

THE LEECH

BY CHARLES CALDWELL DOBIE

"I DON'T fancy that it will be as hot to-morrow," Elizabeth Hewitt said, half musingly. "There's a cloud or two in the sky . . . a bit of high fog, I think."

Walter Hewitt left his iced tea to chill further as he joined his wife at the edge of the porch.

"Well, if it's only fog . . ." his voice trailed off into chilling significance.

She let her glance sweep the cloud-flecked heavens and fall appraisingly upon the continuous lines of tree-tops sliding down the hillside. Below them stretched the famous prune-orchards of the Santa Clara Valley, miles and miles and again miles of faded greenery seared to a note of yellow by the prolonged drought of a California summer. Upon trays, between the trees, a plum-purple harvest shriveled to blackness under the sun's hot gaze.

"Oh, it simply won't rain!" she insisted. "And, even if it did, the first rain of September never lasts—a mere sprinkle doesn't do any harm. Drying prunes aren't quite that delicate."

He said nothing. She felt sure that her bravado had not convinced him. She wondered whether it had convinced herself, but she had whistled so many times through the graveyard of his anxieties that she had ceased to take account of her own fears.

"Do you know," she broke out, passionately, "I'm beginning to hate this place. It's—it's taken so much out of us!"

"I've always hated it!" he said, and he went abruptly back to his seat and tinkled the ice in his glass with an air of nervous defiance.

She leaned her head wearily against

the iron rod which upheld the gay-striped awning. Like most San Franciscans, reared in the cool lap of a mist-shrouded summer, she detested hot weather. But sunset hour in the Santa Clara Valley brought its compensations. There was always a pageantry about the death of this almost tropical sun which snared her into a complete surrender to its beauty. At such a moment she felt glad, at least, that her father-in-law's dubious legacy was perched upon a height. When everything else failed there was at least a view!

To-night, as usual, the flaming spectacle was hectic instead of wrathful. There were none of the reticences of the seashore landscape to which she was accustomed, shrinking timidly into ocean mists or swallowed up in a maw of smoke-dun clouds flushed to sudden nocturnal anger. Instead, the opposing hills languished behind a veil of palpitant colors, rearing their heads with provocative boldness. The hills, the skies, the plain below, were full of beautiful and cruel subtleties—the subtleties of a magnificence that could be as generous or as niggardly as it fancied. And it struck her that on the surface it was always opulent and alluring.

The first time she had looked down from that height upon the valley it had been snow-white with promise, an unending stretch of satin bloom that held a prophecy of purple harvest. But overnight the blossoming spirit of spring-time had been broken utterly by the sharp tooth of a late frost, and yet throughout it all the land has smiled with the indifference of a princess who could squander as she chose, secure in the knowledge of her inexhaustible treas-

ures. Yes, the land was adorable and impulsive and capricious—it made or broke men as it wished! She turned away from the false allurements of this artfully flushed landscape and she went slowly back to her place at the table. Walter Hewitt was still tinkling the lump of ice in his tea-glass.

"I don't quite see how you've made it," she began, boldly. "I mean the financial grade. . . . I've never spoken of it before because—because— Well, I've had my fearful moments. I might as well admit that now . . . a man in your position . . ."

"A man in my position?" he echoed, craftily.

She colored as she put an apologetic hand on his. "You know what I mean, George. You're in a position of trust and you're surrounded by money—and Heaven knows you've been pushed pretty close to the wall."

He laughed, but she could see that the effort hurt him. "Oh, so that's the idea! Couldn't you grant me at least a little more originality? The trusted bank official turning thief has been rather overdone, don't you think?"

She wished that he had not parried the blow with such a dubious weapon as sarcasm. "But this place has fairly eaten up money," she insisted. "One must have pretty good security even for friends. I've never realized until this past week how worried I've been. I suppose it's the old story—one always collapses within sight of the goal."

"Well," he threw back at her, gaily, "it's almost over. In a week every prune on the place will be stewed safely in its own sugar. Unless, of course, it rains!"

She rose impulsively and went over to the railing again. The clouds had vanished, sucked up completely by the warm breath of the shimmering valley.

"It was only fog, after all," she said, quietly. And she drew in a long, deep breath.

They both fell silent, partly from a sense of sharp relief and partly from a desire to let the passing day die in mute

dignity. It was George Hewitt who first broke the silence.

"What are you looking at?" he asked, quite suddenly.

Her hand dropped from her forehead. "There's a man coming up the road," she answered. "A machine brought him as far as the first bend. I can't make him out."

Her husband had risen; she felt his breath upon her bare neck.

"It looks like Cranston," he said, almost too evenly.

She turned slowly and faced him. "Cranston?" she whispered. "Why, what can *he* want *here*?"

He walked toward the table again. "Something's gone wrong at the office, I guess."

She wondered if her face were pale.

"You'd better go down and help him with his grip," she said, as calmly as she could. "And I'll see about a bite for him. I fancy he hasn't had dinner."

"He's very fond of wine," Hewitt suggested, significantly.

"I'll see that he has a bottle," she answered, but her voice had a chilling brevity.

Her husband threw her a grateful glance. "I want him to be comfortable . . . you understand . . . *as comfortable as we can make him!*"

She had never liked Cranston, a little, prying man with faded red hair and a clerical stoop, and she liked him less now, sitting at her al-fresco table and smacking his thin lips over the wine. She could not help wondering why her husband had ever picked him for an assistant.

"You've a nice place here," he was saying with a fine air of patronage as she cleared away his empty dinner-plate and set a dish of frozen peaches before him.

"Yes," she replied, "but we're tired of it. A place like this means money and thought and worry. And this is the first good year we've had. Prunes, you know, are nearly fourteen cents a pound."

"So I was told. I got to talking with a man on the train. People don't seem to have anything else on their minds in this section."

She made no reply, but he continued to chatter, throwing out covert inferences—about prices, and labor difficulties, and markets, and the chances of rain. Yes, it seemed that he had weighed even this last possibility to the final fraction. He *had* been talking to people, with a vengeance.

At last her husband stirred. "Oh, I'm not particularly worried about rain, *now*," she heard him lie defensively as she went back into the house for black coffee. "September is a pretty safe month."

She halted at the threshold to catch Cranston's reply: "But they tell me that *once* it rained for a solid week. And even with the trays all stacked, the prunes mildewed. Moist, warm air is always dangerous."

"Well . . . if that happens this year . . . I'm ruined, that's all!"

Cranston said nothing, but he made significant and greedy noises over his dish of frozen peaches. Elizabeth Hewitt continued her movements into the house. They were lighting cigars when she got back.

"I've been telling Hewitt he looks fagged," Cranston said.

The light of a sputtering match at the tip of Hewitt's cigar emphatically confirmed the statement.

Elizabeth drew away into the shadow where she could give her rancor scope without betraying the full measure of her scorn.

"My husband *is* fagged," she retorted, with deceitful coolness. "He needs a good, long rest. And, of course, *this* isn't any vacation—running down here for two weeks with all the anxieties and worries of watching prunes convert themselves into dollars. . . . And you people there at the bank, you who know how things are . . . well, I should think you'd spare him all you could, and not come bothering him with bond and

mortgage problems. If he had gone away fishing in the wilderness you couldn't have found him. But here, of course—"

"Yes, you're quite right," Cranston agreed, with a shade of banter. "I've been urging him for five years to take a vacation, a *real* vacation. But doubtless he has his *reasons*, Mrs. Hewitt."

Hewitt laughed harshly. "Why put it in the plural form, Cranston?"

The assistant stared. "You always were a stickler for details," he burst out, finally. And the two laughed in unison.

She did not know just what to do. The obvious thing was to excuse herself and leave them together with their business problems. But a curious reluctance urged her to stay. She had an absurd feeling that she would like to stand forever between these two, and, in a fantastical flash, she pictured the years rolling on and on while she continued to balk any exchange of their confidences by her coolly stubborn presence. . . . The air was growing chilly as it does so often in the California country within range of the sea's nocturnal breath. A few more wisps of fog were laying their cool bodies against the warm bosom of the hills.

"Suppose we go inside," she suggested.

The two men rose and stood facing each other. She passed between them. When she looked back she saw that they were following slowly and that Cranston's arm was locked tightly in the arm of her husband. She felt a renewed distrust, almost a loathing, for her visitor's intrusive presence. It was not possible, she reflected, for George Hewitt to have any affection for this man, and he had never yet been at a loss to keep at bay advances which he found distasteful or inexpedient.

She switched on the lights, arranged the newspapers which were scattered over the rug by her husband's chair, shut out a sharp draft of air from an adjoining room with a quick drawing together of draperies. The men sat down, settling themselves comfortably.

An impulse to retire fluttered and died. She went to the piano.

"What shall I play?" she asked, almost gaily.

It was her husband who replied, and his voice sounded far away:

"If you don't mind, my dear, Cranston and I have a lot of tiresome things to talk over . . . another night—there'll be plenty of time for music—later!"

She felt suddenly as if a door had been closed in her face, and she had all the indignation of one put to the test of such an affront. She would not leave him alone with that man! She would *not*!

"Why," she pouted, "Mr. Cranston will be running away to-morrow. . . . I know these bankers—they never have time for anything but money-grubbing!"

She had meant to be insulting and she knew that her shaft had struck home, but Cranston shielded his feelings behind a crafty smile.

"And what if I stayed for a week or two—just to disprove your statement, my dear Mrs. Hewitt? I'm anxious to see a prune crop *safely* harvested."

So that was it—he proposed staying, and he did not even intend to wait for an invitation! She rose from the piano shrugging her shoulders, and walked to the door without a word. At the threshold she hesitated. A sense of helplessness came over her. She was sure that her husband needed her, and yet there was nothing to do but leave the room. She waited for some sign from him, halting for the briefest fraction of a second, which seemed to her eternity. He cleared his throat, but nothing further came of it. She passed on, out into the night. The chill seemed welcome to her now.

She crossed the porch and glided down the steps, throwing her spangled after-dinner scarf about her dark hair. Little puffs of warm air came up caressingly from the tawny ground. Before her, row upon row, stretched the quiescent trees, bent and broken, and seared by the weakening burden of fruition. Between them, upon the drying trays,

lay the purple yield that mellow spring-time had spawned and thick-breathed summer had swaddled to perfect consummation.

"It's almost over," she said to herself, consciously repeating her husband's words.

But the thought no longer thrilled her. What was the use in feasting if a ghost were to sit forever at their table? She did not mind sharing her husband's virtues with another, but his shortcomings . . . She stopped short. What was she thinking of?

The wind veered suddenly.

"It's from the south!" flashed through her mind. "Suppose it should rain, after all?"

And it struck her that she felt curiously undisturbed at this possibility. She went around by a devious path and climbed the back stairs to her bedroom.

She sat in the darkness, by an open window, thinking—reviewing the history of these past five years. How well she remembered the satisfaction with which she had met the news that her father-in-law's prune-orchard was to be their portion! A country place within motoring distance of town! How smart it had all sounded! But her husband had not shared her enthusiasm.

"A pretty expensive luxury!" he had replied, grimly.

But she had refused to be daunted, even with the story of Hewitt, Senior's, failure ringing in her ears. He had been an old man, of course, and too conservative. And he had been bitten unconsciously by the old-fashioned theory that the land's yield was in the hands of Fate. Furthermore, he didn't know how to market his product to advantage. In short, he played the part of country gentleman with perfect consistence, even to the inevitable detail of a steadily encroaching mortgage.

Of course her husband would change all that! He was a man of affairs, and he could command money in a crisis. There was really no reason why, in addition to

having a delightful summer home, they should not increase their income. Thus had Elizabeth Hewitt reasoned from her comfortable position on the side-lines. Participating in the game was different. She came to think, in due season, that such ventures *were* in the lap of the gods, after all. The first year had come a frost, and the second a drying wind at just the wrong season. Again, a prolonged drought had reduced the crop to a shadow. Finally, the bottom had dropped out of the market, and the returns from a good yield had barely paid for the harvesting. And all the time the sloping hillside sucked up money like a greedy mistress who lured with false promises and mockingly withheld her favors.

Owning a country place was not a delight, but a responsibility, and all through the long, hot, palpitant summer Elizabeth Hewitt found herself chained to a rock of petty cares and worries and details, while George slaved in town for wherewithal to pour into the insatiable maw of this relentless enterprise. Not that his earnings could satisfy the demands upon him! The salary of a bank cashier might be almost opulent as other salaries went, but it had small place in stemming the tide of a horticultural disaster. At first it had all been very poetic—the snow-white springtime of blossoming, the green-gold summer of swelling fruit, the wine-purple autumn of consummation. From bud to final ripening, the prim, slender trees had revealed the seasons colorfully and with fragrant symbols. And in the richness of these dew-starred pageantries Elizabeth Hewitt sometimes forgot to regret the shallower delights in which her first hopes had indulged. But presently this procession from bloom to fruition became blurred by the mists of an ever-increasing anxiety. She began to feel a disquiet at the circumstance that had once reassured her—at the fact that her husband *was* a man of affairs and could command money in a crisis. It bore in upon her that a man lacking easy access to

capital might have been less tempted to prolong the agony. At the beginning, she had known the sources of supply—an expansion of the first mortgage, the profit from a quick sale of an active stock, the grudging help from a reluctant relation, a friendly boost or two. But, as time went on, his financial course became blurred and finally lost in a series of quick turns and evasions. She remembered the chill that had swept her on that day when in answer to her usual frank questions about finances he had replied, curtly:

“I’ve managed to arrange things for a while longer . . . you needn’t worry.”

Later when she had pressed him, tactfully, though a bit tremulously, he had been less sharp but quite as unyielding:

“Don’t think about it. . . . I’ll pull through somehow.”

You needn’t worry! Don’t think about it! Did a man fancy that anxiety and fear and loyalty were subject to command? That the blossoms of peace and contentment could flourish in the dark?

Presently she ceased to prod him, and when that moment came she had a sick realization that something had died within her. Could it be that her flame of faith had been blown out?

This year she had followed the usual seasonal progressions, parted - lipped, every nerve strained to anxious attention. Bud, blossom, harvest—she had hung upon each successful unfolding until her very senses ached with the tautness of concentration. As late as yesterday the victory had seemed assured.

She rose from her place before the open window. It was long past midnight. She thrust her hand out into the night. The wind had died. Anything might be possible—a swift downpour or an equally sharp clear-up of the threatening clouds.

She went to the door and opened it, listening. The low rumble of voices came to her. George Hewitt’s clipped laugh, the acrid pungency of stale tobacco. Why didn’t they break up and come to bed?

She stepped back from the threshold and closed the door. Presently she began to undress. She was braiding her hair when she heard the tramp of feet coming up the stairs. She tried to be calm, but her husband's nearness was disturbing.

When he came into the room she pretended to be very busy with the thick black strand of hair in her hand. Sitting before her dressing-table mirror, she caught glimpses of his face. She was not reassured.

"Well," she yawned at last, "I'm glad you've decided to turn in. Mr. Cranston will bless us as it is—in the morning—when his alarm goes off!"

He did not reply at once. "His alarm won't be going off," he answered, throwing aside his collar.

She tossed her braid backward with a quick gesture. "You mean he really intends to stay—*here*?"

"Yes," he flung out, sharply. "Is there anything so extraordinary in that?"

She leaned close to the mirror, drawing her upraised forefinger across her eyebrows. "I didn't know it was policy for two people from the same department to be away from a bank. . . . How long is he going to stay?"

He frowned savagely. "A week—maybe two."

She rose and faced him. "In other words, he intends to see the prunes safely harvested. Just what is Cranston's interest in *our* crop?"

She had never questioned him defiantly before and she could see that her attitude had confused him. He was off guard and unprepared.

"I know he hasn't any money," she went on, relentlessly, "so he can't have any personal financial interest. And I also know that a banking institution doesn't lend to its employees, so he can't be here in the interest of the firm. But I do know one thing—he's not staying for pleasure!"

He made a weary gesture as he leaned against the chiffonier. "Do you really want me to tell you?" he demanded.

Her hands fell from their folded position on her breast. For a moment she stood inactive, gripped with the sudden terror of an impending flash that she knew would blind her.

"No," she answered, weakly, "perhaps you'd better not."

She turned and sank down in her seat before the dressing-table, and she made a pretense of drawing her ivory comb through her imprisoned hair.

He went to the window; he threw it higher. A keen current of air stirred a spent rose upon the casement to swift showering.

"It's clearing up," he cried out, buoyantly. "The wind's from the north!"

She let the comb drop from her fingers and she buried her face in her hands. Presently she felt his nearness—he was infolding her with a gracious tenderness.

"Come . . . come . . ." he urged. "Bear up a little longer. I know it's hard. . . . But, just think, in a week at the most, everything will be over. You're not displeased, are you . . . at . . . at anything I've done?"

She drew his arms closer. "Displeased? No, it isn't that. But you've shut me out so long I've lost courage."

He put his lips to her hair. "There . . . there. . . . You needn't worry! Don't think about it!"

She released herself slowly. "I'm beyond worrying, *now*!" she said, distinctly.

The morning broke clear and cloudless. The effect of the potential rain-storm had been almost as complete as if a sullen torrent had descended to wash the air clean of its dust-golden haze. Elizabeth laid the breakfast-table out in the open, upon the porch, in spite of the air's fresh tang.

Cranston and her husband came down together, arm in arm. Elizabeth gave them a swift sidelong glance and almost at that moment she saw George Hewitt disentangle himself from his friend's proprietary embrace. She put slices of

melon at each place, humming audibly. The men sat down. Cranston fell upon the cool crescent of melon in front of him, smacking his lips. Already Elizabeth Hewitt was growing accustomed to that audible sound of satisfaction. It was extraordinary how much vitality seemed to express itself in these thin, pale, secretive lips snared to sudden and almost ugly revelations by gastronomic delights.

"It must have been a great relief," Cranston ventured, affably, "for you people to wake up this morning and find the sun shining."

Elizabeth seated herself opposite him and began to pour the coffee. "Oh, I'm not sure that I care one way or the other," she drawled with palpable affectation. "We've experienced every disaster but an untimely rain at the drying season . . . and—well, I'm curious to discover just what the last straw will be."

Cranston dug greedily into his melon. "Well, I guess *any* streak of bad luck would prove the last straw this year, eh, George?"

She flashed a swift glance at her husband; he dropped his eyes.

"There's such a thing as a choice of evils," she said, coolly, transferring her steady glance to Cranston.

He gave an odd chuckling snort and deliberately unbuttoned his vest.

Would he take off his coat, next, she wondered. And how long before he would be slopping about her house in straw slippers? She could have stood such arrogance from a physically vital personality, but somehow this man's pallid insolence seemed an unbearable affront. The Chinese cook brought on shirred eggs and crisp, pungent bacon and thin slices of buttered toast.

"Gad! but you live well!" escaped Cranston, enthusiastically, and the smacking of his bloodless lips began again.

Hewitt, picking at bacon, read the paper between gulps of coffee. Elizabeth fell silent.

Presently the meal was finished and Hewitt rose, flinging his newspaper to the ground.

"Well, I'm off!" he announced. "Want to come with me, Cranston, and look the place over?"

Cranston stretched himself comfortably, and glanced through a rift in the awning at the blue sky. "No, I don't think I'll move about much to-day. It's going to be hot, later on. I'll just stay here and chin with the missus."

An incredulous stare briefly escaped Hewitt. Cranston began to roll a cigarette.

Elizabeth pushed back her chair. Cranston's words had a casual tone, but she fancied that she could sense a distinctly malevolent ring beneath the surface. Should she rise and go with her husband or should she stay and face the music? It almost seemed as if George Hewitt had read her thoughts, for he said, very coldly:

"Perhaps Mrs. Hewitt has other plans."

"Well . . ." stammered Cranston, put out for the moment by Hewitt's brusqueness, "in that case . . ."

Elizabeth folded her napkin with slow precision. "No," she said, finally. "I think I'll stay here and listen to Mr. Cranston. I'm sure he must be an entertaining talker."

They were silent for a season. Cranston was busy with his evil-smelling cigarette and Elizabeth was shrouded in deep speculation. Was her apprehension investing the man before her with sinister values out of all proportion to any reality? she asked herself. Superficially, he seemed pallid enough, and perhaps his very neutrality gave her the power to stamp every trivial act of his into a confirmation of her fears. But she had to confess, as she watched him sprawling in perfect physical content over his morning smoke, that he impressed her as a man whose very shallowness was disturbing—he had none of the suavities of either real power or understanding. She withdrew to the mechanical diver-

sion of drumming idly upon the blue-and-white breakfast cloth, and suddenly, with a directness that surprised even herself, she broke out:

"What is it that you want to say to me, Mr. Cranston?"

He tossed away the spent cigarette stub. "I don't think, Mrs. Hewitt," he began, confidently, "that you quite realize how deeply your husband is involved. A mere financial disaster would be serious enough, but as it is . . ."

She was calm. "You mean that he's been forced into something not quite . . ."

"Precisely."

She felt no emotion save a withering scorn for the man opposite her.

"How long have you known?" she demanded.

"For about two days. . . . I ran into the thing quite by accident. . . . Of course I came down here as soon as I could arrange things without exciting suspicion. . . . I pleaded an impending nervous breakdown. I felt sure it would be well for me to stick close to Hewitt until . . . until everything was over. One never knows what a man will do under such circumstances. . . . Of course, you realize I'm still loyal, still his friend in spite of everything. . . . Most people wouldn't take that view of it, I know, but *I'm* different! . . . After all, what is a little moral lapse between friends? And if what he tells me is true, the crop this year will more than make good the defalcation."

"And if something should happen?"

"In that case . . . Well, you couldn't expect me to keep this affair quiet forever, Mrs. Hewitt, could you, now? . . . And then, I'm not sure that he would stand the strain of another season. . . . It's very unfortunate . . . and I'm sorry for *you*, Mrs. Hewitt, indeed I am!"

She could have stood everything from him except this last smug commiseration. "Why should you feel sorry for me?" burst from her as she rose to her feet. "I'm sure I haven't asked for your sympathy!"

He gave a self-satisfied laugh. "I don't blame you for having pride. Fact is, I admire that quality in a woman. . . . Naturally, you're bowled over for the moment at the news. . . . I understand how you feel."

She drew back scornfully: "*News?* . . . I hope you don't think you've told me anything I didn't know!"

"Do you mean to say that he . . . ?"

"There are some things that women don't have to be told, Mr. Cranston. . . ."

He refused to be disturbed by either her manner or her revelations. Instead, he rolled another cigarette with irritating satisfaction.

"Well," he began, pompously, "I'm glad you knew. It eases my conscience. . . . I wanted to do the right thing by George, and after seeing you here at close range I felt sure that you ought to know the situation. But such a question isn't easy to decide. As it turns out, it wouldn't have mattered whether I spoke or was silent. But at least you have one satisfaction. You know I'm your friend. . . . Don't worry! With the help of the weather, you and I will pull him through, Mrs. Hewitt! You can depend on *me*!"

She sat down suddenly and her peals of laughter rippled the still morning air. "Excuse me, but you don't know how funny you are, Mr. Cranston!"

He shifted about now, a bit uneasily. She stopped laughing.

"He would have understood tears!" flashed through her mind.

And she began to laugh again, glad to find some weapon that could pierce his hitherto impervious self-satisfaction.

She waited until one-thirty for her husband to come in to his midday meal, and then she decided to carry it through without his presence. Cranston was worried, she could see that, but he was cautious in expressing his anxiety. Apparently he had not recovered from the shock of her morning laughter; she still puzzled him to the point of confusion.

But he did gather the courage to say, finally:

"Doesn't George usually come in to lunch?"

She passed him a plate of crisp salad. "Not always," she lied, blandly.

"I hope," he ventured, "that . . . that nothing has happened."

She closed her eyes for a swift moment. "Nonsense," she threw back with a defiance that would have betrayed itself to a more subtle audience.

He fell upon his salad with a crunching sound that made her shiver. Was the balance of her days to be spent in listening to this man eat? she asked herself. She felt that if she were to live forever she would always recall this visit of Cranston's as a continuous and audible feast.

"I really ought not to have let him go about this morning . . . *alone!*" he insisted, between mouthfuls. "A man under *his* strain needs companionship."

She knew what he was thinking; in fact, the same idea had suggested itself to her as she was freshening up for luncheon. At that moment she had crossed over deliberately to her husband's chiffonier, and, with her hands upraised, she had dared herself to pull open the top drawer and see whether his pistol was in its accustomed place. At the crucial moment she had weakened; she had decided *not* to look.

In spite of the sick disquiet which the memory of her cowardice evoked, she found a delicious irony in the spectacle of this hunter apprehensive as to his quarry. Like all leeches, he needed a virile body upon which to feed—a dead George Hewitt would not serve his purpose. The man before her was many times and in many ways an ignorant fool, but he had instinctive impulses which guided unerringly, and he had made no mistake in ranging himself upon her husband's side. The rôle of informer would place him at best in a position of transient glory, but, as confidential friend and savior, he had his future by the heel. From this moment on Cran-

ston would rise or fall upon the fortunes of his superior.

"With the help of the weather, you and I will pull him through, Mrs. Hewitt. You can depend on *me!*" His complacent words of early morning came to her mind. Did he feel as confident now, as smugly sure, that the only enemy to his rising fortunes was the weather? She knew that he must be cursing his carelessness, chaffing inwardly at the impulses which had persuaded him that an after-breakfast chat with her had been worth the risk of giving his victim any rope.

She would not have found a professional blackmailer so disturbing. After all, such men usually had a definite price. They named the sum that would buy their silence and there was a fair chance that one heard no more of them. But this man was trading upon their gratitude and it was plain that he expected the store to be inexhaustible. To the end of their days they must smile upon him, suffer his patronizing hand-clasp, convert themselves into tufted footstools for his rough-shod arrogance, become the ladder upon which his mediocrity would climb to otherwise unattainable heights. And he would not even temper the situation with the grace of either tact or understanding! A slight tremor ran through her. She picked up her fork and made a pretense of eating.

She had been acting this morning when she had intimated that an inopportune trick of weather might be less disturbing than some other shift of fortune. She realized now that, while such a circumstance would accomplish its end swiftly, it would be scarcely a vindication of her husband's courage! Yes, courage was always left, even though honor had flown. The thought beguiled her. It was curious to discover the solaces that one could wring from disaster, the fresh point of view glimpsed from the last position that one fell back upon, in an attempt to stem the tide of utter defeat! What if her husband had still enough courage to outwit self-contempt

and the man before her in one swift flight? Cranston, she felt, had acknowledged one more sinister possibility to the chances against establishing for himself a secure foothold upon the ledge of fortune. The weather and a gleaming pistol—either of these agents could destroy his hopes. But did he have the vision to include the third contingency which was flashing so luminously across her black anxiety? . . . No, she felt sure that he did not.

He finished his meal rapidly, but he slighted nothing in either his haste or his uneasiness.

"I think," he said, as he pushed back his chair, "that I'll take a look about the place, after all. It's cooler and perhaps I'll run into George!"

She went to the foot of the steps with him. It *was* cooler, and, as her gaze swept the distant hills, she discovered that a gray film was being drawn across the blue face of the sky. The air was moving restlessly in little aimless gusts, and yellow leaves from the exhausted prune-trees danced in the screened sunlight.

"They ought to be stacking the trays," flashed through her mind.

Cranston's figure disappeared, merging itself into the converging foliage of the orchard. She went into the house and up to her bedroom. This time she did not hesitate—she crossed to her husband's chiffonier and pulled open the upper drawer. . . . *His pistol was not there!*

She wondered afterward how it had been possible for her to sit quietly all that sultry afternoon, waiting for her husband's familiar step upon the stairway, but there had seemed little else to be done. She was not a woman who expressed her concern in physical restlessness, and her seemingly tranquil moments were often her darkest.

She blamed herself a thousand times and in a thousand different ways. Why had she allowed her cowardice to thwart his confidence last night? Wouldn't it

have been better to have heard the truth from *him* rather than from Cranston? A word from her might have saved him, while now . . . But she put the very suggestion away with a sharp thrust. The fact that he had succumbed to temptation no longer disturbed her—she had greater hopes and fears for him. She had lost many vague and tremulous ideals along the pathway of reality, but her step was surer and her gaze accustomed to the relentless glare of a spiritual noonday. She felt a responsibility, a sense that in the final analysis her husband would become what she had helped to make him—that only an incorrigible remained impervious to environment and association. And her thoughts flew back swiftly to the day when she had been pleased with her father-in-law's legacy merely because it seemed smart to have a summer place within motoring distance from town. She had wanted it for display more than anything else, snared by the empty grandeur of possession. . . . Well, it had ended by taking them both captive.

When, finally, she did hear the familiar footsteps, she closed her eyes and clutched the arms of her chair. He came into the room cautiously. She could not trust herself to rise and greet him.

"Ah, so there you are!" he said, inadequately, and he went to his chiffonier and stood before it awkwardly, combing out his hair. . . . Presently he opened the upper drawer and she saw him put the pistol back. He turned and faced her. She rose.

"I knew you wouldn't do it!" she said, and her voice quivered.

He kept his place, leaning back with a suggestion of exhaustion.

"Where's Cranston?" he demanded.

"Out looking for you. . . . He's been nervous."

"Naturally," he laughed back, harshly. "He told you, of course . . . but I guess it wasn't really news. . . . I've been figuring things out this afternoon. . . . I'm in pretty bad, but not bad enough to buy my safety at *his*

price—unless you would rather have it so.”

She felt the sudden glow of a warm relief. She went up to him and she took his face between her trembling hands.

He put her from him gently. “Don’t!” he entreated. “I mustn’t break down now. If you’ll find me my overcoat and a decent collar and tie . . . I want to get away before he comes in.”

She hustled about, gathering his things, while he freshened up. It was curious how all these trivial common-places relieved the strain.

Finally he was ready. She had never seen him look so well, she thought. At the door he infolded her, and she clung for a moment, inert but tearless.

“You realize,” he said, “what this *may* mean? I’m hoping that with fair prospects they’ll let me make good—and then resign. On the other hand . . .”

She looked into his eyes with a clear, steady gaze. “Nothing matters but just this . . . to know you had the courage to go to them . . . *alone!* Remember that . . . *always* . . . no matter what happens!”

He answered with a swift, passionate embrace.

“To-morrow, if it still looks threatening, have them stack the trays. Everything depends on the crop now.”

“Yes . . . yes . . .”

“And make any excuses you think best to Cranston. . . . To-morrow you can tell him what I have done. . . . I’ll be back as soon as they’ll let me.”

He had gone and she stood, wilting for a moment, in the doorway. The flapping of a curtain claimed her attention. She crossed over, thrusting it up sharply. The wind struck her face with cool refreshment and played wantonly with her hair.

“From the south again,” she muttered, shivering slightly. She shut the window decisively and threw herself upon the bed. “I’ll have to get them at work early to-morrow, stacking trays. We can’t afford to take any chances.”

She wondered what Cranston was doing at that moment, and a droll picture of him running about the orchard, like an anxious setter sniffing for game to no purpose, rose before her, moving her to inward laughter. She thought with a sharp gasp of satisfaction that, no matter what happened, to-night would be the last time she would be compelled to share her loaf with the man she detested. And she had a sudden sense of the sincerity and fairness in the Far Eastern custom that denied an enemy bread and salt. Well, she would play the game according to Western standards and provide him a good meal. . . . She closed her eyes, thinking over the fare that she would set before him, picking out all the things that would bring the greedy and audible smack to his lips. Yes . . . she wanted to move him to all his irritating tricks so that she could measure the depths of their escape. She would have a piquant soup and a crisp salad again and chicken broiled to a turn. And for dessert . . . something cool and juicy. Had she better serve another melon or would he find a crushed and frozen fruit more to his taste? . . . How about prune whip? Of course, just the thing . . . so appropriate . . . and . . . and . . . My, but she was growing drowsy! . . . Prune whip . . . Well, she had better rouse herself and tell . . . the cook. . . . Yes, in just a minute . . . just a min— . . . Prune whip. . . . What a . . .

She awoke with a sense of stifled confusion. It was dark, and somebody was tapping on her door. She flung herself to her feet and switched on the light.

“Come in!” she called, boldly.

The door flew back. Cranston stood before her at the threshold. He had on his overcoat and his hat and traveling-bag were in his hand.

“I’m very sorry, Mrs. Hewitt,” he began, awkwardly. “But I’ve decided to catch the next train.”

“Going? . . . without *dinner?*” she gasped.

"Yes," he spit out, brutally. "It's raining!"

She could hear it now, flinging itself in an angry torrent against the pane, but she refused to surrender.

"Rain?" she echoed. "Why, it's only a shower. . . . In a few moments—"

"Nonsense!" he retorted, bitterly. "It's been coming down for over an hour. Everybody says it will last all night! Your husband is a fool, Mrs. Hewitt; he ought to have been stacking the trays to-day!"

He was turning from her with a gesture of impatient contempt. She roused herself suddenly, drawing up to her full

height. She was not exactly a happy woman, but at that moment she knew what it was to be a proud one.

"You might as well stay, Mr. Cranston," she said, distinctly, "and eat. My husband is already in San Francisco."

He put his hat on his head and pulled it over his eyes. "A confession won't get him anything now!" he growled, viciously. "He's done for. . . . Big business isn't tender-hearted with paupers!"

She stood motionless, pressing her cold fingers against her throbbing temples. She heard him go down the stairs and out into the night, banging the door. . . . She felt an enormous relief.

SONG IN THE SPRING

BY LOUISE MORGAN SILL

WHAT is there to sorrow for
When the spring is young?
What are all to-morrows for
But songs to be sung?

When I see the lilacs flower,
And the apple-trees,
Every minute seems an hour
Ripe with ecstasies.

In the wood the ferns unfold
Slow their fronded green,
Little mysteries are told
By little tongues unseen.

Footsteps pass, and on the earth
Leave no impress there;
There are sounds of secret mirth—
Where are they, oh, where?

And yet, within my true love's eyes
Hides a stranger thing,
Mystery of mysteries,
Subtler than the spring.