, when he had finished, "and lately Jane has been trying, but they don't seem to have the knack. I don't want to urge you, Annie, but—"

"You know when I am married you will have to get on without me," Annie said, in a low voice.

"Yes, but in the mean time you might, if you were home, show Susan and Jane."

"Father," said Annie, "you know if I came home now it would be just the same as it was before. You know if I give in and break my word with myself to stay away a year what they will think and do."

"I suppose they might take advantage," admitted Silas, heavily. "I fear you have always given in to them too much for their own good."

"Then I shall not give in now," said Annie, and she shut her mouth tightly.

There came a peal of the cracked door-bell, and Silas started with a curious, guilty look. Annie regarded him sharply. "Who is it, father?"

"Well, I heard Imogen say to Eliza that she thought it was very foolish for them all to stay over there and have the extra care and expense, when you were here."

"You mean that the girls—?"

"I think they did have a little idea that they might come here and make you a little visit—"

Annie was at the front door with a bound. The key turned in the lock and a bolt shot into place. Then she returned to her father, and her face was very white.

"You did not lock your door against your own sisters?" he gasped.

"God forgive me, I did."

The bell pealed again. Annie stood still, her mouth quivering in a strange, rigid fashion. The curtains in the dining-room windows were not drawn. Suddenly one window showed full of her sisters' faces. It was Susan who spoke.

"Annie, you can't mean to lock us out?" Susan's face looked strange and wild, peering in out of the dark. Imogen's handsome face towered over her shoulder.

"We think it advisable to close our house and make you a visit," she said, quite distinctly through the glass.

Then Jane said, with an inaudible sob, "Dear Annie, you can't mean to keep us out!"

Annie looked at them and said not a word. Their half-commanding, half-imploring voices continued a while. Then the faces disappeared.

Annie turned to her father. "God knows if I have done right," she said, "but I am doing what you have taken me to account for not doing."

"Yes, I know," said Silas. He sat for a while silent. Then he rose, kissed Annie—something he had seldom done—and went home. After he had gone Annie sat down and cried. She did not go to bed that night. The cat jumped up in her lap, and she was glad of that soft, purring comfort. It seemed to her as if she had committed a great crime, and as if she had suffered martyrdom. She loved her father and her sisters with such intensity that her heart groaned with the weight of pure love. For the time it seemed to her that she loved them more than the man whom she was to marry. She sat there and held herself, as with chains of agony, from rushing out into the night, home to them all, and breaking her vow.

It was never quite so bad after that night, for Annie compromised. She baked bread and cake and pies, and carried them over after nightfall and left them at her father's door. She even, later on, made a pot of coffee, and hurried over with it in the dawn-light, always watching behind a corner of a curtain until she saw an arm reached out for it. All this comforted Annie, and,

moreover, the time was drawing nearer when she could go home.

Tom Reed had been delayed much longer than he expected. He would not be home before early fall. They would not be married until November, and she would have several months at home first.

At last the day came. Out in Silas Hempstead's front yard the grass waved tall, dotted with disks of clover. Benny was home, and he had been over to see Annie every day since his return. That morning when Annie looked out of her window the first thing she saw was Benny waving a scythe in awkward sweep among the grass and clover. An immense pity seized her at the sight. She realized that he was doing this for her, conquering his indolence. She almost sobbed.

"Dear, dear boy, he will cut himself," she thought. Then she conquered her own love and pity, even as her brother was conquering his sloth. She understood clearly that it was better for Benny to go on with his task even if he did cut himself.

The grass was laid low when she went home, and Benny stood, a conqueror in a battle-field of summer, leaning on his scythe.

"Only look, Annie," he cried out, like a child. "I have cut all the grass."

Annie wanted to hug him. Instead she laughed. "It was time to cut it," she said. Her tone was cool, but her eyes were adoring.

Benny laid down his scythe, took her by the arm, and led her into the house. Silas and his other daughters were in the sitting-room, and the room was so orderly it was painful. The ornaments on the mantel-shelf stood as regularly as soldiers on parade, and it was the same with the chairs. Even the cushions on the sofa were arranged with one corner overlapping another. The curtains were drawn at exactly the same height from the sill. The carpet looked as if swept threadbare.

Annie's first feeling was of worried astonishment, then her eye caught a glimpse of Susan's kitchen apron tucked under a sofa pillow, and of layers of dust on the table, and she felt relieved. After all, what she had done had not completely changed the sisters, whom she loved, faults and all. Annie realized how horrible it would have been to find her loved

ones completely changed, even for the better. They would have seemed like strange, aloof angels to her.

They all welcomed her with a slight stiffness, yet with cordiality. Then Silas made a little speech.

"Your father and your sisters are glad to welcome you home, dear Annie," he said, "and your sisters wish me to say for them that they realize that possibly they may have underestimated your tasks and overestimated their own. In short, they may not have been—"

Silas hesitated, and Benny finished. "What the girls want you to know, Annie, is that they have found out they have been a parcel of pigs."

"We fear we have been selfish without realizing it," said Jane, and she kissed Annie, as did Susan and Eliza. Imogen, looking very handsome in her blue linen, with her embroidery in her hands, did

not kiss her sister. She was not given to demonstrations, but she smiled complacently at her.

"We are all very glad to have dear Annie back, I am sure," said she, "and now that it is all over, we all feel that it has been for the best, although it has seemed very singular, and made, I fear, considerable talk. But, of course, when one person in a family insists upon taking everything upon herself, it must result in making the others selfish."

Annie did not hear one word that Imogen said. She was crying on Susan's shoulder.

"Oh, I am so glad to be home," she sobbed.

And they all stood gathered about her, rejoicing and fond of her, but she was the one lover among them all who had been capable of hurting them and hurting herself for love's sake.

The Forbidden Lure

BY FANNIE STEARNS DAVIS

"**L**EAVE all and follow—follow!"
 Lure of the sun at dawn,
 Lure of a wind-paced hollow,
 Lure of the stars withdrawn;
 Lure of the brave old singing
 Brave perished minstrels knew;
 Of dreams like sea-fog clinging
 To boughs the night sifts through:

"Leave all and follow—follow!"
 The sun goes up the day;
 Flickering wing of swallow,
 Blossoms that blow away,—
 What would you, luring, luring,
 When I must bide at home?
 My heart will break her mooring
 And die in reef-flung foam!

Oh, I must never listen.
 Call not outside my door.
 Green leaves, you must not glisten
 Like water, any more.
 Oh, Beauty, wandering Beauty,
 Pass by; speak not. For see,
 By bed and board stands Duty
 To snatch my dreams from me!