

# The Breaking-Point

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HER neighbors said of her that for twenty years she had not smiled, and it was true. Her husband had not observed this, though he had observed another thing equally remarkable—that for twenty years she had not wept. He smiled with pride when he thought of this, because it seemed to him proof of his merit as a husband.

Only her son, Anson, coming twenty-one years of age, had observed the absence of both smiles and tears.

She was only forty-three years old, but she was already like an old woman. She spent all her time working about her house, silently, going from one thing to another as if led unerringly by habit. Her eyes were expressionless, as if she had come to demand of life nothing in the way of variety or surprise or promise. Occasionally she sat down and sank into a drooping posture and stared straight before her without seeing anything. This moment of surrender, as it might perhaps have been called, always ended in the same way: with a sudden blinking, a purposeful getting up, a passing on to the first task that came uppermost.

This too had been the manner of her life for twenty years.

And then change and relief—transformation—came on the evening of her son Anson's twenty-first birthday.

On that evening, at seven o'clock, she was in her dining-room, a room which would have seemed very pleasant if there had been a happy person in it. It was neat and wholesome, and it had an attractive bay window toward the west, where the light of day was now softening into a golden vapor. She was intent upon a simple task. She spread a newspaper,

folded across once, on the table, moving the sugar-bowl and the spoon-holder back out of the way. She meant presently to place a cake here on the table. She presented a sad, appealing picture as she smoothed the paper without quite appearing to put her mind upon what she did.

The cake was still in the kitchen range, and she sat down to wait for it to bake. With the skill of a practised housewife she kept the cake in mind, but she thought of something else too. She thought of her husband.

Her husband had been sitting out on the front porch enjoying his pipe and calling out with loud good-fellowship to persons who went by on the sidewalk. Now he had left his place on the porch and was walking up the street, up the hill, in the dusk. She had not known just when he left the front porch, as he had a way of doing some things furtively; but she could see him from the bay window. She watched listlessly as he walked with a kind of swagger up the hill, and she noted the manner in which the neighbors responded to his greetings as he passed. For example, the Gwinns, working among their flower-beds up on their bit of terrace—the month was June—smiled back at him willingly enough, though with a kind of irony, an effect of innuendo. He laughed loudly as he passed the Gwinns.

She surmised that he would probably stop at the house of Mrs. Woods, who dwelt midway up the hill with her three grown daughters, including the eldest, Mrs. Crabtree, a grass-widow. Mrs. Woods was herself a grass-widow, and she and all her daughters were always spoken of lightly and vaguely.

She got up and went out to look at her cake in the oven; but the image of her husband was still in her eye and she was thinking: "What was it about him that ever fascinated me?"

Her husband, Charley Fowler—everybody called him Charley, though he was nearly fifty years old—was a rather striking man to look at. He was very robust and ruddy, his head rising erectly from his magnificent chest and shoulders. He was so powerful a man that it would have seemed hopeless to undertake to subdue or humble him save by the use of a bludgeon in relentless hands. He held his head with the arrogance of noisy good humor, and he laughed loudly and talked in a voice like thunder. A block away you could hear his laughter, his boisterous greetings; you could catch the gleam of his lustrous teeth under his thick red mustache. He seemed always care-free and happy.

But his wife, looking carefully at the cake in the oven, and drawing back from the rush of heat, realized that there was something gross, something beastly, about him, too. This appeared particularly when he walked. There was something bearlike rather than manlike in his powerful carriage.

She was not a learned woman; yet for an instant she vaguely pictured him as a beast of burden, yoked with another of his kind, dragging heavy loads; and in her mind there was a dim consciousness of the peasant way of life, when men toiled in stony fields and were the product of tyranny and wrong. Her husband's carriage had made her think of these things.

At that moment she was, perhaps, at the threshold of a true interpretation; for a student would have seen in Fowler the headstrong impulses of a slave set free, the familiar phenomenon in our American life, of Europe and the past mingled with America and to-day. He was a pagan made jocund and singing out of key.

The cake in the oven—the several layers in their shallow pans—was not quite done yet; and she returned to the dining-room with the question still in her mind: "What was it about him that ever fascinated me?"

She thought how passionately she had loved him when she was a girl, when she first met him, when they were married. Of course, her love had been that of a young animal, overflowing with life as a cup is filled with water. It hadn't been love, really, but only the foundation upon

which, sometimes, love is afterward built. Still, it had been the response of one living atom to another; and why had her response been so intense?

Only because he was strong? Was the human soul so base a thing, then, that it worshipped mere strength of body?

No, it couldn't have been just that. Other strong men had not attracted her as he had done. Reaching back in her consciousness she groped for the thing which had fascinated her.

She heard him laughing in the distance and she leaned forward, seated at the table, so that she could see him through the bay window. He had stopped to talk to Angie Killifer, the cashier in Woolfson's store down on the avenue, who had grown up in the next block. Angie, her work done for the day, was on her way home, looking incredibly fresh after her long hours at Woolfson's, and her face was now lit up amazingly in response to Charley Fowler's roaring laughter with which he ended every sentence he uttered.

Suddenly she realized two things clearly; one a little thing and one a momentous thing. The little thing was that her husband had not said anything to Angie to justify that loud laugh. Angie's pretty face betrayed bewilderment quite as much as it expressed pleasure. The momentous thing was that it had been his good humor which had won her when she had been a girl—his warm, beaming face, his actually embracing delight, his laughter which filled his chest and throat and shook him all over.

Now, looking back across the years, she knew that her husband's good humor was a perfectly meaningless thing.

For whom and when had he not laughed like that? For every man and woman and child of his acquaintance, and especially when there were others by to observe him. He loved to make a noise; he liked to be observed. His good nature was in fact selfishness, a form of egotism.

She could hear him laughing and shouting from the beginning, at every one. At every one save herself. Alone, in their home life, he had been quiet, almost stupid, seemingly dwelling in his mind upon things elsewhere. He had never discriminated when he walked abroad. Base men and evil women had evoked his



The Gwinns, working among their flower-beds, smiled back at him.—Page 97.

good humor as easily as any others. He had not laughed and jested for the sake of others, but for his own sake. And baseness had been mingled with his good humor, too. In crowds, when babies in their mothers' arms had put out their hands to him, the mothers had sometimes smiled

into his eyes—and then their smiles had faded away abruptly, giving place to an expression of uneasiness.

Almost at the beginning he had been an unfaithful husband and had made an uproarious, taunting jest of his unfaithfulness.

She had withdrawn from him in her mind, first in pride and anguish, but in the course of time with something like indifference. She had not intended in the beginning that the breach between them should become lasting, and she had scarcely realized when it had become so.

He had fixed the breach between them by not minding it at all. He had gone on laughing and shouting and beaming rosily upon others.

She could recall how, year after year, she had heard him in the evenings and late at night as he parted from his companions before his own door, laughing with a very flood of good-will—and how, a moment later, he had come into the house with heavy features, with a sullen word, as if he had come perforce into the one place in the world which held no pleasure for him.

She had gone on tending her house dutifully, without smiling or weeping. She had learned to accept her situation in silence: she was a woman of his own class, though not of his own kind.

She got up suddenly, remembering her cake.

She went out into the kitchen with its shining nickel and steel and aluminum, its spotless floor. She opened the range door and her face expressed a certain satisfaction. The cake had turned out a perfect success, the various layers, each in its shallow pan, being delicately brown and symmetrically rounded.

She turned the heat off and removed the shallow pans from the oven. At the kitchen table she went forward with her task: removing the layers of cake from the pans, and placing the layers one on top of the other with a filling of cocoanut and icing between and on the top. All this required a degree of skill comparable to that of the average watch-maker; yet she worked without pride, because it was her idea that, since it was a woman's work she was doing, it was of little consequence.

At last she sat down before the kitchen table and drew a small parcel from behind the bread box, where it had been concealed. And now her expression became in a measure animated, so that one watching her would have followed her further movements with curiosity.

She opened the parcel with firm hands

and brought to view two delicate little pasteboard boxes of an oblong shape. She removed the lid from one of these boxes and took into her hands the contents of it: twelve lovely wax candles of various delicate colors—pink and blue and red and orange and lavender and white. She regarded them with bright eyes, handling them exquisitely, as if she were caressing them. There was really something almost magic in their soft prettiness.

Thoughtfully, almost solemnly, she began placing the candles on the cake, each candle representing a year. And despite the fact that if it had been her own years she was contemplating, it would have been needful to have only candles of a uniformly gray hue, she was most watchful that a charmingly variegated effect should be wrought; and she ranged the tiny candles so that a pink one had only a lavender or a blue or an orange or a white candle to stand beside it. For this was her son Anson's birthday cake she was finishing; and perhaps in her uncommunicative mind there was the hope that her son's years had been really pleasant.

When there were only three candles left in the second box, which had also contained a dozen, she knew that her work was done. However, she counted, to make sure; and she also tried the effect of a slight readjustment here and there. There was another lavender candle in its box which she wished she might use—it was so lovely; but of course she couldn't have more than twenty-one.

She leaned back in her chair and sat with folded hands and face a little inclined, taking in the cake and its ornaments, its twenty-one softly tinted candles. No, she couldn't have more than twenty-one, even if there was that remaining lavender candle. A voice repeated the words to her sternly: "You can't have more than twenty-one!"

Suddenly she whispered abjectly: "But I didn't have twenty-one. I was married at twenty." And then she firmly drew her hands down across her face as if to readjust there the mask of immobility which it had worn so long. After all, she had nothing to do with years. This was her son Anson's cake, and they were his twenty-one years.



She began to think of her son more curiously than she had done for a good many years. She had wronged him, perhaps, by paying so little heed to him—merely because she was discouraged, because life had treated her shabbily. She was glad she had thought to make him a birthday cake, now that he was twenty-one. Certainly it would surprise him; perhaps it would please him.

He would be home presently, at almost any moment now. He worked until seven in the evening every day in the summer, his employer being a truck gardener over near the river a mile away. He would be coming presently, ravenously hungry, spent with labor, silent—like his father.

Yet no, not like his father—that was to wrong him, to compare him with his father. But at any rate, quiet and reserved and really mysterious. Anson was always quiet, an odd youth who seemed always to analyze things and to arrive at no conclusion.

She did not know that she loved her son passionately. How should she know, since she had done with yielding to the emotions these many years? She had never been confidential with any one; and certainly a woman could not have confided to her son the sort of stories there were to tell about Charley Fowler. She had never spoken to her son of her unhappiness. At first it had not seemed worth while, and later it had not seemed possible. She had simply withdrawn from her son, because he was a figure in that world in which she no longer had the heart to live.

However, she now obeyed an impulse to get up and go into her son's room.

Undoubtedly she had felt a strange stirring because of that cake with its twenty-one beautiful candles; and when she entered the room where her son spent his nights she experienced a sudden feeling of tenderness.

She had come to think of Anson as a man, as a mature and taciturn person who no longer needed her. But the youth which he no longer manifested in any way was expressed here in his room in ways which seemed wistful and touching.

He had once wished to be a scholar, and had put aside his ambition only after his father required him, at the age of sixteen,

to leave his class in high school and go to work. But the emblems of the old boyhood ambition were here in the silent room: school flags on the walls; a pile of text-books, forlorn and dilapidated, on a table; a class book filled with a sort of rapturous conglomeration of things. There was a baseball bat in one corner of the room. Anson had performed a prodigious feat with that bat long ago and had won a game for his class. And there were a pair of boxing-gloves which had once been to him as the apple of his eye, and which he had used with great skill.

Suddenly her heart ached because of a sense of guilt, of opportunities neglected.

She had permitted her son to become a stranger to her, to regard her as a dull creature who cared for nothing, to suppose that she was the thing she was through choice rather than necessity. She had made no effort to keep close to him, to hail him across the deep chasm of a husband and father who cared for neither of them.

His life—her son's life—had been a tragedy too, she realized. He, too, had been a victim of Charley Fowler's brutal egotism. Fowler, the ruddy and laughing, had never had anything but a growl, a sidelong glance, for his son. He had seemed actually to hate his son, as if in his heart he feared him. He had beaten the boy a time or two for no reason at all other than that Anson had stared at him curiously when he laughed.

She wondered if Anson felt the same passive despair, the same hopelessness, that she felt in the presence of the master of the house. It occurred to her that her son's life, too, had been ruined.

She took up the pillow from his bed and beat it with her hands; she refolded one of his ties; she took up the baseball bat and inspected it curiously. Yes, perhaps his life, too, had been ruined. It was true, he was only twenty-one, twenty-one today, and that life might be said to be just beginning for him. But no, she concluded, life didn't begin at twenty-one; it began at the beginning.

She started almost guiltily—she had heard him walking in the yard.

She slipped out of his room, fearful of being found there. It seemed to her unfair for her to loiter in his room. If she

had always masked her very self from him, what right had she to spy out his soul, there in that room where he had spent his boyhood?

He was going around the back way, because of the soil on his shoes. She reached the kitchen before he entered it and stood between him and the cake on the table.

"Go right in and sit down, Anson," she said. "I'll bring your supper right away."

He stopped at the sink to wash his face and hands and she waited uneasily. He would wonder why she did not put the things on the table promptly. But she only stood waiting. When he went into the dining-room she hurriedly followed with the supper things. There was a dish of stew simmering on the top of the range, and a salad and strawberries in the ice-box, and bread and butter.

She went back into the kitchen while he ate and stood regarding the cake with its twenty-one candles. She looked with satisfaction at the cake, which was perfect, and at the same time she listened to the sounds in the dining-room. If Anson should wish for anything more she should want to serve him instantly, to prevent him from complaining or becoming impatient.

Her son did not speak but she knew by the sound of the dishes when he had put his plate aside and was eating his strawberries. She heard the click of the spoon in the sugar-bowl.

She waited a moment longer and then she went in, bearing the cake in her hands. There was the faintest tinge of color in her cheeks; her eyes were fixed anxiously on the cake.

She placed the cake before him and looked at him almost shyly.

He exclaimed in simple surprise—"Mother!" And then he lifted his eyes to her, wondering, a trifle abashed.

"I didn't forget that you are twenty-one to-day," she said.

He sat regarding her, taking in the fact that she was deeply moved in secret, that there was a kind of childish entreaty in her gaze, that her voice had trembled, that—most strange of all!—there was a kind of loveliness about her.

He said: "Mother—sit down, won't you?"

She sat down opposite him and regarded him with a painful stirring at her heart. Something in his tone, in his eyes, had seized hold of her.

He seemed to be contemplating the cake now. He gazed at it a long time, but at length he lifted his eyes to her. She could not bear to meet his glance. Dusk was now falling and she found relief by lighting the twenty-one candles.

He watched her thin hands; he lifted his glance again and again to her face. When the candles were all lighted she sat down again.

Suddenly he leaned his elbows on the table and said with deep intensity—

"Mother! Mother, why have you gone on living as you have all these years?"

She nervously smoothed the tablecloth with her hands and made no reply. What did he mean? What was she to say in reply?

"I mean," he went on, "why didn't you leave him long ago?"

She lifted her glance to him in alarm.

"I know," he continued, "you haven't been like this always—like a woman walking in her sleep. I can see that now. I know he is a beast, that it's been his fault. What made you give in to it?"

"Anson!" she whispered warningly.

"I've known what he was," he said; "ever since I was a little boy. Everybody knows. I don't remember how long ago it was that I knew about him and understood everything—how he'd stop at a gate in the evening and talk across to women who were rubbish, and then slip back to them after dark. Men always laughed at it, and women would pretend not to understand; but everybody knew what it meant. You had no right to put up with it."

She continued to smooth the tablecloth with her hand; she sat with her head inclined, her lips tremulously alive.

"You've allowed yourself to die. Why did you do it?"

She was confused, distressed. Her son was no longer a boy; he was revealing himself to her as a man; he was accusing her, demanding that she take him into her confidence. She had the wish to justify herself.

"You'll scarcely understand how I loved him," she said. "I was very foolish,

perhaps. I was young, you know. And I couldn't make him over, make him different. There didn't seem anything I could do. There was nothing to do. I just gave up."

"But how," he asked, "could you have ever loved such a man?"

She met his searching, incredulous gaze above the lightly wavering candles. Their light was increasing as the darkness deepened. They gave to his expression a mysterious authority, an unwonted color, an elusive movement.

The apathy which had folded her about like a net for many years released her. She desired greatly to win the respect of her son, this man who questioned her. Her brows contracted from the effort to form a plea in defense of herself.

"How can a woman say why she loves a man?" she demanded. "There's no use trying to explain."

He sat regarding her pityingly, yet with a certain incredulous wonder too.

She tried again. "The ancients admitted that there were four mysteries in life," she said.

He broke in with vehemence, with a hint of irony—"Four!" And then patiently and with candor: "What were the four mysteries, mother?"

"One was the way of a bird in the air and one was the way of a lizard on a rock, one was the way of a ship in the sea, and one was the way of a man with a maid."

He sat in silence, turning the words over in his mind.

She went on: "I don't know as I ever saw a lizard; but when it comes to birds and women——"

He interrupted: "Let's not mind about the birds. That seems easy—their way of sailing in the sky and getting back to safety when the wind blows——"

"But I think maybe the birds and the women are a good deal alike. The mystery about the birds is something deeper than you've said. It means their coming back to where their homes are, their loving the place where they belong. You know they say even the littlest birds fly thousands of miles away in the winter-time, across mountains and seas and forests, to where it is warm. But they come back in the spring all the way to where they were born. They find their way

somehow. You can see how mysterious it is."

He was moved almost beyond the power of speech by something tender and sad in her voice, by something steadfast in her eyes.

She continued: "The wonder is that they should wish to come back from the lands of summer. It—it is so dreary here. You can't think what attracts them. The happy days here are so few and short. There is just a glimpse of the sun, as if it were lost from its place—and then the bitter winter comes."

He could not look at her for a moment. "And—mother, there is the way of a man with a maid. What is the mystery about that?"

She continued to smooth the tablecloth and he perceived that her hands were trembling now. Presently she said: "Men do attract girls, of course—most of all when they are strong and happy. But I think the ancients should have said something about the way of a maid with a man. It is the girls who are mysteries, I think, wanting to make life something that it isn't, wanting to be nice, wanting to be secure, wanting to be at peace. That's the real mystery. It's the same kind of mystery there is in the birds wanting to come back to dreary places. I don't know what it is. We're driven, the birds and the women, too. We are looking for something better than life allows. We can't help ourselves. I don't know why we do it."

She lifted her perplexed glance to him. He was bending closer toward her so that the flames of the candles illuminated his face. But much more wonderful was the fact that there seemed to be a sort of illumination from within, too. She observed heedlessly a scar half hidden by an eyebrow—the mark of his father's angry hand left there years ago when her son had once rebelled against his father's authority. But the vital thing she saw was the strange expression of elation in the eyes bent upon her, the expression of recognition, of discovery.

He brought his hands together with the rapture of one who is saved.

"It isn't a mystery, mother!" he exclaimed. "It's a proof! It's proof that there is something in life that we don't

control—something back of us, above us. You might say it's proof of God if you wanted to. Anyway, proof of goodness stronger than our logic, stronger than anything men have made or done."

He had arisen and he stood looking triumphantly down upon her, his face withdrawn now from the glow of the candles. Out of a half-shadow he talked to her.

"Mother," he said, his voice vibrant with emotion; "I want to tell you something, to confess something. I've been proud and stubborn a long time, too proud to talk to anybody about what was going on in my mind. I felt I had been wronged, even ruined; by having the kind of father I've got. You see, I've been like him in one way, thinking mostly about myself. But I'm going to be different from now on. I *am* different. My eyes have been opened—by you, mother! You're bigger than a thousand fathers! I can see now that all the time you've been meaning everything I've wanted life to mean: something sound, something to tie to. I'm going to be different from now on. We're going to share things—our thoughts, mother, and all we hope for. We're going to *live* together, you and I—"

He stopped, because something was happening to his mother. She had begun to beat her hands together nervously; she arose as if she hoped by movement of some sort to keep her emotions under control. Then with a surrendering, spasmodic movement she flung her forearm up so that it lay across her eyes. A tortured cry escaped from her, and then she was weeping, her breast was wracked, her features were distorted, tears coursed down her cheeks.

After twenty years of stolid self-possession she wept again.

Her son stood back in the shadow gazing at her, wishing to go to her, to comfort and reassure her. But the wonder of it all held him in his place an instant. She was not crying as a woman twenty years younger than she might have wept; she had gone back to the beginning, she was crying like a little girl. The flood-gates of her emotions had been swept open by simple words of kindness, spoken by one who understood.

So the two stood opposite each other a moment; and then they were both dismayed and shocked by a booming voice, the voice of Fowler, who had come into the room unheard.

"Hey?" he thundered; "hey? What's this? Hey?" He looked from his wife to his son, from his son to his wife, and then at his son again. His hair was bristling; his face was inflamed with passion. He strode ferociously toward his son. "Hey?" he repeated, and his booming voice trailed off into inarticulate blasphemies. He plunged forward and spun his son about by a vicious box, as from a lion's paw, on his shoulder. "Hey?" he demanded again and again. By sheer momentum he began to bear down upon his son, meaning, it appeared, to crush him, to destroy him.

But it was to be observed that Anson began almost immediately a kind of manœuvring. He gave way before his father, but not as one who is afraid, who seeks to escape, but rather as one draws on an adversary. He kept his head proudly erect—a trick inherited from his father—and his face was set, his eyes keenly watchful.

He backed away out of the dining-room into the kitchen; out of the kitchen into the secluded garden enclosure at the rear of the house. There he hastily glanced about to make sure of his footing; and then, quite astoundingly, he began a kind of attack upon his father. He began by moving lightly this way and that, but no longer backward. He stooped and dodged and sprang aside when his father bore down upon him with his arms moving like flails. And then suddenly he did a surprising thing: he sprang forward like a catapult and dealt a ringing blow with his right fist on his father's barrel-like chest. Immediately he was away again, cautiously balanced on his toes.

Fowler stood still, seeming to expand with amazement and new fury. He was speechless; and then he lunged forward again, his great paws extended, trembling with hunger to get a grip upon this shifting adversary. But Anson watched for his chance again, and again he struck—now a stinging blow to his father's jaw. And again he was away, alertly watching his father, thrilling with the realization





"Oh, Anson mustn't hit him again!"—Page 106.

that certain training of his high-school days had been of greater value than he had ever dreamed.

Mrs. Fowler had come to the kitchen window and was looking out. She was at first alarmed, and then incredible—and then thrilled. She stood like a pillar, the

tears still finding lodgment in the creases of her cheeks. Away in the dining-room the twenty-one candles burned unseen, and wavered ominously, each the object of a separate impulse, of divergent airs, each the puppet of its own law. But Mrs. Fowler no longer needed to see the

twenty-one candles to realize clearly that her son had come to be a man.

Fowler was becoming blind with fury; he sought to prevail by the weight of authority. He uttered abusive, booming words, and advanced overbearingly.

A fierce blow beneath his chin, which he seemed to lean forward to receive, brought him heavily to his knees. But he was up quickly. He took a lesson from his son's book and began striking out with his fists. Occasionally one of his blows found its target; and presently Anson's mouth was bleeding, one of his eyes was closing from a swelling which appeared as quickly as a bubble is blown. But Anson was still seeing perfectly, and he was keeping his head. He began to carry the battle to his father now, instead of fighting on the defensive. His father, muscle-bound, immense and heavy, was beginning to make a snorting noise as he drew his breath. All his powers were already on the wane—all but his blind passion. He rushed forward again; and now a blow sent him heavily, full length on his back, on the grass.

He got up and advanced more deliberately. Again he was knocked down. He arose, mumbling, and came back to the attack—and again he fell.

Now, when he arose, his legs were trembling, he could not regain his balance; he seemed to be walking in his sleep.

Mrs. Fowler, still at the kitchen window, murmured to herself: "Oh, Anson mustn't hit him again!"

But Anson did and now Fowler lay a moment where he fell, and when he tried to arise it was plain that he was utterly bewildered, all but unconscious. He propped himself up on his right arm and lay gasping for breath, his head nodding.

And then Anson helped him to rise, and guided him into the house, slowly and laboriously, and to a chair in the dining-room which Mrs. Fowler eagerly brought forward.

It was Mrs. Fowler who knelt beside him and peered at him solicitously, in alarm. It seemed to her that he might be fatally injured, that he might collapse in a moment. He lifted his dazed glance and seemed to be trying to make out who

it was over there beyond those swaying candles. He frowned in perplexity.

Mrs. Fowler spoke to her son, who stood beyond the candles: "Bring me a wet towel, Anson; and then—then you'd better go away a little while. You'd better leave me alone with your father." She was thinking, "I don't see why he wanted to strike him, that last time."

Anson brought a dripping towel and placed it in his mother's eager hands. His mother did not look at him, did not note that he walked with a superior air, with a newly acquired dignity. He went away and sat down in the back yard, beyond hearing.

Mrs. Fowler began to bathe her husband's bruised and swollen face. Suddenly she stopped and gazed at him with a kind of deep bewilderment. And then she spoke.

"Charley," she said; "I don't understand—why did you get so angry at him? I mean, when you came in and found us together."

"Why?" he reiterated dully. "Why? Because—he made you cry!" And he groped for her hand and pressed it feebly.

She leaned closer toward him, and the thrill she had got long ago when she had held to his strong hand came back to her now—or something related to it—at the touch of his hand which clung to her.

She began to bathe his face solicitously with the soothing cool towel. She observed that he held his face up eagerly, like a child.

It came to her gratifyingly that he would not have liked another woman to bathe his face like this, and it occurred to her that a man might go thoughtlessly enough to another woman for trivial services and pleasures, but that he would want to come to the woman he loved when he was hurt.

She thought again: "Anson went too far, a powerful young man like him. His father isn't the man he used to be; he's getting along in years."

Suddenly she put the towel down in her lap and slipped her hand about her husband's head. She gazed at him musingly, almost in a rapt way; and then impulsively she drew his head down against her breast. "It won't hurt very long," she said, her cheek lying against his rough

hair. She wanted to kiss him, and she lifted his face and did so.

Fowler's hand tightened on hers again; he clung to it gratefully, with returning strength. It was now certain that he was not hurt seriously, that he had only been dazed for a moment. He held his face up again to receive her ministrations, closing his eyes and sighing.

And ministering to him she began to undergo another transformation. A curious little disturbance took place about

the set line of her lips. There was an unwonted, spasmodic twitching, a seeking of an outlet for newborn energies. She turned her face away to hide a tremor which ran along the line where her lips met. In spite of her wish to prevent it the line presented a tucked-in and turned-up appearance.

She leaned forward, applying the soothing towel, and watching to see that he did not open his eyes. And for the first time in twenty years she smiled.

## Bats Macabre

BY ISA URQUHART GLENN

ILLUSTRATION (FRONTISPIECE) BY OTTO J. GATTER



LATE afternoon in the tropics. A long, narrow pier stretching from the flat town into the flat bay, out toward a small island. Another long, thin line up in the sky, seeming about to connect the town and the island—bats awaking from their day's sleep and journeying forth upon a night of sinful revelry. Large bats such as one sees in dreams—bats with a sweep of wing so vast as to cast a shadow over the soul—with a stretch of dirty body so dark as to throw a suggestion of horror into the approaching night. Harbingers of evil—symbols of a world contended for by God and Lucifer.

It seemed to Odom, as he stood aside on the pier of Zamboanga and watched his company march aboard the little inter-island transport, that he was suffering more than any man deserved.

Past him, swinging along in steady line of khaki, went "M" Company. And "M" Company was going into a fight and leaving him behind. Disability was an accursed word to apply to a soldier; a weakened heart action was a poor end for a fighting man.

He had heard the doctors talking about him. They had whispered of things

worse than the weak heart. Odom knew that the doctors were wrong. But he had been out here a long time; and he had brooded over facts of which the doctors knew nothing. He realized that life did not stop at what one could see. He was of Highland and Scandinavian stock. The north knows intuitively what the tropics prove to be true. These whispering doctors did not worry him. He had greater troubles than what they thought of him. The company was leaving for Jolo. No place at the front for a sick man.

Odom kicked savagely at the iron girder by which he stood. With despair in his heart he watched the feverish preparations going on around him. Moros trotted past with burdens, running in single file up the gangplank. Out of their way scattered the onlookers. On the outskirts of the crowd hovered symbols ominous as the bats in the sky—tiny Japanese women from the houses of ill fame which were located beyond the city where the quagmires began.

In a group to one side were the wives of the soldiers who were going out to fight. These women, on whom the fortunes of war fell heaviest, had come to look for possibly the last time on their men in health. On their cheeks were traces of the tears they had shed—presage