

Weird Tales



ALL STORIES NEW—NO REPRINTS

MARCH, 1943

Cover by E. Franklin Wittmack

NOVELETTES

- FLIGHT INTO DESTINY** Verne Chute 6
After all, he had a right to go where he pleased—even if he was trying to run down a lost Viking
- UNDER YOUR SPELL** Henry Kuttner 72
Other mortals have tried to get the best of the gods, usually with disastrous results

SHORT STORIES

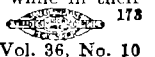
- A BARGAIN WITH THE DEAD** Seabury Quinn 22
Would the watching dead enforce a vow made so long ago?
- NO LIGHT FOR UNCLE HENRY** August Derleth 37
Is it possible for a dream to make a man do things alien to his nature—like killing?
- THE BOOK AND THE BEAST** Robert Arthur 44
If there is no natural explanation to a crime the authorities will invent one, rather than admit the supernatural solution
- THE WHISPERING WINE** Thorne Lee 51
Was there a connection between the ghostly babble of voices and those dead things in the forest?
- LIL** Mindret Lord 64
It was more than superstition that made her strike him when he tried to open the old make-up box
- A BOTTLE OF GIN** Robert Bloch 94
The doctor said there was gin in the bottle—or did he say djinn?
- THE WIND** Ray Bradbury 106
He was tracked across the world by the damnedest, biggest prehistoric killer that ever hunted prey
- COREY'S CAT** Harry Raymond 114
It was an ideal vacation spot; nothing to worry about. That's what he thought!

VERSE

- A VASE FROM ARABY** Leah Bodine Drake 69
- FROST DEMONS** Joseph C. Kempe 93
- NECROMANCY** Clark Ashton Smith 105
- SUPERSTITIONS AND TABOOS** Irwin J. Weill 70
- THE EYRIE AND WEIRD TALES CLUB** 121

Except for personal experiences the contents of this magazine is fiction. Any use of the name of any living person or reference to actual events is purely coincidental.

Published bi-monthly by Weird Tales, 9 Rockefeller Plaza, New York, N. Y. Reentered as second-class matter January 26, 1940, at the Post Office at New York, N. Y., under the act of March 3, 1879. Single Copies, 15 cents. *Subscription rates:* One year in the United States and possessions, 90¢. Foreign and Canadian postage extra. English Office: Charles Lavell, Limited, 4 Clements Inn, Strand, London, W.C.2, England. The publishers are not responsible for the loss of unsolicited manuscripts although every care will be taken of such material while in their possession. Copyright, 1943, by Weird Tales. Copyrighted in Great Britain. Title registered in U. S. Patent Office.



*Alone in the empty dwelling she felt the presence of one of those things
our reason tells us is not there, but which our nerves and senses
proclaim beyond all possibility of denial.*



A Bargain With the Dead

By SEABURY QUINN

MATILDA knelt on the first of the three steps leading to the chancel, her hands joined palm to palm, her fingertips just touching the dimple that cleft her chin. The altar was ablaze with candlelight, decked with roses

and white lilac as for a wedding, and the scent of flowers mingled with the incense. From the grilled stalls where the choir sisters knelt the muted voices came as softly as a light breeze sighing through an enclosed shaded garden:

*. . . the Holy Spirit shall come upon thee,
And the power of the Highest shall over-
shadow thee.*

Alleluja!

The four bridesmaids with ceremonial overveils of crimson crêpe above their veils of black bunting had fallen back and grouped around her in a semi-circle. One had the Arum lily she had held in her right hand when she entered the chapel, another the tall lighted candle she had carried in her left, the third had taken up the silver alms basin to catch the hair that would be cropped with the long shears held by the fourth when her profession had been made. The chaplain, looking rather hot and uncomfortable in embroidered chasuble and Jerusalem cope, was bending over her. "Matilda, wilt thou freely and without reserve vow holy poverty unto the Lord?"

She heard, but dimly, hardly comprehendingly, as if the question had been whispered at her bedside while she was still asleep. It all seemed so unreal, so like a dream. She might have been an actress in an unconvincing play, or perhaps a real person in a world of gentle but uncomprehending phantoms. Why, she asked herself almost impersonally, was she there? . . .

Ever since she could remember Matilda Johnstone had known she was different from other girls. Other children played and romped, she walked sedately at her mother's side. Other little girls had frilly, lace-trimmed under-pretties, sometimes with satin ribbons on them. Matilda's little nainsook waists and panties were severely, plainly utilitarian. Other little girls wore socks or sometimes ran in barefoot freedom. Summer and winter Matilda wore long, heavy, ribbed stockings of black cotton and high-laced boots. At an age when other little girls were reveling in the adventures of Dorothy and Toto in the Wonderful Land of Oz she was memorizing the Book of Common Prayer and learn-

ing the hymnal by rote. She never had a chum or playmate, for until her twelfth year her mother acted as her teacher. A very strict and most efficient teacher. She spoke French and Spanish fluently and read Greek and Latin texts at sight. Algebra she mastered by her tenth birthday and plane geometry before her twelfth.

At thirteen she was entered at the school kept by the Sisters of Nazareth at Harrisonville, New Jersey, where she boarded the year round and studied without intermission. By the time she was fifteen she had absorbed all the sisters had to teach and went back to her mother's house, which could be called a home only by the most torturing stretch of courtesy.

IT WAS a small, forbidding frame cottage with a frowning doorway and an air of almost sinister silence. The shingle roof was grayish-brown with age, the clapboards wanted painting, the steps that led up to the narrow porch were weather-warped, and some of their planks were loose. Inside the place seemed musty, as if it had been shut up a long time. In every room there was a smell of dust and scuffing leather, mildewed fabric and decay.

After the cleanly brightness of the convent school the house was like a prison and the silent, watchful-eyed woman who had met her at the station like a wardress or (she thought with a convulsive tightening of her throat) a mad woman who had somehow contrived to secure custody of a sane person.

"You do not care for it here, do you, Matilda?" asked her mother after dinner on the second day of her return. The meal had been a silent one preceded and followed by prayers of thanksgiving the length and eloquence of which were out of all proportion to both quality and quantity of food.

"Well, frankly, Mother, it isn't very

cheerful, and you seem to lead such a lonely life—”

“We are withdrawn from the world, child. We have no need of human friendships.”

“The sisters at Mount Nazareth are withdrawn from the world, too,” Matilda began, and stumbled on her reply. For the first time she realized her mother’s eyes were curiously pewter-gray and had a trick of sliding away obliquely to lose themselves under their lashes, like someone peeping skillfully beneath the drawn blind of a window.

“The sisters?”

“Why, yes, they—”

“Perhaps you’d like to live with them? Be one of them?” The question was casually put, almost too casually, for the momentary brightening of her mother’s eyes betrayed some inner, secret excitement.

Matilda had not thought of it. She had been eager for the world as a young bird for its first flight, but at the question she compared the damp, cold cheerlessness of the house with the nunnery where the white-robed sisters passed along the phlox—and zenia-bordered sunlit walks as they read from their books of hours, or went silent-footed about their duties in the rooms and corridors, or wafted quietly as dedicated ghosts, hands hidden in the loose sleeves of their habits, to chant the offices of nones or compline in the chapel. “Yes, I should,” she answered almost sharply. “I’d love it.”

“You’re sure of that?” Her mother’s voice was low, but her eyes were on her with a hard insistence.

“Of course.”

“You’ll swear it?”

The intent, almost eager look in her mother’s face startled her, but she kept her voice controlled and level. “Yes, Mother, if you wish it.”

Mrs. Johnstone propped the family Bible on the seat of the dining chair before

which Matilda knelt as before a priedieu, leafed through it till it opened at the twenty-third chapter of the Book of Deuteronomy, and pointed to the black-letter text of the twenty-second verse: “When thou shalt vow a vow unto the Lord thy God thou shalt not slack to pay it, for the Lord thy God will surely require it of thee. . . .”

“You understand that this is absolutely irrevocable, of course?”

“Yes, Mother.”

“Then lay your hands upon the Book and vow as you have hope of everlasting life that when you are eighteen you will present yourself as an aspirant at the convent at Mount Nazareth and progress through postulancy and novitiate to your vows of perpetual obligation as a nun.”

“I vow to do so, Mother.”

“And may the Lord do so to me, and more also, if aught but death deter me from the keeping of this, my solemn vow and oblation,” her mother dictated.

“Amen,” responded Matilda and bent to kiss the page.

HOW Janet Minchin came to marry Evans Johnstone was a mystery inscrutable as one of faith. A gentlewoman leaving home and family to follow after a gypsy would have seemed scarcely more incongruous. Her father had been vicar of an obscure North Country parish, a fragile man with thinning fair hair and eyes that glowed with mystic fervor as he expounded a theology as narrow as the grave, and as harsh and inexorable. His ghostly devotion centered on High Church, his earthly duty was to High Toryism and the House of Lords, especially the Lords Spiritual.

Janet had been thirty when he died, poor as any mouse that foraged in the sacristy, and her character and habits were already moulded by her background. She was piously reverential rather than religious.

When Evensong was intoned by the young Oxford esthete who had taken her father's place she felt a glow akin to exaltation as he stood before the altar rail and raised his hand in benediction; at the solemn celebration of the Eucharist she knew positive ecstasy. Had it been possible for her to join one of the Anglican sisterhoods she might have spent a life of negatively peaceful cloistered happiness, but however much the sisterhoods might have been preoccupied with spiritual considerations they also had a practical and worldly side. Unlike this Church they received no support from the Crown, their endowments were few and small and their incomes uncertain. The woman who aspired to membership must have a dowry of at least a hundred pounds. All told Janet's capital was less than twenty. She was well educated in a noncommercial sort of way, with a wide knowledge of things that constituted culture, and none at all of things concerned with the business of life.

She was also obviously well bred, a perfect example of the British middle class. So presently we find her name inscribed with those of other "gentlewomen in reduced circumstances" on the rolls of Bernstein, Wallace & Macumber, placement specialists, and later still we see her installed as nursery governess in the near-palatial duplex apartment of Nathan Walitzky in East Sixty-seventh Street.

It was on a bright May morning she met Evans. The trees in Central Park were burgeoning and sparrows bickered noisily as they set up housekeeping. Open-topped green buses waddled up and down Fifth Avenue like dowagers in flowered bonnets and the freshly turned soil of the flower beds smelt sweet and warm. The ten-year-old Walitzky twins Sylvia and Valérie played shrilly and—for a wonder—amicably on the crocus-studded grass a dozen yards or so away, and Janet put the tooled red leather book of poems down while she

wiped a nostalgic tear away. She had been reading:

*Go down to Kew in lilac-time, in lilac-time,
in lilac-time;*

*Go down to Kew in lilac-time (it isn't far
from London!)*

In point of sober fact cold rain was probably sweating against the windows of Kew at that moment, and wind as bitter as a witch's curse was keening through the trembling trees while flocks of rain-drenched starlings huddled disconsolately beneath the eaves. Moreover, Janet had never seen Kew, or London, for that matter, but that made no practical difference. Kew was England for her, England was home, and she was racked with home sickness.

She looked pretty and appealing with her smooth fresh complexion and blue-gray eyes heavy-lidded and agleam with tears. But her real beauty was the long fair hair drawn back as smoothly as a Madonna's and arranged in a loose figure 8 at the nape of her neck. Seeing that wealth of jonquil-colored hair one overlooked the fact that her features were so finely cut they verged on sharpness, that her lips were a trifle too thin and her body one more of lines and angles than of curves.

Seeing the glory of her sun-haloed hair the young man walking southward through the Park came to a halt beside her. "Is anything wrong—can I help?" he asked.

SHE looked up quickly, ready to repel impertinence, but the small frown gathering between her slim brows gave way to a slight smile as she took stock of him. He carried himself well, not slouchily like most Americans, there was no stoop in his back, and his tweeds had the shade of peat-smoke in them and the smell of moss and turf about them. His face was

thin. Two lines almost like saber-scars ran down his cheeks and his square hard-shaven chin was firm as his lips were whimsical. His eyes were keen and rather tired, but there was a frank, friendly smile in them. There was about him the look of close acquaintanceship with many places and all types of people.

"There's nothing wrong that you can help," she told him as the ghost of a smile formed at the corners of her mouth. "I'm just homesick, and miserable."

"H'm'm. English, aren't you?"

"Of course." She seemed astonished and mildly offended at the question, as if he'd asked if she were honest or literate.

"I know just how you feel. I was in England once, and it seemed the boat for home would never sail."

"You"—incredulity put a slight edge on her voice—"you mean you *wanted* to leave England?"

He grinned, and there was something impish in his face. "Well, it wasn't so much I wanted to leave England as that I wanted to come home. It doesn't matter greatly where home is, we always want to go there, don't we? But you'll get used to this in time. Why, after you've been in New York a few years you'll be as eager as anyone to catch the next boat when you go back to England for a visit. Keep the chin up."

"Thank you. I'll try."

He touched his hat in farewell, then with an air of almost boyish diffidence, "I hope you didn't mind my speaking to you. You looked so wretched—"

Her manner grew a little constrained. One had to hold these over-friendly unconventional Americans at arm's length. "I don't see why I should object. I am a lady and you seem a gentleman."

"Thanks," he answered ironically, then, with quick generousness, "I hope I helped a little. It's dreadful to be alone in a strange land with no one to talk to."

She arraigned herself at the bar of her conscience. For an English gentlewoman to permit a stranger, and especially an American, to speak to her was definitely a solicism. She must never speak to him again. Not that there was much danger of it. New York had seven million people. Their meeting had been a chance one. It was unlikely they would ever see each other. . . .

Next morning she was at the same bench at the same time and before half an hour had passed he came swinging down the path. Her heart beat faster and she turned her head aside, but, "Good morning," he greeted, and she looked up, blushing hotly. A little smile came into his eyes, found its echo in hers, and—it was suddenly as if they'd known each other always.

Their intimacy ripened with the summer. From casual meetings they progressed to a definite schedule, within a week they called each other by their first names; before June roses had supplanted May lilacs the diffident handclasps with which they met and parted had given way to kisses. Not passionate embraces, to be sure, but kisses, nevertheless, with none of the essentials missing. They were married in September.

WITH just a little more patience and understanding, a little more bearing and forbearing, their marriage might have been ideal. But these were qualities neither of them possessed.

Evans was assistant city editor of *The Crescent*, and had fallen heir to more than his share of the newspaperman's common legacy of human frailties. He was cynical and utterly without illusions, nervous, and more than safely fond of drink. The piety that was her heritage and background irritated him. "Faith is believing what you know ain't so," he liked to quote. The ritual of the high church where she worshiped he characterized as a twelfth car-

bon copy of Roman Catholicism. Pragmatic and objective in his outlook on life he could not understand that what was meaningless theatricalism to him was a spiritually satisfying drama to her.

When he came home in a jovial mood, comfortably fuddled with Scotch, she reproached him for swinish drunkenness; when he secured tickets for some musical comedy or revue she often refused to go with him, suggesting that he take some of his bottle-companions to the vulgar exhibition. Her whole life had conditioned her to regard inhibition as an end in itself. The world, the flesh and the Devil composed for her the hideous trinity of sin, and that which savored of the world or flesh, was to be feared and shunned and hated as much as Apollyon himself.

So they tore love to pieces pulling stubbornly in opposite directions. Evans lapsed into a state of almost constant alcoholic sulkiness, but if he repented his bargain he never said so; never reproached her. As for Janet, she both loved and hated Evans, but gradually the dreadful realization grew that she hated him more than she loved him.

Fate broke the deadlock. The signals on the fog-blinded Third Avenue L went wrong one rush hour, the wooden cars fell crashing to the cobbled street, and Evans' was among the bodies taken to Bellevue.

The city editor, who knew something of how things stood, attempted to be kind and tactful. He called the Reverend Goeffrey Pancoast, rector of Saint Simeon's, asking him to break the news to Janet. And the cleric, more concerned with souls than bodies, perhaps smarting under the sting of some things Evans had said concerning ritualistic Anglicanism, ended his message of tragedy with the dreadful announcement, "He died in mortal sin, my daughter."

Then Janet knew that what she had thought hate was just the sting of pique

and wounded vanity, that always and forever she would love Evans; that while she lived her heart would cleave to his memory as the tides swing to the moon. Beside his welfare nothing mattered. She remembered Father Pancoast's sermon of Ash Wednesday: "When the poor damned have writhed a hundred million years in the unquenching flame, if they call through the glowing grilles of hell, 'How long?' the answer will come back, 'Eternity has just begun!'"

She would gladly have offered her own body to be burned in his stead, but such vicarious atonement was impossible. Could she retire from the world into some sisterhood and spend her life in prayer and works of reparation in penitence for him? That too was denied her, for Evans' child was stirring underneath her heart, she must provide for it; look to its spiritual and bodily welfare.

But if her life were circumscribed the child's was not. Through it the father's tortured spirit might find surcease from its torment and come at last to everlasting bliss. With the insurance money Evans left she moved to an unfashionable suburb, bought a cottage and husbanded the fund like any miser. When presently her daughter had been born her life was mapped out in advance, plotted and charted for her as a ship's course is by some master mariner.

Now the consummation of her plans was almost reached. Brought up unspotted from the world, immune to earthly love and guarded carefully against inordinate affections, Matilda had vowed to give herself to religion, to be a reasonable, holy and living sacrifice for the sins of her father. She would not be eighteen for three years and the Sisterhood of Nazareth would not consider an aspirant of less age, but with care the little money remaining could be made to support them and leave sufficient for Matilda's dowry when she entered the order.

HEADLINES bawled and shrieked across the front pages of the newspapers. Bull-voiced newsboys amplified the details of the tragic ending of an era: "Stock Market Crashes! Banks Fail!" *Variety*, that buffoon among journals, grinned Pagliacci-like through its dismayed panic and quipped, "Wall Street Lays an Egg!"

The cry that brought Matilda from the kitchen to her mother's side was half a sob, half terrified exclamation. Janet Johnstone sat by the window, her face like weather-grayed plaster, tears rolling down her cheeks. "The finger of the Lord has touched us, child."

"Why, Mother—"

"Our money—all we had to live on, all I've hoarded for your dowry when you are wedded to the Heavenly Bridegroom—is gone. We are paupers." There was flat and final tragedy in the words. Their tone was empty as the echo in the craters of a dead world.

"But we'll not starve, Mother. I learned stenography and typing at the convent. I can take dictation in three languages and transcribe ninety words a minute—"

Something—not hope exactly, but something akin to it—brightened in her mother's eyes. "You might support yourself with your typing, but I'd be a burden to you, and your dowry—"

"We can manage that, too. I don't know what they'll pay me, but we can live on it, and put a little bit aside each week until we have enough. They only want two thousand dollars, and after all that isn't very much. Suppose it takes us twenty years to save it. What of it? I'll be only thirty-five by then, and that will leave almost a lifetime to devote to religion—"

The urge to take her daughter in her arms and cuddle her against her breast was almost overpowering, but Janet fought it down. Since Matilda had been a small, red, wrinkled bundle, mostly squirms and

squalls, she'd yearned to fondle her, to hold her tightly to her bosom and whisper the nonsensical small things that mothers have whispered to their babes since the Angel of the Flaming Sword was set on guard beside the Gates of Paradise, but that had been her cross, her penance. Matilda had to be brought up unspotted from the world, free of inordinate affections. Love begets love and tenderness breeds tenderness. Suppose her daughter learned to love her so she could not bear to leave her? Would she not then be guilty of compromising the avoidance of her vow? Would she not be doubly a traitress, false to her compact with heaven, false to Evans who every moment suffered torment where *Their Fire Is Not Quenched* and yearned for the release his daughter's oblation would some day buy for him?

"You are a good girl, Matilda," she said, and added as an afterthought, "but be sure to stack the dishes neatly in the pantry tonight. Last night you mixed the Dresden with the Minton."

FOR hours Janet had walked a frustrated diamond-shaped pattern in her room. Now she was so tired, fatigue had become almost impersonal, and her legs moved with a jerky motion suggestive of a marionette.

Her hands and feet were numb as if they had been chilled for a long time, her brow and cheeks were burning, and there was a fine pain in the hollows of her shoulders. Her eyes scalded with tears that would not come, and there was a scratchy, sandy feeling in her throat. From every corner of the chamber shadows leered at her, ugly, faceless things that seemed to have the power to outstare her. What if she lived to be an old woman? What if she fell ill and doctors' bills ate up the dowry fund? What if she lay a helpless paralytic in some hospital when the time had come for Matilda to be received in the

sisterhood? Could she—*dared* she—live to let that come to pass?

She fumbled for the matches, lit the candle on her desk and scrawled a line across a sheet of note paper: "Remember your vow." Then she put a shawl about her narrow shoulders and walked without haste but with no air of leisure toward the railway station.

A dawn breeze whispered through the quiet streets like a spirit walking, and in the east there was the faintest streak of light. Posts, fences, letter boxes became dimly visible and the wheel-polished rails that led toward New York gleamed like silver in the gloom. She stepped down between them, began to walk.

The ridge that marked the Palisades was faintly luminous along its top, soon its blueness would be brightened by the first rays of the sun. "I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills from whence cometh my help," she murmured as the cricket-chirp of rails that felt the coming burden of the train became louder. "My help cometh from the Lord which made heaven and earth. . . ."

The locomotive's long-drawn scream of protest was like a blast of wind become hysterically articulate. The grinding clatter of the brakes was like the clang of armored men who meet in battle, and the hissing of the steam like the heart-broken, self-accusing sigh of one who has unwittingly caused tragedy.

"Jeez!" said the fireman.

"She must 'a' been deaf as a post. I di'n'd see her till we wuz a'most on top' o' her, but if she'd heard th' whistle she'd 'a' had time to jump clear!" the engineer defended.

"This'll make us half an hour late!" the conductor complained.

The brightness of the hilltops had the sheen of burnished copper now, and streams of luminance washed down into the lowlands. The sun, a disc of glowing

scarlet, poised on the rim of the horizon like a plate poised by a juggler. Full day had come, but for Janet Johnstone it was the night that has no dawn.

EIGHT years in New York had worked startling changes in Matilda. The lanky, spindle-shanked youngster had blossomed into an exceptionally attractive young woman with waving light brown hair which she wore braided in a heavy coronal, a broad white forehead, wide-spaced hazel eyes that seemed to deepen their shade as you looked into them, and a mouth with full red lips that seemed to turn up at the corners. Her chin was small and pointed, but cleft by a deep dimple, and delicate hollows showed beneath her cheek-bones. There was not an ounce of surplus flesh on her small bones, but she was not thin, only finely modeled with that graceful slenderness the old Greek sculptors loved to give their nymphs and lesser goddesses.

Depression held the country in its grip when she came to the metropolis, but a girl who could take notes in English, French and Spanish at a hundred and eighty words a minute and transcribe them tirelessly at a rate of ninety—and was willing to work for fifteen dollars a week—did not long lack employment.

She had been decidedly a country mouse with shy eyes and a hesitant, embarrassed smile that seemed to ask indulgence for her unsophistication. In a vague way she knew there were such things as lipsticks, vanishing creams, depilatories and nail polishes, but the nearest she had ever been to any of those vanities was when she passed them in some drugstore window. She was familiar with the works of Epictetus, Martial and Cervantes; but she had never heard of Steinbeck, Hemingway or Faulkner. She had never owned a pair of silk stockings, and the modistes of her native heath had striven with amazing success to

hide the gracious lines of her trim, small figure.

Now the cocoon had burst and the grub come forth a moth. A natural flair for layout and an uncanny sense in choosing type faces—perhaps a legacy from her father—had taken her from the typewriter desk to the copy department. She had a flat-topped glass-covered desk on which an office boy each morning put a bud vase with a single rose in it, and which bore a neatly lettered bronze sign, MISS JOHNSTONE. She had achieved a style, the definite New York look. A man could not have told just what her distinction was based on, but a woman would have known at once. She had that undefinable but femininely-understood quality called *chic*, which is something you either have or don't have, and about which no more can be done than about the color of your eyes. Dignified, entirely self-possessed she was, but far from prim and only unobtrusively religious. She smoked infrequent cigarettes when she felt so inclined, danced and danced exceedingly well, drank occasional whiskey-sodas or cocktails and carried them admirably.

The two thousand dollar dowry which had seemed "not so very much" the night she comforted her mother for their fortune's loss was still uncollected. Just a little less than fifteen hundred dollars was in the savings bank account earmarked for it, and no contributions had been made for almost three years. Her salary had been raised successively since she came to work for Winkleman, Robinson & Danzansky, but with each increase new demands came. The little typist might come to office in bargain basement or self-service store clothes, the junior executive had to look important as her position, or even a bit more so. Careful grooming was a requisite, and while the neighborhood beauty parlor could cut and wash and give a permanent to a feather bob or even a Veronica Lake coiffure nothing less than the ministrations of a expert

in the best *salon de beauté* was acceptable for hair that reached to the bend of her knees when she stood and fell about her like a veil when she sat. She had to have a good address, and even in depression times two-room suites in the East Fifties commanded impressive rentals. But what difference did it make really? She was still in her early twenties. There was time and to spare to complete the fund, and meanwhile she was having the time of her life.

She met de Lacey Keogh in unpromising circumstances. Winkleman, Robinson & Danzensky had a new client. The client made lawnmowers and copy came through marked 24 point Broadway for heads and 14 point Garamond for body. Matilda took a look at the directions and shuddered. "Why not 72 point Caslon bold and 6 point Sans-serif?" she penciled on the margin of the copy sheet and called Mike Ginsberg, sixth assistant office boy and her more or less personal factotum. "Take this back to whoever sent it and tell him to study a style sheet for at least an hour," she ordered.

"Jeez, Mis' Johnstone," the freckle-faced youngster, usually brash as a Scottie pup, demurred, "I dissent. That's Mr. Keogh's copy, an' he'd just natchelly skin me alive if I tol' him anything like—"

"You tell that Mr. Keyhole exactly what I said," she cut in acidly. "I'll take full responsibility if he wants to make something of it. Even he ought to know Broadway and Garamond swear at each other."

Three minutes later by the office clock, or perhaps only two and a half, Mr. Keogh burst into her cubicle. "Did you send this?" he demanded, waving his copy with her insulting endorsement about as if he hoped to swat a hornet with it.

"I did," she answered tersely, looking up from the galley proofs she had been reading. Her cool hazel eyes met his hot brown ones, and for a moment nothing moved in either of their faces. Then the ghost of a

reluctant grin began to form on his lips. "Well, what's wrong with Broadway and Garamond?"

"Sit down Mr.—" Her eyes smiled. They had a trick of doing that while her lips were quite serious.

"Keogh," he supplied. "De Lacey Keogh."

"All right, de Lacey Keogh. Sit down and take a look at this style sheet."

Her sales talk was effective. She combined a knowledge of type faces to make a veteran printer jealous with a soothing manner which would have made the everlasting fortune of a physician. They compromised on Caslon bold for headlines and Bodoni for body. But before that consummation had been reached he had extended and she accepted an invitation to go to dinner at the Central Park Casino.

SINCE it is characteristic of New York and New Yorkers to be dissatisfied with things as they are, neither Matilda nor de Lacey was content to let their new-found friendship remain static.

He was a "Yankee from the South," a native of New Orleans to whom Harvard had imparted a high polish on which service with the Marines and two years post-war graduate work at the Sorbonne had laid an exceedingly hard finish. His crisply curling auburn hair and direct, intense tortoiseshell eyes were Celtic as Killarney's Lakes or Cuchillin or Fion na Gael, but the lean long jaw of him was pure Norman English. He was the first man Matilda ever had more than a passing interest in, the first of whom she'd ever asked herself, "How would it seem to be married to him?"

Strangely, she was the first girl he had wanted to have more of than an evening's casual company. There had been small time for women in his life. His family had been poor with that arrogant post-bellum poverty of so many Southerners; he had worked for everything he had, and

his lean face showed the effects of years of high ambition and slender resources. Now he was on the way up, and he loved the success he had won as an addict loves his drug or a miser his mounting stack of gold. Marriage was as remote from his mind as celibacy. Some day, perhaps, when he'd made his first hundred thousand—or half million. . . . Meantime, life was good and success sweet and women flowerlike decorations along the borders of the upward-leading path.

But the first morning they went riding in the Park he viewed the course he'd laid out for himself with something like misgiving. It was late August and light haze dimmed the buildings to the south while the fresh smell of newly-wet asphalt rose behind a lumbering sprinkler in Fifth Avenue. The sun's rays and the glowing green of the lawns coalesced in a picture fresh and bright as a new water-color and Matilda was part of it.

Smiling, frankly glad to see him, she looked younger and much smaller, almost childlike, in the breeches of white gabardine, white silk shirt left open at the throat and long boots of black kid that cased her narrow feet and slim straight legs. In place of belt she wore a scarf of orange silk twined three times round her waist; her long bright hair was turbaned in a square of scarlet silk bandanna.

He saw as much of her as their work would permit, and each succeeding meeting added to the doubts of the schedule he had set himself. Before he realized it she was in his blood like some unconquerable drug; the thought of her, the vision of her cleanly cut profile, her sometimes merry, sometimes serious hazel eyes swam between him and the copy on his desk. How could a man center his attention on motor cars or cigarettes or lawnmowers when he had a girl always in mind, when he was constantly remembering her in a backless, strapless evening gown dancing with him

on the Bossert Roof or at the Waldorf, or in printed crêpe and a pert small hat which might have graced a Watteau shepherdess smiling at him across the luncheon table? Or on the tennis court in shorts and halter, her glowing skin as vital as the sun that warmed it; or in a moulded lastex bathing suit diving like an otter and swimming like a seal, or running weightlessly as wind along the white sands of Jones Beach?

Transition from a egocentric to a girl-centric universe had come hard, but it was complete.

There was a sort of cool aloofness about her that baffled him. She took frank pleasure in his company, she never put him off when he asked her to see him, and when he called she met him with a smile and ready handclasp; she seemed regretful when they parted. But though she showed her liking for him openly she shrank from all but formal physical contact. She laid her hand in his at greeting, gave it to him when they said good-by, melted pliantly into his arms when dancing. That was all. When once or twice he took her hand impulsively as they walked she gently disengaged it, not reprovingly or prudishly, but with an unobtrusive definiteness that discouraged further demonstrations.

GLOWING summer burned itself to embers. Chestnut vendors replaced flower sellers at street corners, leaves came fluttering to the sidewalks or changed their greens for ardent reds and browns and yellows. Haze lay on the Westchester and Jersey hills and a hint of frost was in the air. They had been dining at the Fisheree at Coney Island, watching the kaleidoscope of the Boardwalk, seeing the tall ships drop down the bay and lose themselves in the blue mists of the broad ocean. Now they stood listening to the lispng gossip of the waves against the sand while silence lay across the purple, silver-dusted sky where a few stars had enmeshed themselves in the

gauzy light like dewdrops in a cobweb. As yet there was no moon, but a pale radiance gleamed at the horizon and the silver of it lay upon the tangled skeins of wavelets creeping tiptoe up the quiet beach.

Matilda stifled a small sigh. "How beautiful, how lovely, it all is?" she murmured.

De Lacey laid his hand on hers where it rested on the iron railing of the Boardwalk. His voice did not break, but it came out of his throat breathlessly, almost inaudibly. "How beautiful—how lovely—you are! I love you, worship you, Matilda. Will you marry me?"

She turned to him, her face as pale as a carved ivory mask with mouth outlined in blood. Her eyes, tear-misted, pleading, came up to his. Her full lips, usually so mobile, hung limply parted, yearning, slack with longing almost past endurance. She swayed a little, like a young tree in a sudden wind.

He caught her in his arms. "Matilda! Matilda darling!"

But before his eager lips could find hers she had bowed her body backward, one hand pressed desperately against the rough tweed of his jacket, the other held across her mouth to shield it from his kiss. "No—no!" she implored. "Please, dearest one!"

He drew back mystified, a little hurt. "But, Matilda, you love me, don't you?"

"Love you?" Her lips moved stiffly, awkwardly, as though she drove them to pronounce the words by sheer will power. "Oh, yes—yes!" Her voice was weak, almost as tremulous as an old woman's. "But I mustn't let you kiss me, even touch me. I am an oblate, vowed and dedicated to religion. Earthly love is not for me. *Peccavi*—I have sinned. I have been guilty of inordinate affection. *O mea culpa, mea maxima culpa!*"

He drew the story from her by degrees, heard how she had been brought up, how she had come to vow herself to a religious life. Soothingly and understandingly, as

one might with a frightened child, he reasoned with her. Her mother's stratagem had been no more than a trick; a promise exacted so had no validity. How could she have renounced the world when she knew nothing of it, eschewing love when she had never had so much as a kiss from her mother?

By degrees she quieted. Vaguely, intuitively, she had felt these things were so, but not until he put the thought into words had she seen how her promise to renounce her birthright had been exacted from her rather than given freely. She was still sobbing, but there was something satisfied in her sobs, like the sobbing of a child who had received what she wants, but cannot stop for a moment. Her fingers twisted and untwisted themselves. There was about her the air of a bewildered little girl, or one who had come suddenly to brilliant sunlight from the darkness of a cave. "You—you think I'm not really bound by my vow? That I might in honor disregard it?" she faltered.

"There's only one vow that will bind you, dear. The one you take to forsake all others and keep only to me as long as we both shall live."

SHE was going to be married. The thought of it sang in her heart like a melody. When she walked down the Avenue it seemed that wedding bells were sounding joyously from the infinity of the bright sky; out of the canyon of Broadway when the wind blew between the tall buildings it seemed the echoes of a wedding-march were sounding from a mighty organ; the pigeons strutting in the wintry sunshine of Rockefeller Plaza seemed to coo a prothalamium. She looked positively arrogant with happiness.

Arrangements were almost complete. She'd notified the landlord she was giving up the apartment; delicious hours had been spent in shopping for her trousseau and her

bank account was almost wiped out—but what use was money now except to buy pretty things to make her husband love her all the more?

Only the dowry fund she kept intact. She would send it as a gift, a sort of votive offering, to the sisters at Mount Nazareth. They would put it to some good and pious use.

Cross-legged like a child she squatted on the Chinese rug as she sorted the papers from her files. Except for her sweet roundures of maturity she seemed a little girl, for her small body was arrayed in a checked gingham dirndl and a white old-fashioned-looking shirtwaist with little cap sleeves and a square neck edged with cotton lace. Her slender, almost adolescent-looking legs were bare and she wore moccasins on her unstockinged feet.

There was so little that she cared to save. Receipts from shops and milliners and hairdressers, paid bills for telephone and electric service, a note or two from men, picture postcards from vacationing office acquaintances. She tossed them into the waste basket, holding one here and there, but throwing away five for every one she kept.

Here was a note—the very first she'd received—from de Lacey. Here a card that had been on the flowers he'd sent her on her birthday, here— Her lower lip began to quiver. She caught it between her teeth to steady it.

It was a cheap half sheet of note paper, the sort that can be had at any ten-cent store, and the writing on it was bold, ill-formed, almost illegible, the writing of an educated Englishwoman. But she could read it! It's three words burned into her brain like molten silver, seared her new-found happiness away with ruthless cauterization. "Remember your vow." Her mother's parting admonition. . . .

Like one who watches a screen in a darkened theater she saw the bleak, ill-furnished

dining-room, saw herself kneeling with clasped hands upon the Bible opened on a chair. The text on the page underneath her hands seemed glowing with a fiery light that burned her eyes. She closed her lids, pressed her fingers against them. Still the searing, branding letters scorched her eyes like the after-image of a flash of blinding light upon the retina. "When thou shalt vow a vow unto the Lord thy God thou shalt not slack to pay it. . . ."

The little breath-caught sobbing sigh that raised her eyes from the scrawled note was doubtlessly a woman's, but it had the sexlessness, the soul-wrung neuterness of a thing of absolute, unfathomable despair. It seemed to come from the half-shadows in the farther corner where the shaded lamplight did not quite reach, but when she looked she saw nothing. Or did she? The more she strained her glance the less certain she was.

She could not say it was a form with definition and outline, neither was it nothing more than a shadow slightly darker than the clustering gloom. Rather, it was one of those amorphous, flickering, illusive things we sometimes have a momentary sense of seeing when we are alone in an empty house—the flicker of a stealthy, silent shape that vanishes around a corner in the hallway, the outline of a head withdrawn around the angle of a door or window before we have a chance to make sure we have really seen it—one of those things our reason tells us is not there, but which our nerves and senses proclaim past all possibility of denial.

"Who—who's there?" she challenged, her voice so low that she herself could scarcely hear it.

The lamplit room was still as a church whose worshippers have departed. Not even muted murmurs of the outside traffic filtered in.

She held her breath to catch the whisper of a reply. The tiny, almost soundless

ticking of her wrist-watch and the little gilt-and-crystal clock that stood upon her dressing table in the farther room beat contrapuntally against each other in a sort of fugue, then once again the small, sad, sobbing sound was there, though if she heard it with her outward ear or if she heard it only with the ear of the spirit she could not say.

SHE got to her feet, began walking. Back and forth across the rug she plodded, ten steps forward, eight steps to the left, ten steps back. She kicked her buckskin moccasins aside, trod her weary *Via Dolorosa* barefoot. And as she walked, as though they beat a muffled death march for her happiness, she heard the sorrowful, reproachful sobs, and when she tried to face the visitant it seemed to melt into the shadows, yet as she turned her head away she caught the momentary outline of its presence in the corner of her eye.

Her head jerked back. Her delicate, slim nostrils flared and widened like the nostrils of some frightened forest creature drawing warning from the breeze. *Lavender!* The scent was faint, so faintly fragile she could hardly catch it, but delicate and elusive as it was, there was no denying it. *Lavender.* Her mother's sole indulgence in feminine vanity, the only scent that she had known in childhood. She never used it. She couldn't. It was too fraught with somber memories. Her lingerie was laid away in sachets faintly spiced with *Jicky*. After her shower she used *Revillon's Latitude Cinquante*, yet there the simple English-countryside perfume was. Every moment, every faltering, weary-footed step she took, it grew stronger.

"No—no!" she pleaded as she turned to face the presence lurking in the shadows. "It wasn't fair! You tricked me—trapped me—lured me into vowing my birthright away before I knew what life meant! You shan't do this to me! I can't—I won't—"

But there was nothing there to argue with when she turned squarely on the nebulous visitant, yet as she turned away again in heartsick weariness she caught the flickering impression of a shadow-form that veiled itself in shadows. And the scent of lavender grew stronger . . . stronger.

"I won't—I won't!" she kept repeating doggedly to herself—or was it to the rather-sensed-than-seen other who stood just out of reach of sight and spoke no word and made no move, just waited? Waited . . . for what? For how long? She had an oddly unsubstantial feeling, as though she walked upon a cloud instead of solid floor, as though nothing underneath or around her were quite real. Her thoughts were whirling giddily, like shadows cast by a weaver's shuttle. How long was eternity? Infinity must be filled with just such shadow-forms as this, bodiless and substanceless outcasts; the sinful, the selfish, the forsworn. . . . The forsworn—those who broke their plighted troth! . . . "When thou shalt vow a vow . . . the Lord thy God will surely require it of thee."

And with the memory of the Scriptural text there came another, the dim, wiped-over recollection of a line by James Whitcomb Riley:

So vowed I. It is written. It is changeless as the past.

"Changeless as the past!" Morning came and through the windows the bright winter sunshine poured like water. She had walked almost twenty miles since she had come upon her mother's farewell note, but with the coming of the day she reached her goal. It was futile to attempt to dodge Destiny as to try to hold the sun back in its course, she realized. Destiny, the invisible, infallible nuncio of God, had spoken.

She dressed carefully, choosing a shabby

old three-piece tweed suit, a pair of well-worn tan brogues and a pointed old felt hat with a rather somber pheasant's feather. She didn't need to make herself attractive, but she needed desperately to save everything that had merchantable value. Then she called the antique dealer and the second-hand man.

THE Chinese rug and Sheraton table and the old Victorian Sheffield brought just under three hundred dollars. The second-hand man swore he robbed his wife and seven starving children when he made the offer, but for her trousseau and the bedroom furniture and the silver-mounted crystal toilet things, together with all her linen and odd furnishings, he gave her two hundred dollars. With the few bills and odd change in her purse that would just stretch the dowry fund in bank to the required two thousand and leave her bus fare to Mount Nazareth. Nothing for breakfast or luncheon. (*Dear God, the old Eve dies hard in me, thinking of cinnamon toast and coffee at a time like this!*)

"Will you wait a moment, please?" she asked the truckman who had called for the furniture. "I'd like to write a note before you take the desk."

First a line to Mr. Winkleman apologizing for her abrupt resignation, "but circumstances beyond my control"—*how utterly, fantastically true that is!*—"compel me to leave the city permanently and at once."

Then her valedictory to de Lacey:

"My darling, more to me than this world or the next, it must, it has to be good-by. There is no way I can avoid it, no other way, dearest. It's Destiny, Fate, the Will of God, whatever we may choose to call it, but it's greater, stronger than we are.

"I know what you would say if you were here, how you would reason with

me, but this is something stronger than cold reason. Were I to listen to my heart I'd not be writing this, heart's dearest, but even love is powerless before the awful compulsion of a vow, and I am vowed and dedicated, dear. Long, long ago I took a vow upon my knees to do this thing, and I cannot—*dare* not—slack to pay it.

"Oh, dearest one, why did I have to meet you before they had me safely in the sisterhood? I might have been happy that way, for you can't miss the sunshine if you've always been blind, but—"

TEARS stung her eyes until she could not see to form the letters, or even see the page before her. She clamped her teeth into her quivering lower lip and finished, writing by pure instinct:

"You'll understand, dear, when I tell you that my honor is involved in this, and 'I could not love thee, dear, so much, loved I not honor more.'

"Good-by, my dear, dear love. Always and forever, God bless and keep you.

"Matilda."

"Wilt thou vow holy poverty unto the Lord?" the cracked treble of the old chaplain came to her as from a great distance.

She caught her breath, then: "I will," she answered steadily.

"Wilt thou vow chastity, obedience . . . putting behind thee all earthly affections . . . forgetting . . ."

Forgetting? Could she see forget their walks through the Park in the sweet soft dusk, or up Fifth Avenue while the street lamps glowed like a necklace of opals against the velvet background of the lilac shadows and the great stone lions drowsed like benign pussy-cats on the steps of the Library? Or the gift of the flask of vodka shaped like a dancing bear from the proprietor of

the little Russian restaurant in East Thirteenth Street who mistook them for bride and groom and made his offering with a grinned wish for their happiness and numerous progeny? Lily Pons as Lakmé at the Metropolitan . . . the Easter pageant at Radio City . . . that snow-swept afternoon at the Polo Grounds when they huddled close together in a rug and watched Army fight Notre Dame to a scoreless tie? Or (*be pitiful, kind God!*) the moon-washed night at Coney Island when he told her that he loved her?

"I will," she responded clearly.

A little sigh, freighted more with weariness than regret, slipped past her lightly parted lips.

The silver wedding ring had been slipped on the third finger of her right hand, the bridesmaid with the shears had handed them to Father Pancoast. She bent her head still lower as the steel snicked through the long strands of her hair. The wimple had been adjusted, the long veil of black bunting presented for her kiss, then draped upon her head, pinned in place—"Matilda, thou art as dead. Rise, Sister Mary Bernadine."

The eyes she raised in adoration to the flower-decked altar seemed dark and shadowed in a face almost as whitely colorless as the wimple of white linen that framed it, but there was no tragedy in them, no hot tears of renunciation. They were calm and soft and steady, like the eyes of a Madonna, the eyes of one who has been vouchsafed a glimpse of Paradise. This was that for which she had been destined since her birth, since her conception. All else was transitory and illusory. Already the past began to seem dim and unreal as the measures of a half-forgotten song. All that had gone before was really meaningless to her now. She could just open her hands and let it go.

She loosened her clasped fingers, let them fall apart slackly. . . .