

Charlotte's Marriage

GRACE VANCAMP had said from the first that she was going to look up Charlotte when she went to California.

"Oh, let Charlotte Evans alone!" Roy told her.

"Why, I'm just going to look her up! It'd be funny if I didn't. She's one of my oldest friends."

"Yeah," Roy muttered. He knew Grace's "old friends."

But anyway, he wouldn't be along.

Grace had that visit to Charlotte in mind all the time that she was out in California. She stayed in LaJolla which proved to be exactly the right place, for she met awfully nice people, several artists among them, and she could drive down into Mexico and have a little wine and lose a little money at roulette. She loved roulette—her mother would have died if she had known Grace ever gambled! Oh, of course, there was the beach too, and the sunset that everybody pretended to be so crazy about. She had plenty to do that winter besides wonder about Charlotte, you would have thought—unless you had known Grace as well as Roy did. But once let curiosity about a certain person get into her mind and hell itself couldn't make her let go.

She was much too adroit, however, to go straight to see Charlotte. Grace didn't like to do things that way. It was more fun to work the thing out under cover of something else. She had that trip more or less in mind all winter. She led Major Raleigh up to proposing a long drive; and then, pretending she wanted to see the redwoods beyond, worked the plan around

until she was sure the drive would take them through Woodlands.

Now why did she go to all that trouble? Grace wondered about it herself that night. She looked around at the pretty Spanish apartment, that was costing a lot more than Roy thought she ought to spend. It had all the things that she just simply must have—not because of the things themselves; people were always pretending to find something deep and mysterious in old furniture and dishes and things; but because her hungry sense of values told her that she couldn't be right without them. A little carved mission balcony of brown wood opened out from the flat white wall, and she had all the semi-Spanish modern colors of white and yellow and wood-brown and blue, and the kind of view of the sea that every one seemed to be after. She knew very well that Charlotte had nothing like this. How could she? Charlotte and Ken had left with almost nothing. And yet Grace couldn't be satisfied without seeing exactly what Charlotte *did* have. She liked Charlotte. She admired her. But—besides being curious about any women, her cook, girls in beauty shops, a woman whom she saw at a tea; aching until she had burrowed her way into the secret of their personal lives and held it up against her own—she had certain old grudges against Charlotte that were not in the least Charlotte's fault. Grace was always perfectly candid in admitting these things to herself in spite of her deviousness in getting satisfaction. It was all that made Roy forgive her.

"What have you got against Charlotte Evans?" one might imagine him asking—and Grace answering quite candidly:

"Nothing. Except that she was always the most popular girl in our class, and then my grandmother was always talking about what a dear little girl she was when we were kids."

You could say until you were black in the face that there wasn't anything particularly pretty about Charlotte Evans. It didn't make a bit of difference. Grace remembered when they were children, and her grandmother had made such a fuss when Charlotte came to the house. "The sweetest little girl." Why? Grace, looking eagerly into the big walnut-framed mirror in her grandmother's bedroom, and comparing her thin little face with Charlotte's, couldn't really see why Charlotte should get all the praise. Grace knew there was always a mysterious reserve in her grandmother's fondness for Grace herself. But at that time Charlotte was just a little girl with a round face and blue eyes wide apart and two perfectly smooth dove-brown braids. But there was something—smiling dents at the corners of her lips, a little tilt to the corners of the eyes . . . and then there was something about the way Charlotte spoke and acted . . .

"Distinction." Grace had heard that once. That was really what Charlotte had.

And Grace knew perfectly well that it was just what she didn't have herself. Even her yellow silk sports suit, yellow stockings and white sandals, white hat, smoothly parted hair and earrings, couldn't give it to her; or the dash of crimson on her thin lips.

But even without that old rivalry, Grace couldn't have rested until she had ferreted out just how Charlotte and Ken were getting along.

Grace was excited over the trip and pleased with the party. It made a good appearance in the long low car with the gay red wheels. Both Mrs. MacArthur and Mrs. Dupont had the proper look of wealth and authority; but Mrs. MacArthur was big-bosomed and considerably older than Grace, and Mrs. Dupont

was small and over-refined, so that neither of them gave her any real competition with the Major. She could take gratification in the company of Major Raleigh himself, well-dressed, with wind-reddened face and clipped white mustache. And she felt happily that she herself in the front seat beside him, in the yellow knit silk and the white hat, was definitely the most striking of the party.

But the Major was curious to understand why Grace was so determined to go through Woodlands. Just a little California town, he said. People used to go there, but didn't much any more. She must have an interest there.

"No," Grace said. "I'll tell you. It's an old friend from home."

"Man?"

"No, woman. Believe it or not!"

"And you're really so anxious to see her?"

"Oh, it's not friendship! It's curiosity."

The Major was pleased at that. It carried out his theory that all women hated each other. He liked audacity, too, in women—good looking women—and when it didn't seem to be directed toward him and to endanger his pleasant state of widower. Grace VanCamp made it known that she had an adequate husband at home. He didn't mind the slight touch of intrigue, either. It pleased him to help women put through their little games—to arbitrarily range himself on their side. He promised Grace they'd manage to stop for an hour or so in Woodlands.

The trip was made in late winter—a beautiful time, the Major thought. Grace tried to look as if she felt it too when they all exclaimed over the golden hills and the rocks gray in the sun; but what really pleased her was the lordly roll of the big car through little towns. She was glad it was a nice day, and that the landscape was pretty and not just flat, but Woodlands was

her real interest in the trip. The Major—amused, and to have some subject for raillery—asked about this friend of hers.

"Charlotte?"

Charlotte! That was a pretty old name.

"Makes me think of crinolines," Grace said. "Charlotte Eyre. Or Jane Somebody. Some old novel, anyway."

"Are you making insinuations, young lady, about my years?"

Even Charlotte's old-fashioned name seemed to be interesting, Grace thought rebelliously; besides getting her that legacy from that queer old aunt. Who cared about "Grace"? She hated her parents for calling her Grace. "A good name" was as much as anybody could say for it.

"Well, are you going to take me with you to call on Charlotte?"

No, Grace said coolly, she wasn't.

Wanted to see for herself, did she? And what did Charlotte look like?

"Oh, rather good looking," Grace answered nonchalantly. "Used to be, anyway."

"Miaow!"

Well, Grace said shrugging her shoulders, maybe was now. But she'd had enough to make any woman lose her looks. And without quite meaning to do it, hating her own tongue that she knew was hung in the middle, just as Roy said, Grace began to expatiate on Charlotte's marriage.

"She's married the most awful man. Or at any rate, a flop. Doesn't even try to make a living, and had to get out of town."

Grace was ashamed of herself as she said it. What made her? She was always doing things like that and then feeling sick inside. She knew Ken wasn't as bad as that. She saw his face while she was talking, a pleasant face with nice brown eyes. But

she went right on.

"All the Robinsons hated to have her do it. Charlotte comes of a wonderful family. Everybody thinks it's a shame."

Why was she talking like that? Of course, Ken had made a failure. . . . But Grace thought of Ken as he had been in college, in his thick white sweater with the big red D, coming down the street under the autumn trees. She would have given anything for just one date with him. He was the hero of the school where Grace had gone just one year, not because she cared about going to college, but because Charlotte Robinson went there. "Ken and Charlotte." And then, when he'd visited at home that summer, all the crowd had been crazy over Charlotte's man. He played football and basketball, was good in track, he was handsome and he could sing. It absolutely crowned Charlotte's distinction, bringing home with her the pick of the land. They were just the right ones for each other, all the crowd said exultantly. The Robinsons were pleased to death. Grace knew that. Mr. Robinson talked all over town about taking Ken into his business.

"And they had an enormous wedding!"

Grace laughed.

Nevertheless, old-fashioned and simple as it might seem now, one of the occasions of her life had been Charlotte Robinson's wedding. Before that, she had always thought church weddings the thing, but this—perhaps because it was Charlotte's—had eclipsed them. She could see now the spills of sunlight and dapples of shade on the great wide Robinson lawn, where boys with bare heads, and girls with light dresses and wide-brimmed hats, were idyllically wandering. There was just something about it . . . she remembered yet the blush pink of the roses in the heat, beside great bushes of which Ken and Charlotte

had stood to be married.

"Hasn't turned out so well?" the Major said with easy cynicism.

"Scarcely!"

And then, to make up for all she had said, Grace began to praise Charlotte hectically.

"She's just a grand girl. Don't look at me like that. I mean it. I've been wild, honestly, about Charlotte all my life. Used to want to have all my clothes made like hers! She was terrifically popular. And now just think of being thrown away on Ken Evans! It's amazing that it's lasted as long as it has. *Every* one wished Charlotte would get rid of him."

Ugh, what a sickening mixture of candor and falsehood! Grace despised herself. Despised the Major if he believed it. Even the humiliatingly true little bit about copying the clothes—she had, people used to laugh at her for it, once there had been something in the high school annual—but it couldn't make up. Why did she say that last thing? It had been like a turning of the fates, making them side at last with Grace, that Charlotte's marriage—her enviable, perfect marriage—had turned out like that! Grace couldn't really believe it yet. And she herself had the perfectly good husband! She dreamed about it sometimes, and it was all mixed up—hadn't really happened.

"Well," the Major said heavily, "all the fine fellows fall for the lemons and vice versa. Law of life."

Grace was so preoccupied that it was a moment before she thought to say vivaciously:

"Why, Major Raleigh! When I've told you over and *over* what a perfectly grand husband I have."

But she heard his satisfied little chuckle.

Now they were coming into Woodlands. Grace's eyes were

avid and bright under the white sports hat. So this was all it was!—a little California town of the older sort, slightly shabby, lots of houses with the kind of porches that showed they had been built by middle westerners. In fact, an old winter resort, where elderly couples from home used to come and take rooms in some big frame house with palms outside, called The Whittier or The McClellan.

"Good heavens! To come *here*, with the whole coast to choose from!"

Santa Barbara and Los Angeles and LaJolla—even Pasadena. It didn't cost much. She believed that was it. And yet she couldn't get over the suspicion that because Charlotte was living here there must be something mysteriously superior about the place.

"Are we stopping here?" Mrs. MacArthur cried.

The Major gave a wink at Grace. "Sub-generator needs oiling," he said solemnly.

"Oh, dear!" cried Mrs. MacArthur. She took it in good faith.

"Sorry, ladies. Have to amuse ourselves for an hour or so. Mrs. VanCamp says she has an errand. Now I propose that we three have a good old-fashioned dish of ice cream and then stroll about the town."

What a silly business!—making this mystery of it. Still, Grace liked it, and the Major was in high delight.

Charlotte was watering the garden. She liked to do that when Ken was at work and the children were in school. She always felt as if she got back, in some mysterious way, her old free self when she was out in the midst of the flowers . . . the Charlotte who, at home, in the red brick house with the white pillars, used to run lightly out to the lawn early in the morning, when only

Tom and Annie were up in their vine-shaded rooms above the stables, and go browsing around among the wet blue iris and the roses. This garden was still strange. Still, when she touched the big winter roses, she could catch the spicy breath of the briar rose at home in the summer heat. But all her anxieties lay quiet in her mind under the soothing of the sunshine.

She stood still, the old-fashioned garden hose in her hand, the sun making rainbows through the falling water. The town taxi was driving up. Charlotte stifled an impulse to steal away. She was always afraid that some one from home might find her out here, and she was ashamed of the feeling.

Yes, it was stopping. A woman in a yellow sports suit was getting out. Charlotte saw the lovely clothes—the soft white of the hat, the rich gleam of the sun on the yellow silk. It made her angrily aware of her old blue linen dress. Those were *her* clothes, the way *she* ought to dress. But she hated that feeling. It was just what Ken was afraid of, and what she always denied . . . yes, and the denial was true, too, true in a deeper sense, and the thought of Ken's pain if he knew of that feeling hurt her as if it had been her own. She forced herself proudly through the first instinctive reluctance and went to the house.

"Charlottel!"

"Grace!"

Grace kissed her dramatically. Good heavens—Grace VanCamp! Of all the people on earth, she didn't want Grace VanCamp to come. She was ashamed when she remembered how more than nice to her Grace had always been . . . except when they were little, then Grace used to be horrid . . . yet she always had the feeling that there was something under all this kindness—couldn't help remembering the kind of little girl Grace had been . . . Charlotte loathed suspicions.

"Why, Grace, I didn't dream of seeing you!"

"Didn't you know I was in California? I couldn't leave without seeing you. If I hadn't known you must be tied with the children, I would have made you come over and visit me at LaJolla."

"I didn't know you were in LaJolla."

"Oh, yes. A *dar*-ling little apartment. The grandest view of the sea."

"Shall we go inside?" Charlotte said.

She tingled with reluctance when she gave that invitation. What did it matter if Grace saw how they were living? She wasn't making any pretenses, certainly. The situation was so far beyond that, such considerations had almost dropped out of sight. But when she saw Grace, whom she had always known at home, she remembered her own pretty white house with the green door. She remembered luncheon with "the girls" at the Country Club on the wide porch under the gay orange and green sunshades, overlooking the thick green stretch of the golf course where some of the husbands were playing. It seemed that she simply couldn't be here. It made her aware of every bit of shabbiness about the cheap little old-fashioned bungalow with the white paint getting dingy, the horrid rented furniture in the living room that no more belonged to her, Charlotte . . .

And yet she didn't really care. That was the funny part of it. It was just that Grace would think she *did* care.

"I'm so glad to *see* you!" Grace cried vivaciously.

She went on to tell how she was driving through with Major Raleigh's party.

"Do you know him, Charlotte? I thought you might have run into him. Owns a lot of aviation business, you know."

Charlotte's lip curled a trifle as she thought how very likely

she was to meet Major Raleigh or Major Anybody! The party sounded very gay, driving so easily around the country. But Charlotte suffered with the feeling that it was not sincere, that Grace was always playing up to her somehow. The party didn't really tempt her much. She knew she wouldn't care for the people. It was what people expected of her that hurt her, not the thing itself.

Grace, still talkative and animated, was telling her all about things at home. Perhaps it was only Charlotte's sensitiveness that made her suspect double motives and feel that Grace's sharp eyes were taking in everything under the brim of the white hat.

"Oh, hadn't you heard about the Dixons? I thought surely your mother had written you!"

"I don't think so," Charlotte said.

And for some time after she was in such a haze of pain as she thought of her parents that she lost half of what Grace was saying. How could they have done it? Would she ever do a thing like that to her own children? And yet these were her parents, the papa and mamma of her childhood. And it was to get away from her parents that she and Ken had left.

She remembered that light-hearted old existence . . . for a moment thought of herself as Charlotte Robinson again, and all that had happened later than her college days was unreal. Her father—his heavy figure, dominant but kindly voice, the sun on his gray hair as he stood on the lawn looking at the roses . . . her mother, the dainty figure with the flossy waved white hair moving like a little aging princess through all the rich comforts of the big rooms. . . . She had never supposed she could break with her father and mother. And yet, when she thought of how they had treated Ken—! Papa loved them as long as he could do everything for them. He hadn't let Ken make a move for

himself in the business . . . and when Ken left it, he had laughed in the horriddest way, an incredible way, and predicted his failure, wanted to make Ken fail, said Ken had lost his chance and could never come back to him again. . . .

"And what, then, does Ethel Dixon do but start up an *af-fair*, my dear, with this man! I found out all about it."

Ethel Dixon. It was just as if Charlotte had never known an Ethel Dixon, that whole way of living seemed so far away. . . .

That was what hurt the worst of all—that her father had been right. Ken didn't have business brains. He couldn't make a go of it. What of it? She wanted to break out fiercely. Was that all there was to existence? Ken—as if anybody else knew what he was, his intelligence, his fairness, his absolute kindness with the children, their love . . . It had taken a long time to draw her away from her father's way of looking at things, from all that her parents considered necessities; it had almost broken Ken, almost broken their marriage. . . . But just having Grace here, some one from home, brought it all back and made the break incredible—made her think of her father and mother and what they had been to her when she was a child. . . .

But the other was the truth, too. It had actually come to the point when she had to choose between her parents and her husband. She couldn't accept anything from her father after the way he had talked to Ken. She would rather live out here, on the little Aunt Charlotte had left her, on nothing if need be. She wasn't dependent on the old comforts, she had amazingly shown them, amazingly even to herself.

But it hurt even more that mother, her dear little devoted mother, had taken father's side—as it hurt mother that she had taken Ken's. . . .

"And so, my dear, that was the way it ended!"

Charlotte hadn't the faintest idea how.

But Grace was off on another tack.

"What grand flowers!"

The calla lilies. She *would* pick the biggest. "Yes, we have wonderful flowers here."

"I remember—" enthusiastically—"what a wonderful garden you always had at home. Oh, your mother's having the whole garden done over! Pool and everything. That woman that designs those darling pools. I want Roy to get hold of her, too. But you know that, of course!"

Charlotte was noncommittal. But she was amused in a way. When Grace used to praise the garden, her eyes were always looking at anything but the flowers themselves—studying what Charlotte had on, or the way her hair was cut. Lots of people detested Grace VanCamp. But there was something about her that always made Charlotte feel sorry for her. Now, in spite of the beautiful sports clothes, and Major Raleigh's party, they seemed all at once to be back in the old relationship.

"Where are the children, Charlotte? In school? My dear, isn't it awful? Have you been able to find a decent private school? You know, Roy and I can't bear to send Alan away yet. But we're afraid we'll have to. You know, the Miss Fenners are really getting awfully old. But there isn't anywhere else. What do *you* do?"

Charlotte felt amused again. "We send them to public school," she said. Did the looks of the house suggest that the children were being educated in Europe? And as if she and Grace hadn't gone to high school together!

"Oh, really, Charlotte? I wonder if you aren't right! Roy always says that Alan would be better off in the public school."

Roy, Roy, Roy. Grace brought him in most insistently. How anxious she was to get back to Roy—although she *a-dored* California, didn't see how she could ever stand those winters again. How wonderful Roy was, how he wanted to have her enjoy herself. But still more how Roy had missed her, how she felt she must go back again.

"But I'm so restless, Charlotte. I can't just stay somewhere and be contented, the way you do."

Well, there was that redeeming touch of candor about Grace! But at the same time her bright eyes were taking in the shabby room and boring into Charlotte.

"You're looking grand, Charlotte."

"Oh, do you think I am?"

"Well, perhaps you're a little thin."

Charlotte gave a slight laugh. She knew very well how thin she was—she had moments, when she came suddenly face to face with the mirror, when she felt an angry desperation because her looks were slipping away from her and there was nothing to be done about it. And yet in a sense it didn't matter. She couldn't spend all her time thinking about herself. She had cast in her lot with Ken and the children. She would lose her looks sometime, anyway.

"Oh, and tell me! *How* is Ken?"

That was the question that Charlotte had been expecting.

She said lightly. "He's quite well."

All through Grace's visit, she had been preparing herself against this question.

"Really? I'm so glad. He looked so badly when you left, Charlotte." Grace was very solemn and earnest. "He isn't here, I suppose? It would be too much luck to find both of you."

"No, he went out a little while ago."

Grace VanCamp could worm almost anything out of anybody; but she was not to know—nobody at home was to know—what Ken was doing. Charlotte was aware of what people at home would think if they heard Ken was working in a store downtown. They would all pity Charlotte. But simply at the mention of Ken's name by Grace, an outsider, her allegiance to Ken, so much deeper these last few years since they had been out here together, since they had been through so much that was grinding and painful, came over her in a rush and blotted out everything. Oh, she knew what people would think of it! She supposed she couldn't expect any one outside to understand. But she didn't care what Ken did if it would only help him to get back his self-respect and happiness. Charlotte felt a terrible resentment and pain. Why must she defend the inner trouble and sweetness of her life against her old playmate as against the bitterest enemy? Against her own father and mother!

"And you like it out here?" Grace asked. "Both of you?"

"Oh yes, I think we do."

"And you really think it's better for Ken?"

"Much better."

"I think it's so *lovely* you can be out here together and that Ken's contented. I wish Roy could come with me. But he thinks he must stick to business! You know how Roy is."

Charlotte smiled. She fully understood the sting. But there was a queer wistfulness in Grace's tone that she half understood, too. Roy VanCamp was a decent fellow. But no one had supposed, when Grace married him, it was exactly in an outburst of romance. In fact, Charlotte suddenly seemed able to draw upon a depth of dispassionate understanding that comprehended the whole of her relationship with Grace.

How strange! Life was painful, and yet most interesting to contemplate. Because after all, according to the ideas of most of the world, it was Grace's marriage that had turned out to be the success! Roy VanCamp was making money, as much, at least, as most of his friends. Grace and Roy kept their proper position in the town. And she, Charlotte Robinson, was out here in a little town in California and her husband was working in a store. That, as most people would see it, was the outcome of "one of the most popular and charming weddings our city has ever seen." Charlotte could see how it would all look to Grace. It would sound like a tragedy to her mother. In a way, it *was* a tragedy. . . . The day of her marriage, the laughter and tears and roses, and she and Ken standing in front of the sweetbriar bush. . . .

This was what it had meant. That bright June day . . . and earlier, the spring night at college as they crossed the wet grass under the big trees, the moment alone in her room when she said to herself that the grandest man in school had asked her to marry him—she remembered her wild, trembling joy, her amazed humility. They were always going to be "Charlotte and Ken." . . . It had meant dropping her old ambitions, leaving all she had, taking his failure into her, putting her pride in his goodness into him, letting it mold her own life and body. When she saw some one out of the old life again, she knew what she was—her thin face, the lines about her mouth and the hollows under her eyes. But she felt something different, too, something worn and capable and sustaining about her hands. A sweetness and solace of which she had never dreamed in that first trembling happiness had sunk into her and, perhaps, molded her too. No matter what they had lost or dropped overboard, she and Ken had kept their allegiance to each other and

a breath of its first freshness.

And yet all the same, in spite of her reluctance and the cringe of her pride, she was glad to see Grace. There was an aching, unappeased something in her that was hungry for anything from home. Over all the old life, painful as it had become to her, there was a sweetness of the past that had a depth beyond happiness.

But it *was* a past to her.

"Well, Charlotte, I'll tell your mother I saw you. She misses you terribly. And I'm so *sorry* I didn't see Ken."

Charlotte suffered, but she smiled with a slight touch of irony. How much did Grace know, and how much was said to hurt? Grace cried in one of her rushes of candor:

"You don't know, Charlotte Evans, how I've always admired you. Honestly! I was always so jealous because my grandmother liked you when we were little girls. She liked you better than she did me."

"Oh, no, Grace!"

"Oh yes, she did! Aren't you ever coming back?"

Charlotte smiled and shook her head.

"Don't you want to come, Charlotte?"

"No, I don't think I do."

"You tell Ken I don't forgive him, all the same, if he doesn't bring you back. Every time I pass your old house, I think you ought to be in it."

Grace kept looking into Charlotte's eyes as if she couldn't get away. It made Charlotte uncomfortable. Again it made her feel unreasonably sorry for Grace.

Just as Grace got into the taxi, Charlotte saw Ellen, the young English girl who sometimes stayed with the children, coming.

"Oh, Mrs. Evans!"

She was going to hear all Ellen's troubles again. Grace's last vision was of Charlotte and the distraught young girl going into that little house together.

The Major said:

"Well, find your friend?"

"Yes, I found her."

"Things as bad as you hoped?" He chuckled.

"Worse!"

Grace launched out into an animated description. But she was dissatisfied under the forced vivacity. All at once she became silent. The Major glanced at her, and then put his attention on his driving, with a pleasing thought of the unaccountability of women.

Getting out of the taxi loudly panting in front of that little house, Grace in her smart clothes had felt proud, relieved and assured. And then when she had seen Charlotte—! No matter what there might be about Roy that she wanted to criticize—and there had always been plenty—certainly as things had turned out, she could congratulate herself. She could have the satisfaction of thinking "Poor Charlotte!"; and the envy that gnawed at her—making her eyes restless, thinning her lips—should have been appeased. She had everything now that Charlotte didn't. She had seen for herself!

But at the involuntary mention of her grandmother, the old uncertainty and dissatisfaction had to come up again, a teasing perception of values she could never quite grasp. Before she left, she had that same old feeling that Charlotte was looking at her and being kind to her, as if she knew something that Grace didn't.

Grace tried angrily to shake off this feeling. Why, think of

Charlotte—thin, faded, in an old blue linen dress that Grace wouldn't have worn for a *house* dress, probably hadn't had any new clothes since she came out here, gray threads in her hair. Certainly no stranger looking at her would ever think of how good looking she had been. Grace wished she *had* taken Major Raleigh; heard him say, "Is *that* your good looking Charlotte?"

Or was she, as Roy told her, just bound to be dissatisfied?

She thought of that queer-looking girl that had come up to the house just as she was leaving, and her tone—"Oh, Mrs. Evans!" People—servants, every one—used to go to her grandmother like that. Grace thought her grandmother had had a horrible life, too, raising all those children after grandfather had died. Why was it? Grace had tried being terribly nice once to one of the maids. But the girl's face was simply closed up when she talked to her. She supposed *that* girl would have talked to Charlotte.

"Ah, now we're reaching them!" the Major said in a tone of satisfaction.

Grace looked out of the car. She saw a lot of big trees again. Now the rest of the trip would be a bore until they reached the Inn, and she would have to pretend she was enjoying it.

And the winter was almost over. She ought to have gone home before this. She knew Charlotte had thought it queer that she could leave Alan for a whole winter. She had seen that same look on other people's faces. Well, goodness, she couldn't be just tied to Roy and Alan all the time! She couldn't just stick around home. She had never yet had the—something, she didn't know how to express it—that she had always felt she must find somewhere, and that would start her out being happy for the rest of her life. Oh God, how she hated to go back! Not

because she was more unhappy at home than anywhere else, but just because . . . oh well, what was there? When she had first married Roy, she had loved going into shops and giving her name: "Mrs. VanCamp." Then she had felt satisfactorily married. But marriage hadn't seemed to be much else, as far as she could see, but Roy always trying to make her go *his* way, and Grace holding out for her own way.

The Major glanced shrewdly at her.

"You don't seem to have enjoyed your visit much," he told her. "With your dear old friend."

"Well, when I found her living like that—!" Grace got hold of her animation with an iron hand. But she couldn't seem to keep it up. "Only . . . oh, I don't know! But I was just thinking—what *is* anything, anyway?"

"Oh, tut, tut!" the Major said gently. "Look out at the trees and refresh your soul."

"Aren't they *grand!*" Grace cried.

But she still wondered why Charlotte had seemed to be patronizing her again.

She glanced mechanically at the big trees.