

WHAT HAVE I?

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To-day the Club met. It was called just that, The Club, needed no other name. Of all the women's organizations in Battle Bluff—and they were innumerable—this was the most desirable. Membership was a passport to the center of the center of social life in this old Midwestern river town. Except in a few special instances, it was passed on down from mother to daughter, or from grandmother, or grandmother-in-law; people were just coming to realize that The Club was an old institution. And by tradition The Club had a literary and artistic flavor along with its charming social intimacy.

Even The Club had not been immune from the troubles of the times. The Frank Hood affair, that had upset the whole city, had struck right into The Club and shaken its long-established security. Some of Lenora Hood's old friends had felt they could never bear to meet again without her. The affair had left bitterness behind it. People—even people like the Richmonds, the Kitchens, the Butterfields, the Beardsleys—hadn't known for a while where they stood or what they had. During the worst period of all The Club had suspended meetings, a thing that had never happened since its founding just after the Civil War. But of course for The Club to disband was unthinkable. The meeting this afternoon would be a gala occasion, held at the old Bliss home on the river bluffs, a mile or so from town: one of the most delightful old places in the whole region.

Winifred Serles—Mrs. Alton Serles—came rightly by her place in The Club. Her mother, Mrs. Dr. Wallingford, had been one of its most dearly loved members; and her grand-

mother was one of the founders. It seemed a very long time though since Winifred had gone to a meeting; not since before the break. She had been ill and forced to drop out of things. This past winter she had spent in Florida. Now as she dressed for The Club she felt excited and happy, much as she used to feel, eager to show the girls her new outfit and the improvement in her looks generally. She had stopped in Chicago with her married daughter Nancy, and the two of them had shopped wide and handsomely. This gown was a sheer, of dusty pink, with hat and accessories of iris purple. Pink had been Winifred's color in her girlhood, and it was as becoming now as then, together with the purple shade that went so marvelously with her dark eyes and wavy silver-streaked hair. In the oval-shaped glass above the dressing-table she and her costume were mirrored at their best. The new draperies, in white and deep red, made a rosy light all through the large room.

Winifred called, "I'm going to The Club now, Mrs. Bjornson." The housekeeper came to the door. "I needn't leave you any instructions though." Mrs. Bjornson gave a slight, kindly, professional smile. "Has Mrs. Bolton come?"

"Yes, she's in the den, Mrs. Serles."

The den was an odd little room just off the lower landing. Winifred looked in on her way downstairs. Edna Bolton sat there mending. Winifred nodded at her brightly.

"How are you?"

"All right, I guess." Edna stared with a slowly gathering, subtle contempt, as if daring her to follow up that question. Winifred caught the satiric undertone in Edna's voice.

Saying hastily, "I'm on my way to a meeting. But Mrs. Bjornson knows about everything—more than I do now!" Winifred went on downstairs. In that last admission she had been asking for a little acknowledgment of her own troubles, her illness and all; but she had felt rather than seen how Edna's

slight grimace in response turned into a contemptuous twist of the lip.

Her heart was beating very fast, and she had to stand a moment in the cool paneled hall, waiting for it to calm down.

She felt how lightly and quickly she had spoken, with what a false smile. She could hear herself go tripping downstairs, the high heels of her new slippers shining and unmarred.

She couldn't meet Edna's challenge. She *hadn't* dared go farther and ask about Don. She had to skirt round mention of Don's name as if blandly unaware that he still existed—and after she'd been so sympathetic. She had been glad to try to find work for Don Bolton when he had come over, saying somewhat defiantly that he was out of a job and the whole family almost down to rock bottom. It was the natural thing. Don's father used to do all the fixing and tinkering for their old neighborhood, and Winifred had known Don since he was a little bit of a fellow. Her mother had got all the Bolton kids to go to Sunday School—"gathered them in" was Mrs. Wallingford's phrase.

Winifred hadn't dreamed she was running into anything! Now it turned out that Don Bolton had been fired from the Richmond Plow Works and was bringing some kind of suit against Hal Richmond. The government was mixed up in it somehow, but seemingly on *Don's* side. Alton was Hal Richmond's lawyer, as he had been Grover Hurd's.

There were no explanations this time. Both of them remembered too well. But Alton wouldn't let Winifred employ Don even to mow the lawn. He would give no encouragement to that element. Winifred just couldn't think of Don Bolton as a part of a horrifying "element."

But she could when it came to Edna. It was awful having Edna in the house.

Winifred felt she would like to go straight back up to the den and have a real set-to with that woman! Because Edna was

mean, Winifred felt she really was, and she found herself almost crying with resentment. She had kept her promise the best she could, had given her household odd jobs to Don's wife, since she couldn't help Don directly—paying Edna out of her own money too. She had done everything for the Boltons that *she* could. The little bit she paid wouldn't keep them, but that wasn't her fault. Winifred had learned her ways from her father and mother, "some of the very best people who ever lived"—those who remembered Dr. and Mrs. Wallingford still spoke of them in just such terms: the kindest people, the most conscientious. She had always been on good terms with her help. There hadn't been any barrier except what she thought of as just the natural one. Winifred Serles had never in her life—no, not even under the scrutiny of a surgeon—been forced to meet anything like this hostile, cold, implacable stare. It judged and classified her according to some rule she had never learned. It opened an unknown dimension.

What was she afraid of? What could Edna Bolton do, poor thing? She ought to be pitied, Winifred thought, trying to find her way back to what should be her natural attitude.

The clock sounded a mellow chime. Yellow iris glowed in the old stone jar. These were her own surroundings, what she thought of as simple and real and down-to-earth after the rackety gaieties of a winter playground. She was going to The Club, into the midst of her own old friends, to have a delightful afternoon, to be welcomed back to the pleasant, natural ways of existence.

Marlin was waiting out in front with the car.

"Hello, Marlin. How are you?"

"Fine. Hello, Mrs. Serles. Swell day, isn't it?"

Alton took the small car downtown nowadays and left Winifred the Packard. Dr. Barnes said she oughtn't to have the strain of driving, and so Alton was hiring this boy to be on call for her every afternoon. He was a nice youngster, amusing

company as well as a good driver—played seven musical instruments and said he was “studying” to be an orchestra leader. Having Marlin was an extravagance, but oh, what a pleasure! Winifred sank back into the soft retirement of the back seat with luxurious relief.

But even now, as they swung round the curves under the scattered shade of oak trees out in the semi-rural wooded addition where the Serleses lived, Winifred had not come out from under the cold spell of Edna’s stare. Suppose, she couldn’t help thinking, *I* had to go out, if something happened to Alton, and grab what little I could from someone I hated, should I have the bitter resolution just to put it through? She felt chilled, pampered, feeble, and distraught. There was no reason for thinking about anything of that kind. It was morbid and she must stop.

“What’s that, Marlin?”

“I said, they’ve sure got swell gardens out this way.”

They were driving along the southwest road. It was a highway now and the old farms had been cut up into semi-suburban places, with small trim houses, and landscaped gardens—white gates guarded by wooden bulldogs, stony pools watched over by wooden birds.

“Don’t miss the turn, Marlin!”

Marlin leaned forward and peered, putting out his hand with a sweeping gesture as he turned into the narrow side-road.

“Gol-lee. This is sure some road.”

“Oh, I’ve driven out here, Marlin, when it was lots worse.”

“Sure enough?”

She had driven out in all sorts of conveyances and in all seasons—in the family surrey, in long-ago autumns, come to pick wild grapes; in hayricks, through the deep green summer; in bobsleds, on winter nights; in carriages, by moonlight, going to dances. The old Bliss place used to be the gathering spot.

The road didn’t look much different now—lonelier, if any-

thing; for people kept to the highway. There were deep mud holes that Marlin approached with elaborate care. Sometimes the car had to scrape through branches that whipped back and hit the glass. An old frame house some distance from the road seemed to be deserted. It stood dark and forlorn among its flowering lilacs.

Winifred began almost to dread seeing the old Bliss place. Flora Belle and Kerwin had been so hard up for a while that their friends hadn't wanted to come out and impose any extra burden. The two of them, brother and sister, had been living here together ever since the old General had died.

But the place when she came to it looked almost the same—except that Winifred hadn't remembered how beautiful it was. She used to take it for granted. The four-storey brick house, one of the few surviving pioneer mansions, was built on a lofty spot overlooking the river. The weathered white cupola rose embowered in great trees. On the sloping grounds, each under his own tree, stood the statues of the Civil War leaders—Grant, Sherman, Sheridan, McPherson under whom General Bliss himself had fought. "The greatest loss the Union cause ever suffered was in the death of McPherson. Do you realize that, young lady?" The girls used to think they would perish if they ever had to hear about McPherson again! The lilacs were blooming, a lofty hedge. Out at the back stood the windmill, which Kerwin had kept, since this was too far out for city water. The gasoline engine was pumping. At this distance, in this rural stillness, it had a romantic sound.

"Thanks, Marlin." She let him help her out with great éclat. "You did awfully well over that road."

"Oh, I like to drive something like that once in a while. Gosh." He stared about him frankly. "I didn't know there was any place like this."

"Why, Marlin!" Winifred was shocked. "This is one of the oldest places near Battle Bluff. The most historic."

"Is that right? It sure looks historical. Boy, look at the statues. Are they of anybody? Civil War! Gee, 'way back then?"

The great front door of carved walnut stood open. Mr. Hawley was holding open the screen.

"Why, Mr. Hawley, how are you? I'm so glad—" you're still here, she was going to say; but thought she'd better not. "You know me, don't you? Mrs. Serles?"

"Mrs. Serles. Oh, yes! Miss Wallingford."

Before Winifred had time to ask after Mrs. Hawley—and maybe it wouldn't have been safe anyway; who knew whether she was still alive?—Flora Belle came hurrying. "Winifred!" They kissed. "I'm *so* glad. We've missed you terribly. You know where to leave your wrap, don't you? *Darling* outfit. You look so nice, you sweet thing."

Winifred went on upstairs to the guest-room. The great rosewood bed was strewn with brightly colored spring coats and scarves; and in the cool, leafy, springtime light, in the large north room, women were moving about, crowding round the dressers, examining themselves in the wardrobe mirror, picking up and putting down some of the odd old knickknacks.

"Winifred!" "How wonderful to have *you* back!"

Others kept coming in, all with the same enthusiastic greetings. Just as in old times, when they had driven out for a dance, a group went out laughing and chattering together, down the broad walnut stairway toward the green-gold light from the open door.

Winifred went into the front parlor with Dorothy Kitchen. The new spring hats were all she could see at first! Then the girls crowded round, saying how joyful they were to have her back, how perfectly grand and absolutely stunning she looked. Mrs. Burnham smilingly rescued her and led her over to the old Victorian chair with the footstool.

"Girls, do let her get her breath. There, my dear. You have the place of honor."

Winifred could sit back and enjoy it. She could enjoy being in this house. During the worst period Flora Belle and Kerwin had closed off most of the rooms. But now all the great doors stood open. The hand-carved cornices, the mantels, the beautiful faded furnishings—all were visible in the afternoon light; and with flowers massed everywhere. People had urged Flora Belle at various times to have the two parlors thrown into one. But in holding devoutly to things as they had been in her father's time she had really preserved the character of the place. This arrangement was more interesting, more in keeping.

The girls began coming up to Winifred, telling her she looked marvelous, they didn't believe she'd ever been sick. She'd just wanted a winter in Florida.

"Yes," Stella Beardsley croaked, "and get out of serving on our renowned Civic Board."

"Is that so awful, Stel?"

"Is it *awful*?"

Stella launched into the tale, using gestures freely. The dramatic play of her features and the hoarse animation of her voice did more than justice to her mild story. The cerise of her hat was really too brilliant for her sallow skin. Her thin face was withering. The others laughed with the old indulgence, and Winifred smiled. But her glance wandered uneasily seeking relief among the other groups.

The whole scene gave her at first a sense of joyous reassurance. The break had been only temporary. The Club seemed just the same—except for the new clothes, and they were part of the pleasure. The organization took in all ages of course. There were still a few of the old ladies, her mother's friends, although these were becoming almost as rare as Civil War veterans. Winifred smiled across to Carol Mann, a chum of Nancy's, who had come in lately. Winifred's own crowd, those she called "the girls," were the matrons now and predominated. But all were of the inmost group where the associations

were oldest and the ties strongest in the end; although one might actually *like* someone better who didn't fit or belong. Now she was back in her own atmosphere. Here she was accepted at the natural value and needed to make no assertion.

But the program was about to begin. The women round Winifred's chair finally stopped talking, Stella giving the last of her recital in hoarse whispers . . . then Stella too scurried for a seat.

Mrs. Burnham was presiding. She took the chair that Flora Belle had placed beside the mahogany table near the long front windows. A sweet-faced, broad-faced, silver-haired, ample-bosomed woman of a generation older than Winifred's, she smiled with maternal complacency upon all. She called the meeting together by playfully tapping on the shining table top with the silver thimble she had reached over to borrow from the *petit-point* in Lucille Countryman's lap. The Club had none of the official atmosphere of the Federation meetings in the Civic Center. Members sewed or not as they pleased.

"Girls—most of you *are* girls to me," Mrs. Burnham began. "We hoped Marianne would give us the account of her visit to the Scandinavian countries. We're all so interested in the Scandinavian countries these days as offering really a *middle* way. Not that I don't believe the American way is best. As all of us do. But as I suppose you know, Marianne left this morning for the East. So I'm going to suggest—if our hostess agrees—that we take advantage of the day and spend most of our time in these beautiful grounds we all love so well and don't see half often enough."

"Then I'm let out!" a dark-haired girl cried, springing up.

"Oh, no, you aren't!" Mrs. Burnham waved her back. "Fellow-members, I was about to add that first of all Gail Salisbury has promised to play for us. And we all know what a musical treat *that* means."

The dark-haired woman, shaking her fist lightly at Mrs.

Burnham, made her way between chairs to the grand piano in the back parlor, where she was invisible to at least half of her audience. "Little girls should be heard and not seen," a voice cried mockingly. Winifred had thought at first, why, are there people in The Club I don't know? But now she could place them both. That rather distinguished-looking girl was Gail Salisbury, young Glenn Salisbury's wife, and the unfamiliar voice belonged to Mrs. Billy Butterfield: two young matrons, fully eligible for The Club, although both had entered by the mother-in-law route.

The members seemed to wait in their usual complacent, half-attentive hush. There was a slight tension of expectancy however. Gail Salisbury had studied in the East and abroad. If she hadn't married Glenn she might have gone on the concert stage. So people said.

Winifred sat softly and brightly smiling, thinking of all the times she had listened to music in these rooms. Then this music suddenly sounded, hard and expertly careless, in sharp dissonance. Winifred gave a slight gasp. It wasn't at all what she'd been waiting for or wanted to hear. It was like a rude assault. The discords struck against her tender flesh.

All at once without warning she was brought back to the edge of that hour when the ground had opened—the solid midland ground her own parents had cultivated for her benefit—and she had looked down in and seen the foundations of her established life. She could smell the secret earthy rot, here in the springtime air of the cool old parlors.

Winifred took hold of the smooth walnut arms of her chair. She closed her eyes—not for long; but in that tiny space of darkness she relived at a distance the hour that had been covered up and forgotten, because it was unnatural and couldn't have been.

Now it was clear how she had come up to it step by step but blindly, and every one of the steps incredible in itself. First there was the shocking news about Frank Hood. She couldn't believe it of *Frank*. But he didn't deny it. Rumors spread that others were implicated. Frank Hood was by no means the worst. Grover Hurd was the big boy who was actually behind the whole thing. It was partly because Frank didn't know so well what he was doing that he had got out in front. The others were better covered. It looked as if Frank would have to take the blow. But then, Winifred had very earnestly asked Alton and Phil Gibbons, who happened to be at the house, oughtn't people to *tell* what they knew—those who did know—and do what they could to help Frank? Both the men had looked very strange. Finally Phil (who had always admired her, always said Winnie Serles was his ideal of a lovely woman) had told her gently:

"Well, Winnie, I'm afraid it's more complicated than that."

Winifred couldn't be satisfied though—not this time. She couldn't bear to see what Lenora was suffering. Frank, it seemed, couldn't speak—couldn't, wouldn't, she didn't know what. There was something peculiar about it. Winifred had never dreamed of meddling in Alton's affairs. She was proud of the position he had reached. She confided in him absolutely. But she was driven to go to Alton at last and put it to him outright: if the other men knew anything to Frank's advantage why didn't they *tell* what they knew? Frank was their friend. Why should they all back up a dreadful person like Grover Hurd? It seemed to her they were being almost cowardly.

Winifred kept her eyes closed but she was conscious again of the flower-filled rooms. Could the girls ever have dreamed there had been such a scene between her and Alton?

She wasn't good at discussing business matters, and the details of this awful affair were still vague to her. All that had

clear import was the point they finally came to, the point between Alton and herself. She ought to have been warned by what led up to it, by the glint in Alton's eyes, by his too carefully explaining tone; but she wasn't.

"Win dear," he had finally said, "you *must* understand what an attorney's relation with his client is! We've gone over that so often, and you've always seemed to understand."

She thought she *did* understand! She had said, "I know that, Alton! And of course that's all you have to do with that terrible man. You had to defend him of course." And then she had gone on, never dreaming she was driving him into a corner. "But you've always been Frank's attorney too! Why couldn't you have defended him at the same time if they were both on the same spot? Why, I should think it would have been good *business* as well as common decency to defend Frank Hood while you were defending Grover Hurd!"

She had felt righteous saying this, and hadn't noticed how Alton's look had changed. Only afterward she realized that he had got up, taken one or two nervous steps, and then had faced her with a harassed yet grimly determined look, like someone unwillingly turning after being forced against a wall.

"Frank Hood," he said in a biting, deliberate way, "is a fairly decent fellow, if not too bright. I haven't anything against him. But that's beside the point. The point is, and you've asked for it, all this"—his arm had taken in the room in a sweeping gesture and he had actually glared at her as if she were only part of the surroundings—"this didn't come from playing ball with Frank Hood! Not in a town like this, with a man like Grover Hurd where he is in this town."

That was all, but it was the moment that had stood like something unreal and at the same time too acutely real. The look in Alton's eyes for that moment had seemed to open the very ground under her.

Alton's whole attitude had quickly changed then, and he was sitting beside her, his voice sounding husky, but still with an undertone of warning. "When I married you, and promised to love and cherish you, and told your dad that was going to be the main object of my life, I meant just what I said. I meant to do the most I could for my family and myself. For you first. All right. I have. And I will. You can depend on that. But you can take it that way or not at all."

No more was said. It had all been covered over, never referred to by either of them. Alton did everything he could to obliterate those words except to speak others. Winifred had somehow recovered herself without showing much hurt. The times were unnatural. Alton wasn't his normal self, or perhaps she hadn't been; she hardly knew which. But things would right themselves. All would be as before.

That was how it seemed and must be. No catastrophe had struck. She had been ill but she was recovering. Alton was better to her than ever. Their two children were happily married. Their marriage was the most successful in their crowd. They hadn't lost their money. All had turned out as in her happy girlhood dreams, when she was waiting in the warm confidence of the old home nest to be married to the grandest man she knew. No one had a suspicion of that one lurid hour . . . which perhaps after all couldn't have been real.

Winifred became conscious again of hearing the music which had passed into a quieter interval. She realized that she was sitting with her eyes closed, and that people might notice and think she was ill. She opened her eyes and glanced round very brightly.

But she had a curious feeling of being a looker-on returned from some strange planetary distance. She was seeing everything from a changed refraction of light, in this uncertain flow-

ery springtime. The air was warm and then suddenly chilled in the lofty rooms. The faces under the new hats had become remote.

Gail Salisbury's first selection had ended, and an encore was of course demanded and given. Winifred changed her position slightly. She couldn't see the performer, away off in the back parlor, but Mrs. Billy Butterfield was seated not far from her. The two girls didn't look alike—Jean Butterfield freckled and fair, while the other was the dark kind always described as "sophisticated." But Winifred put them together. Both were of a type that seemed to have grown up while she wasn't keeping count; and something about them daunted her. They took things for granted, but not the same things she did.

They brought an alien element into The Club. But The Club itself had changed. At first it had seemed to her the same, but now she could see the difference. New members had entered, old ones had dropped out. Old Mrs. Kearns, "Aunt Katie," The Club's veteran member, had died just after New Year's. How was it possible not to have missed Aunt Katie sooner? Ida Lauermann, Carol's mother, had moved to California. Lenora Hood had dropped her membership. She was gone.

Winifred felt her heart beating rapidly and disturbingly again. For a long while she had tried not to think about Lenora. She tried to think of her now as she would of anyone else. Things happened to people. Women in The Club had not been immune. Think of Mary Wilkerson, the terrible thing that had happened to *her*, husband, son, and son's wife and baby, all blotted out in an instant when another car had struck theirs. Mary's friends seldom heard from her now. Not that they didn't care! It was her own desire. Unhappy things must be dismissed as far as possible. It had been reassuring to know that Lenora wouldn't be at The Club. But Lenora's absence only made her more vivid. Lenora's friends couldn't get round her predicament just by not looking at her. It touched them

anyway. They were all mixed up in it. Was that what Edna's contemptuous look had meant?

The program ended and now they could go outside. Ava Gibbons came up to Winifred and said confidentially, "Do you want to go, Winnie? I noticed you while Gail was playing and I was afraid you were tired. I do think she plays difficult stuff—it's over *my* poor head. Well, you and I can go slowly."

"I don't want to make you go slowly, Ava dear."

"Oh, Winnie, I'm not so young and spry. I don't want to admit it, but I'm getting rheumatics. We'll both lag back and pretend we're studying the birds and flowers."

Flora Belle of course was leading, with Mrs. Burnham beside her, panting a trifle but smiling and resolute. Groups wandered off and lingered here and there, running to catch up again. Jean Butterfield cried that she must see the Generals. She'd heard about them ever since she'd been living in Battle Bluff. She dragged the younger women after her, Gail Salisbury and Carol Mann, running from General to General and staring in rapture; while the older women, following more slowly, laughed indulgently. They had gone through a period of thinking these statues were perfectly frightful, of saying Flora Belle ought to cart them out of sight. Some thought so still. And now hear these girls raving about them!

"Iron things are all back," Alma Kite was earnestly insisting. "People in the East have been collecting for a *long* time. They're getting terribly valuable."

"Oh," Stella groaned, "I can't keep up with old things getting valuable! *I'm* not getting more valuable, I know that."

"Now my dear, don't be so sure," Mrs. Burnham chided.

Dorothy Kitchen was crying that she wanted to see the grove. She hadn't been out there since they all used to go nutting.

"There isn't much to see," Flora Belle said sighing. "But then one can't keep up *every*-thing."

Ava and Winifred followed the others slowly. The larger group was moving on again when they came to stand at the edge of the grove. It looked denuded and scanty. Ava whispered, asking if she knew they'd burned this wood during the depression?—Kerwin and Flora Belle? It was actually their only source of fuel.

But after all, even this remnant of the grove was lovely, situated so beautifully here at the head of the slope. The sun made aisles of light between lofty trees. Winifred began to wish she could look at what she pleased without this running murmur of explanation. When they went over to the iris Ava said, "You know for a while Flora Belle sold these flowers on the highway. She tried to have a stand." And as they went down the slope of the great front lawn again, round which the Generals stood in a silent, broken ring, their bronze faces darkly inscrutable under their campaign hats—Ava murmured: "She would have taken tourists. But this place is too far from the road. They simply wouldn't come out here. They'd rather stay in some little dump. Well, if she and Kerwin can just keep going . . . The place ought to be bought for a museum." Now and then Winifred caught Flora Belle's voice. "Oh, we don't try to do anything new. It's all Mr. Hawley can keep up, and, girls, you don't know all *I* do. I suppose there are possibilities, but—" Mrs. Burnham interrupted warmly:

"This is just what we want. To have the old Bliss place remain as it is. Girls, isn't that true?"

Now the women in their fresh spring costumes began trailing, by twos and threes, up the slope to the house. Winifred and Ava were about the last. Candles were lighted and there was a fire of pine in the beautiful old fireplace in the front parlor. Carol ran to get Winifred's oval-backed chair. She said quickly, "I'm going to sit near you," and took the footstool for herself.

They always had such marvelous teas at Flora Belle's. "Does Mrs. Hawley still make all these grand cakes and things herself?" "Oh, yes. She has to. My dear, we don't have anyone but the Hawleys." "But to think you still have both of them. And to think of being honored with sherry from the General's old stock!"

"Why shouldn't The Club be honored?" Mrs. Burnham smilingly asked. "Such a band of queenly ladies."

"This is in Winifred's honor!"

They lifted the glittering small glasses. Stella shouted for a speech, but Dorothy quickly said Winnie needn't do a thing. All they asked was that she should once more grace their meetings with her charming presence. Winifred, sitting smiling, with a worshipping younger woman at her feet—adoring her because she was adored by her husband—was back in her own world. For a little while she had what she had come to find. The fire crackled with delightful incongruity in this flower-filled room with the deep-green May foliage outside.

But Winifred, even while she was having her close little chat with Mrs. Burnham, so soothing and bright—"How are you, dear? You do remind me so of your darling mother, more and more"—had begun to realize that Katherine Burchard was talking about something she wanted to hear. She wanted terribly to know just what it was, but she hadn't the courage to ask directly. There was a private, secretive air about the group. Helen Redding kept glancing over her shoulder. Katherine spoke with sober earnestness, in lowered tones. Winifred dropped Carol's soft little hand, murmured something about the fire, and moved her chair.

". . . Well of course I didn't see much of her. But I was de-ter-mined . . ." The narrative was lost while Ava told one of her stories about Dick, her young son. Then Winifred, sitting very still in the oval-backed chair, caught it up again.

"She has that terrible creature to look after. Oh, I can't describe her—I don't want to. Lenora has to be with her night and day. . . . I know my dear, but jobs aren't so easy these days, and Lenora hasn't had any training, people have to have *training*. . . . Oh, I admire her too. I admire her *ter-ri-fically*. . . . We didn't talk about things here. I don't know whether Lenora wanted to hear or not—or was even glad to see me. But girls I just *had* to . . ."

Mrs. Burnham had turned back. "Excuse me, Winifred." Winifred felt the comfortable plump pressure of her elderly hand. "You do have good help, don't you? It's so hard these days. But I needn't ask whether Alton has everything arranged!"

"I have marvelous help," Winifred said hastily. "She's had *training*." Her face flushed, but she went on with tales of Mrs. Bjornson's efficiency. She heard with wonder the self-satisfied sound of her own voice. The girls were impressed. All repeated how lovely she was looking. Those colors were grand for her.

"You never got that outfit here!" Ava said enviously.

"Well, Nancy simply forced me to shop."

"Oh, Winnie, tell us about Nancy!"

This she did joyously—but still with a nervous attention on Katherine's group. Stella broke in, and Winifred let her. ". . . Oh, yes she shows it. Girls, I was shocked. She looks really old. Oh, and you know, it was a shame because it did more than anything else to spoil her looks—but that front tooth of Lenora's, you remember it was knocked out when she was just a kid—well, the peg tooth is gone and there's that awful gap. . . ."

Winifred turned away.

She heard Mabel Richmond going on now. "It's the government. Our own government! That's the real enemy."

Ava shrieked, "For heaven's sake! *Don't* let's talk politics, economics, labor troubles, or war, or *mention* the President or

the W.P.A. Let's not bring such things into The Club. I make it a motion!"

"Second! Second!"

Mabel looked both hard and hurt. "We know how we feel about these things," Mrs. Burnham told her soothingly. "It's just that we don't want to arouse any differences, dear—if there *are* any." Jean Butterfield stared with big solemn blue eyes. Mrs. Burnham felt annoyed however. She too had caught some of Katherine's words—and she didn't feel it was quite right to bring such matters up just now; it was out of place.

She hastened to say to Gail Salisbury, "How do you keep it up, you wonderful child, with your beautiful house, and everything else? And you and Glenn never miss out on any good times. I think that's *so* wonderful."

Gail answered drily, "I don't keep it up."

"My dear, why say that?" Ava Gibbons demanded. "Now don't set your standards impossibly high! We don't ask you to be absolutely *pro-fes-sional*."

"I know you don't," Gail answered even more drily.

Winifred felt she couldn't listen to anything more. She was back in the midst. Her friends were her friends again, close, and not remote. But, whether they knew and admitted it or not, all were in a sense survivors. All must have experienced, in some degree, the same shaking of their own solid ground.

But were things really much different? Some had gone through bankruptcy but apparently weren't much the worse; where formerly they had kept two maids they now kept one. Stella's animation had worn thin, but even Stel couldn't keep it up forever. Flora Belle looked exactly as she had for years, wearing the same type of printed chiffon dress for afternoon, with her gray hair marcelled, and the marcel flattened down by a net. Mabel Richmond, the girls complained, howled constantly about how frightful conditions were, as if she were standing in her custom-made sandals on the edge of doom,

bitterly resentful, and trying to point to the personal enemy who had pushed her there. Here Mabel was sitting though on the Victorian sofa beside a bouquet of white lilacs, ostentatiously youthful, her hair blacker than black, in her red-and-white costume and lacquered red hat. It seemed to Winifred she must have dreamed that awful time.

But she kept having a strange feeling among her group here, her own rightful desirable circle, in the beautiful old house in its romantic seclusion, as if a gulf had widened between these bluffs and the smoky town, and they were set off here by themselves with the candlelight, firelight, and flowers.

“Winnie, haven’t you your car?”
“Yes, it’s here, Marlin’s driving up now.”

“Oh, I forgot you’re bumming round with a chauffeur these days! You’re as grand as Mabel, aren’t you?”

Winifred laughed. Mabel, in her brilliant red-and-white, was standing at a little distance. She was taking this chance to tell her troubles. Winifred heard the hard, aggrieved voice, caught the glance of the wandering, resentful eyes. But she didn’t go over although she realized that she had scarcely spoken to Mabel to-day. Guilt was heavy on her, because she was employing Don Bolton’s wife. Mabel would regard that as a traitor’s act. And it was perhaps according to some strict division of loyalty. The knowledge hurt Winifred, and she felt sickeningly that she didn’t like Mabel Richmond, never had—no better than she liked Edna Bolton. She really did like Don. She felt as if she were a tiny, soft, tame animal that had got helplessly into some gigantic trap.

“You have room, haven’t you, Winnie?”

Flora Belle had come up with Gail and Jean Butterfield. These two reckless girls had driven out without a spare and here was their car with a flat. Winnie quickly and generously

offered to drive them home. *Please*. She was ashamed to have this big car all to herself.

"Where do you both live? Of course I know where Gail lives, but—"

"I should think you wouldn't know where we live," Jean said, laughing, and gave the address. Winifred was really taken back. She hadn't been through that district for ages, but she had always supposed it was the jumping-off place. Billy Butterfield—Sherman Butterfield's son? Would he live in such a part of town, bring his bride there?

The bride seemed to feel no shame. She was still talking about the Generals. "Yes, he was stunning. But I want the little man. He would be sweet under our big oak tree." Now she turned to explain to Winifred how she and Billy had bought an old house out in the slums. "I want to prepare you for entering our depressed area. Gail's never recovered from the first shock. She thinks it's slumming to come to see *me*."

"It is," Gail said coldly. "You're W.P.A. people and I'm an old royalist. So is Mrs. Serles."

"Oh, I'm not anything," Winifred protested. "I don't know enough."

The girls both laughed, and Winifred felt all at once that they approved of her. On close view Gail Salisbury didn't look so formidable. Her color was bad—as so often with these pared-down girls who smoked too much and nourished themselves on green salads and black coffee. The dissatisfaction in her face was familiar. Jean's healthy good looks were reassuring in a different way, making it plain to Winifred's practiced maternal eye that—no matter how unorthodox her views—she had had the right things to eat during childhood. But it did give Winifred Serles a shock to learn that Sherman Butterfield's son was working for the government.

The shock was worse when they drove over ancient rail-

road tracks, sunk in deep grass, and on into the outlying river section. Then Winifred could scarcely hide her astonished distaste. Jean spoke with enthusiasm. This was the oldest part of town, older than the bluffs—as if that made it the best. A few of the original buildings were left. Of course there were the railroad tracks and some factories, but the district had kept a rural wildness.

“We can walk right down to the river, to the old landings.”

“And smell the nice little muddy-water fishes!” Gail said.

The houses, the shacks, the muddy yards, and weedy lots—they made Winifred shudder. And she was afraid to look at them for she wondered if Edna and Don might not be living somewhere out here, maybe in some place like that awful trailer. . . . Don had said they were going to lose their house. Jean told now, her eyes big and excited, how interesting it was in this neighborhood. They lived with people on the real bottom level, right among these people, so they got the chance to know them.

“What a chance,” Gail drawled. “No wonder I can’t compete.”

Winifred was too courteous to make any comment. And to her relief, she was able to admire the Butterfields’ house, to agree with the girls that it had good lines. She could say, with her own responsive charm, how interesting it must be to make an old house over—reserving her suspicions of what it must cost, sure that the plumbing could never be right. The large white house, still needing its second coat of paint, stood in forlorn seedy dignity in a big flat yard that had kept one magnificent tree. Winifred *could* admire the tree.

As Jean stepped from the car she cried, “Look over there in the lot! That old woman. She’s getting dandelion greens. *I’m* going to dig some. There isn’t any reason why Bill and I should buy our vitamins. Gail, I invite you to the mess. Greens are a mess, aren’t they?”

"Thanks. Yours will be."

Winifred laughed. She felt with tender relief that Jean was a romantic child—as much a child as Carol Mann, more than Nancy. Yet there was something daunting and disturbing in her eager freshness. Gail looked jaded by comparison.

The old woman stood up just then and turned to stare. Winifred looked straight at the sunken old face. The mouth was open showing a few hideous tusks. Winifred shuddered again.

She felt homesick for the comforts of her own lovely room. She was glad to get rid of both the girls, and to reach there.

"Gosh that sure smells, down there by the river," Marlin observed with gusto as he helped her out of the car.

Winifred said good-night gaily—she'd call about to-morrow—and walked slowly up the flagstone path between the purple and yellow iris in the cool sweet air of early evening. The front door was open, but no one seemed to be about. Alton was probably in the garden surveying his peonies. Thank heaven Edna Bolton was gone.

Winifred stood a few moments in the panelled hall looking into the mirror as she took off her purple hat. She saw the lovely faded image of herself that had changed little throughout the years. She recalled the approbation of her friends; she had always lived and moved in its warmth, and she hadn't lost it. A cold memory touched her. What was herself in this image, with its charming colors, against the dim background? Would that self still have sustenance if she were like the old woman out picking greens—if her streaked gray hair was cut raggedly with the scissors and a gap in her front teeth gave everyone a shock who saw it? How much of the "sweetness" and the "dignity" that had always belonged to her, as Winifred Wallingford, and Mrs. Alton Serles, was fed by her pleasure in her own physical loveliness? Could she live without that—if, instead of being pleasing, so that Marlin felt set up to

be driving her . . . She didn't finish it. But her delight in her new clothes was dimmed. She couldn't bear the faint, expensive scent of Nancy's perfume, that Nancy had given her because it went with the costume.

The question rose clear that for all this long while had been aching in her mind beneath the shifting confusions: suppose Alton *had* come out and told all he knew, paid whatever it would have cost to get clear of Grover Hurd—suppose we'd lost everything—could I have stood it?

Lenora had. What gave her the power? If she had any particular religion, nobody knew about it. Lenora was like the rest of them in that respect; went sometimes to the church where her parents used to go. Love of Frank? But Frank Hood was—oh a nice fellow, they all liked him; but if his wife felt any great devotion nobody knew about that either. The Hoods' one child had died years ago.

Once Winifred would have said—as Alton had said—that their happiness together was the main object of her life. It had included even her devotion to her children. But her love had been her trust in Alton—in his splendid competence and his worshipping care. It had been her security. The smitten ground had closed again but that one vision of old roots and rotted foundations had stayed with her.

It might be just that Frank and Lenora had been the ones hit while the others had all escaped. If they hadn't escaped—or if it should happen to them still—something might stand clear, if only for an instant. She might learn what she really had. Whether—though having dwelt, with becoming grace, in the pleasant places ordained for her—she really had anything.