

# A Monarch of a Small Survey

By Gertrude Atherton

## I

The willows haunted the lake more gloomily, trailed their old branches more dejectedly, than when Dr. Hiram Webster had, forty years before, bought the ranchos surrounding them from the Moreño grandees. Gone were the Moreños from all but the archives of California, but the willows and Dr. Hiram Webster were full of years and honours. The ranchos were ranchos no longer. A somnolent city covered their fertile acres, catching but a whiff at angels' intervals of the metropolis of nerves and pulse and feverish corpuscles across the bay.

Lawns sloped to the lake. At the head of the lawns were large imposing mansions, the homes of the aristocracy of the city, all owned by Dr. Webster, and leased at high rental to a favoured few. To dwell on Webster Lake was to hold proud and exclusive position in the community, well worth the attendant ills. To purchase of those charmed acres was as little possible as to induce the Government to part with a dwelling site in Yosemite Valley.

Webster Hall was twenty years older than the tributary mansions. The trees about it were large and densely planted. When storms tossed the lake they whipped the roof viciously or held the wind in longer wails. There was an air of mystery about the great rambling sombre house; and yet no murder had been done there, no traveller had disappeared behind the sighing trees to be seen no more, no tale of horror claimed it as birthplace. The atmosphere was created by the footprints of time on a dwelling old in a new land. The lawns were unkempt, the bare windows stared at the trees like unlid eyes. Children ran past it in the night. The unwelcomed of the spreading city maintained that if nothing ever had happened there something would; that the place spoke its manifest destiny to the least creative mind.

The rain poured down one Sunday morning, splashing heavily on the tin of the oft-mended roof, hurling itself noisily through the trees. The doctor sat in his revolving-chair before the desk in his study. His yellow face was puckered; even the wrinkles seemed to wrinkle as he whirled about every few moments and scowled through the trees at the flood racing down the lawn to the lake. His thin mouth was a trifle relaxed, his clothes hung loose upon him; but the eyes, black and sharp as a ferret's, glittered undimmed.

He lifted a large bell that stood on the desk and rang it loudly. A maidservant appeared.

'Go and look at the barometer,' he roared. 'See if this damned rain shows any sign of letting up.'

The servant retired, reappeared, and announced that the barometer was uncompromising.

'Well, see that the table is set for twenty, nevertheless; do you hear? If they don't come I'll raise their rents. Send Miss Webster here.'

His sister entered in a few moments. She was nearly his age, but her faded face showed wrinkles only on the brow and about the eyes. It wore a look of haunting youth; the expression of a woman who has grown old unwillingly, and still hopes, against reason, that youth is not a matter of a few years at the wrong end of life. Her hair was fashionably arranged, but she was attired in a worn black silk, her only ornament a hair brooch. Her hands were small and well kept, although the skin hung loose upon them, spotted with the moth patches of age. Her figure was erect, but stout.

‘What is it, brother?’ she asked softly, addressing the back of the autocrat’s head.

He wheeled about sharply.

‘Why do you always come in like a cat? Do you think those people will come to-day? It’s raining cats and dogs.’

‘Certainly; they always come, and they have their carriages—’

‘That’s just it. They’re getting so damned high-toned that they’ll soon feel independent of me. But I’ll turn them out, bag and baggage.’

‘They treat you exactly as they have treated you for thirty years and more, brother.’

‘Do you think so? Do you think they’ll come to-day?’

‘I am sure they will, Hiram.’

He looked her up and down, then said, with a startling note of tenderness in his illused voice:

‘You ought to have a new frock, Marian. That is looking old.’

Had not Dr. Webster been wholly deficient in humour he would have smiled at his sister’s expression of terrified surprise. She ran forward and laid her hand on his shoulder.

‘Hiram,’ she said, ‘are you—you do not look well to-day.’

‘Oh, I am well enough,’ he replied, shaking her off. ‘But I have noticed of late that you and Abigail are looking shabby, and I don’t choose that all these fine folks shall criticise you.’ He opened his desk and counted out four double-eagles.

‘Will this be enough? I don’t know anything about women’s things.’

Miss Webster was thankful to get any money without days of expostulation, and assured him that it was sufficient. She left the room at once and sought her companion, Miss Williams.

The companion was sitting on the edge of the bed in her small ascetic chamber, staring, like Dr. Webster downstairs, through the trees at the rain. So she had sat the night of her arrival at Webster Hall, then a girl of eighteen and dreams. So she had sat many times, feeling youth slip by her, lifting her bitter protest against the monotony and starvation of her existence, yet too timid and ignorant to start forth in search of life. It was her birthday, this gloomy Sunday. She was forty-two. She was revolving a problem—a problem she had revolved many times before. For what had she stayed? Had there been an unadmitted hope that these old people must soon die and leave her with an independence with which she could travel and live? She loved Miss Webster, and she had gladly responded to her invitation to leave the New England village, where she was dependent on the charity of relatives, and make her home in the new country. Miss Webster needed a companion and housekeeper; there would be no salary, but a comfortable home and clothes that she could feel she had earned. She had come full of youth and spirit and hope. Youth and hope and spirit had dribbled away, but she had stayed, and stayed. To-day she wished she had married any clod in her native village that had been good enough to address her. Never for one moment had she known the joys of freedom, of love, of individuality.

Miss Webster entered abruptly.

‘Abby,’ she exclaimed, ‘Hiram is ill.’ And she related the tale of his unbending.

Miss Williams listened indifferently. She was very tired of Hiram. She accepted with a perfunctory expression of gratitude the gold piece allotted to her. ‘You are forty-two, you are old, you are nobody,’ was knelling through her brain.

‘What is the matter?’ asked Miss Webster, sympathetically; ‘have you been crying? Don’t you feel well? You’d better dress, dear; they’ll be here soon.’

She sat down suddenly on the bed and flung her arms about her companion, the tears starting to her kindly eyes.

‘We are old women,’ she said. ‘Life has not meant much to us. You are younger in years, but

you have lived in this dismal old house so long that you have given it and us your youth. You have hardly as much of it now as we have. Poor girl!

The two women fondled each other, Abby appreciating that, although Miss Webster might not be a woman of depths, she too had her regrets, her yearnings for what had never been.

‘What a strange order of things it is,’ continued the older woman, ‘that we should have only one chance for youth in this life! It comes to so many of us when circumstances will not permit us to enjoy it. I drudged—drudged—drudged, when I was young. Now that I have leisure and—and opportunity to meet people, at least, every chance of happiness has gone from me. But you are comparatively young yet, really; hope on. The grave will have me in a few years, but you can live and be well for thirty yet. Ah! if I had those thirty years!’

‘I would give them to you gladly for one year of happiness—of youth.’

Miss Webster rose and dried her eyes. ‘Well,’ she said, philosophically, ‘regrets won’t bring things. We’ve people to entertain to-day, so we must get out of the dumps. Put on your best frock, like a good child, and come down.’

She left the room. Miss Williams rose hurriedly, unhooked a brown silk frock from the cupboard, and put it on. Her hair was always smooth; the white line of disunion curved from brow to the braids pinned primly above the nape of the neck. As she looked into the glass to-day she experienced a sudden desire to fringe her hair, to put red on her cheeks; longing to see if any semblance of her youthful prettiness could be coaxed back. She lifted a pair of scissors, but threw them hastily down. She had not the courage to face the smiles and questions that would greet the daring innovation, the scathing ridicule of old man Webster.

She stared at her reflection in the little mirror, trying to imagine her forehead covered with a soft fringe. Nothing could conceal the lines about the eyes and mouth, but the ageing brow could be hidden from critical gaze, the face redeemed from its unyouthful length. Her cheeks were thin and colourless, but the skin was fine and smooth. The eyes, which had once been a rich dark blue, were many shades lighter now, but the dulness of age had not possessed them yet. Her set mouth had lost its curves and red, but the teeth were good. The head was finely shaped and well placed on the low old-fashioned shoulders. There were no contours now under the stiff frock. Had her estate been high she would have been, at the age of forty-two, a youthful and pretty woman. As it was, she was merely an old maid with a patrician profile.

She went downstairs to occupy her chair in the parlour, her seat at the table, to be overlooked by the fine people who took no interest whatever in the ‘Websters’ companion.’ She hated them all. She had watched them too grow old with a profound satisfaction for which she reproached herself. Even wealth had not done for them what she felt it could have done for her.

The first carriage drove up as she reached the foot of the stair. The front door had been opened by the maid as it approached, and the rain beat in. There was no *porte-cochère*; the guests were obliged to run up the steps to avoid a drenching. The fashionable Mrs. Holt dragged her skirts, and under her breath anathematised her host.

‘It will be the happiest day of my life when this sort of thing is over,’ she muttered. ‘Thank heaven, he can’t live much longer!’

‘Hush!’ whispered her prudent husband:

Miss Webster had appeared.

The two women kissed each other affectionately. Everybody liked Miss Webster. Mrs. Holt, an imposing person, with the rigid backbone of the newly rich, held her hostess’s hand in both her own as she assured her that the storm had not visited California which could keep her from one of dear Dr. Webster’s delightful dinners. As she went upstairs to lay aside her wrappings she

relieved her feelings by a facial pucker directed at a painting, on a matting panel, of the doctor in the robes of Japan.

The other guests arrived, and after making the pilgrimage upstairs, seated themselves in the front parlour to slide up and down the horsehair furniture and await the entrance of the doctor. The room was funereal. The storm-ridden trees lashed the bare dripping windows. The carpet was threadbare. White crocheted tidies lent their emphasis to the hideous black furniture. A table, with marble top, like a graveyard slab, stood in the middle of the room. On it was a bunch of wax flowers in a glass case. On the white plastered walls hung family photographs in narrow gilt frames. In a conspicuous place was the doctor's diploma. In another, Miss Webster's first sampler. 'The first piano ever brought to California' stood in a corner, looking like the ghost of an ancient spinet. Miss Williams half expected to find it some day standing on three legs, resting the other.

Miss Webster sat on a high-backed chair by the table, nervously striving to entertain her fashionable guests. The women huddled together to keep warm, regardless of their expensive raiment. The men stood in a corner, reviling the midday dinner in prospect. Miss Williams drifted into a chair and gazed dully on the accustomed scene. She had looked on it weekly, with barely an intermission, for a quarter of a century. With a sensation of relief, so sharp that it seemed to underscore the hateful monotony of it all, she observed that there was a young person in the company. As a rule, neither threats nor bribes could bring the young to Webster Hall. Then she felt glad that the young person was a man. She was in no mood to look on the blooming hopeful face of a girl.

He was a fine young fellow, with the supple lean figure of the college athlete, and a frank attractive face. He stood with his hands plunged into his pockets, gazing on the scene with an expression of ludicrous dismay. In a moment he caught the companion's eye. She smiled involuntarily, all that was still young in her leaping to meet that glad symbol of youth. He walked quickly over to her.

'I say,' he exclaimed, apologetically, 'I haven't been introduced, but do let ceremony go, and talk to me. I never saw so many old fogies in my life, and this room is like a morgue. I almost feel afraid to look behind me.'

She gave him a grateful heart-beat for all that his words implied.

'Sit down,' she said, with a vivacity she had not known was left in her sluggish currents. 'How—did—you—come—here?'

'Why, you see, I'm visiting the Holts—Jack Holt was my chum at college—and when they asked me if I wanted to see the oldest house in the city, and meet the most famous man "on this side of the bay," why, of course, I said I'd come. But, gods! I didn't know it would be like this, although Jack said the tail of a wild mustang couldn't get him through the front door. Being on my first visit to the widely-renowned California, I thought it my duty to see all the sights. Where did you come from?'

'Oh, I live here. I've lived here for twenty-four years.'

'Great Scott!' His eyes bulged. 'You've lived in this house for twenty-four years?'

'Twenty-four years.'

'And you're not dead yet—I beg pardon,' hastily. 'I am afraid you think me very rude.'

'No, I do not. I am glad you realise how dreadful it is. Nobody else ever does. These people have known me for most of that time, and it has never occurred to them to wonder how I stood it. Do you know that you are the first young person I have spoken with for years and years?'

'You don't mean it?' His boyish soul was filled with pity. 'Well, I should think you'd bolt and

run.'

'What use? I've stayed too long. I'm an old woman now, and may as well stay till the end.'

The youth was beginning to feel embarrassed, but was spared the effort of making a suitable reply by the entrance of Dr. Webster. The old man was clad in shining broadcloth, whose maker was probably dead these many years. He leaned on a cane heavily mounted with gold.

'Howdy, howdy, howdy?' he cried, in his rough but hospitable tones. 'Glad to see you. Didn't think you'd come. Yes, I did, though,' with a chuckle. 'Well, come down to dinner, I'm hungry.'

He turned his back without individual greeting, and led the way along the hail, then down a narrow creaking stairway to the basement dining-room, an apartment as stark and cheerless as the parlour, albeit the silver on the table was very old and heavy, the linen unsurpassed.

The guests seated themselves as they listed, the youngster almost clinging to Miss Williams. The doctor hurriedly ladled the soup, announcing that he had a notion to let them help themselves, he was so hungry. When he had given them this brief attention he supplied his own needs with the ladle direct from the tureen.

'Old beast!' muttered Mrs. Holt. 'It's disgusting to be so rich that you can do as you please.'

But for this remark, delivered as the ladle fell with a clatter on the empty soup-plate, the first course was disposed of amidst profound silence. No one dared to talk except as the master led, and the master was taking the edge off his appetite.

The soup was removed and a lavish dinner laid on the table. Dr. Webster sacrificed his rigid economic tenets at the kitchen door, but there was no rejoicing in the hearts of the guests. They groaned in spirit as they contemplated the amount they should be forced to consume at one of the clock.

The doctor carved the turkeys into generous portions, ate his, then began to talk.

'Cleveland will be re-elected,' he announced dictatorially. 'Do you hear? Harrison has no show at all. What say?' His shaggy brows rushed together. He had detected a faint murmur of dissent. 'Did you say he wouldn't, John Holt?'

'No, no,' disclaimed Mr. Holt, who was a scarlet Republican. Cleveland will be re-elected beyond a doubt.'

'Well, if I hear of any of you voting for Harrison! I suppose you think I can't find out what ticket you vote! But I'll find out, sirs. Mark my words, Holt, if you vote the Republican ticket—'

He stopped ominously and brought his teeth together with a vicious click. Holt raised his wine-glass nervously. The doctor held his note to a considerable amount.

'The Republican party is dead—dead as a door nail,' broke in an unctuous voice. A stout man with a shrewd time-serving face leaned forward. 'Don't let it give you a thought, doctor. What do you think of the prospects for wheat?'

'Never better, never better. They say the Northern crops will fail, but it's a lie. They can't fail. You needn't worry, Meeker. Don't pull that long face, sir; I don't like it.'

'The reports are not very encouraging,' began a man of bile and nerves and melancholy mien. 'And this early rain—'

'Don't contradict me, sir,' cried Webster. 'I say they can't fail. They haven't failed for eight years. Why should they fail now?'

'No reason at all, sir—no reason at all,' replied the victim, hurriedly. 'It does me good to hear your prognostications.'

'I hear there is a slight rise in Con. Virginia,' interposed Mrs. Holt, who had cultivated tact.

'Nonsense!' almost shouted the tyrant. The heavy silver fork of the Moreños fell to his plate

with a crash. 'The mine's as rotten as an old lung. There isn't a handful of decent ore left in her. No more clodhoppers'll get rich out of that mine. You haven't been investing, have you?' His ferret eyes darted from one face to another. 'If you have, don't you ever darken my doors again! I don't approve of stock gambling, and you know it.'

The guests, one and all, assured him that not one of their hard-earned dollars had gone to the stock market.

'Great Scott!' murmured the youth to Miss Williams; 'is this the way he always goes on? Have these people no self-respect?'

'They're used to him. This sort of thing has gone on ever since I came here. You see he has made this lake the most aristocratic part of the city, so that it gives one great social importance to live here; and as he won't sell the houses, they have to let him trample on their necks, and he loves to do that better than he loves his money. But that is not the only reason. They hope he will leave them those houses when he dies. They certainly deserve that he should. For years, before they owned carriages, they would tramp through wind and rain every Sunday in winter to play billiards with him, to say nothing of the hot days of summer. They have eaten this midday dinner that they hate time out of mind. They have listened to his interminable yarns, oft repeated, about early California. In all these years they have never contradicted him, not once. They thought he'd die long ago, and now they're under his heel, and they couldn't get up and assert themselves if they tried. All they can do is to abuse him behind his back.'

'It all seems disgusting to me.'

His independent spirit was very attractive to the companion.

'I'd like to bluff him at his own game, the old slave-driver,' he continued.

'Oh don't! don't!' she quavered.

She was, in truth, anxiously awaiting the moment when Dr. Webster should see fit to give his attention to the stranger.

He laughed outright.

'Why, what makes you so afraid of him? He doesn't beat you, does he?'

'It isn't that. It's the personality of the man, added to force of habit.'

'Well, Mr. Strowbridge,' cried Dr. Webster, suddenly addressing the youth, 'what are you doing for this world? I hear you are just out of Harvard University. University men never amount to a row of pins.'

Strowbridge flushed and bit his lip, but controlled himself.

'Never amount to a row of pins,' roared the doctor, irritated by the haughty lifting of the young man's head. 'Don't even get any more book-learning now, I understand. Nothing but football and boat-racing. Think that would make a fortune in a new country? Got any money of your own?'

'My father, since you ask me, is a rich man—as well as a gentleman,' said Strowbridge, with the expression of half-frightened anger of the righteously indignant, who knows that he has not the advantages of cool wit and scathing repartee, and, in consequence, may lose his head. 'He inherited his money, and was not forced to go to a new country and become a savage, he blurted out.

Mr. Holt extended himself beneath the table, and trod with terrified significance on Strowbridge's foot. Miss Williams fluttered with terror and admiration. The other guests gazed at the youth in dismay. For the first time in the history of Webster Hall the grizzly had been bearded in his lair.

'Sir! sir!' spluttered Webster. Then he broke into a roar. 'Who asked this cub here, anyway?'

Who said you could write and ask permission to bring your friends to my house? How dare you—how dare you—how dare you, sir, speak to me like that? Do you know, sir—’

‘Oh, I know all about you,’ exclaimed Strowbridge, whose young blood was now uncontrollable. ‘You are an ill-bred purse-proud old tyrant, who wouldn’t be allowed to sit at a table in California if it wasn’t for your vulgar money.’ He pushed back his chair and stood up. ‘I wish you good-day, sir. I pity you. You haven’t a friend on earth. I also apologise for my rudeness. My only excuse is that I couldn’t help it.’

And he went hurriedly from the room.

To Miss Williams the feeble light went with him. The appalled guests attacked their food with feverish energy. Dr. Webster stared stupidly at the door; then his food gave out the sound of ore in a crusher. He did not speak for some time. When he did he ignored the subject of young Strowbridge. His manner was appreciably milder—somewhat dazed—although he by no means gave evidence of being humbled to the dust. The long dinner dragged to its close. The women went up to the parlour to sip tea with Miss Webster and slide up and down the furniture. The men followed the doctor to the billiard-room. They were stupid and sleepy, but for three hours they were forced alternately to play and listen to the old man’s anecdotes of the days when he fought and felled the grizzly. He seemed particularly anxious to impress his hearers with his ancient invincibility.

That night, in the big four-posted mahogany bed in which he had been born, surrounded by the massive ugly furniture of his old New England home, Dr. Webster quietly passed away.

## II

Not only the lakeside people, but all of the city with claims to social importance attended the funeral. Never had there been such an imposing array of long faces and dark attire. Miss Webster being prostrated, the companion did the honours. The dwellers on the lake occupied the post of honour at the head of the room, just beyond the expensive casket. Their faces were studies. After Miss Williams had exchanged a word with each, Strowbridge stepped forward and bent to her ear.

‘Oh, I say,’ he whispered, eagerly, ‘I have to tell some member of this family how sorry I am for losing my temper and my manners the other day. It was awfully fresh of me. Poor old boy! Do say that you forgive me.’

A smile crept between her red lids.

‘He had a good heart,’ she said. ‘He would have forgiven you.’ And then the long and impressive ceremony began.

All the great company followed the dead autocrat to the cemetery, regardless of the damaging skies. Miss Williams, as chief mourner, rode in a hack, alone, directly behind the hearse. During the dreary ride she laboured conscientiously to stifle an unseemly hope. In the other carriages conversation flowed freely, and no attempt was made to discourage expectations.

Two evenings later, as the crowd of weary business men boarded the train that met the boat from the great city across the bay, it was greeted as usual by the cry of the local newsboys. This afternoon the youngsters had a rare bait, and they offered it at the top of their shrill worn voices:

‘Will of Dr. Hiram Webster! Full account of Dr. Hiram Webster’s lastwillundtestermint.’

A moment later the long rows of seats looked as if buried beneath an electrified avalanche of newspapers. At the end of five minutes the papers were fluttering on the floor amid the peanut shells and orange skins of the earlier travellers. There was an impressive silence, then an

animated, terse, and shockingly expressive conversation. Only a dozen or more sat with drawn faces and white lips. They were the dwellers by the lake. Hiram Webster had left every cent of his large fortune to his sister.

For two weeks Webster Lake did not call on the heiress. It was too sore. At the end of that period philosophy and decency came to the rescue. Moreover, cupidity: Miss Webster too must make a will, and before long.

They called. Miss Webster received them amiably. Her eyes were red, but the visitors observed that her mourning was very rich; they had never seen richer. They also remarked that she held her gray old head with a loftiness that she must have acquired in the past two weeks; no one of them had ever seen it before. She did not exactly patronise them; but that she appreciated her four millions there could be no doubt.

Strowbridge glanced about in search of Miss Williams. She was not in the room. He sauntered out to the garden and saw her coming from the dairy. She wore a black alpaca frock and a dark apron. Her face was weary and sad.

‘Could any one look more hopeless!’ he thought. ‘The selfish old curmudgeon, not to leave her independent! How her face can light up! She looks almost young.’

For she had seen him and hastened down the path. As he asked after her health and said that he had been looking for her, she smiled and flushed a little. They sat down on the steps and chatted until approaching voices warned them that both pleasure and duty were over. She found herself admitting that she had been bitterly disappointed to learn that she was still a dependant, still chained to the gloomy mansion by the lake. Yes; she should like to travel, to go to places she had read of in the doctor’s library—to live. She flushed with shame later when she reflected on her confidences—she who was so proudly reticent. And to a stranger! But she had never met any one so sympathetic.

Many were the comments of the visitors as they drove away.

‘Upon my word!’ exclaimed Mrs. Holt; ‘I do believe Marian Webster will become stuck-up in her old age.’

‘Four millions are a good excuse,’ said Mrs. Meeker, with a sigh.

‘That dress did not cost a cent under three hundred dollars,’ remarked a third, with energy. ‘And it was tried on four times, if it was once. She is evidently open to consolation.’

But Miss Webster had by no means ceased to furnish material for comment. A month later Mrs. Meeker burst in on Mrs. Holt. ‘What do you think?’ she cried. ‘Old Miss Webster is refurnishing the house from top to bottom. I ran in just now, and found everything topsy-turvy. Thompson’s men are there frescoing—frescoing! All the carpets have been taken up and are not in sight. Miss Webster informed me that she would show us what she could do, if she was seventy-odd, but that she didn’t want any one to call until everything was finished. Think of that house being modernised—that old whited sepulchre!’

Mrs. Holt had dropped the carriage blanket she was embroidering for her daughter’s baby. ‘Are you dreaming?’ she gasped. ‘Hiram will haunt the place!’

‘Just you wait. Miss Webster hasn’t waited all these years for nothing.’

Nor had she. The sudden and stupendous change in her fortunes had routed grief—made her dizzy with possibilities. She had no desire to travel, but she had had a lifelong craving for luxury. She might not have many more years to live, she reiterated to Miss Williams, but during those years her wealth should buy her all that her soul had ever yearned for.

In due course the old exclusive families of the infant city received large squares of pasteboard heavily bordered with black, intimating that Miss Webster would be at home to her friends on

Thursdays at four of the clock. On the first Thursday thereafter the parlour of Webster Hall was as crowded as on the day of the funeral. 'But who would ever know the old barrack?' as the visitors whispered. Costly lace hid the windowpanes, heavy pale blue satin the ancient frames. The walls were frescoed with pink angels rising from the tinting clouds of dawn. The carpet was of light blue velvet; the deep luxurious chairs and divans and the portières were of blue satin. The woodwork was enamelled with silver. Out in the wide hall Persian rugs lay on the inlaid floors, tapestry cloth hid the walls. Carved furniture stood in the niches and the alcoves. Through the open doors of the library the guests saw walls upholstered with leather, low bookcases, busts of marble and bronze. An old laboratory off the doctor's study had been transformed into a dining-room, as expensive and conventional as the other rooms. There a dainty luncheon was spread.

Miss Webster led the lakeside people upstairs. The many spare bedrooms had been handsomely furnished, each in a different colour. When the guests were finally permitted to enter Miss Webster's own virgin bower their chins dropped helplessly. Only this saved them from laughing outright.

The room was furnished as for a pampered beauty. The walls were covered with pink silk shimmering under delicate lace. The white enamel bed and dressing-table were bountifully draped with the same materials. Light filtered through rustling pink. The white carpet was sprinkled with pink roses. The trappings of the dressing-table were of crystal and gold. In one corner stood a Psyche mirror. Two tall lamps were hooded with pink.

All saw the humour; none the pathos.

The doctor's room had been left untouched. Sentiment and the value of the old mahogany had saved it. Miss Williams's room was also the same little cell. She assisted to receive the guests in a new black silk gown. Miss Webster was clad from head to foot in English crepe, with deep collar and girdle of dull jet.

That was a memorable day in the history of the city.

Thereafter Miss Webster gave an elaborate dinner-party every Sunday evening at seven o'clock. No patient groans greeted her invitations. Never did a lone woman receive such unflagging attentions.

At each dinner she wore a different gown. It was at the third that she dazzled her guests with an immense pair of diamond earrings. At the fourth they whispered that she had been having her nails manicured. At the fifth it was painfully evident that she was laced. At the sixth they stared and held their breath: Miss Webster was unmistakably painted. But it was at the tenth dinner that they were speechless and stupid: Miss Webster wore a blond wig.

'They can just talk all they like,' said the lady to her companion that last night, as she sat before her mirror regarding her aged charms. 'I have four millions, and I shall do as I please. It's the first time I ever could, and I intend to enjoy every privilege that wealth and independence can give. Whose business is it, anyway?' she demanded, querulously.

'No one's. But it is a trifle ridiculous, and you must expect people to talk.'

'They'd better talk!' There was a sudden suggestion of her brother's personality, never before apparent. 'But why is it ridiculous, I should like to know? Hasn't a woman the right to be young if she can? I loved Hiram. I was a faithful and devoted sister; but he took my youth, and now that he has given it back, as it were, I'll make the most of it.'

'You can't be young again.'

'Perhaps not, in years; but I'll have all that belongs to youth.'

'Not all. No man will love you.'

Miss Webster brought her false teeth together with a snap. 'Why not, I should like to know? What difference do a few years make? Seventy is not much, in any other calculation. Fancy if you had only seventy dollars between you and starvation! Think of how many thousands of years old the world is! I have now all that makes a woman attractive—wealth, beautiful surroundings, scientific care. The steam is taking out my wrinkles; I can see it.'

She turned suddenly from the glass and flashed a look of resentment on her companion.

'But I wish I had your thirty years' advantage. I do! I do! Then they'd see.'

The two women regarded each other in silence for a long moment. Love had gone from the eyes and the hearts of both. Hate, unacknowledged as yet, was growing. Miss Webster bitterly envied the wide gulf between old age and her quarter-century companion and friend. Abigail bitterly envied the older woman's power to invoke the resemblance and appurtenances of youth, to indulge her lifelong yearnings.

When the companion went to her pillow that night she wept passionately. 'I will go,' she said. 'I'll be a servant; but I'll stay here no longer.'

The next morning she stood on the verandah and watched Miss Webster drive away to market. The carriage and horses were unsurpassed in California. The coachman and footman were in livery. The heiress was attired in lustreless black silk elaborately trimmed with jet. A large hat covered with plumes was kept in place above her painted face and red wig by a heavily dotted veil—that crier of departed charms. She held a black lace parasol in one carefully gloved hand. Her pretty foot was encased in patent leather.

'The old fool!' murmured Abby. 'Why, oh, why could it not have been mine? I could make myself young without being ridiculous.'

She let her duties go and sauntered down to the lake. Many painted boats were anchored close to ornamental boat-houses. They seemed strangely out of place beneath the sad old willows. The lawns were green with the green of spring. Roses ran riot everywhere. The windows of the handsome old-fashioned houses were open, and Abby was afforded glimpses of fluttering white gowns, heard the tinkle of the mandolin, the cold precise strains of the piano, the sudden uplifting of a youthful soprano.

'After all, it only makes a little difference to them that they got nothing,' thought the companion, with a sigh.

A young man stepped from one of the long windows of the Holt mansion and came down the lawn. Miss Williams recognised Strowbridge. She had not seen him for several weeks; but he had had his part in her bitter moments, and her heart beat at sight of him to-day.

'I too am a fool,' she thought. 'Even with her money my case would be hopeless. I am nearly double his age.'

He jumped into a boat and rowed down the lake. As he passed the Webster grounds he looked up and saw Abby standing there.

'Hulloa!' he called, as if he were addressing a girl of sixteen. 'How are you, all these years? Jump in and take a row.'

He made his landing, sprang to the shore and led her to the boat with the air of one who was not in the habit of being refused. Abby had no inclination to suppress him. She stepped lightly into the boat, and a moment later was gliding down the lake, looking with admiring eyes on the strong young figure in its sweater and white trousers. A yachting cap was pulled over his blue eyes. His face was bronzed. Abby wondered if many young men were as handsome as he. As a matter of fact, he was merely a fine specimen of young American manhood whose charm lay in his frank manner and kindness of heart.

‘Like this?’ he asked, smiling into her eyes.

‘Yes, indeed. Hiram used to row us sometimes; but the boat lurched so when he lost his temper that I was in constant fear of being tipped over.’

‘Hiram must have been a terror to cats.’

‘A what?’

‘Beg pardon! Of course you don’t know much slang. Beastly habit.’

He rowed up and down the lake many times, floating idly in the long recesses where the willows met overhead. He talked constantly; told her yarns of his college life; described boat races and football matches in which he had taken part. At first his only impulse was to amuse the lonely old maid; but she proved such a delighted and sympathetic listener that he forgot to pity her. An hour passed, and with it her bitterness. She no longer felt that she must leave Webster Hall. But she remembered her duties, and regretfully asked him to land her.

‘Well, if I must,’ he said. ‘But I’m sorry, and we’ll do it again some day. I’m awfully obliged to you for coming.’

‘Obliged to me?—you?’ she said, as he helped her to shore. ‘Oh, you don’t know—’ And laughing lightly, she went rapidly up the path to the house.

Miss Webster was standing on the verandah. Her brows were together in an ugly scowl.

‘Well!’ she exclaimed. ‘So you go gallivanting about with boys in your old age! Aren’t you ashamed to make such an exhibition of yourself?’

Abby felt as if a hot palm had struck her face. Then a new spirit, born of caressed vanity, asserted itself.

‘Wouldn’t you have done the same if you had been asked?’ she demanded.

Miss Webster turned her back and went up to her room. She locked the door and burst into tears. ‘I can’t help it,’ she sobbed, helplessly. ‘It’s dreadful of me to hate Abby after all these years; but—those terrible thirty! I’d give three of my millions to be where she is. I used to think she was old, too. But she isn’t. She’s young! Young!—a baby compared to me. I could more than be her mother. Oh, I must try as a Christian woman to tear this feeling from my heart.’

She wrote off a cheque and directed it to her pastor, then rang for the trained nurse her physician had imported from New York, and ordered her to steam and massage her face and rub her old body with spirits of wine and unguents.

Strowbridge acquired the habit of dropping in on Miss Williams at all hours. Sometimes he called at the dairy and sat on a corner of the table while she superintended the butter-making. He liked her old-fashioned music, and often persuaded her to play for him on the new grand piano in the sky-blue parlour. He brought her many books by the latter-day authors, all of them stories by men about men. He had a young contempt for the literature of sentiment and sex. Even Miss Webster grew to like him, partly because he ignored the possibility of her doing otherwise, partly because his vital frank personality was irresistible. She even invited him informally to dinner; and after a time he joked and guyed her as if she were a schoolgirl, which pleased her mightily. Of Miss Williams he was sincerely fond.

‘You are so jolly companionable, don’t you know,’ he would say to her. ‘Most girls are bores; don’t know enough to have anything to talk about, and want to be flattered and flirted with all the time. But I feel as if you were just another fellow, don’t you know.’

‘Oh, I am used to the role of companion,’ she would reply.

With the first days of June he returned to Boston, and the sun turned gray for one woman.

Life went its way in the old house. People became accustomed to the spectacle of Miss Webster rejuvenated, and forgot to flatter. It may be added that men forgot to propose, in spite of

the four millions. Deeper grew the gulf between the two women. Once in every week Abby vowed she would leave, but habit was too strong. Once in every week Miss Webster vowed she would turn the companion out, but dependence on the younger woman had grown into the fibres of her old being.

Strowbridge returned the following summer. Almost immediately he called on Miss Williams.

'I feel as if you were one of the oldest friends I have in the world, don't you know,' he said, as they sat together on the verandah. 'And I've brought you a little present—if you don't mind. I thought maybe you wouldn't.'

He took a small case from his pocket, touched a spring, and revealed a tiny gold watch and fob. 'You know,' he had said to himself apologetically as he bought it, 'I can give it to her because she's so much older than myself. It's not vulgar, like giving handsome presents to girls. And then we are friends. I'm sure she won't mind, poor old thing!' Nevertheless, he looked at her with some apprehension.

His misgivings proved to be vagaries of his imagination. Abby gazed at the beautiful toy with radiant face. 'For me!' she exclaimed—'that lovely thing? And you really bought it for me?'

'Why, of course I did,' he said, too relieved to note the significance of her pleasure. 'And you'll take it?'

'Indeed I'll take it.' She laid it on her palm and looked at it with rapture. She fastened the fob in a buttonhole of her blouse, but removed it with a shake of the head. 'I'll just keep it to look at, and only wear it with my black silk. It's out of place on this rusty alpaca.'

'What a close-fisted old girl the Circus must—'

'Oh, hush, hush! She might hear you.' Abby rose hastily. 'Let us walk in the garden.'

They sauntered between the now well-kept lawns and flower-beds and entered a long avenue of fig trees. The purple fruit hung abundantly among the large green leaves. Miss Williams opened one of the figs and showed Strowbridge the red luscious pith.

'You don't have these over there.'

'We don't. Are they good to eat this way?'

She held one of the oval halves to his mouth.

'Eat!' she said.

And he did. Then he ate a dozen more that she broke for him.

'I feel like a greedy schoolboy,' he said. 'But they are good, and no mistake. You have introduced me to another pleasure. Now let us go and take a pull.'

All that afternoon there was no mirror to tell her that she was not the girl who had come to Webster Hall a quarter of a century before. That night she knelt long by her bed, pressing her hands about her face.

'I am a fool, I know,' she thought, 'but such things have been. If only I had a little of her money.'

The next day she went down to the lake, not admitting that she expected him to take her out; it would be enough to see him. She saw him. He rowed past with Elinor Holt, the most beautiful girl of the lakeside. His gaze was fixed on the flushed face, the limpid eyes. He did not look up.

Miss Williams walked back to the house with the odd feeling that she had been smitten with paralysis and some unseen force was propelling her. But she was immediately absorbed in the manifold duties of the housekeeping. When leisure came reaction had preceded it.

'I am a fool,' she thought. 'Of course he must show Elinor Holt attention. He is her father's guest. But he might have looked up.'

That night she could not sleep. Suddenly she was lifted from her thoughts by strange sounds

that came to her from the hall without. She opened the door cautiously. A white figure was flitting up and down, wringing its hands, the gray hair bobbing about the jerking head.

‘No use!’ it moaned. ‘No use, no use, no use! I’m old, old, old! Seventy-four, seventy-four, seventy-four! Oh Lord! Oh Lord! oh Lord! Thy ways are past finding out. Amen!’

Abby closed her door hurriedly. She felt the tragedy out there was not for mortal eyes to look upon. In a few moments she heard the steps pause before her door. Hands beat lightly upon it.

‘Give me back those thirty years!’ whimpered the old voice. ‘They are mine! You have stolen them from me!’

Abby’s hair rose. ‘Is Marian going mad?’ she thought.

But the next morning Miss Webster looked as usual when she appeared, after her late breakfast in bed, bedecked for her drive to market. She had modified her mourning, and wore a lavender cheviot, and the parasol and hat were in harmony with all but herself.

‘Poor old caricature!’ thought Abby. ‘She makes me feel young.’

A week later, when the maid entered Miss Webster’s bedroom at the accustomed morning hour, she found that the bed had not been occupied. Nor was her mistress visible. The woman informed Miss Williams at once, and together they searched the house. They found her in her brother’s room, in the old mahogany bed in which she too had been born. She was dead. Her gray hair was smooth under her lace nightcap. Her hands were folded, the nails glistening in the dusky room. Death had come peacefully, as to her brother. What had taken her there to meet it was the last mystery of her strange old soul.

### III

Again a funeral in the old house, again a crowd of mourners. This time there was less ostentation of grief, for no one was left worth impressing. The lakeside people gathered, as before, at the upper end of the parlour and gossiped freely. ‘Miss Williams ought to have put the blond wig on her,’ said Mrs. Holt. ‘I am sure that is what Marian would have done for herself. Poor Marian! She was a good soul, after all, and really gave liberally to charity. I wonder if she has left Miss Williams anything?’

‘Of course. She will come in for a good slice. Who is better entitled to a legacy?’

Pertinent question! They exchanged amused glances. Words were superfluous, but Mrs. Holt continued:

‘I think we are pretty sure of our shanties this time; Marian was really fond of us, and had neither kith nor kin; but I, for one, am going to make sure of some memento of the famous Webster estate.’ And she deliberately opened a cabinet, lifted down a small antique teapot, and slipped it into her bag.

The others laughed noiselessly. ‘That is like your humour,’ said Mrs. Meeker. Then all bent their heads reverently. The ceremony had begun.

Two days later Miss Williams wandered restlessly up and down the hall waiting for the evening newspaper. She made no attempt to deceive herself this time. She thought tenderly of the dead, but she was frankly eager to learn just what position in the world her old friend’s legacy would give her. Two or three times she had been on the point of going to a hotel; but deeply as she hated the place, the grip of the years was too strong. She felt that she could not go until the law compelled her.

‘I cannot get the capital for ten months,’ she thought, ‘but I can get the income, or borrow; and I can live in the city, or perhaps But I must not think of that.’

A boy appeared at the end of the walk. His arms were full of newspapers, and he rolled one with expert haste. Miss Williams could contain herself no further. She ran down the walk. The boy gave the paper a sudden twist and threw it to her. She caught it and ran upstairs to her room and locked the door. For a moment she turned faint. Then she shook the paper violently apart. She had not far to search. The will of so important a personage as Miss Webster was necessarily on the first page. The 'story' occupied a column, and the contents were set forth in the headlines. The headlines read as follows

WILL OF MISS MARIAN WEBSTER  
—————  
SHE LEAVES HER VAST FORTUNE TO  
CHARITY  
—————  
FOUR MILLIONS THE PRICE OF ETERNAL  
FAME  
—————  
NO LEGACIES

The room whirled round the forgotten woman. She turned sick, then cold to her marrow. She fell limply to the floor, and crouched there with the newspaper in her hand. After a time she spread it out on the floor and spelled through the dancing characters in the long column. Her name was not mentioned. Those thirty years had outweighed the devotion of more than half a lifetime. It was the old woman's only revenge, and she had taken it.

No tears came to Miss Williams's relief. She gasped occasionally. 'How could she? how could she? how could she?' her mind reiterated. 'What difference would it have made to her after she was dead? And I—oh God—what will become of me?' For a time she did not think of Strowbridge. When she did, it was to see him smiling into the eyes of Elinor Holt. Her delusion fell from her in that hour of terrible realities. Had she read of his engagement in the newspaper before her she would have felt no surprise. She knew now what had brought him back to California. Many trifles that she had not noted at the time linked themselves symmetrically together, and the chain bound the two young people.

'Fool! fool!' she exclaimed. 'But no—thank heaven, I had that one little dream!—the only one in forty-three years!'

The maid tapped at her door and announced dinner. She bade her go away. She remained on the floor, in the dark, for many hours. The stars were bright, but the wind lashed the lake, whipped the trees against the roof. When the night was half done she staggered to her feet. Her limbs were cramped and numbed. She opened the door and listened. The lights were out, the house was still. She limped over to the room which had been Miss Webster's. That too was dark. She lighted the lamps and flooded the room with soft pink light. She let down her hair, and with the old lady's long scissors cut a thick fringe. The hair fell softly, but the parting of years was obtrusive. A bottle of gum tragacanth stood on one corner of the dressing-table, and with its contents Abby matted the unneighbourly locks together. The fringe covered her careworn brow, but her face was pallid, faded. She knew where Miss Webster had kept her cosmetics. A moment later an array of bottles, jars, and rouge-pots stood on the table before her.

She applied the white paint, then the red. She darkened her eyelashes, drew the lip-salve across her pale mouth. She arranged her soft abundant hair in a loose knot. Then she flung off her black

frock, selected a magnificent white satin dinner-gown from the wardrobe, and put it on. The square neck was filled with lace, and it hid her skinny throat. She put her feet into French slippers and drew long gloves up to her elbows. Then she regarded herself in the Psyche mirror.

Her eyes glittered. The cosmetics, in the soft pink light, were the tintings of nature and youth. She was almost beautiful.

‘That is what I might have been without aid of art had wealth been mine from the moment that care of nature’s gifts was necessary,’ she said, addressing her image. ‘I would not have needed paint for years yet, and when I did I should have known how to use it! I need not have been old and worn at forty-three. Even now—even now—if wealth were mine, and happiness!’ She leaned forward, and pressing her finger against the glass, spoke deliberately; there was no passion in her tones: ‘When that letter came twenty-five years ago offering me a home, I wish I had flouted it, although I did not have five dollars in the world. I wish I had become a harlot—a harlot! do you hear? Nothing—nothing in life can be as bad as life empty, wasted, emotionless, stagnant! I have existed forty-three years in this great, beautiful, multiform world, and I might as well have died at birth for all that it has meant to me. Nature gave me abundantly of her instincts. I could have been a devoted wife, a happy mother, a gay and careless harlot! I would have chosen the first, but failing that—rather the last a thousand times than this! For then I should have had some years of pleasure, excitement, knowledge—’

She turned abruptly and started for the door, stopped, hesitated, then walked slowly to the wardrobe. She unhooked a frock of nun’s veiling and tore out the back breadths. She returned to the mirror and fastened the soft flowing stuff to her head with several of the dead woman’s ornamental pins.

For a few moments longer she gazed at herself, this time silently. Her eyes had the blank look of introspection. Then she went from the house and down to the lake.

The next day the city on the ranchos was able to assure itself comfortably that Webster Lake had had its tragedy.

Of the Tragedy it knew nothing.