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STORM GIRL

JOSEPH C. LINCOLN

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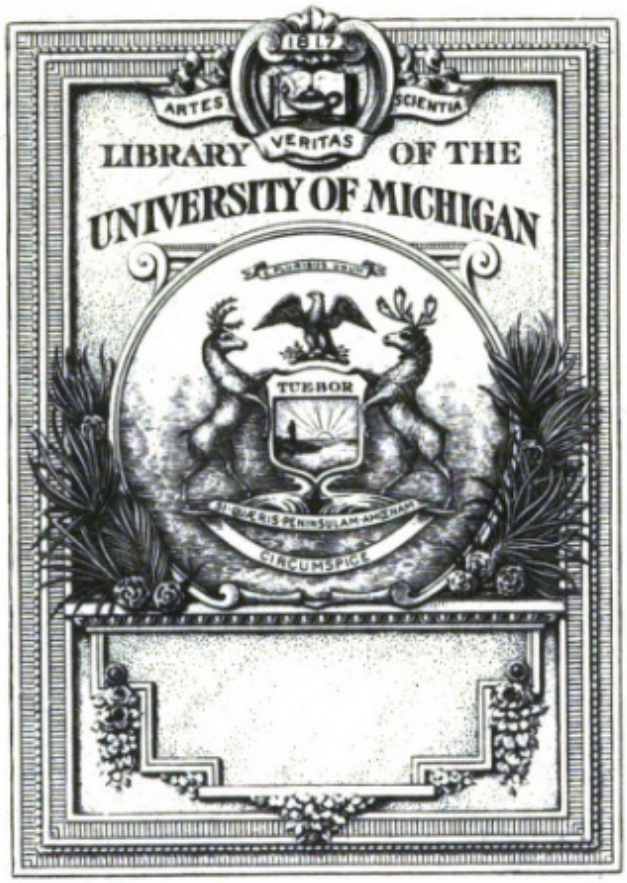

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By JOSEPH C. LINCOLN

STORM GIRL
GREAT-AUNT LAVINIA
STORM SIGNALS
THE PEEL TRAIT
HEAD TIDE
BLOWING CLEAR
SILAS BRADFORD'S BOY
THE ARISTOCRATIC MISS BREWSTER
THE BIG MOGUL
QUEEN JUDSON
RUGGED WATER
DOCTOR NYE
FAIR HARBOR
GALUSHA THE MAGNIFICENT
THE PORTYGEE
"SHAVINGS"
MARY-'GUSTA
CAP'N DAN'S DAUGHTER
THE RISE OF ROSCOE PAINE
THE POSTMASTER
THE WOMAN HATERS
KEZIAH COFFIN
CY WHITTAKER'S PLACE
CAP'N ERI
EXTRICATING OBADIAH
THANKFUL'S INHERITANCE
MR. PRATT
MR. PRATT'S PATIENTS
KENT KNOWLES: "QUAHAUG"
CAP'N WARREN'S WARDS
THE DEPOT MASTER
OUR VILLAGE
PARTNERS OF THE TIDE
THE OLD HOME HOUSE
CAPE COD BALLADS
THE MANAGERS

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STORM GIRL

By

JOSEPH C. LINCOLN

D. APPLETON-CENTURY COMPANY
INCORPORATED
NEW YORK LONDON
1937

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CHAPTER I

DESIRE COLEMAN was waiting for Simeon Coleman to come home. There was nothing very unusual about that, Desire was accustomed to it. She was systematic and punctual and Simeon was anything but either. During the winter months when she and he were alone in the house at East Trumet, her rising hour was always half-past six. In the summer months, when the bedrooms were all occupied and, as Simeon said, "You couldn't stretch out a leg without trippin' up a boarder," she was downstairs by six. From November until the middle of June she prepared and cooked the meals herself and they were always ready at regular hours. During the boarding season, when Emma Bassett did the cooking and Lottie Cahoon waited on table, they were just as promptly regular—Desire saw to that. The family washing was done on Monday, the ironing on Tuesday, the bread and cookies were baked on Saturday. And on Friday evening

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Desire went to prayer-meeting and on Sunday morning she went to church. She was that kind of woman.

But Simeon was distinctly not that kind of man. She was a Knowles before she married Laban Coleman and Simeon was Laban's younger brother. During Laban's lifetime Desire and her husband occupied the rambling gray-shingled house at East Trumet, close to the beach, and took summer boarders. Laban died when Desire was forty-eight—she was fifty-two now—and Desire and her niece, Emily Blanchard, the only child of Mercy, Desire's sister, lived together. Mercy had died when Emily was born and Seth Blanchard, the girl's father, was killed by lightning while raking quahaugs in the bay during a thunderstorm. The other quahaugers had rowed ashore when the storm threatened, but Seth refused to move. "All you fellows are lookin' for is a chance to quit work," Seth called after them. "I ain't sugar nor salt and water won't melt me." So he stayed on and the lightning hit the end of his thirty-foot quahaug rake and passed through his body. They found him dead in the bottom of his dory when they rowed out an hour later.

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Then Emily, who was thirteen, came to live with her Aunt Desire. When she was seventeen she went to Boston to study bookkeeping and stenography at a "business school." After seven months of this she, through a girl friend, obtained a position in the Gloucester branch office of a Boston firm dealing in marine chandlery, boat outfittings and supplies. She had been home but once since she left the business school, although she and her aunt corresponded with some regularity.

Simeon—Emily called him "Uncle Sim"—had spent the larger part of his life codfishing on the Newfoundland Banks. He ran away from home when he was sixteen and, up to the time of his brother's death, his relatives and fellow townspeople saw or heard little of him. What they did hear was not greatly to his credit. One year some masculine Trumet citizen had met him on Atlantic Avenue in Boston. Simeon had promptly invited the citizen in to have a drink and seemed to have no difficulty in locating the drinkables in spite of the fact that this was during the prohibition period. Someone else had met him in Gloucester and reported that he, Simeon, was a kind of "rough-lookin' ticket"

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but that he seemed to have money in his pocket and few cares on his mind. Once—and this was the crowning ignominy which caused Desire to blush with shame when she attended prayer-meeting that week—his name was among those listed in a dispatch to the *Herald* from a Canadian port as having been arrested after a free-for-all fight in a Nova Scotia port between the crews of a Yankee schooner and a French-Canadian mackerel boat. He was regarded as the black sheep of the Coleman family and so when, the year of Emily's leaving to attend the business school, he walked in at his sister-in-law's door and hailed her with a boisterous bellow, the welcome accorded him was not too hearty. Old Mrs. Chapin, who was spending that summer at East Trumet because her doctor had ordered her to "rest her nerves," shot from her rocking-chair as if some one had kicked it violently from beneath. "I give you my word, my dear," Mrs. Chapin confided to a bosom friend, Miss Caroline Seabury, the retired school-teacher, "when I heard that dreadful howl I thought I should faint dead away and when I saw that awful rough-looking creature standing in the doorway I devoutly wished I had."

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But Simeon was quite unconscious of the effect his appearance produced. He walked into the Coleman House as if he owned it and greeted his sister-in-law and her niece as if he had been away only a few hours instead of years. That evening, when the three were alone, he casually informed his relatives that he was through with seafaring for good and all, that he had come back to Trumet to live the rest of his life, and that it was his intention to stay right there at the Coleman House.

"You need a man around this place," declared Sim. "Hadn't been here half an hour afore I could see that. All right, I'm the man. . . . Oh, now, now, Dizzy, don't look so scared. I ain't plannin' to live on you free gratis for nawthin'. I'll pay my way. Got a little cash put by in the locker, more'n you and the rest of Trumet figger I have, I'll bet. I'll pay for my board and keep and, if things go the way I hope they will, I'll do consider'ble more'n that. I've got some notions about this shebang. Yes, indeed I have!"

Desire, whose nerves were in almost as badly shaken state as Mrs. Chapin's, gasped a protest.

"For mercy sakes, Sim Coleman," she sput-

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tered, "don't call me that name. If you do I'll—I'll—"

"Eh? What name? Oh, Dizzy? Ha, ha! What's the matter with it? Used to call you Dizzy when you was a girl, didn't I? Course I did. Ain't started to put on airs, I hope, have you? . . . All right, all right; I'll call you Desire if you say so; anyhow I will when there's any outsiders around. My trunk and the rest of my dunnage'll be down on to-morrow noon's train—or, if they ain't, I'll know the reason why."

That was the manner of his coming and he had remained ever since. At first Desire and Emily and the boarders had regarded him with distaste and nervous dread, but they got used to him and his ways as time went on. He was rough and loud spoken and blunt, but his remarks and dry comments made them laugh in spite of themselves and among the male boarders he became a real favorite. He purchased a second-hand motor-boat in the village and, during the summer months, he took out fishing parties. His passengers returned from these parties chuckling.

"He can tell a story as well as any one I ever heard," declared one. "It ain't so much the yarn itself as the way he tells it. He's led a tough life,

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according to his account, but he's picked up a lot of fun along the way."

Even the old ladies, like Mrs. Chapin, tolerated him. "A genuine 'character'" was their classification of Mr. Simeon Coleman.

Desire found him a very real help in the management of the Coleman House, especially after Emily, who liked him and of whom he was very fond, went away. His boast about cash in the locker was proven to be more than a boast. He not only paid board regularly, but he insisted on certain small improvements being made inside the house and about it and usually paid for them with his own money. He had become almost a partner in the business. Desire admitted that she didn't know what she should do without him.

"Although there's times when he does try me almost to death," she added with a sigh. "He loves to torment me and I never know what he'll do or say next. Just as liable as not to swear in front of the minister and when I scold him for it he looks innocent and says 'Why not? Didn't use no words that parson don't use every Sunday, did I?' What can you do with a man like that? And when he takes a notion to go on one of them Boston trips of his I don't draw a free breath

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till he's back again. He calls those trips vacations, but *I* call 'em sprees, and I'll bet that's almost what they are, too. And meal times don't mean anything to him. I'm always waitin' for him, with the vittles on the back of the stove."

She was waiting for him now on the gloomy evening of this gloomy March day. She glanced at the clock on the mantel and saw that it was twenty minutes to seven. He knew that a quarter past six was supper time. There was a storm coming up, too, and he knew that she was always nervous about storms. And why shouldn't she be? There was that prophecy about her family—or about Emily, which was the same thing—and hadn't it worked out true, almost every single bit of it, so far? Emily had been born during a storm; and Mercy, Emily's mother, had died during a storm; and Seth, Emily's father, had been killed by a storm. Peleg Myrick had said the spirits told him that Emily was a storm child and that every important happening in her life would have a storm connected with it. Of course, old Peleg had been a little queer in the head and folks used to make fun of him, but, all the same, he *had* prophesied right in—in—oh, lots of

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things. Simeon could "ha, ha" all he wanted to, but just the same—

She went to the window, lifted the shade and looked out. Black as black, the night was. The only lights in sight those in the windows of the Trumet life-saving station a mile away. The rising wind was whimpering and whining about the gables, and the surf along the beach and on the outer shoals was roaring ominously. She dropped the shade and turned back with a sigh. The electric lamp over the table was ablaze but she crossed to the mantel and turned on the pair above it. Thank goodness they had electricity down at East Trumet nowadays. It wasn't as it used to be when she and Laban first lived there.

"Oh dear, *why* didn't Simeon come?"

And then she heard him open and close the kitchen door. A moment later he entered the dining-room.

"Hello, old girl!" he hailed, cheerfully. "Supper ready? Hope so; my appetite's got an edge on it like a guttin' knife. Couldn't have you keepin' me waitin' tonight."

His sister-in-law was a dependable Dr. Watson, she could always be counted upon to be

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surprised in the right place. She stared at him, sputtering like a damp candle.

"Keepin' *you* waitin'!" she gasped. "My soul and body! And here I've had the table set for a full half hour. You know it, too. Of all the provokin'— Where on earth have you been?"

He had shed his oilskin and heavy jacket and had stepped back into the kitchen to wash his hands at the tin basin in the sink. There was a bathroom in the Coleman House, but, when they were alone, Sim invariably washed in the kitchen. "Habit's habit, Dizzy," was his explanation. "Bathrooms are scarce up on the Banks. Put off washin' long as you can and then head for the nighest bucket, that's the rule aboard a schooner."

"Where have you been, I ask you?" she repeated.

He replied between splashes and splutterings.

"Oh, over to the life station. They're all stirred up over there."

"Stirred up? What about? Oh, my land, it ain't the storm, is it? I do hope it ain't goin' to be *too* bad."

He came back to the dining-room and sat down at his place at the table.

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"Storm? What storm? This ain't nawthin' but a good sailin' breeze, just enough to keep the flies off. No, no, it ain't the weather that's riled 'em up. Bill Ellis has made up his mind, at last, to quit the service and all hands are wonderin' who'll have his job as cap'n, that's all. Ed Olson is Number One man, and he'd have it in the natural run of things, but—well, I don't know. Ed's pretty well along and they're app'intin' young men lately."

"Well, well! Cap'n Ellis has been cap'n of Trumet station for ever so many years. I'll be sorry to see him go. And Mr. Olson ain't what you'd call young, that's a fact. There's young men over there, though."

"Um-hm, but there ain't ary one with much experience. The service folks may app'int somebody from another station. They've been known to do that."

"Who, do you suppose?"

"Give it up. That's what all hands are guessin'. Sam Bailey, at Wapatomac, would be all right, and there's that young Brewster at Orham. He's Number One there now and he got into the papers a whole lot when he handled that wrecked three-master last winter. His cap'n was

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laid up sick, you remember, and Brewster was in charge of everything and did a fine job. The Coast Guard folks might decide to promote him."

"Brewster.... Let me see.... Why, I remember now. Ain't his first name Chester? Came from here in Trumet in the beginnin', didn't he?"

"Yup. 'Chet' everybody called him when he was a young-one. His ma was widow of Elnathan Brewster and they lived on the Pond Road at West Trumet seventeen or eighteen years ago. Moved away afterwards. Seems to me I heard she was dead.... West Trumet," reflectively. "My, my, how I used to know *that* place. There was a girl over there. Now what was her name? Lettie—Lettie Crull—um-hm, that was it. Some of the boys used to go over to see her. Ho, ho!" with a reminiscent head shake. "Lettie Crull! Yes—yes."

Desire straightened in her chair. "Everybody knows that Crull tribe," she announced tartly. "We won't talk about them."

"Now, now, Dizzy," gravely. "You ain't chuckin' any asparagus at Lettie, are you? Why, as I recollect, Lettie was a real popular girl."

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"Humph! Popular, I shouldn't wonder! Simeon, what are we goin' to do for a cook this comin' summer? Emma Bassett can't come this year and what to do without her I can't think. She's been with us every summer since Laban's time and what I'll do without her I don't like to think. She was consider'ble more than a good cook, she was a wonderful help with the managin'. I'm gettin' old and seems sometimes as if managin' and plannin' for this big house chockfull of boarders is more than I can stand."

Sim's answer was prompt. "You hadn't ought to stand it," he declared. "Emmie ought to be here to help. She's a born manager if ever I see one. What you ever let her traipse off up to Boston to waste her time keepin' somebody else's books for 'em is more'n I can see—yes, or ever could."

"Why, how you talk, Simeon! I didn't let her go any more than you did. She wanted to go. Emily's an ambitious girl and, naturally, she didn't want to spend her life in a place like East Trumet. She wanted to get on in the world and I don't blame her."

"Get on!" scornfully. "And how far has she got? Workin' in a little one-horse shop down to

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Gloucester. I know that store, been in it a dozen times. 'Bout as big as the kitchen out yonder. If she was in Bradley and Company's main place up on Commercial Street in Boston she might have a chance to get somewheres, but that Gloucester branch—bah! Besides, as nice-lookin' and smart girl as our Emmie ain't goin' to be anybody's bookkeeper for long. She'll get married, of course. If she don't the young fellows are a darn sight dumber than they was in my time."

Desire thought she saw an opportunity. "Humph!" she observed. "If gettin' married is a sign of smartness I don't see where you come in. You've been a bachelor all your life long."

Simeon regarded her solemnly over the rim of his teacup. "Now, Dizzy—"

"*Don't* call me Dizzy! I've asked you a million times."

"Sorry, sorry. Desire Huldy, I should say."

"Never mind the Hulda. Plain Desire's enough."

"But I couldn't call you 'plain' Desire—not and speak the truth, I couldn't. You're a wonderful well-preserved woman for your age. Yes, indeed."

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"My age! Anybody'd think I was Mrs. Methuselah, to hear you. Oh, do be still."

"Aye, aye, skipper. But I can't let you find fault with me because I ain't married. Besides, how do you know I ain't? I've been around consider'ble in my time. How do you know there ain't a Mrs. Sim Coleman up in—er—Greenland or somewheres cryin' her eyes out this minute? And another one in—er—Novy Scoshy, say. And three or four more scattered 'round hither and yon? I might be a reg'lar—what's his-name?—Brigham Young and forgot to mention it, you can't tell."

"I shouldn't be so dreadful surprised if you was, far's that goes. *I* don't know where you've been or what you've been up to all those years."

"No, no-o. That's right, so you don't; but think of the fun you have guessin'. There, there, old lady, I ain't ever married, you can bet on that. I've seen too many sailors get married and be sorry for it afterwards to take a chance on my own account. Ho, ho! Why, I remember one time up in—"

He paused and passed his cup for a refilling. Desire poured the tea and, as he did not finish his sentence, offered a reminder.

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"Well, what?" she asked. "Up in where?"

He sighed. "Never mind, never mind. We won't fetch that up, it's too sorrowful. I cry every time I think of it—that is, I do when I ain't laughin'. There, there, we'll forget it. Don't press me, don't press me, as old Cap'n Reilly used to say when he was reachin' for the whiskey bottle. Who started this marryin' foolishness, anyway?"

"Nobody but you. You was talkin' about Emily and you said—"

"Yes—yes. Of course. What I said was that Emmie ought to be down here this summer helpin' you instead of wastin' her time up in Gloucester."

Desire drew a long breath. "Well," she admitted, "I own up I'd give most anything to have her here, but I sha'n't be the one to coax her."

"Humph! Heard from Emmie lately, have you?"

"I had a letter about three weeks ago, that's the last one."

"Didn't say she was comin' home, did she? No, she wouldn't. Three weeks ago would be a whole lot too early."

She gazed at him. There was suspicion in her

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look. "Now what do you mean by that, Sim Coleman?" she demanded. "Have you—"

He interrupted her by rising from the table. "Now where did I put that newspaper?" he soliloquized. "I stopped up to the village and got one, I know I did. Oh yes, here 'tis. Don't bother me now, Dizzy—plain Desire, I should say—I've got to improve my mind."

She declared that goodness knew it needed improving and began to clear away the supper dishes. He planted himself in the rocker and unfolded the Boston *Herald*.

It was but a few minutes later when they heard the purr of an automobile in the yard. The wind had risen steadily and now the rain was beating against the windows. Desire, in the kitchen, heard the sound first.

"What in the world's that?" she called. "Sounds like a car, don't it? It is a car and it's stoppin' here. Who on earth—at this time of night? And this kind of night!"

Simeon looked up from his paper. "Somebody from the life station, maybe," he suggested. "Can't think of anybody else."

Voices sounded on the walk leading to the side door of the Coleman House, a masculine voice

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and a feminine. The latter said, "Yes, Henry, you can bring it right in. If you can't handle it alone I'm sure Uncle Sim will help you. I'll take the rest myself."

Desire uttered an exclamation. Simeon sprang from the rocker, a delighted grin bisecting his leathery face.

"Why—*why!* Of all things!" gasped Desire.

"Emmie!"

She rushed in to throw her plump arms, covered with suds and dishwater to the elbows, about the girl's neck. Emily kissed her aunt fondly.

"Oh, I'm so glad to be here," she sighed. "*So* glad!"

In the background her Uncle Simeon was chuckling. "If there's any of them hugs left when you two get through," he observed, "maybe you might spare me a couple, Em. Don't get as many from the girls as I used to, your aunt watches me too close. . . . There! That's fine. Well, well, well! . . . Oh, all right, Henry, I'll help you with the trunk."

The driver of the depot bus was grinning in the doorway. Desire turned to look at him.

"Trunk!" she repeated. "Is it your trunk, Em-

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mie? You've brought a trunk? Why, that means—"

Emily smiled. "It means I'm going to stay—if you really want me," she said.

"Want you! Don't talk silly. But stay—how long?"

"Why, for always, perhaps. At any rate, for a long time."

"Oh! Why, that's wonderful! But I don't understand. I thought—"

Simeon interrupted. "There, there, Dizzy," he broke in. "Don't worry about not understandin' that yet awhile. What you'd ought to understand right now is that this girl probably ain't had anything to eat since noontime. You 'tend to that end of the line and me and Henry will wrastle in the dunnage."

But Desire was still in a daze of bewilderment. Even the reference to her niece's need of food could not shake her out of it for the moment.

"But I *don't* understand," she repeated. "I—I just don't. You're comin' here to stay—for—for good? How can you? There's that nice bookkeepin' job you've got in Gloucester."

Emily shook her head. "There isn't any job

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in Gloucester, Aunt Desire," she said quietly. "That is all over and done with."

"Eh? But— Well, I will say you're comin' now is just like an answer to prayer. Only—"

"Only nothin'!" crowed Simeon. "No 'only' in it. She came because she got my letter tellin' her you needed her. That's right, ain't it, Emmie?"

"Why, yes, partly right, Uncle Sim."

"Course 'tis. If anybody prayed you down here I was the one. Desire, don't you ever preach to me again that the prayers of the wicked don't count. See what this one hauled aboard.... Come on, Henry. Look alive! You and me are goin' to stretch our muscles. Where's that trunk I've heard talk about?"

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CHAPTER II

EMILY went up to her room early that evening. It was the same room she had occupied before she went away to the business school, the same which had been hers since she came to the Coleman House after her father's death. When her aunt opened its door and turned on the light, the girl looked about her and drew a long breath.

"Oh, it looks so good," she declared. "It's home. And I never realized until lately how good and—and comforting—home was. Oh, I'm so glad to be here."

Desire looked at her. "I know," she said. "You've said that half a dozen times since you got here. Simeon and I love to hear you say it, of course, only—"

"Only what, Aunt Desire?"

"Why, nothin' maybe, only— There isn't anything wrong, is there, Emmie? I mean nothin's happened to—to make you feel bad or anything like that?"

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The girl's answer was prompt enough, possibly almost too prompt. And she did not look at her aunt when she gave it.

"Wrong? Oh, no. No, of course not. Why?" quickly. "You haven't—I mean you have no reason for thinking there is, have you?"

"Not a mite, except that you look so sort of pale and—well, worried, seemed to me."

"Do I? I suppose I am rather tired. I've had a long train ride, you know."

"That's so. Well, good night, dearie. I hope you sleep well and will feel all freshened up by mornin'. Good night."

But she was far from satisfied. Emily did look pale—yes, she did. And, in spite of her denial, her aunt was strongly suspicious that she was troubled about something. Desire mentioned her suspicions to Sim when she reëntered the living-room.

"Simeon," she declared, solemnly, "that girl acts awful queer to me. And did you look at her? Her face, I mean?"

"Eh? Look at her face? What would I be lookin' at—her feet? Her face is all right; best-lookin' face I've seen in these parts since I got back to 'em. What's the matter with it?"

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"It looks so much older than it did when she went away."

"Well, 'tis older, ain't it? So's yours and mine, far's that goes. Course I own up, Dizzy, that yours don't show it. When you get rigged up for Sunday, with all your store hair on, and the like of that, why—"

"Oh, stop tryin' to be funny! I tell you, Sim Coleman, there's somethin' wrong with Emmie. She don't look right and she don't act right. She's got somethin' on her mind."

"Oh, rubbish! 'Tain't on her mind, it's on her stomach. She ate two of them biscuits of yours for supper and if a man fell overboard after takin' a cargo of them biscuits aboard he'd never come up no three times. No sir, he'd go to the bottom and stay there."

"Be still! I never made better biscuits than those and you know it. Simeon, what does all this mean, anyhow? Her comin' back here this way, without writin' us a word? Givin' up her nice place there in Gloucester and everything?"

"Means that I wrote her you needed her and she came. Sensible thing for her to do."

"Well, I suppose likely there's no use talkin' to you about it. You make fun of everything;

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there isn't a reverent bone in your head, I do believe. But, there's one thing— There! hear that?" as a gust of rain splashed against the window. "You notice what's goin' on, don't you? It's stormin'. And you'll remember what was prophesied about her years and years ago. She was born in a storm and every single important thing in her life would be connected up with a storm. That was what was said then and it's worked out, too. You can't say it hasn't."

Sim laughed. "Dear, dear!" he groaned. "Here's more of that Peleg Myrick business. Dizzy, I used to know old Peleg well as you did —better in some ways. Give him one drink and he'd prophesy the weather. Give him two and he'd prophesy the next election. When he'd had four he'd give out that the end of the world was comin' and, after a couple more, it *had* come—far's he was concerned. Peleg Myrick—ho, ho!"

His sister-in-law gathered up her sewing materials preparatory to going to her room.

"All right," she said. "You're a scoffer and an unbeliever, but some day you may realize there is a whole lot in second sight and prophecy, just the same. Peleg called Emily the 'storm girl' and a storm girl she's been—so far in her life, any-

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how. And, mark you this, Simeon Coleman: Emmie was born while a storm was goin' on, her mother died durin' a storm, her father was killed by a storm, and—"

"And it's stormed every once in a while since. My, my, that's mirac'lous, when you come to think of it!"

Desire snorted in disgust and marched from the room. Her brother-in-law chuckled, picked up the Boston paper and, after extinguishing the lights, departed to his own sleeping quarters. The wind whined and whistled, the surf growled and roared and the rain thrashed upon the shingles and dripped from the overflowing gutters.

Emily Blanchard, alone in her room, did not go to bed immediately. She had told her aunt and uncle that she was tired and that was true. She had expressed her delight at being home once more and goodness knew that was the truth. She had explained, in answer to their questions, that she had lost her position as bookkeeper with the Gloucester branch of the Boston marine outfitting firm, the members of that firm having decided to employ a man instead of a girl for the

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work. All that was true, too, but it was only a part of the truth. There was much, so much, that she had not told them, that she devoutly hoped she might never be forced to tell, to them or any one else. The month just past had been for her a horror, a nightmare. And—that was not the least dreadful part of it—the nightmare was not yet over. At any time, soon perhaps, but eventually almost surely, she might be dragged back into it again, see his name in the papers, and her own, be summoned into court, be held up to shame and ridicule, be exposed as—if not the aider and abettor of a mean rogue, a criminal—certainly as his victim and catspaw. Mr. Bradley had said as much to her, during that last humiliating interview when he notified her of her dismissal.

"You may be innocent, so far as actual share in the crookedness is concerned," he said. "My partner and I are inclined to think you are, at least we are giving you the benefit of the doubt; but we can't help feeling that, if you are, you are altogether too unsuspecting and—er—well, gullible, to be of much use in a business office. I am sorry for you, but we can't afford to take any more chances."

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It was his tone, as well as what he said, that hurt. She had a moment of resentment.

"In plain words, if I'm not a thief you think I am a fool," she said.

"Oh, I wouldn't say that exactly. You're very young, just a girl—"

But that was what he meant. And she had been a fool—oh, such a silly, weak, trusting fool. Believing implicitly, trusting unquestioningly, blindly worshiping, adoring. And all the time the object of her worship had been laughing in his sleeve, using her for his own purposes, lying to her, swearing he loved her and then going away to that other woman.

She blushed from head to foot as she thought of it.

And yet, on her part it had all come about so simply and naturally and, until the beginning of that dreadful month, she had been so blissfully happy in her fool's paradise.

The work connected with her position as bookkeeper, typist and general office minder in the Gloucester office had not been hard. The pay, of course, was small but she had been glad to earn something and to learn by experience. The office itself was a single room in a block not far from

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the water front. Her desk and that of the manager were, except for a few chairs and a safe, its only furniture. Bradley and Company carried on a good-sized business, but their headquarters were in Boston and the Gloucester branch was little more than a station for the taking of orders from the owners of the fishing fleets sailing from that town.

The Gloucester manager was Edward Coombes—practically every one who knew him called him "Ed." Twenty-nine or thirty years old, good looking, a smooth and persuasive talker with a fund of stories and an easy laugh, he was a favorite with the skippers and foremast hands of the fishing schooners and through their friendship he obtained many orders for the outfitting of their vessels between trips to the Banks. For a few years before entering the employ of Bradley and Company he had, himself, made several Banks voyages—"for the fun of it," as he explained—and the fishing crowd liked him because he treated them as comrades and was not "stuck up."

Emily liked him, too—she could not help it. He was an "easy boss," never finding fault, overlooking small mistakes and, except occasionally

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and usually on mornings following a dance or a party, always good-natured. She had been at the office only a few days when he began calling her by her Christian name and insisted that she call him "Ed." "I've been called that so long," he explained with that hearty laugh of his, "that when you say 'Mr. Coombes' I look around to see who you're talking to. Of course when the old man"—meaning the head of the firm—"comes down you can Mister me, if you want to, but when we're alone we'll cut out the frills, if you don't mind. They waste time and, in every letter I get from the firm, I'm likely to be reminded that time is money."

Yes, Emily had liked him and, obviously, he liked her. They became more and more friendly, during office hours and, later on, after them. He was fond of sociability and a good time and seemed to have a wide acquaintanceship among young people of both sexes. Emily was lonely. She lived in an inexpensive rooming and boarding-house on a back street and, although she might have made friends there had she desired, the people of her own age whom she met at supper and breakfast were not particularly interesting. Several of the young masculine boarders

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would have liked to capture her interest, but they were not encouraged. She spent her evenings in her room, reading or writing letters to Aunt Desire and Uncle Simeon.

So, when Ed Coombes invited her to accompany him to supper and the movies one evening, happening to catch her in a particularly lonely mood, she accepted. They had a pleasant evening together. Other, and similar evenings, followed. Sometimes they rode in Coombes' little car—a recent acquisition. At the end of three or four months she was, although she scarcely realized it, head over heels in love with him. Realization came, however, when, as they parted at the door of the boarding-house, he kissed her good night. She had had her share of mild high school flirtations, she had been kissed by boys before, but this—this was different. Different and, as she vaguely sensed, somehow dangerous. He would have lingered, but she summoned all her resolution, struggled from his embrace and, without a word, opened the door, closed it behind her and hurried up to her room.

There, she threw herself upon the bed, and burst into tears. Whether they were tears of indignation or shame or joy she was not quite

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sure; she did not attempt to analyze her feelings. She was frightened, a little, and she knew she should have been very angry, but—but she was not. She was happy. And to be happy, under the circumstances, was wicked. It must be. Ed did not really care for her; how could he? He was ten years older than she and he was her employer; she must see him and be with him every day. She was afraid, quite as much of herself as of him. Perhaps she ought to give up her position at once. Aunt Desire, if she knew, would insist on her doing so.

When morning came the question was still unanswered. She went to the office as usual, dreading to see him, but with her mind made up on one point. There should be no more familiarity. It would be Mr. Coombes and Miss Blanchard from then on.

It was not, of course. Ed Coombes soon sensed the situation. His first facetious reference to the previous evening showed him how the land lay and, being an experienced campaigner, he knew when he had made a mistake. He did not apologize, he continued to be his good-natured, slangy, genial self and, little by little the formal-

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ity wore away and the old comradeship was resumed. They began to spend their evenings together, became more and more confidential and intimate until, at the end of the first six months of Emily's employ by Bradley and Company, there was an understanding between the manager of the Gloucester branch and his pretty bookkeeper.

It was not an engagement exactly but it amounted to that. They were to be married. The date of the marriage was indefinite, but they were to wait until, as he expressed it, he made himself a little more solid with the firm. Emily, radiantly happy, was content to wait. She believed in him now, trusted him whole-heartedly, and worshiped him as she might a god. The engagement—or understanding—was to be kept a secret for the present. Ed thought that best and she, of course, thought so because he did. In her letters to East Trumet she made no mention of her love affair.

And then came the crash. It came without warning; at least, if there was one, Emily did not recognize it as such. Coombes was away from the office a good deal, soliciting orders and the like, and of late she had been doing most of the office

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work, attending to the correspondence, the monthly bills and statements, without his assistance or even advice. The accounts of the Gloucester branch were never large although, especially when the customer was himself the owner of the vessel he commanded, the term of credit given was often rather lengthy. One day, on the first of the month, Ed being away on a trip to the Boston headquarters, or so he said, she sent out all the statements without consulting him at all. When he returned, and learned that she had done this, he seemed, so she thought, unaccountably irritated. He had been nervous and moody of late, but she accepted his explanation that he was troubled about one or two large orders which were hanging in the balance, as she accepted all his statements to her, without doubt or question.

"But I only did it to help you, Ed. You were so busy and I certainly ought to know how by this time."

"I know, I know, but—well, I wish you hadn't. Some of these fellows are mighty sensitive about being dunned and competition is too keen for us to take risks."

"But I didn't dun them, Ed. I just sent a slip

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showing what they owed. And some have owed it for a long time."

"Yes. Perhaps so, but I wish you had let me handle it, that's all. Confound it, why won't people mind their own business!"

"But I thought it was my business, dear. . . . I have always—"

"Oh, well, never mind. Don't argue, I'm not up to it. My head aches and I feel rotten. Let me alone, will you?"

She let him alone, although she wanted much to comfort him, and, after a silent hour at his desk, he went out without telling her where he was going.

Two days later, one of the customers to whom a statement had been sent came into the office. He was the skipper and owner of the *Sea Runner,* a little mackerel schooner, and he seemed, to Emily, who was alone in the office, in a decidedly cantankerous frame of mind.

"Look here," he demanded, "what in the devil does Ed Coombes mean by sending me this thing? Eh? What's the matter with him?"

The "thing" was one of the monthly statements. It showed that the *Sea Runner's* owner owed Bradley and Company fifty-three dollars

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and twenty cents and had owed it for more than three months. Emily could not understand his resentment.

"But it is just a regular statement, Captain Kelly," she said. "We always send them out on the first of the month."

"Don't send 'em when a bill's paid, do you? I paid Ed Coombes myself three weeks ago, and I paid him in cash. I've got his receipt somewheres."

"You did! Why, there is no entry on the books. Mr. Coombes didn't tell me. Are you sure?"

"Sure? Think I have fifty dollars in my pocket so often that I can't keep account of what I do with it?"

"No—but—I suppose Mr. Coombes must have forgotten. I'm awfully sorry, Captain Kelly. I'll speak to him about it as soon as he comes back."

"You'd better. Hard enough for a fellow to pay his debts once these days, without bein' asked to pay 'em again."

He stamped out of the office. Coombes returned from Boston the following morning and she called the matter to his attention. He seemed taken aback, confused and oddly irritated. At

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first he denied that the money had been paid him, but when she told him that Captain Kelly claimed to have a receipt he admitted that the man might be right.

"Must have put it in my pocket-book with my own cash," he said, "and didn't think of it again. That's it, I guess."

"But it was more than fifty dollars," she reminded him. "How could you forget as much as that?"

"Well, I did, that's all. Look here," turning upon her savagely, "you don't think I kept it on purpose, do you?"

"You know I don't, Ed. I only—"

"Well, never mind. You needn't fix it up on the books, I'll attend to that myself. Better let me look out for the bills and statements after this. I'll try and keep 'em straight."

She was hurt and a trifle resentful, but she made no protest. He was grumpy and silent during the remainder of the day and, when she came to the office the following morning, she found that he had been there before her and had left a note for her on her desk. It was brief, stating merely that he had gone away on a short business trip and that, if anything unexpected or urgent

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turned up which needed his attention she might write him at an address in Newburyport. He added that, as his business there was confidential she must keep that address a secret. She was a little surprised, for it was the first time he had left the office without informing her of his intention.

Nothing of importance took place the next forenoon, but when she returned from luncheon she found a stranger waiting by the office door. He was a brisk, thin, spectacled little man and after she had unlocked the door and admitted him, his first question was concerning the whereabouts of Mr. Coombes. She told him that Mr. Coombes was out.

"Humph! Out, eh? Be back soon, will he?"

"I think so. He said he would be gone only a few days."

"Oh, out of town, then?"

"Yes, sir."

"Where has he gone? Do you know?"

She hesitated. Ed had given her that Newburyport address, but he had expressly forbidden her giving it to any one else. And she did not know this man.

"No," she said. "Did you wish to see him par-

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ticularly? I am his assistant here. If it is anything to do with the business, perhaps I can help you."

He ignored the suggestion. "Think he'll be back to-morrow?" he asked.

"I—I hardly think so."

"How about the next day?"

"I should think that more likely."

"Humph! So you are the girl that works for him. How are things going here? Business all right?"

"Why, yes. About as usual."

"I see. No trouble of any kind?"

"Trouble? I don't know what you mean?"

"Don't you? Sure of that?"

"Of course I am," indignantly. "Why should there be any trouble?"

For the first time he smiled. It was only the suspicion of a smile and it vanished as quickly as it came.

"Shouldn't be, that's right," he agreed. Then, after an instant's deliberation, he added, "Well, I've got a job in Portland and now seems to be as good a time to attend to it as any. Haven't got a Boston and Maine time-table around, have you?"

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"No."

"I ought to have one myself somewhere." He extracted a big pocket-book from his inside pocket and opened it. It was crammed with papers and business cards and some of them fell upon the table and behind it on the floor. He picked them up hurriedly.

"Humph!" he grunted. "Time-table seems to be missing. I was afraid it would be. Well, I'll go to Portland to-day and be back here day after to-morrow. See Mr. Coombes then, I hope. Good-by."

He was already at the door, but Emily called after him. "If you will leave your name—" she suggested.

"Never mind. Coombes doesn't know me."

He went out. Emily, surprised and vaguely disturbed, looked after him. He was such a queer little man. He had looked at her so keenly. And what had he meant by asking if there had been any trouble? Who was he, anyway?

She was passing the table when she noticed a white oblong on the floor. She stooped and picked it up. It was one of the cards the visitor had dropped from his pocket-book. She turned it over and read:

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