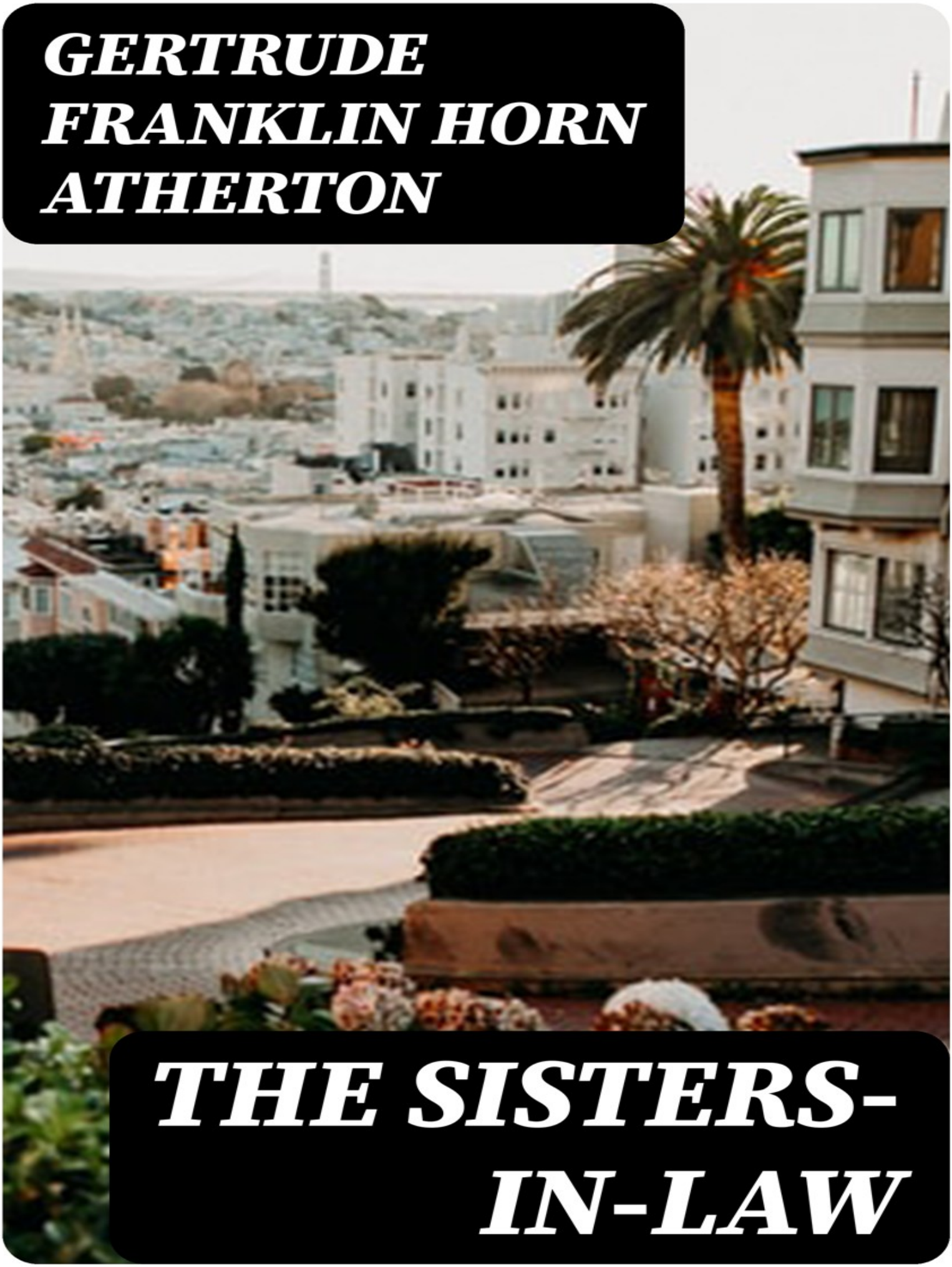
GERTRUDE FRANKLIN HORN ATHERTON



THE SISTERS-IN-LAW

Gertrude Franklin Horn Atherton

The Sisters-In-Law

A Novel of Our Time

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BOOK I

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The long street rising and falling and rising again until its farthest crest high in the east seemed to brush the fading stars, was deserted even by the private watchmen that guarded the homes of the apprehensive in the Western Addition. Alexina darted across and into the shadows of the avenue that led up to her old-fashioned home, a relic of San Francisco's "early days," perched high on the steepest of the casual hills in that city of a hundred hills.

She was breathless and rather frightened, for although of an adventurous spirit, which had led her to slide down the pillars of the verandah at night when her legs were longer than her years, and during the past winter to make a hardly less dignified exit by a side door when her worthy but hopelessly Victorian mother was asleep, this was the first time that she had been out after midnight.

And it was five o'clock in the morning!

She had gone with Aileen Lawton, her mother's pet aversion, to a party given by one of those new people whom

Mrs. Groome, a massive if crumbling pillar of San Francisco's proud old aristocracy, held in pious disdain, and had danced in the magnificent ballroom with the tireless exhilaration of her eighteen years until the weary band had played Home Sweet Home.

She had never imagined that any entertainment could be so brilliant, even among the despised nouveaux riches, nor that there were so many flowers even in California. Her own coming-out party in the dark double parlors of the old house among the eucalyptus trees, whose moans and sighs could be heard above the thin music of piano and violin, had been so formal and dull that she had cried herself to sleep after the last depressed member of the old set had left on the stroke of midnight. Even Aileen's high mocking spirits had failed her, and she had barely been able to summon them for a moment as she kissed the friend, to whom she was sincerely devoted, a sympathetic good-night.

"Never mind, old girl. Nothing can ever be worse. Not even your own funeral. That's one comfort."

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That had been last November. During the ensuing five months Alexina had been taken by her mother to such entertainments as were given by other members of that distinguished old band, whose glory, like Mrs. Groome's own, had reached its meridian in the last of the eighties.

Not that any one else in San Francisco was quite as exclusive as Mrs. Groome. Others might be as faithful in their way to the old tradition, be as proud of their inviolate past, when "money did not count," and people merely "new," or of unknown ancestry, did not venture to knock at the gates: but the successive flocks of young folks had overpowered their conservative parents, and Society had loosened its girdle, until in this year of grace nineteen-hundred-and-six, there were few rich people so hopelessly new that their ball rooms either in San Francisco or "Down the Peninsula," were unknown to a generation equally determined to enjoy life and indifferent to traditions.

Mrs. Groome alone had set her face obdurately against any change in the personnel of the eighties. She had the ugliest old house in San Francisco, and the change from lamps to gas had been her last concession to the march of time. The bath tubs were tin and the double parlors crowded with the imposing carved Italian furniture whose like every member of her own set had, in the seventies and eighties, brought home after their frequent and prolonged sojourns abroad: for the prouder the people of that era were of their lofty social position on the edge of the Pacific, the more time did they spend in Europe.

Mrs. Groome might be compelled therefore to look at new people in the homes of her friends—even her proud daughter, Mrs. Abbott, had unaccountably surrendered to the meretricious glitter of Burlingame—but she would not meet them, she would not permit Alexina to cross their thresholds, nor should the best of them ever cross her own.

Poor Alexina, forced to submit, her mother placidly impervious to coaxings, tears, and storms, had finally compromised the matter to the satisfaction of herself and of her own close chosen friend, Aileen Lawton. She accompanied her mother with outward resignation to small dinner dances and to the Matriarch balls, presided over by the newly elected social leader, a lady of unimpeachable Southern ancestry and indifference to wealth, who pledged her Virginia honor to Mrs. Groome that Alexina should not be introduced to any young man whose name was not on her own visiting list; and, while her mother slept, the last of the Ballinger-Groomes accompanied Aileen (chaperoned by an unprincipled aunt, who was an ancient enemy of Maria Groome) to parties quite as respectable but infinitely gayer, and indubitably mixed.

She was quite safe, for Mrs. Groome, when free of social duties, retired on the stroke of nine with a novel, and turned off the gas at ten. She never read the society columns of the newspapers, choked as they were with unfamiliar and plebeian names; and her friends, regarding Alexina's gay disobedience as a palatable joke on "poor old Maria," and sympathetic with youth, would have been the last to enlighten her.

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Alexina had never enjoyed herself more than to-night. Young Mrs. Hofer, who had bought and remodeled the old Polk house on Nob Hill—the very one in which Mrs. Groome's oldest daughter had made her début in the far-off eighties—had turned all her immense rooms into a bower of every variety of flower that bloomed on the rich California soil. It was her second great party of the season, and it had been her avowed intention to outdo the first, which had attempted a revival of Spanish California and been the talk of the town. The decorations had been done by a firm of young women whose parents and grandparents had danced in the old house, and the catering by another scion of San Francisco's social founders, Miss Anne Montgomery.

To do Mrs. Groome full justice, all of these enterprising young women were welcome in her own home. She regarded it as unfortunate that ladies were forced to work for their living, but had seen too many San Francisco families in her own youth go down to ruin to feel more than sorrow. In that era the wives of lost millionaires had knitted baby socks and starved slowly. Even she was forced to admit that the newer generation was more fortunate in its opportunities.

Alexina had not gone to Mrs. Hofer's first party, Aileen being in Santa Barbara, but she had sniffed at the comparisons of the more critical girls in their second season. She was quite convinced that nothing so splendid had ever been given in the world. She had danced every dance. She had had the most delicious things to eat, and never had she met so charming a young man as Mortimer Dwight.

"Some party," she thought as she ran up the steep avenue to her sacrosanct abode, where her haughty mother was chastely asleep, secure in the belief that her obedient little daughter was dreaming in her maiden bower.

"What the poor old darling doesn't know 'll never hurt her," thought
Alexina gayly. "She really is old enough to be my grandmother, anyhow.
I wonder if Maria and Sally really stood for it or were as naughty as I
am."

Alexina was the youngest of a long line of boys and girls, all of whom but five were dead. Ballinger and Geary practiced law in New York, having married sisters who refused to live elsewhere. Sally had married one of their Harvard friends and dwelt in Boston. Maria alone had wed an indigenous Californian, an Abbott of Alta in the county of San Mateo, and lived the year round in that old and exclusive borough. She was now so like her mother, barring a very slight loosening of her own social girdle, that Alexina dismissed as fantastic the notion that even a quarter of a century earlier she may have had any of the promptings of rebellious youth.

"Not she!" thought Alexina grimly. "Oh, Lord! I wonder if my summer destiny is Alta."

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She was quite breathless as she reached the eucalyptus grove and paused for a moment before slipping into the house and climbing the stairs.

The city lying in the valleys and on the hills arrested her attention, for it was a long while since she had been awake and out of doors at five in the morning.

It looked like the ghost of a city in that pallid dawn. The houses seemed to have huddled together as if in fear before they sank into sleep, to crouch close to the earth as if warding off a blow. Only the ugly dome of the City Hall, the church steeples, and the old shot tower held up their heads, and they had an almost terrifying sharpness of outline, of alertness, as if ready to spring.

In that far-off district known as "South of Market Street," which she had never entered save in a closed carriage on her way to the Southern Pacific Station or to pay a yearly call on some old family that still dwelt on that oasis, Rincon Hill—sole outpost of the social life of the sixties—infrequent

thin lines of smoke rose from humble chimneys. It was the region of factories and dwellings of the working-class, but its inhabitants were not early risers in these days of high wages and short hours.

Even those gray spirals ascended as if the atmosphere lay heavy on them. They accentuated the lifelessness, the petrifaction, the intense and sinister quiet of the prostrate city.

Alexina shuddered and her volatile spirits winged their way down into those dark and intuitive depths of her mind she had never found time to plumb. She knew that the hour of dawn was always still, but she had never imagined a stillness so complete, so final as this. Nor was there any fresh lightness in the morning air. It seemed to press downward like an enormous invisible bat; or like the shade of buried cities, vain outcroppings of a vanished civilization, brooding menacingly over this recent flimsy accomplishment of man that Nature could obliterate with a sneer.

Alexina, holding her breath, glanced upward. That ghost of evening's twilight, the sad gray of dawn, had retreated, but not before the crimson rays of sunrise. The unflecked arc above was a hard and steely blue. It looked as if marsh lights would play over its horrid surface presently, and then come crashing down as the pillars of the earth gave way.

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Alexina was a child of California and knew what was coming. She barely had time to brace herself when she saw the sleeping city jar as if struck by a sudden squall, and with the invisible storm came a loud menacing roar of imprisoned forces making a concerted rush for freedom.

She threw her arms about one of the trees, but it was bending and groaning with an accent of fear, a tribute it would have scorned to offer the mighty winds of the Pacific. Alexina sprang clear of it and unable to keep her feet sat down on the bouncing earth.

Then she remembered that it was a rigid convention among real Californians to treat an earthquake as a joke, and began to laugh. There was nothing hysterical in this perfunctory tribute to the lesser tradition and it immediately restored her courage. Moreover, the curiosity she felt for all phases of life, psychical and physical, and her naïve delight in everything that savored of experience, caused her to stare down upon the city now tossing and heaving like the sea in a hurricane, with an almost impersonal interest.

The houses seemed to clutch at their precarious foundations even while they danced to the tune of various and appalling noises. Above the ascending roar of the earthquake Alexina heard the crashing of steeples, the dome of the City Hall, of brick buildings too hastily erected, of ten thousand falling chimneys; of creaking and grinding timbers, and of the eucalyptus trees behind her, whose leaves rustled with a shrill rising whisper that seemed addressed to heaven; the neighing and pawing of horses in the stables, the sharp terrified yelps of dogs; and through all a long despairing wail. The mountains across the bay and

behind the city were whirling in a devil's dance and the scattered houses on their slopes looked like drunken gnomes. The shot tower bowed low and solemnly but did not fall.

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As the earth with a final leap and twist settled abruptly into peace, the streets filled suddenly with people, many in their nightclothes, but more in dressing-gowns, opera cloaks, and overcoats. All were silent and apparently self-possessed. Whence came that long wail no one ever knew.

Alexina, remembering her own attire, sprang to her feet and ran through the little side door and up the stair, praying that her mother, with her usual monumental poise, would have disdained to rise. She had never been known to leave her room before eight.

But as Alexina ran along the upper hall she became only too aware that Mrs. Groome had surrendered to Nature, for she was pounding on her door and in a haughty but quivering voice demanding to be let out.

Alexina tiptoed lightly to the threshold of her room and called out sympathetically:

"What is the matter, mother dear! Has your door sprung?"

"It has. Tell James to come here at once and bring a crow-bar if necessary."

"Yes, darling."

Alexina let down her hair and tore off her evening gown, kicking it into a closet, then threw on a bathrobe and ran over to the servants' quarters in an extension behind the house. They were deserted, but wild shrieks and gales of unseemly laughter arose from the yard. She opened a window and saw the cook, a recent importation, on the ground in hysterics, the housemaid throwing water on her, and the inherited butler calmly lighting his pipe.

"James," she called. "My mother's door is jammed. Please come right away."

"Yes, miss." He knocked his pipe against the wall and ground out the life of the coal with his slippered heel. "Just what happened to your grandmother in the 'quake of sixty-eight. I mind the time I had getting her out."

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It was quite half an hour before the door yielded to the combined efforts of James and the gardener-coachman, and during the interval Mrs. Groome recovered her poise and made her morning toilette.

She had taken her iron-gray hair from its pins and patted the narrow row of frizzes into place; the flat side bands, the concise coil of hair on top were as severely disdainful of untoward circumstance or passing fashion as they had been any morning these forty years or more.

She wore old-fashioned corsets and was abdominally correct for her years; a long gown of black voile with white polka dots, and a guimpe of white net whose raff of chiffon somewhat disguised the wreck of her throat. On her shoulders, disposed to rheumatism, she wore a tippet of brown marabout feathers, and in her ears long jet earrings.

She had the dark brown eyes of the Ballingers, but they were bleared at the rims, and on the downward slope of her fine aquiline nose she wore spectacles that looked as if mounted in cast iron. Altogether an imposing relic; and "that built-up look" as Aileen expressed it, was the only one that would have suited her mental style. Mrs. Abbott, who dressed with a profound regard for fashion, had long since concluded that her mother's steadfast alliance with the past not only became her but was a distinct family asset. Only a woman of her overpowering position could afford it.

Mrs. Groome's skin had never felt the guilty caress of cold-cream or powder, and if it was mahogany in tint and deeply wrinkled, it was at least as respectable as her past. In her day that now bourgeois adjective—twin to genteel—had been synchronous with the equally obsolete word swell, but it had never occurred to even the more modern Mrs. Abbott and her select inner circle of friends, dwelling on family estates in the San Mateo valley, to change in this respect at least with the changing times.

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Alexina had washed the powder from her own fresh face and put on a morning frock of green and brown gingham, made not by her mother's dressmaker but by her sister's. Her soft dusky hair, regardless of the fashion of the moment, was brushed back from her forehead and coiled at the base of her beautiful little head. Her long widely set gray eyes, their large irises very dark and noticeably brilliant even for youth, had the favor of black lashes as fine and lusterless as her hair, and very narrow black polished eyebrows. Her skin was a pale olive lightly touched with color, although the rather large mouth with its definitely curved lips was scarlet. Her long throat like the rest of her body was white.

All the other children had been clean-cut Ballingers or Groomes, consistently dark or fair; but it would seem that Nature, taken by surprise when the little Alexina came along several years after her mother was supposed to have discharged her debt, had mixed the colors hurriedly and quite forgotten her usual nice proportions.

The face, under the soft lines of youth, was less oval than it looked, for the chin was square and the jaw bone accentuated. The short straight thin nose reclaimed the face and head from too classic a regularity, and the thin nostrils drew in when she was determined and shook quite alarmingly when she was angry.

These more significant indications of her still embryonic personality were concealed by the lovely curves and tints of her years, the brilliant happy candid eyes (which she could convert into a madonna's by the simple trick of lifting them a trifle and showing a lower crescent of devotional white),

the love of life and eagerness to enjoy that radiated from her thin admirably proportioned body, which, at this time, held in the limp slouching fashion of the hour, made her look rather small. In reality she was nearly as tall as her mother or the dignified Mrs. Abbott, who rejoiced in every inch of her five feet eight, and retained the free erect carriage of her girlhood.

Alexina, with a sharp glance about her disordered room, hastily disarranged her bed, and, sending her ball slippers after the gown, ran across the hall and threw herself into her mother's arms.

"Some earthquake, what? You are sure you are not hurt, mommy dear? The plaster is down all over the house."

"More slang that you have learned from Aileen Lawton, I presume. It certainly was a dreadful earthquake, worse than that of eighteen-sixty-eight. Is anything valuable broken? There is always less damage done on the hills. What is that abominable noise?"

The cook, who had recovered from her first attack, was emitting another volley of shrieks, in which the word "fire" could be distinguished in syllables of two.

Mrs. Groome rang the bell violently and the imperturbable James appeared.

"Is the house on fire?"

"No, ma'am; only the city. It's worth looking at, if you care to step out on the lawn."

Mrs. Groome followed her daughter downstairs and out of the house. Her eyebrows were raised but there was a curious sensation in her knees that even the earthquake

had failed to induce. She sank into the chair James had provided and clutched the arms with both hands.

"There are always fires after earthquakes," she muttered. "Impossible!
Impossible!"

"Oh, do you think San Francisco is really going?" cried Alexina, but there was a thrill in her regret. "Oh, but it couldn't be."

"No! impossible, impossible!"

Black clouds of smoke shot with red tongues of flame overhung the city at different points, although they appeared to be more dense and frequent down in the "South of Market Street" region. There was also a rolling mass of flame above the water front and sporadic fires in the business district.

The streets were black with people, now fully dressed, and long processions were moving steadily toward the bay as well as in the direction of the hills behind the western rim of the city. James brought a pair of field glasses, and Mrs. Groome discovered that the hurrying throngs were laden with household goods, many pushing them in baby carriages and wheelbarrows. It was the first flight of the refugees.

"James!" said Mrs. Groome sharply. "Bring me a cup of coffee and then go down and find out exactly what is happening."

James, too wise in the habits of earthquakes to permit the still distracted cook to make a fire in the range, brewed the coffee over a spirit lamp, and then departed, nothing

loath, on his mission. Mrs. Groome swallowed the coffee hastily, handed the cup to Alexina and burst into tears.

"Mother!" Alexina was really terrified for the first time that morning. Mrs. Groome practiced the severe code, the repressions of her class, and what tears she had shed in her life, even over the deaths of those almost forgotten children, had been in the sanctity of her bedroom. Alexina, who had grown up under her wing, after many sorrows and trials had given her a serenity that was one secret of her power over this impulsive child of her old age, could hardly have been more appalled if her mother had been stricken with paralysis.

"You cannot understand," sobbed Mrs. Groome. "This is my city! The city of my youth; the city my father helped to make the great and wonderful city it is. Even your father—he may not have been a good husband—Oh, no! Not he!—but he was a good citizen; he helped to drag San Francisco out of the political mire more than once. And now it is going! It has always been prophesied that San Francisco would burn to the ground some time, and now the time has come. I feel it in my bones."

This was the first reference other than perfunctory, that Alexina had ever heard her mother make to her father, who had died when she was ten. The girl realized abruptly that this elderly parent who, while uniformly kind, had appeared to be far above the ordinary weaknesses of her sex, had an inner life which bound her to the plane of mere mortals. She had a sudden vision of an unhappy married life, silently borne, a life of suppressions, bitter disappointments. Her

chief compensation had been the unwavering pride which had made the world forget to pity her.

And it was the threatened destruction of her city that had beaten down the defenses and given her youngest child a brief glimpse of that haughty but shivering spirit.

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Alexina's mind, in spite of a great deal of worldly garnering with an industrious and investigating scythe, was as immature as her years, for she had felt little and lived not at all. But she had swift and deep intuitions, and in spite of the natural volatility of youth, free of care, she was fundamentally emotional and intense.

Swept from her poor little girlish moorings in the sophisticated sea of the twentieth-century maiden, she had a sudden wild access of conscience; she flung herself into her mother's arms and poured out the tale of her nocturnal transgressions, her frequent excursions into the forbidden realm of modern San Francisco, of her immense acquaintance with people whose very names were unknown to Mrs. Groome, born Ballinger.

Then she scrambled to her feet and stood twisting her hands together, expecting a burst of wrath that would further reveal the pent-up fires in this long-sealed volcano; for Alexina was inclined to the exaggerations of her sex and years and would not have been surprised if her mother,