



THE

KRAMER GIRLS



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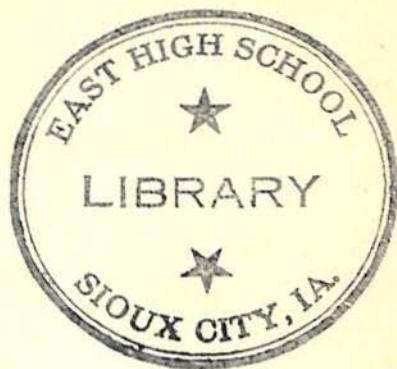
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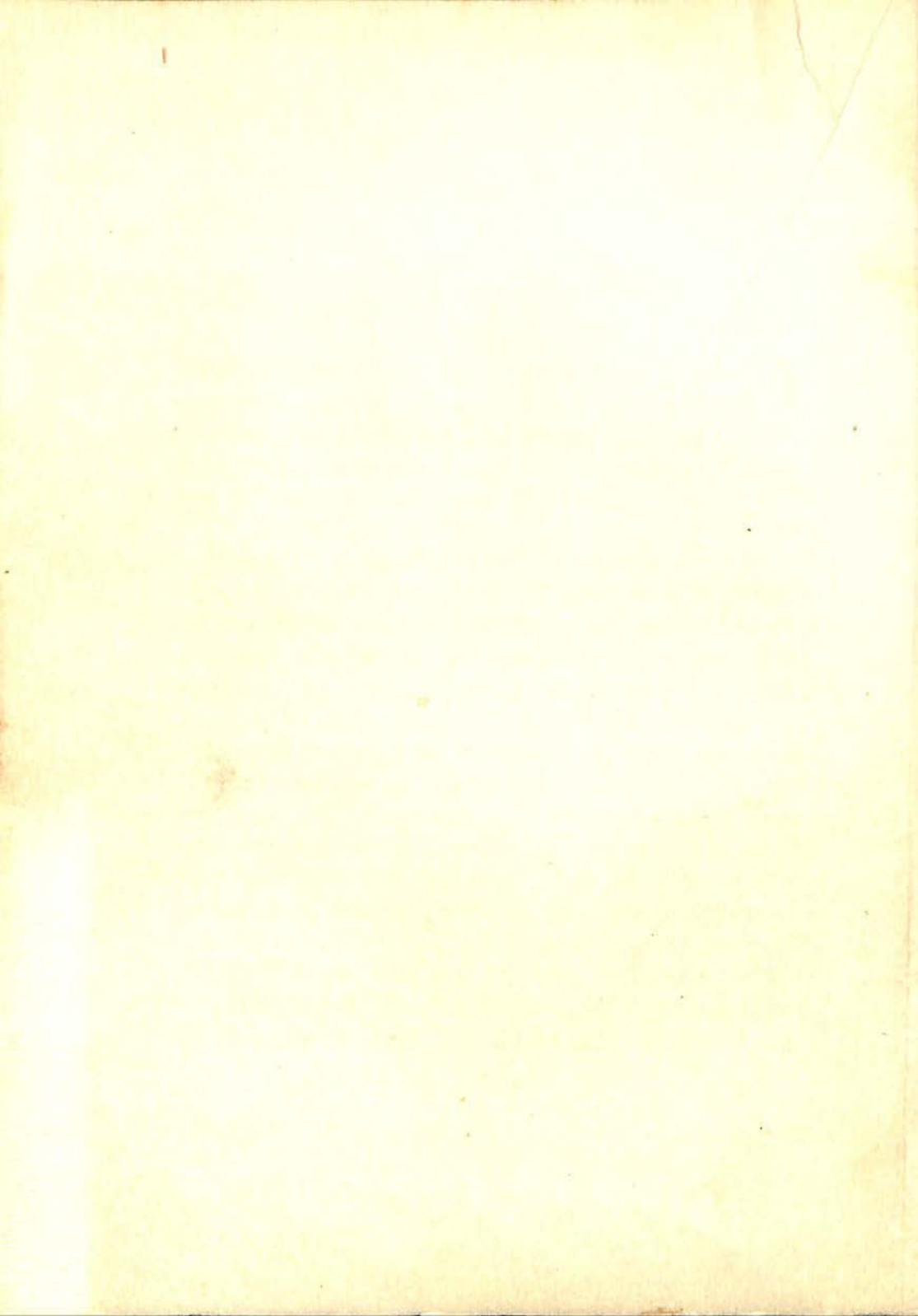
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PART I



GEORGIE was baking a cake for the church supper that night. Annie thought it was Georgie's turn to go, but Georgie said with brusque good nature: "Oh, go on, Annie. You know you're dying to." They could never both leave their mother at the same time.

Here Rose was just getting home from school—had been practicing basket ball, probably. Georgie looked out of the window above the white muslin sash curtain. It was snowing outside, in big soft flakes that piled up, white and feathery, in the rough crotches of the bare, black plum-tree; Rose was tramping through the snow, her hands in her pockets, her head up, enjoying it. "Now, did that kid wear her rubbers?" was Georgie's first thought. Rose saw her, waved, and came around the path to the back door. Georgie heard her stamping and brushing in the back porch before she came bursting into the kitchen.

"H'lo, George! Gee, it's just great outside! What you cooking? Yummy! Smell it!" She sniffed the air hungrily. The whole big kitchen was full of

the warm odor of nut cake baking. "What's it for?"

"Church supper."

"Oh, gee, I forgot! Tonight? You going?"

"No, you and Annie," Georgie said tolerantly. Georgie added severely: "Shake off your things now, before you go into the other room. How're your feet? Annie cleaned this morning." She pretended it was the clean rugs that worried her, bending down at the same time to be sure that Rose's feet were not wet.

"Oh, they're all right," Rose said impatiently.

As she passed, Georgie gave a good-natured brush at her red felt cap, sending the snow-flakes and the little melted drops in a shower across her fresh cold cheeks and into her eyes.

"Here, now, old lady—" Rose began.

"Sh! Mamma!"

Rose giggled as she wrestled noiselessly with Georgie. She was strong, but Georgie was stronger. Suddenly and breathlessly Rose melted all to soft, warm, cuddling weakness in Georgie's grasp, nestled her plump face into the big curve of Georgie's neck and shoulder, and kissed the back of Georgie's neck where the rough short hairs curled.

"You old love-budget!" Georgie scolded, with shamefaced pleasure. "Get along with you."

"Ouch!"

She had given Rose a good resounding spat.

THE KRAMER GIRLS

Rose hung her gray coat and red cap on the pegs in the chilly front hall, and then, whistling softly under her breath, went out into the sitting-room. It was a big, plain, old-fashioned room, painted and papered like the hall, with light walls and cream-colored woodwork, but warm now from the hard coal burner. Rose plumped down upon the wide shabby couch near the stove. Annie's gray cat was curled up tightly on his favorite, feather-stuffed blue cushion. Rose didn't specially care for animals, like Annie, but at times she liked to feel the warmth of the cat's fur. Her plump hand was softly mottled with pink from the cold. She thrust it into the warm downy nest of fur between the cat's neatly curved thigh and his fluffy under side. He flicked his gray ears, shook his head, snapped out "Miaow!" with emphasis, got up, turned all around, and then settled down more compactly than ever.

"Oh well, if you're going to be so snippy, Mr. Gray!" Rose said. "I think you might get my hand warm for me."

She went to the window and stood with her cheek pressed against the curtain for the feel of the cold glass behind it. All the time now, she was living and moving in a secret warmth that made her want to snuggle down by herself, dreamy and motionless, and then that suddenly brightened into a restless happiness that wouldn't let her keep still. She

THE KRAMER GIRLS

wanted to—to—oh, she didn't know what she wanted to do! But Rose liked to be with people, not alone. Since Gray wouldn't have anything to do with her, she went back to Georgie in the kitchen.

There, all at once, she felt disconsolate. She sat down on the green-painted chair, watching Georgie. There was a sort of comfort in Georgie's presence, even in the sight of her broad sturdy back as she bent over the oven. There was something capable and reliable about the set of her shoulders, clad in faded, nurse's-stripe gingham—the short, firm, reddish neck with a few deep creases in it, and the reddish hair growing vigorously and curling about it. Annie was the one to whom she usually told things—about parties, basket-ball trips, what the girls had done, what the boys said to her. Annie loved to hear all about the high-school doings and listened with childlike awe and enthusiasm. But when Rose was with Georgie, she had a feeling that nothing could happen to her.

Georgie straightened up. "Too bad you didn't get here an hour sooner, kid. You'd have come in for a job picking out hickory nuts. Practicing?"

"Um-um. Had to stay after school. Whispering in assembly."

"You're a dandy!" Georgie commented.

"I don't care. It was Bert's fault."

THE KRAMER GIRLS

"Oh, now, kid, take what's coming to you!"

"Well, it was. He was whispering to me. But *darling Polly*"—Rose simpered—"always keeps the girls and lets the boys go."

"You bet! That's the way of it!" Georgie muttered ironically, more to herself than to Rose.

"I don't care anyway. Miss Alexander had assembly, and she came over and talked to me."

"Did, did she?" Georgie looked pleased. "What did she have to say?"

"Oh, nothing. About work, I guess."

Rose had got up and was wandering about the kitchen. She reached out her little finger and stole a dab of Georgie's rich chocolate frosting. "Here, kid, you—!" Then she flopped again, lackadaisically, upon Georgie's big shoulder. She felt a warm, reassuring security at the close sight of Georgie's face—the large face, high-colored, with rough, generous-looking lips, and reddish-brown hair growing strongly up from the forehead, sprinkled with a little dew of perspiration from the heat of the oven.

"What makes you flop so, kid? Straighten up! Look at that clock, would you? The . . . dickens! You might make yourself useful and frost that cake!"

"I want to lick the pan."

"Well, go ahead."

THE KRAMER GIRLS

Georgie hustled about the kitchen. She was a little worried about "the kid." She didn't just know what had got into Rose these days. Or, rather, she suspected all too well! She was beginning to think about the boys, Georgie supposed. Well, she supposed it had to come! Rose had been long enough in reaching her silly stage. When the other girls were beginning to think about their hair and their clothes, Rose was still wild over basket ball for all she was worth and just about as ready, it seemed to Georgie, to go out and play catch with the little Carmody boys across the street as to trail around with the high-school boys. But, then, Rose was so healthy, innocent, frank and open. Why couldn't she always stay that way?

Georgie glanced at her with anxious pride. She was a fresh, wholesome-looking girl, like her two sisters, but prettier. A little too plump, like them, even now; but so healthy and attractive, with her large soft-featured face with the pink-and-white skin that was as fine-textured as a baby's. Her soft dark hair was slightly roughened, with glints of brown-gold along the edges of the waves. The whites of her brown eyes were transparently clear. "A picture of health!"—that was what the minister, Mr. Seegar, always exclaimed admiringly when he met Rose. And just as bright as she looked!—people added. Both her sisters were absurdly proud of her.

THE KRAMER GIRLS

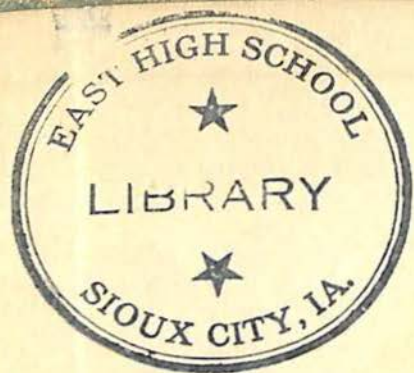
"Are you ready for the supper, kid?"

"As ready as I'm going to be."

"Oh, better brush your hair a little."

Well, that was one thing about Rose. She wasn't always thinking of her looks, anyway. She despised her looks, because she thought she was too fat, and spent as little time on them as possible. Her beautiful skin and her soft brown hair she took for granted. She was contented with her middy blouses and her dark skirts. Probably Georgie was imagining most of this, anyway. It was Mrs. Pick who had put the idea into her head. Mrs. Pickering, the Kramers' neighbor, and a great crony of Annie's, was always commenting now on how Rose was changing, and always teasing her about the boys. Well, Mrs. Pick could just keep her mouth shut about Raymond Hamlin. Georgie drew the line there. Could Rose possibly . . . ? But she couldn't believe it. One of the toughest boys in school. Georgie had warned Rose about him, and told her to pay no attention to Mrs. Pick.

Rose went pell-mell up the stairs to her room. If she should disturb mamma . . . but then, Georgie thought, the kid had to have a little leeway for her high spirits. It was gloomy enough for a young girl in this house. Rose had those blue spells, too. She was emotional. That was what made these next few years a problem.



THE KRAMER GIRLS

And yet, she had escaped the dark atmosphere of the house better than anyone would have believed possible. Georgie did really believe that, in spite of everything, Rose had had a happy childhood. She was going to escape the rest of it, too. Georgie had made up her mind to that.

Annie came into the kitchen all dressed for the church supper. Her round soft face and light eyes were beaming.

"I don't feel right about going, Georgie," she said.

"Oh, go along!"

Georgie suddenly wanted to go, too. Her own unselfishness made her cross. But she could stand the brunt of it so much better, really, than Annie that she took more of it than was necessary. Her own strength betrayed her and made her depreciate that of everyone else. Georgie Kramer liked a good time as well as anyone. But she liked to be the prop of the household, too.

Rose came running back. She had on the red felt cap that looked so dazzlingly bright with her brown hair and her white skin.

"Have you said good-bye to mamma?" Georgie said severely.

"No."

"Well, you go and do it."

Rose knew better than to make any demur, but she went without alacrity. Georgie sighed. Well, that

THE KRAMER GIRLS

couldn't be helped. The kid was too young to understand. She had never really had a mother. But she didn't realize it, because Georgie and Annie had always taken care of her. Georgie wondered whether she felt any affection for her own mother.

Rose went into the bedroom and up to the bed, which stood massive and mysterious in the light dimmed by the snow dropping softly outside the window. A big evergreen tree grew too close to this room. She felt no shock at the sight of the big-boned, wasted face with its waxy, paralytic smoothness. She was used to it. But she felt no affection, either. She never really looked at her mother, but kept away the aversion from her mind by a kind of soft withholding of herself. It was as if she held her breath until she got outside the room again. The girls—Annie and Georgie—looked after mamma.

"Good-bye, mamma. I'm going to the supper," Rose said softly and dutifully.

She kissed her mother's forehead. The straining, dark look of those filmed and tragic eyes meant nothing to the ignorant, untouched callousness of her youth. Her affections, her clinging fondness, she had transferred so naturally to her sisters, and so long ago, that it never occurred to her her mother's clouded spirit might be reaching out for her.

And perhaps it wasn't. Annie thought mamma

THE KRAMER GIRLS

"understood everything," but Georgie, more realistic although no less deeply moved by her mother's plight, was not sure. Perhaps, mercifully, mamma's spirit held aloof from Rose by the same necessity with which Rose held apart from her. Maybe it was a mercy, Georgie sometimes thought, that the kid didn't realize. But now, as always, it gave her a resentful shock when Rose came blithely back into the kitchen.

"You fellows better get a hustle on yourselves," she said gruffly.

"Rose, are you ready, deary?" Annie asked.

In a moment the two were going through the beautiful dimness and the softly falling snow, Annie carrying the cake wrapped carefully in a newspaper so that the frosting wouldn't be spoiled. Georgie watched them from the window. Rose pranced along and Annie went trotting so happily.

"Oh, well . . ." Georgie thought tolerantly.

Annie and Rose sat together at the church supper.

"Here they come!" Mr. Charlie Rubel exclaimed.

"Here's the girls I've been waiting for. Been keeping these two chairs the hull evening. Missis, here, tried to make me give 'em up two or three times."

Everyone at the long table laughed. It was an old joke that Charlie Rubel pretended to be in love

THE KRAMER GIRLS

with Annie Kramer—with all three Kramer girls, in fact, but Annie especially; and pretended that his wife was madly jealous. Under cover of this perennial joke—at lodge meetings, church suppers, everywhere—he was always hugging Annie and patting her plump arms. Mrs. Rubel laughed dutifully now, as always. It had taken Mrs. Pickering's sharp little eyes to discover that the joke wasn't quite so funny to her as to Charlie.

"Hey! Pass my two girls the salad. Why, they ain't getting a thing!" Charlie Rubel shouted. "I see how 'tis. I'll have to set between 'em next time. Ettie, here, she wants to starve 'em out. Spoil their good looks. Well, I'll look after you, girls!"

Annie beamed; and Rose, although it made her tired to see a bald-headed old fellow like Charlie trying to be funny, smiled with her glowing, soft acquiescence. Georgie, when Charlie Rubel tried to get free with her at lodge meetings, gave him a good sound slap. "Here, you pick on somebody besides an old maid," she told him. "I'm not used to such doings." He was a little afraid of Georgie.

"Say, Annie, didn't you bring some of that cake of yours along? I just been saving my stummick for that."

"Why, Charlie!" Mrs. Rubel put in in a shamed tone. To mention "stummick" right at the table!

Annie couldn't help beaming again, although she

THE KRAMER GIRLS

said: "Oh, Georgie was the one made the cake."

"Go on! Don't tell me you can't make cake with the best of 'em."

"This the cake you're talking about?" Mrs. Hefferlin asked.

She was waiting on their table and had just brought in fresh supplies.

"That's it! Put it down here. This end gets it first."

They were all calling at once. Little Marvin Deutsch began to cry. He thought he wasn't going to get any of it. The men were reaching out their hands.

"Now, you just hold your horses, everybody," Mrs. Hefferlin said, well pleased with this triumph, and at exerting some little authority. "They's a piece here for everyone, if you just all quit grabbing. Mamie, you start it going."

Smiling, she gave the cake plate to Mrs. Shump and started it on its triumphal round. "Don't cry, honey. There'll be a piece for you," the women comforted little Marvin. The cake melted with creamy, moist richness, and Georgie had spread on the deep, dark, chocolate icing with her usual lavishness. Rose and Annie both refused pieces, modestly.

"Say, who made this cake?" Mr. Pendleton wanted to know.

"You must like it, Tom," his wife put in, not al-

THE KRAMER GIRLS

together approvingly. "You got a mustache of that chocolate. Here—take your napkin."

"The Kramer girls brought it."

"Say!" T. E. Pendleton said with conviction, pausing in the act of wiping off the mustache, "I'm going to call on the Kramer girls."

There was loud laughter at the table.

Rose had been looking around for some of the high-school girls. Just as she was finishing her desert of marble cake and canned peaches, Leila Harker came up to her. She and Leila were in entirely different crowds in high school. Or, rather, Leila was in no crowd. She stood alone. She had started going with the boys long before the other girls, had spoiled her reputation before she was out of the grades, and the girls in the crowd regarded her with suspicion, fear, and a little distaste. Until just lately Rose had had no use for girls who thought about the boys all the time, and were sly, and wouldn't go out for basket ball. But now, for the last few weeks, there had been a kind of alliance between her and Leila—both knew what it was, although neither of them mentioned it—and tonight suddenly they were bosom-friends.

"Kid, aren't you almost through?" Leila whispered.

"I want to eat this cake. Oh well, I guess I'm through."

"No, go on and finish."

"No, I'm through."

They went away from the table arm-in-arm.

A little later, now with their arms around each other, they came up to the corner where Annie was ensconced in a cozy little nook behind the organ, with her cronies, Mrs. Pickering, Lollie McCoy, and Bertha Scholtz. Mrs. Pick was doing the talking. "So I just thinks, all right, old lady, I thinks, I'll see what you're up to . . ." Leila pinched Rose, and Rose tried not to laugh. Everything that older people did seemed funny to them, they were so silly to-night.

"Here, what are these two eavesdroppers up to? I bet I know what *they're* after," Mrs. Pick said. "They're looking for those two fellows."

Leila laughed and Rose blushed. She didn't really like Mrs. Pick's teasing—she had heard too many of Georgie's caustic comments on Mrs. Pick's mental processes—but Rose was always smiling and soft; she couldn't bear to make trouble; and Mrs. Pick thought she enjoyed it highly.

"Let's see, now, who are they? I don't know if I know Leila's. She's got so many I can't keep track of them. But I know Rose's. It's Bert she's looking for. Aha! Just look at those cheeks."

Leila, squeezing Rose's arm, was nearly overcome with laughter. Mrs. Pick was so far off the track!

THE KRAMER GIRLS

But Rose, blushing all over her soft, full face, felt something blissful and secret thrill through her shame.

"Oh, I guess Rose hasn't got any fellow yet," Annie said. She knew Georgie didn't like such talk.

"Don't be too sure! I wouldn't trust these girls."

Leila said: "Miss Kramer, Rose is going over home with me." She was squeezing Rose's arm tightly and significantly. "We want to get our geometry together."

Annie looked doubtful. But that was only because she thought Georgie might not approve. She couldn't see but that Leila Harker was as nice as anybody. Annie did so admire all the pretty high-school girls. They were like actresses in a wonderful rosy drama of youth. When Annie and Bertha went to the movies together, taking a little striped sack of chocolate almonds and munching happily in the dark, they kept track of all the couples as they went in and out. It really gratified Annie to have Rose with Leila Harker, who was so popular with the boys.

The two girls ran off, taking assent for granted; and the three women, left behind, talked admiringly about them. "My, but the complexion that Rose has got! Well, I hope she can keep it longer than most

THE KRAMER GIRLS

of us do." The girls just heard this, and it added to their youthful, warm, common excitement. It made them giggle. Everything made them giggle tonight. In the entry Mr. Seegar said to them; "Are you leaving us, young ladies?" and they could scarcely keep their faces straight. But when Mrs. Seegar added: "I'm so sorry that Georgie couldn't get here, too," Rose sobered and felt ashamed. She knew that Georgie wouldn't have liked her going home with Leila; and it hurt her fond heart to know that she was so horrid, that she was glad that Georgie hadn't come.

Out they ran into the dim and snowy air. It was so soft and cool and good! The girls scarcely knew what to do with their delight. The snow on the church steps was tramped and scuffed, but it lay feathery-soft on the ground, all fluffed over with a light glitter.

Rose said: "Oh, I just *love* this kind of a night!"

The night was so strange and beautiful, the air all thick with tufted flakes, so that they could scarcely see where they were going, and everything was different and mysterious. Leila ran ahead and slid, with her arms outstretched; and then, when she looked back at Rose, her eyes had a dark bright gleam through the snow-fall. It excited Rose, yet made her a little ashamed that *she*, Rose Kramer, should be running off with Leila Harker, as if she

THE KRAMER GIRLS

were being treacherous to the crowd and even to her old—she supposed her real—self. Because she felt a sweet, thrilling madness. The gleam of Leila's eyes was leading her on, willing and yet frightened, she didn't know where.

At the corner, though, Leila halted and strangely lingered. There was a big light which illumined the slanting thickness of the snow. "Oh, isn't this pretty! Just see how it is on the ground." Not that Leila cared. Rose knew she didn't. But Rose bent down obediently. The new-fallen flakes lay in separate little star-shapes and flowers and fern-leaves, all glimmering white on the earlier, smoother surface of snow . . . so soft that when Rose tried to pick up one of the fern fronds, it smudged into moistness on the fingers of her gloves. The flood of sweet, ineffable fondness that she always felt for all soft things—for the down on babies' heads, and the silver-gray fur that tipped the petals of wind-flowers, for little chicks with their frail and tender necks, fluttery and yellow in her hands, and even for her little old discarded muff that she still cherished with ridiculous affection—poured blissfully all through Rose. Yet there was something about lingering here on the lighted corner that made her ashamed. There was something not real about it. The gleam of Leila's eyes had a slyness, veiled and slanting, no longer wild and bright. . . .

THE KRAMER GIRLS

When the boys came up, Rose knew that was why Leila had been waiting. It was why she had waited, too. Rose had known that somehow she and Leila would meet the boys tonight. They couldn't have been satisfied otherwise. But at first Rose felt ashamed and silent, knowing how she was deceiving Georgie and Annie, unable to believe that this was herself.

As soon as they got beyond the lighted corner, they separated into couples. It gave Rose that blissful thrill to see how quickly, as if it were a foregone conclusion, Hammie had chosen her. The spell of his good-looking features, of the lock of black hair hanging down from under his cap, and of his husky voice were upon her again. His black hair and blue eyes were all the more fascinating seen through the snow, with little white flakes caught in his eyelashes. When they came to the crossing, he drew her back, so that Rick and Leila could go on ahead. As soon as Rose felt his caressing touch, she knew that she couldn't go home.

He was talking to her now in that low, coaxing, intimate tone that flattered her.

"What's the matter with you tonight?"

She wouldn't say.

"Aren't you going to tell me?"

Her arm quivered, and his caressing fingers tightened.

THE KRAMER GIRLS

"I'll bet you were going off with some other fellow."

That wasn't true. Hammie knew it. She had never gone with any other boy—just home from parties, sometimes, with Bert. But it flattered her—the way Hammie said it, as if she were terribly popular and he was jealous.

"Didn't you want me to walk home with you, Rose?"

She was guilty when she thought of her reluctance. It made her ashamed to look at Leila and Rick, for some reason. Rick was shorter than Leila—but a "pretty" boy, even if he was so small and slight, with thick blond hair. He ought to have been in Rose's own crowd, but he had been going with the girls ever since he was in the grades, and now he had more or less put himself outside going with Leila—it made the girls resentful. He had a reputation for being very "soft" with the girls, and this was something that Georgie had taught Rose to despise. But now, when Rick and Leila stopped and turned around, Rose felt guilty for not liking him. Rick, too, looked different with the snow-flakes misty and thick in his fair hair. Leila's bright eyes gleamed.

"Say, folks, let's decide where we're going."

Rose was silent. She always let other people make such choices.

THE KRAMER GIRLS

"We were going to my house," Leila said vivaciously. "To study geometry." She giggled. "But it's too nice to go in anywhere."

"Sure."

"You bet."

"Let's just roam around awhile."

Rick and Leila went on ahead, and Hammie took Rose's arm again.

"Is that all right with you?" he murmured.

"I guess so."

He pressed her arm up against him. That blissful feeling went through her, her arm quivered, and she tried faintly to draw it away.

"No?" he whispered. "Don't you like that?" But he kept his fingers on her coat sleeve.

The falling snow seemed to have covered up all the landmarks. Rose scarcely knew where they were. Snow lay in a thick, rounded whiteness upon the arbor-vitæ hedge around Mr. Little's lawn. It made Rose gasp to squint against the moist, thick flakes.

"Here!" Hammie said.

He stopped. He brushed the flakes off her red felt cap and out of her hair, and then took off his golf gloves and softly whisked his fingers across her lashes. Rose stood obediently. Her eyelids drooped. She had never known any feeling like the exquisite thrill of pleasure, made poignant by a kind of frightened pain, that went all through her at the cold touch

of Hammie's fingers on her face. She liked standing still and obedient.

"Here, you two!" Rick was calling. "Come out of it. Listen! Let's have some sport." He and Leila came up close and talked in low, eager tones that seemed hushed by the mystery of the snow. "Let's see if we can get into the schoolhouse."

"Will you, Rose?"

What would Georgie say? And they had told a lie to Annie. But they were all three standing around her, waiting. She couldn't fail them or hold out against them, be the one to spoil the fun—the very thought of such resistance was a horror to Rose.

"Sure Rose will. She's all right," Hammie said tenderly.

And then they all went on together.

Now it was more dreamlike than ever. Here was Hammie beside her, his hand tucked caressingly into the warm curve of her arm—Hammie, the one whom all the girls liked, no matter what people said about him; and it was Rose, who used to feel ashamed of being so fat because she thought the boys wouldn't think she was pretty—Rose whom he was favoring. She had always been a sort of tomboy, playing basket ball, wearing middies and pleated skirts, wearing her hair braided—and now with Hammie she seemed to be altogether different . . . soft and silent and helpless. He seemed to play upon her feel-

THE KRAMER GIRLS

ings as he liked . . . and she was quiet and quivering-ly responsive and happy; and yet, away down in her heart somewhere, there was a kind of mute resistance and resentment.

The high-school building stood huge and dark in a desolate waste of snowy lawn, open and bare, that made Rose shiver and think of deserts and the ocean—things that frightened her. The front door was locked. But there was a basement window that the boys knew how to open. The two girls stood back and clung together, shaky with laughter, while the boys worked determinedly.

"Come on, we've got it open!"

Rick came back for them. "Shut up, Leila!" He gave her a little push as she wriggled, squealing, through the opening. But Rose did not make a sound. "That's the stuff," Rick commended her. "Leila'll have the marshal down here after us."

Rose glowed under his approval. She was afraid she was too fat to get through the window. But Hammie helped her—both boys did; their hands lingered with caressing approval on her arms as they showed her how to sit down on the window-sill and then helped her jump down on to the floor. It couldn't help pleasing her. Rick Cummings had never thought of looking at her before—he liked cute, dashing girls, like Leila.

"Hurt yourself?" Hammie whispered tenderly.

THE KRAMER GIRLS

She shook her head. But she stood still while he brushed the snow off her coat. There was a sort of happy ache in her throat. She could have got down from that window without the slightest trouble. But now it seemed as if she must wait for Hammie to help her—because he wanted to help her.

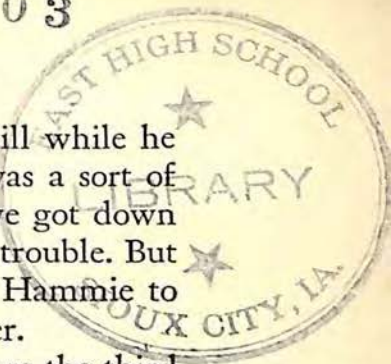
They were in the basement room where the third grade met, because the old grade building was too small. The little bits of desks—how funny they looked! “Remember when we sat in these, Rose?” Rick asked.

That seemed to make them friends. The light from the snowy world outside was pale and mysterious in the room. There were strange creakings all over the empty building. Leila screamed and both the boys scolded her.

“Look at Rose. She can keep still,” they said.

Leila was nervous and shrill and wild. That made Rose a little disgusted, as if Leila were making trouble for the boys. Down at the bottom of Rose’s feeling was that same reluctance and fear—it gave a strange, hurt darkness to her brown eyes, so that Hammie whispered tenderly to her and pressed her arm; but on the surface, there was a soft, acquiescent, proud happiness at following the boys and having them so pleased with her.

Rick was a wiry, restless little chap. It was not enough for him to have got into the building.



THE KRAMER GIRLS

"Let's go up and ring the bell," he urged now.

"All right," said Hammie nonchalantly, "*let's* ring the bell."

Leila protested, but wildly giggling and excited, letting Rick drag her up the echoing stairs. Rose's heart sank. She knew that people in town thought that was a terrible thing to do. They might be expelled—arrested. And she, Rose Kramer, whom everybody liked, whom the minister and his wife admired, whom all the teachers approved as such a nice, wholesome girl! Oh, if only the boys wouldn't! But it seemed to her she could not go back on the others. And now the excitement entered into her. She felt a heady, reckless daring. With Hammie's hand under her elbow, they both sped noiselessly up the stairs and stopped at the top, breathless.

"I didn't know Rose Kramer would do this," Leila said mischievously.

Hammie told her: "Don't you say anything about Rose!" His fingers squeezed Rose's arm.

"Sure, Rose is all right," said Rick.

After that she couldn't go back. Now they were going up those narrow, dark little stairs to the bell loft. Leila and Rick went on ahead. Rose felt as if fate were making her go. Hammie came just behind her. She heard him breathing. He touched her, and she was terrified at the blissful weakness that made

THE KRAMER GIRLS

her feel as if she were going to sink down on the stairs. She didn't want to go on. She began to pray wildly under her breath. She heard Leila give a squeal, and her heart almost stopped. Hammie was on the step just below her. He put his arm around her. He whispered with that beguiling tenderness, with the touch of flattering raillery in it: "Are you scared, Rose?" His arm tightened around her, and her bones seemed to melt all to softness; and, as if against her will, her head drooped and her cheek touched his shoulder, her hair brushed his face. . . .

Then Leila was shrieking and all four of them were clattering pell-mell down the narrow staircase.

"Bats!" Leila was screaming. "Bats! I saw a bat."

"Aw, you're crazy!"

But they were all of them glad to get safely down. Rose was wet and shaking. She was saved. Now they wouldn't have to ring the bell. They all stood trembling, hot and laughing, their hearts pounding; and their fright had given them all a delicious bright-eyed sense of unity in evil-doing.

"We didn't want to go up there, anyway," Hammie assured Leila. He brushed the back of his hand against her neck. Rose felt uneasy.

But the boys had their spirits set on mischief. They couldn't go tamely home. Rick wanted to break into the domestic-science room and try to find some-

thing to eat. "Sure we can. They don't keep it locked." Hammie, as always, was coolly ready and debonair. Again the two girls clung together, giggling and shivering, not knowing whether it was more fun to enter daringly with the boys or to wait like this, docile and laughing, and have the spoils brought to them.

A noise came from somewhere. It was as if someone had dropped a book. "Ghosts!"

"Oh, Leila, you're crazy!" Leila wrung her hands, mocking and laughing all the time, and Rose pleaded: "Oh, quick, quick!" in a little moan—and yet both of them were shaking with laughter. The boys came out to them. Rick was breathing hard. In hasty silence they drew the girls to the open window. One after another they squeezed through.

"Where?" Leila whispered wildly.

A wind caught them, and the snow whirled against their faces.

"To the hedge!" Rick whispered.

He caught Leila's hand, Hammie caught Rose's, all four ran silently, breathlessly, across the great snowy stretch of lawn through the strange soft, pearly dimness. Rose was panting and scared, but wild with happiness. The arbor-vitæ divided the school yard from Mr. Little's lawn. The four crouched down in the dark shadow of the hedge, in the nest of snow; and the snow, piled thickly

THE KRAMER GIRLS

on the tough branches and fronds, slid down in cold, moist avalanches upon their heads and shoulders. They were panting, giggling, and warm.

Rose was so breathless that it was moments before she realized she was crowded up against Hammie. His arm was around her, and her head was snuggled back against it. Now Hammie put his cold round cheek against her soft one, and she did not move.

"Kids!" the others were whispering.

Rick had stolen a jar of something—cherries!—from the domestic-science cupboard. He was working, frowning and industrious, with the cover, while Leila shook with smothered laughter. But Rose and Hammie were the ones, now, who didn't care.

"Wake up there, you two! It's time for breakfast. . . . Dead to the world!" Rick said cynically.

Moments passed. Rick and Leila were fighting and laughing over the cherries, slapping each other when some of the juice was spilled, interspersing all this with comments—gleeful on Leila's part, ironical on Rick's—about the other two. . . . Rose used to have a kind of day-dream that always frightened her. She would think: "What if I were up in a tree, and let go of the branches . . ." and she could feel herself falling. . . . The sensation was terrifying, dizzy, and yet strangely sweet. Now she had that same old sensation again. She was sunk, unstimulating, in the incredible happiness of Hammie's arms. The snow fell

THE KRAMER GIRLS

all around them, soothed them, shut them in. . . . But again, in the bottom of her heart, it seemed to her, a dark, mute, frightened pain was growing. She didn't consciously think of Georgie, but a burden of guilt was upon her. Her throat ached, and then miserably, and almost noiselessly, she began to cry.

"What's the matter?" Hammie whispered softly. His lips moved over her smooth forehead and kissed. But there was raillery in his voice. He wasn't really sorry for her. He was only cajoling.

Rose could not answer.

"She's cold," Hammie said. He brushed away the snow that had fallen in thick splotches from the arbor-vitæ. "Are you cold Rose?"

"Sure," Rick said. "Let's go home."

The boys were both so nice to her now. She let them think it was that—blindly let Hammie help her to her feet, stood while he whisked all the clinging snow off her coat and fondled her hands to get them warm. He kept his arm around her as they all four, soberly now, plodded back across the snowy lawn. She made no resistance, but no response now, either. When they got to the walk, where they might meet people, Rose had again a feeling of relief, as if something outside herself had helped to rescue her from a dark, irresistible fate. She was ashamed of crying, and yet glad the helpful tears had come.

THE KRAMER GIRLS

Long before Hammie stopped whispering to her that she would soon be warm, she was consoled—in spite of her pain and fear, the nest in the snow under the bitter-scented hedge was beautiful and magical. They were all good to her, and before long they had her smiling.

“Good-bye, kids,” Rick and Leila said at the corner.

Rick took Rose’s hand in his, gloved in heavy leather, and shook it in solemn approval. She had pleased them and they liked her. Rose felt a happy, shy warmth. But it worried her to think of all the maneuvers she would have to make to keep on going with them—made her feel guilty toward them and her sisters both.

When they reached the house, Rose knew that Hammie was going to kiss her again.

“Don’t!” she whispered weakly.

“Why not?” he answered teasingly.

He did it so easily, as if he had the right. Rose liked it all too well. That was the trouble. And it gave her such a guilty, awry feeling to be deceiving the girls. When Hammie let her go and she went into the house, the memory of his favor and of her happiness sustained her glowingly with a secret pride.

Georgie said: “Where have you been, Rose Kramer?” Rose saw at once that Georgie’s face was

THE KRAMER GIRLS

severe and that Annie's soft round face, looking at her from behind Georgie's shoulder, was both guilty and scared. "I telephoned to Leila's, and they said you hadn't been there all evening."

The floor seemed to drop away from under Rose's feet, and blackness to come around her. But she stood her ground.

"We were walking around—"

Georgie broke in: "Annie, you go to bed. You've messed things up enough for one evening." Annie went off immediately. Georgie said to Rose: "Look at those wet clothes! Take them off right away and get into bed." Rose saw that there was a hurt, reluctant look on Georgie's face in spite of the severity—Georgie hated to scold Rose. As Rose turned to go out of the room, Georgie caught her by the arm, looked at her straight and hard, and said: "I'm coming up to have a talk with you, young lady!"

Rose sat huddled up in bed, dreading and waiting. Annie had peeped into the room. "Where did you go, babe?" Annie was really more interested and excited than angry. But a mist came into her light soft eyes when she added: "Georgie's been giving me the dickens." Annie heard a sound and scuttled to her room.

Georgie came into the room.

"Are you in bed? Are you warm enough?"

Rose did not answer. The sullenness that was her only form of resentment settled over her. Rose dreaded so to be scolded! It had astonished and disarmed her teachers to discover that sensitiveness—Rose seemed so sturdy and able to take care of herself. Besides, she had not really been defying the girls—she couldn't help going with Leila and the boys . . . and there had been that dark pain in the bottom of her heart.

Georgie sat down heavily on the bed.

"Now look here, kid, you'd better come across with just what you were up to this evening."

Rose was sullenly mute, defending Hammie in her thought. But when she looked at Georgie, she saw that her face was far more troubled than cross. Her sullen resentment melted away in a rush of childish affection. She longed for the refuge of that broad, sturdy shoulder to ease and deny her strange, dark, inarticulate sense of pain.

"I was walking around," she whispered.

"You told Annie you were going home with Leila Harker."

"Well—we were."

"Then why didn't you?"

Rose looked down and picked at the fuzzy little rosettes of knotted wool on the flowered bed-quilt.

"Don't do that, kid. It makes the quilt wear out.

THE KRAMER GIRLS

... Now look here." Georgie looked straight at her again. "I want you to tell me the straight of this—where you went and who you were with—and why you lied to Annie." Rose could scarcely stand the shame of that word "lied." "Come on."

"With Leila—"

"Yes, and with somebody else, too."

Rose was silent.

"You might just as well come out with it, kid. Some boy, wasn't it?"

"Rick Cummings—" It sounded better to put Rick first, because everyone thought well of the Cummings family.

Georgie waited.

Resentful of the way she knew Georgie would think of him, Rose whispered reluctantly: "Well, and with Hammie."

But she felt relieved now that Georgie knew. The responsibility and the helpless fear seemed to be gone from her. Georgie made no comment for a long time. Her eyes were fixed. Then she moved over closer to Rose.

"Look here, kid," she said at last. "Just how much do you know?"

Rose looked at her startled, and a deep crimson flush of embarrassment colored her soft cheeks. Georgie was embarrassed, too. She had a queer sort of shy reserve, for all her plain speaking.

THE KRAMER GIRLS

She said doggedly: "I guess it's about time I had a talk with you."

Rose lay on her side. She could not look at Georgie, partly because there was such an interest and excitement in talking of these things. A year ago she would have flung away and scorned to listen. Georgie was determined, but shamefaced. She couldn't get over the feeling that it ought to have been Rose's mother who was doing this. She resented—as she often did—that everything must fall upon her. But she felt a grinding, maternal anxiety for Rose.

"Kid, how long have you been going with this Raymond Hamlin? How many times have you been with him before tonight?"

"I *haven't* been with him." Rose spoke in a choked, angry whisper.

She couldn't tell Georgie about her little encounters with Hammie, those sudden miraculous moments—meeting him when she came out of school and walking with him to the corner; having him sit beside her in English class and draw pictures on her white arm with his huge red-and-white striped pencil; getting a note from him in assembly; meeting him, and lingering and "fooling" when she went out to get a drink from the faucet in the hall . . . to have told Georgie, and hear how she interpreted it, would have been to dispel that bright,

ridiculous magic that had put a spell over all the rest of the day.

"I've heard Mrs. Pick tease you about him. But I never thought you'd really let a boy like that go with you."

Rose was hot. She said: "The girls *all* like Hammie."

"I s'pose they do!" Georgie commented dryly. "Girls always *do* like boys like that. But you know very well, Rose Kramer, what kind of a reputation he has. You know how he hangs around that pool-room, and the kind of girls he's gone with before. Why, he almost got expelled from school last year! Don't you know about his father? He's a great one! Scooted out and was gone for two whole years once, and left the mother with that whole tribe of children to provide for!"

"Well, that wasn't Hammie."

"No, but he belongs to the same tribe."

Rose was crying. She thought piteously of Hammie's eyes, that were so blue through the black eyelashes and under the black hair, in which the snowflakes were mistily caught. But she couldn't really contradict Georgie. In spite of Hammie's caressing, flattering tenderness, she could feel no help and no pity in him . . . he seemed to leave her to defend him all alone. She could only do it weakly—for she thought of the way his hand had touched Leila's

THE KRAMER GIRLS

neck, of how she had seen him going down the walk with Gertie Burns, bent over her with just that same caressing tenderness. . . .

Georgie was sitting frowning. After a while she said: "I guess you know about Ella Bostwick, kid."

Rose gave her a startled look. She remembered, as if it were something she had dreamed long ago, how they had snuggled under the hedge and how she had let Hammie hold her . . . that old sensation of letting go the branches and falling. . . .

"Not that I mean to say I think you're like Ella Bostwick. Because I know you aren't and you never will be." Rose's heart ached with dull alarm. "But, all the same, it just shows how careful girls have to be. No one would ever have thought that would have happened to one of the brightest girls in high school. Ella had a scholarship for college the next year. Just think what she might have made of herself if she hadn't got in with that Guy Andrews. And now just look at where she is! Living in that shanty of Davidson's, and two kids to look after, and going around doing cleaning for folks! A husband that's no good on earth."

Still Rose would not speak.

"Well, kid, you have to think about things like that. Boys like Raymond Hamlin aren't thinking

THE KRAMER GIRLS

about what happens to the girls. It's just themselves they're thinking about." Georgie spoke with harsh bitterness.

Rose lay silent, and Georgie patted her arm.

"I wouldn't compare you to Ella, babe. I know you know better than that. But I don't want you to even get started fooling away your time on such fellows. If you have to go with boys—and I s'pose most girls do sooner or later—then you be careful who you pick out. If you want to go with Bert sometimes, why, I don't care."

"I don't *want* to go with Bert." Rose's voice broke fiercely. She buried her face and held away from Georgie.

"I know you don't like to have me talk this way to you, kid. And I know you haven't gone with kids like that before. But things have to be done sometimes. I've got to be a mother to you, kid," Georgie said soberly, "and it's hard enough. I'm responsible for you and I've got to look after you. Rose. Babe. Come here. Don't do that way. You make Georgie feel awful."

But it was partly shame with Rose. If Georgie knew how she had acted tonight . . . if she knew how Rose felt. . . . She had only let Hammie kiss her and hold her . . . but she remembered how she liked it, the blissful, weak feeling. How could she be cold to Hammie and keep away from him? Where

THE KRAMER GIRLS

would she get the strength? But she hated him now. She was frightened and crying.

Georgie said, with a sober, shy determination: "You see, kid, you're the one in this family that's got the chance to make something of yourself. The rest of us are stuck here. But you needn't be."

Rose lay listening to her, wondering and ashamed—she had always simply taken it for granted that the two older sisters should be at home, and do everything for her, and that her mother should be an invalid.

"I can tell you, kid, if I'd had half the chance you're going to have— Well, I'd be something different by now. That's certain."

Again, to Rose's wonder, Georgie spoke bitterly.

But she spoke kindly, too. "It makes your old sisters darned proud of you when you get such good marks in school. I know this house isn't the place for a young girl. Well, you'll get out of it, kid. I don't want you to be dependent upon anybody. I want you to do things for yourself. I tell you, that's what all girls ought to do. If more of them—" Georgie stopped.

But it was as if a promise had been given and taken. Georgie hugged Rose and patted her. "Go to sleep now, kid. Forget this. There's no harm done." But for a long time tears kept seeping into Rose's brown eyes. She cried because she would have to



break away from Hammie and Rick and Leila—because of the shame her own coldness must give them . . . and because she could still feel, in a helpless way, the fascination of Hammie's blue eyes and black hair and huskily caressing voice. Only it was all spoiled now. She turned over restlessly. It seemed that Georgie had put a great destiny upon her. She mustn't think of the boys any more. She dared not, guilty with the sense of her secret weakness.

. . . When she got to her room and sat down on the bed to take off her shoes and stockings, Georgie was troubled and ashamed. She thought: "Ought I to have told the kid about the folks?" Maybe it was simply cowardice that she hadn't. But she had always wanted to keep that old story from Rose. With a kind of grumpy generosity and justice, Georgie wanted to keep her young sister free of those shameful old burdens. Rose must have a fresh start. Rose had no idea—no curiosity, it seemed—about her parents' lives. She took it for granted that they should have so little to do with each other. She couldn't conceive that her mother had ever been different. She knew vaguely that her father was in some sort of disgrace with the household, and she avoided him; but she had simply supposed that it was because he wouldn't put in a furnace, and wouldn't give the girls things they needed, that they resented him. She didn't know that old dark story.

THE KRAMER GIRLS

Ella Bostwick's story was a blind. Georgie was a little ashamed of that. But somehow she couldn't tell the kid that her own father had got her mother "into trouble" . . . knowledge that had come to Georgie and Annie through old tales and hints of gossip, years ago, and clung, and poisoned their youth with its shame and pain. Rose had seen the three little mounds in the cemetery—they wouldn't even have had stones if Georgie hadn't been determined, and tried to earn money selling cakes and biscuits until she had shamed her father into buying them. Rose had gone with Georgie, on Sunday afternoons or early summer evenings, to put fresh flowers—sprays of snowballs or bunches of pansies—into the knobby glasses, stained dark and green, on the little mounds. But when she had said to the other children—and rather proudly—"I had three little baby brothers who died," she hadn't an idea of what it meant. The day when her mother had fallen unconscious over her sewing was only the dimmest memory to Rose, although to Georgie and Annie it was an event from which all their after life followed. But Rose didn't know that—for her mother's sake—she herself ought never to have been born. Georgie meant that she should never know. Georgie cherished her with fierce generosity.

Yet as Georgie bent over to unlace her shoes, in the chilly, unlighted bedroom, all those old bitter

THE KRAMER GIRLS

resentments were stirring painfully in her mind; and she wanted somehow—while keeping all taint of them from her—to fill her sister with the knowledge of them.

Anyway—she threw open the laces angrily—she had seen too much herself. She never wanted to have anything to do with men in her life. There were other things.

2

Georgie called: "Annie, I'm going now!"

"All right. Don't forget the embroidery silk," Annie called back.

"No."

There was a mirror in the hall. Georgie stopped to survey herself. She was glad that Annie was busy, because she wanted to make no explanations. Georgie had put on her best hat. It was a stiff black velvet with a rolling brim that Lollie McCoy had trimmed for her, but somehow it never seemed to fit on to Georgie's head. None of her hats did. She carried a handkerchief with a border of blue tatting, a Christmas present. She looked anxiously at herself in the glass, wet her finger, and rubbed the pink powder out of her eyebrows. She wanted to look nice for the kid's sake.

A sudden warm day had come in the midst of

THE KRAMER GIRLS

January. The snow had been on since last week, but all at once it had disappeared from the sunny sides of lawns, leaving the short, matted winter grass pale brown on the hard earth. The cement sidewalks were all dry. Houses and lawns looked dingy on a day like this, with the snow half on and half off. Streaks from the drip of the eaves showed dark on the white-painted sidings. Peony bushes stood uncovered, in ugly clumps of dead-brown stalks. But the sky was a sudden joyous blue. There were sharp flashes from snow patches.

"Why didn't I leave my rubbers at home, con-found it?" Georgie thought disgustedly.

She bought Annie's embroidery floss in town at Lollie McCoy's little millinery and fancy-work shop. Patches of sunshine lay on the wooden floor. Old Mrs. McCoy sat in a big rocker, draped with a knitted shawl, near one of the show-windows, crocheting. Lollie's big cat lay in one of the sunshine patches, that showed the dust in his thick black coat. Georgie and Lollie talked about the next lodge meeting, for which Georgie had charge of the pot-luck supper. Georgie did get a lot of satisfaction out of the lodge. It was one place where her activity could have scope. She always held an office—not Grand Matron, because an unmarried woman never had quite the dignity for that, but the next office to it. Annie loved going to lodge, too, but she was

THE KRAMER GIRLS

never more than a standard-bearer or door-keeper. Annie made a poor officer.

"And how is mamma today?" old Mrs. McCoy asked. To her, Georgie and Annie and all the women of Lollie's age were still "the girls."

"Pretty good. She's up in her chair."

"My, my, wasn't that too bad!" To old Mrs. McCoy it seemed as if Mrs. Kramer's stroke might have happened yesterday.

But pleasant as it was in the store, Georgie couldn't stay.

"Well, you put a bug in Mrs. Fischel's ear about those sandwiches," she said to Lollie. "We don't want all cakes and baked beans this time."

Then she started off on her secret errand.

The red brick schoolhouse stood on a half-block of ground that sloped to Mr. Little's hedge. Georgie opened the heavy front door. It was almost time for school to be dismissed. She went creaking through the hall to the superintendent's office. The door was open and Georgie marched in boldly. The leather-seated swivel-chair was half turned about. Georgie sat down and looked defiantly around the room to show that she was perfectly at ease. The place was all changed since her day. Then the high school had given only a two-year course.

The grade children came tramping up from the basement and began to shout as soon as they reached

THE KRAMER GIRLS

the walk outside. A gong sounded. Georgie heard the piano in the assembly room, and then came more tramping. She squinted out cautiously. She had a glimpse of Rose going past, her arms linked in the arms of two other girls, laughing and talking, looking so strange in her unconsciousness of Georgie. Georgie sat down in a straight chair until the noise had died down into spasmodic footfalls.

The superintendent came in—a youngish man, very shy, unable to look a woman in the face. He turned scarlet when he saw Georgie. He greeted her with embarrassed cordiality.

Georgie replied curtly. Mr. Atwater was unmarried, and she wasn't going to have him suppose she was waiting for *him*. She knew what people in town would say about her coming here. "How do you do? I was waiting to see Miss Alexander. Where can I find her, please?"

"Oh, yes! Yes, on the next floor—floor above—in the English room, first door to the left—"

"Thanks," Georgie said grimly. "He needn't be afraid of me. *I'm* not after him," she thought as she went out. There were a few women in this town who thought of something besides getting themselves married. But she could not refrain from stopping in the doorway to ask: "How's Rose getting along in her studies?"

"Oh, fine, fine!" he answered, nervously effusive.

THE KRAMER GIRLS

"Glad to hear it," Georgie said, trying to speak with dispassionate lukewarmness. "Well, I think Rose is pretty conscientious about her work."

"Oh, yes, yes, certainly. Yes, Rose . . ."

"You big dummy—I'm not going to eat you!" Georgie thought angrily. She marched off.

She knocked much more circumspectly at the door of the English room. Miss Alexander's cordial voice called: "Come!" Georgie went in with a look of bashful pleasure. Two boys sitting slumped in chairs looked at her with staring eyes. "You can go now, Willie and Napoleon," Miss Alexander said sweetly.

"If you're busy, Miss Alexander, I can wait—"

"Oh no, I was going to let them go in a minute, anyway. They're probably delighted to have you come!"

This surmise was correct. At that moment Willie and Napoleon, prancing down the walk and struggling into their coats, were vying with each other in praise of Georgie. . . . "She's a good ole gal, that ole Georgie Kramer." "You bet, ole Georgie's all right." . . .

"Well," Georgie said, "I wouldn't like to interfere with your work."

But she sat down in one of the front-row chairs, feeling highly gratified. Miss Alexander was a new teacher this year, and everyone in town liked her. The students liked her, the superintendent secretly

THE KRAMER GIRLS

admired her, the women in town approved her for being so ready to sing at programs and club meetings, the minister for taking a Sunday School class; and even her landlady had only praise for her because she was so nice to the children and they thought so much of her. Georgie thought Miss Alexander was just about as nice a girl as could be. But she stood in awe of her, as a college graduate and English-teacher. Georgie "missed what she hadn't had." Some people didn't think Miss Alexander was so very pretty. Georgie would like to know what they called pretty, then! Miss Alexander was a large girl, with fuzzy dark-brown hair piled thickly on her head, and thick, dark eyebrows. But now Georgie was astonished to find that the eyes beaming sweetly at her from under the heavy eyebrows were gray instead of black. That was what gave Miss Alexander's face its sweet look.

"I'm so glad you've come in, Miss Kramer. You know, I've been wanting so to call on you and Miss Annie—on Rose's sisters."

"We've been wanting to have you in to supper. Well, we're going to get around to it one of these days!"

Miss Alexander said: "I'm going to look forward to that! I know the reputation you and Miss Annie have as cooks."

"Oh well, I guess . . ." Georgie was tremendously

THE KRAMER GIRLS

pleased, but she scarcely knew how to carry it off. She cleared her throat. "Well, if I'm not interfering with anything you've got to do, Miss Alexander, I thought I'd come in and have a talk with you about that young sister of mine."

Miss Alexander cried warmly: "I'm never too busy to talk about Rose Kramer." She beamed.

Georgie's face flushed with gratification. She began deprecatingly, however, as she thought was her duty. Well, of course, she and Annie thought Rose was pretty bright—good as the average, anyway. . . .

"Oh, none of my girls do any better work than Rose! I think Rose has a *wonderful* mind," Miss Alexander said with enthusiasm.

"Well, of course, her sisters think she's all right."

"Oh, I'm *so* fond of Rose!"

Miss Alexander went on to praise Rose's skin and hair and eyes, and to tell how splendid she was in basket ball; and Georgie drank it all in with shining eyes and shamefaced pleasure. It made it much easier for her to get out what she had come to say. Miss Alexander went on to talk about Vivian and Marian, too— "What a lovely crowd of girls!"—but Georgie hadn't come to hear that.

"You know, though, I'm kind of worried about Rose," she said.

Miss Alexander leaned toward her with flattering attention. "Not about her work, surely! For a little

while last month Rose didn't do so well—I don't know just what it was. But now she's just doing splendidly again."

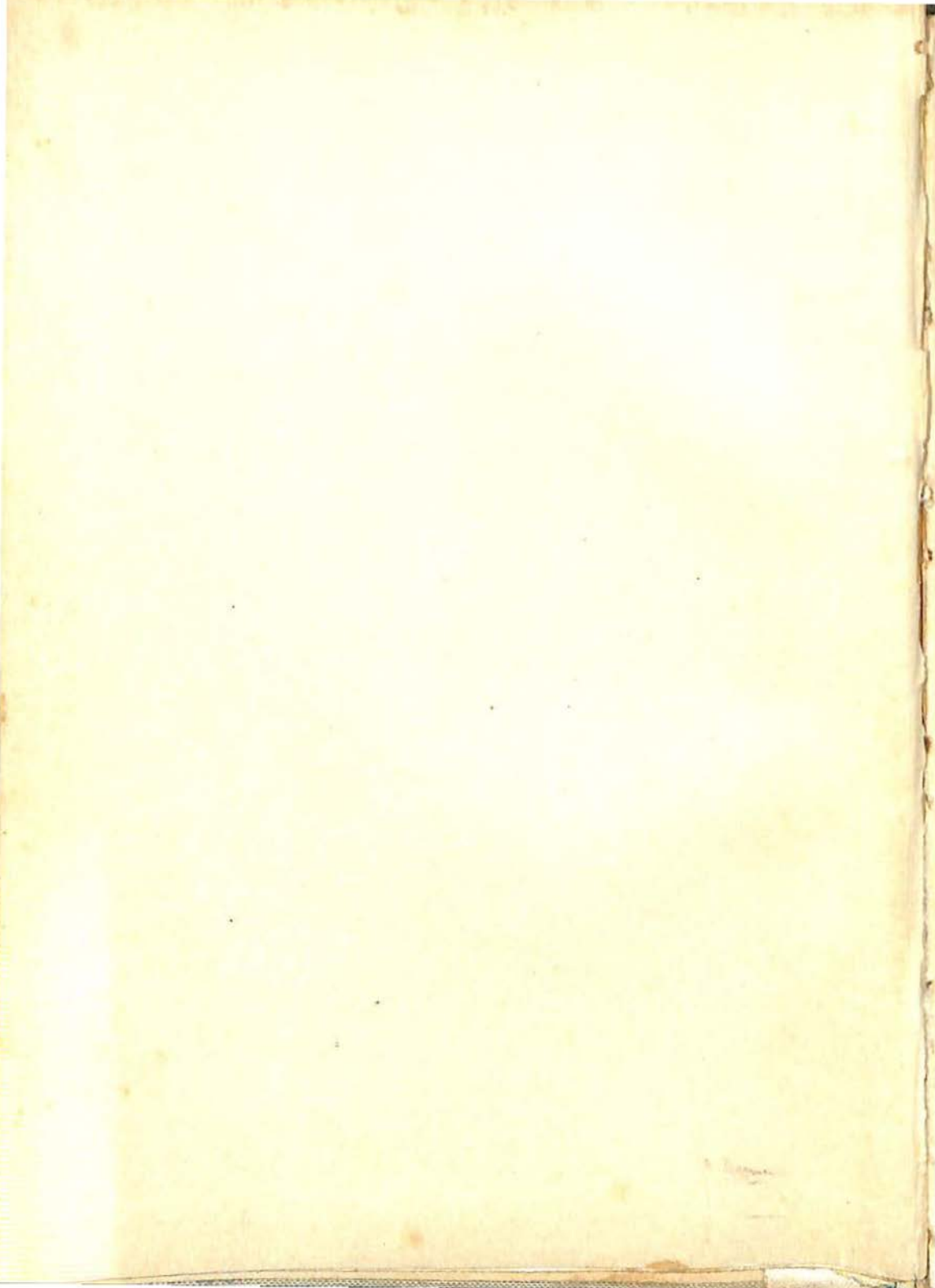
"Oh no, not about her school work. But I'll tell you, Miss Alexander—" Georgie was flushed with earnestness— "Rose is a kind of funny girl. It took her a long time to grow up. She never was after the boys, like Vivian and some of those girls. I don't know, Rose liked to run and play outdoors and everything like that—"

"I know, Rose is such a dear!"

"But—" Georgie was always embarrassed when she came to such subjects. "Well, I guess all girls have to go through it. Anyway, this winter the kid's been altogether different. I think it's partly that Hamlin boy's fault. He's been kind of after Rose."

"Hammie?" Miss Alexander said, a little doubtfully. She was wild over *all* her boys and girls—she really thought Hammie was a dreadfully attractive boy. But she could see that that wasn't how Georgie considered him.

"Of course, he isn't the kind of fellow I want Rose to go with." Georgie was blushing. She found Miss Alexander's sweetness a sort of barrier, too. It was always difficult to get right down to brass tacks with people who were so sweet to everybody—you couldn't exactly discuss things. "I tried to put a stop to it, and I guess I've done it. But Rose is so sort of



THE KRAMER GIRLS

moody. She isn't a bit like herself. I don't suppose you'd think it, Miss Alexander, Rose looks so healthy, but she gets terrible blue streaks."

"No," Miss Alexander murmured, "I can't *imagine* that of Rose."

Georgie blundered on, warmed into difficult confidence by Miss Alexander's response, and feeling that here was someone who could understand her ideas.

"I want the kid to have a good time. But it wouldn't do her any good to get tied up with a fellow like that. I don't have any use for that Raymond Hamlin. Or for most of the fellows in this town," Georgie said in a little burst of bitterness. Miss Alexander didn't know about her home, about her father; or about Carl Finch, who had gone off because Annie couldn't be married right then, and had married someone else. Georgie went on doggedly: "I want Rose to get around a little bit before she settles down. I don't want her to get tied up with any of these fellows—not even Bert. He's a nice boy, of course. I kind of wanted to ask your advice, Miss Alexander—what you thought about Rose's going away somewhere to school."

Miss Alexander beamed at that, all enthusiasm again. Oh, she thought it would be *splendid* if Rose could have the chance to go to college! Georgie tried to make clear some of the ideas that struggled

THE KRAMER GIRLS

fiercely and darkly in her mind, and that most people would have thought she was crazy if she ever uttered. "I don't know how you feel about these things, Miss Alexander, but it always seems to me a girl ought to get on her own feet somehow before she marries anybody. Well, I look around at the women here in this town, and seems to me they don't any of them know just what they're doing. While their husband's alive and supports 'em, it's all right, but if he dies, why, then they're up against it. Seems to me, if folks could stand on their own feet. . . ."

Miss Alexander thought there was something to that. It was wonderful the way Miss Kramer thought about these things. And she *did* want Rose to go to college.

"I don't know, Miss Alexander, maybe I'm talking foolishness, but I've always thought if women kind of *made* more of themselves, and didn't just—well, weren't just kind of around—they wouldn't get themselves into such scrapes. Now, you're a teacher," Georgie said. "You *are* something. You aren't at anybody's mercy. You've always got something you can do—and *want* to do."

Miss Alexander agreed enthusiastically with that. And she blushed and smiled as Georgie went on speaking, thinking how she wasn't likely to be teaching next year. . . .

But the greatest trouble with the conversation was that there were so many things Georgie had to keep to herself. While she tried to make all these ideas sound so impersonal, down under them was the painful old knowledge of her parents and her home—the tragic mistakes and misfortunes that Georgie saw so clearly, rebelled and fought against, but, in her fierce shyness and loyalty, thought she must keep eternally hidden. Yet if there had been anyone who exactly understood, anyone to whom she could say things right out—always there were women like Mrs. Pick whom she had to guard against—it would have been a relief to Georgie to speak. Her family didn't understand. Not even Annie. Georgie had been lonely all her life. She hinted now: "I don't know whether you know how it is in our house, Miss Alexander. . . ."

Miss Alexander was soft and pitying at once. She assured Georgie that she *did* know, she was so sorry—it must be so hard to have one's mother an invalid, and to think how sad it was. But it was just the things outside—the mentionable things, like illness and death—that Miss Alexander seemed to know about. Probably, Georgie thought, she had always had an easy time. It made Georgie flush with a kind of shame to think of telling her about the underneath things—as if Georgie herself were soiled and coarsened by their very existence. And

THE KRAMER GIRLS

again she had that old feeling of being all alone, in the cold, and at a disadvantage, because she liked to get down to the bottom of things and it seemed to her no one else ever did—either they didn't see or they just pretended.

The conversation resolved itself into an eager discussion of the schools where Rose might go and the sort of work she might take.

"Of course, I don't want to simply boost my own school," Miss Alexander said, "but I should *love* to have Rose go to Winthrop. . . . I'm so glad you came in and talked this over with me, Miss Kramer. I've always wanted to know Rose's sisters."

"Well, I've been thinking about doing it a long time."

"And come again. Do," Miss Alexander begged.

She held Georgie's hand in her large, soft, white one, and squeezed it affectionately. Georgie felt tears of gratification spring to her eyes—big fool that she was, she considered!

She went away from the building warm, pleased, excited, thinking of eager plans for Rose's future. She didn't know about Winthrop, though. If Rose could come home over Sundays and have her laundry done. . . . Still, why not? If Rose was going anywhere to school, let her go to a good one! Miss Alexander's college must be all right. Georgie's

THE KRAMER GIRLS

plans expanded recklessly. One of her favorite sayings was: "I like to do things on a big scale when I do 'em." And then if Rose wanted to take special work afterwards, let her. Now she had visions of Rose a great woman, leading a great meeting somewhere. . . .

As for not being able to talk more plainly with Miss Alexander, Georgie was scarcely disappointed over that. She was so used to it. At times she felt almost ashamed, because no other women seemed to look at things the way she did—they both respected her and looked down upon her for her earnestness and her ability. Maybe she didn't belong with 'em. When she heard them talk about their husbands and lay their little schemes—Mrs. Pick and all the rest—she had one satisfaction. She could despise the lot of 'em.

That thought pleased Georgie. Old visions of her own stirred in her mind. She thought of herself as a doctor, or the manager of some big business—she hadn't quite given up these crazy dreams. But all her conscious plans were centered on Rose. Georgie had always taken it for granted that she couldn't get away. Not unless something happened . . . but she was fiercely ashamed even to think of that. Poor mamma, things had turned out badly enough for her. Georgie hated herself for grudging the least bit of care. Still, folks all seemed to want to have

THE KRAMER GIRLS

lives of their own. They were made that way. Well, the kid was going to have something, at least.

On a side street, just off Main Street, stood her father's little frame office-building, "J. B. Kramer. Dealer in Produce. Farms. Real Estate." A spark kindled in Georgie's eye. Her loneliness was warmed by the heat of coming battle. He would kick against sending Rose to school, but Georgie was going to get the money out of him, she didn't in the least care how. Now she began to feel fine and marched along in high feather. Georgie loved to be in the midst of a dramatic situation. And it was always easier for her to fight for someone else than for herself—it seemed more the thing, somehow, for a woman to do. Then she could forget compunction.

3

Annie wanted to wait for Rose, but Georgie said: "Oh, she'll be wanting to go home with the other kids tonight." Mrs. Pickering echoed that. "Sure. Us old fogies'll all trot along together." She took hold of Georgie by one arm and Annie by the other and comfortably leaned her weight on them. Except that it wasn't much weight. Mrs. Pick was what Georgie called with good-natured contempt "a little sliver" of a woman, as dry and faded and brittle

as her own frizzed red hair, that was bleaching into gray.

"Bert'll bring Rose home. She don't want us waiting for her," Mrs. Pickering said.

The girls went out of the church reluctantly. Georgie had wanted to speak to Miss Alexander, but she saw that Paul TenEyck, the town's exceedingly eligible young banker, was with her, and that made Georgie shy. So did the elegance of Miss Alexander's dress, a blue "party gown" left over from college, with which she was wearing blue satin slippers.

"Aren't you going to speak to her?"

"I don't like to."

Annie was childishly disappointed. She and Bertha knew all about Paul TenEyck's attentions, and his rivalry with a mysterious out-of-town man—these things made Miss Alexander a heroine in her eyes.

But there was a crowd outside the church standing about on the walk and the lawn and discussing the exercises. Georgie and Annie were stopped before they got down the steps. Mr. Seegar stopped them. "Well, well! Aren't we proud? I guess we are!" Then Paul TenEyck and Miss Alexander came down the steps past them, Miss Alexander with a soft brush of filmy draperies that left behind them a fragrant waft of powder scent; and Miss

THE KRAMER GIRLS

Alexander paused to squeeze Georgie's hand—"Aren't we *proud* of her tonight?"—and to beam sweetly at Annie. But, then, everyone was saying: "You must be proud of that little sister!" Rose's valedictory was certainly the best thing on the program, except for Harold's speech, and Harold couldn't be a rival, since he was a boy.

The very nicest of all was when old Roland Yarborough, one of the old settlers of the township, who ran the mill down on Silver Creek, assured Georgie solemnly: "Well, sir! I tell ye Rose done the best of all. She's a fine girl—a lovely, fine girl!" And then went off to his familiar white horse and shabby old buggy, nodding his splendid old head with the long, silvery hair. He always wore a broad-brimmed black felt hat. He was "a kind of a philosopher," other men in town said. Georgie remembered now that he had praised Rose before. She didn't know when she'd been so gratified. It was some time before Georgie, red-faced and inordinately proud and happy, turned to look for Annie again. Then Annie came up to her and Mrs. Pickering. She was blushing.

"Where'd you go to?"

"Oh, that Charlie Rubel was talking to me."

Georgie gave a snort.

Rose hadn't come out of the church yet. "Us old gals had better pike along," said Mrs. Pick gayly.

THE KRAMER GIRLS

She took hold of the two stout arms again. They were sure that Bert would come home with Rose. He had been taking her to all the high-school parties this spring—Rose had always been Bert's favorite, since they were children. It pleased Annie highly, and Georgie tried to pretend she didn't mind. The whole town looked festive tonight. So many lights were on. The air was theatrically blue. There was a mild ineffable warmth, drifted across with the vague, evening fragrance of leaves and lilacs and grassy earth.

Annie sighed: "Oh, it's so lovely! I just seem to *float* along!"

"Well, don't float off," Mrs. Pickering told her.

"No," Georgie thought dryly, "it's you that ought to be floating, hanging on to us like this." But then, what did it matter?

Mrs. Pick and Annie were chattering, but Georgie was still rapt in her dreams for Rose. She answered them at haphazard. Annie exclaimed over how beautiful Miss Alexander looked. Mrs. Pick disagreed. She didn't care to see a woman so tall, and she thought all that hair piled up on her head looked bushy.

"Well, I guess Paul TenEyck don't think so!"

"No, I s'pose he's got to take up with someone out of town—nobody in town good enough for him! But he won't get her. There's another man in the

THE KRAMER GIRLS

case. Somebody she knew in college. Paulie loses out."

Georgie did not even bother to defend her Miss Alexander. She could still see Rose standing there on the platform, in the dress of fine white flouncing that Annie had made, and speaking so clearly. No one had dreamed that Rose could speak so well. Usually she didn't like to get up before people. "Well, I'd like to know how Harold Dancy was any better?" Just because he was a boy. . . . Georgie was still thrilled over the applause, in which she had joined, red-faced, but doggedly clapping, with Annie ready to cry.

"My, I wonder where they'll all be this time ten years from now!" Annie exclaimed sentimentally.

"You know what Vivian said in the prophecy. Rose was going to be a basket-ball coach, wasn't she?"

"I didn't think that hit off Rose very well," Georgie grumbled.

"Oh, I thought 'twas pretty good," Mrs. Pick declared. "Rose likes basket ball so well."

"Yes, but she's not likely to make a life-work of basket ball," Georgie said scornfully.

Mrs. Pick said comfortably: "Oh, well, I guess we don't need to worry about any of these girls' life-works!" She laughed.

That made Georgie tired. Maybe *she* called being

THE
KRAMER GIRLS

THE KRAMER GIRLS

the wife of Mr. Pick a life-work, but Georgie didn't! Not one she'd care to have. He was a traveling man and never home more than a week at a time. There was talk about what he did on his trips. But Mrs. Pick was always perfectly self-satisfied with the girls. There wasn't enough work in her little house to keep a child busy, and she spent her time gossiping and doing fancy work. But she was married, and so she felt superior. It disgusted Georgie.

"And now, just think, it's all over for them."

"Yep, all over!" Mrs. Pick said cheerfully. "Now they'll have to settle down and get busy like the rest of us."

"I think Vivian and Harold'll get married, don't you? I wonder how soon."

"That Vivian's a piece! Harold's going to have his work cut out for him if he marries her. Hope he can manage her better than her folks have."

Annie laughed delightedly. She thought ill of no one, but she loved to hear Mrs. Pickering talk. Georgie had an impatient look.

Mrs. Pick, however, was unaware of it. She said: "Well, now, after this you girls'll have Rose at home and you can get out a little more."

"Where'd we get out to?" Georgie asked dryly.

"Oh well, what do you suppose, now? You can both of you join the club. It'll be real nice for you to go together. You don't want to get to be old

THE KRAMER GIRLS

stick-in-the-muds," she railed good-naturedly. "One of you may get hold of a man now if you look sharp—you never can tell. Nettie Rubel might pop off." Georgie scowled, and Annie tried to laugh. "Let Rose take her time staying at home now. She's young. Bert can wait awhile."

"Bert!" Georgie scoffed.

"Well, who is it, then? I thought she'd given Hammie the go-by."

"I don't know why it should be either of them." Georgie was wrathful. She was a good deal more ambitious for Rose than to have her marry Bert Shump, and she didn't want Hammie even mentioned. But it was no use saying anything to Mrs. Pick. She had just one idea in her head.

Mrs. Pick went on with melancholy relish: "Yep, their good times are over now! Well, I know how it goes. I was as crazy as the rest of 'em. I was going to keep on having a good time all my life. But I tell you, after I'd tried teaching country school and making my own living, I was mighty glad to take Pick. These girls'll find out the same thing." She laughed.

Georgie stalked along.

They left Mrs. Pickering at her little blue-painted cottage, next door to the large, plain, rambling, white Kramer house. Annie sat down in the porch swing, but Georgie wouldn't let her stay there. "The

THE KRAMER GIRLS

kid'll want that, Annie," she said. Poor Annie got up reluctantly. She would have usurped Rose's place, but she wanted to see if Bert came home with Rose, and to hear what they had to say about the exercises. Georgie went in to see if her mother was all right. Her father had promised to stay at home tonight so the girls could go to the exercises. Annie was the one, however, who told Mrs. Kramer about the program, in loving detail, as if she never doubted that her mother took in every word. And that Mrs. Kramer enjoyed having Annie talk.

Georgie went out to the kitchen to make some lemonade for Bert and Rose. She stepped about, humming, still elated. What a fool she was to mind anything Mrs. Pick said! But she couldn't help it. Georgie knew that both Rose and Annie called her bossy sometimes, and she really tried hard to subdue her passion for managing the affairs of the whole family. But, then, she felt she knew more than they did—so why pretend? And she did want the kid's life to amount to something. She dreaded to see Rose with any boy. She didn't object to Bert, of course, as she did to Hammie. But he was going to be just like his father—right in with the hardware store as soon as school was over, and never think of going away to college. Georgie had greater ambitions than that for Rose. And she thought she had a right to them, when she considered how

splendidly Rose had spoken tonight, when she thought of the excellent grades Rose had received all through school. Rose had led her class from the time she started primary—well, except for Harold Dancy, and these girls who taught always liked to give better marks to the boys. . . . Still, Georgie wanted Rose's friends to have a good time when they came to the house. She had to admit to herself, too, that she used to be a little jealous when the boys were paying attention to Vivian and Marion and not to Rose. She wanted everything for Rose, in fact.

She went out with the two tall glasses of lemonade and a plate of her raisin cookies. But there was only Rose in the porch swing, her white dress glimmering in the blue dimness.

"Why, I thought—!" Georgie stopped, confused. "I thought you had somebody else with you, kid."

Rose made the swing move with her toes on the porch floor.

"You didn't have to come home all alone, did you?"

Rose shook her head.

"Were you with the girls?"

"No, Bert." Rose's voice was almost inaudible.

"Well, he must have got away in a hurry!" Georgie sat down beside Rose. "Well, kid, you were all right tonight." She hugged Rose's soft plump shoul-

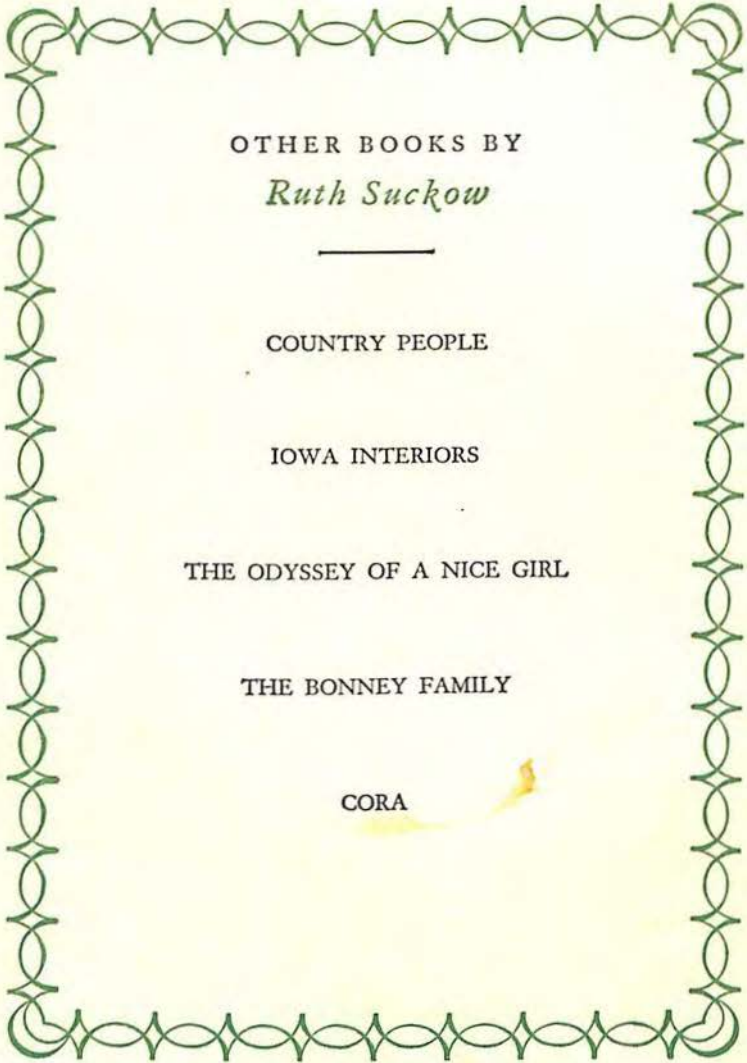
THE KRAMER GIRLS

ders. Rose said nothing. Her face was hidden against Georgie's shoulder. Georgie tried to lift it. "What's the matter, kid? Rose! You aren't crying, are you?"

Rose would not answer. Georgie held her awhile, staring straight ahead into the blue night, and worried. She wanted to know what the matter was, but something kept her from inquiring too sharply. She preferred to think that it was only because of the excitement, and because Rose hated to part from the crowd and have her high-school days over.

"Aw, you don't want to cry," she scolded gently, as they swung. "Not after you did so well this evening. I heard lots of fine things about you, kid. Mr. Seegar, and Miss Alexander, and who do you think?—Old Mr. Yarborough. He said some pretty nice things about you." Rose still kept her face hidden, and Georgie rocked the swing gently. "Cheer up, kid. There'll be lots of good times to come. Lots better than any you've ever had. You don't have to get stuck here, like your old *schwesters*. You've got everything ahead of you. You bet you have. Everything," Georgie repeated, and there was just a tightening of resentment in her voice. But she patted Rose's shoulder. "Come on, kid. Let's go into the house."

PART II



OTHER BOOKS BY

Ruth Suckow

COUNTRY PEOPLE

IOWA INTERIORS

THE ODYSSEY OF A NICE GIRL

THE BONNEY FAMILY

CORA

THE
KRAMER GIRLS

BY
RUTH SUCKOW

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THE KRAMER GIRLS

forward to the crisp walk home, the dinner at the funny little hotel where she ate with the other teachers and the few unattached males of Tyler—the good steak with its brown savory juice, and the fried potatoes . . . things that made her fat, but that she did enjoy. She always had a good time with Mr. Hornblower, who kept the hotel, answering the motherly questions of Mrs. Hornblower, who did the cooking and always came into the dining-room “to see if they all had what they wanted”—if Mr. Swensen, the young Lutheran pastor, had a piece of steak that wouldn’t upset his stomach, and if Mr. Jensen, the high-school principal, wanted more coffee.

Was that why she liked going to the hotel? Why the almost unvarying menu of steak and potatoes tasted so good to her? Why every moment in the high-school building was invested with interest and significance and seemed all to be part of a drama? Because she was aware all the time of Denny in the assembly room and because of the chance of those casual meetings in the halls?

Rose blushed hotly. She despised herself. She put on her hat and coat in a hurry, suspecting herself of delay because Denny might still be in the building. She shut the heavy schoolhouse door behind her with the feeling of destroying her own pleasure. Yet she was glad. The cold fresh air met her cheeks. She felt a sense of joyous freedom. If she hadn’t been a

THE KRAMER GIRLS

teacher, she would have run and scampered down the walk. Because she didn't really care. She knew it when the door was shut on the warm, crowded, involved atmosphere of the big schoolhouse with its lighted windows. She could laugh at her own romantic silliness, that always had to have an object of personal interest everywhere. Well, that was what Denny was. An object. That and nothing else. She began to sing, freely and joyously, just above her breath.

Oh, it was nice, nice living and being here! A kind of chant was going on in her mind, and her steps were keeping time to it. The crisp air was nice, and the bleak small trees and the rough roads that ran over the prairies. "Hello, Miss Kramer," called a child's shy voice. And Rose felt she was surrounded by friends. She loved all the frame-houses with the lights in the windows and the bare bushes in the yards. . . .

And because she felt so brisk and free, she could let a little hidden part of her mind, a little unimportant and foolish and discredited part, play with a notion that of course could never be real . . . play with the thought of sinking down into the friendly intimacy of the life of Tyler, being one of the women of the town, having her own house, taking part in things—herself in one of those lighted doorways, and a man coming home to supper. It had nothing

really to do with Denny. It was only play. It didn't count.

"There, you see!" Miss DeWitt whispered excitedly to Mrs. Fortescue when Rose came into the dining-room. Then she quickly warned: "Sh!" for fear that Mrs. Fortescue ("Fortes-cue," the other teachers called her in jest) was going to say something and let Rose see that they had been discussing her.

Yes, Rose was ignoring the empty seat beside Denny and going to the other table. She looked flushed and confused. She must have known that the whole dining-room was interested. She pretended that she wanted to talk to Miss Larson, who sometimes helped her with the basket-ball coaching, and took the one unoccupied chair at that table. It was a dramatic move that stirred the whole dining-room, because for weeks Rose and Denny had sat next to each other.

"Hey!" Mrs. Fortescue called. "That's Connie's chair. She'll oust you out o' there, young lady."

Rose did not respond to her facetiousness. "I have to talk to Miss Larson about the game," she said.

"My," Mrs. Fortescue said, "but basket ball's a responsibility!"

Miss DeWitt choked on her beefsteak, she tried so hard not to giggle. Mrs. Fortescue pounded her back

with dramatic vigor, winking, meantime, at the other teachers.

Rose pretended not to notice, although her face was flaming. She knew exactly what Mrs. Fortescue meant. Why must her affairs be the affairs of the whole teaching force and the whole town? Miss Larson, however, was a reserved Norwegian girl who always presented a thin and stolid countenance to the eager gossiping of the other teachers; and little Mr. Swensen, the Lutheran minister, who sat at this table also, was so shy and so wrapt up in the delicacies of his digestion that he was always outside the dining-room talk. Rose was aware of Denny, scowling in the most determined concentration at his beefsteak and potatoes and ignoring the curious looks. It was all dreadful. She ought to be taking his part against the others. She could have cried.

If it hadn't been for Mr. and Mrs. Duffus, who sat at her table—an elderly couple who kept the drug-store and boarded at the hotel because Mrs. Duffus hated housekeeping—Rose felt that the silence would have been too dreadful. Miss Larson and Mr. Swensen could talk only in answers, and her own mind was a wild blank. But the Duffuses liked Rose and made a sort of pet of her.

"Well, those girls of yours going to win tonight?" Mr. Duffus asked.

"That's a pretty question!" Mrs. Duffus told him.

THE KRAMER GIRLS

"Well, what's the matter with it?"

"Of course they're going to win."

The Duffuses had to disagree now on principle, no matter what their actual notions might be.

"Are you ready to leave?" Rose asked Miss Larson desperately.

"Here! You haven't finished your *dessert*," Mr. Duffus told her with heavy kindness.

"Sh!" Mrs. Duffus hissed fiercely. She pinched him.

He muttered: "What's the matter now?"

She disdained to tell him.

"Yes, I have," Rose said hastily. She left the room with Miss Larson, refusing to be separated from her for one moment.

The others were all dying to discuss the affair, but Mr. Dennis still stuck it out at his table, his face set and his eyes bright with concealed pain, although he tried to join in the conversation as if nothing were the matter. He knew they would talk about him if he left. The other teachers, however, and Mrs. Duffus, would certainly have outstayed him if they had not been afraid of being late for the basket-ball game. They did remain in the dining-room for a moment or two after he had left. Mrs. Hornblower came in to see if he wanted more coffee.

"Has the professor gone?"

The teachers all had a significant look.

THE KRAMER GIRLS

"Did they sit at different tables tonight, too? Ain't that too bad!" Mrs. Hornblower said ingenuously. And in the little lobby, with its ancient roll-top desk with the tattered register, and its brownish linoleum tracked with muddy foot-marks, she talked for a moment with Miss DeWitt and Mrs. Fortescue. "Well, now, ain't that too bad? I thought them two made such a nice couple. Me and Hornblower always said that. What's the matter? Is she the one, or is he?"

"Oh!" Mrs. Fortescue shrugged her shoulders dramatically. "*She* is. Denny's pining away."

"But what's the matter? Don't he suit her? I thought them two had it all fixed up by this time."

"Don't ask *us* what's the matter. That's what we all wonder. Well—" Mrs. Fortescue said airily, "he can have me if Kramer gives him the go-by. I'm crazy about Denny."

"Well, I should say," Mrs. Hornblower agreed heartily. "I think the professor's a lovely fellow. Just real nice and common. But there must be something. She's a lovely girl, too. Them pink cheeks."

"Well, if there is, we don't know what!"

"Come on, Fortescue. The bob'll go off without us," Miss Conover said impatiently.

And when *they* had left, Mrs. Duffus said to Mrs. Hornblower: "She's a wild one, for a married woman."

She's old, too. I wonder how old she is? Wonder if she really is a widow. Saying she was crazy about the professor!"

"Yes, but she's real jolly," Mrs. Hornblower said comfortably. "Well—" she gave a gusty sigh—"I wish me and Hornblower could go to the game along with the rest of 'em. I'd ride in the bob. Yah—but that's the way!"

Mrs. Fortescue, Miss DeWitt, and Miss Conover hurried down the snowy street, their arms tightly linked.

"Boo! Bet it'll be cold driving way off there to-night."

"You're always cold, Forty. You better stay at home and go to bed with your eighteen covers and your hot-water bottle."

"Now, Connie, don't you say anything against my hot-water bottle. Don't you malign my old friend Reginald. Stay at home! I guess not—not if I freeze. I want to see how this thing comes out."

"The basket-ball game?"

"Game, your eye! Yes, the kind of game Kramer's playing with Denny."

They discussed it all the way to the boarding-house, Mrs. Fortescue strident in her alignment with Denny. "What's got into Kramer? I thought she had some sense. Well, she needn't think fellows like that grow on bushes. I guess nixie!" Mrs. Fortescue exclaimed,

THE KRAMER GIRLS

out of a bitter wisdom. But the whole town was interested, including, of course, the high-school pupils. The sudden case between Mr. Dennis and Rose had developed from their joint efforts with the basket-ball team. Rose had the basket-ball girls, Denny the boys. Now, to most of the on-lookers the only question was whether they were engaged. "And now what's got into that girl? Gosh, gals, I'd like to know the straight of it."

"Well, you will, probably, Fortescue," Miss Conover said dryly.

She let the others talk and kept her thoughts to herself as they hurried on through the snow. Although she was constantly with Mrs. Fortescue and Miss DeWitt, she treated them usually with an ironic reserve. She was thinking of Rose as she had been these last weeks . . . that extra bloom of happiness on her soft cheeks, the deep-brown glow in her eyes, her air of being loved and cherished, that Miss Conover recognized with a kind of sympathetic pain, but in her own wryly admitted loneliness had never felt. How would it be to exist and move in such a warmth of happiness? Think of even having the power of disdaining it! It was a kind of royalty.

Two big bobs had been commandeered to drive the basket-ball team and a dozen or more rooters to the game at Miller, eleven miles away. The bobs were already standing in front of the high school. The

basket-ball girls were packed snugly into one of them, with Rose in the midst of them. But Denny was still out in the road with a little group of others. He wandered off a little way, scooped up a handful of cold bright snow, moulded it carefully into a ball, and then threw it down with a gesture of disgust.

"Which one you going to ride in, professor?" Charlie Owens called good-naturedly from his high driver's seat.

"Oh, I don't know," Denny tried to answer carelessly.

But he wandered over nearer the bobs again. He was waiting for some sign from Rose. She was staring straight ahead of her. Only the rigidity of her attitude told that she had heard. The minister's wife had lent her the black sealskin cap that the minister wore when he drove out to the country. Her hair was tucked up under it, except for a dark-brown lock, gold at its feathery ends, against her cheek, pink from the wintry air. When Rose had first come to Tyler, she had seemed shy and quiet, and no one had thought much of her looks. But now they were enhanced more and more, by success, by her eminence as the prettiest and most popular of the teachers, by the admiration of Denny and the shy Mr. Swensen and Mr. Stevens . . . and tonight, when she seemed to have become unattainable, she was so lovely that Denny's heart ached to look at her.

THE KRAMER GIRLS

"Here! Where's there room for us? Don't forget us'ns!" Mrs. Fortescue called facetiously.

"Room in the other bob," called Charlie Owens.

"Oh, this is Bob Number One, is it? And the other's Bob Number Two. All right. Come on, girls, for Number Two. We don't care."

The big, dark farm horses pawed the snowy ground under the wintry trees.

"Come on!" Charlie Owens shouted. "They're a-rarin' to go. *Gid-dap!*"

"Hey, wait! You're leavin' the professor!"

Denny ran and swung himself on to Bob Number Two, where he was welcomed hilariously by Mrs. Fortescue. All through the drive he had to endure her vociferous attentions, slyly spiced with little teasing and mock-pitying references. Miss Conover suffered for him in silence; but because he was a man, she did not have the courage to offer him aid, or even speak much to him—her self-distrust blighted all her generous intentions. Her sympathy was with him and Rose both, simply because they shone in her mind as lovers—of what the trouble between them was, she had no idea. Denny's thin young face looked dark with pain. Most of the time, he sat crouched under the heavy robes, letting his body jerk with the jolting of the bob, but occasionally he roused himself and tried to talk with the others. Shouts went back and forth from one bob to the other. All the way,

THE KRAMER GIRLS

Charlie Owens's team was in the lead; and the big runners of the second bob slid and jerked a little in the shiny tracks the first had made as they trundled along between level fields, where great black clods raised little hillocks in the spread of snow, now brittle and shiny and lacy on top from the day's thaw, and where the weedy banks of tiny, frozen creeks were thick with shaggy whiteness. It was an ideal night for sleighing. The thaw had packed down the snow just enough. The air was mild with a wintry brightness.

"All right back there, Miss Kramer?" Charlie called.

"Fine," Rose answered.

She chattered gayly with the basket-ball girls, and then fell into a silence. Her own confused trouble mocked at the loveliness of the night. "But I can't. I'm not going to. Just the same . . ." She wished she was through with the whole business. Her mind went over and over all her recent conversations with Denny, and all her reasons, stopping short every time at her mute, stubborn conviction that she couldn't let herself marry him. She had gone crazy for a little while, but she was sure she wasn't in love with him. Yet the night would have been empty if she had not been constantly aware of him in the other bob.

When they stopped at the Miller high school, Rose

THE KRAMER GIRLS

went at once to the basement with her girls, where they put on their basket-ball togs, squealing when their bare feet touched the cement floor. Rose's mind was still going around the circle of that reasoning, still stopping short at that conviction . . . it was in a dream that she gathered the girls around her, gave them instructions, talked earnestly to them.

"And, Helen, I don't want you to foul, no matter what the other side does to you."

"Well, Miss Kramer, if that great big—"

"I don't care. *My* girls are going to play a square game."

Rose felt a kind of brightness go all through her as she laid down the law to the obstreperous Helen. Her body felt free and supple in her middie and the bloomers that she wore under her dark-blue skirt. Her tread was elastic and soft-footed in the sneakers she had put on so that she could go out on the basket-ball floor. She liked the curt tone of her own voice. Even her gestures were masterful and certain as she talked to the girls grouped eagerly around her. She felt suddenly freed of all her languors and moments of hidden, delicious reverie, the docile softness with which she had moved when she was falling in love with Denny.—This was like the cold, clean plunge into water; she was free of that, she was through with Denny. She despised that passive, blissful self that could do nothing—even comb its hair or lift its hand

—without reference to Denny and his thought of her.

Feet were stamping. There was impatient whistling. "Come on, girls. Now, you're going to play like demons—all of you." They laughed delightedly, with a nervous trill in the laughter. As she led them out to the basket-ball floor, Rose saw Denny talking to the Miller principal. But now she seemed to care nothing about him. Her nerves thrilled in sympathy with the taut eagerness of her girls. They depended upon her. She gave them her last directions. Then the shrillness of the whistle sang through her and left her tingling. Her glance ignored Denny. After her complete absorption in him, it exhilarated her to give herself to this which had nothing to do with him. She felt as if she had herself back again.

"Ready, Tyler? Ready, Miller?"

Rose danced a little on her tiptoes.

"Play!"

It was just the kind of game that she liked. Rose gave herself rapturously to the excitement of it. There was a cruelty to Denny in this. She didn't care. The Miller side hooted angrily over some of the umpire's decisions. Rose herself didn't care tonight if he was partial. Their success, the feeling that they had the umpire with them—enhanced by the hoots of the Millerites—thrilled the Tyler girls. Helen did get away with a few fouls—Rose's eyes sparkled with anger—but the girls played splendidly. Jane could

never see why Rose kept on liking basket ball. But this was what she loved of it—the end, the girls hot and panting, with tired, happy eyes, pushing back their damp hair with sweaty hands from flushed foreheads, running to her, dropping down beside her . . . being lost in the eager, thrilled, relaxed happiness of victory . . . or succoring them in defeat—it didn't much matter, it was the feeling of unity.

"Did I do all right?"

"Did I, Miss Kramer?"

"I didn't foul, did I, Miss Kramer?"

"Yes, you did, Helen. I saw you, if the umpire didn't."

Helen pouted.

The girls sent back scornful, bright glances at the Millerites, who made remarks and even hooted a little. In the basement they talked the game over excitedly, appealing to Rose with every other word. "Because that *was* our ball, I know it just as well as anything." "Oh, Miller's always peeved at the umpire. I hate Miller." Rose was brushing her hair at the little mirror. Dorothy Stevens and Mae, the two forwards, stole up to her, and each one put an arm around her. They laughed in delighted triumph. "We've got her. We're going to walk beside her and sit in the bob beside her." Mae laid her dark head softly and confidingly against Rose's arm, and for just a moment her little fingers touched the back of

THE KRAMER GIRLS

Rose's hand. She breathed: "Oh, Miss Kramer, I think you're so nice!" Rose laughed.

Miss DeWitt and one of the town girls came rushing down the basement stairs.

"Hurry up, Miss Kramer—girls! We're all going over to the restaurant and have some grub before we start back. Hurry."

The restaurant—a little frame building, painted a dingy green—was all steamy and filled with people gulping pale-brown coffee from thick cups and opening their mouths wide for bites of the immense, juicy Hamburger sandwiches. But it all tasted good after the excitement of the game. The crowd from Tyler, fortified by being at the same time visitors and victors, made facetious remarks about the food. Rose saw Denny, standing not far from her, but she was concerned strictly with her girls and with Miss Larson.

Afterwards, however, when they were all waiting on the corner near the big tree for the bobs, Denny came up to Rose, and Miss Larson, to her distress, moved shyly away.

"What bob are you getting into?"

Rose did not answer.

"Oh, all right."

Denny, terribly offended, turned away. Rose wanted wildly to go after him. She hadn't meant that at all—for the moment she had been confused and simply

hadn't known how to answer him. At that hurt tone in Denny's voice she loved him. Again she had the feeling of something outside herself compelling her to act this way . . . as if she must struggle against Denny for she scarcely knew what.

And now it was too late—even if she had wanted to answer him. They were getting into the bobs. Mae and Dorothy took a long slide over the snowy walk and clutched Rose's arms again. "We've got her. You can't have her." Before Rose knew it, she was snuggled down between them on the straw under the thick robes. There was some excitement. It was a moment before Rose realized that she had any concern in it. Some of the boys were trying good-naturedly to make Denny get into her bob. Her heart gave a bitter throb when she saw him struggling angrily and refusing.

"Come on! No room in the other."

"Let me go."

He got away from them—they all sobered as they realized that he was really angry. He climbed up to the driver's seat of the other bob beside old Bill Giddens. "Gee, well, I didn't know . . ." one of the boys was saying. The bobs were starting. At that very last moment if Rose had made the slightest sign, if she had looked at him or asked the girls to move over . . .

But now it was probably all over. Rose's throat

THE KRAMER GIRLS

was choked with pain as they drove down the wide, wintry street with the plain, bleak houses on either side . . . as they drove on, into the open country, where the snow-covered fields were magically, slumbrously still under the moonlight and there was only the plop-plop of the horses' feet, the creaking and swaying of the bob, and the song that the boys were singing and the girls, snuggled down beside her, sleepily humming. . . .

"Tyler will shine tonight, Tyler will shine. . . ." The pain in her heart seemed to spread out through the whole night and set the very air to aching. It was done. She couldn't even consider her own act. She couldn't look back down the road and see Denny sitting silent and hunched over on the lofty seat beside Bill Giddens. What had she done? She didn't know. Mae was leaning sleepily against her arm. Rose slipped down farther under the robe. With her other arm she drew Dorothy up to her, soothing the child's restless movements—but whether for solace to herself or Dorothy, she could not have told.

Annie and Rose were supposed to be packing. Rose sat on the bed, in a block of sunshine, drying her hair, that spread in short, curling tendrils not thick, but very soft, across the Turkish towel around her shoulders.

"Just see how your hair curls when you've washed it, babe," Annie said admiringly.

Rose shook the soft tendrils, and little drops sprayed.

"Do you want more than one apron, babe? The whole bunch is clean. . . . Well, now go on and tell me," Annie urged. "Did you see anything of him after that? Did he ever ask you again?"

Rose had been telling her about Mr. Stevens in Tyler. Annie's face was alight with gleeful interest. She laughed delightedly. She could scarcely believe that an old widower had proposed to the babe!

Rose went on. She had always loved to tell things to Annie. Besides, it didn't matter about Mr. Stevens. It was all right to make a comedy out of that. He had only really talked with her once—when he had her for a partner at a card party—and then he had come over to the schoolhouse and proposed! It wasn't Rose whom he wanted, just a wife. "But don't you tell any of this to Mrs. Pick," she warned. Annie knew all about the teachers in Tyler, the favorite pupils, the townspeople with whom Rose had been friends—just as she had known about the college people, in the days when she had pored over the *Junior Annuals* until the faces of Rose's class-mates were almost more familiar to her than to Rose herself. Although she was delighted that an old widower had proposed, she had wanted Rose to refuse him, of course. But she was inclined to sympathize with Denny.

"Didn't you like him? Wasn't he nice?"

"I told you he was nice."

"Well, then, why didn't you—?"

"Because I didn't want to marry him," Rose said. "I didn't want to be a principal's wife." She couldn't exactly explain that to Annie—how Denny, nice and dear as he was, just took things as they were: taught a boys' class in the Sunday school, and believed in the Bible, and was a standpatter in politics and against woman suffrage. He had a stubborn notion of what women ought to be. "Anyway—I wasn't sure that I liked him well enough." She didn't want to explain the mysterious weaknesses of her nature to trusting Annie. It might have been just that Denny was there—the only possible man in the place. She truly didn't know.

Annie wanted to know: "Were you and he ever really engaged?"

"Not quite. Oh, I don't know whether we were or not. Denny thought we were and I thought we weren't."

"You crazy kid!"

Annie began to laugh, and Rose laughed too, although she still felt hurt and awry from the memory of those long, dreadful weeks of argument, discussion, recriminations, pleadings, yielding, and drawing back . . . Rose wanted to get away from it.

THE KRAMER GIRLS

"Well, then, what did you finally tell him?"

"Well—that I couldn't. I guess that was all."

"Did he feel bad? How did he act?"

"You would have *thought* he felt bad enough, from the way he talked. But right after that he began taking Dorothy Stevens to card parties and things. So I guess he wasn't broken-hearted!"

"Maybe that was just to show you. I mean, to make you jealous, or something."

"Maybe. Well, it didn't. I thought he looked awfully foolish running around with a little Sophomore in high school." That hurt Rose yet. But she knew that what Annie said was true. ". . . Oh, I guess I did treat Denny pretty badly. I guess I went farther than I'd meant to—anyway, he thought I'd meant more than I had. But I—well, I didn't know every single minute just what I was doing, and just what I meant by every single thing. Men never seem to understand that. If you're nice to them, they think you mean something by it, or otherwise you're just playing with them, or—oh well, I can't explain."

Annie listened respectfully, feeling that Rose was now experienced.

"And did he care anything about that Mrs Fortescue?"

"Mrs. Fortescue? Oh heavens, Annie, she's ancient!"

"Hey, you two!" Georgie had come into the room.

"Thought you were the packers. What's all this gibble-gabble?"

Rose and Annie giggled like two naughty children.

"Here are the nighties. How's your hair, kid? Annie, you get busy."

Even after Georgie had gone, Annie and Rose giggled when they looked at each other. "I feel silly," Rose said luxuriously. The events of the year in Tyler, painful as some of them had been at the time, were all enhanced by Annie's childlike delight in listening, until Rose herself could see the whole year as an emotional drama with herself the heroine.

"Tell me about Jane. You haven't told me about her."

"Well, she's going to try to get on the stage. You know, she met that woman that helped run the Little Theatre."

"And is this boy she knew, the one in her school, really going along? S'pose she's going to marry him?" Annie asked eagerly.

"No," Rose said with scorn. "He's just a kid Jane's been nice to."

"I know, but he's going there with her."

"Oh well, Jane isn't the kind of a fool I am."

They heard voices downstairs. "Oh dear, here comes somebody," Rose moaned. Georgie came, proudly bringing Mrs. Seegar into the room.

THE KRAMER GIRLS

"Well! So our lady's getting all ready to go! Never mind your hair, my dear, you look all right. Well, now, let's hear about it."

Georgie and Annie scurried about taking piles of clean clothes off chairs to find a place for Mrs. Seegar to sit down—and then she started to sit on a folded silk dress on the little rocker. But she was so kind and anxious to be good to everybody, in spite of her effusive little manner and the funny peering look that came from her bad eyesight, that people had to forgive her.

"I think this is just splendid! And I didn't know anything about it until just last night, when Mr. Seegar came home and told me."

"We didn't know much about it ourselves," Georgie said. "The kid—Rose—didn't spring this on us until a few weeks ago."

"I think it's just fine, though," Mrs. Seegar said. "Mr. Seegar says there are going to be wonderful opportunities for women in that line. My, when I think of all that girls are doing these days!"

"Yes, I guess so," Georgie muttered somberly.

"Well, I expect to see Rose secretary to some great man before long." Rose laughed and blushed. "Oh yes, I do. You don't know how much faith Mr. Seegar and I have in Rose."

Georgie's whole face glowed with pleasure, and the easy, sentimental mist dimmed Annie's eyes.

THE KRAMER GIRLS

"And to have your friend with you! Isn't that just lovely? And then when I heard about Mr. Yarborough—! Well, I told Mr. Seegar I thought that was the finest thing. I never knew just what to think about Mr. Yarborough. You know Mr. Seegar has called on him time and again and asked him to come to church. Is he a free-thinker? I've heard that. But I guess he has his good points. We all have our good points. You know that little verse, I think of that so often—

There's so much good in the *best* of us,
And so much bad in the *worst* of us—

No, that isn't it; what is it? Well, anyway."

"It wasn't just Mr. Yarborough," Rose put in hastily. Why had Georgie had to tell all that? It was no one's business but their own. No wonder Jane talked about small towns!

Georgie was so pleased about Mr. Yarborough, though—she couldn't wait to tell all the rest of it.

"Well, I told the kid to ask him. He'd always said such nice things to me about Rose. Maybe he is a free-thinker." Georgie scowled anxiously. "I don't know about that. Anyway, he's always been mighty nice to us. Even then, the kid wouldn't have gone out there if I hadn't gone along with her and done most of the asking."

THE KRAMER GIRLS

"And he's going to let you have the money for your studies—!"

"Oh, no," Rose said hastily. "I'm borrowing from the bank."

"Yes, kid, but he was the one arranged it all. He's signing the note for your security."

Why *did* Georgie have to tell just everything? But she was so proud and delighted that Rose couldn't even plan to scold her after Mrs. Seegar had gone.

"Well, it was nice of him. It's just as nice as it can be. . . . I told Mr. Seegar last night I wished you'd come to us. But then, of course, we couldn't . . ." Mrs. Seegar sighed. "We'd so love to help some of our young people, if we just had the means. But, you know, ministers can't do things like that. Their salaries . . . and, anyway, since Mr. Seegar and I were so unfortunate in that investment out in Idaho."

"Well, I guess you folks have done enough for us!" Georgie said heartily.

Then she went on to tell about old Mr. Yarborough. What a nice old house he had and how neat he kept it—no wonder he hadn't married again if he didn't need a wife any more than that! He had so many books! Georgie guessed it was true he was a sort of philosopher. They were all in these old-fashioned walnut bookcases. He called his sitting-room the library. He showed them an old rope bed that his own brother had made—the one that was

killed in the Civil War. Rose was crazy over it, and he'd told her as soon as she had a home of her own, she should have that bed. Georgie's face glowed.

"Think of that!" Mrs. Seegar said. "Now, Rose . . ."

Rose shook her head, and Annie laughed excitedly.

And then the mill. Mr. Yarborough had explained to Georgie just how it worked. The most interesting thing she'd seen around here in a long time—she'd like to be a miller herself.

"Yes, and now *I'm* going to tell what he said about you," Rose said, with a touch of malice. "He said if he ever had to hire a helper, it would be Georgie."

"Yes, and I tell you, I bet you I could do it."

They all laughed and Mrs. Seegar was sure she could. . . . The loveliest spot where that mill stood! Had Mrs. Seegar ever been out there? Well, she ought to drive out there with Mr. Seegar some day.

"Well, you know, since we haven't our old horse any more—"

"The prettiest woods out there! Why, they're just as if they'd never been touched. Mr. Yarborough won't let them be cut down. That little mill-pond is as clear as glass. And then that old mill—one of those old rock buildings—you don't see many of them any more. Annie ought to have come along, I told her, and seen all the kittens. This old Mr. Yarborough, he keeps all the kittens his cats go and have

THE KRAMER GIRLS

—you never saw such a raft of 'em. Gee, I like mills and places like that!" Georgie burst out, and her face shone. "I don't know why, but I just like the smell of 'em."

"Do you suppose it can pay?"

"I suppose not much, any more. . . . I'd like to work in a factory."

Mrs. Seegar had risen, and patted Georgie's shoulder. "Well, I think you're doing the best work right where you are. . . . Now, my dear, if I don't see you again . . ."

Her wrinkled, dry lips pressed Rose's cheek, her bony little hand squeezed Rose's soft palm . . . and in that moment Rose forgave her all her effusions. She kissed her with a soft heartiness, and Mrs. Seegar, gratified and smiling, went downstairs.

Annie and Georgie both went with her, Georgie talking all the time about Rose—what a success she had been in Tyler, how the school-board had asked her to stay. . . . But Rose stayed on, shaking back her hair impatiently and going at the packing in earnest now.

It was a joy to handle the piles of clean linen the girls had got ready for her. Starting out with all clean things!—how good that was, and how many times she had done it! Rose felt emotional as she thought of how good the girls had always been to her. She was ashamed of the way she had acted the

first part of the summer. But her mind had been all torn to pieces. It had taken her a while, she supposed, to get over the Denny affair. . . . And then, when they had wanted to ask Jane to visit her, she had refused, saying that Jane couldn't come and that it would disturb mamma—anything to keep Jane away. She was ashamed of that when she thought of Georgie's and Annie's generous simplicity. But, all the same, she didn't want Jane to come to Valley Junction. The way she felt when she was here and the way she felt when she was with Jane didn't match. She had to keep all the people and places away, in a different sort of world, from Jane's cool and aloof disdain.

That was one reason why Rose was so wild to go to Chicago with Jane this winter. She thought she would leave all her commonplace, childish affections behind and start a new, splendid life. She shivered with eagerness as she pressed down the smooth clothes in the trunk. It was just as when she waited for the basket-ball whistle to blow. She would be free of Sunday schools, free of aid-societies, free of clubs and of the fear of hurting people's feelings, of silently disagreeing with their ideas although she couldn't say so or they would think she was terrible . . . and she would have fled away from even the thought of Denny, from her own fear of being caught and kept for ever in some Tyler—actually part of it

—to the everlasting scorn of both herself and Jane.

If she would be homesick in Chicago, she would simply have to get over it. This was her test, her trial. She wouldn't dare fail after she had borrowed money from the bank. People believed in her.

But she couldn't let herself think of what she was leaving. It seemed to her that, now that she was going to meet Jane in Chicago, she must turn her back on Valley Junction forever. All those things for which she had a secret affection—things like Roland Yarborough's old mill, the rope bed, the sunshine in her own room, talks with fond and simple people like Mr. and Mrs. Seegar—she must tear out of her heart. She hadn't wanted Jane to see her plain little room, with the old painted woodwork, and the floor of wide boards that sagged away slightly from the wall. Not that Jane would have been snobbish about it, or had so much nicer things herself—but Jane thought it was silly to care for old stuff except real antiques (and, of course, there weren't any of those, Jane said, in this part of the country) and to have any patience with all this little town way of living.

Georgie had come back to the room. She put her hands on Rose's shoulders. "Well, kid, have you had a good time this summer?" She asked that soberly. Rose declared that she had—although she was ashamed, when she thought of the way she had acted about Jane, to look into Georgie's face. And she re-

membered the summer of her Sophomore year, when she had been so horrid to the girls, and wanted everything different in the house. But Georgie still kept her hands on Rose's shoulders and looked straight at her. There was triumph in Georgie's eyes.

"Well, have you got what you want, now, kid?"

3

Georgie came down to the kitchen to get the tea-kettle. Rose was just wiping the last of the dinner dishes. Now that they had so many people in the house—the practical nurse, and mamma's sister and her husband coming over from Centralia, and some of papa's relatives most of the time, too—it seemed that the dish-washing was simply endless. Georgie frowned.

"Haven't you finished, kid?"

"Not quite."

"I wish you'd left them. Annie or I could have helped you. I guess Annie's asleep. Poor old Ann, she was up half the night. Well, you won't have to do them tonight. One of us will."

"I'd just as soon do them. Why shouldn't I?"

Rose spoke curtly. She was resentful of the commiseration in Georgie's voice. In fact, she seemed to be at odds with Georgie half the time this summer. Georgie had noticed how strange the kid seemed to

THE KRAMER GIRLS

be. But then, Rose had been working hard—that was the trouble. She was tired out and ought to have a rest. Georgie wished she had time to look after her. She did try to shield Rose from as much of the work and worry as she could—tried to send her out to get all the fresh air she could before she had to go back to the city—and she saw to it, as she always had, that Rose should be free from the care of their mother and in the sickroom as little as possible. It was hard on the kid, being called away from her fine position, and having to spend the whole summer in this dead little town. Georgie didn't blame her for being cross occasionally.

"Well, kid—" she stopped, and put an arm around Rose's shoulders—"it won't last forever. You'll get back and feel all the better for having been away from the job a while. It'll be waiting for you."

"I'm not worrying about my job."

"Gee, kid, if I'd had any idea it was going to last like this . . . None of us did. The doctor says he doesn't see what keeps her alive. We thought she was dying right then when we sent for you."

"Don't."

Rose pulled away from Georgie's arm. And then, ashamed of herself, she pretended that it was because her dishes were getting cold. It made her angry to have Georgie keep talking about her job, and understand her so little.

THE KRAMER GIRLS

But Georgie had scarcely noticed her rudeness. As she went on up the stairs with the teakettle, Georgie was thinking about Mrs. Pickering and all the rest of the neighbors, and what they said about Rose. "How lovely it is for you girls to have Rose at home this summer." It disgusted Georgie. They never seemed to think of it from Rose's standpoint at all—never seemed to consider that her work might mean anything to her. In fact, these old ladies seemed to Georgie to take a kind of ancient delight in having got Rose down among them again, in proving that all her work and training went for nothing, that she was just a woman like the rest of them and her place was in the home. "Yes, and look at 'em! Aren't they a grand set to want everybody else to be just like them? Bah! Make me tired—the whole caboodle . . ." Georgie was muttering angrily as she went into the bedroom. They kept her mother upstairs now—it had been a long time since her invalid chair had been of any use to Mrs. Kramer. This tragedy was so old and familiar to Georgie now that she scarcely noticed or thought about her mother personally . . . even while she helped the practical nurse sponge the invalid, she was mentally carrying on her argument against the old women. "Going back? Well, I should say she is going back. 'Don't you wish you could have her at home all the time now!'" Georgie mimicked that, with a kind of sav-

age mincingness, silently, but so fervently that her face expressed every one of the words as if she had been acting before a motion picture camera. "No, I don't!" She thought that so belligerently that she snorted a little. "You old hens don't seem to realize what it means to be secretary of the head of the Anti-Tuberculosis Campaign for the Middlewest—old stick-in-the-muds, anyway, you make me tired!" Georgie handled that helpless body with respect and tenderness. But it had ceased to have a personal significance for her. She admitted, now, that it would be better if mamma died—and Annie, although she wept, could not longer gainsay that. Everyone knew it. Even the old women.

But Rose wished that Georgie would let her alone. When Georgie had come down and talked about her job, it put a discordant note into the quietness of the kitchen. It had turned Rose's thoughts and made her feel guilty and stubborn. The way Georgie believed she thought was the way she supposed she ought to think . . . but didn't.

In fact, she was deeply, profoundly ashamed when she secretly contrasted what this whole summer had actually been to her with what outwardly, according to everyone's notions, it was. Did it mean that she was heartless—really too dreadful to be let live? . . . Her mother was dying. Solemn relatives came and talked in hushed voices. Every visit was a kind of

farewell. Georgie and Annie were fagged to the limit of endurance. Rose herself was overwhelmed with housework. It was a house of death.

Yet, actually, the summer was a respite. Something had to happen to get her away from her job—from all jobs, from being lost in the hard, stony world of business and crowded city streets and mechanical devices and cramped impersonal living quarters, that she knew now was alien. At first, the time at home had been only a secret interval of refreshment . . . but gradually, she had begun to realize, even to admit to herself, that something must happen to save her from that alien world altogether. She could never, herself, break away from it. Too much was involved—shame, self-respect, the ambitions and ideas of other people, even her own . . . Was she dreadful? But long ago she had become hardened to her mother's illness . . . or perhaps it was that she had never realized the tragedy, she had lived beside it so long, absorbed in her personal being.

And now, just in the same way, she avoided that tragic element in the household and went on with her secret life. Whenever she looked out of the window, she could see—above the muslin sash curtain—her own little plum tree, that she loved as no other, because it seemed to have shared in all the personal happiness and unhappiness of her life. Sunshine

THE KRAMER GIRLS

poured in through the window and glinted off the clean wet dishes; and Rose felt as if she were bathing in this sunshine . . . and in openness, peace, personal affections, continuity—all these were in the sensuous blessing of the sunshine. To be able to go up and down stairs, and from room to room, to run outdoors . . . oh, but these were only the outer things, there was something underneath them. The girls had very little time to give her. She was left to herself—and that was what she wanted. It was as if she were hiding away (but in these beloved, familiar surroundings) to come to a kind of growth and realization of herself, to prepare for what dimly she saw ahead of her. To have Georgie, with her brusque speech and her overpowering affection, come into the room, was an interruption.

Just the quiet. Just this warm, warm sunshine. Just the plum tree, where the sap was coming out in thick brown gummy globules on the flaky bark and the fruit, still small and hard, showed a tinge of red on smooth unripened green. Just to sit here, too lazy to move, with her cheek cuddled dreamily against the soft furry side of Annie's new little tiger kitten, which Rose loved because it was still young, still just a baby cat to be cuddled and played with and protected—not a mature cat-personage on its own, like Annie's old Mr. Gray, who was now no more.

THE KRAMER GIRLS

"Kid, could you go downtown and take back these magazines to Lollie McCoy? I promised I'd get 'em right back to her, and here . . . oh well, how can a fellow think of everything?"

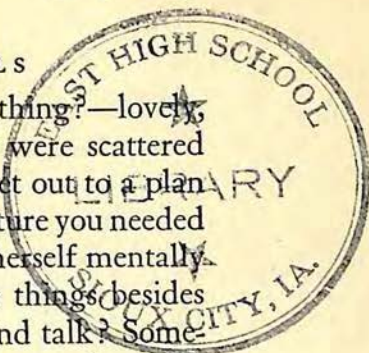
Outside, it seemed so lovely to Rose that her walk was only a slow wandering. How could Jane say that little towns were all dreadful? Not European villages, of course—Jane was crazy to see those, to spend a summer in a fishing village on the coast of Brittany, she wanted Rose to go with her—nor even New England villages . . . just towns at home. Well, whether this was just commonplace or not, Rose loved it. She felt her mind draw away from Jane's and settle stubbornly by itself. Her disloyalty horrified her. She thought of Jane's big blond splendor, her fine disdain and her cold white fire . . . with a little fear, because she knew how these things affected her, and yet with resentment because they affected her so much. She could enjoy this all by herself.

She could enjoy having everybody she met on the street speak to her; knowing people by their names, instead of just as—the laundress, the ice man, the paper boy, the janitor, the fruit stand man. Here at home, they were people to her, not just factors. But she hid away her enjoyment, in that secret and silent stubbornness, because she supposed it must prove that she was very inferior—inferior because she wasn't unhappy in Valley Junction, didn't hate it, and want

THE KRAMER GIRLS

to get back to the city. Wasn't air anything?—lovely, open, measureless air, and trees that were scattered as they really grew, instead of being set out to a plan . . . Jane said you could find all the nature you needed in parks. All the time now, Rose felt herself mentally criticizing Jane. Weren't there other things besides plays and art and music and books and talk? Sometimes it seemed to her that Jane had no understanding of what just living was, in and for itself. Rose had been away from Valley Junction for so long now that she could see things for just what they were, with all the freshness of return. She loved the town all the more because she was defending it against Jane.

She loved the way the road dipped down and then rose in the distance, with blue sky between and above thick trees. She loved the chance and unconsidered way in which little un-named side-streets petered out and dwindled into country. She loved being able to know that country was all around her and that at any moment she could reach it . . . go beyond the row of tall and gloomy evergreens that marked the furthest boundary of the last yard, and stand and let great sunny silence sink into her whole being, not just into her mind . . . sunny silence that held and contained the thrill of telegraph wires, the soft stirring of the wind through long grass, the whirr of a car on a distant road, and then the few liquid notes



THE KRAMER GIRLS

of a meadowlark's song welling up out of the silence. She could feel all this without having to say in words just how and why, make a case for it.

And just as much, although in a different way, she loved going along the street and knowing every step of the way. Things that she knew so well were funny and dear to her, just because she *did* know them. Right in the center of the town of Valley Junction, before you reached the business section, there was a little park, and in the center of this, darkened with trees, a fountain that was like four great iron petunias, set into each other, each one smaller than the one beneath it. For as long as Rose could remember, this fountain had been the source of far more local jests than of water refreshment—"since the town fountain ran" was a way of reckoning ancient time in Valley Junction; and to "paint the fountain red" the daring ambition of every high-school class. Rose saw this ancient encumbrance more brightened with all these local associations than ever it could have been by the water that never appeared. It seemed to her that Jane didn't know anything about—well, just *affections*. . . .

"Hello, Rose? Going to stay with us now?"

Of course, people didn't entirely mean that—they would wonder and criticize if she *did* stay. But it seemed to Rose as if she became herself again when people knew her on the street and called her by name.

Jane said the most wonderful thing about a city was that nobody knew you.

She passed the hardware store, and through the open door, she could see Bert talking to some old fellow from the country. Bert's fair hair was a little mussed . . . and suddenly it seemed wrong to Rose that somebody else would cook Bert's supper for him when he went home that night, and look after his clothes, and look after *him*. Not that she was in love with Bert. But they had grown up together. It would have been the natural thing. She thought of her graduation night, when Bert had tried to kiss her and make her promise to be engaged to him (whether that meant marriage or not they hadn't thought) if she went away to school—and she wouldn't. Now, when she went into the hardware store, she had almost nothing to say to Bert. But if she had married him, she would have stayed a part of everything here. Bert was married. Vivian and Marian and Florence were all married—yes, and even Leila Harker, and taken, in a grudging way, into the social life of the town. Rick Cummings had gone to Cleveland. Leila had lost her freshness too soon. She had married a man that clerked in one of the grocery stores. But these girls were her own playmates, and in a way it hurt Rose to feel that she was separate from them. And yet . . . no, she wasn't just like them any more.

Somehow, she classed Georgie and Jane together.

THE KRAMER GIRLS

It was astonishing how they had taken to each other the very instant they had met. Georgie had visited Rose for a few days in Chicago a year ago. How she had enjoyed it! Going around, hearing things, seeing things—she had worn out both the girls. Rose felt as if she had never really known Georgie before that visit. She had taken an interest in all they had shown her; and she had even spent two mornings in the Art Institute all by herself—“Gee, I like it! I tell you these statues are great—I like the big ones, the ones with horses”—and she had hunted out a factory, and learned more about the organization of the big department stores than Rose had ever dreamed of. She had wanted the girls to take her to a different kind of queer restaurant every night. “Gee, I like this! I like all the noise—means things are going on. It’s dirty. Well, what of it? Too many folks spend their whole lives just chasing dirt—and then dirt gets ’em in the end. What else are folks, after all? Isn’t that so, girls?” Annie, when she had come to Chicago, had spent nearly all her time hunting up people whom she had once known, or people whom people she knew had once known. That was Annie’s idea of being in a strange place. But ever since that visit, it seemed to Rose, Georgie had been holding up Jane to her—and she revolted. It was part of her general resentment against Georgie this summer.

THE KRAMER GIRLS

"I tell you, kid, there's a girl got a head on her shoulders. I bet Jane *will* be a great actress. Now, kid, you want to get busy yourself. You've got your chance."

Or Hammie . . . what had become of Hammie? Vivian, who had given her all the news, had told her that Hammie had gone West somewhere. He hadn't even finished school—didn't amount to anything. What Hammie had meant to Rose was quite different from what Bert had meant—it terrified her, seemed to pull her down and leave her helpless and alone in a great, dangerous, uncharted world . . . yet it was her one glimpse of something so perilously sweet and thrilling that she seemed . . . well, she knew more about them than Jane, who talked about them. And then Denny—oh yes, and Mr. Stevens . . . Rose would not have admitted how much of her time was occupied now in thinking about and recalling in detail all the men she might have married—all, in fact, who had paid any attention to her. Denny was the best of them. She didn't exactly regret any of them, even Denny. She saw now that she had never loved anyone just as a person in himself . . . oh yes, but she had—Hammie! And the most worthless, she supposed, of the lot. What a fool she was. Instead of with regrets, her mind occupied itself with just the kind of person who would suit her. She saw a large, firmly-built, capable, noble and idealistic man—a doctor, a

THE KRAMER GIRLS

great surgeon, and she would assist him in his work, and he would adore and cherish her and be unable to get along without her help. But he would make love like Hammie. And he would be as companionable and well-known to her as Bert. He would be more splendid than Jane. He would always be very clean-shaven, use a good-smelling brand of soap, and wear rough, masculine, expensive clothes. . . . Their large beautiful house with spotless ruffled starched curtains in the bedrooms . . . she drove the car for him, went with him on all his professional visits . . . and their children—she saw them blissfully ahead of her, but she hadn't reached them yet in her dream. . . .

"Oh, those magazines? Georgie could have kept those!"

"She thought you wanted them."

"Go in and see mamma," Lollie begged. "She loves to have people go in to see her."

Rose went into the little dark back room where old Mrs. McCoy—as tiny and shriveled and brittle now as a leaf blown to shelter and left to fade from brown to gray-white—sat in a large chair among blankets.

"Well! Yer home, are ye? Annie? No, Rosie! Yes, that's right. How's mamma? What say? My, that was too bad, wa'ant it?"

Rose, responsive and soft and smiling, submitted

THE KRAMER GIRLS

her fresh cheek to the wrinkled kiss. The tiny hand, with bones that were like shiny, bluish shells showing through the skin, clutched hers. Old ladies liked Rose.

Out in the shop, she had to smile to see the collection of elderly hats in the window, the table of fashion magazines, the show case full of "gifts." Talking with Mrs. McCoy had made her feel the significance, and slow, inevitable, painful grandeur of the passing of time; but with Lollie, boon companion of her sisters, she was petted and young. She stayed talking to Lollie for a while—there was nothing to talk about, but she loved the affectionate familiarity of the place, Lollie's fond admiration; and she loved having the chance to really feel things like the passing of time and the change of seasons and the different stages in people's lives.

Outside the shop, she saw a tall, loosely built man coming toward her and smiling as if he knew her.

"Hello, Rose," he said. "I heard you were back. Don't you remember me? Archie Carpenter?"

"Oh, of course I do!" Rose said.

She couldn't imagine why she hadn't recognized him at once, because he looked just the same. But then, they hadn't really known each other. Archie Carpenter was several years older, and had gone in an entirely different crowd. But that was one of the pleasant things about growing up—to be accepted

by older people whom she had always thought of as ahead of her. The warmth of Archie Carpenter's greeting flattered her.

"Well, I've been hearing all kinds of fine things about you!"

"What things?" Rose said derisively.

"Oh, that you've got a grand job over there in Chi, and that you're a regular business woman these days. Well, I'm not surprised," he said admiringly. "You were always the smartest girl in school."

"You don't remember a thing about me in school!" Rose challenged him.

"Sure I do!"

"We were never in the same grade in our lives."

"I remember more about you than you think, young lady."

Rose was more pleased than she would admit. She felt that she liked Archie Carpenter—he was nicer than she had remembered. She liked his rangy height, as he stood easily looking down at her, and his pleasant, smiling face, with the fair, sunburnt hair and the blue-gray eyes laughingly crinkled at the corners. Again it flattered her to see that he enjoyed talking to her, because she remembered Archie Carpenter as a big, grown-up fellow taking the older girls to dances when she was just a little kid in a middy blouse.

"Well, are you home to stay now?" he asked.

THE KRAMER GIRLS

"Oh . . . I'm home right now, anyway."

"That's the stuff. Well, let us see something of you once in a while."

As she went on, she heard him calling to her:

"Rose!"

He caught up with her.

"Bound for home? Wait a minute, and I'll walk along with you."

She waited while he went into the drug store and came out with a package of cigarettes—evidently his errands in town were not strenuous.

"Might as well have some company," he said. "You a smoker now, like the rest of these girls? S'pose you don't dare say so in your home town. Well, being in Chicago must agree with you. I don't like it. Somebody bumping into you wherever you go." He grinned.

"I didn't know you were here," Rose said.

"Didn't you? Well, I've been here all summer."

"I thought you were somewhere else." She tried to remember what she *had* heard about him.

"You've forgotten me. That's the trouble. Own up now, Rose."

"I haven't," she answered, nettled.

"Oh, I've been all kinds of places since I saw you last. Over in The Rapids most of the time—lately. Been home here this summer. Now I'm trying to see they get a bridge built over Plum Creek. Haven't you

THE KRAMER GIRLS

heard of that new bridge? Well, I'm the guy that's building it."

"No. Where?"

"Over near the Hutt place. Better come out and see it some day."

"Where that old wooden bridge used to be?"

"That's the place. Wooden bridge went to pieces. Too many guys carved their girls' names on the railing. Found your name there, Rose."

"You didn't!"

"I sure did."

But she laughed, remembering how she used to walk out to that bridge with Bert, in the spring of her Senior year. She hated to have the old bridge gone.

Archie lounged along easily beside her, smoking his cigarettes. The mottled shade was pleasant on the cement walk. Rose liked the personal way in which Archie asked after her mother.

"I suppose you're kept pretty busy," he said.

It made Rose ashamed. But she told him that Georgie and Annie did everything—with a little flare of anger against them, as she spoke.

"Say, those two girls have certainly stuck to it, haven't they?"

But if she wasn't so busy, he suggested, why shouldn't she walk out and take a look at the new bridge with him?

"Aren't *you* busy?"

No, he said easily, the work was held up right now. Some of the materials delayed on the road. . . . Rose hesitated. She felt that she ought to be busy every moment, even if she really wasn't so—people expected it, and that she would think of nothing but her mother. They would think it dreadful of her to do anything for enjoyment. But the air was so lovely. She hadn't seen the little wooded place near the Hutt farm for years. She would ask the girls if they needed her. . . .

"That's right. But tell 'em I said you needed the walk."

Of course Georgie was willing to have her go. For some reason, Rose didn't mention Archie Carpenter—"to walk out and see the new bridge," was all she said.

"That's good! Say, Rose, shall I go 'round for the car? Rather walk? So would I. I get too darn lazy hopping in that old car wherever I go. All right. Come along. Say, this is great!"

When they turned down the street that led out into the country road, both of them felt as if they had been suddenly let out of school and had a whole free afternoon before them. Rose had never known anyone to whom it was so easy to talk as to Archie Carpenter. There was something confiding about his friendliness. Both of them had been away from Val-

THE KRAMER GIRLS

ley Junction enough to give them a pleasant sense of superiority to the concerns of the town—and yet both of them belonged to it.

"I always liked this road," Archie said. "Say, you know, it's kind of fun to work out here this summer. I got old Tom Bissel working for me. Remember old Tom? He's a character. Course, it isn't much of a job . . . But then," he told her, "mother likes to have me home with her. She's alone so much. I don't know why it should hurt a fellow to look after his mother once in a while. The way I figure it, Rose, she won't be here forever. Isn't that so?"

Rose remembered the narrow, curving road, with the thickets of tall sweet clover dusty and fragrant in the afternoon sun.

"Want me to pick you some of that, Rose, when we go back? I often take some of that back to my mother. She likes to dry it and stick it around in her clothes, I guess, in the bureaus. You can take back some to Chicago."

"Oh!" Rose cried. "The bridge is still there!"

She felt more than ever like a child let out of school. She ran ahead of Archie, looking back at him, her cheeks pink and her brown eyes glowing; and, smiling, he followed her. She remembered all this place. She remembered the Hutt farm on the right, the old brick farmhouse set away back from the road, and the low, lush green pasture with the brown cattle

THE KRAMER GIRLS

moving slowly across it and the smooth hills rising beyond it . . . and on the other side of the road, the barbed wire fence all tangled up with weeds and undergrowth that was supposed to keep people from gathering nuts in Mr. Hutt's woods—and kept out no one. But it seemed years and years since she had been out here.

"Be careful of that bridge!" Archie warned her.

"Teams go over it."

"Sure, but it's pretty rickety. Come over here, Rose, and I'll show you what we're building. A swell concrete bridge! I tell you, we're making Valley Junction classy!"

But the old wooden bridge was what attracted Rose; and after she had looked at all that Archie had to show her, she came back to it. He followed her. He forgot his warning against the railing, and both of them leaned their arms on the scarred wood and stood looking down at the brown water. It flowed smoothly, quietly, the current away over at the farther side . . . and they could look on, into the woods, tangled and thick on one side, but across the stream a smooth hill rising into the sunshine scattered with oaks in full foliage.

"Air's pretty nice out here, isn't it?"

"I love it."

"Thought you were all for Chicago these days."

Rose did not answer. The low sound of the water

made her almost too dreamy to answer. Here it was—the sunny silence . . . and over the hill, a bird flying until the black wings were lost in the air. . . . Archie was looking idly for initials on the bridge railing. Rose smiled, and made a pretense of being interested. —“Doc Peterson and Millie Little! Say, do you call that ancient history? Oh, look here, Rose—‘A. K.!’ Bet that’s your sister Annie.”—But her fancy was following the creek on into the woods, to where the water spread dark and silent near the big swimming rock. . . .

“Rose is going to sleep!” Archie gibed softly.

“I could go to sleep. It’s so quiet.”

“I’d have to fish you out of the creek, then. . . . Look here, Rose. I can’t seem to find ‘R. K.’ anywhere. I’ll have to put it here. *You* ought to have some record on the Plum Creek bridge. But you’ve been out here before, haven’t you? What’s your middle name, Rose?”

“Augusta!” Rose said with a smirk.

“Say! They were about as mean to you as they were to me.”

He worked diligently, until, among the shiny, ancient, darkened scars there was a fresh “R. A. K.” enclosed in a frame with a neat little floweret beneath it.

“The last initials on the Plum Creek bridge! There now, Rose. I’ve sent you down to history.”

THE KRAMER GIRLS

They had looked long enough at the water, and so they turned away, down the rutted little detour that had been made for the farmers over the old bridge, and out into the road again. Now there was a low green light across the pasture and the shadows of the trees fell long and clear.

"Why don't you stop in and see my mother?" Archie was urging her. "She'd be terribly pleased to see you again."

"Shall I?"

Rose liked Archie's asking her—most men would never have thought of that. She had almost forgotten where old Mrs. Carpenter lived—in this narrow house at the edge of town, with shuttered windows rounded at the top, and the lawn in front scattered with long, curved, shiny-dark, crackly catalpa pods. She had almost forgotten old Mrs. Carpenter, too—but she remembered her now, her round, pleasant, English face, her smooth sandy hair, her clean percale dress with faded sprigs of black on white—

"Who's this? Well, Rosie Kramer!"

"I thought I'd bring Rose over to see you, mother."

"Well, and that's just right!"

It made Rose almost ashamed that old Mrs. Carpenter was so pleased. But she was alone here, she explained—"so fur out"—and folks didn't like to come where there weren't sidewalks. Rose couldn't have imagined that Mrs. Carpenter would have re-

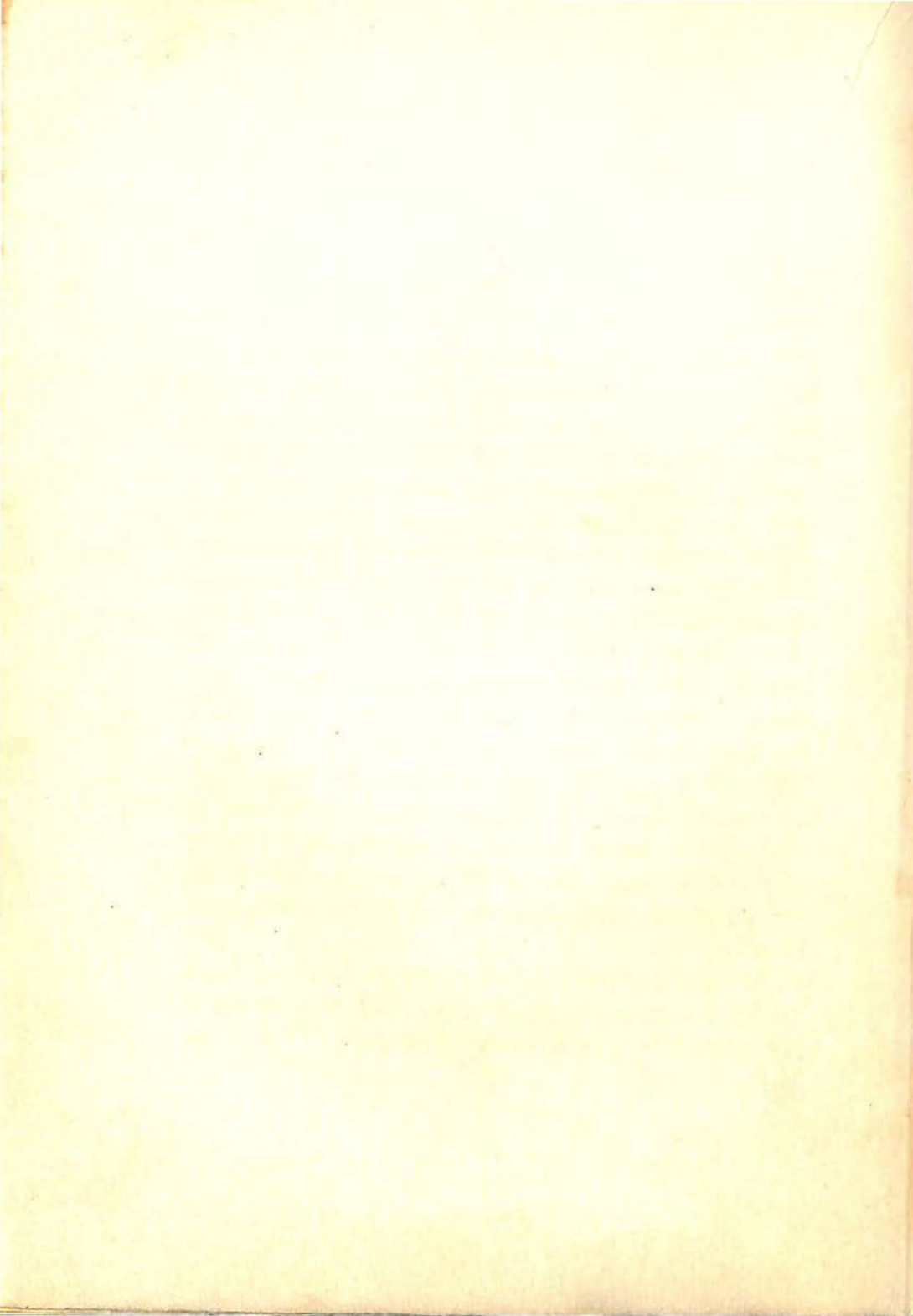
membered her so well. She hadn't known what a nice old lady Mrs. Carpenter was. And although she said that she must hurry, Mrs. Carpenter wouldn't let her go until she'd had a "cup o' tea" and been out to see her chickens in their neat little yard, and her garden, and her flowers. She showed everything with pride—and Archie, lounging along after them, smiled, and seemed fondly to encourage her, but to enjoy the joke with Rose. And there *was* something pleasing about the old-fashioned place!—a settled English quality of neatness and cleanliness, of pleasant living . . . the ground so carefully tended under the apple tree, even the floors of sheds swept and the unpainted board walls a shining, silvery-gray. "Only them catalpas. Them pesky things! I'd have them out if Archie's papa hadn't planted them."

While Mrs. Carpenter bustled about in the orderly kitchen, Rose sat in the dining-room. The door had panes of red glass, and these lent a strange glow to the neat rag carpet and the drop-leafed table upon which Mrs. Carpenter was putting one of her cherished cloths of silky-threaded, coarse, hand-woven linen.

"I hate to make so much work for your mother."

"Oh, this is what mother enjoys."

Mrs. Carpenter, pleased and flustered to be visited by a college graduate, and to have her so friendly with Archie, was saying:



GEORGIE had been in an outrageous state of temper all week. Mrs. Pickering, when she had run over with some of the new refrigerator cookies she had just learned to make—coming, as always, to the kitchen door, shivering, with that little tiny shawl wrapped around her head and shoulders—had stayed only a few minutes, instead of settling down in the green-painted chair beside the window for a good talk-fest. “Thought the orphan—or I guess she isn’t the orphan, is she?—anyway, the bereaved woman, needed a little something to cheer her up,” Mrs. Pickering began cheerily. But Georgie was so glum that she thought: “Whew! Guess this is no place for me!” She went over instead to see Mrs. Katzemayer, who lived next door on the other side, and to report on Georgie and the Kramer household—although she didn’t enjoy talking with her, the old lady spoke such poor English.

“She acted as if she was ready to bite my head off for bringing her something. Well, you know, it is too bad. She’d been counting on going. Both those

THE KRAMER GIRLS

girls, you know, think the sun rises and sets in Rose. Rose is a nice enough girl, but I can't see that she's so wonderful as those two girls make out. She isn't as pretty as Vivian—not anywhere near. She's too fat. Well, you know the way they eat—all of those Kramers! But, then, it's Georgie's own fault. She made Annie go. That's the way Georgie is. She insists on taking all the responsibility, and then she gets sore because they let her."

There was a good deal of truth in this. Georgie herself knew it. She was always feeling the drawbacks of her own generosity. But she was ashamed that she felt them. Georgie wanted to give freely, with a big open hand. She wrestled savagely with what she thought her own base, selfish instincts. She loved to feel that she was helping people to enjoy themselves. She couldn't withhold anything from Rose and Annie. She knew that Annie would have been willing to stay. But it had disappointed her so when she had found that after all her planning they couldn't both leave, that in a kind of black anger she had insisted upon being the one to suffer. What really hurt her was that Annie should always give in to her insistence. She wanted someone to override her, to care enough. But there was never anyone strong enough to do it. It was her own strength, partly, that had always got in the way of her happiness.

THE KRAMER GIRLS

What was the matter with her? What was she coming to? Sometimes Georgie was frightened. She had always had moods of savage rebellion. But these were only moods. She could rule them with an iron hand. She knew what she had to do, and she was strong enough to go through with it. But lately these moods had lasted for days and weeks. They had changed from crises of revolt into long periods of despairing darkness. She kept them entirely to herself, except that she was so cross sometimes—"as cross as a bear with a sore eye," Mrs. Pick called it—that poor Annie could scarcely get along with her. Then it seemed to her that all her thousand and one activities amounted to nothing. She was making quite a little extra money now, taking orders for cakes. Three families were on her regular list—the Cummingses, the Pendletons, the Littles—she baked three cakes and twelve loaves of bread for them every week, and a pan of cinnamon rolls for the Littles. But such little fiddling work! If she'd had the chance, Georgie believed she could have worked the thing up into a big business. Sometimes it seemed to her that she would go mad caged up in this house. And where was there any way out of it?

There was just one way—and Georgie was ashamed even to think of that. The most horrifying thing was the way she was getting to feel about her

mother. But it was hard to think of mamma as really a human being any more. There was no use denying that mamma was slowly losing even what remained of her mind. Annie seemed to grow more fond of her, to treat her like a child or a toy, but the things they had to do for her revolted Georgie. It seemed to her at times that their whole household life had been nothing to do but look after her. Georgie could earn the money—she knew she could. They wouldn't have to struggle for it with papa. She found herself wanting to scold her mother for her tragic, repulsive helplessness—angry at her when she couldn't swallow the food Georgie had prepared, furious at her for her meaningless restlessness, wanting to be in bed when they had got her in her chair, back in her chair when they had got her into bed. . . . But when she reached this point, Georgie always felt a revulsion of strong, sustaining, overwhelming pity. She would never get over her revolt against life because such things could happen to innocent people. There was papa going scot-free—so it seemed to Georgie; driving around the country, talking all day with a lot of other men in town . . . and here was mamma. Her deep, fierce tenderness, so different from Annie's softness, revived. Whether it was reasonable or unreasonable, she could never put her mother in an institution. She had to keep to that consecration of pity and de-

votion she had felt when the thing had happened—when she came into the room and found her mother fallen at her endless work. . . .

Oh, but who could have dreamed then it could last so long—so many, many years?

By the end of the week she had worked herself into a better frame of mind. Left with her mother, she had felt again the strange, deep, tender consolation and sustainment of giving her strength to weakness. The old feeling between the two had revived. This was her mother—this helpless, bloodless creature whose flaccid lips stumbled over the utterance of the simplest word, whose filmy eyes, in the white head motionless against the crumpled pillows, followed Georgie's movements with a dark, straining significance that she could not make out . . . could not be sure was there or not there. Even the pitiful wreck that remained of this woman was something to her that no other woman could ever be. Even that helpless wreck was more worth cherishing than any other body. In those filmed, terrible eyes, from which other people averted their own with hopeless distress, there was a faint lingering of that light that had been so precious to Georgie in her childhood and that could never be kindled for her in any other eyes.

This was the day set for Annie to come home, but Georgie knew how easy it would be for Rose to persuade her. She heard the whistle of the four ten,

but went right on with her baking. Great was her surprise, then, to hear familiar steps outside on the walk, tap-tap-tapping long before they got to the house.

"Georgie! Yoo-hoo!"

She heard the pleased excitement in Annie's voice, and knew from that she had had a good time. They met at the kitchen door. They were together so much that Georgie was a little shamefaced about embracing, but Annie kissed her eagerly. The radiance of the visit was still upon her. Her soft cheeks were pink and cold from the outdoor air. She looked pretty.

"Didn't think you'd get here today."

Annie was surprised at that. It made Georgie ashamed of all her resentment. It excited her, too, to think of what Annie had to tell.

"Come in here, old shanks. Let's hear what happened to you."

"Is mamma . . . ? Oh, just grand! The grandest time."

"I don't think she heard you. . . . Well, go in and see. Maybe she did."

Georgie waited eagerly for Annie to come back. The whole kitchen atmosphere was brightened by this dramatic return. Annie came back in a moment. Her cheeks were still pink, and her eyes very bright. She sat down in the green chair like a royal visitor.

Until she had taken off her wraps and got into one of her old dresses, she would not quite belong to the house again. Together they had decked her out in the best they owned—Georgie's black furs and best black gloves and Annie's new red dress. Lollie McCoy had made her a hat. It gave her an unfamiliar look. The frostiness of her glowing pink cheeks faded out now, but the flush remained, deepened by the heat of the kitchen and by the becoming red dress.

"Poor old Ann! Well, why shouldn't she enjoy herself once in a while?" Georgie thought rebelliously. She couldn't say why this glowing look made her feel sorry for Annie.

"Well, come on! Let's hear about the doings. How was the kid?" Georgie had to ask that first of all.

"Oh, fine!"

"Come on. Tell us about it."

Annie opened and threw back her coat and began drawing off her gloves. "There's so much to tell I don't know how to begin."

Georgie herself scarcely knew what to start asking. "Want a cinnamon roll? I guess they're done." Annie accepted it with delight. The kitchen was filled with fragrance, and brilliant squares of sunshine lay on the floor. Georgie hadn't known how glad she would be to get Annie back. All she could do was to feed her. All at once existence was warm and glowing again.

"How'd the kid get through her exercises—or whatever they were?"

"Fine! It was in the chapel. Prexy and all the profs wore their robes. It was a big doings. I couldn't sit with Rose. She and the other three sat on the platform."

"On the platform, did she?" Georgie was highly pleased at that. "Well, what did she have to do? How did they give it to her?"

"Well, Prexy just called them forward and presented the keys—"

"What are these keys? What do they look like?"

"Well, they're just little kind of square gold pins. I don't know how I can describe them."

"Oh well, never mind. I'll see it when Rose comes home. Go on and tell me about the doings. What did Prexy say? Did the kid have to say anything?"

"Oh, no, she just took the key. They none of them said anything. Oh, yes, Prexy did. He told about all four of them and what fine grades they'd had, and told how . . ."

"Say anything special about the kid?"

"Well, how she'd played basket ball, and worked in the Y. W. . . . I can't remember. . . . Oh yes, he said she was one of the best all-round girls in her class."

"Well, gosh all fish-hooks, Annie! Why didn't you

THE KRAMER GIRLS

tell me that before? I should think that was worth remembering."

"Well, I was so excited," Annie apologized. "I hardly knew what he was saying myself."

"The kid wear her cap and gown?"

"Oh yes, they all did. All the Seniors."

Georgie heard that with great satisfaction.

"I sat with them," Annie said proudly. "Right up in front with all the Seniors."

Dot and Muffet had taken her. Who were they? Oh, two of the girls in Rose's house. They were lovely to her—well, all the girls, and she liked them all, but she had just fallen in love with Muffet. Georgie wanted to know, derisively, where they'd got hold of a name like that. It was a nickname. All the girls in the house called each other by nicknames. The kid have one? Yes, they called her Posy. Posy! Georgie thought that was a great note. But she liked it.

"Didn't you see Jane?" she interrupted.

"I should say I did see Jane!"

"And is she so wonderful as the kid seems to think? Why didn't *she* get Phi Beta Kappa then?" Georgie asked that with satisfaction.

"Well, Jane hates mathematics. She almost flunked her math. It's English, and languages I guess, and things like that she's good in. Oh, Jane, didn't want a key."

THE KRAMER GIRLS

"No, I'll bet she didn't!" Georgie scoffed. "The kid was tickled about hers, though, wasn't she?"

"Oh, they all pretend they don't care about Phi Beta Kappa."

Georgie, belligerently, wanted to know why not. She thought it was about the highest honor they could get.

"They all say it's just for studies."

"Well, that's what they're there for, isn't it? I'd like to know what that means!"

"Well, what they care about is outside things. Dramatic clubs and things like that. Jane's the best one in the dramatic club."

"Hm, I guess Rose was pretty tickled to get her key, all the same."

It didn't worry Georgie much to hear about the dramatic club. Why, Phi Beta Kappa was a national organization! But Rose had talked about Jane so much that Georgie wanted to hear about her.

Annie, however, had so much to tell that she was telling it all in a jumble. Georgie could scarcely even keep the names straight—Muffet, Dot, Gyp, Bobbie Phelps, Susie ("Oh, that's the Dean of Women. The girls all hate her.") . . . Annie talked about them as if she herself belonged to the college now and had known them all her life.

"This wasn't at the exercises, was it?"

"Oh goodness, no, Georgie. This was when the

girls took me to their literary society." Annie seemed to think Georgie ought to know all about it. Georgie could scarcely get out of her what sort of looking man Prexy was (they had long ago learned from Rose to call President Calkins "Prexy"), or what the others were like who got Phi Beta Kappa keys. "Well, one of them, I told you, was this little fellow they call Brownie. He got the highest marks in college. But the kids don't like him. He's just a grind, they all say. Harry is the one they're all crazy about. He and Miss Muffet go together. They—" Annie stopped, looking guilty and knowing. Muffet had confided the engagement to her, but even the girls didn't know yet. The other girl was named Sadie Pugh. She was just a grind, also. Not popular, like Rose.

"Well, they like the kid, don't they?" Georgie asked jealously.

"Oh, I guess they do! Rose is right up in her class."

"Well, how about this Jane?"

"Why, I told you about her."

"No, you haven't. Not a thing. What she looks like, or anything. Or why Rose is so crazy about her. Was she as nice as you thought she'd be?"

"Oh, I should say! I'm crazy about Jane." But, then, Annie seemed to be crazy about all of them. And when she came to particulars, she was so vague.

"But you liked this Moffett, or Muffett, better," Georgie accused her.

"No, I didn't. Only Muffett was at home more. Jane's in everything."

"In what? More than the kid is?"

"Well, she was practicing all the time. She was going to be heroine of the dramatic-club play. . . . Well, Jane's quite tall. Quite big. I didn't think at first she was as pretty as I'd been expecting, but afterwards I could see she was." That was like Annie. She always agreed. "She looks grand in evening dress. All the girls rave over her when she wears evening dress. She's got this long, blond hair. Well, you know how she looks. You saw her picture in the Annual."

"Yes, but you can't tell from pictures. . . . And are she and the kid still so thick?"

"Oh, they're just together all the time. The girls call them the inseparables. Oh yes, Jane's wonderful. She's the most talented girl in college."

"Doesn't get as good marks as the kid does, though!"

There were so many other things to ask—whether Rose's clothes were all right; what kind of board she got; her room. But then Georgie looked out of the window and saw Mrs. Pick coming. Right on deck, as usual! Couldn't wait.

"Oh, confound it! Now, Annie, you be careful what you tell her. You know how she talks."

But Annie forgot about caution in her somewhat

flustered delight over the éclat with which Mrs. Pick greeted her.

"Well, well, well! So the wanderer is returned! Let's get a look at her. See how she's been affected by her sojourn in college halls. See the new hat, would you! Look at the lady! The shoes!—aren't they new, too? How blooming she looks! Annie, Annie, now . . . see here! What have you been up to away from us? All these new clothes, and those pink cheeks—looks suspicious!"

Annie laughed and blushed and protested.

"Don't you tell *me*! I know how these women act when they get away from home. I just bet she's got a man tucked up her sleeve somewhere."

"Where'd she find him, I'd like to know, at college?" Georgie demanded gruffly.

"Don't ask me where they all find 'em!"

Mrs. Pick took off her little shawl and settled down, while Georgie got ready a plate of cinnamon rolls and heated coffee—a household custom, inherited from her mother's Pennsylvania Dutch ancestors; a custom, by the way, that didn't come amiss with Mrs. Pickering.

"Well, now, let's hear all about the big doings."

Georgie let them talk while she returned to her baking. But her mind was occupied now with proud, happy thoughts of Rose. It was all in the paper about Rose's getting Phi Beta Kappa. "Valley Junction Girl

THE KRAMER GIRLS

Receives High Honor." Georgie had called up the office to be sure Matt Weaver got it right. She interrupted once: "Did you tell the kid what old Mr. Yarborough said?"

And Miss Alexander, married now to the mysterious man, and living in Minneapolis, had written Rose a lovely letter. Georgie could hear more or less of what the other two were saying.

"Well, Annie, how did they treat you down there?"

"Oh, just grand. The girls gave a spread for me one night, and I went to the literary society with them—heard Jane give a reading from Kipling. Then I was asked with all four of the Phi Beta Kappas to Bobbie Phelps's for supper one night. Dinner," Annie amended hastily.

"Hey! You didn't tell me about that," Georgie interrupted.

"Yes, I did. Didn't I? Well, anyway . . ." Annie went on beamingly to describe it.

"Did you know how to act in such swell society, old lady?" Georgie asked, with a little shake of Annie's shoulder, as she put down the rolls. It pleased her greatly that Annie had been asked.

"Hm! Look at this," Mrs. Pick said with relish.

"Oh, I guess I got along all right. Bobbie's wife speaks with a real Eastern accent, but, then, she was nice. It wasn't affected. She comes from there. But this little Brownie, I felt sorry for him. He just sticks

in his room, the girls say, and never goes out to the college doings, and he wore just a blue common shirt and acted like he hadn't ever been out before. But Mrs. Phelps was just lovely to him. Oh, I enjoyed it. But I enjoyed the things the girls took me to more."

"You bet," said Mrs. Pick. "I don't like these uppish affairs, either. Pot-luck supper at the lodge is good enough for me. Where you can eat all you want to."

"It was nice of them to ask Annie, though."

"Well," Mrs. Pickering asked when Georgie went back to look at her cakes, "and what's Rose been doing besides study? Has she got engaged?"

"Oh, no, nothing like that," Annie said hastily.

"What's the matter? Hasn't she been able to find anybody among all those college fellows? No use to wait for Bert, you better tell her. He's taken now."

"Rose doesn't seem to go much with the fellows in school. Not with one, anyway. She thinks more of Jane. She and Jane are going to Chicago together, when they've saved up enough money."

"Lots can happen before then," Mrs. Pick said wisely.

Even with Mrs. Pick, there were a thousand things about the visit that Annie couldn't tell. After Mrs. Pick had gone—"Pick may be coming home tonight, guess his spouse had better be there to welcome him,"

THE KRAMER GIRLS

she said—she wandered restlessly about the house still wrapped in her memories of the college. Georgie wouldn't let her help with the supper, and since she had promised to go over to the Pickerings' in the evening and help make up a five-hundred table, it was no use changing her clothes. As long as she wore her red dress, she could keep the feeling of herself as she had been at Winthrop. "What have they done to your hair?" Mrs. Pick had demanded at once. Muffett and Dot had done that. They had combed it for her. It was mussed now from wearing her hat so long in the train, but Annie hated to do it over. She couldn't get the same look to it. . . . Oh, the girls had all been so lovely to her. She couldn't begin to tell Georgie. Never left her alone a minute—taken her to chapel, to classes, invited her to spreads; and at night, when they came home from their dates or parties, they had come in and talked to her and made a sort of confidante of her. Told her all about their love-affairs—their "cases," they were called in college. And Prexy had shaken hands with her and told her he was proud of Rose. Annie had had the time of her life!

The radiance of it still lingered with her that evening over at the Pickerings'. Mr. Pick had got home, and Bertha Scholz was asked to make the fourth. Everyone could see that Annie was different tonight. Mr. Pick teased her about her red dress, and her hair,

and all the things she was supposed to have done on her visit—treated her in the sort of half-admiring, half-teasing way that Charlie Rubel did, and ruffled her hair and touched her cheeks to see if the color was real, until Mrs. Pick said sharply: "Pick, let that girl alone. You'll bother her to death." He even insisted on going home with her and Bertha—something he never troubled himself to do ordinarily—and made Annie walk with him to Bertha's—took one girl on each arm, and made facetious jokes over how nice it seemed for a change to have a fat girl—pinched their plump arms, but Annie's more tenderly.

"Well, Annie," he said, when he left her at the door, "won't you give me a kiss?"

Of course it was just a joke. Still, it flustered Annie.

"Gave 'em all to those college fellows," Mr. Pick sighed sentimentally.

Annie knew what an old fool Mr. Pick was. Not very nice, either, according to reports. Still, she couldn't help treasuring that walk home from Bertha's through the cold wintry moonlight, crusts of silvery snow left here and there on the ground, and the bright little stars above the church steeple. She sighed when she had to take down her hair. Tonight she felt almost like the long ago, but always most real, Annie whom Carl Finch had courted. She went to sleep with her flushed cheek snuggled into her warm,

THE KRAMER GIRLS

plump palm. She felt as if she had been in a different world.

Her happiness over the visit made Georgie ashamed of her resentment. Georgie looked at her heavy, high-colored face in the poorly lighted mirror before she got ready for bed. The skin was chapped, as always in the winter, and the creases from her nose to her mouth were getting deeper. With a kind of disgust at herself, she tried to subdue and thrust away once for all her own hot feelings. She thought: "What am I, after all? Nothing but an old hack horse. I needn't fool myself. I wanted all this for the kid, didn't I? Well, then, shut up, you fool, and get into bed, where you belong."

It was her own little sister who had just received the highest honor the college had to give, Rose was a member of a national organization. And if it hadn't been for Georgie, she wouldn't have got to college at all. Georgie knew that, and she guessed it was something.

"What more do you want, you big dumb fool? Shut up and go to sleep. I'm sick of you."

2

When Rose came back to her classroom from the assembly, she had that same feeling of welcome as when she entered her own room at college and at

THE KRAMER GIRLS

home. More so than at college, in a different way, because the excitement of sharing the room with Jane had changed the feeling, and this again was all her own.

Rose sat down at her desk and took out her papers, but all the same she was happily aware of the warmth and intimacy surrounding her. She was aware of the empty seats in front of her, all disarranged from the scurrying exit of the last class, and of the bookshelves which she had hung with curtains of brown-gold silky stuff, of the great bunch of oak leaves that she, and some of her girls, had ironed over with paraffin, and that glowed with somber autumnal colors through the smooth waxy polish. She realized for the first time that the stretch of rough treeless ground beyond her windows had become one of her own dear, intimate landscapes—like the lawn outside her window at home, with the little plum-tree, and the smooth verdant stretch of campus she used to see from the chair where she had always done her studying in the college library.

When she first went to a new place, she was always homesick. She had been homesick at college. Her whole Freshman year, as she looked back upon it, seemed to have been a dark agony. But although the girls sympathized with her, and she knew that Annie had even cried over her letters, they wouldn't let her come home. Her shame at disappointing them

THE KRAMER GIRLS

had kept her there. Rose had never known just what arguments Georgie had used with her father, to force him to pay for her course, but she suspected they had been drastic. The feeling that she simply had to live up to Georgie's ambitions for her had made her get up and go to classes again after agonized nights when she had kept sobbing even in her sleep. She had hated the place just because it wasn't Valley Junction—because the people, and the buildings, and the way of living were different, and to accept this change had seemed to her like treachery to all she had loved.

For the first month or two of teaching she had hated Tyler in just the same way, except that it was the college for which she had been homesick instead of Valley Junction. No, it was worse this time, because she knew she had to stick it out—the first time, there had always been the hope that the girls would let her stay when she went home for holidays. People didn't know her, they all seemed to look at her with curiosity and suspicion; and until she was accepted and approved and loved, Rose could have no happiness. She even lost the feeling of being herself.

But now she was on friendly terms with the other teachers, the people in town were beginning to know and speak to her—mothers invited her to meals, and to Aid Society suppers, and to club programs—and

at school she was known as "the students' friend." It was she who was asked to chaperon parties. The banker was friendly and joked with her when she cashed her salary checks. Her basket-ball girls waited to walk home with her after school. Rose could never love anything just for itself, without associations. But now she was happy here, she had even grown to care for the plain little town, with its atmosphere of pioneering that still clung to the wooden buildings and the streets with scrubby trees—so different from the white houses in Valley Junction, that were aging and getting a mellow air, in the little, wooded town that formed part of a landscape of low hills and gradual hollows, all threaded with clear woodland creeks and wound about by shining loops of a small, meandering, provincial river. She had actually grown fond of this northwestern country, that had seemed to her so bleak—the big rough emptiness, and the cold fresh vigor of the air, walks along country roads, where the farms, with their plain frame-houses, were far apart, and the immensity of gray sky was broken only by the dim brush-work of willow groves.

And again it seemed to her that this acceptance was treachery. It made her guilty to admit it to herself, because she had never admitted it to Jane. She wrote to Jane just as she had done at the beginning of the year—still pretended that she, too, abominated teaching, and loathed little burgs, and was just ex-

THE KRAMER GIRLS

isting until she could get to a city. She had not actually been aware until now that she was making a pretense, it was so natural to her to respond in every way to Jane, whom she adored. It frightened her, because she knew that she would have to keep on writing in the same way to Jane, that to admit her actual feeling would be to separate herself from Jane and break up that wonderful alliance that had glorified all her college days. And it shamed her, because she admired Jane so ardently, and had so accepted Jane's ideas that she scarcely knew them from her own. It seemed to her that, away from Jane, she was reverting to an earlier, natural, common sort of self, and that she was in danger of letting go all that radiant, ambitious, different future in which she had participated through Jane. . . . For instance, the minister had stopped her on the street a few days ago and asked her to take a Sunday-school class, and although she had really stopped "believing" in religion, she hadn't been able to refuse—just because he was so friendly to her, and seemed to trust her . . . and, anyway, it was all part of the place.

What was she? Did she have no loyalty? No stamina at all? Oh yes, because she adored Jane as ardently as ever and struggled against what seemed to her the shameful weakness of her own nature. But people liked her, and she was happy and a part of things. In her own mind, she believed as

THE KRAMER GIRLS

she had always done—only she couldn't make trouble and stand out alone and suspected and conspicuous.

Rose was never able to have her classroom to herself. A group of her basket-ball girls came in to talk to her and to discuss in shrill excitement the question of white or dark-blue middies with their bloomers. After that it was Luther Green. He really had nothing to ask her—Rose knew it—but he hung about, pretending to talk about his history work, while his eyes gleamed with a shy, secret devotion. He stood as close to Rose as he dared, while she found the place in the text-book, but he kept his hands carefully and self-consciously from touching hers. Rose loved these boys and girls she taught, and it pleased her to have them devoted. She couldn't be like Jane, just interested in those who were different and might do something some day. Jane kept her own aloof bright scorn and cared only for that one boy who wanted to be a musician and whose father and mother were against it. He came to see Jane, and she lent him books and all her prints of interesting pictures—"and so all the old hens are having a grand time," Jane wrote scornfully. She said he was the first boy she had ever known who wasn't a potential store-keeper.

When Luther had finally left, Rose worked hard at her papers. Already she was beginning to look

THE KRAMER GIRLS

"Now, Archie, you want to make Rosie right at home!"

4

For some time, Georgie had seen that there was something wrong with the kid. But Rose told her nothing, and so Georgie put it down to her being all worn out. Dr. Peterson had said that, job or no job, she must not go back to Chicago before fall.

Rose had read Jane's letter the instant she received it; but after that, she had hidden it away and said nothing about it, until she went up to her room at night and took it out and painfully read it over again.

It seemed to her that Jane had deserted her, and just at a time when it mattered most. It was over. Their paths were separated. Rose lay across the bed, the letter still in her limp fingers, too miserable to undress. She whispered, "Jane. Jane. Jane." They had been together so long—sharing their money, their stockings, their daily experiences, their desires and ambitions . . . and now, all at once, with what seemed a single move, the likeness had melted away and they were two different, single beings. And Rose felt as if she had always seen this coming. When they had parted, earlier in the summer, it had been just for a little while. Rose could see their room, as she had left it—the two narrow beds, the two dressers, the two chairs, but their clothes all mixed up in the

closet, and their books together on the table. And yet Rose had known that this was coming. Jane had gone with her to the station, but she had sat silent while they waited for the train, and Jane had talked coolly and frivolously about nothing that mattered. Jane had known that this was coming, too.

Jane did not even suggest that Rose come to New York. She took it for granted that Rose would stay in Chicago. New York terrified Rose, it seemed so far off, so eastern and alien. She had lost Jane now that Jane was going to New York. She recognized in Jane that cold audacity with which she could not cope, and saw now clearly and painfully the action of that thing she had always felt and feared in Jane—the power to leave her out, to leave anyone out, when Jane herself wanted a thing. The letter seemed completely cold. Every sentence of it hurt Rose, because—almost savagely—it took no account of her at all. It was all in scorn of Chicago. It did not seem to remember in the least all the new delights—the music and the pictures and the cold, whipped blue of the Lake—that she and Jane had shared and rejoiced in. And Rose could not help knowing that this was intentional. She was feeling now, for herself, the whip of that cold cruelty that she had always sensed in Jane, but that had never been turned against her.

And yet, the worst of all was that neither of them were to blame, neither she nor Jane. It was the slow,

irresistible, brutally carelessly working out of life—what people called fate, because they saw it so darkly—that was sending each to her separate destiny. Rose had felt the thing herself. Her resentment against Jane had been her own painful, stubborn effort to free herself—because, although she loved Jane so terribly, something else was forcing her. Her letters had been no more frank than Jane's. Instinctively, she said nothing about the very thing that meant the most to her—sinking into the life of her home again, renewing all its ties and its remembrances . . . those happy, almost religiously happy, hours in the open air she had kept hidden away in her own heart, fearing the blight of Jane's scorn and lack of comprehension. She knew that every indulgence in such joys was taking her away from sympathy with Jane. She had never written Jane a word about Archie Carpenter—and now it seemed to her that she had been with him most of the summer. So hadn't she been just as treacherous?

No . . . Rose felt she hadn't. Because she knew that it was she who would suffer from the wrenching apart, and not Jane. Jane had feeling, but it was a different kind—a passionate feeling, not devotion or tenderness. And Jane had the terrible strength of her coldness. It was she who had flung Rose off. She had none of the compunctions of deep affection grown into the heart and the life. She had loved Rose, but

now that they were to be together no more, her love had turned to cold impatience. . . . Rose could see her going on, bold and adventurous in spite of all her shyness—and it was Rose who was left behind, for whom there were months of suffering ahead.

But she could not live through the torture of lonely suffering. Now she knew that she could not go back to Chicago. Besides, what Jane could give her—what any friend could give—was no longer enough. Terror filled her. She had a shaken remembrance of that old dream of falling through the air, letting go the branches . . . and there was another feeling (she did not know whether she had once actually dreamed it or not) of lying huddled, helpless, cast away in a great dark waste of country. . . . Her heart beat heavily and she struggled up from the bed. There had always been something fatalistic in Rose's nature. She felt it now—now it was happening, as she had always known it would. It was as if Jane had pushed her off and her hands were loosening on the branches . . . she could almost feel torn leaves in her hands as she fell down, down through the darkened air. . . . Now she could not help herself.

And she didn't want to help herself. She wanted what was coming. It had been coming all summer—long before that . . . all her life. Now she flung herself away from Jane, away from Georgie, in a luxury of defiance. She whispered: "Archie." A gleam

of something bright and new, always seen, but thrust down and smothered, struggled up through the darkness of her pain and bewilderment. Now she could listen to the sound of the water flowing under the old Plum Creek bridge.

5

The road looked different on this cloudy afternoon. The sky hung low over it—soft, brooding, dark, portentous—and made the whole landscape larger . . . the level lush fields, the motionless oak trees, the cattle moving slowly through the darkened air.

Archie kept glancing at Rose. She sat with her face slightly averted, her hands clasped in her lap, her brown eyes fixed on the road ahead. When he looked at her, she tried to smile. Once or twice he was half afraid that she was crying.

"Cheer up, Rose," he told her. "The worst is yet to come."

That ancient witticism brought no response. Archie felt guilty. He searched his mind for just what could be the matter, hitting, with masculine good will and clumsiness, on the wrong things.

"We don't have to go to the justice, Rose. We can get a minister if you'd rather. I don't know, I think maybe we'd better, anyway. There's something kind of funny about being married in the courthouse—I

THE KRAMER GIRLS

don't know, I don't really like it myself. I can hunt up a minister. Shall I? Guess I'd better."

Rose shook her head. But then she said, after a moment—"Well, all right." Archie thought it was not having a real wedding that worried her. He supposed all girls wanted pretty weddings. It was not that, at all. It was the thought of the way they were doing it—running away, deceiving Georgie and Annie and the fault of it with Rose . . . as if being married by a minister could change that! But Rose hated to worry Archie.

"Sure," he said soothingly. "He'll keep it to himself if we ask him. These ministers are used to having folks come. Anyway, I'd kind of hate to tell mother we'd been married at the courthouse, like a couple of timber rats. She'd think it wasn't legal, or something."

Rose tried to smile. But still she could not talk through the dark oppression that hung over her and made her chest and her throat ache. She had hurried this thing along. Last night she had twisted and tossed in a fever. It had seemed to her that marriage with Archie was a refuge. Then everything would be settled. She would have given in to life—to her nature, to her fate. After that, there could be no going back. But she felt as if they were driving straight into that cloudy sky at the end of the road.

Archie said, with a rueful drollery, "You aren't

going back on me, are you, Rose?" He tried to get a glimpse of her face.

She shook her head, smiled as well as she could, let him press her hand in his taken for a moment from the wheel. Even Archie's hand was considerate, gentle and kind. After a moment, Rose's fingers pressed it gratefully. That made Archie feel better. But still he wanted to reassure her.

"I know you feel bad, honey, because you think we oughtn't to do this when your mother's so sick. Isn't that the trouble?" She let him think so, as she stared ahead with aching eyes. "But that's just one of those things that can't be helped, honey. We aren't responsible for them. It wouldn't help your folks a bit to have us put this off. And I don't know, I'd like to feel I had the right to look after you, if anything happened. Now you'll have me back of you. Isn't that right?" He put his arm around her for a moment—then hastily righted the car as it swung toward the ditch. They drove along smoothly and swiftly for a little while. "You hate the way we're doing this, don't you, Rose? Would you rather have told the girls?"

"No," Rose said huskily. If she had spoken to Georgie, she might never have had the recklessness to do this. And she had to do it—she must—it must be settled for ever and ever. She couldn't stand this being torn in two any longer.

Archie was so dear . . . but he hadn't the least

THE KRAMER GIRLS

understanding in the world of what troubled her. It seemed to Rose that she could not connect her two lives—this life to which Archie belonged, and her other life with Jane. They had nothing to do with each other. She must be given to one kind or the other. Archie knew only half of her. Did she really love Archie? With half of herself . . . the other half was quite apart, different, lonely. She had to marry him, anyway. In remorse, she leaned against him, her cheek against his arm. He represented all that was best and dearest to her in the old life, the life of home. Reassured, a gaiety came over him. He began to talk about what they would do.

“ . . . And then I'll go back to The Rapids. Try to get the contract for those new houses out in the Addition. Pretty soon you'll be coming along, and then we'll have to find somewhere to live.” He pressed her shoulder. “I'll get you a brand new house, honey. We'll start out all brand new.”

Elated, he touched her soft cheek with his. “Look out for the car, Archie!” “Don't you worry.” Then, in remorse and wonder, he thought of all she was forsaking to marry him. He hugged her more closely. He murmured whimsically:

“Gee, I didn't know I was going to get the very nicest girl in town!”

He hadn't really believed that she would be willing to marry him. He could be perfectly happy if

THE KRAMER GIRLS

only he were sure that Rose was happy. Ashamed, she laid her cheek against his arm once more. Then she drew away. They were coming into Warrington. The town lay ahead of them in a dark cluster of trees under the cloudy, blue-gray sky. Rose felt a struggling sense of panic. In a moment, the trees, the little streets would enclose her. It would keep her life, fixed and settled, and there would be nothing she could do for herself.

Then they entered the town. They drove smoothly along the pavement between the neat rows of houses where the air was heavier, closer, under leafy trees, than in the great stillness of the open country. Ahead of them, above the tree-tops, shone the pale clock face in the courthouse tower. A fatalistic calm had settled over Rose. She sat very quietly.

"Well," Archie said, "I guess that's where we stop first."

She got out of the car with him. The ground was strange and firm under her feet after the long drive. Her knees felt shaky. The heavy door of the courthouse swung slowly back after them. Their footsteps echoed on the empty stairs. They were one of those couples, from a little town or from the country, coming to the county seat for their license—she and Archie. But Archie and the clerk were acting just as if it were real.

As they went downstairs, Archie murmured:

THE KRAMER GIRLS

"You'd rather we'd go to a minister's, wouldn't you, Rose?"

She assented in her dream. She heard, from a distance, what he was saying to her. "Do you want the Methodist or the Congregational? The Congo minister's a pretty nice fellow. I heard him once when he preached over in the Junction. Better be married by our own kind of minister—think so, honey?" Archie cared little for the church any more. She knew that he was thinking of his mother, and she loved him for it. . . . She sat back in the car, her face averted, while Archie asked a genial-looking man the way to the Congregational parsonage. She was failing Georgie, in some dim, momentous way. She would have to face Georgie's terrible disappointment when she told her that she had married Archie Carpenter. But there was no help for it. Rose felt that she could not breathe in this heavy air.

But in the little side street where the church and the parsonage stood, it was better. The trees were more scattered, the brooding sky was not so close. There was something homely and friendly about the place. A little cart stood out on the lawn, and children were playing there.

"Is Mr. Milner at home?"

"Mary Alice, is your father at home?"

"Yes, he's here. I'll tell him." A slim little fair-haired girl went speeding up the front steps. They

could hear her shrill voice inside the house. "Daddy!" Then she came to the door. Her eyes were lively and bright.

"He'll be here. You can come in. They're varnishing the floor. Come on in," she urged in a friendly, but slightly dictatorial tone.

Rose and Archie entered the little vestibule. A strip of terra-cotta paper was laid over the new shininess of the floor, and big cans of paint and varnish, with dark runlets down the sides, stood all about. Mary Alice was confiding brightly:

"We kids have to stay outside."

All the other children were grouped now like a chorus on the porch.

A rather pretty, faded woman came hurrying anxiously out to the hall. She had put on a fresh bungalow apron.

"You wanted to see Mr. Milner? He'll be down in just a moment. I'm sorry I can't ask you in. I'm afraid it's pretty much of a mess. Mr. Milner and I were just varnishing our floors—"

"We didn't want to ask the trustees," Mary Alice said brightly.

"Sh!"

But it was useless to pretend they hadn't heard it. Even Mrs. Milner gave a pained smile. Her face was flushed. She smoothed the blond hair of the littlest of the children as they waited.

THE KRAMER GIRLS

Mr. Milner, a pleasant, rugged, youngish man, came down the stairs and tentatively offered a reddened, freshly scrubbed hand with dark stains of varnish on it—he was never quite sure whether he ought to recognize people. But Rose and Archie, confused, were assuring Mr. Milner that the condition of the house did not matter at all—

"The fact is," Archie said, flushed but proud, "we came to ask you to do a sort of special favor for us."

"I see, I see."

"We wanted to ask you to marry us."

Now the words were out. Archie felt happy and relieved. Mrs. Milner, flustered, was eager to help, and Rose—her heart suddenly lightened and happy—smiled. All at once it was shyly wonderful, beautiful, transfiguring to be a bride. Rose felt a strange softness and lightness envelop her. She responded to the atmosphere about her. Mr. Milner was hearty. There were sounds of excited scampering on the porch. All accepted with an air of eager, smiling conspiracy Archie's statement that "they'd sort of stolen a march on the people at home." Of course, of course! Mr. Milner supposed, smilingly, that they were both of age.

"But this dreadful house!" Mrs. Milner mourned. "I told Mr. Milner that if we started to varnish those floors—!"

"Maybe we could step over to the church," Archie

suggested. He always tried to make things easier for people. The church, of course!

"Run over, Mary Alice, and see if the door's unlocked. If it isn't daddy will get the key."

Delighted to have even this much part in the wedding, the whole chorus scampered madly for the church. "It's unlocked—unlocked!" they came back chanting.

Mrs. Milner said softly, "You mustn't tell the neighborhood."

She smiled apologetically at Rose; and as they walked across the lawn to the church, she kept on apologizing—for her dress, for the house, for the children, for Mr. Milner's unreadiness. "Tom!" she whispered horrified. But she couldn't get his attention. He had changed his clothes religiously, and subdued his mane of hair with water, but he had left on his dreadful old painting shoes! Mrs. Milner suffered.

The children had left the door open. Inside, it was still and dark. The chorus had followed the wedding party. At the end of it, tagged the littlest child, hugging his maltese cat by its poor suffering middle and letting its hind legs dangle.

"Oh, Bobbie, you mustn't bring Maltie into the church!"

Again Mrs. Milner smiled apologetically at Rose. Archie laughed kindly. Let the cat come too, he

THE KRAMER GIRLS

said. He and Rose didn't care. They smiled at each other, and there was a sudden sweet harmony between them. But that, at least, Mrs. Milner's sense of decorum would not allow. She made Bobbie put down his pet on the steps, and the cat, glad to escape, ran under the porch and sat there, sedate and secure in the darkness, washing its satiny paw. But the chorus Mrs. Milner could not keep out of the church. Rose was the one who pleaded for them. With quick affection, Mary Alice laid her cheek against Rose's arm and looked up into her face. The chorus were relegated to the back pew where they sat, eager and solemn, while Mr. Milner was making his arrangements.

"Mamma, you can be one witness. But I guess we'll have to have another. Jackson, do you suppose you could get your mother?"

All the chorus were sure that he could.

"No, just Jackson go."

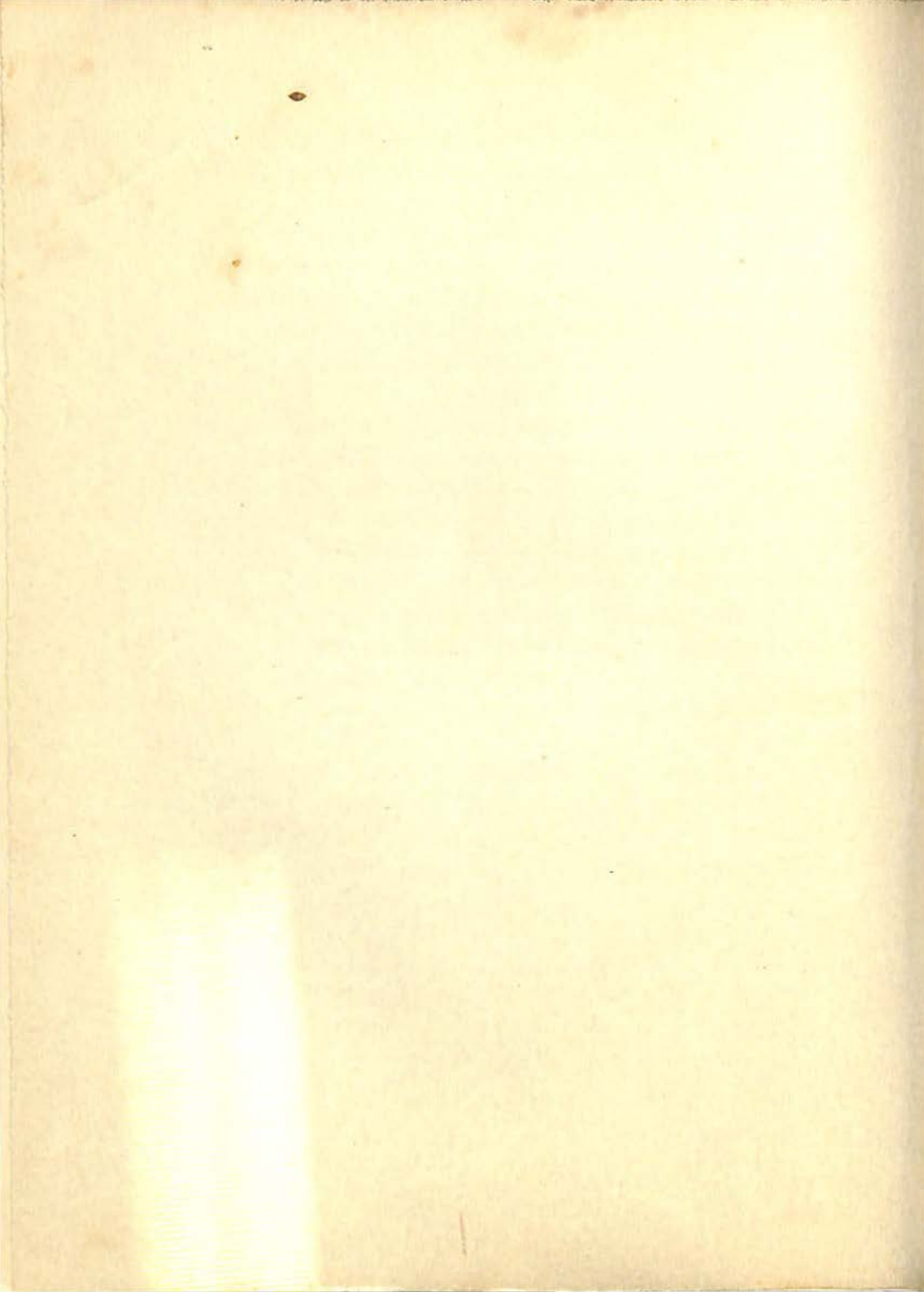
The little ceremony was so easy and friendly after that dark, portentous drive through the great landscape. The air was soft and dim in the church; she could see the leafy branches of trees above the lowered tops of the colored windows. The two witnesses sat together, and all the spectators were breathlessly still. Archie looked friendly and intimate as he stood with Rose, near the pulpit, facing the minister. Who would ever have thought of getting married like this! But

Rose could not help responding to something solemn in the words.

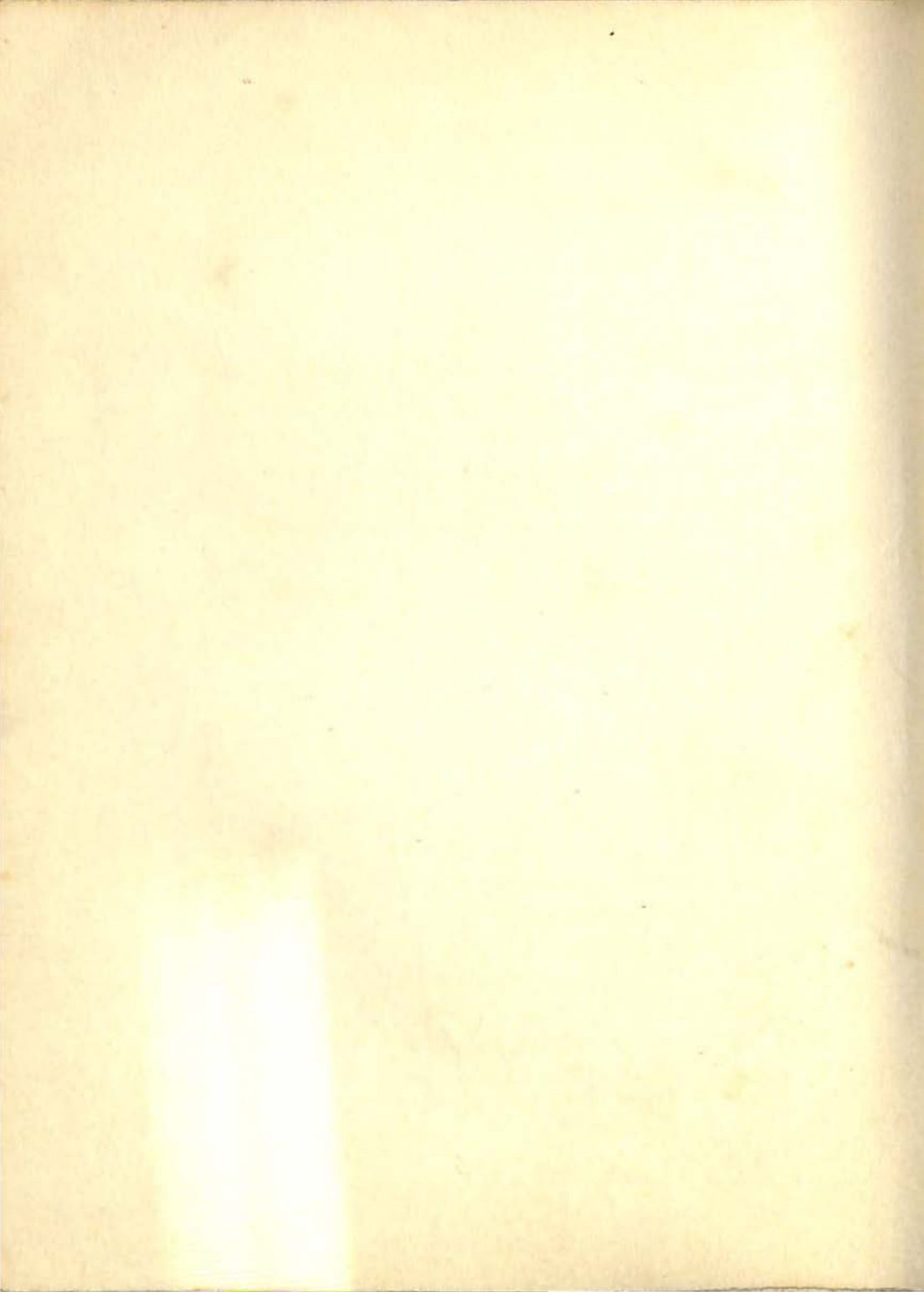
"Dearly beloved," Mr. Milner began.

It was all over and she had not known that she would feel like this. The sound of the congratulations and the laughter was still in their ears as Rose and Archie drove out of Warrington. But now the country all seemed different. There was a lovely quiet over the fields and a soft smell of dampness in the air. Rose's heart seemed happy and still. She was glad now that no one but she and Archie knew of their wedding. It was a secret and a bond between them. But she was eager to tell Annie—she could imagine Annie's excitement and surprise. Georgie . . .

When they reached a little patch of trees along the road, Archie drew up at the side and stopped the car a moment. He put his arms around Rose, and the sound of the throbbing engine was the sound of their beating hearts.



PART III



THE long asphalt road, paved all the way from Warrington to The Rapids, was a whitish-gray ribbon laid curving over great swells and dips of the open country and going on level and narrow and hard between fields where now the farmers were plowing grayish earth to moist fresh black . . . farms, and little towns, creeks cold and clear, green grass in the low places standing in water still and bright—and all under a sky of huge and singing April blue upon which great mounds of white clouds were thickly painted.

Cars sped down the asphalt, a black and endless stream, with flash of sun from windshields, and a high singing sound of motors. Just before they got into The Rapids, they passed a little cemetery, high on a hill, the stones whitish above rough grass and merging into blue of sky, the whole abandoned now and enclosed in black iron. Then they went bumping over railroad tracks if they were lucky enough to reach them before the long freight trains started switching. Through the outskirts then . . . street after seemingly nameless street, where the sprinkling

THE KRAMER GIRLS

of older, dingy and narrow houses held back and belied the newness of brightly painted bungalows—all so insignificant, so far from the center of things, so lost in the wide blueness and brightness of the April morning; yet each little street with its own oil station and its own grocery, and each little house a separate home where babies slept in their buggies on the sunny front walk and little children playing shouted "Hi!" to the speeding cars. After that, the cars went through older, grander streets and then on into the noisy center of the little city.

One of these bungalows was so new that it smelled of paint and woodwork and tinted plaster. The small front yard, neatly bisected by the new cement walk, was still of cold and flat black earth where grass was sparse. But in the back yard, one medium sized elm was left from the earlier and more casually settled days of this section of the town; and its buds were delicate green on its rough, unpruned branches. Out here, there was a different, more homelike feeling. Two squares of black, moist garden had been spaded up on each side of the walk that led to the garage, and long whitish strings marked the straight length of the front rows of planting.

This was the place where Rose and Archie were living. It was one of the houses that Archie had built. When they could get a good price for it, they would sell it. Rose was sitting out on the back steps. She had

a catalogue lying there face-down, packages of seeds with shiny pictures of resplendent flowers, a black-handled knife from the ten-cent store and a little trowel gritty with cold damp earth.

She was humming—the secretly exultant hum of inward concentration and outward abstraction: the kind that bees make when the honey flow is just past the first excited beginning, when fields of flowers lie before them almost stealthy in their fragrance, but the heat and heavy work of the harvest is not yet upon them. Rose took up the catalogue, and gloated over the variety of flowers with their charming names and enticing descriptions—she meant to have all of them some time: Canterbury bells, and love-in-a-mist, and baby's breath, and snow-on-the-mountain. And then she wanted all the old kinds that would make her think of Valley Junction, that would help (like the few treasures from home the girls had given her) to turn this unestablished new home into a continuation of all that was beloved and precious in the other—she wanted "zinnies," and live-forever, and those rose-colored petunias that blankly gave out nothing during the day but breathed their intimate and indefinable fragrance into the dewiness of evening. Archie's mother would give her slips and plants when they went to Valley Junction. She would be only too delighted—dear old lady that she was—to help out with the new garden. Oh yes, and next Sunday

THE KRAMER GIRLS

Rose must get Archie to drive her out to the woods somewhere so that she could bring back wildflowers—now was the time. She wanted hepaticas, the kind that grew near the swimming rock at home. Sitting on the porch steps in the warmth of sunshine, she could almost see the radiance of the little delicate flowers looking up with their starry wonder. If she had wildflowers, she would be keeping some remembrance of the woods. But the little blue-eyed grass in the open pastures . . . those she couldn't transplant, those she would have to leave where they grew so naturally and casually and shyly in the midst of glossy grass. Those were what she had given up when she moved out of the country.

Rose sat dreaming on the sunny step. A little smile deepened the corners of her full fresh lips. Her hand, reddened from the spring chill that mingled with the sunshine, lay idly on the open, smooth page of the catalogue. Her face was fresher, both younger and more mature than when she had come back from Chicago last summer. She was getting fatter and didn't care. Her hair was wind-blown under the old felt hat she had crammed down over it. She wore Archie's big gray sweater. Her own old coat was hanging in the kitchen closet; but when she went outside into the yard—not, of course, to the store—she always put on this sweater of Archie's. Its heavy, ribbed wooliness enclosed her with a secret, smiling

remembrance of Archie's arms at night. When Archie was away at work, it seemed to keep his presence about the place. It pleased Rose to think of how many years, and in how many places, Archie had worn the thing—at college, when he had gone for a year or so to Wesleyan, and up in Minnesota when he was doing some building there, around on raw vacant lots, on his old solitary drives in the car and walks in the woods, out at the Plum Creek bridge where still she could hear the water singing in the sunlight. To wear this sweater was like burrowing back into Archie's personal history. Even the holes in the elbows had a significance.

Archie . . . she was contented, she had never known that happiness could be actual like this. Other women were out working in the lawns and gardens of the little houses all about. But Rose didn't want to know them yet. It was enough to live here with Archie. The sunlight was open, free, limitless. But just behind her was her little house. It kept, within its breathing stillness, the memories of the nights. The little kitchen was bright and clean, the sink spotless, all the breakfast dishes put away, and the teakettle empty and shiny on the gas stove. The bed was made, but she had not attended to the living-room. That would come later, after she got too chilly working outdoors. Then she would go into the room, blindingly dark after the sunlight, and set all the

THE KRAMER GIRLS

things in their accustomed places until all about her was the sweet, significant, personal order that she loved. This was the morning she had chosen to plant her flowers. She and Archie were making the garden together in the evenings. Rose could not break into the happiness of this casual, intimate time . . . when Archie put on his old sweater, and—from the kitchen window as she put away the dinner dishes—she saw him standing thoughtfully at the edge of the garden and ruffling his fair hair. Archie liked to take his time. But he was a good gardener, like his mother. “Aren’t you coming, kid?” he called. He gave her the seeds to hold and give to him just as he needed them. There was the obedient happiness of working under his direction, supplying all his needs, being there just when he wanted her. The sunset was over, and the western sky was cold with clear, pure light, with the watery chilliness of spring. Then it was time to go back into the house. . . .

Rose knelt on the walk and scooped into the black earth with her trowel, turning up wet buried stones and a little worm. She patted down the earth over the seeds and her hands were cold from the April soil, with gritty finger nails. She was whistling softly all the time. She knew that they might leave this house during the summer. But she couldn’t subdue the happy exuberance of her plans for her gardening and her housekeeping. The future could take care of itself.

THE KRAMER GIRLS

A shrill whistle. Time for the mailman. Rose got up, her limbs aching and yet feeling supple, not really wanting this interruption although she pretended even to herself that she did. She liked to get the letters from Archie's mother—quaint little ungrammatical letters, written in a slanting wavering hand on pieces of ruled tablet paper, and telling all about the weather and the yard and the chickens. But, although she would have been ashamed to think it, she really dreaded a letter from the girls.

And there was one in the shiny black mail-box—but from Annie. Guiltily, she knew that she minded that less than one from Georgie. The girls were unsettled, they were having troubles. She ought to be sympathetic, but she was still rapt in the selfishness of her own happiness. Besides, Georgie's letters were stilted and strange. They hurt Rose. Georgie didn't understand how Rose could have married Archie and for almost a month kept it all from them. She didn't understand how Rose could have married Archie Carpenter, anyway—Rose, with her chances, and her position, and her good mind. Rose was always aware of Georgie's disappointment which Georgie grimly now, since the first outburst, suppressed. The girls were free. Mamma was dead. But Rose had never succeeded in getting them to visit her in The Rapids. Georgie couldn't bring herself to countenance the marriage to that extent; and Annie, although now

THE KRAMER GIRLS

quite reconciled and eagerly interested when she was with Rose, was too much under Georgie's influence to come without her. Rose and Archie went to Valley Junction. Rose, in the overflowing charity of her happiness, couldn't hold anything against the girls; and Archie, instead of being disgruntled at Georgie's attitude, as most men would have been, was kindly and commiserating. "Oh, she'll come round," he said. "I can see how she thinks we played her kind of a dirty trick. We just won't let on we see. Whenever she's ready, she can come." In fact, it was Archie who had cajoled Rose at first and taken the girl's side. Rose was angry because she knew that Georgie didn't think Archie was good enough for her. "Well, I'm not. I don't see, either, how I happened to be lucky enough to get a kid like you. Georgie's all right. I'm not going to quarrel with her."

The first few sentences of the letter were a little stiff. But after that, the words flowed happily and confidently on and on. All the news of the neighborhood in Annie's round hand—deaths, births, suppers, socials. Then she began to get confiding about Georgie. When Rose was small, the two older sisters had always seemed to her almost as one. But now that Rose was grown and married, Annie began to talk about Georgie to her.

"Well, at home things go pretty much as usual. I cleaned the house last week. I think papa lost some

money on a sale but he doesn't say. I don't know about Georgie. She acts very restless and talks about wanting to get out of here and there is nothing doing in Valley J. how can anybody start a business here. We have about all we can do besides the house baking cakes etc. but Georgie seems not to be contented. you know she always did have big ideas. Now lately she has kind of got it into her head she would study chiropractic and be a doctor and I think if she had the money she might go and take that course. she is pretty hard to get along with sometimes but then Georgie always did have these big ideas about things. and lately she is more so than ever. so I don't know how it will come out."

Annie's tongue was loyal. Talking to Rose, she would never have given away Georgie's plans or her own feelings. But on paper, the words just bubbled, at their own sweet will, and the secret thoughts were as clear and plain as in a little shallow pool.

Study chiropractic! *Georgie*. Why, it made Rose indignant to think of either of the girls leaving the house. The thought of Georgie's unhappiness rasped her and put a chill over her happiness, just as when one of those white clouds passed for a moment across the April sun. And she felt lonely for some reason. There was no one to whom she could tell her happiness. Not to Annie, because it didn't seem fair to

THE KRAMER GIRLS

Georgie. Not to Jane, because she had to write very stiffly and impersonally to Jane knowing that she thought such a marriage as this the end of all things. Not to Vivian, or any of the girls at home, because they too thought she ought to have done better than to come home and marry Archie Carpenter. She felt a shyness with Archie's mother. There had always been old Georgie, the support, the final sure reliance . . . and now, where she should have felt certainty, there was only a soreness.

But she couldn't stop to think of how the girls were getting on at home . . . of how the old house was, strangely lonely and uncentered now that mamma was gone, in spite of the fact that she had had so little to do with it while she was still there. Rose was absorbed in the rhythm of her own joy. Now it was time to go into the house and straighten the living-room. Then would come her solitary little lunch, when she had just what she liked, a sandwich and milk and an apple and a big rich chocolate, a chapter in her library book to read leisurely as she ate. A rest on the soft, upholstered davenport. Then little things to do . . . and then she must be thinking of Archie's dinner.

So the lovely day passed, with a sort of ritual, from event to event. The spring sunshine brightened it all. The household happiness grew, deepened and expanded. Over and over in Rose's mind a line from one

THE KRAMER GIRLS

of the poems in Jane's book repeated itself. She whispered it to herself with glowing eyes.

"Rich in the simple worship of a day."

She was blissfully sleepy after lunch. But all the sunshine now was in the kitchen. The living-room was dim, silent, cool. Rose had hung up the old sweater. But now she turned to it, grasped it, buried her face in it. She was smiling. She had never known life was so beautiful—and there would be more and more and more, it would go on and on and on. . . .

Drunk with sleep and sunlight, she went into the living-room and snuggled on the soft, over-stuffed couch. For the first time, her life was really her own . . . except that she had given it to Archie—and that was better than having it herself. In a way, she did not want the girls to come. It was as if they had deceived her, kept her away from this. She had to break the old childish tie. She felt, oh so much more experienced than they were, and she regarded the girls with pity from the secure vantage ground of her matronhood. So she sank sweetly into sleep.

Outside, the endless stream of cars sped and sped past the little house, that told nothing, its curtains veiling its bright windows, that was so much like all the others no one bothered to look at it.

* * *

THE KRAMER GIRLS

Georgie had said to Annie, "I'm going to see how the kid's really fixed. I don't care whether she wants us to come or not."

Now her heart sank as she got off the street car at nearly the end of the line and saw that little house standing raw and lonely in the bleak lot swept by the November wind. To think of Rose—the kid—living here! It made Georgie enraged against Archie—to marry Rose, to take her away from a fine job, and then to bring her to this! But Rose had let herself in for it. Georgie never quite forgot that, although she had long been reconciled to Rose and even, after a fashion, to Archie.

On the porch was evidence of the first cause of the reconciliation . . . Kramer's old kiddy-car stopped at a sort of dislocated angle. Of course, long before the arrival of Kramer, Georgie had secretly been longing for a chance to make it up with Rose.

But this porch! It was still unfinished; and now, without paint, the floor was getting soft and warped. Now they could never sell this house, and the kid might be stuck here forever. Worse than that was the disheveled clutter which Georgie eyed with disfavor—litter of dirt and pebbles the children had left, some old rubbers . . . it was so unlike Rose to leave things in such a mess, right on the front porch. It told all too much about the condition of the Archie Carpenter household. They had never even put in a bell.

THE KRAMER GIRLS

Georgie thought—well, probably few enough people come out here. Poor old Rose!

She knocked until her knuckles hurt. And then she waited. Boo! It was twice as cold out here as in town.

"Oh, for heaven's sake!"

"Hello, kid, how are you?"

Georgie's greeting was hearty. She gave Rose a good smack on the cheek with her cold rough lips.

"Aren't you going to ask your old *Schwester* to come in?"

"I should say I am."

But it embarrassed her to have Georgie come. Oh well, poor kid! It was really a shame to catch her like this. But Georgie wanted to know how things were. She looked determined.

"I was in the kitchen," Rose explained. "We haven't lighted the furnace fire yet, and so I've just been—"

"Kitchen's good enough for me."

But the truth of it was, Georgie thought shrewdly, they hadn't been able to get in that furnace yet. Evidently, the house hadn't progressed a bit since she had seen it last. No, it was deteriorating.

"Hm! That fire feels good."

"Yes, it's so nice in here, and I have to spend most of the time in here, anyway . . ."

"Here's Georgie's old girl!"

Little Majorie Jane was sitting on the linoleum near

the stove. Georgie caught her up and kissed her heartily. But the little thing cried and drew away. She held out her hands piteously to Rose.

"What! Have you forgotten your old aunt? Where's the other one? I bet he hasn't forgotten Aunt Georgie!"

The child's withdrawal nettled Georgie, even though she recognized, ruefully, that it was because Marjorie Jane had seen so little of her. But it was more than that. It was as if the baby shared that mysterious instinct of animals, and knew that Georgie had resented her being born . . . it was baffling, just as Annie's cat used to sense that Georgie, no matter what her protestations of tolerance, didn't really like to have him around, and snarled when she gave him a propitiatory pat. Well, Rose had been ill . . . and Georgie remembered old family history, and was fearful. Rose took Marjorie Jane, laid her cheek against the smooth blond hair; and it was as if Georgie was shut out from the wordless unity between mother and child.

"I don't know where Kramer is. He's always outside somewhere. Wait, I'll see--"

"Oh, don't call him. Sit down, kid, and rest your weary bones. I came to have a little confabulation with you. I'll see my old boy before I go."

But there was embarrassment between them. Georgie pretended valiantly to notice nothing, but she

couldn't help being aware of the atmosphere of meagerness and desolation in the kitchen, and Rose knew that she was aware. Georgie couldn't help saying:

"You haven't done much to the house, kid."

"No, what's the use when we're going to sell it?"

So she still kept up that pretense! Oh well, if it made her feel better . . . things told their own story.

"Where's Archie?"

"He's off on a job."

"Things picking up a little around the burg?"

"Well, not so very much," Rose admitted. "But they're beginning to build again. Several houses are going up on the other side."

"Nothing doing out here, though."

"Not yet," Rose said with reserve. But it was an admission that Archie was working for someone else, that his own plans hadn't materialized. Just a by-the-day carpenter's job, Georgie surmized shrewdly.

"I don't know, kid, I'm afraid we're in for a stretch of hard times."

Rose pressed her cheek against the baby's head. She seemed to draw mysterious consolation from the touch, and to be worlds away from Georgie.

But the heat of the cook stove was having its effect. Georgie drew off her gloves and stretched out her hands luxuriously.

THE KRAMER GIRLS

"You don't ask me, kid, how I got here?" Then, without waiting for a reply, she burst out with her great news:

"Well, sir, kid, I've got a new plan up my sleeve!"

The look of delight that Georgie's face always wore when she was concocting a new scheme and saw a big bout of work ahead of her, shone now. It was she who had forgotten Rose; and Rose who, in her defensive and rasping consciousness of her ancient dress and tell-tale old shoes, was separated from Georgie.

Because this was a new and splendid Georgie. She might pretend some interest in Rose's affairs, but she was really absorbed in her own business . . . and for a while it seemed to Rose as if the very foundation was cut from under her feet. In spite of her reserve and her loyalty to Archie, her spirit was secretly reaching out for the old warm protection and security. . . . To the amazement and the confounding of all the cynical predictions of people in Valley Junction, Georgie had actually gone off and taken her course in chiropractic. She had got the money out of old man Kramer. She had confronted him, just as stubborn and determined as ever he had been himself, with the fact of all the years that she had devoted to the household—saving him a housekeeper, saving him a nurse, patching up his own mistakes: now she wanted

something for herself. She had shamed him into consent. Well, there was no denying that he had made money in the land boom that followed the war. His new success had reacted upon him and actually mellowed his grudgingness. Georgie had thrown herself into her new career with all her energy let loose. She had accepted the doctrines of chiropractic with the fervor of a convert. The months away from home, in a larger place, and with the irresponsibility of a student replacing the long years of responsibility, had given her a new lease of life. It had refuted every prediction. Georgie had blossomed. And now that she had a profession and some money of her own, now that she was no longer cramped and dependent on what her father doled out to her, she was a different person.

Rose saw and admitted that as Georgie sat there before the fire. Something eager and childlike, long repressed—a Kramer quality, shared by Rose and Annie, too—transformed her heavy face. She even took an interest in clothes. She dressed, now, almost like a city woman, and indulged a delight in good bright colors; so that Rose, in her old garments, felt poor and left behind. Georgie had bought a new hat in town—a dark bright green that went well with her high coloring and the rough auburn in her hair. The magnificence in Georgie, that people had always felt as a kind of warm sustaining vigor and generosity,

THE KRAMER GIRLS

seemed to expand and have full play in the meagerness of this kitchen.

"But first of all, Rosabella, I've got some news for you."

There was something mysterious and portentous in Georgie's tone that warned Rose. But she would never have guessed this! . . . Her father actually asserting a life of his own, appearing as a human being, and marrying a young widow of all people! Rose felt as if she were listening to a story from the newspapers. But then, she realized with sudden amazement how little she knew of her father—less than of half the other people in Valley Junction, it seemed! He had darkened and straitened her home without actually entering into its inner life—an outsider, a personal stranger.

"And so, kid, for all these years that sly old badger has been looking around for somebody—and now he's found her!"

There was actually triumph in Georgie's tone. She laughed. And then with that dramatic relish with which she occasionally related scandal (so different from Annie's eager and sly concern) she told the whole story.

"Well, sir, you know papa owns farms all up and down that road. You didn't? Well, he does. Oh, he's not so poverty-stricken, kid—don't you believe it. Well, and here's this young foreign woman, Bohe-

mian or something, living on one of those farms, lost her husband, he got caught in some farm machinery. You remember. You heard about it."

"*That* one?"

"That's the one!"

"But she's—why, she can hardly speak English!"

"True enough, but what do you suppose that matters to dad? He doesn't want to talk to a woman. She's young, and she can cook, and she's willing to work her head off for him. That's what he wants. Oh, I tell you, kid, the ways of men are strange to behold!"

There was deep satire in the dramatic relish of Georgie's tone. But it was different from the old shamefaced, Puritanical resentment with which Georgie used to view any evidence of the mating instinct. "Scat—git!" she would say angrily to the cat when the poor thing gave yowling evidence of this instinct. . . . But Rose could see how it was. Georgie was reveling in her own independence. She had detached herself from her father's concerns and was viewing him with the robust tolerance really more natural to her (Rose now suspected) than the old attitude had been. Something must have happened to Georgie, something of which Rose didn't know, to have given her those old crotchets. She wondered, momentarily, about the family history . . .

"Oh yes, of course, Annie's about broken-hearted.

THE KRAMER GIRLS

Of course we girls couldn't stay there after the bride comes home! Annie thinks now she can't exist anywhere but in that house. Rats! The ramshackle old place—we've had hard enough times there. This was on the books to happen, and let it, I say. I'll be glad enough to get away from there."

Georgie's eyes sparkled.

"And now, kid, this brings me to the second part of our story."

And that was the part, Rose could see, that really counted with Georgie. The other was only preliminary.

"I've got a bee in my bonnet as big as a wasp. Know what I'm thinking of doing? Moving to your fair city!"

Georgie's eyes sparkled again in triumph. She laughed delightedly, watching the effect. Rose felt her cheeks flush. She squeezed the baby on her lap. The strangeness between her and Georgie was wearing off; and now she couldn't help feeling that old sense of drama, richness, enlivenment she had always felt when Georgie had a scheme underway. Things would be doing! It was Georgie's phrase, and what Georgie loved. Rose's cold, defensive reserve seemed to melt like a crust of old snow under glaring sunshine. To have Georgie here—the girls . . . everything would change, she would get out of this terrible cold pit of desolation and helplessness. It was

what she had been craving, although she had been ashamed to admit it to herself. The relief . . . security. . . . She listened with a sense of excited warmth as Georgie went on.

Oh, she'd been wanting to get out of that burg for a long while. Ever since she'd started in practice and begun to see she could really make a go of it. "Tell you what, kid, right now I've got more practice in the towns around than I have in Valley Junction. Darned little mud-hole. Aw, the people there are so scared to take up any new thing! Now in Centralia, for instance, they step out a little." (Rose mutely defended Valley Junction. She sympathized with Annie.) Georgie swept on. But, gosh, you couldn't do anything in any of these little burgs! She wanted some room. She wanted to make a big thing of this. And she scowled, in fierce heavy concentration, assuring Rose that if people only knew what these treatments would do for them, the world would be a different place. Rose listened restively to that. Georgie had been seeing an office today. And she already had a few patients to begin with—the Baxters who had moved from Centralia, friends and relatives of the Baxters, Bertha Scholz's aunt. Just a chance to begin, that was all Georgie asked.

"And then anyway, Rose, there's another thing. I want to get Annie out of Valley Junction."

"Annie!" Rose was startled. But would Annie

come? She couldn't picture Annie anywhere but at home.

"Come! I should say she'll come. She'll have to come if I pry her out. And that's one big reason I'm doing this thing, Rose. If I didn't drag Annie out of there by the very hair of her head, she might stick in that place forever. Even with that woman."

She was so pleased and so certain about it that Rose couldn't demur. In a way, it seemed pitiful to her—the girls seemed too old to be taking up new things. Of course, they weren't old, really. It was only that they had always been doing the same things. Georgie made anything sound possible—anything was, or might be, with Georgie back of it. Rose found herself Georgie's ally. The old relationship seemed to be revived. Georgie said abruptly, but gently:

"Look here, kid!" Marjorie Jane was down on the floor again. Georgie hitched her chair nearer to Rose. "Own up. You and Archie are having a hard time."

There was such honesty in Georgie's gray-blue eyes, seen close, looking straight into her face like this. Rose could not lie or evade them. She felt a great relief. Tears came into her own eyes. She fumbled for a handkerchief.

"I knew you were, kid. Now look here. Is there anything you need?"

Rose shook her head dumbly. She got up and

found a handkerchief in the pocket of her other apron.

"Because if there is, you know—well, I guess you've got your two old sisters back of you. . . . Hm? If you are an old married lady?"

Georgie caught hold of Rose as she passed. Rose weakened, and let herself be pulled down until she was half sitting in Georgie's lap, half on the arm of Georgie's chair. Her face was hidden against Georgie's neck, she could feel the rough curls. She gave herself the relief of crying, in that shelter, the most maternal she had ever known . . . but still her loyalty to Archie kept her silent.

"Have you tried to do anything yourself, babe?"

But how could Rose? With Kramer and the baby? . . . No, of course not. She couldn't take a job. Georgie admitted that. Rose had thought of doing some sewing—or baking. . . .

"Oh, look here, kid. Now that won't do. No, sir."

It wasn't Archie's fault. And anyway, it was only right now, for a little while, when things were bad. Rose hastened to say that. . . . "Sure," Georgie soothed and agreed with her—not agreeing, just the same. But Rose was to do no sewing or baking—little, frittering work from which Georgie herself had escaped!

"By the time the kids are older—"

THE KRAMER GIRLS

"I won't need it then," Rose said proudly.

"No, of course not. Sure you won't."

That was generous of Georgie, seeing how she felt about Archie.

Kramer came running into the house. He stopped short—his breath coming fast, his cheeks cold, dirty smudges on his chin: a little hooligan in his tattered, outgrown, red knitted suit.

"Here's the old boy!"

"What's the matter with mamma?"

He said that before he paid the slightest attention to Georgie, holding away, just enduring her kiss. But when they both said "Nothing," he graciously accepted that, and even returned Georgie's hug with enthusiasm. Now Marjorie Jane herself was softened, and let Georgie kiss the top of her head. Rose asked Georgie, of course, to stay for dinner. Georgie suspected how little there might be in the house. Archie and Rose were cutting it pretty fine these days. No, she must go back to town—still had some things to do there; and she'd driven in with the Littles, she must go back with them.

"You old curmudgeon! Growing up so fast nobody can keep track of you. . . . Now, Rose, you remember, if there's anything . . . You remember that?" She hugged Rose. "Well, when Annie and I get here, things are going to be different. Kid, it's all going to work out grand!"

THE KRAMER GIRLS

. . . And after Georgie had gone, the warm glow persisted. And yet, mixed with her relief, Rose had a feeling of reluctance and defeat. She didn't want Georgie doing everything for them—she was afraid of her own relief. It meant admitting that she had been wrong, her marriage had been a failure, Archie was nothing more than Georgie had first, in her anger and disappointment, always declared him to be. And—superficially true—that was essentially false. It wasn't Archie's fault that the building business had slumped, that he had been left with these lots on his hands, with his family marooned out here in the wilderness. He was a good builder, if he wasn't a good business man. It would be glorious, in a way, to have the girls here—her fear lifted. But she couldn't bear to admit that the little enterprise of the family had failed. It meant that the old home was gone; and there had been the secret hope of that refuge for herself and the children in need. . . .

She would have been astonished, however, if she had known what Georgie was actually thinking as she rode back to town in the jolting street car. She was thinking, half angrily, how she had been a fool again. Her old generosity had betrayed her. She couldn't help thinking of all that she had done for Rose—the kid didn't appreciate, didn't understand—and now, because Rose had been a fool like every other woman, must Georgie have her back on her

hands? Oh, she loved Rose. She loved, still, to do things for the kid. But her old pride and vicarious hopes were gone. Rose hadn't lived up to them. If it had been Georgie herself who'd had the chance. . . . The streets were getting dark. Georgie didn't know this part of town. She wished that it was actually a strange city—that she was cutting her ties, burning her bridges, leaving everything and everybody behind her and starting out utterly afresh, without a thing in the world to bind her.

She was wishing it all the way home in the Littles' car, as she sat back tired now from her crucial day, brooding over her life, what it might have been and what it was turning out to be . . . all the way home, speeding along the whitish pavement between fields dark and lonely and cold, oak trees on which the dry leaves rattled, under a sky iron-cold and iron-dark until the lights of Valley Junction made everyone, even Georgie, glad to be home, and the very streets seemed warm and snug.

"I've got Rose and Archie with me," old Mrs. Carpenter said delightedly to her few friends and neighbors. "Ain't it nice!"

Whenever the old lady spoke like this, Rose smiled and said nothing. But to Mrs. Carpenter, having them all at home was simply a delight. She didn't seem to

realize at all the humiliation or the necessity. "Oh, yes," she would say happily, "but you know I got Rose and Archie here, so I ain't got so much work this summer—my, they're such a help to me! And I don't know what I ever done without them dear children." Was that really all she knew? Didn't she understand that Archie had made a failure of his business in The Rapids? Rose couldn't tell. The old lady's life was bounded by the streets of Valley Junction, where—or close to where—she had been living since, a little girl of three, she had come to this country with her parents from England.

But within those tiny limits, how wisely, how satisfactorily, how thoroughly she lived! Rose loved Archie's mother. She couldn't help wishing sometimes, with the very sense of wistful sadness—distant and yet intimate—with which she might listen to an old song, that she could find the same satisfactions. That feeling was like an echo of music to the lovely summer weather in this old-fashioned house on the outskirts of the town. But there was a sense of impossibility, of failure in it. The lovely peace of the summer could not last.

Rose and Archie slept in "the upstairs bedroom." Early in the morning, the long stretches of sunlight fell slanting across their bed, across the clean blue and white of the patchwork quilt, across the thin, faded, softened ingrain carpet on the pine-wood floor. All

THE KRAMER GIRLS

the room was sunshine . . . even the tall wardrobe, the little commode, the thick white crockery with its decorous adornment of pink crotchet. The light brought out all the gold in Archie's mussed fair hair. . . . But in the other room, at the back, that was half chamber and half attic, the children slept in the black walnut bed that now the "second-hand store woman" in Warrington wanted to buy, in the cool quiet shadow of the big evergreen tree.

It had been just as quiet, just as retired in the house in The Rapids, except for the cars tearing past on the pavement a few blocks away. But that had been a raw desolation . . . and this was a living quiet filled to the brim with busy sounds. First, the pattering feet of old Mrs. Carpenter downstairs. There was no need for her to get up, but she couldn't break her settled habits. "You'll have to let mother alone," Archie said easily; "she can't change." Somewhere, there was the sound of a wagon. All the animals were awake . . . the chickens were out in their yard, a rough old dog came racing and snooping for food, birds chirped and hopped a few stiff steps on the dewy lawn, and out in the pastures the cattle moved slowly down the slants of sunlight across the deep wet grass.

Plying their busy little trades in the midst of the great surrounding leisure! It was sweet to get up with all the other living things on a summer morning—with the neighbors, and the lazy old horses, and

THE KRAMER GIRLS

the cattle, the dogs and cats, the twittering birds, and the bees that were even now flying home from their early morning pollen-gathering in the wild meadows down near the creek.

"Oh now, you and Archie didn't need to git up! I've had my cup o' tea. 'Twont take the water but a minute to boil again."

After that, the two women discussed what they would prepare for Archie's lunch. "They's a piece of that apple pie left. That he'll like." It seemed to old Mrs. Carpenter quite natural to send the man of the house out to his day's work, for his day's pay—quite natural that Archie should be doing exactly as his father had done. There was something pleasing and natural about it to Rose, too—and Archie liked it, the strain was gone, he was easy and happy in the old place. But always to Rose there was that underlying sense of falsehood—for her and Archie, this was a past life, it couldn't be true.

After her beloved Archie was gone, "Now we kin settle to our work," old Mrs. Carpenter said comfortably. The man was out of the house. And that, too, was as it should be at this time of day.

Bare feet on the narrow stairs, the door opened, faces peeped out . . . "Ah, here they come!" Scamper of little feet across the rough, prickling carpet, the laughter and the embraces . . . "Grandma's little man! And she ain't seen him since 'way last night!"

THE KRAMER GIRLS

Sometimes one of them stood pouting. "What's the matter with this little girl? Did she git up on the wrong side o' the bed this morning?" The children washed in the cool soft water at the wooden sink. They ate breakfast at the kitchen table, curling their toes about the rungs of their chairs. Then they were dressed, and then they were out to play with the flowers and the trees and the chickens—and so much of the day's work was done.

There were all the outdoor tasks to be attended to before the sun grew hot. And again Rose had that sense of satisfaction in the thoroughness with which the small duties of the place were performed . . . with the way in which the fallen sticks were stacked into a neat little pile at the side of the shed, the fallen leaves raked together for burning, the withered bits picked from the garden plants, the dewy phlox confined within a barrel hoop, and the buckets of butter and cream let down into the cool dark mystery of the cistern. In sunbonnets, in their old stretched and easy shoes, the two women worked out in the yard, apart and yet feeling close together, each deep in her own thoughts, her own trouble or contentment . . . while the children played, came close for affectionate notice and ran off again upon their own small concerns. . . . This neat little settled spot, this human home, in the midst of the big free open country.

Later in the morning, when the sun was higher,

THE KRAMER GIRLS

the dew was dried, Rose went with sun-dazzled eyes into the dim cool house where already old Mrs. Carpenter was sitting and taking her little rest.

"Come on in and set a while," the old lady pleaded. "I ain't had any such company as this for a long while."

Mrs. Carpenter was still delighted that Archie should have got such a nice girl as Rose. This was the hour of the day when she loved to talk. Later she was tired . . . she was old. Little scraps of memory, some bright, some faded, some sweet, some sad, filled her mind as the pieces of her old dresses, her mother's and sisters' dresses, filled the muslin rag-bag that hung from a store-room nail; and she brought them out, scattered them, displayed them, for Rose. She told about "Archie's papa," his likes and dislikes in food, and his death; about her own family, the farm, and the old country. . . .

"Can you remember anything about England?"

"Well, not so much as what the folks used to tell. Father's family have lived in the same house for seven generations. Think of that, Rose! That seems funny to us, don't it? But I expect houses must be built stronger over there, and I guess folks don't want so many new things—they're more satisfied. Mother, though, she always said if old country people didn't want to be on the go so much, 'twas just because they didn't have so many places to go. Pa, he always took

THE KRAMER GIRLS

the side of the English, and mother, she always opposed him. Pa wanted to go back and see the old house, but mother said he'd go alone then. She liked it here better than she did in England. She didn't like all this kow-towing to the nobility—she used to tell us about it. Mother was real independent—more so than father. . . . I got the picture of father's old home somewheres. I'll hunt it out for ye. It's a real nice-looking place, if it *has* been lived in so long."

She told little things about Archie.

✓ "He's like his father, Archie is. He likes to take his time and do things just to suit him. That's why he don't get along as fast as some."

It seemed, then, to Rose that it was she herself who had betrayed Archie, who had taken him from his own little niche—"for his own advantage," other people would say. It was because he had married her that he had gone to The Rapids. Their background, she realized now, was alike—and oh, so unlike! Out at Ellensburg—a few houses and a store in the country, where they were putting up the new consolidated school—Archie worked happily, knew all the other men, studied and enjoyed their peculiarities, did his bit of work with leisurely and careful perfection. . . . Or was she to blame? Wasn't it the time? Archie belonged—most of him, at least—to an age passing, almost past, a rural Englishman in growing America.

Rose realized that when she studied the enlarged

THE KRAMER GIRLS

pictures in the parlor—that room “kept shut off” with heavy folding doors behind red portieres, cooled and darkened by the closed shutters, by the evergreen outside . . . pictures of fair English faces and the blunt and pleasant features that made Rose think of daisies, and apples, and May Day. She wouldn’t let the children disturb this sacred room, but she liked to softly enter it herself. There was the beautiful walnut desk that “Uncle Robbie,” the cabinet-maker and the queer one, had made; the cool pink sea shell that roared dimly of the long left sea; the big plush album and the smaller, older album with neat little pictures and a gold clasp like a Book of Hours . . . things endeared by use, cherished so long and so carefully, rich with significance—but what would become of them when old Mrs. Carpenter was dead?

Rose always came out of that room sadly.

Then it was time to hunt up the children. They had wandered off into the pasture—there was just a glimpse of little forms beyond the daisies, beyond the gold of the black-eyed Susans and of the thistles. Rose called, “Children! Come now, children!” And back then, with a child hopping along and clinging to each hand.

But by afternoon, the freshness and the satisfaction were gone. She was restless under the old pursuits. She hated to go to town, because there was

THE KRAMER GIRLS

always the pain of avoiding her friends or of braving them in her shabby clothes, of saying, "Yes, Mother Carpenter is so frail we thought we ought to be at home this summer," hearing their acquiescence while she felt the bright incredulity of their eyes. To them, she and Archie were both failures. They had gone to a big town and then come back to a little one. Mrs. Pick, of course, was the worst—with her urging, half sincere and half malicious, that Rose must come to see her; with her hints about the new Mrs. Kramer, her prying questions about the girls. Rose had to remember, then, how her own home was broken.

But, staying at home, she wandered about the little house, the little yard, not knowing what to do with herself. It was not enough. Abilities, long ago awakened, rusting now, were not to be silenced, ached to be used. Now she could see so many things. . . .

She could see, for instance, that her rebellion against the girls was only a rebellion, not a solution. Valley Junction was not the refuge she had pictured. She might have stayed, but she could not come back. She had to admit, with soreness and difficulty, and then with a wiser and larger acceptance, the truth on the girls' side. She was ashamed, now, of her touchy quarrel with Georgie, her defense of Archie, her restlessness and fear of having the girls over her again. Her whole rebellion against their viewpoint had run its course and was inevitably, irresistibly, drawing to a

close. Sometimes, now, she resented Archie and longed for the more secure, more competent, more passionate protection of the girls. Archie had failed her. She had wanted to make a success of their home, but Archie wasn't up to it.

And it wasn't good for Archie, either, to give up and return. Staying, he might have gone on naturally in the old way. Now she could see that he had slumped. A certain light was gone from his eyes. He went around grumpily, sometimes, like an old countryman, and kept his concerns with taciturn inconsiderateness from his womenfolk. Mrs. Carpenter accepted that. But Rose, docile as her nature was, could not. Archie wore his dirty old shirts and overalls unless she and his mother protested.

"The men-folks don't think about such things."

Archie came home tired, not so happy in his work as Rose had pictured him. She was worn with the tiny exactions and irritations of her day. Supper made them all feel better for a while. But the evening was lonely, with the white cottony mist thick above the low pastures. Kramer insisted on going to the movies, and Rose had to take him. Tonight, instead of being amused, she felt hemmed in and mentally tarnished as she watched, with cold eyes, the empty silliness that made the little boys and girls in the front rows shout and clap their hands and whistle with crude delight.

THE KRAMER GIRLS

"Well," people said afterwards, "how did you like the show?"

Most were skeptical, and yet satisfied. A few—Mrs. Little and Mr. Cummings—said: "I don't see why we must always see this same stuff in the movies!"

"We-ell," said Mr. Little sagely, "most of 'em wouldn't like it if 'twas something else."

"I guess we'll have to make our own, Jessie," Mr. Cummings said.

In spite of the quiet darkness, Rose couldn't go to sleep for a long time. She brooded over all the different chances of different ways of life that she had been offered—slipping from the most difficult, she had fallen to the easiest and simplest . . . and now, somehow, she must right herself. Trying to fit her life to Archie's she had only forced herself into resentment of him.

2

Rose took the elevator up to the fourth floor of the Farmers building and then went down the whitish corridor to the door marked in heavy black letters on pebbled glass:

DR. GEORGIA KRAMER

A little bell tinkled as she opened the door. Georgie stuck her head out of the inner office.

THE KRAMER GIRLS

"Hello, there! Sit down. Be out pretty soon."

This office was so familiar now to Rose that it seemed she must always have had it as a meeting-place and refuge. She knew the dismally obstructed view from the window looking down into the court, and the very magazines on the desk. But it was all made cozy and homelike to her because it was Georgie's. She sat down in the mission rocker with a sigh, and then saying to Marjorie Jane, "Come here, babe," she took off the child's coat and cap and smoothed her softly ruffled hair.

"I want to go in to Aunt Georgie."

"No, stay with mother. Aunt Georgie has a patient."

"For a treatment?"

"Yes."

Marjorie Jane prowled about the tiny room, getting into everything.

"Look, mommie!"

"Yes, but put it down."

"What's it going to be?"

"I don't know."

But she did know, and so did Marjorie Jane—the little rascal! It was a little embroidered dress for that same Marjorie Jane herself. The girls were always at work on something or other for the children.

The patient came out of the inner office—not one patient, but two: a man and wife. Georgie with her small amount of training could not hope for a large

or expensive practice in The Rapids; but she had worked up a good following among the country people. She knew how to deal with them. She was one of them, and at the same time they looked up to her. They said she "knew her business." Her treatments were what they called reasonable, meaning cheap. The smallness and plainness of her office, her own plain clothes and rough-and-ready manner, reassured them. She gave them all sorts of extra advice and help—told the women where to go for hats and shoes, told them to eat at the Star Cafeteria; and she was willing to make long trips at any time of the day or night. Her treatments may not have been so very helpful—Rose was skeptical about those—but her good sensible advice and her hearty, reassuring presence were worth a great deal more. When she thought she could not help them, she sent them to other doctors. They trusted her. This old lady had been taking treatments and liked the doctor so well that she had persuaded her husband to come, too.

"Mrs. Christbaum, this is my sister, Mrs. Carpenter. And Mr. Christbaum. Mr. and Mrs. Christbaum came in from Centralia. My sister lives in Dudley."

"Ja, so?"

"Ach, we know somebody there. You know Mrs. Rindelmeyer?"

"I've only been there a little while," Rose said.

"Well, you people better get a good cup of coffee

THE KRAMER GIRLS

to warm you up before you start home. It's a nasty day. Now, Mr. Christbaum, six glasses of water a day. You remember that. You make him drink them, Mrs. Christbaum."

"Ja," Mrs. Christbaum said doubtfully, "that ain't so easy to do."

"Well, you just keep after him. Make him mind you."

That pleased both of them.

"Well, good day, doctor. Pleased to have met you, Mrs. Carpenter."

They had got on their heavy old coats, Mr. Christbaum his thick brown cap, and now they managed to take their departure.

Georgie flopped down heavily on the couch.

"Well, Rosabella, where did you come from? Hello, Auntie Georgie's old gal."

"Is this for me, Aunt Georgie?"

"I should say not. For some other little girl."

"It isn't!"

"Well, Rosabelle, how are things going with you?"

They were not going well. That was just the trouble. But for some reason, Rose hated to begin with what she had come to say. It struck her that Georgie looked very tired. In fact, all through the latter part of the summer, Georgie had not seemed to be herself. But if anyone suggested that to her, she was angry.

THE KRAMER GIRLS

It was unusual, too, for Georgie not to ask at once all about the affairs of the Carpenter household. She sat slumped on the couch, her feet wide apart; and it seemed to Rose that she was thinner, the creases in her neck almost wrinkles, the rough high color in two spots on her cheeks but the skin around them sallow and dull. Rose felt a selfish pang. She needed Georgie's help. She felt just a touch of fear . . . and then affection.

"Gosh," Georgie said, "I wish people in this world had a little sense. Look at that old Christbaum. What's the use of giving him good advice? He'll go on doing just what he's always done. Oh well, I might as well reap a few sheckles," Georgie added cynically. Her face was still more gloomy. "Oh, I don't know, kid," she burst out, "sometimes I wonder what about the whole business."

"What do you mean?" Rose asked.

"Well, I wonder if these treatments I give folks . . . Oh, I don't know what I do mean!"

Georgie tried roughly to shake off her despondency. She asked Rose now how she had got into town, whether she was shopping. But soon she was back on her old subject again.

"You know, kid, sometimes I'd like to give up this business altogether. What's the use? The little bit you can do for folks! If I'd started in at the beginning, I might have done something. I see that now.

THE KRAMER GIRLS

I see lots of things I didn't see when I began this business. I'd like to have started in at the very beginning of medicine. I tell you, kid, it's a big subject. And nobody knows very much about it, not even the ones that think they do. I'd like to have started in years ago and made a real study of the human critter. What good does this little tinkering do?"

Rose sought for consolation. "But your patients think you help them."

"Oh yes, compared to folks that don't know anything, I suppose I know something. . . . Well, maybe that's all anybody can say."

With that reflection, Georgie seemed to get back something of her good humor. She turned now to Rose with full attention. She repeated:

"Well, kid, how are things going with you?"

Rose hesitated. She hated, now, to dump her troubles upon Georgie . . . she had a kind of glimpse of the help that Georgie had given her, all through these years, of how little return she had made, of how she relied upon Georgie. She had seldom seen her older sister in these fits of gloom, although Annie had given hints about them. But then, her own affairs had come to a stand-still. She must do something.

Her affairs were always reaching one of these stand-stills. From the year that Archie's contracting business had failed, and that they had first left The Rapids, their whole existence had been a series of brief

THE KRAMER GIRLS

wanderings, briefer halts . . . in The Rapids, in Warrington, at home in Valley Junction, and now in the barren little town of Dudley, populated almost entirely by German Catholics who had crowded out the earlier settlers. Archie could get work, but he could never make a go of his own business; and since he had started out in business for himself, he could never be really contented to work for other people.

"They aren't going," Rose said bluntly.

Even as she said it, she had a pang of regret, a vague realization of how far matters had passed since the time when she had still clung with secretive loyalty to Archie, when she wouldn't have acknowledged to the girls that he couldn't do all for her that she needed. But being stuck in Dudley had made her desperate.

"Yes, it's a bum burg," Georgie admitted. "I wish you were out of there. But what's your idea, kid?"

Well, Rose didn't exactly know. That's why she wanted to talk with Georgie. Of course, the old Carpenter house in Valley Junction was empty now, and it was doubtful if they could sell it—away out there on the edge of town, no plumbing, no furnace. That station agent had rented it, but the rent came to almost nothing. Valley Junction was infinitely better than Dudley. But still, to go back there for good, now that they had left it . . .

"No," Georgie said decisively, "you can't do that."

THE KRAMER GIRLS

"Of course, we'd be saving money—"

"Yes, but what would you be making?"

"Well . . . oh, we could get along. But you know how it would seem to people. And anyway—I don't know, Georgie, I'm getting awfully tired of just taking things as they come. I want to do something. But the trouble is . . ."

Georgie did not take her up on that as Rose had expected. Instead she sat heavily, slumped, scowling. At last she had to say something.

"Well, Rose, if you want to come back to The Rapids—"

"I want to go somewhere out of that dump."

"I don't doubt we could fix it some way. But you know it's none too prosperous here. There's not much building."

"Well, there's some. And anyway, if *I* want to do something—!"

"What would you do with . . ." Georgie nodded her head at Marjorie Jane.

"I know it. But how much better off are they in Dudley? The school is simply awful. They might as well go nowhere. Almost all the children in town go to the parochial school. I don't like the thought of that, either."

"What's your idea about doing something?"

"Well, I'd like to take up my old work again. Or it seems as if I would. I get awfully dissatisfied, Geor-

gie. Do you suppose I've been out of it too long? Or, I might get something in one of the stores, like Annie."

"No. Fiddlesticks. You'll have to brush up again."

"That's what I thought."

Rose sat flushed and meek. There was the remembrance behind her of Georgie's old ambitions for her, of Chicago, of how Georgie had opposed her marriage. Georgie was too generous—or had grown, perhaps, too cynical—to refer to that. But Rose felt it. Still . . . things had turned out as they were. She clung to her secret stubbornness, the little something true and valid in her rebellion, in her choice.

"Oh, kid, I don't know. Sometimes I think women are fools to take things into their hands. Those that get along best are the ones that let somebody else do the work for them. What do they get for their pains?"

Georgie talking like this! Such apostasy Rose had never heard. It frightened her more even than Georgie's appearance. She inwardly protested—she knew too well the other side. But, of course, Georgie didn't really mean it.

The little bell tinkled.

"Gosh!" Georgie suddenly looked like a guilty child late for a lesson. She got up from the couch, and smoothed her hair. "Listen here, Rose. . . . Good afternoon. Just a minute, Mrs. Piets. . . . Suppose you take the child and go over to the room. I'll be

along in an hour or so. With good luck. We'll both be thinking this thing over. . . . All right, Mrs. Piets."

Rose obeyed. After the stolid quiet of Dudley, the business section of The Rapids, with the cars, and the colored traffic signals, the stores and the two policemen, exhilarated her. She wanted to get back. She wanted decent clothes again—all kinds of things; and she wanted to get something for her work. Rose's long reluctance was giving way. She had to keep tight hold of Marjorie Jane who seemed to go crazy when she got into town and wanted to stop at every window. Cars were drawn up luxuriously in front of the big new hotel, built on an imposing sky-scraper plan; and all the lighted windows, above the bare trees of the little park, gave Rose the old excited feeling of autumn when every autumn had meant that she was starting out on a new venture.

"Aren't we going to see Aunt Annie?"

"We can't, now. . . . Yes, we will, for a minute."

Rose found that she suddenly wanted to talk to Annie about Georgie. She went into the store where Annie clerked—Hofthaler's, an oldfashioned dry goods store, that kept its place among the new department stores because of its settled reputation for reliability of goods and for courteous clerks. Away down at the silk counter, they had a glimpse of Annie's round, comely face—older too, of course, and

yet actually prettier because Annie dressed better now, had cut her shining fair hair, and wore it curled with the greatest neatness. Annie saw them. Her eyes beamed. They stood back and waited while she finished with a customer.

"Well!"

"Hello, Aunt Annie!"

The children really liked Annie better than they did Georgie. But after Marjorie Jane had given an eager kiss, she danced away. The other clerks—women, most of them, of Annie's age and older; one man in the drapery department—knew Annie's little niece. She was the pet of the whole store.

"Been in to see Georgie yet?"

"I just came from there." Rose was so troubled that she couldn't wait. "What's the matter with her, Annie?"

"Why?"

Annie looked startled.

"She seems so sort of . . . well, in the dumps."

"She gets that way sometimes."

"I never saw her like this, though."

Annie's unconsciousness reassured Rose. And yet, after she left the store, it seemed to her that there had been something knowing and secretive about Annie's eyes. She felt oppressed.

The oppression lifted when she went into the girls' room. Here she could take off her hat and coat,

THE KRAMER GIRLS

settle herself in a big upholstered chair, let Marjorie Jane run about as she pleased. This room, even more than Georgie's office, was Rose's refuge when she came to The Rapids. It had superseded, in the last few years, the old house in Valley Junction as "home," even though she always spoke of it as "the girls' room." A big living-room and an alcove bedroom in an oldfashioned house that had once been "a mansion"—but the girls seemed able to give sleeping room to half a dozen, to do almost as much cooking on their little gas plate (set on a marble-topped commode in an ancient, tiny closet) as in the big kitchen at home. It was a refuge, as well, for all the shoppers from Valley Junction, who seemed to come to The Rapids in hordes now that the Kramer girls were there: Mrs. Pickering, Bertha Scholtz, even Mrs. Little who was so fond of Georgie. It was filled, and over-filled, with the old boardinghouse furniture: a huge dark dresser, oldfashioned chairs, relegated pictures—and yet, the warm and generous personalities of the two girls had turned it into something homelike; their few personal possessions—the big vase filled with autumn leaves, the reading lamps, the cushions from Hofthaler's art department—were what gave the room its atmosphere. After her bare little rented house in Dudley, it seemed luxurious to Rose. It was all warmed and brightened by the memory of the good times she

had had here—little suppers on the card table before they all went out to the movies, and long satisfying talks with the girls that seemed to straighten out her affairs and give her a sense of ultimate security. No one in Valley Junction could deny that Georgie and Annie Kramer had done pretty well for themselves since they left home and struck out on their own account—it would never work, never in this world, people had predicted. “Those two girls at *their* age! What do they think they’re doing?” Now, Georgie, particularly, was regarded in Valley Junction as a successful character.

2

Now when people from Valley Junction went to The Rapids, there was something they all must do. Georgie Kramer was in the hospital there. They must go in to see her before they went home.

“How was Georgie?”

“Oh, I thought she looked pretty bad.” They shook their heads.

Or Mrs. Pickering did, Mrs. Pendleton and Bertha Scholtz. They were all fond of Georgie, and yet it cannot be denied that her illness added a new excitement to their trips to The Rapids. There were others, however, who came in a different way. Mrs. Little had Mr. Little drive her into the city often, and she

THE KRAMER GIRLS

sat in Georgie's room, quiet and fond, hiding her distress under her gentle, oldfashioned, ladylike reserve. Once she brought Lollie McCoy in with her. Lollie had closed the shop to visit Georgie. She cared even more than Mrs. Little. She went away from the hospital, through the little park, feeling old and solitary in the early spring weather . . . feeling that, now that her mother was dead, the Kramer girls gone from Valley Junction, Georgie perhaps—but she couldn't say or think that . . . her day, the day of her "crowd" and her generation, was past.

How changed Georgie was! Could it actually be . . . they didn't like to say that word aloud. Then why hadn't she done something long ago? She must have known. Annie must have known, too. They were sure that Annie had suspected. Georgie had always been so strong, so used to looking out for other people, that she wouldn't admit until the very last moment that anything could be wrong with her. Rose told them that Georgie had been angry if anyone even so much as hinted. And yet she had known all along . . . Well, people did foolish things like that!

But in spite of their dark prophecies as they drove home, when they were actually with Georgie—once the first shock of seeing her in the hospital had passed—it was impossible to think of her as dying. Her color was gone, her rough auburn hair was grizzled,

THE KRAMER GIRLS

there was a shrivelled look about her large body. But her brusque cheerfulness still radiated from her, feebly at first, more strongly as she talked with them. She tossed off angrily any inquiries about her illness—angrily, and with a certain shame, quite unlike the pride of martyrdom that most of these women would have felt in her place.

"Oh, all right, I guess. No, can't say I enjoy the treatments, but it's all in the game." The worst she would ever admit was: "Oh . . . so-so . . ."

She kept her fierce, shy, personal reserve. Mr. Little had come in for a few awkward moments, since Mrs. Little had said that he must.

"Why, I don't think she seems so bad," he said.

But it was easy to make a man think that things were coming out all right. They didn't look underneath. Mrs. Little and Lollie both agreed upon that. As they drove home through the darkening spring air, their temporary cheer dwindled into a fearful certainty. They sat together in the back of the car, talking in low voices, encouraging each other all they could. . . . The hospital room seemed very cheerful. How nice of old Mr. Yarborough to have sent his lovely tulips! It was so much better for Georgie that Rose was staying in The Rapids now. (They diverged for a moment into the subject of Rose's work at the courthouse, of the Carpenter affairs.) But by the time they reached home, they felt

THE KRAMER GIRLS

tired, silent and sad. They parted with comprehending but difficult smiles. While Lollie lighted the oil stove in her back room, and put on the water for tea, she cried a little. She went to the back door and called her cat. This new little spotted kitty, although she was so sprightly and had such cunning ways, could never take the place of Lollie's old black cat.

Georgie had insisted on going to the hospital. No, sir, she said, she wanted people to take care of her whose business it was. Then she didn't mind asking for things. Georgie, who had given so much help in her life, would have no help given *her* that was not professional.

And in a way, it seemed to Rose that when Georgie was not too ill, she enjoyed the bustle and companionship of the hospital. Although she had that shamefaced air, it pleased her that so many people took the trouble to come to see her. The nurses were careful to tell her about all who had inquired. There were gifts from her patients. Once, when Rose was there, she looked around the room and said with a kind of abashed pleasure:

"Looks like a greenhouse, don't it? Didn't know I knew so many folks!"

But in general, it seemed to Rose that Annie got more delight from all this attention than Georgie. She couldn't tell how much Annie "realized." She never so much as hinted that Georgie might not get

well—that frightened, secretive look came over her face—but sometimes, when they were together in the room in the evening, Rose would see tears in her eyes. Probably Annie didn't dare let herself think.

Rose, too, dared not let herself think too far; and during the bright, soft spring daytime she succeeded. She had grown accustomed to Georgie's illness to some extent, so that she could feel something home-like about the small, white, sunny hospital room with its plants and flowers. This crisis seemed to knit up the frayed threads of old associations. Mr. and Mrs. Seegar wrote from Florida, where they were living with their daughter and her husband, and sent up a box of fruit. The Christbaums "wouldn't come up," but left a basket with fresh eggs, jelly, and coffee cake at the hospital desk. There was that girl who used to work in the telephone office, and who had got into trouble. She was a patient of Georgie's. Georgie had "got after the fellow," it seemed (she hadn't told Rose or Annie about it) and they were married and really happy now. They both came to her room for a moment, "the fellow" very bashful, but almost as grateful to Georgie as the girl. Once, even, their father came. The girls weren't present at that interview. He hadn't said much, Georgie told them. But they could see that she was pleased.

"You know, kid," she said to Rose that evening, "I don't know that anybody's so bad as it seems to

other folks. Anyway—oh well, shoot . . . guess we're all kind of in the same box, or some box."

Still, she had enough of her old fierce, lifelong resentment left to say grimly of her father's wife, "Well, I'd just as soon she stayed at home." Georgie was still protecting her mother.

Annie and Rose had to take charge of the overflow of the gifts. Nothing had pleased Georgie more than the tulips from old Roland Yarborough. "I always liked that old fellow. He was different." Those she kept in her room, although she said of the other things, "Well, gals, help yourselves to the plunder." Rose even thought she looked a little shyly at them. . . . Sometimes, when she was alone, and considered all the attention she was receiving, all the tokens of personal affection, Georgie's eyes misted over with a shy, almost unbelieving pleasure. She couldn't feel that such things belonged to her, but just the same . . . When she heard a nurse coming, she reached for her handkerchief.

Rose was working for her old college mate, Arthur Kessler, who was County Recorder now. He knew that her sister was in the hospital, and was very nice about letting Rose off for a while in the afternoon. They were good to Annie at Hofthaler's, but they were methodical. She could seldom be with Georgie in the daytime. Rose was very busy with her work, the time she must spend with Georgie, Marjorie Jane

THE KRAMER GIRLS

on her hands when school was over. But Georgie's illness made it unnecessary for her to explain—even to Mrs. Pickering—why she had come to The Rapids and left Archie and Kramer in Dudley.

Georgie never hinted to Rose that she might not get well; and she wouldn't have the slightest hint, or the slightest fuss, either. She seemed to be full of plans. She talked about saving some money—"when she got over this"—and taking a special course in orthopedics. Big things could be done along that line. After a little while in that sunny room, Rose got over the shock that first met her when she entered—the shock of thinking, "Only a few months ago, Georgie was all right, and now—!" and felt the reassurance and enlivenment of Georgie's old exuberance.

But sometimes Georgie would say things like this: "Well, kid, do you like what you're doing now? Do you think it's going to head anywhere? . . . You don't want to leave Archie and Kramer off there away from you too long." She said that once. "Get them over here, too." Then Rose had to talk against a dread uneasiness. Especially when Georgie said to her, "I tell you, Rose, maybe Archie doesn't quite come up to the scratch, but it's pretty nice to be able to feel that you've got him there with you, all the same."

One day, it was a little later when Rose came. The spring light was dimmed and softened in the room,

THE KRAMER GIRLS

there was a hint of raininess about it. A damp earth scent seemed to come from the pot of gloxenia, great beautiful lavender bells, that old Mrs. Katzemeyer, in Valley Junction, had "sent by somebody else." There was an intimacy about that hour such as the two sisters—so far apart in age, until Georgie was almost more like mother to Rose than sister—had never experienced together before. Without any of her old shy, brusque reserve, simply, as one woman to another, Georgie talked to Rose about Annie.

She told Rose many things that Rose had never known. "You know—well, I suppose you didn't—but it was partly on Annie's account I wanted to get out of that burg."

"You did tell me that."

"Yes, but I guess I didn't tell you why."

Rose thought she knew all about the girls. Yet this was something that she had never suspected. Did she remember how Charlie Rubel used to always sort of joke with Annie? Well, he did, always. Especially at the lodge—people even began to talk about it. "That was one reason I dropped the lodge. That, and—oh well, I got sick of working my head off for nothing! Well, then Nettie—Mrs. Rubel—died, and everyone thought that he would marry Annie. I wouldn't have liked that once. I didn't have any too much of an opinion of Charlie Rubel. But if Annie had cared . . ."

"But *did* Annie care?"

"Well . . . I don't know, but I guess Annie kind of thought he'd take up with her, too. Oh, Mrs. Pick., of course, was always talking and teasing her. Gosh, I used to get sore! But then, I think Annie thought about it a lot. Well, why shouldn't she? He'd been acting that way toward her all these years. More than you ever knew about, kid."

"But why—"

"Well, why? That's the question. Here before anybody thought he'd got over mourning for Nettie, he was going over to Warrington and calling on this flip little widow. And then we hear they're married!"

"And did Annie really feel badly about it?"

"I guess she did, all right," Georgie answered somberly.

Why was it? Who could say? Perhaps he'd fooled around with Annie too long. Perhaps, by this time, although she was younger than Charlie Rubel himself, she wasn't young enough to suit him. Perhaps she waited for him to ask her, and the other woman went after him. Anyway, the widow led him a life, and Georgie didn't pity him a particle.

Care for him? Oh well, Annie was kind of soft . . . she couldn't hold out against any man that cared for her. Otherwise, as far as Charlie Rubel himself was concerned . . . Georgie was lying and talking of Annie, in a strange softened way, as if she

could see her sister's whole life, from their childhood together—reminiscence, of the kind old people feel at the end of their lives. It frightened Rose. And yet she could not help feeling the sweetness, the satisfying and painful intimacy, of this hour.

Oh, Annie could have married when she was a girl! Georgie said that with a kind of pride. If things hadn't been the way they were at home. . . . Rose had a strange moment of remembrance. She thought of that summer day at Plum Creek bridge, when she had first walked out there with Archie, when he had cut her initials—the very last; and she remembered seeing, near the fresh, woody-scented marks, one of those old, silver-gray scars—"A.K. & C.F." She asked Georgie about it.

Yes, Georgie said, that was Annie and Carl Finch! Could Rose remember when they used to go together? "You were just a tyke, I suppose." That seemed to separate Georgie and Rose again. Georgie's eyes grew cloudy . . . it seemed to Rose that she had drifted away into a past, to Rose herself so distant, that it was like the bright dawning of her memory. In this past, Georgie and Annie were girls. They wore shirtwaists and wide belts and sailor hats, and their hair in topknots . . . and young people were coming to the Kramer house—Lollie McCoy, slender and pretty with dark crimped hair, and Avis Cummings who was dead now. Rose remembered them,

THE KRAMER GIRLS

in that bright distance, as shining beings quite apart from the plump Annie, the thin and wrinkled Lollie, of today. . . . She remembered wildflowers, and foaming creeks, and spring in the air. . . .

"Yes, sir," Georgie murmured, "Carl Finch!"

"What became of him?"

"Well . . . Annie couldn't marry him right then, and he went away. He married someone else. I don't know where he is now."

All these old remembrances weighed on Rose as she left the hospital, although the brightness still surrounded her. She had never loved her sisters so much before. She saw them as those shining, distant figures—heard Georgie's hearty laugh, and saw Annie's rose-pink flush . . . and in her ears there was the sound of the water flowing under the Plum Creek bridge, cool and clear and bright as if it belonged to that same distance, yet with an accumulated echo of all the later experience. But it seemed to her for the moment as if she could bear the loss of youth, could bear the demands of maturity that were upon her. All were enhanced and deepened by the intimacy of her talk with Georgie. All were clarified by the romantic brightness of that early time.

After that, although Georgie said nothing directly, the pretense seemed to be gone. People came back to her mind. She asked Rose about Jane. "Why don't you write to her again, kid? When people have been

as good friends as you two were, they oughtn't to let things separate them." The painful dissatisfaction in the thought of Jane lessened for a moment in Rose's mind.

But the two older sisters were much closer now than Georgie and Rose. They had lived through so much together. No matter how unconscious Annie might seem to be when she was with other people, with Georgie her understanding was so complete that nothing needed to be said. Indeed, after some of these talks, Rose went away with the feeling that Georgie had done her best for her—that now Georgie let her go; and in loneliness, she clung to the thought of Archie. She felt security slipping from her and reached desperately for it. With Annie, Georgie's conversation was often fragmentary, but highly significant. There was no need for any pretense. Annie knew too much of her. Annie was like a second self. Georgie could let her real feeling come to the surface.

Annie, although for some reason she could say nothing to Rose, was appalled by the darkness of Georgie's gloom. The people who visited her, and heard her talk and joke as usual, had no conception of this. Annie wept, but she was too used to being ruled by Georgie to oppose it. It didn't matter how many people called at the hospital, how many of her patients sent messages—Georgie felt that she had accomplished nothing. In spite of her periods of de-

pression, Georgie had always been sanguine. She had always dreamed that somehow or other she was going to accomplish some big thing. Annie spoke timidly, hopelessly, of all the things that Georgie had done.

"It was all unnecessary. As I look back on it, it seems as if we didn't really have to do a thing that we did. Papa would have hired somebody to take care of mamma—he'd have had to. And it would probably have turned out just as well—better." Annie didn't want to believe that. It was almost blasphemy. But Georgie overbore her as usual. "Why didn't I start in and do some of the things I wanted to? I could have, if I'd just thought so. I tell you, Annie, if I thought I was really leaving behind me anything that I'd accomplished—"

Annie spoke timidly of her patients. Almost brutally, Georgie scoffed.

"Rubbed a few kinks out of their backs. They'll get 'em again. Anyway—what was it? I hadn't even begun at the beginning of being a doctor. I've seen that for a long while."

And no matter how she might talk of Archie now—appreciating the kindness—the worst disappointment to her was Rose. It came out in these talks with Annie. "What have I done for the kid, when you come right down to it? I thought I was doing so much! I really meant to. As it turns out, it's nothing

THE KRAMER GIRLS

but meddling. I was so careful about every fellow she went with, and now she's taken up about the weakest sister of the lot. I might about as well let her have her fun with that Hammond boy in the first place. I believed she cared for him more than she's cared for anyone since."

Georgie turned away from Annie. A look of dark brooding was on her face. Annie could not make it out. She tried to tell Georgie that Rose needed her now. Georgie would not listen.

"It'll be better for the kid to have me gone. She won't have me, and then she'll have to stand on her own feet. You'll be better off, too. As long as I'm around, you do what I say. If you don't have me, you'll do what you want to do. Folks can't do much for other folks."

Annie cried silently and bitterly. Georgie lay somberly staring at her. She did not take back a word of it. Annie went out into the spring twilight still crying. It seemed to her that the world was lost in blackness. She had hinted timidly of the church—another life after this. . . . Georgie said, in bitter honesty:

"I'm not so sure of that as I used to be."

But Annie couldn't accept anything at its worst. When she was with Georgie, she was overborne and overwhelmed; but now she could not believe that anything could really be so bad as that. She considered in panic, in her blackness, the possibility of

THE KRAMER GIRLS

a world without Georgie. Annie did consider that; to other people she dared not admit it, for fear that might make it true. There struggled in her a guilty acknowledgment of all the secret times when she had resented Georgie's strength and management. But after that came a panic of incredulity. The walk to her boarding house was a horror. She could scarcely breathe, scarcely live, until she was safely within the room and heard Rose's voice.

In the night, when Rose and Marjorie Jane were asleep, Annie turned away from them and wept, with faint little smothered sniffs. The silence of the night was terrifying to her, she was sunk in horror. She knew, with a soft fatalistic knowledge, as she had known of the cancer—but only in such solitary silence as this could she admit it. Georgie's influence was still so strong that she could confide nothing of it to Rose. The two sisters must still pretend to each other that they had no doubt that Georgie would get well.

The old friends in Valley Junction were all protesting. Although the Kramer girls had been away for several years now, they still belonged to the town. The funeral should be held at home. Rose could see, too, that this was what Annie wanted.

She was glad, now, herself. In The Rapids, it had

seemed to her that no one realized that Georgie was gone. The little obituary was lost among other news items in the paper. The people who cared were only on the humble fringes of the town's life—Georgie's landlady, the clerks at Hofthaler's, some of her country patients. When Rose and Annie came away from the hospital, through the park, after that momentous hour that cut apart all their life before from all that would come after, there was no difference, no awareness in the busy streets. A few people stared curiously at their tear-stained faces; but only in passing. Georgie's life in The Rapids had seemed to be fuller, happier, more successful than in all the slow years at home. But it was to Valley Junction that she belonged. There, the death of Georgie Kramer was not a tiny passing event to be glanced at briefly. . . . "That chiropractic doctor? Oh, is she dead?" . . . At home everyone knew. The very air of the town seemed hushed. The funeral took on the dignity of an event in the long, local continuity of the town's history. Rose had the feeling that, by this event, all those frayed-out strands of the lives of the Kramer family were re-knit and gathered back into the pattern.

There was one of those long, almost unendurable services in the church. It seemed to Rose that if she could only cry out and break this dreadful, solemn hush upon which everyone seemed mysteriously

THE KRAMER GIRLS

agreed, it would not be true. This was the church where she had sung in the old chorus choir on Sunday nights and gone home with Bert; where she had heard so often the rustling of Quarterly pages as she sat in her Sunday School class; where she had stood, in her white embroidered dress, on graduation night; and where Georgie, her face flushed and her hair roughly curling, in the kitchen fragrant with coffee, had cut the cakes for the big church suppers. And now, in this very church, Georgie's funeral was being held.

Rose's mind was protesting that such a thing could not be true. She felt shaken and trembling at the sounds of many people gathering, seat after seat being filled, the solemn whispering, the careful creaking of the ushers' footsteps. Its portent overwhelmed her. And yet when she looked stealthily about for a moment with eyes bright with pain, saw all those faces, heard the folding doors pushed back and even the chairs in the Sunday School room filled, there was a deeply painful sense of gratitude and compensation. When she came out into the bright open air, she saw all the cars waiting.

And the service had a different feeling in the open air. The white clouds moved across the blue spring sky and the ground had wet black places under the dark evergreens. In the small, enclosed cemetery, with its mown grass and its carefully tended bushes,

THE KRAMER GIRLS

the little company of people was gathered . . . but beyond it stretched the sunny pastures, with their long pale grass turned this way and that way by the winds and the rains that had passed over them . . . stretched to the boundary of the wooded hills tinted in soft spring colors upon the farthest sky. Fresh flowers were placed on other mounds. This death had reminded people of others. In the pause between the solemn words a bird song bubbled up, free and unconscious, out of the sunny silence.

This company was made up of the friends and relatives. If the crowd at the church had been satisfying by its miscellaneous largeness, this had another compensation of narrow depth and poignancy. At the edge of the group, Lollie McCoy, thin in her dark winter coat, shivered in the bright air and wept from cold red-rimmed eyes; . . . feeling how life had somehow dwindled into losing, one after another, the things that she loved. Mrs. Pickering cried, and Mr. Pickering looked large and shamefaced. Close about the grave, stood the members of the relationship. Georgie's father stood there, his face now the sharp face of an old man under shaggy white hair, in his heavy overcoat, his feet knobby and large in his big overshoes shining with wet. His wife was beside him, taller than himself, built on a big scale, but her face childish and frightened . . . there, because she must be there, but aloof and ashamed. Rose

and Annie stood together, but Archie was beside Rose, he held her arm. Had she married any other man, he would have come to this ceremony as an outsider. But Archie was part of the pattern.

The cars drove back into town where even now the crowd going home from the funeral was scarcely dispersed; stores were just being re-opened, a little trade was going on again, women still stood talking on street corners; and where old Mrs. Katzemeyer, who scarcely ever left home these days, in the old black coat she had worn for years and her knitted winter hood of rusty black, was buying some meat for supper instead of sending Mr. Katzemeyer—because “ach, she was downtown anyway.” People who couldn’t leave their work were asking others about the funeral. The janitor was putting away the extra chairs in the church and picking up leaves and fallen petals. Out in front of the bank stood Roland Yarborough’s old white horse and ancient buggy so old-fashioned that it now appeared only as a relic in Valley Junction. People, noticing it, said, with a sense of respect for the occasion of Georgie’s funeral:

“He hasn’t been in town for a long time!”

Rose and Annie were with the Littles now. At noon, they had eaten dinner with their father and his wife, in the alien strangeness of the old house. Now they parted from those two, estranged, all awkward

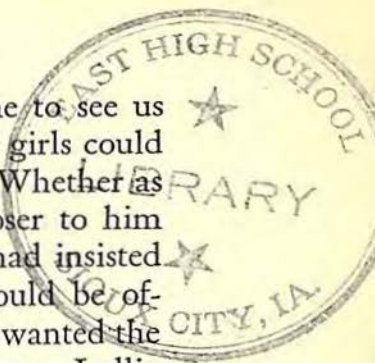
THE KRAMER GIRLS

and ashamed, yet on good terms. "Come to see us again." "Yes, we will." All the same, the girls could see that their father felt Georgie's death. Whether as a friend or an enemy, she had been closer to him than his other children. Mrs. Pickering had insisted that they come home with her. She would be offended. But they had made excuses. They wanted the soothing gentleness of Mrs. Little's house. Lollie McCoy was to come, too. But she was uneasy, must stop at the store. She could not go off to supper without first finding and feeding her cat. Mrs. Little made Mr. Little drive there and wait.

As they waited, old Mr. Yarborough saw them. He stopped, climbed down from his buggy, came over to them. He raised his broad-brimmed hat with an air of rustic courtliness to Mrs. Little and Annie; but he held Rose's hand.

"She was a fine woman."

He meant it. He had a better appreciation of Georgie than did most of the people in town. But it was for Rose's sake, not for Georgie's, that he had driven in today. It was for the sake of Rose's clear brown eyes and curling hair tinged with gold that he had asked the bank to lend the money. He was not disappointed in Rose's later career, since her skin was still beautiful and the soft dark helplessness was still in her eyes. He was too courteous to speak of that today. He paid Georgie her fitting tribute. But



Rose felt it in the pressure of his hand, old and work-worn, large but fine . . . and was comforted, and yet pained, because it seemed that in some hidden and ancient way she was defrauding Georgie.

At Mrs. Little's, in the pleasant living-room in the evening, they talked of Georgie. Only the beautiful and comforting things would be said here. It was the older people who talked. Rose and Archie, together on the davenport, were set apart, the younger ones. Again Rose saw the figures in that bright distance.

"She always did so much," Lollie said. "Georgie was always busy at something."

Mrs. Little said, "I felt as if Georgie might have accomplished almost anything."

Old Mrs. Little, Mr. Little's mother, remembered how Georgie had taken care of her mother all those years.

But the good time they used to have on picnics—the time Georgie took off her shoes and stockings and waded right out into the creek after the water snake the boys had dared her to catch—that was what Mr. Little remembered. "You couldn't down Georgie. She was game for anything. I tell you, it doesn't seem possible she's gone!"

Lollie couldn't see why some should be taken and others left. She said that Georgie was so much more useful in the world than she was. But old Mrs. Little

—fragile, ailing, half blind and more than half helpless—fearfully assured her, “Well, there was a reason. The Lord must have needed her there or he wouldn’t have taken her. And he needs you here, just the same way. No, no, we mustn’t question those things.”

Annie did not join in the soft-voiced conversation. She still cried, softly and mutely, tears that came so readily they scarcely reddened her eyelids. Impassible as always, she gave herself to the comfort of all these affirmations and consolations . . . but in her secret heart there was the black, frightened knowledge of how Georgie herself had felt. . . .

For Rose there was frightened blackness too. She longed for night, and longed to find a security in Archie’s arms . . . and felt, not what she sought, but something timid, sweet, sustaining . . . wept wildly because Georgie was gone, and then wept sorrowfully because in all those voices there had been none to speak of her with the sweetness with which Archie spoke to Rose. . . .

There were other households in which the event of this day had brought up the memory of old times. It had made one or two people—recalling the old crowd—think of Carl Finch, wonder about Annie. It had made some talk of Rose and the Carpenters. There was much discussion, too, of old J. B. Kramer and his second wife; and there were a few—a very

THE KRAMER GIRLS

few—who recalled, none quite understanding it, the very old story of his marriage with Georgie's mother. It had made people see and estimate the value of the Kramer pattern entwined with the pattern of Valley Junction.

Old Mrs. Katzemeyer took off her coat and knitted hood. She was tired. The spring twilight was cold. "Ja, this is the last time . . ." She murmured that to herself and shook her head. She put the meat on to fry, but meanwhile she sat in the painted wooden rocker near the kitchen window, looking out at the pale sky above the geranium plants in tin cans on the sill. Ja, all her best neighbors were gone . . . she couldn't get used to these new ones . . . she was too old, she would stay at home after this. . . .

After supper, when the town had more or less settled into its routine again, and everyone, of course, had left the cemetery, Hulda Raugh stopped in to see Mrs. Angie Bloomer in her crude little rented house on the outskirts of town. These women had not been to the funeral. They belonged only to the tattered fringe of the social life of Valley Junction. But Hulda wanted Angie to walk out to the cemetery and see the flowers.

"Gee, Harry ain't come home yet for his supper. Well, he can get it himself. Serve him right for being late."

"I'm gona come along, mamma!"

THE KRAMER GIRLS

"No, you stay to home. Oh well, come then if you have to."

There was a wild streak in Hulda and Angie both. They liked being out, free, in the evening air. Twilight had settled, soft and dark, in the woods beyond the cemetery. But it was not yet too dark to see the flowers. They lay heaped on the raw yellow earth of the mound, the white petals of narcissus withering in the chill air, gauze lavender ribbons stained with wet.

"Oh, looky, mamma, looky what I found!"

"You put that down. It don't belong to you."

"I guess I *found* it!"

Angie's elfish little girl danced away between the graves holding a limp pink rose. She had never owned such a pretty flower. She stuck it in her hair, and stuck it in her dress, and then dancing, waved it in her hand.

"She's got some nice ones," Angie said. "Well—" her voice was defiant—"she deserves 'em. She was one woman in this town didn't have her ideas all made to order. She wasn't just one of these old prissies. I don't care if she did go to church and stand in with the rest of 'em. I liked Georgie Kramer—all I knew of her, wasn't much. Yes sir, I did."

Her thin brown face with the wild eyes was still defiant. Somehow, she had the feeling that she and

THE KRAMER GIRLS

Georgie Kramer stood together, that life was against them—oh yes, people liked Georgie Kramer, they had given her these flowers and a big funeral . . . but they hadn't given her her chance, all the same,—she didn't really fit into the town although she was buried here.

3

Rose knew that Archie was willing to have her go to work again—they had threshed it out so many times, Rose sullen and Archie angry, but Archie acquiescent, although troubled, in the end . . . and yet she always had this sense of defiance. Defiance, almost guilt. She felt it now, as she dressed. "I want you to do what you like. I've never put anything in your way. You know that." Nevertheless, Rose knew, and Archie knew, that there was unwillingness under his willingness—that her very desire cut and shamed him; while irrationally, part of Rose's resentment was against this very willingness of Archie's. He never tried to force his own way . . . and this shamed Rose, in a way too dark and hidden for her to understand, because it seemed to her that if men really cared for women, they did not acquiesce and let them go. That feeling made her, at times, break into irrelevant, cruel reproaches . . . and she was ashamed when she remembered how Archie winced and quivered under them, how humbly and

honestly he assented. He had always looked up to her and felt that she was too good for him; and as their married life went on, and he blundered and Rose had to strike out and help herself, he settled back with a wounded self-admission into this attitude . . . while fiercely, and with a sense of aching defraudment, Rose wanted him to come up to herself. She had tried to narrow herself and to deny her own capability. Now it hurt and angered her that she could not. If Archie really loved her, he would cherish, not obey her . . . no, that was untrue, unjust—she saw the look of hurt, suffering devotion in Archie's blue-gray eyes.

Guilt, just as much as defiance. More. Rose's tenderness was her chief quality. She dressed with a suppressed, excited haste that gave her a superficial calmness; but her finger-tips, as she polished her nails, were cold. The very intentness with which she looked at her image in the glass put to shame the rickety sparseness of their furniture in the dark little bedroom of the apartment that was all that Archie could provide—said that she herself must be superior to this. It made Rose hurry still more with her dressing. If she got this job she would admit herself ahead of Archie in the social scale . . . Archie, who had charge of the building of that horrid little row of all-alike houses, under another contractor, and was scarcely more than a day workman. It was his very

THE KRAMER GIRLS

conscientiousness and love of his work that helped to put him at a business disadvantage. Rose knew that, secretly, and was ashamed because she seemed to acquiesce in the case of the world against Archie.

Her eyes stared back at her dark with fright in her large soft face. She was ready. She had a panicky feeling of wanting to cower away within the meager darkness of this poorly lighted room and sink into a sad acceptance of its limitations. This was the first time in her life that she had actually stepped out beyond the warmth of protection and made a move all alone, upon her own responsibility. There had always been someone to supply the incentive—Jane, Georgie . . . The black stark panic which she used to sense at those dreadful moments when the knowledge that Georgie was going to die cut through her merciful and defensive unbelief, was now upon her. She had entered into its black and breathless vacuum. There was that great dark stretch of country all around . . . but the little figure of herself was not huddled, it was moving, mechanically, against its own volition, over the rough ground and through the cold immensity of darkness . . . she herself had put on her hat, looked about the apartment, locked the door, gone down the battered varnished stairway and was outside in the low-lying side street gloomy with gray-painted frame houses under too many trees.

The necessity for boarding and finding a seat in the street car gave her courage. But when she sat on the battered wicker seat beside the open window, starting upon the long slow ride, she was afraid that her breathlessness and the trembling of her hands would get beyond her control. She would startle the indifferent faces and lack-lustre eyes of all these people. Fool! Hadn't she worked in a much larger city than this? Yes, but so long ago. This was like coming out of a dark little hole, a kind of hibernation, where she had been crouching for so long that the hard bright sunlight of the streets hurt and dazzled her.

The bright hot hurry seemed to jolt and knock her awake. Uneasily, reluctantly, she felt a desire to share in it. It was as if she were shedding one kind of self and reverting again to another . . . were just creeping out into the open brightness, timid, bewildered, and yet renewed. Now it excited her to think that this was Danford, where so many of her old college friends lived, where associations once natural to her but long renounced might be waiting for her again . . . although until she had clothes, and some sort of decent position, she felt that she must creep along side streets lest she should meet any of those people, who sounded so successful in the Alumni Bulletin. She had really been the cause of Archie's getting work here—her desire, unadmitted

THE KRAMER GIRLS

and inarticulate, yet working in the darkness. Her compassion for Archie was an aching core of pain in her heart. And yet she was enlivened. She had a feeling of the old fatality again. She must come back to this, and she had always known it—it was that secret knowledge that had oppressed her when she had married Archie; just as, in that troubled time in Chicago, she had known that she must go back to Valley Junction, and do exactly as she had done.

Besides, ever since Georgie's death, she had had a different feeling about things. Loneliness—at moments, panic . . . and yet it was as if in the very center of her being a little eager spark, kindled long ago, but smothered, was now breaking into a trembling flame. Did it mean that she didn't miss Georgie? No . . . but there was a difference, a freedom. . . .

Huge and monumental, yellow-white, almost powdery-new, the United Trust Company building towered above the heated asphalt into the blinding blue of the sky. The hard white brilliance of the lower floor took away Rose's breath again. In the glittering cage of the elevator, crowded in with girls cheap-looking and yet all smartly dressed, and with rosy-faced, well-barbered business men, Rose stood at the back, feeling shabby and countrified and soft . . . and yet protesting, because this smartness was not all, these people didn't know everything. But

her clothes made her humble as she got out of the elevator. They made her stand a moment before she had courage to turn the knob of Mr. Kessler's door.

If it had not been for Arthur's recommendation, it seemed to her she could not have asked the shining-haired young man for Mr. Kessler. Panic swirled around her again as she sat waiting and she was struggling in the breathless center of it. From the window, she had an oblique view downwards along stony walls of the narrow stony street and the crawling people. Even while she tried desperately to be equal to this hardness, all the rest of her mind—and of her body—was aching with inarticulate protest . . . she had a pained distant awareness of Archie's hurt and kindly eyes, of the sweet morning sunshine in Valley Junction, the responsive softness of the ground, and far away, across a field of gold and purple flowers, two little childish figures happily wandering against blue sky. . . .

"Mr. Kessler will see you now."

She could not go in to him, he terrified her, he would never want to employ her. She had become too soft—she had that feeling . . . and yet softness was as right as all this stony, brilliant hardness.

But as soon as she faced Mr. Kessler, a responsive smile came upon her full lips and a brown glow into her eyes. He was not curt, hard, indifferent to

THE KRAMER GIRLS

match the office building. He was just an older, more alert, more prosperous replica of Arthur. His wide mahogany desk was humanized by scattered papers, ash trays, and a portrait photograph of two blonde children playing with carefully posed unconsciousness before a wide, modern fireplace. He seemed to be quite amiably willing to consider Rose as a possible secretary. He was just middle-sized, neither light nor dark, with pleasant eyes and a few nervous wrinkles; incongruous, so it seemed to Rose, with the towering audacity and menacing coldness of the building in which he kept his office. Courage came back to her in a sweet flow of relief. Why, she had worked before—in The Rapids, even in Chicago.

"My brother writes me you've been helping him out in the courthouse over there in Pratt County, Mrs. Carpenter."

He spoke with the easy, friendly knowledge of the state of a prosperous citizen.

"Let's see, I believe you and he were in Winthrop together, weren't you? Pretty nice little college, I guess. I didn't go there. I went to the state university."

"Yes, we were in school at the same time."

"Well, I hear pretty fine reports of you from Arthur."

He gave her an encouraging, almost an admiring

smile. Then all her earlier life was not renounced, thrown away . . . she could get hold of it again and use it.

"Would you mind telling me what other experience you've had, Mrs. Carpenter, besides your work in my brother's office?"

She told him about the position in Chicago—even about her teaching. It seemed to her that her narrative was jumbled and all inconsequential, but even so there was the fact of the work in Chicago that stood out and called for respect. She had a right to apply for this position in spite of her clothes that didn't combine into a smart costume; and Mr. Kessler seemed to accept that without question.

"Why did you leave Chicago, Mrs. Carpenter?"

"Well, my mother was very ill . . . and then I got married, so I didn't go back."

Mr. Kessler seemed to believe Arthur's estimate of her. His younger partner came into the office, and Mr. Kessler called him over to the desk.

"Mrs. Carpenter, Mr. Cole. Mr. Cole is the other member of this firm, Mrs. Carpenter. Mrs. Carpenter has been doing some work for my brother Arthur, Fred, over there in Pratt County."

"Oh, yes! Over there where they've got the new courthouse."

Both men seemed to have time to talk easily and negligently about politics in The Rapids. But Mr.

THE KRAMER GIRLS

Kessler could be businesslike, although pleasantly so.

"Well, Mrs. Carpenter, so far as your recommendations go, I'm inclined to think you're the person we're looking for. There's just this question in my mind. You say you're actually settled in the city now? Permanently, you think. Now, let's see, you have two children, you say? Both in school? . . . You see, I have to ask these questions to make sure you could take up this position with a view to permanency. As a rule, we're not inclined to employ married women in this office. You feel sure you can handle the home question and the office, too?"

Rose felt sure . . . yet guilty, too, inwardly reluctant and protesting. . . .

"Well, you think you could come to us next Monday?"

That meant that he was hiring her. A feeling of relief, then hilarity, swept over Rose, crowding her aching protest to the very edge of her mind. And he had been amiable, unformidable. In the talk with him, in spite of her early floundering, her old mental clearness and reliability had come back, as if simply waiting to be used again. It had all been so easy! That was the amazing part. The building looked so powerful, but the people who had their offices in it were just men.

And he had liked her looks. She had pleased him. Her humility was gone, her old soft yet certain self-

respect was back, her warm happy feeling that people would always like Rose Kramer. If they did that, she could stand anything.

Now she didn't mind being pushed back in the elevator. She had a right there. She had a job in this building. The people no longer seemed like enemies. But she suffered so when she felt herself an alien, not a part of things.

Coming out into the brilliant summer sunshine, she had stronger than ever, that feeling of hilarity. Everything interested her—the speeding cars, the stores, the people who passed her, their clothes. Yes, because she had a place now in the city. She could take an interest in clothes again. She could have things. She could look up her old friends. What a wild, unexpected exhilaration there was in reverting to the Rose of college days! The oppression that had haunted her so long with its soft fatality, even in her happiness, was all brightly dispersed. For the first time in years, she wanted to write to Jane again. She had done it, she had done it—taken her step alone! Not that the salary was much, or the job—it was that she could get it! She had to go into a store this minute and buy something for the children. Not for herself . . . and yet she saw all the bright, gay, worldly trinkets—the scarves, bags, gossamer stockings, glitter of cosmetics—with new, hungry, daring eyes. . . .

THE KRAMER GIRLS

Away at the very edge of her mind, though, there was that hurt reluctance, that inarticulate aching. . . .

4

Now, in all this excitement and elation, Rose seemed to forget the secret reluctance she had felt at having Jane come. She had had to pretend, even to herself, to be glad when she got the letter—"What do you suppose? *Jane* is coming!"—but she didn't really want her and neither did Archie. Why? . . . Oh, because she dreaded having the visit break into her life, that seemed to her all balanced and arranged now. She couldn't explain it all to Jane. She feared Jane's criticism of Archie—and by now, her relationship with Archie was adjusted, there was understanding between them and the resentment was gone. Now that she was no longer all dependent upon him, Rose could appreciate—not with her old craving for devotion, to be sure, but with a kind of loyal and compassionate tenderness, his odd little streak of humorous quaintness, his goodness with the children. Their love for each other had come back. It was always there. Even at the office, where she appeared in such a different role—a clear-headed business woman, upon whom both Mr. Kessler and Mr. Cole depended for having everything kept straight

—Rose felt herself relying upon it. Without it, her existence would have been bleak. But with it—in spite of all the demands her household made upon her—she could look out of the office windows and enjoy the lights that jewelled the smoky sky of late afternoon. She had an existence separate and apart from her relationship to Mr. Kessler and Mr. Cole; and that gave her a self-reliance, a dignity. Otherwise—Rose knew herself to some extent—she would have been like Sweet Alice—

“Who laughed with delight when you gave her a smile,
And trembled with fear at your frown.”

Yes, she had the feeling that her feet were set in a sure path. So that she hadn't wanted Jane to come. . . .

But now, was it possible she had felt like that? The instant she had seen Jane, her reluctance had all broken and changed into a bright elation. First, the long train drawing into the station, the quiver of excitement with which she went forward to meet it; then the realization of the stranger, the tall blonde woman in the light furred coat and close little hat . . . the recognition of the face, the feeling that in spite of all the difference, this was still *Jane* . . . How silly to have imagined anything else! They came together, and their wild eager kiss—girlishly rapturous, for a moment, as when they had met at

THE KRAMER GIRLS

the little old station, at college, after the summer's holiday—obliterated the years. Even when they sat in the taxi going home, her soft, beige gloves crumpled in her lap—they felt a smothered hilarity under the scattered commonplaces that they talked. Jane put out her hand once, squeezed and shook Rose's, and said:

"Well, *Rose!*"

And they both laughed. Rose sat with a tingling knowledge of how she had always adored the firm smoothness of that hand, the fingers small and feminine, although Jane was large and her hands capable . . . that smooth, beautifully moulded wrist. . . .

"I didn't think you'd be a bit like this," Rose happily confided.

"How did you think I'd be?"

"Oh, I don't know."

"Idiot!"

They both laughed joyously.

All these years, she had been picturing Jane as cold, ruthless, scornfully successful; all these years been slowly recovering from the cruelty and necessity of their estrangement. But now they had been apart for so long, that they were free, each of them, of the encroachments of the other's personality—there was even a delight and excitement in realizing how far each had gone in her own direction—and their coming together was a gloriously refreshed renewal.

THE KRAMER GIRLS

And how unjust her remembrance of Jane had been! How she had discounted Jane's magnificence, her splendid extravagance—it was these things that made her so different from most people. Yes, and her simplicity. Why, Jane, in her fierce directness, her honesty, had never been aware of the way Rose had been feeling about her all these years—not even aware that she had hurt or offended! There was a kind of purity about Jane—about her large cool body, her round face with the smooth skin, her pale gold hair; a white candor, an icy limpidity about her mind. It made Rose feel herself soft, vague, weighted with dark inarticulate knowledge . . . a little humble . . . yet cherishing.

“This is where we live.”

Rose was shy, proud, happy at the thought of showing her home to Jane. She was so glad now that she had taken the apartment in this pretty apartment house, in spite of her guilt because it was all against the ideas of Valley Junction thrift. Things like vanity did count—they had to be considered. Oh, the apartment was nothing much, of course, but now Rose loved it. Her life there was all enhanced by the delight of revealing it to her dearest friend. Her children were all the more her little treasures. Jane was not scornful and New Yorkish, the way so many people were when they came home. She was looking around with bright eyes. . . . And suddenly Rose

had a perception of how Jane was feeling, how this visit meant to her the same kind of unexpected refreshment and renewal that the meeting was to Rose—and something more, something else.

"You mustn't expect anything a bit grand."

"I like it."

Jane stood in the middle of the living-room. She looked around slowly, a little smile on her smooth lips. "It looks like you." Then her large arms softly enfolded Rose. They kissed again. Jane's kiss was tender, comprehending, with her rare gentleness, a sweet seal of remembrance and compassion upon Rose's lips.

But they were excited and talkative now. Rose took Jane to her bedroom in the next apartment, the Browns'. She had only scorn for her silliness in thinking it wouldn't be good enough for Jane . . . because she had always pictured Jane living magnificently in New York. All the time she was getting tea ready in the little kitchen, she had to smother that hilarity. "Jane is here. She's in this very house." It added delight to this little plunge into her separate life. She wanted it to be time for the children to come home. Rushing into the bedroom, she caught up the two little photographs on her dresser, kissed them, looked into the candid eyes . . . and whispered, with a blissful foolishness of which she wasn't ashamed—

THE KRAMER GIRLS

"Babies! Do you know it? Jane is here!"

After an interval she heard Jane's voice in the living-room.

"Rose!"

She started to the door, but Jane was coming out into the kitchen.

"Oh, see your little kitchen! She's got a real little house."

They both laughed foolishly at that. Rose was taking the tea into the living-room. What fun it was to be having a whole afternoon off, to be serving tea to Jane in her own living-room! Now there was time for each to see how the other really looked. Jane seemed cool and different without her wraps. Large and cool, cream and pearl-white and pale gold. She had learned how to dress. "Oh, let me see how you're wearing your hair!" Rose cried. It was parted and barely waved, done into a little knot on Jane's neck. Rose mourned over its lost magnificence of length. "I had it bobbed, but I had to let it grow. Didn't look well. I'm too big. Supposed to go in for being a goddess." They laughed. "You look darling with yours cut, Posy." "Oh, but I have so little!" "But it's so darling and soft. This makes it curl. Oh, thank heaven—" Jane burst out—"people don't dress *quite* the tacky way they used to!" That was the old Jane, who must have perfection.

But Rose could see now that Jane was older. There

were dark shadows under her eyes, as if stroked by finger-tips. She was handsomer, but she had lost her girlhood. Rose was aware of the soft wrinkles beginning to come around her own brown eyes. But there was an excitement in realizing themselves as fully adult and responsible. They had changed. They had seen the error of their youthful ways. They could look coolly at themselves in the modern way and made frank admissions.

"Posy, are you sure you aren't busy?"

"Mr. Kessler let me have the afternoon. I told him you were coming. He was terribly interested."

"I forgot! You have a job or something."

Rose felt that her job was not really interesting to Jane; yet she did not resent Jane's little smile nor the considering compassion in her eyes. Rose put aside, tacitly, all that part of her life and listened to Jane. She had slipped back easily into her old role of listener and appreciator. But she had her own life apart from Jane's. She could feel its warmth under her hands, she could smile with her secret knowledge of the two little child faces. She could be happy in her old role—her own role—now that she was no longer wholly dependent upon it.

But to have Jane here, in her own house, so familiar and yet so excitingly changed! She couldn't get used to the delight of that. She began eagerly to make plans. Whom would Jane like to see? There

were scads and scads of their old college mates living here.

She didn't mind Jane's little touch of careless superiority, because she too had departed far from the standards of Winthrop, stepped outside, married the wrong kind of man—once again, it was she and Jane together, in a laughing, malicious sort of superior intimacy. In spite of their having lived so differently, they were still closer than Rose could ever feel herself to be with any of the old Winthrop girls.

"Dot Carter?"

"Oh yes, Dot and Dick. They live just a few blocks away."

"What are they like now?"

"Just exactly the same."

"Bet Dot wears her hair exactly the way she used to. In those braids."

"No, she's had it bobbed."

"Bet it doesn't make her look any different, though."

"No, not a particle!"

They both laughed hilariously. And for the first time, to her relief Rose could confess:

"You know, Jane, I don't go to many of the meetings any more. Oh, I don't know . . . I sort of hate to. I don't fit in. Most of the other girls have married the men they went with in college, and I haven't, and . . . oh, I don't know, but it seems as if so

THE KRAMER GIRLS

much has happened to me since then. They all talk just the way they used to, and still think everything Prexie says is perfect. And then, anyway, you always get dunned for money, and we've had so darned little of it. It's safer to stay away."

"Poor Posy! God, for years I was paying off that Senior pledge, when I was living in basements and existing on coffee and baked beans. Now they've lost my address. It'll stay lost," Jane said with satisfaction.

"Oh, but if they knew you were here, they'd be crazy to see you."

"Go 'long!" Jane scoffed.

"Oh, Jane, really they would. You're one of the successes."

Jane made a face. She said, with a bitterness not quite gone, "But you know they all thought I was leading a life of sin. Rose, I'll never forget—oh, I must tell you!—when I saw Harold Zimmerli and . . . oh, that girl he married, what's her name . . . and they tried to show me the error of my ways. I was furious! It makes me laugh now."

"But why?" Rose asked anxiously.

"Oh, my darling, because of the dreadful company I was keeping. I don't know how they'd heard about it, but they both had. I had some friends who were *Russians*, and of course that meant they went around with bombs in their vest pockets—oh, you see I knew foreigners, and women who smoked, and two of my

best friends lived together and weren't married!—I'll never forget how Harold and this what's-her-name looked when I told them about Jack and Adele and said I admired them. I said they did it because they were idealists. As if *anybody* who hadn't gone to Winthrop could really know about ideals. Then they knew I was lost!"

"But they really are proud of you," Rose insisted. "You were in a big success on Broadway, and brought honor to Winthrop."

"Yes!" Jane interrupted fiercely. "They're proud of me for committing the worst act of my life."

Rose was worried. She couldn't understand what Jane meant.

"Because it was a rotten play. I was ashamed of myself every night when I acted in the thing. It was the only time in my life I ever did anything I was thoroughly ashamed of simply for the sake of making money—and so, of course, it would be the one thing for which Winthrop would be proud of me! I suppose they think since then I've deteriorated, since I haven't been in another 'Broadway success.' "

Rose felt a little guilty. People had really wondered. She herself couldn't quite understand Jane's feeling. She wanted Jane to be successful and everyone have to admit her magnificence. There had always been that sort of . . . well, cold loftiness about Jane, be-

fore which Rose felt humbled and yet chilled. It had seemed to her, too, that it was less splendid for Jane to be working for the New Theatre organization. It astonished her to hear how lightly Jane talked of never making any money, as if there were no disgrace in that, at all—as if it were in the natural order of things. Ah, there had been disgrace enough for Rose . . . months when she had to slip through side streets and could not meet the eyes of her friends, when she felt really wicked, a kind of suspect, as if she were actually against the government or something like that . . . Not respectable. And she had supposed that anyone who lived in New York and had had her picture in magazines was rolling in wealth. Jane had such lovely clothes . . .

“Oh, but my child, I don’t save a cent!”

Well, no matter how her life was conducted, Rose accepted Jane loyally. That was what made her so different from the others, Jane told her. “You don’t have to set up a law for everybody else, Posy. You accept things. Oh, Posy, the time I had at home . . . treading on the family’s toes every minute! They wanted to know everything, and I couldn’t tell them anything. How could I? I shocked them at every word. Oh, it was all right for two weeks, so long as I walked on glass every minute and never expressed a real opinion . . . but you know how long I could stand that sort of thing! We had a rumpus as usual.

Mother wanted me to stay at home. Why, Rose, I should have died! And why she should *want* me, when she's always criticized every single . . . oh, well!" Jane ended, with a bitter shrug. She got up and walked about the room—she seemed almost too big for it. She made a fierce gesture. "And I *wanted* to come home. I'd got tired and I was in a sort of mess . . . and I could have enjoyed it if they'd only let me. If they could only see they drive me away themselves!"

Rose was sympathetically silent. But the old magic of her listening worked. Jane's face cleared. She said, with that rare tenderness, that little considering smile:

"Oh, Posy, this tea is so good! You always were an angel of a cook. Are you happy now, cooking and weaving?"

Rose blushed. She thought of all the troubled past . . . but yes, she was happy. Jane said with grand, sweeping scorn:

"Weren't we fools!"

The sound that Rose had been listening for came now—the children's voices in the hall. They came in, eager, happy—stopped short, grew shy. This was Rose's moment of great pride.

"Children, this is your Aunt Jane."

It made her prouder still to see how nicely they acted. They were shy of Jane, but she was just as shy

THE KRAMER GIRLS

of them. After shaking hands with her, they retreated. Kramer wanted to go roller-skating with a "gang of kids." He pretended now not to see this splendid stranger and was even a little blustering. Rose kept her arm around him, and stroked his rough little sleeve, although of course she meant to let him go. It made her love the children all the more because she was showing them to Jane. Her whole life seemed enhanced and justified by Jane's approval. Marjorie Jane did not go. She, too, did not say a word, but she stood solemnly by her mother's side staring in fascination at Jane.

"They were darling," Jane said shyly afterwards. And when Rose assured her, "Margie Jane thinks you're wonderful," Jane was still more shy and pleased. She knew so little about children, she confessed. Rose had to smile at her efforts to talk to Marjorie Jane—it was as if she were trying to make friends with some little wild animal or bird. When Rose knew her two children so well! But she was pleased with the success of Jane's efforts. She asked the children, when they went to bed that night, "Do you like your Aunt Jane?" Kramer said, "She isn't our aunt." "No, but she's mother's best friend, so we call her that. Do you like her?" A brusquely shy, "Oh, I guess so!" was all she could get out of Kramer. But Marjorie Jane's brown eyes were large and solemn. "I like her. Mother, hasn't she got bee-yu-tiful

clothes! I think she does her hair so pretty, don't you, mother?" Rose told that to Jane next day, and Jane said, "The darling!" After that, Marjorie Jane was her worshipper.

"I *like* Archie."

Jane had followed Rose into the kitchen to say that. It made Rose's cheeks warm with a deep rose flush. It soothed and sweetened all the old pain. In spite of the cold white fire of her sweeping scorn which she could direct toward anything that seemed to her shoddy, Jane had a side of simplicity on which she could meet Archie. He was far more at ease with her than with any of the other girls with whom Rose had gone to college. Jane stood up for him fiercely when Rose told her how he hated to build little all-alike houses. Rose said nothing. But it confirmed her old sympathy for Archie. It seemed to bring back her confidence and happiness in her choice. New standards that she had been accepting lost their overwhelming importance—they were there, and she *had* to accept them (Jane didn't know all about her life) but they no longer seemed to cover up the validity of the old ones to which Archie still belonged.

Rose found herself wanting to tell everyone in the street, "My friend, an actress in New York, is staying with me!" She was proud to have Mr. Kessler and Mr. Cole meet Jane at the office. Rose did call up some of the girls—they both decided, giggling to-

gether like naughty schoolgirls, that it would be fun. Just as Rose had predicted, the girls were excited! Dot wanted to give a luncheon for her. "I thought—" Jane said—"they thought I was a renegade!" They were excited about having anyone who came from New York. It pleased Rose—no matter how Jane scoffed—when the reporter wanted an interview with Jane and when the President of the Womans Club wanted to know if Jane wouldn't give a talk—"and, my dear, you must come, too!" Rose had suddenly become popular with the great ladies of the town. Archie and Jane had a beautiful time talking about the methods of the Womans Club—Jane enjoyed Archie's little jokes, his queer little scepticism and independence that he had always kept. "I think Archie's a *darling!*" she told Rose. Most of the girls, Rose said, couldn't understand why she had married him—she always felt that and so did Archie. Jane was contemptuous. "*I see why.*" Jane let out all her extravagance, gloriously, in her scorn of their old classmate Ching Bangs, now graduated from a Y.M.C.A. secretaryship into presidency of an insurance company, toastmasters of all the Winthrop banquets, the great alumnus of Danford.

"Why did you go to Winthrop, Posy?"

"Well, it was Georgie," Rose answered. "Mostly, at least."

Jane's face softened. She had liked Georgie.

It was fun at the party, to go through this solemn pretense of being grown-up and Jane being a distinguished visitor . . . but they went home like two girls let out of school, talking and giggling. "But, you know, I like Mary." "Oh, I like Mary awfully well. I like all the ones I didn't like when I was in school." "Isn't it the truth? But Dot. Darling, you didn't tell the half, in your gentle fashion." In spite of Rose's compunctious tenderness of heart, she enjoyed the old sense of being mocking and aloof with Jane. It helped her to see the Winthrop girls in better perspective. She put in only an ameliorating little word now and then. When they got home, Jane made a lavish recital to Archie. He listened in delight, while the children asked funny little questions.

"But Jane, I really did have a good time!"

"Oh, so did I have a good time!"

She could keep her old affection for Winthrop, too. It had hurt her to feel herself growing away from it; and it seemed as if the girls themselves had forced her into a kind of hostility, because they still insisted that she must look at things exactly as she had done in college.

They couldn't get enough of talking. Washing the dishes, setting the table, cleaning the apartment on Sunday . . . they couldn't afford to be discreet; and

THE KRAMER GIRLS

Marjorie Jane and even Kramer listened just as Rose herself used to listen to her older sisters.

Jane said once, following Rose into the kitchen: "Rose, you don't know how often I think about Georgie. Tell me about her. No, don't if you'd rather not. But if you'd just as soon, I'd love to hear."

"Well . . ." Rose talked as she got her Sunday roast ready for the oven. "You know, it was a cancer. Georgie let it go too long." Yes, she told Jane, she thought Georgie had been happy when she had a profession. The girls had liked living in The Rapids. She had to talk through the pain of her knowledge of all her old rebellion against Georgie, and her realization—vague yet humble—of something bigger in her sister's nature than she had ever quite grasped . . . Jane listened, her eyes intent. She said with her fine, sweeping defense:

"I *liked* Georgie. She was too big for the place. That was the trouble. If she'd lived in the right time, and in the right place, I think she might have been a great woman."

Rose's lips quivered. "Georgie gave everything to me," she said. "I wish she hadn't. She cared for me too much. You know, Jane, I feel that if I hadn't always had Georgie back of me, if she hadn't done so much for me, I could have done more for myself."

THE KRAMER GIRLS

"Posy," Jane told her, "you would never have gone to college. You would never have this job you have now. You need poking up, darling, you must admit it."

"I know it. I do. But, even so . . ."

"She did more for you than you know, Rose Carpenter."

But still Rose's feeling toward Georgie was a kind of tangled, aching darkness, filled with hot gratitude, deep rebellion, and shame. In spite of everything, her tenderness was torn by the loss of Georgie. It seemed wicked that she could be working, and living happily, depending upon herself, with Georgie gone . . . for she felt that Georgie had wanted to do everything for her, had lived for her. Although Rose and Jane talked on—more happily now, recalling the wonderful time Georgie had had in Chicago—there was still the aching and almost smothering knowledge of all Georgie's generosity . . . how she used to give treatments to the whole family when they came to The Rapids, saying "Well you might just as well get rid of your kinks"; how she had read the advertisements in the papers and watched the stores for bargains for the children's clothes; and how, when she was dying in grim agony in the hospital, fighting and yet knowing the fight was useless, she had forced herself to plan for Rose's future—and Rose had not carried out that future at all. . . .

THE KRAMER GIRLS

But now that she had learned to live without Georgie, did she really want her back? Rose's heart ached.

"Who, mother?" Marjorie Jane was standing in the doorway. "Who?"

"Never mind, sweetheart."

"I know. Aunt Georgie."

But there was Annie. What was she doing? Oh, she couldn't be pried away from Hofthaler's although Rose had hated to think of her left in The Rapids. Now she was living with Mrs. Donohue, one of the other clerks who owned a little house. What fun it would be if Annie could come while Jane was here! Well, she could—Archie said with the slow smile that crinkled the skin about his blue eyes. He had just come into the room. He would drive over and get Annie. When? "Right now!" And he put on his hat and coat and went that very minute, Kramer loudly in his wake.

Annie came. They had put off dinner, and so she was in time to eat the roast with them. Her face beamed. She took just her old enjoyment in hearing Jane tell about the strange wonders in New York; she had all her old ingenuous interest in Rose and Rose's friends. It made Rose and Jane feel like two girls. Annie revelled in the children, revelled in being in Rose's apartment. Nevertheless, when Archie suggested again that she'd better stay, she shook her

head. "Hofthaler's can get along without you." No, they couldn't. It distressed her. Rose had to tell Archie to stop.

"But she's younger than either of us," Jane marvelled, when Annie had gone. "She'll be younger when she's eighty years old."

Jane declared that she was perfectly happy in her little room in Mrs. Brown's apartment. Rose followed her over there at night, to see if everything was comfortable, and then they sat on the bed talking. It was the one time when they were sure of no interruptions. There was so much that Rose felt she could tell Jane—this visit had unravelled tangled skeins of her old life; but she was back—and happily back—in her old character of listener and consoler. Besides, Jane's cold and sweeping candor was something that Rose had not the courage to match. In spite of Jane's greater sophistication, it was Rose who, in the end, kept her secrets to herself. Sitting up in bed, with her arms clasped around her white knees, over which the pastel-tinted silk fell in classic folds, Jane said many things to Rose.

"You know, Posy, sometimes I feel as if I couldn't stand the way I live. I feel as if I didn't belong anywhere."

"But I thought you loved New York," Rose said anxiously.

"I do. But you know, when you come from this

part of the country, you never really belong there. I love it and I hate it. So there you are!"

"I wish you'd come back," Rose begged.

Jane shook her head. "I don't belong here, either. Isn't it a funny mess? And isn't it funny that, until I went to New York, I always thought I hated it here? Now I stick up for it! But when I'm here I can't stand it. They're so smug."

That hurt Rose a little, and she thought it wasn't altogether true. But Jane didn't notice.

"And yet so many of the old gang are gone—the gang I first knew in New York. It changes simply over-night. It seems to me everyone's out for money now and nothing else—tearing down all the old houses and putting up sky-scrapers . . . All the old gang are married and settled down like everybody else. Sometimes I think I'll get out. Live in Europe. Oh, I don't know what!"

Rose listened in rather uncomprehending but loyal sympathy.

"And then, Rose, sometimes I get honest with myself and I know that it wouldn't really matter to a soul on this earth if I should kick off tomorrow—and when you're getting ancient and losing your looks, that isn't so good!"

"Your mother—"

"Oh," Jane said with a light bitterness, "I think my family would be rather relieved to be rid of me."

THE KRAMER GIRLS

"They wouldn't, Jane. You know it."

"Well, they've always disguised their love beautifully. . . . Oh yes, Ronnie. I'll never really get rid of Ronnie on this earth. I've made him marry that little cutie, and *still* . . . and oh yes, I forgot Harry Gilderstein!" Jane gave a cruel little laugh. "I might marry him. I suppose it's quite possible I will some day. I get so bored having him around under my feet."

"But, *Jane*—"

"Oh, I can't help it, Posy! I'd love either one of them if I could. But, Rose, I think I froze myself up when I was a girl. Or something did—my family. . . . Oh, I don't know!"

Rose was silent, her eyes dark and suffering. There were so many things she wanted to say. But she and Jane were too far apart. She knew things that Jane could not understand. She ached with the realization that in spite of her old adoration, the children, and Archie, were far more to her than Jane. Jane's eyes—blue, cold, small in her smooth round face—were fixed.

"It seems to me that nobody in this world cares for the *best* any more. They just take what they can get. Well, I won't! I'll have nothing all the rest of my days. Sometimes I simply feel like a lost soul."

Rose cried, remembering this, when she was in bed in the darkness. But in the morning, it seemed dif-

ferent. After all, Jane was successful, she was a person, she had had at least part of what she had wanted—adventures, adorers, strange splendor. In her coldly truthful heart, Jane might feel like a “lost soul” . . . but only at moments. Rose had felt shamed through and through by Jane’s fierce cry that she would have “nothing but the best.” Wasn’t that the way all people really wished they dared to feel? And Jane, lonely as she was, had dared to feel that way. But there was something more splendid about Jane—she had always known it—than about other people. When she thought of Jane, it was somehow like thinking of mountains in the distances . . . lofty mountains, bare but grand, with snow on their summits impossibly white and pure, and a cold, blue, shining sky behind them.

But the end of Jane’s visit left her strangely settled in her own ways. How queer! Because what she had feared, was that it would just unsettle her again. She accepted the compassionate tenderness with which Jane kissed her. But she herself felt compassionate, too. When Jane had gone, she loved Archie more, instead of less. She was contented—almost—to have Archie stand for one thing in her life, and Jane for another . . . and to be just herself, Rose.

5

The exercises were just ending when Rose and Annie reached the cemetery.

THE KRAMER GIRLS

"Well! You should have got here a little sooner. We had a fine program. Here for the day?"

Rose managed to decline most of the invitations. No, she had left Archie at home with the children—she must get back. That was taken as a perfect excuse by most of the matrons of Valley Junction, on the grounds that no man was to be trusted with children. Annie's eyes were beaming. She was at home again. But Rose had a strange feeling that this whole scene was only a picture. The crowd leaving the cemetery was only a picture crowd—family groups, the girls in light dresses, the Methodist minister who had delivered the address wiping his heated face—even though she knew so many of them: knew the quartette of which Charlie Rubel was the second tenor, knew Mrs. Little in her voile summer dress, Mrs. Pickering (a widow now) getting dried and chipper and shrill as a little old cricket . . . even Bert in the khaki whose seams were strained by his increasing plumpness. Bert's two youngsters clung to his hands as he spoke to Rose. Vivian's thin face was bright with rouge, and while she greeted the two sisters, her eyes were brightly scrutinizing Rose's city clothes. Lollie McCoy was pathetically glad to see them. Rose had a chance, for the first time, to see Charlie Rubel's wife. It angered her to hear the false heartiness of Charlie's greeting. "Well, well, well! How's the stranger? Still blooming just like a Rose!" He tried

to pinch Rose's arm, as he used to do Annie's, and she drew away with dignity. Annie was smiling painfully under the hurt of his patronizing and deliberate neglect. His wife stared at her with coolly insolent black eyes. Rose heard, with glad impatience, the sound of cars leaving. She did not like to come to Valley Junction any more. So many people had died, and others were getting older, more set in their provincial oddities—or else so changed that she no longer felt at home with them. But to Annie, the place would always be home.

Now that people knew they were in town, they would have to stop in at their old home and spend an uncomfortable hour making conversation with their father and his wife. Rose understood the old man better now, not because of intimacy with him, but because of the exigencies of her own life. But Georgie's lifelong resentment stood in the way of any friendship. Besides, he made no claim upon his daughters. Rose wished that when she came here, she might come invisibly.

But when the people were finally gone, the peaceful homely beauty of the place began to work its spell upon her. It was for its memories that she still loved Valley Junction. They lent a strange distant brightness to the May air. The place seemed to her, at first, all trampled and belittled by the noisy hubbub of the exercises with the commonplace address, the

bad singing, the marching of the veterans, the crying of babies. But when all the crowd had left except for little groups lingering around family lots, she seemed to lose the irritation of the noise and the banality, and to feel instead a poignant deepening of the old folk feeling. Flowers were warm and scented, beginning to wilt and droop, on the mounds. Flags in their hot, shiny colors were fastened above the soldiers' graves. The bridal wreath bushes were thick and white with bloom and dripped small petals. Beyond stretched the hot empty pastures, to the darkness of the woods.

"Oh, how beautiful!" Lollie cried. Rose had opened the big flower box, with the shiny green tissue paper inside, that they had brought with them from Danford, where roses lay packed and fresh on the feathery green ferns. "Oh, you can get such nice things in a big place!"

But she would not take the few roses and ferns that Rose carefully disentangled from their feathery mesh. "No, they look so lovely. I want you to put them on just that way. I decorated my lot this morning—Mr. and Mrs. Little brought me out." The neatness of the McCoy lot was Lollie's pride. The tall whitish shaft was one of the most imposing in the cemetery. The McCoy's were important citizens in their day. This monument, the markers that had cost a fair share of Lollie's minute savings, kept up her dignity

and self-respect. The five graves were all decorated, and at the foot of the monument itself stood a tall glass vase with a big bouquet of the early summer flowers that Lollie grew so carefully in her little yard back of the store "for Decoration Day."

She stood back respectfully while Rose and Annie decorated their own lot. The graves of the three little brothers were sunken and shaggy at the side; but in the center stood a big, sparkling stone of polished granite—"KRAMER"—that had been put up when her mother died. Her marker, and Georgie's were the most approved kind. Their mother's grave was slightly sunken, but Georgie's was rounded and smooth. On the mother's grave lay a tight little foreign bunch of homegrown flowers, of the kind Rose had seen in Catholic churches in the country. There were a few wilting pansies on Georgie's grave. On those of the three little brothers, nothing.

The sisters talked together about the distribution of the flowers. They put half the roses dutifully upon their mother's grave. Lollie, standing back, murmured:

"They look lovely."

Lollie and Annie wandered off together to look at the flowers. It disgusted Rose at first to see the older women's interest in the minutiae of the decorations—just what sort of bouquet Charlie Rubel had

THE KRAMER GIRLS

put on his first wife's grave, conjecture as to who could have put those snow-balls on that little, old, neglected grave of a child. But then she felt a tenderness and pity. Both these older women had so little. Rose in their place, would have starved. She was ashamed, and she bent down to spread out the roses on Georgie's grave . . . for it seemed to her now that she—her own generation—had had everything; and that there was no fairness in it, only the chance of time. . . .

She watched Annie's plump middle-aged figure; and all at once, it seemed to her a miracle that Annie had kept the clear, ingenuous eagerness in her eyes. So little contented her. The intimacies of the life at Hofthaler's; the feeling of belonging and being appreciated and reliable; and perhaps, too, a shy perennial interest in that one man clerk . . . Mr. Loeffler, at the drapery counter, final authority upon his subject in *The Rapids*, with thick white hair and eyeglasses and shiny shoes, and a regal unconsciousness of the interest of the women clerks. Not that Annie expected anything. But the presence of an unattached man kept the decorous scene of the store ever alive and interesting to her. . . . But Rose noticed how, when the two women stopped, it was near the lot marked with an oldfashioned stone: "FINCH" . . . that Annie's eyes strayed toward it, and toward the unexplained decorations on the graves of the father

THE KRAMER GIRLS

and mother and of Jessie, the dark-eyed sister, who had died of pneumonia. . . .

But was Annie happier than Georgie? For Georgie had not had even that. Had she missed it? Rose remembered that stormy, busy, generous life, with its shyly guarded personal truths, and she couldn't tell. She remembered—faintly, though—things that Georgie had said to her in the hospital, just before Georgie died: things about Archie, urging Rose not to stay away from him too long, as if Georgie herself had come to feel differently about Archie.

She thought:

"Georgie ought to have been the one to go away to school."

And she realized that she had never understood just what Georgie's life had been. Jane, in a way, understood better than Rose herself. What had been the course, the goal, the direction of that rushing, tumultuous vitality? . . . it was breaking into new places, it was going farther than her own, it was dragging them and forcing them all a little distance farther in its wake. And yet it seemed to Rose that Georgie had missed the one thing that she herself had found.

"Girls! Oughtn't we to go now?"

She was suddenly impatient of emotion. But as she waited, she saw, in a leisurely and shaded corner,

the grave of old Roland Yarborough's young wife, and the wilting syringa blossoms on it. Again she had that sense of ancient life, through her, defrauding Georgie . . . not consciously enough for her to understand just now. Old Mr. Yarborough had admired Georgie, but admired her as he might have done another man. Rose herself, with her blooming cheeks and dark eyes and the gold in her hair, had been a woman to him—she knew that now, had always known it . . . such another woman as his young English wife. They both knew something which Georgie had never known; and it was not fair to Georgie. She had been better than either of them.

"Girls, *please* come."

She was impatient to get away and drove so fast that poor Lollie held her breath. Nor would she come into the store, even for a glass of lemonade, much as it would have pleased Lollie.

"Well, I guess I'll stay here, babe," Annie said, a little shamefaced. "I'll take the train back to The Rapids."

"I wish you could stay all night," Lollie pleaded.

Oh no, Annie must be in that store on time tomorrow morning!

"All right, then. Goodbye," Rose said.

The older ones were content, after all, to have her go. They settled into the luxury of equal confidence

THE KRAMER GIRLS

in each other. Annie would enjoy the few hours in the shaded little rooms at the back of the store . . . laying her hat on Lollie's neat bed and combing her bobbed hair at the oldfashioned dresser; settling into the low rocking chair; going into tender and foolish ecstasies over the little spotted cat and helping to console it for its plaintive and uncomprehended exile upon the back steps; and then waiting while Lollie prepared the lemonade in tall new ten-cent store glasses and the plate of delicious cakes Mrs. Little had left that morning . . . with no one else in all the world was she on such terms as with Lollie McCoy. . . .

But Rose drove home with a bold and steady speed quite beyond her usual cautious handling of the old car. Rose had no knack—she had a funny, scared, feminine ineptitude with machinery. She was really afraid to drive alone . . . “But what I have to do, I can,” she was thinking with a kind of exultance. She was glad to get the whole Kramer family off her mind. Maybe she hadn't been worth the sacrifices of the older girls—maybe she had . . . she couldn't help it either way.

She was absurdly disappointed at first to come into the stuffy emptiness of her little living-room. Archie, she supposed, had taken the children for a walk or

to the movies. She smiled to think of the distrustful attitude of the matrons of Valley Junction. Archie could do almost as much for the children as Rose herself. Then she was glad that they weren't at home. It was sweet to have the place all to herself for a little while. She drew down the shades against the hot light. She could rest—tomorrow she would have to be at the office, as usual. She smiled, with a tender amusement, to see in what careful neatness Archie had left the little kitchen.

She took off her slippers, spread out her toes in their thin silk stockings, and lay down in tired luxury on the davenport. She thought back over all the men she had known—not an unusual mental occupation for Rose. Strangely enough, it was for Denny that she felt no special tenderness—and she had treated him worst of all! She was ashamed when she thought of how often she had longed, cravenly, for his possessiveness that would have left her no effort to make. She had grown past that. Denny had an official position in some insurance company now. He was a very solid citizen. She would always feel a little guilty and a little pitying—but need she? Somehow she had the feeling that he was not half so nice as he used to be. It was about Hammie that she thought the longest . . . and with a certain pain. . . .

Still, there was not a one of them who suited her

THE KRAMER GIRLS

so well as Archie. Not now, at any rate. Rose blushed when she remembered that she had felt superior to Archie for a while. Well, the girls had always brought her up as if she were something rare. The truth was—it seemed to her, in humility—she wasn't as rare as either of them. She had never done a thing into which she hadn't been pushed. She wasn't as rare as Archie, either. Archie was what he was—like Jane. And Rose was this or that as occasion forced her.

Still, somebody had to change, when everything was changing. She was an ordinary, nice, capable woman, at least—not so thorough a stenographer as Archie was a workman; not so bold a spirit as Jane. But there was no need for despising herself.

Her eyes rested on the big, beautiful photograph of Jane, rested with tenderness and adoration upon the coolness of the smooth pale face and pale shining hair behind the glazing veil of glass that caught a high light from the window. This would always be a home for Jane—this room, crowded and yet restful, that belonged to Archie and Rose. It was the family center now—for Jane, for Annie, for all of them. The beauty of Jane's photograph added a gift of distinction to the homelike, pretty, and yet quite ordinary room.

There was a photograph of Georgie, too, framed and hanging on the wall. But it hung in a poor

THE KRAMER GIRLS

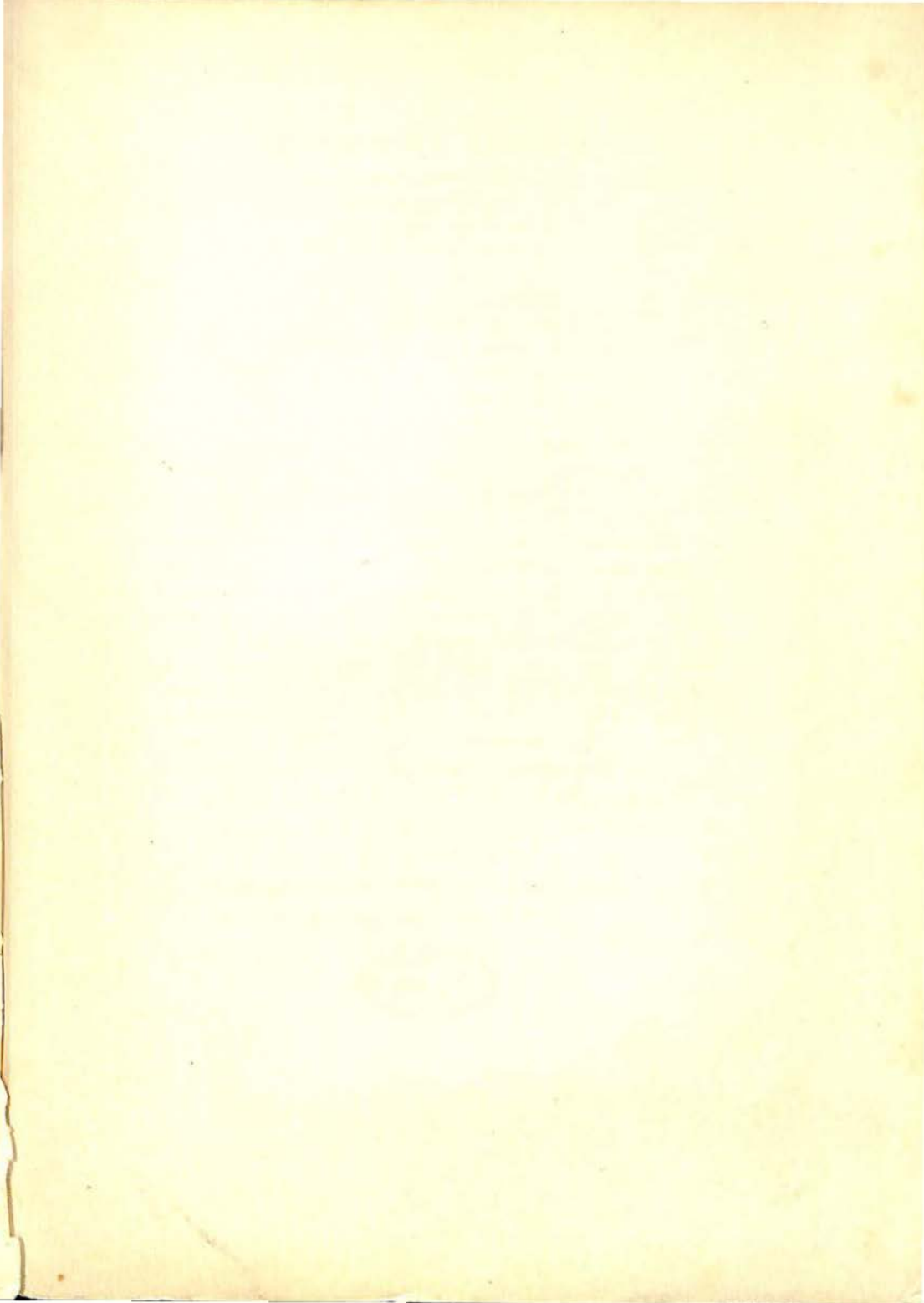
light—and it was such a poor photograph, anyway, doing no justice to Georgie, and taken by a provincial photographer who didn't really know his business.

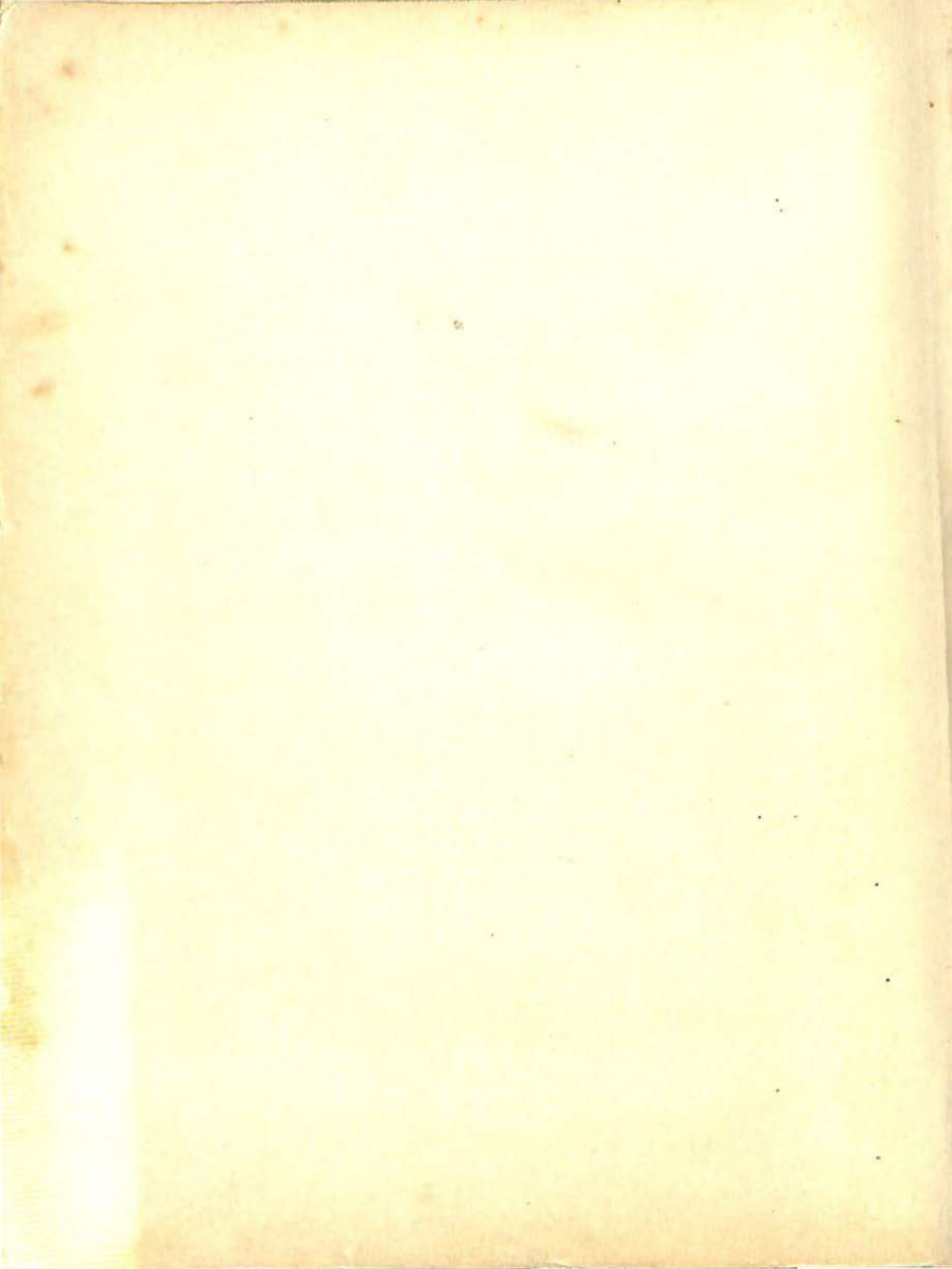
RUTH SUCKOW

*is a living answer
to those critics who
have damned the small
town as a place where no
artist can flourish. She was
born in Hawarden, Iowa,
and throughout her childhood
moved from parish to parish with
her father who was a Congrega-
tional minister, thus arriving at a
thorough knowledge of her region. Dur-
ing a stay in Colorado, she learned to keep
bees which she proceeded to do very profit-
ably at Earlville in Iowa. Her winters, however
she devoted to writing, and soon her early stories
were being published by H.L. Mencken in the Smart
Set, and the editors of other magazines were beating a
path to her door. Since then she has won a place among
the foremost American writers—and it might be pointed
out that though at present she lives in New York, and
though she has ceased to write exclusively of farming
people, she still claims a small town in Iowa as home.*

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