



## The Crossroads

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**W**ATER stood where cars had cut ruts in the country road. Anne sluffed through the mud watching the surfaces of tiny pools glitter in the sunlight. She could see grains of sand at the bottom, reddish-gold and sometimes purple.

Dick was walking ahead, side-stepping the ruts and treading lightly to preserve his shoes. He stopped and looked back. "Coming?"

"In just a minute." Anne stooped to pick up a stone; its surface was polished and streaked with green. As it lay in her palm, its delicate colors gleamed softly in the sun. "Look, Dick. I wonder how old it is?"

"I don't know." He answered absently. "It's getting late. We'd better hurry."

She dropped the stone in her pocket; it clicked against the others she had collected during the long afternoon. "Yes, I suppose so." She was silent as she walked beside him.

**I**N FRONT of them the road stretched in a brown streak, disappearing among low hills where shadows slanted long on northern slopes. It was so silly to hurry. They were only hurrying back to the city, and coal smoke, and news broadcasts. It really didn't matter when they got there; only Dick thought that it did.

"What are you going to do with them?" Dick asked.

"Oh—" Her fingers touched the pebbles in her pocket, slid over the smooth roundness of them. "I don't know. Keep them

awhile, I guess, then throw them away."

Dick bent over. Straightening swiftly, he offered her a large rock. "Here's one for your collection." His voice was teasingly gay.

The rock was drab. Drab, and large, and jagged. He was only laughing at her! "That's too big," Anne said, shaking her head.

Dick dropped the stone and turned away. "You *are* a child." He spoke impatiently.

Glancing up, she saw his face, dark in the sun. A tiny vein near his eye pulsed rapidly up and down. "Yes—I know," she said slowly.

Last week—it seemed a long time ago—her sister had said the same thing. "You are a child." They had been walking in the woods looking for ferns, and Anne had seen a buttercup—the first of the year. "Polly, look!" she had cried. But Polly had answered absently; she'd stepped on it without seeing it at all. As Anne had stood looking at the crushed yellow blossom, Polly had said, "You *are* a child, Anne," in that same adult-to-bad-child tone.

Dick was talking to her, waiting for her to answer. "What did you say? I wasn't—"

"I said, 'You're getting your feet wet'."

**S**HE stared blankly at him. Her feet had been wet for hours. But he didn't seem to know that it was fun having one's feet wet now and then. To please him she stepped out of the rut.

The muscles in her stomach tightened, sending little waves of nausea up her throat. Last week she had almost cried over the buttercup. Now there was only this dull cold, and the nausea congealing in her throat. Last week she had still hoped that some day there would be someone who would understand. She felt heavy and slow. Her legs ached as she walked. The road stretched in a brown streak toward the low hills; they seemed very far away.

"Dick—Dick, wait."

He stopped and, as she came near, grasped her hand in his. Anne leaned against him, fitting the hollow of her cheek to his shoulder.

"What's wrong Anne? Tired?"

She brushed back her hair with one hand and looked at the hills. "Yes, Dick—tired."