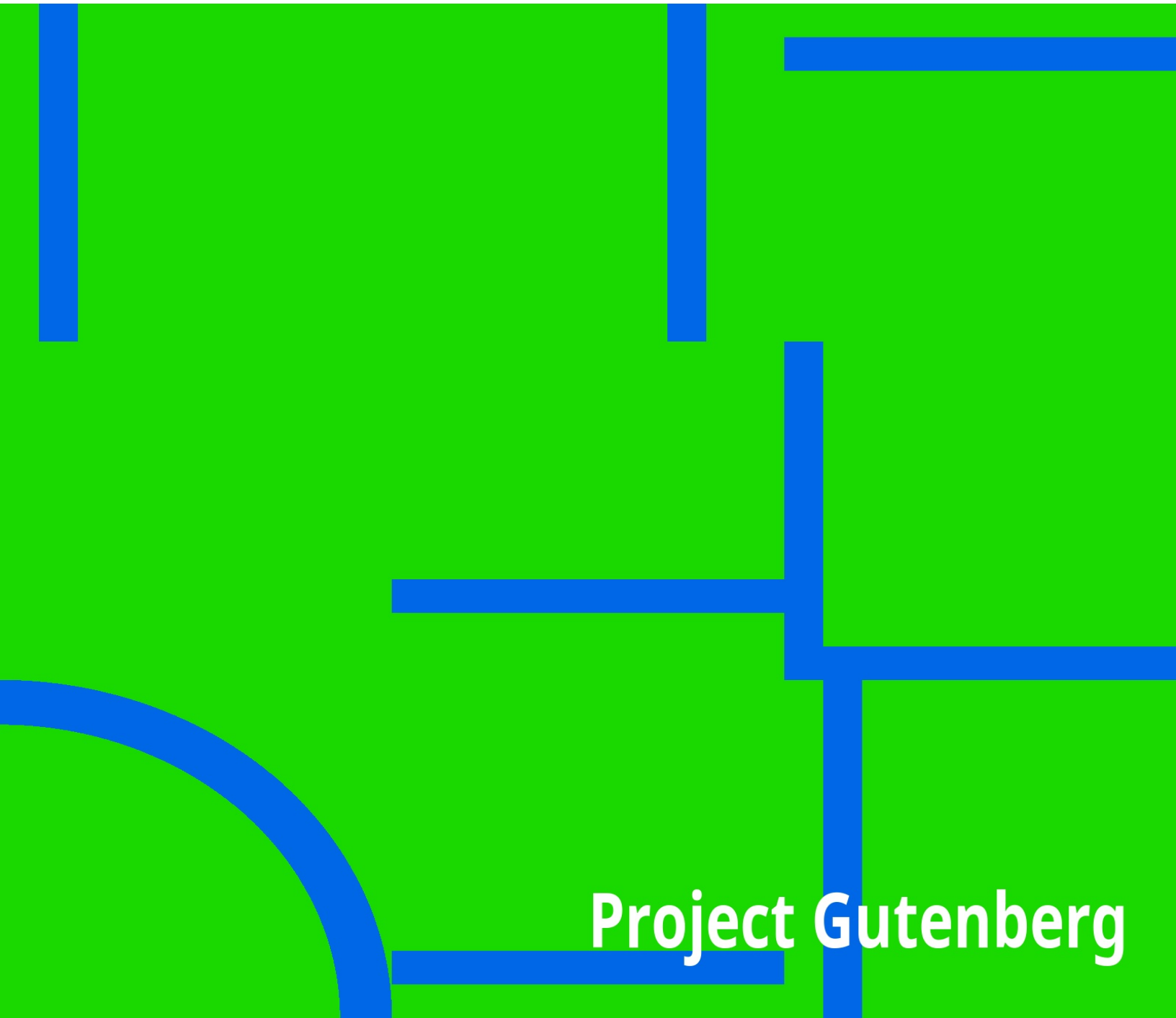
The Flirt

Booth Tarkington



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THE FLIRT

By Booth Tarkington

TO

SUSANAH

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THE FLIRT

CHAPTER ONE

Valentine Corliss walked up Corliss Street the hottest afternoon of that hot August, a year ago, wearing a suit of white serge which attracted a little attention from those observers who were able to observe anything except the heat. The coat was shaped delicately; it outlined the wearer, and, fitting him as women's clothes fit women, suggested an effeminacy not an attribute of the tall Corliss. The effeminacy belonged all to the tailor, an artist plying far from Corliss Street, for the coat would have encountered a hundred of its fellows at Trouville or Ostende this very day. Corliss Street is the Avenue du Bois de Boulogne, the Park Lane, the Fifth Avenue, of Capitol City, that smoky illuminant of our great central levels, but although it esteems itself an established cosmopolitan thoroughfare, it is still provincial enough to be watchful; and even in its torrid languor took some note of the alien garment.

Mr. Corliss, treading for the first time in seventeen years the pavements of this namesake of his grandfather, mildly repaid its interest in himself. The street, once the most peaceful in the world, he thought, had changed. It was still long and straight, still shaded by trees so noble that they were betrothed, here and there, high over the wide white roadway, the shimmering tunnels thus contrived shot with gold and blue; but its pristine complete restfulness was departed: gasoline had arrived, and a pedestrian, even this August day of heat, must glance two ways before crossing.

Architectural transformations, as vital, staggered the returned native. In his boyhood that posthumously libelled sovereign lady, Anne, had terribly prevailed among the dwellings on this highway; now, however, there was little left of the jig-saw's hare-brained ministrations; but the growing pains of the adolescent city had wrought some madness here. There had been a revolution which was a riot; and, plainly incited by a new outbreak of the colonies, the Goth, the Tudor, and the Tuscan had harried the upper reaches to a turmoil attaining its climax in a howl or two from the Spanish Moor.

Yet it was a pleasant street in spite of its improvements; in spite, too, of a long, gray smoke-plume crossing the summer sky and dropping an occasional atomy of coal upon Mr. Corliss's white coat. The green continuous masses of tree-foliage, lawn, and shrubbery were splendidly asserted; there was a faint wholesome odour from the fine block pavement of the roadway, white, save where the snailish water-wagon laid its long strips of steaming brown. Locusts, serenaders of the heat, invisible among the branches, rasped their interminable cadences, competing bitterly with the monotonous chattering of lawn-mowers propelled by glistening black men over the level swards beneath. And though porch and terrace were left to vacant wicker chairs and swinging-seats, and to flowers and plants in jars and green boxes, and the people sat unseen—and, it might be guessed, unclad for exhibition, in the dimmer recesses of their houses—nevertheless, a summery girl under an alluring parasol now and then prettily trod the sidewalks, and did not altogether suppress an ample consciousness of the white pedestrian's stalwart grace; nor was his quick glance too distressingly modest to be aware of these faint but attractive perturbations.

A few of the oldest houses remained as he remembered them, and there were two or three relics of mansard and cupola days; but the herd of cast-iron deer that once guarded these lawns, standing sentinel to all true gentry: Whither were they fled? In his boyhood, one specimen betokened a family of position and affluence; two, one on each side of the front walk, spoke of a noble opulence; two and a fountain were overwhelming. He wondered in what obscure thickets that once proud herd now grazed; and then he smiled, as through a leafy opening of shrubbery he caught a glimpse of a last survivor, still loyally alert, the haughty head thrown back in everlasting challenge and one foreleg lifted, standing in a vast and shadowy backyard with a clothesline fastened to its antlers.

Mr. Corliss remembered that backyard very well: it was an old battlefield whereon he had conquered; and he wondered if "the Lindley boys" still lived there, and if Richard Lindley would hate him now as implacably as then.

A hundred yards farther on, he paused before a house more familiar to him than any other, and gave it a moment's whimsical attention, without emotion.

It was a shabby old brick structure, and it stood among the gayest, the most flamboyant dwellings of all Corliss Street like a bewildered tramp surrounded by carnival maskers. It held place full in the course of the fury for demolition and rebuilding, but remained unaltered—even unrepaired, one might have thought—since the early seventies, when it was built. There was a sagging cornice, and the nauseous brown which the walls had years ago been painted was sooted to a repellent dinge, so cracked and peeled that the haggard red bricks were exposed, like a beggar through the holes in his coat. It was one of those houses which are large without being commodious; its very tall, very narrow windows, with their attenuated, rusty inside shutters, boasting to the passerby of high ceilings but betraying the miserly floor spaces. At each side of the front door was a high and cramped bay-window, one of them insanely culminating in a little six-sided tower of slate, and both of them girdled above the basement windows by a narrow porch, which ran across the front of the house and gave access to the shallow vestibule. However, a pleasant circumstance modified the gloom of this edifice and assured it a remnant of reserve and dignity in its ill-considered old age: it stood back a fine hundred feet from the highway, and was shielded in part by a friendly group of maple trees and one glorious elm, hoary, robust, and majestic, a veteran of the days when this was forest ground.

Mr. Corliss concluded his momentary pause by walking up the broken cement path, which was hard beset by plantain-weed and the long grass of the ill-kept lawn. Ascending the steps, he was assailed by an odour as of vehement bananas, a diffusion from some painful little chairs standing in the long, high, dim, rather sorrowful hall disclosed beyond the open double doors. They were stiff little chairs of an inconsequent, mongrel pattern; armless, with perforated wooden seats; legs tortured by the lathe to a semblance of buttons strung on a rod; and they had that day received a streaky coat of a gilding preparation which exhaled the olfactory vehemence mentioned. Their present station was temporary, their purpose, as obviously, to dry; and they were doing some incidental gilding on their own account, leaving blots and splashes and sporadic little round footprints on the hardwood floor.

The old-fashioned brass bell-handle upon the caller’s right drooped from its socket in a dead fag, but after comprehensive manipulation on the part of

the young man, and equal complaint on its own, it was constrained to permit a dim tinkle remotely. Somewhere in the interior a woman's voice, not young, sang a repeated fragment of "Lead, Kindly Light," to the accompaniment of a flapping dust-cloth, sounds which ceased upon a second successful encounter with the bell. Ensued a silence, probably to be interpreted as a period of whispered consultation out of range; a younger voice called softly and urgently, "Laura!" and a dark-eyed, dark-haired girl of something over twenty made her appearance to Mr. Corliss.

At sight of her he instantly restored a thin gold card-case to the pocket whence he was in the act of removing it. She looked at him with only grave, impersonal inquiry; no appreciative invoice of him was to be detected in her quiet eyes, which may have surprised him, possibly the more because he was aware there was plenty of appreciation in his own kindling glance. She was very white and black, this lady. Tall, trim, clear, she looked cool in spite of the black winter skirt she wore, an effect helped somewhat, perhaps, by the crisp freshness of her white waist, with its masculine collar and slim black tie, and undoubtedly by the even and lustreless light ivory of her skin, against which the strong black eyebrows and undulated black hair were lined with attractive precision; but, most of all, that coolness was the emanation of her undisturbed and tranquil eyes. They were not phlegmatic: a continuing spark glowed far within them, not ardently, but steadily and inscrutably, like the fixed stars in winter.

Mr. Valentine Corliss, of Paris and Naples, removed his white-ribboned straw hat and bowed as no one had ever bowed in that doorway. This most vivid salutation—accomplished by adding something to a rather quick inclination of the body from the hips, with the back and neck held straight expressed deference without affecting or inviting cordiality. It was an elaborate little formality of a kind fancifully called "foreign," and evidently habitual to the performer.

It produced no outward effect upon the recipient. Such self-control is unusual.

"Is Mr. Madison at home? My name is Valentine Corliss."

"He is at home." She indicated an open doorway upon her right. "Will you wait in there?"

“Thank you,” said Mr. Corliss, passing within. “I shall be——” He left the sentence unfinished, for he was already alone, and at liberty to reflect upon the extraordinary coolness of this cool young woman.

The room, with its closed blinds, was soothingly dark after the riotous sun without, a grateful obscurity which was one of two attractions discovered in it by Mr. Corliss while he waited. It was a depressing little chamber, disproportionately high, uncheered by seven chairs (each of a different family, but all belonging to the same knobby species, and all upholstered a repellent blue), a scratched “inlaid table,” likewise knobby, and a dangerous looking small sofa—turbulent furniture, warmly harmonious, however, in a common challenge to the visitor to take comfort in any of it. A once-gilt gas chandelier hung from the distant ceiling, with three globes of frosted glass, but undeniable evidence that five were intended; and two of the three had been severely bitten. There was a hostile little coal-grate, making a mouth under a mantel of imitation black marble, behind an old blue-satin fire-screen upon which red cat-tails and an owl over a pond had been roughly embroidered in high relief, this owl motive being the inspiration of innumerable other owls reflected in innumerable other ponds in the formerly silver moonlight with which the walls were papered. Corliss thought he remembered that in his boyhood, when it was known as “the parlour” (though he guessed that the Madison family called it “the reception room,” now) this was the place where his aunt received callers who, she justifiably hoped, would not linger. Altogether, it struck him that it might be a good test-room for an alienist: no incipient lunacy would remain incipient here.

There was one incongruity which surprised him—a wicker waste-paper basket, so nonsensically out of place in this arid cell, where not the wildest hare-brain could picture any one coming to read or write, that he bestowed upon it a particular, frowning attention, and so discovered the second attractive possession of the room. A fresh and lovely pink rose, just opening full from the bud, lay in the bottom of the basket.

There was a rustling somewhere in the house and a murmur, above which a boy’s voice became audible in emphatic but undistinguishable complaint. A whispering followed, and a woman exclaimed protestingly, “Cora!” And

then a startlingly pretty girl came carelessly into the room through the open door.

She was humming “Quand I’ Amour Meurt” in a gay preoccupation, and evidently sought something upon the table in the centre of the room, for she continued her progress toward it several steps before realizing the presence of a visitor. She was a year or so younger than the girl who had admitted him, fairer and obviously more plastic, more expressive, more perishable, a great deal more insistently feminine; though it was to be seen that they were sisters. This one had eyes almost as dark as the other’s, but these were not cool; they were sweet, unrestful, and seeking; brilliant with a vivacious hunger: and not Diana but huntresses more ardent have such eyes. Her hair was much lighter than her sister’s; it was the colour of dry corn-silk in the sun; and she was the shorter by a head, rounder everywhere and not so slender; but no dumpling: she was exquisitely made. There was a softness about her: something of velvet, nothing of mush. She diffused with her entrance a radiance of gayety and of gentleness; sunlight ran with her. She seemed the incarnation of a caressing smile.

She was point-device. Her close, white skirt hung from a plainly embroidered white waist to a silken instep; and from the crown of her charming head to the tall heels of her graceful white suede slippers, heels of a sweeter curve than the waist of a violin, she was as modern and lovely as this dingy old house was belated and hideous.

Mr. Valentine Corliss spared the fraction of a second for another glance at the rose in the waste-basket.

The girl saw him before she reached the table, gave a little gasp of surprise, and halted with one hand carried prettily to her breast.

“Oh!” she said impulsively; “I *beg* your pardon. I didn’t know there was —— I was looking for a book I thought I——”

She stopped, whelmed with a breath-taking shyness, her eyes, after one quick but condensed encounter with those of Mr. Corliss, falling beneath exquisite lashes. Her voice was one to stir all men: it needs not many words for a supremely beautiful “speaking-voice” to be recognized for what it is;

and this girl's was like herself, hauntingly lovely. The intelligent young man immediately realized that no one who heard it could ever forget it.

"I see," she faltered, turning to leave the room; "it isn't here—the book."

"There's something else of yours here," said Corliss.

"Is there?" She paused, hesitating at the door, looking at him over her shoulder uncertainly.

"You dropped this rose." He lifted the rose from the waste-basket and repeated the bow he had made at the front door. This time it was not altogether wasted.

"I?"

"Yes. You lost it. It belongs to you."

"Yes—it does. How curious!" she said slowly. "How curious it happened to be *there*!" She stepped to take it from him, her eyes upon his in charming astonishment. "And how odd that——" She stopped; then said quickly:

"How did you know it was *my* rose?"

"Any one would know!"

Her expression of surprise was instantaneously merged in a flash of honest pleasure and admiration, such as only an artist may feel in the presence of a little masterpiece by a fellow-craftsman.

Happily, anticlimax was spared them by the arrival of the person for whom the visitor had asked at the door, and the young man retained the rose in his hand.

Mr. Madison, a shapeless hillock with a large, harassed, red face, evidently suffered from the heat: his gray hair was rumpled back from a damp forehead; the sleeves of his black alpaca coat were pulled up to the elbow above his uncuffed white shirtsleeves; and he carried in one mottled hand the ruins of a palm-leaf fan, in the other a balled wet handkerchief which released an aroma of camphor upon the banana-burdened air. He

bore evidences of inadequate adjustment after a disturbed siesta, but, exercising a mechanical cordiality, preceded himself into the room by a genial half-cough and a hearty, “Well-well-well,” as if wishing to indicate a spirit of polite, even excited, hospitality.

“I expected you might be turning up, after your letter,” he said, shaking hands. “Well, well, well! I remember you as a boy. Wouldn’t have known you, of course; but I expect you’ll find the town about as much changed as you are.”

With a father’s blindness to all that is really vital, he concluded his greeting inconsequently: “Oh, this is my little girl Cora.”

“Run along, little girl,” said the fat father.

His little girl’s radiant glance at the alert visitor imparted her thorough comprehension of all the old man’s absurdities, which had reached their climax in her dismissal. Her parting look, falling from Corliss’s face to the waste-basket at his feet, just touched the rose in his hand as she passed through the door.

CHAPTER TWO

Cora paused in the hall at a point about twenty feet from the door, a girlish stratagem frequently of surprising advantage to the practitioner; but the two men had begun to speak of the weather. Suffering a momentary disappointment, she went on, stepping silently, and passed through a door at the end of the hall into a large and barren looking dining-room, stiffly and skimpily furnished, but well-lighted, owing to the fact that one end of it had been transformed into a narrow “conservatory,” a glass alcove now tenanted by two dried palms and a number of vacant jars and earthen crocks.

Here her sister sat by an open window, repairing masculine underwear; and a handsome, shabby, dirty boy of about thirteen sprawled on the floor of the “conservatory” unloosing upon its innocent, cracked, old black and white tiles a ghastly family of snakes, owls, and visaged crescent moons, in orange, green, and other loathsome chalks. As Cora entered from the hall, a woman of fifty came in at a door opposite, and, a dust-cloth retained under her left arm, an unsheathed weapon ready for emergency, leaned sociably against the door-casing and continued to polish a tablespoon with a bit of powdered chamois-skin. She was tall and slightly bent; and, like the flat, old, silver spoon in her hand, seemed to have been worn thin by use; yet it was plain that the three young people in the room “got their looks” from her. Her eyes, if tired, were tolerant and fond; and her voice held its youth and something of the music of Cora’s.

“What is he like?” She addressed the daughter by the window.

“Why don’t you ask Coralie?” suggested the sprawling artist, relaxing his hideous labour. He pronounced his sister’s name with intense bitterness. He called it “Cora-*lee*,” with an implication far from subtle that his sister had at some time thus Gallicized herself, presumably for masculine favour; and he was pleased to receive tribute to his satire in a flash of dislike from her lovely eyes.

“I ask Laura because it was Laura who went to the door,” Mrs. Madison answered. “I do not ask Cora because Cora hasn’t seen him. Do I satisfy

you, Hedrick?”

“`Cora hasn’t seen him!’” the boy hooted mockingly. “She hasn’t? She was peeking out of the library shutters when he came up the front walk, and she wouldn’t let me go to the door; she told Laura to go, but first she took the library waste-basket and laid one o’ them roses——”

“*Those* roses,” said Cora sharply. “He *will* hang around the neighbours’ stables. I think you ought to do something about it, mother.”

“*Them* roses!” repeated Hedrick fiercely. “One o’ them roses Dick Lindley sent her this morning. Laid it in the waste-basket and sneaked it into the reception room for an excuse to go galloping in and——”

“`Galloping’?” said Mrs. Madison gravely.

“It was a pretty bum excuse,” continued the unaffected youth, “but you bet your life you’ll never beat our Cora-*lee* when there’s a person in pants on the premises! It’s sickening.” He rose, and performed something like a toe-dance, a supposed imitation of his sister’s mincing approach to the visitor. “Oh, dear, I am such a little sweety! Here I am all alone just reeking with Browning-and-Tennyson and thinking to myself about such lovely things, and walking around looking for my nice, pretty rose. Where can it be? Oh heavens, Mister, are *you* here? Oh my, I never, never thought that there was a *man* here! How you frighten me! See what a shy little thing I am? You *do see*, *don’t* you, old sweeticums? Ta, ta, here’s papa. Remember me by that rose, ‘cause it’s just like me. Me and it’s twins, you see, cutie-sugar!” The diabolical boy then concluded with a reversion to the severity of his own manner: “If she was *my* daughter I’d whip her!”

His indignation was left in the air, for the three ladies had instinctively united against him, treacherously including his private feud in the sex-war of the ages: Cora jumped lightly upon the table and sat whistling and polishing the nails of one hand upon the palm of another; Laura continued to sew without looking up, and Mrs. Madison, conquering a tendency to laugh, preserved a serene countenance and said ruminatively:

“They were all rather queer, the Corlisses.”

Hedrick stared incredulously, baffled; but men must expect these things, and this was no doubt a helpful item in his education.

“I wonder if he wants to sell the house,” said Mrs. Madison.

“I wish he would. Anything that would make father get out of it!” Cora exclaimed. “I hope Mr. Corliss will burn it if he doesn’t sell it.”

“He might want to live here himself.”

“He!” Cora emitted a derisive outcry.

Her mother gave her a quick, odd look, in which there was a real alarm. “What is he like, Cora?”

“Awfully foreign and distinguished!”

This brought Hedrick to confront her with a leap as of some wild animal under a lash. He landed close to her; his face awful.

“Princely, I should call him,” said Cora, her enthusiasm undaunted. “Distinctly princely!”

“Princely,” moaned Hedrick. “Pe-rin-sley!”

“Hedrick!” Mrs. Madison reproved him automatically. “In what way is he `foreign,’ Cora?”

“Oh, every way.” Cora let her glance rest dreamily upon the goaded boy. “He has a splendid head set upon a magnificent torso——”

“*Torso*!” Hedrick whispered hoarsely.

“Tall, a glorious figure—like a young guardsman’s.” Madness was gathering in her brother’s eyes; and observing it with quiet pleasure, she added: “One sees immediately he has the grand manner, the bel air.”

Hedrick exploded. “`*Bel air*’!” he screamed, and began to jump up and down, tossing his arms frantically, and gasping with emotion. “Oh, bel air! Oh, blah! `Henry Esmond!’ Been readin’ `Henry Esmond!’ Oh, you be-yoo-tiful Cora-Beatrix-a-*lee*! Magganifisent torso! Gull*o*-rious figgi-your!

Bel air! Oh, slush! Oh, luv-a-ly slush!” He cast himself convulsively upon the floor, full length. “Luv-a-ly, *luv*-a-ly slush!”

“He is thirty, I should say,” continued Cora, thoughtfully. “Yes—about thirty. A strong, keen face, rather tanned. He’s between fair and dark——”

Hedrick raised himself to the attitude of the “Dying Gaul.” “And with `hair slightly silvered at the temples!’ *Ain*’t his hair slightly silvered at the temples?” he cried imploringly. “Oh, sister, in pity’s name let his hair be slightly silvered at the temples? Only three grains of corn, your Grace; my children are starving!”

He collapsed again, laid his face upon his extended arms, and writhed.

“He has rather wonderful eyes,” said Cora. “They seem to look right through you.”

“Slush, slush, luv-a-ly slush,” came in muffled tones from the floor.

“And he wears his clothes so well—so differently! You feel at once that he’s not a person, but a personage.”

Hedrick sat up, his eyes closed, his features contorted as with agony, and chanted, impromptu:

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“Slush, slush, luv-a-ly, slush!
Le’ss all go a-swimmin’ in a dollar’s worth o’ mush.
Slush in the morning, slush at night,
If I don’t get my slush I’m bound to get tight!”
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“Hedrick!” said his mother.

“Altogether I should say that Mr. Valentine Corliss looks as if he lived up to his name,” Cora went on tranquilly. “Valentine Corliss of Corliss Street—I think I rather like the sound of that name.” She let her beautiful voice linger upon it, caressingly. “Valentine Corliss.”

Hedrick opened his eyes, allowed his countenance to resume its ordinary proportions, and spoke another name slowly and with honeyed thoughtfulness:

“Ray Vilas.”

This was the shot that told. Cora sprang down from the table with an exclamation.

Hedrick, subduing elation, added gently, in a mournful whisper:

“*Poor* old Dick Lindley!”

His efforts to sting his sister were completely successful at last: Cora was visibly agitated, and appealed hotly to her mother. “Am I to bear this kind of thing all my life? Aren’t you *ever* going to punish his insolence?”

“Hedrick, Hedrick!” said Mrs. Madison sadly.

Cora turned to the girl by the window with a pathetic gesture. “Laura ——” she said, and hesitated.

Laura Madison looked up into her sister’s troubled eyes.

“I feel so morbid,” said Cora, flushing a little and glancing away. “I wish ——” She stopped.

The silent Laura set aside her work, rose and went out of the room. Her cheeks, too, had reddened faintly, a circumstance sharply noted by the terrible boy. He sat where he was, asprawl, propped by his arms behind him, watching with acute concentration the injured departure of Cora, following her sister. At the door, Cora, without pausing, threw him a look over her shoulder: a full-eyed shot of frankest hatred.

A few moments later, magnificent chords sounded through the house. The piano was old, but tuned to the middle of the note, and the keys were swept by a master hand. The wires were not hammered; they were touched knowingly as by the player’s own fingers, and so they sang—and from out among the chords there stole an errant melody. This was not “piano-playing” and not a pianist’s triumphant nimbleness—it was music. Art is the language of a heart that knows how to speak, and a heart that knew how was speaking here. What it told was something immeasurably wistful, something that might have welled up in the breast of a young girl standing at twilight in an April orchard. It was the inexpressible made into sound, an improvisation by a master player.

“You hear what she’s up to?” said Hedrick, turning his head at last. But his mother had departed.

He again extended himself flat upon the floor, face downward, this time as a necessary preliminary to rising after a manner of his own invention. Mysteriously he became higher in the middle, his body slowly forming first a round and then a pointed arch, with forehead, knees, and elbows touching the floor. A brilliantly executed manoeuvre closed his Gothic period, set him upright and upon his feet; then, without ostentation, he proceeded to the kitchen, where he found his mother polishing a sugar-bowl.

He challenged her with a damnatory gesture in the direction of the music. “You hear what Cora’s up to?”

Mrs. Madison’s expression was disturbed; she gave her son a look almost of appeal, and said, gently:

“I believe there’s nothing precisely criminal in her getting Laura to play for her. Laura’s playing always soothes her when she feels out of sorts—and —you weren’t very considerate of her, Hedrick. You upset her.”

“Mentioning Ray Vilas, you mean?” he demanded.

“You weren’t kind.”

“She deserves it. Look at her! *You* know why she’s got Laura at the piano now.”

“It’s—it’s because you worried her,” his mother faltered evasively. “Besides, it is very hot, and Cora isn’t as strong as she looks. She said she felt morbid and——”

“Morbid? Blah!” interrupted the direct boy. “She’s started after this Corliss man just like she did for Vilas. If I was Dick Lindley I wouldn’t stand for Cora’s——”

“Hedrick!” His mother checked his outburst pleadingly. “Cora has so much harder time than the other girls; they’re all so much better off. They seem to get everything they want, just by asking: nice clothes and jewellery —and automobiles. That seems to make a great difference nowadays; they

all seem to have automobiles. We're so dreadfully poor, and Cora has to struggle so for what good times she——"

"Her?" the boy jibed bitterly. "I don't see her doing any particular struggling." He waved his hand in a wide gesture. "She takes it *all*!"

"There, there!" the mother said, and, as if feeling the need of placating this harsh judge, continued gently: "Cora isn't strong, Hedrick, and she does have a hard time. Almost every one of the other girls in her set is at the seashore or somewhere having a gay summer. You don't realize, but it's mortifying to have to be the only one to stay at home, with everybody knowing it's because your father can't afford to send her. And this house is so hopeless," Mrs. Madison went on, extending her plea hopefully; "it's impossible to make it attractive, but Cora keeps trying and trying: she was all morning on her knees gilding those chairs for the music-room, poor child, and——"

"`Music-room'!" sneered the boy. "Gilt chairs! All show-off! That's all she ever thinks about. It's all there is to Cora, just show-off, so she'll get a string o' fellows chasin' after her. She's started for this Corliss just exactly the way she did for Ray Vilas!"

"Hedrick!"

"Just look at her!" he cried vehemently. "Don't you know she's tryin' to make this Corliss think it's *her* playin' the piano right now?"

"Oh, no——"

"Didn't she do that with Ray Vilas?" he demanded quickly. "Wasn't that exactly what she did the first time he ever came here—got Laura to play and made him think it was *her*? Didn't she?"

"Oh—just in fun." Mrs. Madison's tone lacked conviction; she turned, a little confusedly, from the glaring boy and fumbled among the silver on the kitchen table. "Besides—she told him afterward that it was Laura."

"He walked in on her one day when she was battin' away at the piano herself with her back to the door. Then she pretended it had been a joke, and

he was so far gone by that time he didn't care. He's crazy, anyway," added the youth, casually. "Who is this Corliss?"

"He owns this house. His family were early settlers and used to be very prominent, but they're all dead except this one. His mother was a widow; she went abroad to live and took him with her when he was about your age, and I don't think he's ever been back since."

"Did he use to live in this house?"

"No; an aunt of his did. She left it to him when she died, two years ago. Your father was agent for her."

"You think this Corliss wants to sell it?"

"It's been for sale all the time he's owned it. That's why we moved here; it made the rent low."

"Is he rich?"

"They used to have money, but maybe it's all spent. It seemed to me he might want to raise money on the house, because I don't see any other reason that could bring him back here. He's already mortgaged it pretty heavily, your father told me. I don't——" Mrs. Madison paused abruptly, her eyes widening at a dismaying thought. "Oh, I do hope your father will know better than to ask him to stay to dinner!"

Hedrick's expression became cryptic. "Father won't ask him," he said. "But I'll bet you a thousand dollars he stays!"

The mother followed her son's thought and did not seek to elicit verbal explanation of the certainty which justified so large a venture. "Oh, I hope not," she said. "Sarah's threatening to leave, anyway; and she gets so cross if there's extra cooking on wash-days."

"Well, Sarah'll have to get cross," said the boy grimly; "and *I*'ll have to plug out and go for a quart of brick ice-cream and carry it home in all this heat; and Laura and you'll have to stand over the stove with Sarah; and father'll have to change his shirt; and we'll all have to toil and moil and sweat and suffer while Cora-lee sits out on the front porch and talks toodle-

do-dums to her new duke. And then she'll have *you* go out and kid him along while——"

"*Hedrick*!"

"Yes, you will!—while she gets herself all dressed and powdered up again. After that, she'll do her share of the work: she'll strain her poor back carryin' Dick Lindley's flowers down the back stairs and stickin' 'em in a vase over a hole in the tablecloth that Laura hasn't had time to sew up. You wait and see!"

The gloomy realism of this prophecy was not without effect upon the seer's mother. "Oh, no!" she exclaimed, protestingly. "We really can't manage it. I'm sure Cora won't want to ask him——"

"You'll see!"

"No; I'm sure she wouldn't think of it, but if she does I'll tell her we can't. We really can't, to-day."

Her son looked pityingly upon her. "She ought to be *my* daughter," he said, the sinister implication all too plain;—"just about five minutes!"

With that, he effectively closed the interview and left her.

He returned to his abandoned art labours in the "conservatory," and meditatively perpetrated monstrosities upon the tiles for the next half-hour, at the end of which he concealed his box of chalks, with an anxiety possibly not unwarranted, beneath the sideboard; and made his way toward the front door, first glancing, unseen, into the kitchen where his mother still pursued the silver. He walked through the hall on tiptoe, taking care to step upon the much stained and worn strip of "Turkish" carpet, and not upon the more resonant wooden floor. The music had ceased long since.

The open doorway was like a brilliantly painted picture hung upon the darkness of the hall, though its human centre of interest was no startling bit of work, consisting of Mr. Madison pottering aimlessly about the sun-flooded, unkempt lawn, fanning himself, and now and then stooping to pull up one of the thousands of plantain-weeds that beset the grass. With him the little spy had no concern; but from a part of the porch out of sight from the

hall came Cora's exquisite voice and the light and pleasant baritone of the visitor. Hedrick flattened himself in a corner just inside the door.

"I should break any engagement whatsoever if I had one," Mr. Corliss was saying with what the eavesdropper considered an offensively "foreign" accent and an equally unjustifiable gallantry; "but of course I haven't: I am so utterly a stranger here. Your mother is immensely hospitable to wish you to ask me, and I'll be only too glad to stay. Perhaps after dinner you'll be very, very kind and play again? Of course you know how remarkable such ____"

"Oh, just improvising," Cora tossed off, carelessly, with a deprecatory ripple of laughter. "It's purely with the mood, you see. I can't make myself do things. No; I fancy I shall not play again today."

There was a moment's silence.

"Shan't I fasten that in your buttonhole for you," said Cora.

"You see how patiently I've been awaiting the offer!"

There was another little silence; and the listener was able to construct a picture (possibly in part from an active memory) of Cora's delicate hands uplifted to the gentleman's lapel and Cora's eyes for a moment likewise uplifted.

"Yes, one has moods," she said, dreamily. "I am *all* moods. I think you are too, Mr. Corliss. You *look* moody. Aren't you?"

A horrible grin might have been seen to disfigure the shadow in the corner just within the doorway.

CHAPTER THREE

It was cooler outdoors, after dinner, in the dusk of that evening; nevertheless three members of the Madison family denied themselves the breeze, and, as by a tacitly recognized and habitual house-rule, so disposed themselves as to afford the most agreeable isolation for the younger daughter and the guest, who occupied wicker chairs upon the porch. The mother and father sat beneath a hot, gas droplight in the small “library”; Mrs. Madison with an evening newspaper, her husband with “King Solomon’s Mines”; and Laura, after crisply declining an urgent request from Hedrick to play, had disappeared upstairs. The inimical lad alone was inspired for the ungrateful role of duenna.

He sat upon the topmost of the porch steps with the air of being permanently implanted; leaning forward, elbows on knees, cheeks on palms, in a treacherous affectation of profound reverie; and his back (all of him that was plainly visible in the hall light) tauntingly close to a delicate foot which would, God wot! willingly have launched him into the darkness beyond. It was his dreadful pleasure to understand wholly the itching of that shapely silk and satin foot.

The gas-light from the hall laid a broad orange path to the steps—Cora and her companion sat just beyond it, his whiteness gray, and she a pale ethereality in the shadow. She wore an evening gown that revealed a vague lilac through white, and shimmered upon her like a vapour. She was very quiet; and there was a wan sweetness about her, an exhalation of wistfulness. Cora, in the evening, was more like a rose than ever. She was fragrant in the dusk. The spell she cast was an Undine’s: it was not to be thought so exquisite a thing as she could last. And who may know how she managed to say what she did in the silence and darkness? For it was said—without words, without touch, even without a look—as plainly as if she had spoken or written the message: “If I am a rose, I am one to be worn and borne away. Are you the man?”

With the fall of night, the street they faced had become still, save for an infrequent squawk of irritation on the part of one of the passing automobiles, gadding for the most part silently, like fireflies. But after a time a strolling trio of negroes came singing along the sidewalk.

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“In the evening, by the moonlight, you could hear
  those banjos ringing;
In the evening, by the moonlight, you could hear
  those darkies singing.
How the ole folks would injoy it; they would sit
  all night an’ lis-sun,
As we sang I-I-N the evening BY-Y-Y the moonlight.’
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“Ah, *that* takes me back!” exclaimed Corliss. “That’s as it used to be. I might be a boy again.”

“And I suppose this old house has many memories for you?” said Cora, softly.

“Not very many. My, old-maid aunt didn’t like me overmuch, I believe; and I wasn’t here often. My mother and I lived far down the street. A big apartment-house stands there now, I noticed as I was walking out here this afternoon—the `Verema,’ it is called, absurdly enough!”

“Ray Vilas lives there,” volunteered Hedrick, not altering his position.

“Vilas?” said the visitor politely, with a casual recollection that the name had been once or twice emphasized by the youth at dinner. “I don’t remember Vilas among the old names here.”

“It wasn’t, I guess,” said Hedrick. “Ray Vilas has only been here about two years. He came from Kentucky.”

“A great friend of yours, I suppose.”

“He ain’t a boy,” said Hedrick, and returned to silence without further explanation.

“How cool and kind the stars are to-night,” said Cora, very gently.

She leaned forward from her chair, extending a white arm along the iron railing of the porch; bending toward Corliss, and speaking toward him and away from Hedrick in as low a voice as possible, probably entertaining a reasonable hope of not being overheard.

“I love things that are cool and kind,” she said. “I love things that are cool and strong. I love iron.” She moved her arm caressingly upon the railing. “I love its cool, smooth touch. Any strong life must have iron in it. I like iron in men.”

She leaned a very little closer to him.

“Have you iron in you, Mr. Corliss?” she asked.

At these words the frayed edge of Hedrick’s broad white collar was lifted perceptibly from his coat, as if by a shudder passing over the back and shoulders beneath.

“If I have not,” answered Corliss in a low voice, “I will have—now!”

“Tell me about yourself,” she said.

“Dear lady,” he began—and it was an effective beginning, for a sigh of pleasure parted her lips as he spoke—“there is nothing interesting to tell. I have spent a very commonplace life.”

“I think not. You shouldn’t call any life commonplace that has escaped *this*!” The lovely voice was all the richer for the pain that shook it now. “This monotony, this unending desert of ashes, this death in life!”

“This town, you mean?”

“This prison, I mean! Everything. Tell me what lies outside of it. You can.”

“What makes you think I can?”

“I don’t need to answer that. You understand perfectly.”

Valentine Corliss drew in his breath with a sound murmurous of delight, and for a time they did not speak.

“Yes,” he said, finally, “I think I do.”

“There are meetings in the desert,” he went on, slowly. “A lonely traveller finds another at a spring, sometimes.”

“And sometimes they find that they speak the same language?”

His answer came, almost in a whisper:

“`Even as you and I.’”

“`Even as you and I,’” she echoed, even more faintly.

“Yes.”

Cora breathed rapidly in the silence that followed; she had every appearance of a woman deeply and mysteriously stirred. Her companion watched her keenly in the dusk, and whatever the reciprocal symptoms of emotion he may have exhibited, they were far from tumultuous, bearing more likeness to the quiet satisfaction of a good card-player taking what may prove to be a decisive trick.

After a time she leaned back in her chair again, and began to fan herself slowly.

“You have lived in the Orient, haven’t you, Mr. Corliss?” she said in an ordinary tone.

“Not lived. I’ve been East once or twice. I spend a greater part of the year at Posilipo.”

“Where is that?”

“On the fringe of Naples.”

“Do you live in a hotel?”

“No.” A slight surprise sounded in his voice. “I have a villa there.”

“Do you know what that seems to me?” Cora asked gravely, after a pause; then answered herself, after another: “Like magic. Like a strange, beautiful dream.”

“Yes, it is beautiful,” he said.

“Then tell me: What do you do there?”

“I spend a lot of time on the water in a boat.”

“Sailing?”

“On sapphires and emeralds and turquoises and rubies, melted and blown into waves.”

“And you go yachting over that glory?”

“Fishing with my crew—and loafing.”

“But your boat is really a yacht, isn’t it?”

“Oh, it might be called anything,” he laughed.

“And your sailors are Italian fishermen?”

Hedrick slew a mosquito upon his temple, smiting himself hard. “No, they’re Chinese!” he muttered hoarsely.

“They’re Neapolitans,” said Corliss.

“Do they wear red sashes and earrings?” asked Cora.

“One of them wears earrings and a derby hat!”

“Ah!” she protested, turning to him again. “You don’t tell me. You let me cross-question you, but you don’t tell me things! Don’t you see? I want to know what *life* is! I want to know of strange seas, of strange people, of pain and of danger, of great music, of curious thoughts! What are the Neapolitan women like?”

“They fade early.”

She leaned closer to him. “Before the fading have you—have you loved —many?”

“All the pretty ones I ever saw,” he answered gayly, but with something in his tone (as there was in hers) which implied that all the time they were really talking of things other than those spoken. Yet here this secret subject seemed to come near the surface.

She let him hear a genuine little snap of her teeth. “I *thought* you were like that!”

He laughed. “Ah, but you were sure to see it!”

“You could ‘a’ seen a Neapolitan woman yesterday, Cora,” said Hedrick, obligingly, “if you’d looked out the front window. She was working a hurdy-gurdy up and down this neighbourhood all afternoon.” He turned genially to face his sister, and added: “Ray Vilas used to say there were lots of pretty girls in Lexington.”

Cora sprang to her feet. “You’re not smoking,” she said to Corliss hurriedly, as upon a sudden discovery. “Let me get you some matches.”

She had entered the house before he could protest, and Hedrick, looking down the hall, was acutely aware that she dived desperately into the library. But, however tragic the cry for justice she uttered there, it certainly was not prolonged; and the almost instantaneous quickness of her reappearance upon the porch, with matches in her hand, made this one of the occasions when her brother had to admit that in her own line Cora was a miracle.

“So thoughtless of me,” she said cheerfully, resuming her seat. She dropped the matches into Mr. Corliss’s hand with a fleeting touch of her finger-tips upon his palm. “Of course you wanted to smoke. I can’t think why I didn’t realize it before. I must have——”

A voice called from within, commanding in no, uncertain tones.

“Hedrick! I should like to see you!” Hedrick rose, and, looking neither to the right nor, to the left, went stonily into the house, and appeared before the powers.

“Call me?” he inquired with the air of cheerful readiness to proceed upon any errand, no matter how difficult.

Mr. Madison countered diplomacy with gloom.

“I don’t know what to do with you. Why can’t you let your sister alone?”

“Has Laura been complaining of me?”

“Oh, Hedrick!” said Mrs. Madison.

Hedrick himself felt the justice of her reproof: his reference to Laura was poor work, he knew. He hung his head and began to scrape the carpet with the side of his shoe.

“Well, what’d Cora say I been doing to her?”

“You know perfectly well what you’ve been doing,” said Mr. Madison sharply.

“Nothing at all; just sitting on the steps. What’d she *say*?”

His father evidently considered it wiser not to repeat the text of accusation. “You know what you did,” he said heavily.

“Oho!” Hedrick’s eyes became severe, and his sire’s evasively shifted from them.

“You keep away from the porch,” said the father, uneasily.

“You mean what I said about Ray Vilas?” asked the boy.

Both parents looked uncomfortable, and Mr. Madison, turning a leaf in his book, gave a mediocre imitation of an austere person resuming his reading after an impertinent interruption.

“That’s what you mean,” said the boy accusingly. “Ray Vilas!”

“Just you keep away from that porch.”

“Because I happened to mention Ray Vilas?” demanded Hedrick.

“You let your sister alone.”

“I got a right to know what she said, haven’t I?”

There was no response, which appeared to satisfy Hedrick perfectly. Neither parent met his glance; the mother troubled and the father dogged, while the boy rejoiced sternly in some occult triumph. He inflated his scant chest in pomp and hurled at the defeated pair the well-known words:

“I wish she was *my* daughter—about five minutes!”

New sounds from without—men’s voices in greeting, and a ripple of response from Cora somewhat lacking in enthusiasm—afforded Mr. Madison unmistakable relief, and an errand upon which to send his deadly offspring.

Hedrick, after a reconnaissance in the hall, obeyed at leisure. Closing the library door nonchalantly behind him, he found himself at the foot of a flight of unillumined back stairs, where his manner underwent a swift alteration, for here was an adventure to be gone about with ceremony. “Ventre St. Gris!” he muttered hoarsely, and loosened the long rapier in the shabby sheath at his side. For, with the closing of the door, he had become a Huguenot gentleman, over forty and a little grizzled perhaps, but modest and unassuming; wiry, alert, lightning-quick, with a wrist of steel and a heart of gold; and he was about to ascend the stairs of an unknown house at Blois in total darkness. He went up, crouching, ready for anything, without a footfall, not even causing a hideous creak; and gained the top in safety. Here he turned into an obscure passage, and at the end of it beheld, through an open door, a little room in which a dark-eyed lady sat writing in a book by the light of an oil lamp.

The wary Huguenot remained in the shadow and observed her.

Laura was writing in an old ledger she had found in the attic, blank and unused. She had rebound it herself in heavy gray leather; and fitted it with a tiny padlock and key. She wore the key under her dress upon a very thin silver chain round her neck. Upon the first page of the book was written a date, now more than a year past, the month was June—and beneath it:

“Love came to me to-day.”

Nothing more was written upon that page.

CHAPTER FOUR

Laura, at this writing, looked piquantly unfamiliar to her brother: her eyes were moist and bright; her cheeks were flushed and as she bent low, intently close to the book, a loosened wavy strand of her dark hair almost touched the page. Hedrick had never before seen her wearing an expression so “becoming” as the eager and tremulous warmth of this; though sometimes, at the piano, she would play in a reverie which wrought such glamour about her that even a brother was obliged to consider her rather handsome. She looked more than handsome now, so strangely lovely, in fact, that his eyes watered painfully with the protracted struggle to read a little of the writing in her book before she discovered him.

He gave it up at last, and lounged forward blinking, with the air of finding it sweet to do nothing.

“Whatch’ writin’?” he asked in simple carelessness.

At the first sound of his movement she closed the book in a flash; then, with a startled, protective gesture, extended her arms over it, covering it.

“What is it, Hedrick?” she asked, breathlessly.

“What’s the padlock for?”

“Nothing,” she panted. “What is it you want?”

“You writin’ poetry?”

Laura’s eyes dilated; she looked dangerous.

“Oh, I don’t care about your old book,” said Hedrick, with an amused nonchalance Talleyrand might have admired. “There’s callers, and you have to come down.”

“Who sent you?”

“A man I’ve often noticed around the house,” he replied blightingly. “You may have seen him—I think his name’s Madison. His wife and he both sent for you.”

One of Laura’s hands instinctively began to arrange her hair, but the other remained upon the book. “Who is it calling?”

“Richard Lindley and that Wade Trumble.”

Laura rose, standing between her brother and the table. “Tell mother I will come down.”

Hedrick moved a little nearer, whereupon, observing his eye, she put her right hand behind her upon the book. She was not deceived, and boys are not only superb strategic actors sometimes, but calamitously quick. Appearing to be unaware of her careful defence, he leaned against the wall and crossed his feet in an original and interesting manner.

“Of course *you* understand,” he said cosily. “Cora wants to keep this Corliss in a corner of the porch where she can coo at him; so you and mother’ll have to raise a ballyhoo for Dick Lindley and that Wade Trumble. It’d been funny if Dick hadn’t noticed anybody was there and kissed her. What on earth does he want to stay engaged to her for, anyway?”

“You don’t know that she is engaged to Mr. Lindley, Hedrick.”

“Get out!” he hooted. “What’s the use talking like that to me? A blind mackerel could see she’s let poor old Lindley think he’s High Man with her these last few months; but he’ll have to hit the pike now, I reckon, ‘cause this Corliss is altogether too pe-rin-sley for Dick’s class. Lee roy est mort. Vive lee roy!”

“Hedrick, won’t you please run along? I want to change my dress.”

“What for? There was company for dinner and you didn’t change then.”

Laura’s flushed cheeks flushed deeper, and in her confusion she answered too quickly. “I only have one evening gown. I—of course I can’t wear it every night.”

“Well, then,” he returned triumphantly, “what do you want to put it on now for?”

“*Please* run along, Hedrick,” she pleaded.

“You didn’t for this Corliss,” he persisted sharply. “You know Dick Lindley couldn’t see anybody but Cora to save his life, and I don’t suppose there’s a girl on earth fool enough to dress up for that Wade Trum——”

“Hedrick!” Laura’s voice rang with a warning which he remembered to have heard upon a few previous occasions when she had easily proved herself physically stronger than he. “Go and tell mother I’m coming,” she said.

He began to whistle “Beulah Land” as he went, but, with the swift closing of the door behind him, abandoned that pathetically optimistic hymn prematurely, after the third bar.

Twenty minutes later, when Laura came out and went downstairs, a fine straight figure in her black evening gown, the Sieur de Marsac—that hard-bitten Huguenot, whose middle-aged shabbiness was but the outward and deceptive seeming of the longest head and the best sword in France—emerged cautiously from the passageway and stood listening until her footsteps were heard descending the front stairs. Nevertheless, the most painstaking search of her room, a search as systematic as it was feverish, failed to reveal where she had hidden the book.

He returned wearily to the porch.

A prophet has always been supposed to take some pleasure, perhaps morbid, in seeing his predictions fulfilled; and it may have been a consolation to the gloomy heart of Hedrick, sorely injured by Laura’s offensive care of her treasure, to find the grouping upon the porch as he had foretold: Cora and Mr. Corliss sitting a little aloof from the others, far enough to permit their holding an indistinct and murmurous conversation of their own. Their sequestration, even by so short a distance, gave them an appearance of intimacy which probably accounted for the rather absent greeting bestowed by Mr. Lindley upon the son of the house, who met him with some favour.

This Richard Lindley was a thin, friendly looking young man with a pleasing, old-fashioned face which suggested that if he were minded to be portrayed it should be by the daguerreotype, and that a high, black stock would have been more suitable to him than his businesslike, modern neck-gear. He had fine eyes, which seemed habitually concerned with faraway things, though when he looked at Cora they sparkled; however, it cannot be said that the sparkling continued at its brightest when his glance wandered (as it not infrequently did this evening) from her lovely head to the rose in Mr. Corliss's white coat.

Hedrick, resuming a position upon the top step between the two groups, found the conversation of the larger annoying because it prevented him from hearing that of the smaller. It was carried on for the greater part by his mother and Mr. Trumble; Laura sat silent between these two; and Lindley's mood was obviously contemplative. Mr. Wade Trumble, twenty-six, small, earnest, and already beginning to lose his hair, was talkative enough.

He was one of those people who are so continuously aggressive that they are negligible. "What's the matter here? Nobody pays any attention to me. I'M important!" He might have had that legend engraved on his card, it spoke from everything else that was his: face, voice, gesture—even from his clothes, for they also clamoured for attention without receiving it. Worn by another man, their extravagance of shape and shade might have advertised a self-sacrificing effort for the picturesque; but upon Mr. Trumble they paradoxically confirmed an impression that he was well off and close. Certainly this was the impression confirmed in the mind of the shrewdest and most experienced observer on that veranda. The accomplished Valentine Corliss was quite able to share Cora's detachment satisfactorily, and be very actively aware of other things at the same time. For instance: Richard Lindley's preoccupation had neither escaped him nor remained unconnected in his mind with that gentleman's somewhat attentive notice of the present position of a certain rose.

Mr. Trumble took up Mrs. Madison's placid weather talk as if it had been a flaunting challenge; he made it a matter of conscience and for argument; for he was a doughty champion, it appeared, when nothings were in question, one of those stern men who will have accuracy in the banal, insisting upon portent in talk meant to be slid over as mere courteous sound.

“I don’t know about that, now,” he said with severe emphasis. “I don’t know about that at all. I can’t say I agree with you. In fact, I do not agree with you: it was hotter in the early part of July, year before last, than it has been at any time this summer. Several degrees hotter—several degrees.”

“I fear I must beg to differ with you,” he said, catching the poor lady again, a moment later. “I beg to differ decidedly. Other places get a great deal more heat. Look at Egypt.”

“Permit me to disagree,” he interrupted her at once, when she pathetically squirmed to another subject. “There’s more than one side to this matter. You are looking at this matter from a totally wrong angle. . . . Let me inform you that statistics. . . .” Mrs. Madison’s gentle voice was no more than just audible in the short intervals he permitted; a blind listener would have thought Mr. Trumble at the telephone. Hedrick was thankful when his mother finally gave up altogether the display of her ignorance, inaccuracy, and general misinformation, and Trumble talked alone. That must have been the young man’s object; certainly he had struggled for it; and so it must have pleased him. He talked on and on and on; he passed from one topic to another with no pause; swinging over the gaps with a “Now you take,” or, “And that reminds me,” filling many a vacancy with “So-and-so and so-and-so,” and other stencils, while casting about for material to continue. Everything was italicized, the significant and the trivial, to the same monotone of emphasis. Death and shoe-laces were all the same to him.

Anything was all the same to him so long as he talked.

Hedrick’s irritation was gradually dispelled; and, becoming used to the sound, he found it lulling; relaxed his attitude and drowsed; Mr. Lindley was obviously lost in a reverie; Mrs. Madison, her hand shading her eyes, went over her market-list for the morrow and otherwise set her house in order; Laura alone sat straight in her chair; and her face was toward the vocalist, but as she was in deep shadow her expression could not be guessed. However, one person in that group must have listened with genuine pleasure—else why did he talk?

It was the returned native whose departure at last rang the curtain on the monologue. The end of the long sheltered seclusion of Cora and her

companion was a whispered word. He spoke it first:

“To-morrow?”

“To-morrow.”

Cora gave a keen, quick, indrawn sigh—not of sorrow—and sank back in her chair, as he touched her hand in farewell and rose to go. She remained where she was, motionless and silent in the dark, while he crossed to Mrs. Madison, and prefaced a leave-taking unusually formal for these precincts with his mannered bow. He shook hands with Richard Lindley, asking genially:

“Do you still live where you did—just below here?”

“Yes.”

“When I passed by there this afternoon,” said Corliss, “it recalled a stupendous conflict we had, once upon a time; but I couldn’t remember the cause.”

“I remember the cause,” said Mr. Lindley, but, stopping rather short, omitted to state it. “At all events, it was settled.”

“Yes,” said the other quietly. “You whipped me.”

“Did I so?” Corliss laughed gayly. “We mustn’t let it happen again!”

Mr. Trumble joined the parting guest, making simultaneous adieus with unmistakable elation. Mr. Trumble’s dreadful entertainment had made it a happy evening for him.

As they went down the steps together, the top of his head just above the level of his companion’s shoulder, he lifted to Corliss a searching gaze like an actor’s hopeful scrutiny of a new acquaintance; and before they reached the street his bark rang eagerly on the stilly night: “Now *there* is a point on which I beg to differ with you. . . .”

Mrs. Madison gave Lindley her hand. “I think I’ll go in. Good-night, Richard. Come, Hedrick!”

Hedrick rose, groaning, and batted his eyes painfully as he faced the hall light. “What’d you and this Corliss fight about?” he asked, sleepily.

“Nothing,” said Lindley.

“You said you remembered.”

“Oh, I remember a lot of useless things.”

“Well, what was it? I want to know what you fought about.”

“Come, Hedrick,” repeated his mother, setting a gently urgent hand on his shoulder.

“I won’t,” said the boy impatiently, shaking her off and growing suddenly very wideawake and determined. “I won’t move a step till he tells me what they fought about. Not a step!”

“Well—it was about a `show.’ We were only boys, you know—younger than you, perhaps.”

“A circus?”

“A boy-circus he and my brother got up in our yard. I wasn’t in it.”

“Well, what did you fight about?”

“I thought Val Corliss wasn’t quite fair to my brother. That’s all.”

“No, it isn’t! How wasn’t he fair?”

“They sold tickets to the other boys; and I thought my brother didn’t get his share.”

“This Corliss kept it all?”

“Oh, something like that,” said Lindley, laughing.

“Probably I was in the wrong.”

“And he licked you?”

“All over the place!”

“I wish I’d seen it,” said Hedrick, not unsympathetically, but as a sportsman. And he consented to be led away.

Laura had been standing at the top of the steps looking down the street, where Corliss and his brisk companion had emerged momentarily from deep shadows under the trees into the illumination of a swinging arc-lamp at the corner. They disappeared; and she turned, and, smiling, gave the delaying guest her hand in good-night.

His expression, which was somewhat troubled, changed to one of surprise as her face came into the light, for it was transfigured. Deeply flushed, her eyes luminous, she wore that shining look Hedrick had seen as she wrote in her secret book.

“Why, Laura!” said Lindley, wondering.

She said good-night again, and went in slowly. As she reached the foot of the stairs, she heard him moving a chair upon the porch, and Cora speaking sharply:

“Please don’t sit close to me!” There was a sudden shrillness in the voice of honey, and the six words were run so rapidly together they seemed to form but one. After a moment Cora added, with a deprecatory ripple of laughter not quite free from the same shrillness:

“You see, Richard, it’s so—it’s so hot, to-night.”

CHAPTER FIVE

Half an hour later, when Lindley had gone, Cora closed the front doors in a manner which drew an immediate cry of agony from the room where her father was trying to sleep. She stood on tiptoe to turn out the gas-light in the hall; but for a time the key resisted the insufficient pressure of her finger-tips: the little orange flame, with its black-green crescent over the armature, so maliciously like the “eye” of a peacock feather, limned the exquisite planes of the upturned face; modelled them with soft and regular shadows; painted a sullen loveliness. The key turned a little, but not enough; and she whispered to herself a monosyllable not usually attributed to the vocabulary of a damsel of rank. Next moment, her expression flashed in a brilliant change, like that of a pouting child suddenly remembering that tomorrow is Christmas. The key surrendered instantly, and she ran gayly up the familiar stairs in the darkness.

The transom of Laura’s door shone brightly; but the knob, turning uselessly in Cora’s hand, proved the door itself not so hospitable. There was a brief rustling within the room; the bolt snapped, and Laura opened the door.

“Why, Laura,” said Cora, observing her sister with transient curiosity, “you haven’t undressed. What have you been doing? Something’s the matter with you. I know what it is,” she added, laughing, as she seated herself on the edge of the old black-walnut bed. “You’re in love with Wade Trumble!”

“He’s a strong man,” observed Laura. “A remarkable throat.”

“Horrible little person!” said Cora, forgetting what she owed the unfortunate Mr. Trumble for the vocal wall which had so effectively sheltered her earlier in the evening. “He’s like one of those booming June-bugs, batting against the walls, falling into lamp-chimneys——-”

“He doesn’t get very near the light he wants,” said Laura.

“Me? Yes, he would like to, the rat! But he’s consoled when he can get any one to listen to his awful chatter. He makes up to himself among women for the way he gets sat on at the club. But he has his use: he shows off the other men so, by contrast. Oh, Laura!” She lifted both hands to her cheeks, which were beautiful with a quick suffusion of high colour. “Isn’t he gorgeous!”

“Yes,” said Laura gently, “I’ve always thought so.”

“Now what’s the use of that?” asked Cora peevishly, “with *me*? I didn’t mean Richard Lindley. You *know* what I mean.”

“Yes—of course—I do,” Laura said.

Cora gave her a long look in which a childlike pleading mingled with a faint, strange trouble; then this glance wandered moodily from the face of her sister to her own slippers, which she elevated to meet her descending line of vision.

“And you know I can’t help it,” she said, shifting quickly to the role of accuser. “So what’s the use of behaving like the Pest?” She let her feet drop to the floor again, and her voice trembled a little as she went on: “Laura, you don’t know what I had to endure from him to-night. I really don’t think I can stand it to live in the same house any longer with that frightful little devil. He’s been throwing Ray Vilas’s name at me until—oh, it was ghastly to-night! And then—then——” Her tremulousness increased. “I haven’t said anything about it all day, but I *met* him on the street downtown, this morning——”

“You met Vilas?” Laura looked startled. “Did he speak to you?”

“`Speak to me!’” Cora’s exclamation shook with a half-laugh of hysteria. “He made an awful *scene*! He came out of the Richfield Hotel barroom on Main Street just as I was going into the jeweller’s next door, and he stopped and bowed like a monkey, square in front of me, and—and he took off his hat and set it on the pavement at my feet and told me to kick it into the gutter! Everybody stopped and stared; and I couldn’t get by him. And he said—he said I’d kicked his heart into the gutter and he didn’t want it to catch cold without a hat! And wouldn’t I please be so kind as to kick——” She choked with angry mortification. “It was horrible! People were

stopping and laughing, and a rowdy began to make fun of Ray, and pushed him, and they got into a scuffle, and I ran into the jeweller's and almost fainted."

"He is insane!" said Laura, aghast.

"He's nothing of the kind; he's just a brute. He does it to make people say I'm the cause of his drinking; and everybody in this gossipy old town *does* say it—just because I got bored to death with his everlasting do-you-love-me-to-day-as-well-as-yesterday style of torment, and couldn't help liking Richard better. Yes, every old cat in town says I ruined him, and that's what he wants them to say. It's so unmanly! I wish he'd die! Yes, I *do* wish he would! Why doesn't he kill himself?"

"Ah, don't say that," protested Laura.

"Why not? He's threatened to enough. And I'm afraid to go out of the house because I can't tell when I'll meet him or what he'll do. I was almost sick in that jeweller's shop, this morning, and so upset I came away without getting my pendant. There's *another* thing I've got to go through, I suppose!" She pounded the yielding pillow desperately. "Oh, oh, oh! Life isn't worth living—it seems to me sometimes as if everybody in the world spent his time trying to think up ways to make it harder for me! I couldn't have worn the pendant, though, even if I'd got it," she went on, becoming thoughtful. "It's Richard's silly old engagement ring, you know," she explained, lightly. "I had it made up into a pendant, and heaven knows how I'm going to get Richard to see it the right way. He was so unreasonable tonight."

"Was he cross about Mr. Corliss monopolizing you?"

"Oh, you know how he is," said Cora. "He didn't speak of it exactly. But after you'd gone, he asked me——" She stopped with a little gulp, an expression of keen distaste about her mouth.

"Oh, he wants me to wear my ring," she continued, with sudden rapidity: "and how the dickens *can* I when I can't even tell him it's been made into a pendant! He wants to speak to father; he wants to *announce* it. He's sold out his business for what he thinks is a good deal of money, and he wants me to marry him next month and take some miserable little trip, I don't know

where, for a few weeks, before he invests what he’s made in another business. Oh!” she cried. “It’s a *horrible* thing to ask a girl to do: to settle down—just housekeeping, housekeeping, housekeeping forever in this stupid, stupid town! It’s so unfair! Men are just possessive; they think it’s loving you to want to possess you themselves. A beautiful `love’! It’s so mean! Men!” She sprang up and threw out both arms in a vehement gesture of revolt. “Damn 'em, I wish they’d let me *alone*!”

Laura’s eyes had lost their quiet; they showed a glint of tears, and she was breathing quickly. In this crisis of emotion the two girls went to each other silently; Cora turned, and Laura began to unfasten Cora’s dress in the back.

“Poor Richard!” said Laura presently, putting into her mouth a tiny pearl button which had detached itself at her touch. “This was his first evening in the overflow. No wonder he was troubled!”

“Pooh!” said Cora. “As if you and mamma weren’t good enough for him to talk to! He’s spoiled. He’s so used to being called `the most popular man in town’ and knowing that every girl on Corliss Street wanted to marry him ——” She broke off, and exclaimed sharply: “I wish they would!”

“Cora!”

“Oh, I suppose you mean that’s the reason *I* went in for him?”

“No, no,” explained Laura hurriedly. “I only meant, stand still.”

“Well, it was!” And Cora’s abrupt laugh had the glad, free ring fancy attaches to the merry confidences of a buccaneer in trusted company.

Laura knelt to continue unfastening the dress; and when it was finished she extended three of the tiny buttons in her hand. “They’re always loose on a new dress,” she said. “I’ll sew them all on tight, to-morrow.”

Cora smiled lovingly. “You good old thing,” she said. “You looked pretty to-night.”

“That’s nice!” Laura laughed, as she dropped the buttons into a little drawer of her bureau. It was an ugly, cheap, old bureau, its veneer loosened and peeling, the mirror small and flawed—a piece of furniture in keeping

with the room, which was small, plain and hot, its only ornamental adjunct being a silver-framed photograph of Mrs. Madison, with Cora, as a child of seven or eight, upon her lap.

“You really do look ever so pretty,” asserted Cora.

“I wonder if I look as well as I did the last time I heard I was pretty,” said the other. “That was at the Assembly in March. Coming down the stairs, I heard a man from out of town say, `That black-haired Miss Madison is a pretty girl.’ And some one with him said, `Yes; you’ll think so until you meet her sister!’”

“You are an old dear!” Cora enfolded her delightedly; then, drawing back, exclaimed: “You *know* he’s gorgeous!” And with a feverish little ripple of laughter, caught her dress together in the back and sped through the hall to her own room.

This was a very different affair from Laura’s, much cooler and larger; occupying half the width of the house; and a rather expensive struggle had made it pretty and even luxurious. The window curtains and the wall-paper were fresh, and of a quiet blue; there was a large divan of the same colour; a light desk, prettily equipped, occupied a corner; and between two gilt gas-brackets, whose patent burners were shielded by fringed silk shades, stood a cheval-glass six feet high. The door of a very large clothes-pantry stood open, showing a fine company of dresses, suspended from forms in an orderly manner; near by, a rosewood cabinet exhibited a delicate collection of shoes and slippers upon its four shelves. A dressing-table, charmingly littered with everything, took the place of a bureau; and upon it, in a massive silver frame, was a large photograph of Mr. Richard Lindley. The frame was handsome, but somewhat battered: it had seen service. However, the photograph was quite new.

There were photographs everywhere—photographs framed and unframed; photographs large and photographs small, the fresh and the faded; tintypes, kodaks, “full lengths,” “cabinets,” groups—every kind of photograph; and among them were several of Cora herself, one of her mother, one of Laura, and two others of girls. All the rest were sterner. Two or three were seamed across with cracks, hastily recalled sentences to destruction; and here and there remained tokens of a draughtsman’s over-

generous struggle to confer upon some of the smooth-shaven faces additional manliness in the shape of sweeping moustaches, long beards, goatees, mutton-chops, and, in the case of one gentleman of a blond, delicate and tenor-like beauty, neck-whiskers;—decorations in many instances so deeply and damply pencilled that subsequent attempts at erasure had failed of great success. Certainly, Hedrick had his own way of relieving dull times.

Cora turned up the lights at the sides of the cheval-glass, looked at herself earnestly, then absently, and began to loosen her hair. Her lifted hands hesitated; she re-arranged the slight displacement of her hair already effected; set two chairs before the mirror, seated herself in one; pulled up her dress, where it was slipping from her shoulder, rested an arm upon the back of the other chair as, earlier in the evening, she had rested it upon the iron railing of the porch, and, leaning forward, assumed as exactly as possible the attitude in which she had sat so long beside Valentine Corliss. She leaned very slowly closer and yet closer to the mirror; a rich colour spread over her; her eyes, gazing into themselves, became dreamy, inexpressibly wistful, cloudily sweet; her breath was tumultuous. “`Even as you and I’?” she whispered.

Then, in the final moment of this after-the-fact rehearsal, as her face almost touched the glass, she forgot how and what she had looked to Corliss; she forgot him; she forgot him utterly: she leaped to her feet and kissed the mirrored lips with a sort of passion.

“You *darling*!” she cried. Cora’s christening had been unimaginative, for the name means only, “maiden.” She should have been called Narcissa.

The rhapsody was over instantly, leaving an emotional vacuum like a silence at the dentist’s. Cora yawned, and resumed the loosening of her hair.

When she had put on her nightgown, she went from one window to another, closing the shutters against the coming of the morning light to wake her. As she reached the last window, a sudden high wind rushed among the trees outside; a white flare leaped at her face, startling her; there was a boom and rattle as of the brasses, cymbals, and kettle-drums of some fatal orchestra; and almost at once it began to rain.

And with that, from the distance came a voice, singing; and at the first sound of it, though it was far away and almost indistinguishable, Cora started more violently than at the lightning; she sprang to the mirror lights, put them out; threw herself upon the bed, and huddled there in the darkness.

The wind passed; the heart of the storm was miles away; this was only its fringe; but the rain pattered sharply upon the thick foliage outside her windows; and the singing voice came slowly up the street.

It was a strange voice: high-pitched and hoarse—and not quite human, so utter was the animal abandon of it.

“I love a lassie, a bonnie, bonnie lassie,” it wailed and piped, coming nearer; and the gay little air—wrought to a grotesque of itself by this wild, high voice in the rain—might have been a banshee’s love-song.

“I love a lassie, a bonnie, bonnie lassie.
She’s as pure as the lily in the dell——”

The voice grew louder; came in front of the house; came into the yard; came and sang just under Cora’s window. There it fell silent a moment; then was lifted in a long peal of imbecile laughter, and sang again:

“Then slowly, slowly rase she up
And slowly she came nigh him,
And when she drew the curtain by—
`Young man I think you’re dyin’.’”

Cora’s door opened and closed softly, and Laura, barefooted, stole to the bed and put an arm about the shaking form of her sister.

“The drunken beast!” sobbed Cora. “It’s to disgrace me! That’s what he wants. He’d like nothing better than headlines in the papers: `Ray Vilas arrested at the Madison residence’!” She choked with anger and mortification. “The neighbours——”

“They’re nearly all away,” whispered Laura. “You needn’t fear——”

“Hark!”

The voice stopped singing, and began to mumble incoherently; then it rose again in a lamentable outcry:

“Oh, God of the fallen, be Thou merciful to me! Be Thou merciful—merciful—*merciful*” . . .

“MERCIFUL, MERCIFUL, MERCIFUL!” it shrieked, over and over, with increasing loudness, and to such nerve-racking effect that Cora, gasping, beat the bedclothes frantically with her hands at each iteration.

The transom over the door became luminous; some one had lighted the gas in the upper hall. Both girls jumped from the bed, ran to the door, and opened it. Their mother, wearing a red wrapper, was standing at the head of the stairs, which Mr. Madison, in his night-shirt and slippers, was slowly and heavily descending.

Before he reached the front door, the voice outside ceased its dreadful plaint with the abrupt anti-climax of a phonograph stopped in the middle of

a record. There was the sound of a struggle and wrestling, a turmoil in the wet shrubberies, branches cracking.

“Let me go, da——” cried the voice, drowned again at half a word, as by a powerful hand upon a screaming mouth.

The old man opened the front door, stepped out, closing it behind him; and the three women looked at each other wanly during a hushed interval like that in a sleeping-car at night when the train stops. Presently he came in again, and started up the stairs, heavily and slowly, as he had gone down.

“Richard Lindley stopped him,” he said, sighing with the ascent, and not looking up. “He heard him as he came along the street, and dressed as quick as he could, and ran up and got him. Richard’s taken him away.”

He went to his own room, panting, mopping his damp gray hair with his fat wrist, and looking at no one.

Cora began to cry again. It was an hour before any of this family had recovered sufficient poise to realize, with the shuddering gratitude of adventurers spared from the abyss, that, under Providence, Hedrick had not wakened!

CHAPTER SIX

Much light shatters much loveliness; but a pretty girl who looks pretty outdoors on a dazzling hot summer morning is prettier then than ever. Cora knew it; of course she knew it; she knew exactly how she looked, as she left the concrete bridge behind her at the upper end of Corliss Street and turned into a shrub-bordered bypath of the river park. In imagination she stood at the turn of the path just ahead, watching her own approach: she saw herself as a picture—the white-domed parasol, with its cheerful pale-green lining, a background for her white hat, her corn-silk hair, and her delicately flushed face. She saw her pale, live arms through their thin sleeves, and the light grasp of her gloved fingers upon the glistening stick of the parasol; she saw the long, simple lines of her close white dress and their graceful interchanging movements with the alternate advance of her white shoes over the fine gravel path; she saw the dazzling splashes of sunshine playing upon her through the changeful branches overhead. Cora never lacked a gallery: she sat there herself.

She refreshed the eyes of a respectable burgess of sixty, a person so colourless that no one, after passing him, could have remembered anything about him except that he wore glasses and some sort of moustache; and to Cora’s vision he was as near transparent as any man could be, yet she did not miss the almost imperceptible signs of his approval, as they met and continued on their opposite ways. She did not glance round, nor did he pause in his slow walk; neither was she clairvoyant; none the less, she knew that he turned his head and looked back at her.

The path led away from the drives and more public walks of the park, to a low hill, thoughtfully untouched by the gardener and left to the shadowy thickets and good-smelling underbrush of its rich native woodland. And here, by a brown bench, waited a tall gentleman in white.

They touched hands and sat without speaking. For several moments they continued the silence, then turned slowly and looked at each other; then looked slowly and gravely away, as if to an audience in front of them. They

knew how to do it; but probably a critic in the first row would have concluded that Cora felt it even more than Valentine Corliss enjoyed it.

“I suppose this is very clandestine,” she said, after a deep breath. “I don’t think I care, though.”

“I hope you do,” he smiled, “so that I could think your coming means more.”

“Then I’ll care,” she said, and looked at him again.

“You dear!” he exclaimed deliberately.

She bit her lip and looked down, but not before he had seen the quick dilation of her ardent eyes. “I wanted to be out of doors,” she said. “I’m afraid there’s one thing of yours I don’t like, Mr. Corliss.”

“I’ll throw it away, then. Tell me.”

“Your house. I don’t like living in it, very much. I’m sorry you *can’t* throw it away.”

“I’m thinking of doing that very thing,” he laughed. “But I’m glad I found the rose in that queer old waste-basket first.”

“Not too much like a rose, sometimes,” she said. “I think this morning I’m a little like some of the old doors up on the third floor: I feel rather unhinged, Mr. Corliss.”

“You don’t look it, Miss Madison!”

“I didn’t sleep very well.” She bestowed upon him a glance which transmuted her actual explanation into, “I couldn’t sleep for thinking of you.” It was perfectly definite; but the acute gentleman laughed genially.

“Go on with you!” he said.

Her eyes sparkled, and she joined laughter with him. “But it’s true: you did keep me awake. Besides, I had a serenade.”

“Serenade? I had an idea they didn’t do that any more over here. I remember the young men going about at night with an orchestra sometimes

when I was a boy, but I supposed——”

“Oh, it wasn’t much like that,” she interrupted, carelessly. “I don’t think that sort of thing has been done for years and years. It wasn’t an orchestra—just a man singing under my window.”

“With a guitar?”

“No.” She laughed a little. “Just singing.”

“But it rained last night,” said Corliss, puzzled.

“Oh, *he* wouldn’t mind that!”

“How stupid of me! Of course, he wouldn’t. Was it Richard Lindley?”

“Never!”

“I see. Yes, that was a bad guess: I’m sure Lindley’s just the same steady-going, sober, plodding old horse he was as a boy. His picture doesn’t fit a romantic frame—singing under a lady’s window in a thunderstorm! Your serenader must have been very young.”

“He is,” said Cora. “I suppose he’s about twenty-three; just a boy—and a very annoying one, too!”

Her companion looked at her narrowly. “By any chance, is he the person your little brother seemed so fond of mentioning—Mr. Vilas?”

Cora gave a genuine start. “Good heavens! What makes you think that?” she cried, but she was sufficiently disconcerted to confirm his amused suspicion.

“So it was Mr. Vilas,” he said. “He’s one of the jilted, of course.”

“Oh, `jilted’!” she exclaimed. “All the wild boys that a girl can’t make herself like aren’t `jilted,’ are they?”

“I believe I should say—yes,” he returned. “Yes, in this instance, just about all of them.”

“Is every woman a target for you, Mr. Corliss? I suppose you know that you have a most uncomfortable way of shooting up the landscape.” She stirred uneasily, and moved away from him to the other end of the bench.

“I didn’t miss that time,” he laughed. “Don’t you ever miss?”

He leaned quickly toward her and answered in a low voice: “You can be sure I’m not going to miss anything about *you*.”

It was as if his bending near her had been to rouge her. But it cannot be said that she disliked his effect upon her; for the deep breath she drew in audibly, through her shut teeth, was a signal of delight; and then followed one of those fraught silences not uncharacteristic of dialogues with Cora.

Presently, she gracefully and uselessly smoothed her hair from the left temple with the backs of her fingers, of course finishing the gesture prettily by tucking in a hairpin tighter above the nape of her neck. Then, with recovered coolness, she asked:

“Did you come all the way from Italy just to sell our old house, Mr. Corliss?”

“Perhaps that was part of why I came,” he said, gayly. “I need a great deal of money, Miss Cora Madison.”

“For your villa and your yacht?”

“No; I’m a magician, dear lady——”

“Yes,” she said, almost angrily. “Of course you know it!”

“You mock me! No; I’m going to make everybody rich who will trust me. I have a secret, and it’s worth a mountain of gold. I’ve put all I have into it, and will put in everything else I can get for myself, but it’s going to take a great deal more than that. And everybody who goes into it will come out on Monte Cristo’s island.”

“Then I’m sorry papa hasn’t anything to put in,” she said.

“But he has: his experience in business and his integrity. I want him to be secretary of my company. Will you help me to get him?” he laughed.

“Do you want me to?” she asked with a quick, serious glance straight in his eyes, one which he met admirably.

“I have an extremely definite impression,” he said lightly, “that you can make anybody you know do just what you want him to.”

“And I have another that you have still another `extremely definite impression’ that takes rank over that,” she said, but not with his lightness, for her tone was faintly rueful. “It is that you can make *me* do just what you want me to.”

Mr. Valentine Corliss threw himself back on the bench and laughed aloud. “What a girl!” he cried. Then for a fraction of a second he set his hand over hers, an evanescent touch at which her whole body started and visibly thrilled.

She lifted her gloved hand and looked at it with an odd wonder; her alert emotions, always too ready, flinging their banners to her cheeks again.

“Oh, I don’t think it’s soiled,” he said, a speech which she punished with a look of starry contempt. For an instant she made him afraid that something had gone wrong with his measuring tape; but with a slow movement she set her hand softly against her hot cheek; and he was reassured: it was not his touching her that had offended her, but the allusion to it.

“Thanks,” he said, very softly.

She dropped her hand to her parasol, and began, musingly, to dig little holes in the gravel of the path. “Richard Lindley is looking for investments,” she said.

“I’m glad to hear he’s been so successful,” returned Corliss.

“He might like a share in your gold-mine.”

“Thank heaven it isn’t literally a gold-mine,” he exclaimed. “There have been so many crooked ones exploited I don’t believe you could get anybody nowadays to come in on a real one. But I think you’d make an excellent partner for an adventurer who had discovered hidden treasure; and I’m that particular kind of adventurer. I think I’ll take you in.”

“Do you?”

“How would you like to save a man from being ruined?”

“Ruined? You don’t mean it literally?”

“Literally!” He laughed gayly. “If I don’t `land’ this I’m gone, smashed, finished—quite ended! Don’t bother, I’m going to `land’ it. And it’s rather a serious compliment I’m paying you, thinking you can help me. I’d like to see a woman—just once in the world—who could manage a thing like this.” He became suddenly very grave. “Good God! wouldn’t I be at her feet!”

Her eyes became even more eager. “You think I—I *might* be a woman who could?”

“Who knows, Miss Madison? I believe——” He stopped abruptly, then in a lowered, graver voice asked: “Doesn’t it somehow seem a little queer to you when we call each other, `Miss Madison’ and `Mr. Corliss’?”

“Yes,” she answered slowly; “it does.”

“Doesn’t it seem to you,” he went on, in the same tone, “that we only `Miss’ and `Mister’ each other in fun? That though you never saw me until yesterday, we’ve gone pretty far beyond mere surfaces? That we did in our talk, last night?”

“Yes,” she repeated; “it does.”

He let a pause follow, and then said huskily:

“How far are we going?”

“I don’t know.” She was barely audible; but she turned deliberately, and there took place an eager exchange of looks which continued a long while. At last, and without ending this serious encounter, she whispered:

“How far do *you* think?”

Mr. Corliss did not answer, and a peculiar phenomenon became vaguely evident to the girl facing him: his eyes were still fixed full upon hers, but he was not actually looking at her; nevertheless, and with an extraordinarily acute attention, he was unquestionably looking at something. The direct

front of pupil and iris did not waver from her; but for the time he was not aware of her; had not even heard her question. Something in the outer field of his vision had suddenly and completely engrossed him; something in that nebulous and hazy background which we see, as we say, with the white of the eye. Cora instinctively turned and looked behind her, down the path.

There was no one in sight except a little girl and the elderly burgess who had glanced over his shoulder at Cora as she entered the park; and he was, in face, mien, and attire, so thoroughly the unnoticeable, average man-on-the-street that she did not even recall him as the looker-round of a little while ago. He was strolling benevolently, the little girl clinging to one of his hands, the other holding an apple; and a composite photograph of a thousand grandfathers might have resulted in this man's picture.

As the man and little girl came slowly up the walk toward the couple on the bench there was a faint tinkle at Cora's feet: her companion's scarfpin, which had fallen from his tie. He was maladroit about picking it up, trying with thumb and forefinger to seize the pin itself, instead of the more readily grasped design of small pearls at the top, so that he pushed it a little deeper into the gravel; and then occurred a tiny coincidence: the elderly man, passing, let fall the apple from his hand, and it rolled toward the pin just as Corliss managed to secure the latter. For an instant, though the situation was so absolutely commonplace, so casual, Cora had a wandering consciousness of some mysterious tensity; a feeling like the premonition of a crisis very near at hand. This sensation was the more curious because nothing whatever happened. The man got his apple, joined in the child's laughter, and went on.

"What was it you asked me?" said Corliss, lifting his head again and restoring the pin to his tie. He gazed carelessly at the back of the grandsire, disappearing beyond a bush at a bend in the path.

"Who was that man?" said Cora with some curiosity.

"That old fellow? I haven't an idea. You see I've been away from here so many years I remember almost no one. Why?"

"I don't know, unless it was because I had an idea you were thinking of him instead of me. You didn't listen to what I said."

“That was because I was thinking so intensely of you,” he began instantly. “A startlingly vivid thought of you came to me just then. Didn’t I look like a man in a trance?”

“What was the thought?”

“It was a picture: I saw you standing under a great bulging sail, and the water flying by in moonlight; oh, a moon and a night such as you have never seen! and a big blue headland looming up against the moon, and crowned with lemon groves and vineyards, all sparkling with fireflies—old watch-towers and the roofs of white villas gleaming among olive orchards on the slopes—the sound of mandolins——”

“Ah!” she sighed, the elderly man, his grandchild, and his apple well-forgotten.

“Do you think it was a prophecy?” he asked.

“What do *you* think?” she breathed. “That was really what I asked you before.”

“I think,” he said slowly, “that I’m in danger of forgetting that my `hidden treasure’ is the most important thing in the world.”

“In great danger?” The words were not vocal.

He moved close to her; their eyes met again, with increased eagerness, and held fast; she was trembling, visibly; and her lips—parted with her tumultuous breathing—were not far from his.

“Isn’t any man in great danger,” he said, “if he falls in love with you?”

“Well?”

CHAPTER SEVEN

Toward four o’clock that afternoon, a very thin, fair young man shakily heaved himself into a hammock under the trees in that broad backyard wherein, as Valentine Corliss had yesterday noticed, the last iron monarch of the herd, with unabated arrogance, had entered domestic service as a clothes-prop. The young man, who was of delicate appearance and unhumanly pale, stretched himself at full length on his back, closed his eyes, moaned feebly, cursed the heat in a stricken whisper. Then, as a locust directly overhead violently shattered the silence, and seemed like to continue the outrage forever, the shaken lounger stopped his ears with his fingers and addressed the insect in old Saxon.

A white jacketed mulatto came from the house bearing something on a silver tray.

“Julip, Mist’ Vilas?” he said sympathetically.

Ray Vilas rustily manoeuvred into a sitting position; and, with eyes still closed, made shift to accept the julep in both hands, drained half of it, opened his eyes, and thanked the cup-bearer feebly, in a voice and accent reminiscent of the melodious South.

“And I wonder,” he added, “if you can tell me——”

“I’m Miz William Lindley’s house-man, Joe Vaxdens,” said the mulatto, in the tone of an indulgent nurse. “You in Miz Lindley’s backyard right now, sittin’ in a hammick.”

“I seem to gather almost that much for myself,” returned the patient. “But I should like to know how I got here.”

“Jes’ come out the front door an’ walk’ aroun’ the house an’ set down. Mist’ Richard had to go downtown; tole me not to wake you; but I heerd you splashin’ in the bath an’ you tole me you din’ want no breakfuss——”

“Yes, Joe, I’m aware of what’s occurred since I woke,” said Vilas, and, throwing away the straws, finished the julep at one draught. “What I want to know is how I happened to be here at Mr. Lindley’s.”

“Mist’ Richard brought you las’ night, suh. I don’ know where he got you, but I heered a considerable thrashum aroun’, up an’ down the house, an’ so I come help him git you to bed in one vem spare-rooms.” Joe chuckled ingratiatingly. “Lord name! You cert’n’y wasn’t askin’ fer no *bed*!”

He took the glass, and the young man reclined again in the hammock, a hot blush vanquishing his pallor. “Was I—was I very bad, Joe?”

“Oh, you was all *right*,” Joe hastened to reassure him. “You was jes’ on’y a little bit tight.”

“Did it really seem only a little?” the other asked hopefully.

“Yessuh,” said Joe promptly. “Nothin’ at all. You jes’ wanted to rare roun’ little bit. Mist’ Richard took gun away from you——”

“What?”

“Oh, I tole him you wasn’ goin’ use it!” Joe laughed. “But you so wile be din’ know what you do. You cert’n’y was drunkes’ man *I* see in *long* while,” he said admiringly. “You pert near had us bofe wore out ‘fore you give up, an’ Mist’ Richard an’ me, we *use”* to han’lin’ drunkum man, too—use’ to have big times week-in, week-out ‘ith Mist’ Will—at’s Mist’ Richard’s brother, you know, suh, what died o’ whiskey.” He laughed again in high good-humour. “You cert’n’y laid it all over any vem ole times we had ‘ith Mist’ Will!”

Mr. Vilas shifted his position in the hammock uneasily; Joe’s honest intentions to be of cheer to the sufferer were not wholly successful.

“I tole Mist’ Richard,” the kindly servitor continued, “it was a mighty good thing his ma gone up Norf endurin’ the hot spell. Sence Mist’ Will die she can’t hardly bear to see drunkum man aroun’ the house. Mist’ Richard hardly ever tech nothin’ himself no more. You goin’ feel better, suh, out in the f’esh air,” he concluded, comfortingly as he moved away.

“Joe!”

“Yessuh.”

Mr. Vilas pulled himself upright for a moment. “What use in the world do you reckon one julep is to me?”

“Mist’ Richard say to give you one drink ef you ask’ for it, suh,” answered Joe, looking troubled.

“Well, you’ve told me enough now about last night to make any man hang himself, and I’m beginning to remember enough more——”

“Pshaw, Mist’ Vilas,” the coloured man interrupted, deprecatingly, “you din’ broke nothin’! You on’y had couple glass’ wine too much. You din’ make no trouble at all; jes’ went right off to bed. You ought seen some vem ole times me an Mist’ Richard use to have ‘ith Mist’ Will——”

“Joe!”

“Yessuh.”

“I want three more juleps and I want them right away.”

The troubled expression upon the coloured man’s face deepened. “Mist’ Richard say jes’ one, suh,” he said reluctantly. “I’m afraid——”

“Joe.”

“Yessuh.”

“I don’t know,” said Ray Vilas slowly, “whether or not you ever heard that I was born and raised in Kentucky.”

“Yessuh,” returned Joe humbly. “I heerd so.”

“Well, then,” said the young man in a quiet voice, “you go and get me three juleps. I’ll settle it with Mr. Richard.”

“Yessuh.”

But it was with a fifth of these renovators that Lindley found his guest occupied, an hour later, while upon a small table nearby a sixth, untouched,

awaited disposal beside an emptied coffee-cup. Also, Mr. Vilas was smoking a cigarette with unshadowed pleasure; his eye was bright, his expression care-free; and he was sitting up in the hammock, swinging cheerfully, and singing the “Marseillaise.” Richard approached through the yard, coming from the street without entering the house; and anxiety was manifest in the glance he threw at the green-topped glass upon the table, and in his greeting.

“Hail, gloom!” returned Mr. Vilas, cordially, and, observing the anxious glance, he swiftly removed the untouched goblet from the table to his own immediate possession. “Two simultaneous juleps will enhance the higher welfare,” he explained airily. “Sir, your Mr. Varden was induced to place a somewhat larger order with us than he protested to be your intention. Trusting you to exonerate him from all so-and-so and that these few words, etcetera!” He depleted the elder glass of its liquor, waved it in the air, cried, “Health, host!” and set it upon the table. “I believe I do not err in assuming my cup-bearer’s name to be Varden, although he himself, in his simple Americo-Africanism, is pleased to pluralize it. Do I fret you, host?”

“Not in the least,” said Richard, dropping upon a rustic bench, and beginning to fan himself with his straw hat. “What’s the use of fretting about a boy who hasn’t sense enough to fret about himself?”

“`Boy?’” Mr. Vilas affected puzzlement. “Do I hear aright? Sir, do you boy me? Bethink you, I am now the shell of five mint-juleps plus, and am pot-valiant. And is this mere capacity itself to be lightly *boyed*? Again, do I not wear a man’s garment, a man’s garnitures? Heed your answer; for this serge, these flannels, and these silks are yours, and though I may not fill them to the utmost, I do to the longmost, precisely. I am the stature of a man; had it not been for your razor I should wear the beard of a man; therefore I’ll not be boyed. What have you to say in defence?”

“Hadn’t you better let me get Joe to bring you something to eat?” asked Richard.

“Eat?” Mr. Vilas disposed of the suggestion with mournful hauteur. “There! For the once I forgive you. Let the subject never be mentioned between us again. We will tactfully turn to a topic of interest. My memories of last evening, at first hazy and somewhat disconcerting, now merely

amuse me. Following the pleasant Spanish custom, I went a-serenading, but was kidnapped from beneath the precious casement by—by a zealous arrival. Host, `zealous arrival' is not the julep in action: it is a triumph of paraphrase."

"I wish you'd let Joe take you back to bed," said Richard.

"Always bent on thoughts of the flesh," observed the other sadly. "Beds are for bodies, and I am become a thing of spirit. My soul is grateful a little for your care of its casing. You behold, I am generous: I am able to thank my successor to Carmen!"

Lindley's back stiffened. "Vilas!"

"Spare me your protests." The younger man waved his hand languidly. "You wish not to confer upon this subject——"

"It's a subject we'll omit," said Richard.

His companion stopped swinging, allowed the hammock to come to rest; his air of badinage fell from him; for the moment he seemed entirely sober; and he spoke with gentleness. "Mr. Lindley, if you please, I am still a gentleman—at times."

"I beg your pardon," said Richard quickly.

"No need of that!" The speaker's former careless and boisterous manner instantly resumed possession. "You must permit me to speak of a wholly fictitious lady, a creature of my wanton fancy, sir, whom I call Carmen. It will enable me to relieve my burdened soul of some remarks I have long wished to address to your excellent self."

"Oh, all right," muttered Richard, much annoyed.

"Let us imagine," continued Mr. Vilas, beginning to swing again, "that I thought I had won this Carmen——"

Lindley uttered an exclamation, shifted his position in his chair, and fixed a bored attention upon the passing vehicles in the glimpse of the street afforded between the house and the shrubberies along the side fence. The other, without appearing to note his annoyance, went on, cheerfully:

“She was a precocious huntress: early in youth she passed through the accumulator stage, leaving it to the crude or village belle to rejoice in numbers and the excitement of teasing cubs in the bear-pit. It is the nature of this imagined Carmen to play fiercely with one imitation of love after another: a man thinks he wins her, but it is merely that she has chosen him —for a while. And Carmen can have what she chooses; if the man exists who could show her that she cannot, she would follow him through the devil’s dance; but neither you nor I would be that man, my dear sir. We assume that Carmen’s eyes have been mine—her heart is another matter—and that she has grown weary of my somewhat Sicilian manner of looking into them, and, following her nature and the law of periodicity which Carmens must bow to, she seeks a cooler gaze and calls Mr. Richard Lindley to come and take a turn at looking. Now, Mr. Richard Lindley is straight as a die: he will not even show that he hears the call until he is sure that I have been dismissed: therefore, I have no quarrel with him. Also, I cannot even hate him, for in my clearer julep vision I see that he is but an interregnum. Let me not offend my friend: chagrin is to be his as it is mine. I was a strong draught, he but the quieting potion our Carmen took to settle it. We shall be brothers in woe some day. Nothing in the universe lasts except Hell: Life is running water; Love, a looking-glass; Death, an empty theatre! That reminds me: as you are not listening I will sing.”

He finished his drink and lifted his voice hilariously:

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“The heavenly stars far above her,
  The wind of the infinite sea,
Who know all her perfidy, love her,
  So why call it madness in me?
  Ah, why call it madness——”
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He set his glass with a crash upon the table, staring over his companion’s shoulder.

“*What*, if you please, is the royal exile who thus seeks refuge in our hermitage?”

His host had already observed the approaching visitor with some surprise, and none too graciously. It was Valentine Corliss: he had turned in from the street and was crossing the lawn to join the two young men. Lindley rose, and, greeting him with sufficient cordiality, introduced Mr. Vilas, who bestowed upon the newcomer a very lively interest.

“You are as welcome, Mr. Corliss,” said this previous guest, earnestly, “as if these sylvan shades were mine. I hail you, not only for your own sake, but because your presence encourages a hope that our host may offer refreshment to the entire company.”

Corliss smilingly declined to be a party to this diplomacy, and seated himself beside Richard Lindley on the bench.

“Then I relapse!” exclaimed Mr. Vilas, throwing himself back full-length in the hammock. “I am not replete, but content. I shall meditate. Gentlemen, speak on!”

He waved his hand in a gracious gesture, indicating his intention to remain silent, and lay quiet, his eyes fixed steadfastly upon Corliss.

“I was coming to call on you,” said the latter to Lindley, “but I saw you from the street and thought you mightn’t mind my being as informal as I used to be, so many years ago.”

“Of course,” said Richard.

“I have a sinister purpose in coming,” Mr. Corliss laughingly went on. “I want to bore you a little first, and then make your fortune. No doubt that’s an old story to you, but I happen to be one of the adventurers whose argosies are laden with real cargoes. Nobody knows who has or hasn’t money to invest nowadays, and of course I’ve no means of knowing whether *you* have or not—you see what a direct chap I am—but if you have, or can lay hold of some, I can show you how to make it bring you an immense deal more.”

“Naturally,” said Richard pleasantly, “I shall be glad if you can do that.”

“Then I’ll come to the point. It is exceedingly simple; that’s certainly one attractive thing about it.” Corliss took some papers and unmounted photographs from his pocket, and began to spread them open on the bench between himself and Richard. “No doubt you know Southern Italy as well as I do.”

“Oh, I don’t `know’ it. I’ve been to Naples; down to Paestum; drove from Salerno to Sorrentoby Amalfi; but that was years ago.”

“Here’s a large scale map that will refresh your memory.” He unfolded it and laid it across their knees; it was frayed with wear along the folds, and had been heavily marked and dotted with red and blue pencillings. “My millions are in this large irregular section,” he continued. “It’s the anklebone and instep of Italy’s boot; this sizable province called Basilicata, east of Salerno, north of Calabria. And I’ll not hang fire on the point, Lindley. What I’ve got there is oil.”

“Olives?” asked Richard, puzzled.

“Hardly!” Corliss laughed. “Though of course one doesn’t connect petroleum with the thought of Italy, and of all Italy, Southern Italy. But in spite of the years I’ve lived there, I’ve discovered myself to be so essentially American and commercial that I want to drench the surface of that antique soil with the brown, bad-smelling crude oil that lies so deep beneath it. Basilicata is the coming great oil-field of the world—and that’s my secret. I dare to tell it here, as I shouldn’t dare in Naples.”

“Shouldn’t `dare’?” Richard repeated, with growing interest, and no doubt having some vague expectation of a tale of the Camorra. To him Naples had always seemed of all cities the most elusive and incomprehensible, a laughing, thieving, begging, mandolin-playing, music-and-murder haunted metropolis, about which anything was plausible; and this impression was not unique, as no inconsiderable proportion of Mr. Lindley’s fellow-countrymen share it, a fact thoroughly comprehended by the returned native.

“It isn’t a case of not daring on account of any bodily danger,” explained Corliss.

“No,” Richard smiled reminiscently. “I don’t believe that would have much weight with you if it were. You certainly showed no symptoms of that sort in your extreme youth. I remember you had the name of being about the most daring and foolhardy boy in town.”

“I grew up to be cautious enough in business, though,” said the other, shaking his head gravely. “I haven’t been able to afford not being careful.” He adjusted the map—a prefatory gesture. “Now, I’ll make this whole affair perfectly clear to you. It’s a simple matter, as are most big things. I’ll begin

by telling you of Moliterno—he's been my most intimate friend in that part of the continent for a great many years; since I went there as a boy, in fact."

He sketched a portrait of his friend, Prince Moliterno, bachelor chief of a historic house, the soul of honour, "land-poor"; owning leagues and leagues of land, hills and mountains, broken towers and ruins, in central Basilicata, a province described as wild country and rough, off the rails and not easy to reach. Moliterno and the narrator had gone there to shoot; Corliss had seen "surface oil" upon the streams and pools; he recalled the discovery of oil near his own boyhood home in America; had talked of it to Moliterno, and both men had become more and more interested, then excited. They decided to sink a well.

Corliss described picturesquely the difficulties of this enterprise, the hardships and disappointments; how they dragged the big tools over the mountains by mule power; how they had kept it all secret; how he and Moliterno had done everything with the help of peasant labourers and one experienced man, who had "seen service in the Persian oil-fields."

He gave the business reality, colouring it with details relevant and irrelevant, anecdotes and wayside incidents: he was fluent, elaborate, explicit throughout. They sank five wells, he said, "at the angles of this irregular pentagon you see here on the map, outlined in blue. These red circles are the wells." Four of the wells "came in tremendous," but they had managed to get them sealed after wasting—he was "sorry to think how many thousand barrels of oil." The fifth well was so enormous that they had not been able to seal it at the time of the speaker's departure for America.

"But I had a cablegram this morning," he added, "letting me know they've managed to do it at last. Here is, the cablegram." He handed Richard a form signed "Antonio Moliterno."

"Now, to go back to what I said about not `daring' to speak of this in Naples," he continued, smiling. "The fear is financial, not physical."

The knowledge of the lucky strike, he explained, must be kept from the "Neapolitan money-sharks." A third of the land so rich in oil already belonged to the Moliterno estates, but it was necessary to obtain possession of the other two thirds "before the secret leaks into Naples." So far, it was

safe, the peasants of Basilicata being “as medieval a lot as one could wish.” He related that these peasants thought that the devils hiding inside the mountains had been stabbed by the drills, and that the oil was devils’ blood.

“You can see some of the country people hanging about, staring at a well, in this kodak, though it’s not a very good one.” He put into Richard’s hand a small, blurred photograph showing a spouting well with an indistinct crowd standing in an irregular semicircle before it.

“Is this the Basilicatan peasant costume?” asked Richard, indicating a figure in the foreground, the only one revealed at all definitely. “It looks more oriental. Isn’t the man wearing a fez?”

“Let me see,” responded Mr. Corliss very quickly. “Perhaps I gave you the wrong picture. Oh, no,” he laughed easily, holding the kodak closer to his eyes; “that’s all right: it is a fez. That’s old Salviati, our engineer, the man I spoke of who’d worked in Persia, you know; he’s always worn a fez since then. Got in the habit of it out there and says he’ll never give it up. Moliterno’s always chaffing him about it. He’s a faithful old chap, Salviati.”

“I see.” Lindley looked thoughtfully at the picture, which the other carelessly returned to his hand. “There seems to be a lot of oil there.”

“It’s one of the smaller wells at that. And you can see from the kodak that it’s just `blowing’—not an eruption from being `shot,’ or the people wouldn’t stand so near. Yes; there’s an ocean of oil under that whole province; but we want a lot of money to get at it. It’s mountain country; our wells will all have to go over fifteen-hundred feet, and that’s expensive. We want to pipe the oil to Salerno, where the Standard’s ships will take it from us, and it will need a great deal for that. But most of all we want money to get hold of the land; we must control the whole field, and it’s big!”

“How did you happen to come here to finance it?”

“I was getting to that. Moliterno himself is as honourable a man as breathes God’s air. But my experience has been that Neapolitan capitalists are about the cleverest and slipperiest financiers in the world. We could have financed it twenty times over in Naples in a day, but neither Moliterno nor I was willing to trust them. The thing is enormous, you see—a really colossal fortune—and Italian law is full of ins and outs, and the first man

we talked to confidentially would have given us his word to play straight, and, the instant we left him, would have flown post-haste for Basilicata and grabbed for himself the two thirds of the field not yet in our hands. Moliterno and I talked it over many, many times; we thought of going to Rome for the money, to Paris, to London, to New York; but I happened to remember the old house here that my aunt had left me—I wanted to sell it, to add whatever it brought to the money I've already put in—and then it struck me I might raise the rest here as well as anywhere else."

The other nodded. "I understand."

"I suppose you'll think me rather sentimental," Corliss went on, with a laugh which unexpectedly betrayed a little shyness. "I've never forgotten that I was born here—was a boy here. In all my wanderings I've always really thought of this as home."

His voice trembled slightly and his face flushed; he smiled deprecatingly as though in apology for these symptoms of emotion; and at that both listeners felt (perhaps with surprise) the man's strong attraction. There was something very engaging about him: in the frankness of his look and in the slight tremor in his voice; there was something appealing and yet manly in the confession, by this thoroughgoing cosmopolite, of his real feeling for the home-town.

"Of course I know how very few people, even among the `old citizens,' would have any recollection whatever of me," he went on; "but that doesn't make any difference in my sentiment for the place and its people. That street out yonder was named for my grandfather: there's a statue of my great uncle in the State House yard; all my own blood: belonged here, and though I have been a wanderer and may not be remembered—naturally am *not* remembered—yet the name is honoured here, and I—I——" He faltered again, then concluded with quiet earnestness: "I thought that if my good luck was destined to bring fortunes to others, it might as well be to my own kind—that at least I'd offer them the chance before I offered it to any one else." He turned and looked Richard in the face. "That's why I'm here, Mr. Lindley."

The other impulsively put out his hand. "I understand," he said heartily.

“Thank you.” Corliss changed his tone for one less serious. “You’ve listened very patiently and I hope you’ll be rewarded for it. Certainly you will if you decide to come in with us. May I leave the maps and descriptions with you?”

“Yes, indeed. I’ll look them over carefully and have another talk with you about it.”

“Thank heaven, *that’s* over!” exclaimed the lounger in the hammock, who had not once removed his fascinated stare from the expressive face of Valentine Corliss. “If you have now concluded with dull care, allow me to put a vital question: Mr. Corliss, do you sing?”

The gentleman addressed favoured him with a quizzical glance from between half-closed lids, and probably checking an impulse to remark that he happened to know that his questioner sometimes sang, replied merely, “No.”

“It is a pity.”

“Why?”

“Nothing,” returned the other, inconsequently. “It just struck me that you ought to sing the Toreador song.”

Richard Lindley, placing the notes and maps in his pocket, dropped them, and, stooping, began to gather the scattered papers with a very red face. Corliss, however, laughed good-naturedly.

“That’s most flattering,” he said; “though there are other things in `Carmen’ I prefer—probably because one doesn’t hear them so eternally.”

Vilas pulled himself up to a sitting position and began to swing again. “Observe our host, Mr. Corliss,” he commanded gayly. “He is a kind old Dobbin, much beloved, but cares damn little to hear you or me speak of music. He’d even rather discuss your oil business than listen to us talk of women, whereas nothing except women ever really interests *you*, my dear sir. He’s not our kind of man,” he concluded, mournfully; “not at all our kind of man!”

“I hope,” Corliss suggested, “he’s going to be my kind of man in the development of these oil-fields.”

“How ridic”—Mr. Vilas triumphed over the word after a slight struggle —“ulous! I shall review that: ridiculous of you to pretend to be interested in oil-fields. You are not that sort of person whatever. Nothing could be clearer than that you would never waste the time demanded by fields of oil. Groundlings call this `the mechanical age’—a vulgar error. My dear sir, you and I know that it is the age of Woman! Even poets have begun to see that she is alive. Formerly we did not speak of her at all, but of late years she has become such a scandal that she is getting talked about. Even our dramas, which used to be all blood, have become all flesh. I wish I were dead—but will continue my harangue because the thought is pellucid. Women selecting men to mate with are of only two kinds, just as there are but two kinds of children in a toy-shop. One child sets its fancy on one partic”—the orator paused, then continued—“on one certain toy and will make a distressing scene if she doesn’t get it: she will have that one; she will go straight to it, clasp it and keep it; she won’t have any other. The other kind of woman is to be understood if you will make the experiment of taking the other kind of child to a toy-shop and telling her you will buy her any toy in the place, but that you will buy her only one. If you do this in the morning, she will still be in the shop when it is closing for the night, because, though she runs to each toy in turn with excitement and delight, she sees another over her shoulder, and the one she has not touched is always her choice—until she has touched it! Some get broken in the handling. For my part, my wires are working rather rustily, but I must obey the Stage-Manager. For my requiem I wish somebody would ask them to play Gounod’s masterpiece.”

“What’s that?” asked Corliss, amused.

“`The Funeral March of a Marionette!’”

“I suppose you mean that for a cheerful way of announcing that you are a fatalist.”

“Fatalism? That is only a word,” declared Mr. Vilas gravely. “If I am not a puppet then I am a god. Somehow, I do not seem to be a god. If a god is a god, one thinks he would know it himself. I now yield the floor. Thanking

you cordially, I believe there is a lady walking yonder who commands salutation."

He rose to his feet, bowing profoundly. Cora Madison was passing, strolling rather briskly down the street, not in the direction of her home. She waved her parasol with careless gayety to the trio under the trees, and, going on, was lost to their sight.

"Hello!" exclaimed Corliss, looking at his watch with a start of surprise. "I have two letters to write for the evening mail. I must be off."

At this, Ray Vilas's eyes—still fixed upon him, as they had been throughout the visit—opened to their fullest capacity, in a gaze of only partially alcoholic wildness.

Entirely aware of this singular glare, but not in the least disconcerted by it, the recipient proffered his easy farewells. "I had no idea it was so late. Good afternoon. Mr. Vilas, I have been delighted with your diagnosis. Lindley, I'm at your disposal when you've looked over my data. My very warm thanks for your patience, and—addio!"

Lindley looked after him as he strode quickly away across the green lawn, turning, at the street, in the direction Cora had taken; and the troubled Richard felt his heart sink with vague but miserable apprehension. There was a gasp of desperation beside him, and the sound of Ray Vilas's lips parting and closing with little noises of pain.

"So he knows her," said the boy, his thin body shaking. "Look at him, damn him! See his deep chest, that conqueror's walk, the easy, confident, male pride of him: a true-born, natural rake—the Toreador all over!"

His agitation passed suddenly; he broke into a loud laugh, and flung a reckless hand to his companion's shoulder.

"You good old fool," he cried. "*You'll* never play Don Jose!"

CHAPTER EIGHT

Hedrick Madison, like too many other people, had never thought seriously about the moon; nor ever had he encouraged it to become his familiar; and he underwent his first experience of its incomparable betrayals one brilliant night during the last week of that hot month. The preface to this romantic evening was substantial and prosaic: four times during dinner was he copiously replenished with hash, which occasioned so rich a surfeit within him that, upon the conclusion of the meal, he found himself in no condition to retort appropriately to a solicitous warning from Cora to keep away from the cat. Indeed, it was half an hour later, and he was sitting—to his own consciousness too heavily—upon the back fence, when belated inspiration arrived. But there is no sound where there is no ear to hear, and no repartee, alas! when the wretch who said the first part has gone, so that Cora remained unscathed as from his alley solitude Hedrick hurled in the teeth of the rising moon these bitter words:

"Oh, no; *our* cat only eats *soft* meat!"

He renewed a morbid silence, and the moon, with its customary deliberation, swung clear of a sweeping branch of the big elm in the front yard and shone full upon him. Nothing warned the fated youth not to sit there; no shadow of imminent catastrophe tinted that brightness: no angel whisper came to him, bidding him begone—and to go in a hurry and as far as possible. No; he sat upon the fence an inoffensive lad, and—except for still feeling his hash somewhat, and a gradually dispersing rancour concerning the cat—at peace. It is for such lulled mortals that the ever-lurking Furies save their most hideous surprises.

Chin on palms, he looked idly at the moon, and the moon inscrutably returned his stare. Plausible, bright, bland, it gave no sign that it was at its awful work. For the bride of night is like a card-dealer whose fingers move so swiftly through the pack the trickery goes unseen.

This moon upon which he was placidly gazing, because he had nothing else to do, betokened nought to Hedrick: to him it was the moon of any

other night, the old moon; certainly no moon of his delight. Withal, it may never be gazed upon so fixedly and so protractedly—no matter how languidly—with entire impunity. That light breeds a bug in the brain. Who can deny how the moon wrought this thing under the hair of unconscious Hedrick, or doubt its responsibility for the thing that happened?

"*Little boy*!"

It was a very soft, small voice, silky and queer; and at first Hedrick had little suspicion that it could be addressing him: the most rigid self-analysis could have revealed to him no possibility of his fitting so ignominious a description.

"Oh, little boy!"

He looked over his shoulder and saw, standing in the alley behind him, a girl of about his own age. She was daintily dressed and had beautiful hair which was all shining in pale gold.

"Little boy!"

She was smiling up at him, and once more she used that wantonly inaccurate vocative:

"Little boy!"

Hedrick grunted unencouragingly. "Who you callin' `little boy'?"

For reply she began to climb the fence. It was high, but the young lady was astonishingly agile, and not even to be deterred by several faint wails from tearing and ripping fabrics—casualties which appeared to be entirely beneath her notice. Arriving at the top rather dishevelled, and with irregular pennons here and there flung to the breeze from her attire, she seated herself cosily beside the dumbfounded Hedrick.

She turned her face to him and smiled—and there was something about her smile which Hedrick did not like. It discomforted him; nothing more. In sunlight he would have had the better chance to comprehend; but, unhappily, this was moonshine.

"Kiss me, little boy!" she said.

“I won’t!” exclaimed the shocked and indignant Hedrick, edging uneasily away from her.

“Let’s play,” she said cheerfully.

“Play what?”

“I like chickens. Did you know I like chickens?”

The rather singular lack of connection in her remarks struck him as a misplaced effort at humour.

“You’re having lots of fun with me, aren’t you?” he growled.

She instantly moved close to him and lifted her face to his.

“Kiss me, darling little boy!” she said.

There was something more than uncommonly queer about this stranger, an unearthliness of which he was confusedly perceptive, but she was not without a curious kind of prettiness, and her pale gold hair was beautiful. The doomed lad saw the moon shining through it.

“Kiss me, darling little boy!” she repeated.

His head whirled; for the moment she seemed divine.

George Washington used profanity at the Battle of Monmouth. Hedrick kissed her.

He instantly pushed her away with strong distaste. “There!” he said angrily. “I hope that’ll satisfy you!” He belonged to his sex.

“Kiss me some more, darling little boy!” she cried, and flung her arms about him.

With a smothered shout of dismay he tried to push her off, and they fell from the fence together, into the yard, at the cost of further and almost fatal injuries to the lady’s apparel.

Hedrick was first upon his feet. “Haven’t you got *any* sense?” he demanded.

She smiled unwaveringly, rose (without assistance) and repeated: “Kiss me some more, darling little boy!”

“No, I won’t! I wouldn’t for a thousand dollars!”

Apparently, she did not consider this discouraging. She began to advance endearingly, while he retreated backward. “Kiss me some——”

“I won’t, I tell you!” Hedrick kept stepping away, moving in a desperate circle. He resorted to a brutal formula: “You make me sick!”

“Kiss me some more, darling lit——”

“I won’t!” he bellowed. “And if you say that again I’ll——”

“Kiss me some more, darling little boy!” She flung herself at him, and with a yell of terror he turned and ran at top-speed.

She pursued, laughing sweetly, and calling loudly as she ran, “Kiss me some more, darling little boy! Kiss me some more, darling little boy!”

The stricken Hedrick knew not whither to direct his flight: he dared not dash for the street with this imminent tattered incubus—she was almost upon him—and he frantically made for the kitchen door, only to swerve with a gasp of despair as his foot touched the step, for she was at his heels, and he was sickeningly assured she would cheerfully follow him through the house, shouting that damning refrain for all ears. A strangling fear took him by the throat—if Cora should come to be a spectator of this unspeakable flight, if Cora should hear that horrid plea for love! Then farewell peace; indeed, farewell all joy in life forever!

Panting sobbingly, he ducked under the amorous vampire’s arm and fled on. He zigzagged desperately to and fro across the broad, empty backyard, a small hand ever and anon managing to clutch his shoulder, the awful petition in his ears:

“Kiss me some more, darling little boy!”

“*Hedrick*!”

Emerging from the kitchen door, Laura stood and gazed in wonder as the two eerie figures sped by her, circled, ducked, dodged, flew madly on. This commonplace purlieu was become the scene of a witch-chase; the moonlight fell upon the ghastly flitting face of the pursued, uplifted in agony, white, wet, with fay eyes; also it illumined the unreal elf following close, a breeze-blown fantasy in rags.

“Kiss me some more, darling little boy!”

Laura uttered a sharp exclamation. “Stand still, Hedrick!” she called. “You must!”

Hedrick made a piteous effort to increase his speed.

“It’s Lolita Martin,” called Laura. “She must have her way or nothing can be done with her. Stand *still*!”

Hedrick had never heard of Lolita Martin, but the added information concerning her was not ineffective: it operated as a spur; and Laura joined the hunt.

“Stand still!” she cried to the wretched quarry. “She’s run away. She must be taken home. Stop, Hedrick! You *must* stop!”

Hedrick had no intention of stopping, but Laura was a runner, and, as he dodged the other, caught and held him fast. The next instant, Lolita, laughing happily, flung her arms round his neck from behind.

“Lemme go!” shuddered Hedrick. “Lemme go!”

“Kiss me again, darl——”

“I—woof!” He became inarticulate.

“She isn’t quite right,” his sister whispered hurriedly in his ear. “She has spells when she’s weak mentally. You must be kind to her. She only wants you to——”

“`*Only*’!” he echoed hoarsely. “I won’t ki——” He was unable to finish the word.

“We must get her home,” said Laura anxiously. “Will you come with me, Lolita, dear?”

Apparently Lolita had no consciousness whatever of Laura’s presence. Instead of replying, she tightened her grasp upon Hedrick and warmly reiterated her request.

“Shut up, you parrot!” hissed the goaded boy.

“Perhaps she’ll go if you let her walk with her arms round your neck,” suggested Laura.

“If I *what*?”

“Let’s try it. We’ve got to get her home; her mother must be frantic about her. Come, let’s see if she’ll go with us that way.”

With convincing earnestness, Hedrick refused to make the experiment until Laura suggested that he remain with Lolita while she summoned assistance; then, as no alternative appeared, his spirit broke utterly, and he consented to the trial, stipulating with a last burst of vehemence that the progress of the unthinkable pageant should be through the alley.

“Come, Lolita,” said Laura coaxingly. “We’re going for a nice walk.” At the adjective, Hedrick’s burdened shoulders were racked with a brief spasm, which recurred as his sister added: “Your darling little boy will let you keep hold of him.”

Lolita seemed content. Laughing gayly, she offered no opposition, but, maintaining her embrace with both arms and walking somewhat sidewise, went willingly enough; and the three slowly crossed the yard, passed through the empty stable and out into the alley. When they reached the cross-street at the alley’s upper end, Hedrick balked flatly.

Laura expostulated, then entreated. Hedrick refused with sincere loathing to be seen upon the street occupying his present position in the group. Laura assured him that there was no one to see; he replied that the moon was bright and the evening early; he would die, and readily, but he would not set foot in the street. Unfortunately, he had selected an unfavourable spot for

argument: they were already within a yard or two of the street; and a strange boy, passing, stopped and observed, and whistled discourteously.

“Ain’t he the spooner!” remarked this unknown with hideous admiration.

“I’ll thank you,” returned Hedrick haughtily, “to go on about your own business.”

“Kiss me some more, darling little boy!” said Lolita.

The strange boy squawked, wailed, screamed with laughter, howled the loving petition in a dozen keys of mockery, while Hedrick writhed and Lolita clung. Enriched by a new and great experience, the torturer trotted on, leaving viperish cachinnations in his wake.

But the martyrdom was at an end. A woman, hurrying past, bareheaded, was greeted by a cry of delight from Lolita, who released Hedrick and ran to her with outstretched arms.

“We were bringing her home, Mrs. Martin,” said Laura, reassuringly. “She’s all right; nothing’s the matter except that her dress got torn. We found her playing in our yard.”

“I thank you a thousand times, Miss Madison,” cried Lolita’s mother, and flutteringly plunged into a description of her anxiety, her search for Lolita, and concluded with renewed expressions of gratitude for the child’s safe return, an outpouring of thankfulness and joy wholly incomprehensible to Hedrick.

“Not at all,” said Laura cheerfully. “Come, Hedrick. We’ll go home by the street, I think.” She touched his shoulder, and he went with her in stunned obedience. He was not able to face the incredible thing that had happened to him: he walked in a trance of horror.

“Poor little girl!” said Laura gently, with what seemed to her brother an indefensibly misplaced compassion. “Usually they have her live in an institution for people afflicted as she is, but they brought her home for a visit last week, I believe. Of course you didn’t understand, but I think you should have been more thoughtful. Really, you shouldn’t have flirted with her.”

Hedrick stopped short.

"`*Flirted*'!" His voice was beginning to show symptoms of changing, this year; it rose to a falsetto wail, flickered and went out.

With the departure of Lolita in safety, what had seemed bizarre and piteous became obscured, and another aspect of the adventure was presented to Laura. The sufferings of the arrogant are not wholly depressing to the spectator; and of arrogance Hedrick had ever been a master. She began to shake; a convulsion took her, and suddenly she sat upon the curbstone without dignity, and laughed as he had never seen her.

A horrid distrust of her rose within him: he began to realize in what plight he stood, what terrors o'erhung.

"Look here," he said miserably, "are you—you aren't—you don't have to go and—and *talk* about this, do you?"

"No, Hedrick," she responded, rising and controlling herself somewhat. "Not so long as you're good."

This was no reassuring answer.

"And politer to Cora," she added.

Seemingly he heard the lash of a slave-whip crack in the air. The future grew dark.

"I know you'll try"—she said; and the unhappy lad felt that her assurance was justified; but she had not concluded the sentence—"darling little boy," she capped it, choking slightly.

"No other little girl ever fell in love with you, did there, Hedrick?" she asked, and, receiving an incoherent but furious reply, she was again overcome, so that she must lean against the fence to recover. "It seems—so—so *curious*," she explained, gasping, "that the first one—the—the only one—should be an—a—an——" She was unable to continue.

Hedrick's distrust became painfully increased: he began to feel that he disliked Laura.

She was still wiping her eyes and subject to recurrent outbursts when they reached their own abode; and as he bitterly flung himself into a chair upon the vacant front porch, he heard her stifling an attack as she mounted the stairs to her own room. He swung the chair about, with its back to the street, and sat facing the wall. He saw nothing. There are profundities in the abyss which reveal no glimpse of the sky.

Presently he heard his father coughing near by; and the sound was hateful, because it seemed secure and unshamed. It was a cough of moral superiority; and just then the son would have liked to believe that his parent's boyhood had been one of degradation as complete as his own; but no one with this comfortable cough could ever have plumbed such depths: his imagination refused the picture he was bitterly certain that Mr. Madison had never kissed an idiot.

Hedrick had a dread that his father might speak to him; he was in no condition for light conversation. But Mr. Madison was unaware of his son's near presence, and continued upon his purposeless way. He was smoking his one nightly cigar and enjoying the moonlight. He drifted out toward the sidewalk and was accosted by a passing acquaintance, a comfortable burgess of sixty, leading a child of six or seven, by the hand.

"Out taking the air, are you, Mr. Madison?" said the pedestrian, pausing.

"Yes; just trying to cool off," returned the other. "How are you, Pryor, anyway? I haven't seen you for a long time."

"Not since last summer," said Pryor. "I only get here once or twice a year, to see my married daughter. I always try to spend August with her if I can. She's still living in that little house, over on the next street, I bought for her through your real-estate company. I suppose you're still in the same business?"

"Yes. Pretty slack, these days."

"I suppose so, I suppose so," responded Mr. Pryor, nodding. "Summer, I suppose it usually is. Well, I don't know when I'll be going out on the road again myself. Business is pretty slack all over the country this year."

“Let’s see—I’ve forgotten,” said Madison ruminatively. “You travel, don’t you?”

“For a New York house,” affirmed Mr. Pryor. He did not, however, mention his “line.” “Yes-sir,” he added, merely as a decoration, and then said briskly: “I see you have a fine family, Mr. Madison; yes-sir, a fine family; I’ve passed here several times lately and I’ve noticed ’em: fine family. Let’s see, you’ve got four, haven’t you?”

“Three,” said Madison. “Two girls and a boy.”

“Well, sir, that’s mighty nice,” observed Mr. Pryor; “*mighty* nice! I only have my one daughter, and of course me living in New York when I’m at home, and her here, why, I don’t get to see much of her. You got both your daughters living with you, haven’t you?”

“Yes, right here at home.”

“Let’s see: neither of ’em’s married, I believe?”

“No; not yet.”

“Seems to me now,” said Pryor, taking off his glasses and wiping them, “seems to me I did hear somebody say one of ’em was going to be married engaged, maybe.”

“No,” said Madison. “Not that I know of.”

“Well, I suppose you’d be the first to know! Yes-sir.” And both men laughed their appreciation of this folly. “They’re mighty good-looking girls, *that’s* certain,” continued Mr. Pryor. “And one of ’em’s as fine a dresser as you’ll meet this side the Rue de la Paix.”

“You mean in Paris?” asked Madison, slightly surprised at this allusion. “You’ve been over there, Pryor?”

“Oh, sometimes,” was the response. “My business takes me over, now and then. I *think* it’s one of your daughters I’ve noticed dresses so well. Isn’t one of ’em a mighty pretty girl about twenty-one or two, with a fine head of hair sort of lightish brown, beautiful figure, and carries a white parasol with a green lining sometimes?”

“Yes, that’s Cora, I guess.”

“Pretty name, too,” said Pryor approvingly. “Yes-sir. I saw her going into a florist’s, downtown, the other day, with a fine-looking young fellow—I can’t think of his name. Let’s see: my daughter was with me, and she’d heard his name—said his family used to be big people in this town and ____”

“Oh,” said Madison, “young Corliss.”

“Corliss!” exclaimed Mr. Pryor, with satisfaction. “That’s it, Corliss. Well, sir,” he chuckled, “from the way he was looking at your Miss Cora it struck me he seemed kind of anxious for her name to be Corliss, too.”

“Well, hardly I expect,” said the other. “They just barely know each other: he’s only been here a few weeks; they haven’t had time to get much acquainted, you see.”

“I suppose not,” agreed Mr. Pryor, with perfect readiness. “I suppose not. I’ll bet *he* tries all he can to get acquainted though; he looked pretty smart to me. Doesn’t he come about as often as the law allows?”

“I shouldn’t be surprised,” said Madison indifferently. “He doesn’t know many people about here any more, and it’s lonesome for him at the hotel. But I guess he comes to see the whole family; I left him in the library a little while ago, talking to my wife.”

“That’s the way! Get around the old folks first!” Mr. Pryor chuckled cordially; then in a mildly inquisitive tone he said: “Seems to be a fine, square young fellow, I expect?”

“Yes, I think so.”

“Pretty name, `Cora’,” said Pryor.

“What’s this little girl’s name?” Mr. Madison indicated the child, who had stood with heroic patience throughout the incomprehensible dialogue.

“Lottie, for her mother. She’s a good little girl.”

“She is *so*! I’ve got a young son she ought to know,” remarked Mr. Madison serenely, with an elderly father’s total unconsciousness of the bridgeless gap between seven and thirteen. “He’d like to play with her. I’ll call him.”

“I expect we better be getting on,” said Pryor. “It’s near Lottie’s bedtime; we just came out for our evening walk.”

“Well, he can come and shake hands with her anyway,” urged Hedrick’s father. “Then they’ll know each other, and they can play some other time.” He turned toward the house and called loudly:

“Hedrick!”

There was no response. Behind the back of his chair Hedrick could not be seen. He was still sitting immovable, his eyes torpidly fixed upon the wall.

“Hed-*rick*!”

Silence.

“Oh, *Hed*-rick!” shouted his father. “Come out here! I want you to meet a little girl! Come and see a nice little girl!”

Mr. Pryor’s grandchild was denied the pleasure. At the ghastly words “*little girl*,” Hedrick dropped from his chair flat upon the floor, crawled to the end of the porch, wriggled through the railing, and immersed himself in deep shadow against the side of the house.

Here he removed his shoes, noiselessly mounted to the sill of one of the library windows, then reconnoitred through a slit in the blinds before entering.

The gas burned low in the “drop-light”—almost too dimly to reveal the two people upon a sofa across the room. It was a faint murmur from one of them that caused Hedrick to pause and peer more sharply. They were Cora and Corliss; he was bending close to her; her face was lifting to his.

“Ah, kiss me! Kiss me!” she whispered.

Hedrick dropped from the sill, climbed through a window of the kitchen, hurried up the back-stairs, and reached his own apartment in time to be violently ill in seclusion.

CHAPTER NINE

Villages are scattered plentifully over the unstable buttresses of Vesuvius, and the inhabitants sleep o' nights: Why not? Quite unaware that he was much of their condition, Mr. Madison bade his incidental gossip and the tiny Lottie good-night, and sought his early bed. He maintained in good faith that Saturday night was "a great night to sleep," because of the later hour for rising; probably having also some factitious conviction that there prevailed a hush preparative of the Sabbath. As a matter of fact, in summer, the other members of his family always looked uncommonly haggard at the Sunday breakfast-table. Accepting without question his preposterous legend of additional matutinal slumber, they postponed retiring to a late hour, and were awakened—simultaneously with thousands of fellow-sufferers—at about half-after five on Sunday morning, by a journalistic uprising. Over the town, in these early hours, rampaged the small vendors of the manifold sheets: local papers and papers from greater cities, hawker succeeding hawker with yell upon yell and brain-piercing shrillings in unbearable cadences. No good burgher ever complained: the people bore it, as in winter they bore the smoke that injured their health, ruined their linen, spoiled their complexions, forbade all hope of beauty and comfort in their city, and destroyed the sweetness of their homes and of their wives. It is an incredibly patient citizenry and exalts its persecutors.

Of the Madison family, Cora probably suffered most; and this was the time when it was no advantage to have the front bedroom. She had not slept until close upon dawn, and the hawkers woke her irreparably; she could but rage upon her hot pillow. By and by, there came a token that another anguish kept company with hers. She had left her door open for a better circulation of the warm and languid air, and from Hedrick's room issued an "*oof*!" of agonized disgust. Cora little suspected that the youth reeked not of newsboys: Hedrick's miseries were introspective.

The cries from the street were interminable; each howler in turn heard faintly in the distance, then in crescendo until he had passed and another succeeded him, and all the while Cora lay tossing and whispering between

clenched teeth. Having ample reason, that morning, to prefer sleep to thinking, sleep was impossible. But she fought for it: she did not easily surrender what she wanted; and she struggled on, with closed eyes, long after she had heard the others go down to breakfast.

About a hundred yards from her windows, to the rear, were the open windows of a church which fronted the next street, and stood dos-a-dos to the dwelling of the Madisons. The Sunday-school hour had been advanced for the hot weather, and, partly on this account, and partly because of the summer absence of many families, the attendants were few. But the young voices were conducted, rather than accompanied, in pious melody by a cornetist who worthily thought to amend, in his single person, what lack of volume this paucity occasioned. He was a slender young man in hot black clothes; he wore the unfacaded collar fatally and unanimously adopted by all adam's-apple men of morals; he was washed, fair, flat-skulled, clean-minded, and industrious; and the only noise of any kind he ever made in the world was on Sunday.

"Prashus joowuls, sweet joowuls, *thee* jams off iz crowowun," sang the little voices feebly. They were almost unheard; but the young man helped them out: figuratively, he put them out. And the cornet was heard: it was heard for blocks and blocks; it was heard over all that part of the town—in the vicinity of the church it was the only thing that could be heard. In his daily walk this cornetist had no enemies: he was kind-hearted; he would not have shot a mad dog; he gladly nursed the sick. He sat upon the platform before the children; he swelled, perspired and blew, and felt that it was a good blowing. If other thoughts vapoured upon the borders of his mind, they were of the dinner he would eat, soon after noon, at the house of one of the frilled, white-muslin teachers. He was serene. His eyes were not blasted; his heart was not instantly withered; his thin, bluish hair did not fall from his head; his limbs were not detached from his torso—yet these misfortunes had been desired for him, with comprehension and sincerity, at the first flat blat of his brassy horn.

It is impossible to imagine the state of mind of this young cornetist, could he have known that he had caused the prettiest girl in town to jump violently out of bed with what petitions upon her lips regarding his present whereabouts and future detention! It happened that during the course of his

Sunday walk on Corliss Street, that very afternoon, he saw her—was hard-smitten by her beauty, and for weeks thereafter laid unsuccessful plans to "meet" her. Her image was imprinted: he talked about her to his boarding-house friends and office acquaintances, his favourite description being, "the sweetest-looking lady I ever laid eyes on."

Cora, descending to the breakfast-table rather white herself, was not unpleasantly shocked by the haggard aspect of Hedrick, who, with Laura and Mrs. Madison, still lingered.

"Good-morning, Cora," he said politely, and while she stared, in suspicious surprise, he passed her a plate of toast with ostentatious courtesy; but before she could take one of the slices, "Wait," he said; "it's very nice toast, but I'm afraid it isn't hot. I'll take it to the kitchen and have it warmed for you." And he took the plate and went out, walking softly.

Cora turned to her mother, appalled. "He'll be sick!" she said.

Mrs. Madison shook her head and smiled sadly.

"He helped to wait on all of us: he must have been doing something awful."

"More likely he wants permission to do something awful."

Laura looked out of the window.

"There, Cora," said Hedrick kindly, when he brought the toast; "you'll find that nice and hot."

She regarded him steadfastly, but with modesty he avoided her eye. "You wouldn't make such a radical change in your nature, Hedrick," she said, with a puzzled frown, "just to get out of going to church, would you?"

"I don't want to get out of going to church," he said. He gulped slightly. "I like church."

And church-time found him marching decorously beside his father, the three ladies forming a rear rank; a small company in the very thin procession of fanning women and mopping men whose destination was the

gray stone church at the foot of Corliss Street. The locusts railed overhead: Hedrick looked neither to the right nor to the left.

They passed a club, of which a lower window was vacated simultaneously with their coming into view; and a small but ornate figure in pale gray crash hurried down the steps and attached itself to the second row of Madisons. “Good-morning,” said Mr. Wade Trumble. “Thought I’d take a look-in at church this morning myself.”

Care of this encumbrance was usually expected of Laura and Mrs. Madison, but to their surprise Cora offered a sprightly rejoinder and presently dropped behind them with Mr. Trumble. Mr. Trumble was also surprised and, as naively, pleased.

“What’s happened?” he asked with cheerful frankness. “You haven’t given me a chance to talk to you for a long while.”

“Haven’t I?” she smiled enigmatically. “I don’t think you’ve tried very hard.”

This was too careless; it did not quite serve, even for Trumble. “What’s up?” he asked, not without shrewdness. “Is Richard Lindley out of town?”

“I don’t know.”

“I see. Perhaps it’s this new chap, Corliss? Has he left?”

“What nonsense! What have they got to do with my being nice to you?” She gave him a dangerous smile, and it wrought upon him visibly.

“Don’t you ever be nice to me unless you mean it,” he said feebly.

Cora looked grave and sweet; she seemed mysteriously moved. “I never do anything I don’t mean,” she said in a low voice which thrilled the little man. This was machine-work, easy and accurate.

“Cora——” he began, breathlessly.

“There!” she exclaimed, shifting on the instant to a lively brusqueness. “That’s enough for you just *now*. We’re on our way to church!”

Trumble felt almost that she had accepted him.

“Have you got your penny for the contribution box?” she smiled. “I suppose you really give a great deal to the church. I hear you’re richer and richer.”

“I do pretty well,” he returned, coolly. “You can know just how well, if you like.”

“Not on Sunday,” she laughed; then went on, admiringly, “I hear you’re very dashing in your speculations.”

“Then you’ve heard wrong, because I don’t speculate,” he returned. “I’m not a gambler—except on certainties. I guess I disappointed a friend of yours the other day because I wouldn’t back him on a thousand-to-one shot.”

“Who was that?” she asked, with an expression entirely veiled.

“Corliss. He came to see me; wanted me to put real money into an oil scheme. Too thin!”

“Why is it `too thin’?” she asked carelessly.

“Too far away, for one thing—somewhere in Italy. Anybody who put up his cash would have to do it on Corliss’s bare word that he’s struck oil.”

“Well?” She turned her face to him, and a faint perturbation was manifest in her tone. “Isn’t Mr. Corliss’s `bare word’ supposed to be perfectly good?”

“Oh, I suppose so, but I don’t know. He isn’t known here: nobody really knows anything about him except that he was born here. Besides, I wouldn’t make an investment on my own father’s bare word, if he happened to be alive.”

“Perhaps not!” Cora spoke impulsively, a sudden anger getting the better of her, but she controlled it immediately. “Of course I don’t mean that,” she laughed, sweetly. “But *I* happen to think Mr. Corliss’s scheme a very handsome one, and I want my friends to make their fortunes, of course. Richard Lindley and papa are going into it.”

“I’ll bet they don’t,” said Trumble promptly. “Lindley told me he’d looked it over and couldn’t see his way to.”

“He did?” Cora stiffened perceptibly and bit her lip.

Trumble began to laugh. “This is funny: you trying to talk business! So Corliss has been telling you about it?”

“Yes, he has; and I understand it perfectly. I think there’s an enormous fortune in it, and you’d better not laugh at me: a woman’s instinct about such things is better than a man’s experience sometimes.”

“You’ll find neither Lindley nor your father are going to think so,” he returned skeptically.

She gave him a deep, sweet look. “But I mustn’t be disappointed in you,” she said, with the suggestion of a tremor in her voice, “whatever *they* do! You’ll take my advice, won’t you—Wade?”

“I’ll take your advice in anything but business.” He shook his head ominously.

“And wouldn’t you take my advice in business,”—she asked very slowly and significantly—“under *any* circumstances?”

“You mean,” he said huskily, “if you were my wife?”

She looked away, and slightly inclined her head. “No,” he answered doggedly, “I wouldn’t. You know mighty well that’s what I want you to be, and I’d give my soul for the tip of your shoe, but business is an entirely different matter, and I——”

“*Wade*!” she said, with wonderful and thrilling sweetness. They had reached the church; Hedrick and his father had entered; Mrs. Madison and Laura were waiting on the steps. Cora and Trumble came to a stop some yards away. “Wade, I—I *want* you to go into this.”

“Can’t do it,” he said stubbornly. “If you ever make up your mind to marry me, I’ll spend all the money you like on *you*, but you’ll have to keep to the woman’s side of the house.”

“You make it pretty hard for me to be nice to you,” she returned, and the tremor now more evident in her voice was perfectly genuine. “You positively refuse to do this—for me?”

“Yes I do. I wouldn’t buy sight-unseen to please God ‘lmighty, Cora Madison.” He looked at her shrewdly, struck by a sudden thought. “Did Corliss ask you to try and get me in?”

“He did not,” she responded, icily. “Your refusal is final?”

“Certainly!” He struck the pavement a smart rap with his walking-stick. “By George, I believe he *did* ask you! That spoils church for me this morning; I’ll not go in. When you quit playing games, let me know. You needn’t try to work me any more, because I won’t stand for it, but if you ever get tired of playing, come and tell me so.” He uttered a bark of rueful laughter. “Ha! I must say that gentleman has an interesting way of combining business with pleasure!”

Under favourable circumstances the blow Cora dealt him might have been physically more violent. “Good-morning,” she laughed, gayly. “I’m not bothering much about Mr. Corliss’s oil in Italy. I had a bet with Laura I could keep you from saying `I beg to differ,’ or talking about the weather for five minutes. She’ll have to pay me!”

Then, still laughing, she lowered her parasol, and with superb impudence, brushed it smartly across his face; turned on her heel, and, red with fury, joined her mother and sister, and went into the church.

The service failed to occupy her attention: she had much in her thoughts to distract her. Nevertheless, she bestowed some wonderment upon the devotion with which her brother observed each ceremonial rite. He joined in prayer with real fervour; he sang earnestly and loudly; a great appeal sounded in his changing voice; and during the sermon he sat with his eyes upon the minister in a stricken fixity. All this was so remarkable that Cora could not choose but ponder upon it, and, observing Hedrick furtively, she caught, if not a clue itself, at least a glimpse of one. She saw Laura’s clear profile becoming subtly agitated; then noticed a shimmer of Laura’s dark eye as it wandered to Hedrick and so swiftly away it seemed not to dare to remain. Cora was quick: she perceived that Laura was repressing a constant desire to laugh and that she feared to look at Hedrick lest it overwhelm her. So Laura knew what had wrought the miracle. Cora made up her mind to explore this secret passage.

When the service was over and the people were placidly buzzing their way up the aisles, Cora felt herself drawn to look across the church, and following the telepathic impulse, turned her head to encounter the gaze of Ray Vilas. He was ascending the opposite aisle, walking beside Richard Lindley. He looked less pale than usual, though his thinness was so extreme it was like emaciation; but his eyes were clear and quiet, and the look he gave her was strangely gentle. Cora frowned and turned away her head with an air of annoyance. They came near each other in the convergence at the doors; but he made no effort to address her, and, moving away through the crowd as quickly as possible, disappeared.

Valentine Corliss was disclosed in the vestibule. He reached her an instant in advance of Mr. Lindley, who had suffered himself to be impeded; and Cora quickly handed the former her parasol, lightly taking his arm. Thus the slow Richard found himself walking beside Laura in a scattered group, its detached portion consisting of his near-betrothed and Corliss; for although the dexterous pair were first to leave the church, they contrived to be passed almost at once, and, assuming the position of trailers, lagged far behind on the homeward way.

Laura and Richard walked in the unmitigated glare of the sun; he had taken her black umbrella and conscientiously held it aloft, but over nobody. They walked in silence: they were quiet people, both of them; and Richard, not “talkative” under any circumstances, never had anything whatever to say to Laura Madison. He had known her for many years, ever since her childhood; seldom indeed formulating or expressing a definite thought about her, though sometimes it was vaguely of his consciousness that she played the piano nicely, and even then her music had taken its place as but a colour of Cora’s background. For to him, as to every one else (including Laura), Laura was in nothing her sister’s competitor. She was a neutral-tinted figure, taken-for-granted, obscured, and so near being nobody at all, that, as Richard Lindley walked beside her this morning, he glanced back at the lagging couple and uttered a long and almost sonorous sigh, which he would have been ashamed for anybody to hear; and then actually proceeded on his way without the slightest realization that anybody had heard it.

She understood. And she did not disturb the trance; she did nothing to make him observe that she was there. She walked on with head, shoulders,

and back scorching in the fierce sun, and allowed him to continue shading the pavement before them with her umbrella. When they reached the house she gently took the umbrella from him and thanked him; and he mechanically raised his hat.

They had walked more than a mile together; he had not spoken a word, and he did not even know it.

CHAPTER TEN

Dinner on Sunday, the most elaborate feast of the week for the Madisons, was always set for one o'clock in the afternoon, and sometimes began before two, but not to-day: the escorts of both daughters remained, and a change of costume by Cora occasioned a long postponement. Justice demands the admission that her reappearance in a glamour of lilac was reward for the delay; nothing more ravishing was ever seen, she was warrantably informed by the quicker of the two guests, in a moment's whispered tete-a-tete across the banisters as she descended. Another wait followed while she prettily arranged upon the table some dozens of asters from a small garden-bed, tilled, planted, and tended by Laura. Meanwhile, Mrs. Madison constantly turned the other cheek to the cook. Laura assisted in the pacification; Hedrick froze the ice-cream to an impenetrable solidity; and the nominal head of the family sat upon the front porch with the two young men, and wiped his wrists and rambled politically till they were summoned to the dining-room.

Cora did the talking for the table. She was in high spirits; no trace remained of a haggard night: there was a bloom upon her—she was radiant. Her gayety may have had some inspiration in her daring, for round her throat she wore a miraculously slender chain of gold and enamel, with a pendant of minute pale sapphires scrolled about a rather large and very white diamond. Laura started when she saw it, and involuntarily threw a glance almost of terror at Richard Lindley. But that melancholy and absent-minded gentleman observed neither the glance nor the jewel. He saw Cora's eyes, when they were vouchsafed to his vision, and when they were not he apparently saw nothing at all.

With the general exodus from the table, Cora asked Laura to come to the piano and play, a request which brought a snort from Hedrick, who was taken off his guard. Catching Laura's eye, he applied a handkerchief with renewed presence of mind, affecting to have sneezed, and stared searchingly over it at Corliss. He perceived that the man remained unmoved, evidently already informed that it was Laura who was the

musician. Cora must be going it pretty fast this time: such was the form of her brother's deduction.

When Laura opened the piano, Richard had taken a seat beside Cora, and Corliss stood leaning in the doorway. The player lost herself in a wandering medley, echoes from "Boheme" and "Pagliacci"; then drifted into improvisation and played her heart into it magnificently—a heart released to happiness. The still air of the room filled with wonderful, golden sound: a song like the song of a mother flying from earth to a child in the stars, a torrential tenderness, unpent and glorying in freedom. The flooding, triumphant chords rose, crashed—stopped with a shattering abruptness. Laura's hands fell to her sides, then were raised to her glowing face and concealed it for a moment. She shivered; a quick, deep sigh heaved her breast; and she came back to herself like a prisoner leaving a window at the warden's voice.

She turned. Cora and Corliss had left the room. Richard was sitting beside a vacant chair, staring helplessly at the open door.

If he had been vaguely conscious of Laura's playing, which is possible, certainly he was unaware that it had ceased.

"The others have gone out to the porch," she said composedly, and rose. "Shan't we join them?"

"What?" he returned, blankly. "I beg your pardon——"

"Let's go out on the porch with the others."

"No, I——" He got to his feet confusedly. "I was thinking—— I believe I'd best be going home."

"Not `best,' I think," she said. "Not even better!"

"I don't see," he said, his perplexity only increased.

"Mr. Corliss would," she retorted quickly. "Come on: we'll go and sit with them." And she compelled his obedience by preceding him with such a confident assumption that he would follow that he did.

The fugitive pair were not upon the porch, however; they were discovered in the shade of a tree behind the house, seated upon a rug, and occupied in a conversation which would not have disturbed a sick-room. The pursuers came upon them, boldly sat beside them; and Laura began to talk with unwonted fluency to Corliss, but within five minutes found herself alone with Richard Lindley upon the rug. Cora had promised to show Mr. Corliss an “old print” in the library—so Cora said.

Lindley gave the remaining lady a desolate and faintly reproachful look. He was kind, but he was a man; and Laura saw that this last abandonment was being attributed in part to her.

She reddened, and, being not an angel, observed with crispness: “Certainly. You’re quite right: it’s my fault!”

“What did you say?” he asked vacantly.

She looked at him rather fixedly; his own gaze had returned to the angle of the house beyond which the other couple had just disappeared. “I said,” she answered, slowly, “I thought it wouldn’t rain this, afternoon.”

His wistful eyes absently swept the serene sky which had been cloudless for several days. “No, I suppose not,” he murmured.

“Richard,” she said with a little sharpness, “will you please listen to me for a moment?”

“Oh—what?” He was like a diver coming up out of deep water. “What did you say?” He laughed apologetically. “Wasn’t I listening? I beg your pardon. What is it, Laura?”

“Why do you let Mr. Corliss take Cora away from you like that?” she asked gravely.

“He doesn’t,” the young man returned with a rueful shake of the head. “Don’t you see? It’s Cora that goes.”

“Why do you let her, then?”

He sighed. “I don’t seem to be able to keep up with Cora, especially when she’s punishing me. I couldn’t do something she asked me to, last

night——”

“Invest with Mr. Corliss?” asked Laura quickly.

“Yes. It seemed to trouble her that I couldn’t. She’s convinced it’s a good thing: she thinks it would make a great fortune for us——”

“`Us’?” repeated Laura gently. “You mean for you and her? When you’re ——”

“When we’re married. Yes,” he said thoughtfully, “that’s the way she stated it. She wanted me to put in all I have——”

“Don’t do it!” said Laura decidedly.

He glanced at her with sharp inquiry. “Do you mean you would distrust Mr. Corliss?”

“I wasn’t thinking of that: I don’t know whether I’d trust him or not—I think I wouldn’t; there’s something veiled about him, and I don’t believe he is an easy man to know. What I meant was that I don’t believe it would really be a good thing for you with Cora.”

“It would please her, of course—thinking I deferred so much to her judgment.”

“Don’t do it!” she said again, impulsively.

“I don’t see how I can,” he returned sorrowfully.

“It’s my work for all the years since I got out of college, and if I lost it I’d have to begin all over again. It would mean postponing everything. Cora isn’t a girl you can ask to share a little salary, and if it were a question of years, perhaps— perhaps Cora might not feel she could wait for me, you see.”

He made this explanation with plaintive and boyish sincerity, hesitatingly, and as if pleading a cause. And Laura, after a long look at him, turned away, and in her eyes were actual tears of compassion for the incredible simpleton.

“I see,” she said. “Perhaps she might not.”

“Of course,” he went on, “she’s fond of having nice things, and she thinks this is a great chance for us to be millionaires; and then, too, I think she may feel that it would please Mr. Corliss and help to save him from disappointment. She seems to have taken a great fancy to him.”

Laura glanced at him, but did not speak.

“He *is* attractive,” continued Richard feebly. “I think he has a great deal of what people call `magnetism’: he’s the kind of man who somehow makes you want to do what he wants you to. He seems a manly, straightforward sort, too—so far as one can tell—and when he came to me with his scheme I was strongly inclined to go into it. But it is too big a gamble, and I can’t, though I was sorry to disappoint him myself. He was perfectly cheerful about it and so pleasant it made me feel small. I don’t wonder at all that Cora likes him so much. Besides, he seems to understand her.”

Laura looked very grave. “I think he does,” she said slowly.

“And then he’s `different,’” said Richard. “He’s more a `man of the world’ than most of us here: she never saw anything just like him before, and she’s seen *us* all her life. She likes change, of course. That’s natural,” he said gently. “Poor Vilas says she wants a man to be different every day, and if he isn’t, then she wants a different man every day.”

“You’ve rather taken Ray Vilas under your wing, haven’t you?” asked Laura.

“Oh, no,” he answered deprecatingly. “I only try to keep him with me so he’ll stay away from downtown as much as possible.”

“Does he talk much of Cora?”

“All the time. There’s no stopping him. I suppose he can’t help it, because he thinks of nothing else.”

“Isn’t that rather—rather queer for you?”

“`Queer’?” he repeated.

“No, I suppose not!” She laughed impatiently. “And probably you don’t think it’s `queer’ of you to sit here helplessly, and let another man take your

place——”

“But I don’t `let’ him, Laura,” he protested.

“No, he just does it!”

“Well,” he smiled, “you must admit my efforts to supplant him haven’t ——”

“It won’t take any effort now,” she said, rising quickly. Valentine Corliss came into their view upon the sidewalk in front, taking his departure. Seeing that they observed him, he lifted his hat to Laura and nodded a cordial good-day to Lindley. Then he went on.

Just before he reached the corner of the lot, he encountered upon the pavement a citizen of elderly and plain appearance, strolling with a grandchild. The two men met and passed, each upon his opposite way, without pausing and without salutation, and neither Richard nor Laura, whose eyes were upon the meeting, perceived that they had taken cognizance of each other. But one had asked a question and the other had answered.

Mr. Pryor spoke in a low monotone, with a rapidity as singular as the restrained but perceptible emphasis he put upon one word of his question.

“I got you in the park,” he said; and it is to be deduced that “got” was argot. “You’re not *doing* anything here, are you?”

“No!” answered Corliss with condensed venom, his back already to the other. He fanned himself with his hat as he went on. Mr. Pryor strolled up the street with imperturbable benevolence.

“Your coast is cleared,” said Laura, “since you wouldn’t clear it yourself.”

“Wish me luck,” said Richard as he left her.

She nodded brightly.

Before he disappeared, he looked back to her again (which profoundly surprised her) and smiled rather disconsolately, shaking his head as in

prophecy of no very encouraging reception indoors. The manner of this glance recalled to Laura what his mother had once said of him. “Richard is one of those sweet, helpless men that some women adore and others despise. They fall in love with the ones that despise them.”

An ostentatious cough made her face about, being obviously designed to that effect; and she beheld her brother in the act of walking slowly across the yard with his back to her. He halted upon the border of her small garden of asters, regarded it anxiously, then spread his handkerchief upon the ground, knelt upon it, and with thoughtful care uprooted a few weeds which were beginning to sprout, and also such vagrant blades of grass as encroached upon the floral territory. He had the air of a virtuous man performing a good action which would never become known. Plainly, he thought himself in solitude and all unobserved.

It was a touching picture, pious and humble. Done into coloured glass, the kneeling boy and the asters—submerged in ardent sunshine—would have appropriately enriched a cathedral: Boyhood of Saint Florus the Gardener.

Laura heartlessly turned her back, and, affecting an interest in her sleeve, very soon experienced the sensation of being stared at with some poignancy from behind. Unchanged in attitude, she unravelled an imaginary thread, whereupon the cough reached her again, shrill and loud, its insistence not lacking in pathos.

She approached him, driftingly. No sign that he was aware came from the busied boy, though he coughed again, hollowly now—a proof that he was an artist. “All right, Hedrick,” she said kindly. “I heard you the first time.”

He looked up with utter incomprehension. “I’m afraid I’ve caught cold,” he said, simply. “I got a good many weeds out before breakfast, and the ground was damp.”

Hedrick was of the New School: everything direct, real, no striving for effect, no pressure on the stroke. He did his work: you could take it or leave it.

“You mustn’t strain so, dear,” returned his sister, shaking her head. “It won’t last if you do. You see this is only the first day.”

Struck to the heart by so brutal a misconception, he put all his wrongs into one look, rose in manly dignity, picked up his handkerchief, and left her.

Her eyes followed him, not without remorse: it was an exit which would have moved the bass-violist of a theatre orchestra. Sighing, she went to her own room by way of the kitchen and the back-stairs, and, having locked her door, brought the padlocked book from its hiding-place.

“I think I should not have played as I did, an hour ago,” she wrote. “It stirs me too greatly and I am afraid it makes me inclined to self-pity afterward, and I must never let myself feel *that*! If I once begin to feel sorry for myself. . . . But I *will* not! No. You are here in the world. You exist. You *are*! That is the great thing to know and it must be enough for me. It is. I played to You. I played *just love* to you—all the yearning tenderness—all the supreme kindness I want to give you. Isn’t love really just glorified kindness? No, there is something more. . . . I feel it, though I do not know how to say it. But it was in my playing—I played it and played it. Suddenly I felt that in my playing I had shouted it from the housetops, that I had told the secret to all the world and *everybody* knew. I stopped, and for a moment it seemed to me that I was dying of shame. But no one understood. No one had even listened. . . . Sometimes it seems to me that I am like Cora, that I am very deeply her sister in some things. My heart goes all to You—my revelation of it, my release of it, my outlet of it is all here in these pages (except when I play as I did to-day and as I shall not play again) and perhaps the writing keeps me quiet. Cora scatters her own releasings: she is looking for the You she may never find; and perhaps the penalty for scattering is never finding. Sometimes I think the seeking has reacted and that now she seeks only what will make her feel. I hope she has not found it: I am afraid of this new man—not only for your sake, dear. I felt repelled by his glance at me the first time I saw him. I did not like it—I cannot say just why, unless that it seemed too intimate. I am afraid of him for her, which is a queer sort of feeling because she has alw——”

Laura’s writing stopped there, for that day, interrupted by a hurried rapping upon the door and her mother’s voice calling her with stress and urgency.

The opening of the door revealed Mrs. Madison in a state of anxious perturbation, and admitted the sound of loud weeping and agitated voices from below.

“Please go down,” implored the mother. “You can do more with her than I can. She and your father have been having a terrible scene since Richard went home.”

Laura hurried down to the library.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

“Oh, *come* in, Laura!” cried her sister, as Laura appeared in the doorway. “Don’t *stand* there! Come in if you want to take part in a grand old family row!” With a furious and tear-stained face, she was confronting her father who stood before her in a resolute attitude and a profuse perspiration. “Shut the door!” shouted Cora violently, adding, as Laura obeyed, “Do you want that little Pest in here? Probably he’s eavesdropping anyway. But what difference does it make? I don’t care. Let him hear! Let anybody hear that wants to! They can hear how I’m tortured if they like. I didn’t close my eyes last night, and now I’m being tortured. Papa!” She stamped her foot. “Are you going to take back that insult to me?”

“`Insult’?” repeated her father, in angry astonishment.

“Pshaw,” said Laura, laughing soothingly and coming to her. “You know that’s nonsense, Cora. Kind old papa couldn’t do that if he tried. Dear, you know he never insulted anybody in his——”

“Don’t touch me!” screamed Cora, repulsing her. “Listen, if you’ve got to, but let me alone. He did too! He did! He *knows* what he said!”

“I do not!”

“He does! He does!” cried Cora. “He said that I was—I was too much `interested’ in Mr. Corliss.”

“Is that an `insult’?” the father demanded sharply.

“It was the way he said it,” Cora protested, sobbing. “He meant something he didn’t *say*. He did! He did! He *meant* to insult me!”

“I did nothing of the kind,” shouted the old man.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. I said I couldn’t understand your getting so excited about the fellow’s affairs and that you seemed to take a mighty sudden interest in him.”

“Well, what if I *do*?” she screamed. “Haven’t I a right to be interested in what I choose? I’ve got to be interested in *something*, haven’t I? *You* don’t make life very interesting, do you? Do you think it’s interesting to spend the summer in this horrible old house with the paper falling off the walls and our rotten old furniture that I work my hands off trying to make look decent and can’t, and every other girl I know at the seashore with motor-cars and motor-boats, or getting a trip abroad and buying her clothes in Paris? What do *you* offer to interest me?”

The unfortunate man hung his head. “I don’t see what all that has to do with it——”

She seemed to leap at him. “You *don’t*? You *don’t*?”

“No, I don’t. And I don’t see why you’re so crazy to please young Corliss about this business unless you’re infatuated with him. I had an idea—and I was pleased with it, too, because Richard’s a steady fellow—that you were just about engaged to Richard Lindley, and——”

“Engaged!” she cried, repeating the word with bitter contempt. “Engaged! You don’t suppose I’ll marry him unless I want to, do you? I will if it suits me. I won’t if it suits me not to; understand that! I don’t consider myself engaged to anybody, and you needn’t either. What on earth has that got to do with your keeping Richard Lindley from doing what Mr. Corliss wants him to?”

“I’m not keeping him from anything. He didn’t say——”

“He did!” stormed Cora. “He said he would if you went into it. He told me this afternoon, an hour ago.”

“Now wait,” said Madison. “I talked this over with Richard two days ago ——”

Cora stamped her foot again in frantic exasperation. “I’m talking about this afternoon!”

“Two days ago,” he repeated doggedly; “and we came to the same conclusion: it won’t do. He said he couldn’t go into it unless he went over there to Italy—and saw for himself just what he was putting his money into,

and Corliss had told him that it couldn’t be done; that there wasn’t time, and showed him a cablegram from his Italian partner saying the secret had leaked out and that they’d have to form the company in Naples and sell the stock over there if it couldn’t be done here within the next week. Corliss said he had to ask for an immediate answer, and so Richard told him no, yesterday.”

“Oh, my God!” groaned Cora. “What has that got to do with *your* going into it? You’re not going to risk any money! I don’t ask you to *spend* anything, do I? You haven’t got it if I did. All Mr. Corliss wants is your name. Can’t you give even *that*? What importance is it?”

“Well, if it isn’t important, what difference does it make whether I give it or not?”

She flung up her arms as in despairing appeal for patience. “It *is* important to him! Richard will do it if you will be secretary of the company: he promised me. Mr. Corliss told me your name was worth everything here: that men said downtown you could have been rich long ago if you hadn’t been so square. Richard trusts you; he says you’re the most trusted man in town——”

“That’s why I can’t do it,” he interrupted.

“No!” Her vehemence increased suddenly to its utmost. “No! Don’t you say that, because it’s a lie. That isn’t the reason you won’t do it. You won’t do it because you think it would please *me*! You’re afraid it might make me *happy*! Happy—happy—*happy*!” She beat her breast and cast herself headlong upon the sofa, sobbing wildly. “Don’t come near me!” she screamed at Laura, and sprang to her feet again, dishevelled and frantic. “Oh, Christ in heaven! is there such a thing as happiness in this beast of a world? I want to leave it. I want to go away: I want *so* to die: Why can’t I? Why can’t I! Why can’t I! Oh, God, why *can’t* I die? Why can’t——”

Her passion culminated in a shriek: she gasped, was convulsed from head to foot for a dreadful moment, tore at the bosom of her dress with rigid bent fingers, swayed; then collapsed all at once. Laura caught her, and got her upon the sofa. In the hall, Mrs. Madison could be heard running and

screaming to Hedrick to go for the doctor. Next instant, she burst into the room with brandy and camphor.

“I could only find these; the ammonia bottle’s empty,” she panted; and the miserable father started hatless, for the drug-store, a faint, choked wail from the stricken girl sounding in his ears: “It’s—it’s my heart, mamma.”

It was four blocks to the nearest pharmacy; he made what haste he could in the great heat, but to himself he seemed double his usual weight; and the more he tried to hurry, the less speed appeared obtainable from his heavy legs. When he reached the place at last, he found it crowded with noisy customers about the “soda-fount”; and the clerks were stonily slow: they seemed to know that they were “already in eternity.” He got very short of breath on the way home; he ceased to perspire and became unnaturally dry; the air was aflame and the sun shot fire upon his bare head. His feet inclined to strange disobediences: he walked the last block waveringly. A solemn Hedrick met him at the door.

“They’ve got her to bed,” announced the boy. “The doctor’s up there.”

“Take this ammonia up,” said Madison huskily, and sat down upon a lower step of the stairway with a jolt, closing his eyes.

“You sick, too?” asked Hedrick.

“No. Run along with that ammonia.”

It seemed to Madison a long time that he sat there alone, and he felt very dizzy. Once he tried to rise, but had to give it up and remain sitting with his eyes shut. At last he heard Cora’s door open and close; and his wife and the doctor came slowly down the stairs, Mrs. Madison talking in the anxious yet relieved voice of one who leaves a sick-room wherein the physician pronounces progress encouraging.

“And you’re *sure* her heart trouble isn’t organic?” she asked.

“Her heart is all right,” her companion assured her. “There’s nothing serious; the trouble is nervous. I think you’ll find she’ll be better after a good sleep. Just keep her quiet. Hadn’t she been in a state of considerable excitement?”

“Ye-es—she——”

“Ah! A little upset on account of opposition to a plan she’d formed, perhaps?”

“Well—partly,” assented the mother.

“I see,” he returned, adding with some dryness: “I thought it just possible.”

Madison got to his feet, and stepped down from the stairs for them to pass him. He leaned heavily against the wall.

“You think she’s going to be all right, Sloane?” he asked with an effort.

“No cause to worry,” returned the physician. “You can let her stay in bed to-day if she wants to but——” He broke off, looking keenly at Madison’s face, which was the colour of poppies. “Hello! what’s up with *you*?”

“I’m all—right.”

“Oh, you are?” retorted Sloane with sarcasm. “Sit down,” he commanded. “Sit right where you are—on the stairs, here,” and, having enforced the order, took a stethoscope from his pocket. “Get him a glass of water,” he said to Hedrick, who was at his elbow.

“Doctor!” exclaimed Mrs. Madison. “*He* isn’t going to be sick, is he? You don’t think he’s sick *now*?”

“I shouldn’t call him very well,” answered the physician rather grimly, placing his stethoscope upon Madison’s breast. “Get his room ready for him.” She gave him a piteous look, struck with fear; then obeyed a gesture and ran flutteringly up the stairs.

“I’m all right now,” panted Madison, drinking the water Hedrick brought him.

“You’re not so darned all right,” said Sloane coolly, as he pocketed his stethoscope. “Come, let me help you up. We’re going to get you to bed.”

There was an effort at protest, but the physician had his way, and the two ascended the stairs slowly, Sloane’s arm round his new patient. At Cora’s

door, the latter paused.

“What’s the matter?”

“I want,” said Madison thickly—“I want—to speak to Cora.”

“We’ll pass that up just now,” returned the other brusquely, and led him on. Madison was almost helpless: he murmured in a husky, uncertain voice, and suffered himself to be put to bed. There, the doctor “worked” with him; cold “applications” were ordered; Laura was summoned from the other sick-bed; Hedrick sent flying with prescriptions, then to telephone for a nurse. The two women attempted questions at intervals, but Sloane replied with orders, and kept them busy.

“Do you—think I’m a—-a pretty sick man, Sloane?” asked Madison after a long silence, speaking with difficulty.

“Oh, you’re sick, all right,” the doctor conceded.

“I—I want to speak to Jennie.”

His wife rushed to the bed, and knelt beside it.

“Don’t you go to confessing your sins,” said Doctor Sloane crossly. “You’re coming out of the woods all right, and you’ll be sorry if you tell her too, much. I’ll begin a little flirtation with you, Miss Laura, if you please.” And he motioned to her to follow him into the hall.

“Your father *is* pretty sick,” he told her, “and he may be sicker before we get him into shape again. But you needn’t be worried right now; I think he’s not in immediate danger.” He turned at the sound of Mrs. Madison’s step, behind him, and repeated to her what he had just said to Laura. “I hope your husband didn’t give himself away enough to be punished when we get him on his feet again,” he concluded cheerfully.

She shook her head, tried to smile through tears, and, crossing the hall, entered Cora’s room. She came back after a moment, and, rejoining the other two at her husband’s bedside, found the sick man in a stertorous sleep. Presently the nurse arrived, and upon the physician’s pointed intimation that there were “too many people around,” Laura went to Cora’s room. She halted on the threshold in surprise. Cora was dressing.

“Mamma says the doctor says he’s all right,” said Cora lightly, “and I’m feeling so much better myself I thought I’d put on something loose and go downstairs. I think there’s more air down there.”

“Papa isn’t all right, dear,” said Laura, staring perplexedly at Cora’s idea of “something loose,” an equipment inclusive of something particularly close. “The doctor says he is very sick.”

“I don’t believe it,” returned Cora promptly. “Old Sloane never did know anything. Besides, mamma told me he said papa isn’t in any danger.”

“No `immediate’ danger,” corrected Laura. “And besides, Doctor Sloane said you were to stay in bed until to-morrow.”

“I can’t help that.” Cora went on with her lacing impatiently. “I’m not going to lie and stifle in this heat when I feel perfectly well again—not for an old idiot like Sloane! He didn’t even have sense enough to give me any medicine.” She laughed. “Lucky thing he didn’t: I’d have thrown it out of the window. Kick that slipper to me, will you, dear?”

Laura knelt and put the slipper on her sister’s foot. “Cora, dear,” she said, “you’re just going to put on a negligee and go down and sit in the library, aren’t you?”

“Laura!” The tone was more than impatient. “I wish I could be let alone for five whole minutes some time in my life! Don’t you think I’ve stood enough for one day? I can’t bear to be questioned, questioned, questioned! What do you do it for? Don’t you see I can’t stand anything more? If you can’t let me alone I do wish you’d keep out of my room.”

Laura rose and went out; but as she left the door, Cora called after her with a rueful laugh: “Laura, I know I’m a little devil!”

Half an hour later, Laura, suffering because she had made no reply to this peace-offering, and wishing to atone, sought Cora downstairs and found no one. She decided that Cora must still be in her own room; she would go to her there. But as she passed the open front door, she saw Cora upon the sidewalk in front of the house. She wore a new and elaborate motoring costume, charmingly becoming, and was in the act of mounting to a seat beside Valentine Corliss in a long, powerful-looking, white “roadster”

automobile. The engine burst into staccato thunder, sobered down; the wheels began to move both Cora and Corliss were laughing and there was an air of triumph about them—Cora's veil streamed and fluttered: and in a flash they were gone.

Laura stared at the suddenly vacated space where they had been. At a thought she started. Then she rushed upstairs to her mother, who was sitting in the hall near her husband's door.

"Mamma," whispered Laura, flinging herself upon her knees beside her, "when papa wanted to speak to you, was it a message to Cora?"

"Yes, dear. He told me to tell her he was sorry he'd made her sick, and that if he got well he'd try to do what she asked him to."

Laura nodded cheerfully. "And he *will* get well, darling mother," she said, as she rose. "I'll come back in a minute and sit with you."

Her return was not so quick as she promised, for she lay a long time weeping upon her pillow, whispering over and over:

"Oh, poor, poor papa! Oh, poor, poor Richard!"

CHAPTER TWELVE

Within a week Mr. Madison's illness was a settled institution in the household; the presence of the nurse lost novelty, even to Hedrick, and became a part of life; the day was measured by the three regular visits of the doctor. To the younger members of the family it seemed already that their father had always been sick, and that he always would be; indeed, to Cora and Hedrick he had become only a weak and querulous voice beyond a closed door. Doctor Sloane was serious but reassuring, his daily announcement being that his patient was in "no immediate danger."

Mrs. Madison did not share her children's sanguine adaptability; and, of the three, Cora was the greatest solace to the mother's troubled heart, though Mrs. Madison never recognized this without a sense of injustice to Laura, for Laura now was housewife and housekeeper—that is, she did all the work except the cooking, and on "wash-day" she did that. But Cora's help was to the very spirit itself, for she was sprightly in these hours of trial: with indomitable gayety she cheered her mother, inspiring in her a firmer confidence, and, most stimulating of all, Cora steadfastly refused to consider her father's condition as serious, or its outcome as doubtful.

Old Sloane exaggerated, she said; and she made fun of his gravity, his clothes and his walk, which she mimicked till she drew a reluctant and protesting laugh from even her mother. Mrs. Madison was sure she "couldn't get through" this experience save for Cora, who was indeed the light of the threatened house.

Strange perversities of this world: Cora's gayety was almost unbearable to her brother. Not because he thought it either unfeeling or out of place under the circumstances (an aspect he failed to consider), but because years of warfare had so frequently made him connect cheerfulness on her part with some unworthily won triumph over himself that habit prevailed, and he could not be a witness of her high spirits without a strong sense of injury. Additionally, he was subject to a deeply implanted suspicion of any appearance of unusual happiness in her as having source, if not in his own

defeat, then in something vaguely “soft” and wholly distasteful. She grated upon him; he chafed, and his sufferings reached the surface. Finally, in a reckless moment, one evening at dinner, he broke out with a shout and hurled a newly devised couplet concerning luv-a-ly slush at his, sister’s head. The nurse was present: Cora left the table; and Hedrick later received a serious warning from Laura. She suggested that it might become expedient to place him in Cora’s power.

“Cora knows perfectly well that something peculiar happened to you,” she advised him. “And she knows that I know what it was; and she says it isn’t very sisterly of me not to tell her. Now, Hedrick, there was no secret about it; you didn’t *confide* your—your trouble to me, and it would be perfectly honourable of me to tell it. I wont{sic} unless you make me, but if you can’t be polite and keep peace with Cora—at least while papa is sick I think it may be necessary. I believe,” she finished with imperfect gravity, “that it—it would keep things quieter.”

The thoughts of a boy may be long, long thoughts, but he cannot persistently remember to fear a threatened catastrophe. Youth is too quickly intimate with peril. Hedrick had become familiar with his own, had grown so accustomed to it he was in danger of forgetting it altogether; therefore it was out of perspective. The episode of Lolita had begun to appear as a thing of the distant and clouded past: time is so long at thirteen. Added to this, his late immaculate deportment had been, as Laura suggested, a severe strain; the machinery of his nature was out of adjustment and demanded a violent reaction before it could get to running again at average speed. Also, it is evident that his destruction had been planned on high, for he was mad enough to answer flippantly:

“Tell her! Go on and tell her—*I* give you leaf! *that* wasn’t anything anyway—just helped you get a little idiot girl home. What is there to that? I never saw her before; never saw her again; didn’t have half as much to do with her as you did yourself. She was a lot more *your* friend than mine; I didn’t even know her. I guess you’ll have to get something better on me than that, before you try to boss *this* ranch, Laura Madison!”

That night, in bed, he wondered if he had not been perhaps a trifle rash; but the day was bright when he awoke, and no apprehension shadowed his

morning face as he appeared at the breakfast table. On the contrary, a great weight had lifted from him; clearly his defiance had been the proper thing; he had shown Laura that her power over him was but imaginary. Hypnotized by his own words to her, he believed them; and his previous terrors became gossamer; nay, they were now merely laughable. His own remorse and shame were wholly blotted from memory, and he could not understand why in the world he had been so afraid, nor why he had felt it so necessary to placate Laura. She looked very meek this morning. *That* showed! The strong hand was the right policy in dealing with women. He was tempted to insane daring: the rash, unfortunate child waltzed on the lip of the crater.

“Told Cora yet?” he asked, with scornful laughter.

“Told me what?” Cora looked quickly up from her plate.

“Oh, nothing about this Corliss,” he returned scathingly. “Don’t get excited.”

“Hedrick!” remonstrated his mother, out of habit.

“She never thinks of anything else these days,” he retorted. “Rides with him every evening in his pe-rin-sley hired machine, doesn’t she?”

“Really, you should be more careful about the way you handle a spoon, Hedrick,” said Cora languidly, and with at least a foundation of fact. “It is not the proper implement for decorating the cheeks. We all need nourishment, but it is *so* difficult when one sees a deposit of breakfast-food in the ear of one’s vis-a-vis.”

Hedrick too impulsively felt of his ears and was but the worse stung to find them immaculate and the latter half of the indictment unjustified.

“Spoon!” he cried. “I wouldn’t talk about spoons if I were you, Cora-lee! After what I saw in the library the other night, believe *me*, you’re the one of this family that better be careful how you `handle a spoon’!”

Cora had a moment of panic. She let the cup she was lifting drop noisily upon its saucer, and gazed whitely at the boy, her mouth opening wide.

“Oh, no!” he went on, with a dreadful laugh. “I didn’t hear you asking this Corliss to kiss you! Oh, no!”

At this, though her mother and Laura both started, a faint, odd relief showed itself in Cora’s expression. She recovered herself.

“You little liar!” she flashed, and, with a single quick look at her mother, as of one too proud to appeal, left the room.

“Hedrick, Hedrick, Hedrick!” wailed Mrs. Madison. “And she told me you drove her from the table last night too, right before Miss Peirce!” Miss Peirce was the nurse, fortunately at this moment in the sick-room.

“I *did* hear her ask him that,” he insisted, sullenly. “Don’t you believe it?”

“Certainly not!”

Burning with outrage, he also left his meal unfinished and departed in high dignity. He passed through the kitchen, however, on his way out of the house; but, finding an unusual politeness to the cook nothing except its own reward, went on his way with a bitter perception of the emptiness of the world and other places.

“Your father managed to talk more last night,” said Mrs. Madison pathetically to Laura. “He made me understand that he was fretting about how little we’d been able to give our children; so few advantages; it’s always troubled him terribly. But sometimes I wonder if we’ve done right: we’ve neither of us ever exercised any discipline. We just couldn’t bear to. You see, not having any money, or the things money could buy, to give, I think we’ve instinctively tried to make up for it by indulgence in other ways, and perhaps it’s been a bad thing. Not,” she added hastily, “not that you aren’t all three the best children any mother and father ever had! *He* said so. He said the only trouble was that our children were too good for us.” She shook her head remorsefully throughout Laura’s natural reply to this; was silent a while; then, as she rose, she said timidly, not looking at her daughter: “Of course Hedrick didn’t mean to tell an outright lie. They were just talking, and perhaps he—perhaps he heard something that made him think what he *did*. People are so often mistaken in what they hear, even when they’re talking right to each other, and——”

“Isn’t it more likely,” said Laura, gravely, “that Cora was telling some story or incident, and that Hedrick overheard that part of it, and thought she was speaking directly to Mr. Corliss?”

“Of course!” cried the mother with instant and buoyant relief; and when the three ladies convened, a little later, Cora (unquestioned) not only confirmed this explanation, but repeated in detail the story she had related to Mr. Corliss. Laura had been quick.

Hedrick passed a variegated morning among comrades. He obtained prestige as having a father like-to-die, but another boy turned up who had learned to chew tobacco. Then Hedrick was pronounced inferior to others in turning “cartwheels,” but succeeded in a wrestling match for an apple, which he needed. Later, he was chased empty-handed from the rear of an ice-wagon, but greatly admired for his retorts to the vociferous chaser: the other boys rightly considered that what he said to the ice-man was much more horrible than what the ice-man said to him. The ice-man had a fair vocabulary, but it lacked pliancy; seemed stiff and fastidious compared with the flexible Saxon in which Hedrick sketched a family tree lacking, perhaps, some plausibility as having produced even an ice-man, but curiously interesting zoologically.

He came home at noon with the flush of this victory new upon his brow. He felt equal to anything, and upon Cora’s appearing at lunch with a blithe, bright air and a new arrangement of her hair, he opened a fresh campaign with ill-omened bravado.

“Ear-muffs in style for September, are they?” he inquired in allusion to a symmetrical and becoming undulation upon each side of her head. “Too bad Ray Vilas can’t come any more; he’d like those, I know he would.”

Cora, who was talking jauntily to her mother, went on without heeding. She affected her enunciation at times with a slight lisp; spoke preciously and over-exquisitely, purposely mincing the letter R, at the same time assuming a manner of artificial distinction and conscious elegance which never failed to produce in her brother the last stage of exasperation. She did this now. Charming woman, that dear Mrs. Villard, she prattled. “I met her downtown this morning. Dear mamma, you should but have seen her delight when she saw *me*. She was but just returned from Bar Harbor——”

“`Baw-hawbaw’!” Poor Hedrick was successfully infuriated immediately. “What in thunder is `Baw-hawbaw’? Mrs. Villawd! Baw-hawbaw! Oh, maw!”

“She had no idea she should find *me* in town, she said,” Cora ran on, happily. “She came back early on account of the children having to be sent to school. She has such adorable children—beautiful, dimpled babes——”

“SLUSH! SLUSH! LUV-A-LY SLUSH!”

“—And her dear son, Egerton Villard, he’s grown to be such a comely lad, and he has the most charming courtly manners: he helped his mother out of her carriage with all the air of a man of the world, and bowed to me as to a duchess. I think he might be a great influence for good if the dear Villards would but sometimes let him associate a little with our unfortunate Hedrick. Egerton Villard is really *distingue*; he has a beautiful head; and if he could be induced but to let Hedrick follow him about but a little——”

“I’ll beat his beautiful head off for him if he but butts in on me but a little!” Hedrick promised earnestly. “Idiot!”

Cora turned toward him innocently. “What did you say, Hedrick?”

“I said `Idiot’!”

“You mean Egerton Villard?”

“Both of you!”

“You think I’m an idiot, Hedrick?” Her tone was calm, merely inquisitive.

“Yes, I do!”

“Oh, no,” she said pleasantly. “Don’t you think if I were *really* an idiot I’d be even fonder of you than I am?”

It took his breath. In a panic he sat waiting he knew not what; but Cora blandly resumed her interrupted remarks to her mother, beginning a description of Mrs. Villard’s dress; Laura was talking unconcernedly to

Miss Peirce; no one appeared to be aware that anything unusual had been said. His breath came back, and, summoning his presence of mind, he found himself able to consider his position with some degree of assurance. Perhaps, after all, Cora's retort had been merely a coincidence. He went over and over it in his mind, making a pretence, meanwhile, to be busy with his plate. "If I were *really* an idiot." . . . It was the "*really*" that troubled him. But for that one word, he could have decided that her remark was a coincidence; but "*really*" was ominous; had a sinister ring. "If I were *really* an idiot!" Suddenly the pleasant clouds that had obscured his memory of the fatal evening were swept away as by a monstrous Hand: it all came back to him with sickening clearness. So is it always with the sinner with his sin and its threatened discovery. Again, in his miserable mind, he sat beside Lolita on the fence, with the moon shining through her hair; and he knew—for he had often read it—that a man could be punished his whole life through for a single moment's weakness. A man might become rich, great, honoured, and have a large family, but his one soft sin would follow him, hunt him out and pull him down at last. "*Really* an idiot!" Did that relentless Comanche, Cora, know this Thing? He shuddered. Then he fell back upon his faith in Providence. It *could* not be that she knew! Ah, no! Heaven would not let the world be so bad as that! And yet it did sometimes become negligent—he remembered the case of a baby-girl cousin who fell into the bath-tub and was drowned. Providence had allowed that: What assurance had he that it would not go a step farther?

"Why, Hedrick," said Cora, turning toward him cheerfully, "you're not really eating anything; you're only pretending to." His heart sank with apprehension. Was it coming? "You really must eat," she went on. "School begins so soon, you must be strong, you know. How we shall miss you here at home during your hours of work!"

With that, the burden fell from his shoulders, his increasing terrors took wing. If Laura had told his ghastly secret to Cora, the latter would not have had recourse to such weak satire as this. Cora was not the kind of person to try a popgun on an enemy when she had a thirteen-inch gun at her disposal; so he reasoned; and in the gush of his relief and happiness, responded:

"You're a little too cocky lately, Cora-lee: I wish you were *my* daughter—just about five minutes!"

Cora looked upon him fondly. “What would you do to me,” she inquired with a terrible sweetness—“darling little boy?”

Hedrick’s head swam. The blow was square in the face; it jarred every bone; the world seemed to topple. His mother, rising from her chair, choked slightly, and hurried to join the nurse, who was already on her way upstairs. Cora sent an affectionate laugh across the table to her stunned antagonist.

“You wouldn’t beat me, would you, dear?” she murmured. “I’m almost sure you wouldn’t; not if I asked you to kiss me some *more*.”

All doubt was gone, the last hope fled! The worst had arrived. A vision of the awful future flamed across his staggered mind. The doors to the arena were flung open: the wild beasts howled for hunger of him; the spectators waited.

Cora began lightly to sing:

. . . “Dear,
Would thou wert near
To hear me tell how fair thou art!
Since thou art gone I mourn all alone,
Oh, my Lolita——”

She broke off to explain: “It’s one of those passionate little Spanish serenades, Hedrick. I’ll sing it for your boy-friends next time they come to play in the yard. I think they’d like it. When they know why you like it so much, I’m sure they will. Of course you *do* like it—you roguish little lover!” A spasm rewarded this demoniacal phrase. “Darling little boy, the serenade goes on like this:

Oh, my Lolita, come to my heart:
Oh, come beloved, love let me press thee,
While I caress thee
In one long kiss, Lolita!
Lolita come! Let me——”

Hedrick sprang to his feet with a yell of agony. “Laura Madison, you tattle-tale,” he bellowed, “I’ll never forgive you as long as I live! I’ll get even with you if it takes a thousand years!”

With that, and pausing merely to kick a rung out of a chair which happened to be in his way, he rushed from the room.

His sisters had risen to go, and Cora flung her arms round Laura in ecstacy. “You mean old viper!” she cried. “You could have told me days ago! It’s almost too good to be true: it’s the first time in my whole life I’ve felt safe from the Pest for a moment!”

Laura shook her head. “My conscience troubles me; it did seem as if I ought to tell you—and mamma thought so, too; and I gave him warning, but now that I have done it, it seems rather mean and——”

“No!” exclaimed Cora. “You just gave me a chance to protect myself for once, thank heaven!” And she picked up her skirts and danced her way into the front hall.

“I’m afraid,” said Laura, following, “I shouldn’t have done it.”

“Oh, Laura,” cried the younger girl, “I am having the best time, these days! This just caps it.” She lowered her voice, but her eyes grew even

brighter. “I think I’ve shown a certain gentleman a few things he didn’t understand!”

“Who, dear?”

“Val,” returned Cora lightly; “Valentine Corliss. I think he knows a little more about women than he did when he first came here.”

“You’ve had a difference with him?” asked Laura with eager hopefulness. “You’ve broken with him?”

“Oh, Lord, no! Nothing like that.” Cora leaned to her confidentially. “He told me, once, he’d be at the feet of any woman that could help put through an affair like his oil scheme, and I decided I’d just show him what I could do. He’d talk about it to me; then he’d laugh at me. That very Sunday when I got papa to go in——”

“But he didn’t,” said Laura helplessly. “He only said he’d try to—— when he gets well.”

“It’s all the same—and it’ll be a great thing for him, too,” said Cora, gayly. “Well, that very afternoon before Val left, he practically told me I was no good. Of course he didn’t use just those words—that isn’t his way—but he laughed at me. And haven’t I shown him! I sent Richard a note that very night saying papa had consented to be secretary of the company, and Richard had said he’d go in if papa did that, and he couldn’t break his word ——”

“I know,” said Laura, sighing. “I know.”

“Laura”—Cora spoke with sudden gravity—“did you ever know anybody like me? I’m almost getting superstitious about it, because it seems to me I *always* get just what I set out to get. I believe I could have anything in the world if I tried for it.”

“I hope so, if you tried for something good for you,” said Laura sadly. “Cora, dear, you will—you will be a little easy on Hedrick, won’t you?”

Cora leaned against the newel and laughed till she was exhausted.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Mr. Trumble's offices were heralded by a neat blazon upon the principal door, "Wade J. Trumble, Mortgages and Loans"; and the gentleman thus comfortably, proclaimed, emerging from that door upon a September noontide, burlesqued a start of surprise at sight of a figure unlocking an opposite door which exhibited the name, "Ray Vilas," and below it, the cryptic phrase, "Probate Law."

"Water!" murmured Mr. Trumble, affecting to faint. "You ain't going in *there*, are you, Ray?" He followed the other into the office, and stood leaning against a bookcase, with his hands in his pockets, while Vilas raised the two windows, which were obscured by a film of smoke-deposit: there was a thin coat of fine sifted dust over everything. "Better not sit down, Ray," continued Trumble, warningly. "You'll spoil your clothes and you might get a client. That word `Probate' on the door ain't going to keep 'em out forever. You recognize the old place, I s'pose? You must have been here at least twice since you moved in. What's the matter? Dick Lindley hasn't missionaried you into any idea of *working*, has he? Oh, no, *I* see: the Richfield Hotel bar has closed—you've managed to drink it all at last!"

"Have you heard how old man Madison is to-day?" asked Ray, dusting his fingers with a handkerchief.

"Somebody told me yesterday he was about the same. He's not going to get well."

"How do you know?" Ray spoke quickly.

"Stroke too severe. People never recover——"

"Oh, yes, they do, too."

Trumble began hotly: "I beg to dif——" but checked himself, manifesting a slight confusion. "That is, I know they don't. Old Madison may live a while, if you call that getting well; but he'll never be the same man he was. Doctor Sloane says it was a bad stroke. Says it was `induced

by heat prostration and excitement.' `Excitement!'" he repeated with a sour laugh. "Yep, I expect a man could get all the excitement he wanted in *that* house, especially if he was her daddy. Poor old man, I don't believe he's got five thousand dollars in the world, and look how she dresses!"

Ray opened a compartment beneath one of the bookcases, and found a bottle and some glasses. "Aha," he muttered, "our janitor doesn't drink, I perceive. Join me?" Mr. Trumble accepted, and Ray explained, cheerfully: "Richard Lindley's got me so cowed I'm afraid to go near any of my old joints. You see, he trails me; the scoundrel has kept me sober for whole days at a time, and I've been mortified, having old friends see me in that condition; so I have to sneak up here to my own office to drink to Cora, now and then. You mustn't tell him. What's she been doing to *you*, lately?"

The little man addressed grew red with the sharp, resentful memory. "Oh, nothing! Just struck me in the face with her parasol on the public street, that's all!" He gave an account of his walk to church with Cora. "I'm through with that girl!" he exclaimed vindictively, in conclusion. "It was the damnedest thing you ever saw in your life: right in broad daylight, in front of the church. And she laughed when she did it; you'd have thought she was knocking a puppy out of her way. She can't do that to me twice, I tell you. What the devil do you see to laugh at?"

"You'll be around," returned his companion, refilling the glasses, "asking for more, the first chance she gives you. Here's her health!"

"I don't drink it!" cried Mr. Trumble angrily.

"And I'm through with her for good, I tell you! I'm not your kind: I don't let a girl like that upset me till I can't think of anything else, and go making such an ass of myself that the whole town gabbles about it. Cora Madison's seen the last of me, I'll thank you to notice. She's never been half-decent to me; cut dances with me all last winter; kept me hanging round the outskirts of every crowd she was in; stuck me with Laura and her mother every time she had a chance; then has the nerve to try to use me, so's she can make a bigger hit with a new man! You can bet your head I'm through! She'll get paid though! Oh, she'll get paid for it!"

"How?" laughed Ray.

It was a difficult question. “You wait and see,” responded the threatener, feebly. “Just wait and see. She’s wild about this Corliss, I tell you,” he continued, with renewed vehemence. “She’s crazy about him; she’s lost her head at last——”

“You mean he’s going to avenge you?”

“No, I don’t, though he might, if she decided to marry him.”

“Do you know,” said Ray slowly, glancing over his glass at his nervous companion, “it doesn’t strike me that Mr. Valentine Corliss has much the air of a marrying man.”

“He has the air to *me*,” observed Mr. Trumble, “of a darned bad lot! But I have to hand it to him: he’s a wizard. He’s got something besides his good looks—a man that could get Cora Madison interested in `business’! In *oil*! Cora Madison! How do you suppose——”

His companion began to laugh again. “You don’t really suppose he talked his oil business to her, do you, Trumble?”

“He must have. Else how could she——”

“Oh, no, Cora herself never talks upon any subject but one; she never listens to any other either.”

“Then how in thunder did he——”

“If Cora asks you if you think it will rain,” interrupted Vilas, “doesn’t she really seem to be asking: `Do you love me? How much?’ Suppose Mr. Corliss is an expert in the same line. Of course he can talk about oil!”

“He strikes me,” said Trumble, “as just about the slickest customer that ever hit this town. I like Richard Lindley, and I hope he’ll see his fifty thousand dollars again. *I* wouldn’t have given Corliss thirty cents.”

“Why do you think he’s a crook?”

“I don’t say that,” returned Trumble. “All *I* know about him is that he’s done some of the finest work to get fifty thousand dollars put in his hands that I ever heard of. And all anybody knows about him is that he lived here

seventeen years ago, and comes back claiming to know where there's oil in Italy. He shows some maps and papers and gets cablegrams signed `Moliterno.' Then he talks about selling the old Corliss house here, where the Madisons live, and putting the money into his oil company: he does that to sound plausible, but I have good reason to know that house was mortgaged to its full value within a month after his aunt left it to him. He'll not get a cent if it's sold. That's all. And he's got Cora Madison so crazy over him that she makes life a hell for poor old Lindley until he puts all he's saved into the bubble. The scheme may be all right. How do *I* know? There's no way to tell, without going over there, and Corliss won't let anybody do that—oh, he's got a plausible excuse for it! But I'm sorry for Lindley: he's so crazy about Cora, he's soft. And she's so crazy about Corliss *she's* soft! Well, I used to be crazy about her myself, but I'm not soft —I'm not the Lindley kind of loon, thank heaven!"

"What kind are you, Trumble?" asked Ray, mildly.

"Not your kind either," retorted the other going to the door. "She cut me on the street the other day; she's quit speaking to me. If you've got any money, why don't you take it over to the hotel and give it to Corliss? She might start speaking to *you* again. I'm going to lunch!" He slammed the door behind him.

Ray Vilas, left alone, elevated his heels to the sill, and stared out of the window a long time at a gravelled roof which presented little of interest. He replenished his glass and his imagination frequently, the latter being so stirred that when, about three o'clock, he noticed the inroads he had made upon the bottle, tears of self-pity came to his eyes. "Poor little drunkard!" he said aloud. "Go ahead and do it. Isn't anything *you* won't do!" And, having washed his face at a basin in a corner, he set his hat slightly upon one side, picked up a walking stick and departed jauntily, and, to the outward eye, presentably sober.

Mr. Valentine Corliss would be glad to see him, the clerk at the Richfield Hotel reported, after sending up a card, and upon Ray's following the card, Mr. Valentine Corliss in person confirmed the message with considerable amusement and a cordiality in which there was some mixture of the quizzical. He was the taller; and the robust manliness of his appearance, his

splendid health and boxer's figure offered a sharp contrast to the superlatively lean tippler. Corliss was humorously aware of his advantage: his greeting seemed really to say, "Hello, my funny bug, here you are again!" though the words of his salutation were entirely courteous; and he followed it with a hospitable offer.

"No," said Vilas; "I won't drink with you." He spoke so gently that the form of his refusal, usually interpreted as truculent, escaped the other's notice. He also declined a cigar, apologetically asking permission to light one of his own cigarettes; then, as he sank into a velour-covered chair, apologized again for the particular attention he was bestowing upon the apartment, which he recognized as one of the suites de luxe of the hotel.

"`Parlour, bedroom, and bath,'" he continued, with a melancholy smile; "and `Lachrymae,' and `A Reading from Homer.' Sometimes they have `The Music Lesson,' or `Winter Scene' or `A Neapolitan Fisher Lad' instead of `Lachrymae,' but they always have `A Reading from Homer.' When you opened the door, a moment ago, I had a very strong impression that something extraordinary would some time happen to me in this room."

"Well," suggested Corliss, "you refused a drink in it."

"Even more wonderful than that," said Ray, glancing about the place curiously. "It may be a sense of something painful that already has happened here—perhaps long ago, before your occupancy. It has a pathos."

"Most hotel rooms have had something happen in them," said Corliss lightly. "I believe the managers usually change the door numbers if what happens is especially unpleasant. Probably they change some of the rugs, also."

"I feel——" Ray paused, frowning. "I feel as if some one had killed himself here."

"Then no doubt some of the rugs *have* been changed."

"No doubt." The caller laughed and waved his hand in dismissal of the topic. "Well, Mr. Corliss," he went on, shifting to a brisker tone, "I have come to make my fortune, too. You are Midas. Am I of sufficient importance to be touched?"

Valentine Corliss gave him sidelong an almost imperceptibly brief glance of sharpest scrutiny—it was like the wink of a camera shutter—but laughed in the same instant. “Which way do you mean that?”

“You have been quick,” returned the visitor, repaying that glance with equal swiftness, “to seize upon the American idiom. I mean: How small a contribution would you be willing to receive toward your support!”

Corliss did not glance again at Ray; instead, he looked interested in the smoke of his cigar. “`Contribution,’” he repeated, with no inflection whatever. “`Toward my support.’”

“I mean, of course, how small an investment in your oil company.”

“Oh, anything, anything,” returned the promoter, with quick amiability. “We need to sell all the stock we can.”

“All the money you can get?”

“Precisely. It’s really a colossal proposition, Mr. Vilas.” Corliss spoke with brisk enthusiasm. “It’s a perfectly certain enormous profit upon everything that goes in. Prince Moliterno cables me later investigations show that the oil-field is more than twice as large as we thought when I left Naples. He’s on the ground now, buying up what he can, secretly.”

“I had an impression from Richard Lindley that the secret had been discovered.”

“Oh, yes; but only by a few, and those are trying to keep it quiet from the others, of course.”

“I see. Does your partner know of your success in raising a large investment?”

“You mean Lindley’s? Certainly.” Corliss waved his hand in light deprecation. “Of course that’s something, but Moliterno would hardly be apt to think of it as very large! You see he’s putting in about five times that much, himself, and I’ve already turned over to him double it for myself. Still, it counts—certainly; and of course it will be a great thing for Lindley.”

“I fear,” Ray said hesitatingly, “you won’t be much interested in my drop for your bucket. I have twelve hundred dollars in the world; and it is in the bank—I stopped there on my way here. To be exact, I have twelve hundred and forty-seven dollars and fifty-one cents. My dear sir, will you allow me to purchase one thousand dollars’ worth of stock? I will keep the two hundred and forty-seven dollars and fifty-one cents to live on—I may need an egg while waiting for you to make me rich. Will you accept so small an investment?”

“Certainly,” said Corliss, laughing. “Why not? You may as well profit by the chance as any one. I’ll send you the stock certificates—we put them at par. I’m attending to that myself, as our secretary, Mr. Madison, is unable to take up his duties.”

Vilas took a cheque-book and a fountain-pen from his pocket.

“Oh, any time, any time,” said Corliss cheerfully, observing the new investor’s movement.

“Now, I think,” returned Vilas quietly. “How shall I make it out?”

“Oh, to me, I suppose,” answered Corliss indifferently. “That will save a little trouble, and I can turn it over to Moliterno, by cable, as I did Lindley’s. I’ll give you a receipt——”

“You need not mind that,” said Ray. “Really it is of no importance.”

“Of course the cheque itself is a receipt,” remarked Corliss, tossing it carelessly upon a desk. “You’ll have some handsome returns for that slip of paper, Mr. Vilas.”

“In that blithe hope I came,” said Ray airily.

“I am confident of it. I have my own ways of divination, Mr. Corliss. I have gleams.” He rose as if to go, but stood looking thoughtfully about the apartment again. “Singular impression,” he murmured. “Not exactly as if I’d seen it in a dream; and yet—and yet——”

“You have symptoms of clairvoyance at times, I take it.” The conscious, smooth superiority of the dexterous man playing with an inconsequent opponent resounded in this speech, clear as the humming of a struck bell;

and Vilas shot him a single open glance of fire from hectic eyes. For that instant, the frailer buck trumpeted challenge. Corliss—broad-shouldered, supple of waist, graceful and strong—smiled down negligently; yet the very air between the two men seemed charged with an invisible explosive. Ray laughed quickly, as in undisturbed good nature; then, flourishing his stick, turned toward the door.

“Oh, no, it isn’t clairvoyance—no more than when I told you that your only real interest is women.” He paused, his hand upon the door-knob. “I’m a quaint mixture, however: perhaps I should be handled with care.”

“Very good of you,” laughed Corliss—“this warning. The afternoon I had the pleasure of meeting you I think I remember your implying that you were a mere marionette.”

“A haggard harlequin!” snapped Vilas, waving his hand to a mirror across the room. “Don’t I look it?” And the phrase fitted him with tragic accuracy. “You see? What a merry wedding-guest I’ll be! I invite you to join me on the nuptial eve.”

“Thanks. Who’s getting married: when the nuptial eve?”

Ray opened the door, and, turning, rolled his eyes fantastically. “Haven’t you heard?” he cried. “When Hecate marries John Barleycorn!” He bowed low. “Mr. Midas, adieu.”

Corliss stood in the doorway and watched him walk down the long hall to the elevator. There, Ray turned and waved his hand, the other responding with gayety which was not assumed: Vilas might be insane, or drunk, or both, but the signature upon his cheque was unassailable.

Corliss closed the door and began to pace his apartment thoughtfully. His expression manifested a peculiar phenomenon. In company, or upon the street, or when he talked with men, the open look and frank eyes of this stalwart young man were disarming and his most winning assets. But now, as he paced alone in his apartment, now that he was not upon exhibition, now when there was no eye to behold him, and there was no reason to dissimulate or veil a single thought or feeling, his look was anything but open; the last trace of frankness disappeared; the muscles at mouth and eyes shifted; lines and planes intermingled and altered subtly; there was a

moment of misty transformation—and the face of another man emerged. It was the face of a man uninstructed in mercy; it was a shrewd and planning face: alert, resourceful, elaborately perceptive, and flawlessly hard. But, beyond all, it was the face of a man perpetually on guard.

He had the air of debating a question, his hands in his pockets, his handsome forehead lined with a temporary indecision. His sentry-go extended the length of his two rooms, and each time he came back into his bedroom his glance fell consideringly upon a steamer-trunk of the largest size, at the foot of his bed. The trunk was partially packed as if for departure. And, indeed, it was the question of departure which he was debating.

He was a man of varied dexterities, and he had one faculty of high value, which had often saved him, had never betrayed him; it was intuitive and equal to a sixth sense: he always knew when it was time to go. An inner voice warned him; he trusted to it and obeyed it. And it had spoken now, and there was his trunk half-packed in answer. But he had stopped midway in his packing, because he had never yet failed to make a clean sweep where there was the slightest chance for one; he hated to leave a big job before it was completely finished—and Mr. Wade Trumble had refused to invest in the oil-fields of Basilicata.

Corliss paused beside the trunk, stood a moment immersed in thought; then nodded once, decisively, and, turning to a dressing-table, began to place some silver-mounted brushes and bottles in a leather travelling-case.

There was a knock at the outer door. He frowned, set down what he had in his hands, went to the door and opened it to find Mr. Pryor, that plain citizen, awaiting entrance.

Corliss remained motionless in an arrested attitude, his hand upon the knob of the opened door. His position did not alter; he became almost unnaturally still, a rigidity which seemed to increase. Then he looked quickly behind him, over his shoulder, and back again, with a swift movement of the head.

“No,” said Pryor, at that. “I don’t want you. I just thought I’d have two minutes’ talk with you. All right?”

“All right,” said Corliss quietly. “Come in.” He turned carelessly, and walked away from the door keeping between his guest and the desk. When he reached the desk, he turned again and leaned against it, his back to it, but in the action of turning his hand had swept a sheet of note-paper over Ray Vilas’s cheque—a too conspicuous oblong of pale blue. Pryor had come in and closed the door.

“I don’t know,” he began, regarding the other through his glasses, with steady eyes, “that I’m going to interfere with you at all, Corliss. I just happened to strike you—I wasn’t looking for you. I’m on vacation, visiting my married daughter that lives here, and I don’t want to mix in if I can help it.”

Corliss laughed, easily. “There’s nothing for you to mix in. You couldn’t if you wanted to.”

“Well, I hope that’s true,” said Pryor, with an air of indulgence, curiously like that of a teacher for a pupil who promises improvement. “I do indeed. There isn’t anybody I’d like to see turn straight more than you. You’re educated and cultured, and refined, and smarter than all hell. It would be a big thing. That’s one reason I’m taking the trouble to talk to you.”

“I told you I wasn’t doing anything,” said Corliss with a petulance as oddly like that of a pupil as the other’s indulgence was like that of a tutor. “This is my own town; I own property here, and I came here to sell it. I can prove it in half-a-minute’s telephoning. Where do you come in?”

“Easy, easy,” said Pryor, soothingly. “I’ve just told you I don’t want to come in at all.”

“Then what do you want?”

“I came to tell you just one thing: to go easy up there at Mr. Madison’s house.”

Corliss laughed contemptuously. “It’s *my* house. I own it. That’s the property I came here to sell.”

“Oh, I know,” responded Pryor. “That part of it’s all right. But I’ve seen you several times with that young lady, and you looked pretty thick, to me.

You know you haven't got any business doing such things, Corliss. I know your record from Buda Pesth to Copenhagen and——"

"See here, my friend," said the younger man, angrily, "you may be a tiptop spotter for the government when it comes to running down some poor old lady that's bought a string of pearls in the Rue de la Paix——"

"I've been in the service twenty-eight years," remarked Pryor, mildly.

"All right," said the other with a gesture of impatience; "and you got me once, all right. Well, that's over, isn't it? Have I tried anything since?"

"Not in that line," said Pryor.

"Well, what business have you with any other line?" demanded Corliss angrily. "Who made you general supervisor of public morals? I want to know——"

"Now, what's the use your getting excited? I'm just here to tell you that I'm going to keep an eye on you. I don't know many people here, and I haven't taken any particular pains to look you up. For all I know, you're only here to sell your house, as you say. But I know old man Madison a little, and I kind of took a fancy to him; he's a mighty nice old man, and he's got a nice family. He's sick and it won't do to trouble him; but—honest, Corliss—if you don't slack off in that neighbourhood a little, I'll have to have a talk with the young lady herself."

A derisory light showed faintly in the younger man's eyes as he inquired, softly: "That all, Mr. Pryor?"

"No. Don't try anything on out here. Not in *any* of your lines."

"I don't mean to."

"That's right. Sell your house and clear out. You'll find it healthy." He went to the door. "So far as I can see," he observed, ruminatively, "you haven't brought any of that Moliterno crowd you used to work with over to this side with you."

"I haven't seen Moliterno for two years," said Corliss, sharply.

“Well, I’ve said my say.” Pryor gave him a last word as he went out. “You keep away from that little girl.”

“Ass!” exclaimed Corliss, as the door closed. He exhaled a deep breath sharply, and broke into a laugh. Then he went quickly into his bedroom and began to throw the things out of his trunk.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Hedrick Madison's eyes were not of marble; his heart was not flint nor his skin steel plate: he was flesh and tender; he was a vulnerable, breathing boy, with highly developed capacities for pain which were now being taxed to their utmost. Once he had loved to run, to leap, to disport himself in the sun, to drink deep of the free air; he had loved life and one or two of his fellowmen. He had borne himself buoyantly, with jaunty self-confidence, even with some intolerance toward the weaknesses of others, not infrequently displaying merriment over their mischances; but his time had found him at last; the evil day had come. Indian Summer was Indian for him, indeed: sweet death were welcome; no charity was left in him. He leaped no more, but walked broodingly and sought the dark places. And yet it could not be said that times were dull for him: the luckless picket who finds himself in an open eighty-acre field, under the eye of a sharpshooter up a tree, would not be apt to describe the experience as dull. And Cora never missed a shot; she loved the work; her pleasure in it was almost as agonizing for the target as was the accuracy of her fire.

She was ingenious: the horrible facts at her disposal were damaging enough in all conscience: but they did not content her. She invented a love-story, assuming that Hedrick was living it: he was supposed to be pining for Lolita, to be fading, day-by-day, because of enforced separation; and she contrived this to such an effect of reality, and with such a diabolical affectation of delicacy in referring to it, that the mere remark, with gentle sympathy, "I think poor Hedrick is looking a little better to-day," infallibly produced something closely resembling a spasm. She formed the habit of never mentioning her brother in his presence except as "poor Hedrick," a too obvious commiseration of his pretended attachment—which met with like success. Most dreadful of all, she invented romantic phrases and expressions assumed to have been spoken or written by Hedrick in reference to his unhappiness; and she repeated them so persistently, yet always with such apparent sincerity of belief that they were quotations from him, and not her inventions, that the driven youth knew a fear, sometimes, that the horrid things were actually of his own perpetration.

The most withering of these was, “Torn from her I love by the ruthless hand of a parent. . . .” It was not completed; Cora never got any further with it, nor was there need: a howl of fury invariably assured her of an effect as satisfactory as could possibly have been obtained by an effort less impressionistic. Life became a series of easy victories for Cora, and she made them somehow the more deadly for Hedrick by not seeming to look at him in his affliction, nor even to be aiming his way: he never could tell when the next shot was coming. At the table, the ladies of his family might be deep in dress, or discussing Mr. Madison’s slowly improving condition, when Cora, with utter irrelevance, would sigh, and, looking sadly into her coffee, murmur, “Ah, *fond* mem’ries!” or, “*Why* am I haunted by the dead past?” or, the dreadful, “Torn from her I love by the ruthless hand of a parent. . . .”

There was compassion in Laura’s eyes and in his mother’s, but Cora was irresistible, and they always ended by laughing in spite of themselves; and though they pleaded for Hedrick in private, their remonstrances proved strikingly ineffective. Hedrick was the only person who had ever used the high hand with Cora: she found repayment too congenial. In the daytime he could not go in the front yard, but Cora’s window would open and a tenderly smiling Cora lean out to call affectionately, “Don’t walk on the grass—darling little boy!” Or, she would nod happily to him and begin to sing:

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“Oh come beloved, love let me press thee,
While I caress thee
In one long kiss, Lolita. . . . ”
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One terror still hung over him. If it fell—as it might at any fatal moment—then the utmost were indeed done upon him; and this apprehension bathed his soul in night. In his own circle of congenial age and sex he was, by virtue of superior bitterness and precocity of speech, a chief—a moral castigator, a satirist of manners, a creator of stinging nicknames; and many nourished unhealed grievances which they had little hope of satisfying against him; those who attempted it invariably departing with more to avenge than they had brought with them. Let these once know what Cora knew. . . . The vision was unthinkable!

It was Cora’s patent desire to release the hideous item, to spread the scandal broadcast among his fellows—to ring it from the school-bells, to

send it winging on the hot winds of Hades! The boys had always liked his yard and the empty stable to play in, and the devices he now employed to divert their activities elsewhere were worthy of a great strategist. His energy and an abnormal ingenuity accomplished incredible things: school had been in session several weeks and only one boy had come within conversational distance of Cora;—him Hedrick bore away bodily, in simulation of resistless high spirits, a brilliant exhibition of stagecraft.

And then Cora's friend, Mrs. Villard, removed her son Egerton from the private school he had hitherto attended, and he made his appearance in Hedrick's class, one morning at the public school. Hedrick's eye lighted with a savage gleam; timidly the first joy he had known for a thousand years crept into his grim heart. After school, Egerton expiated a part of Cora's cruelty. It was a very small part, and the exploit no more than infinitesimally soothing to the conqueror, but when Egerton finally got home he was no sight for a mother.

Thus Hedrick wrought his own doom: Mrs. Villard telephoned to Cora, and Cora went immediately to see her.

It happened to Hedrick that he was late leaving home the next morning. His entrance into his classroom was an undeniable sensation, and within ten minutes the teacher had lost all control of the school. It became necessary to send for the principal. Recess was a frantic nightmare for Hedrick, and his homeward progress at noon a procession of such uproarious screamers as were his equals in speed. The nethermost depths were reached when an ignoble pigtailed person he had always trodden upon flat-footed screamed across the fence from next door, as he reached fancied sanctuary in his own backyard:

"Kiss me some *more*, darling little boy!"

This worm, established upon the fence opposite the conservatory windows, and in direct view from the table in the dining-room, shrieked the accursed request at short intervals throughout the luncheon hour. The humour of childhood is sometimes almost intrusive.

And now began a life for Hedrick which may be rather painfully but truthfully likened to a prolongation of the experiences of a rat that finds

itself in the middle of a crowded street in daylight: there is plenty of excitement but no pleasure. He was pursued, harried, hounded from early morning till nightfall, and even in his bed would hear shrill shouts go down the sidewalk from the throats of juvenile fly-by-nights: “Oh dar-ling lit-oh darling lit-oh *lit*-le boy, *lit*-le boy, kiss me some *more*!” And one day he overheard a remark which strengthened his growing conviction that the cataclysm had affected the whole United States: it was a teacher who spoke, explaining to another a disturbance in the hall of the school. She said, behind her hand:

“*He kissed an idiot*.”

Laura had not even remotely foreseen the consequences of her revelation, nor, indeed, did she now properly estimate their effect upon Hedrick. She and her mother were both sorry for him, and did what they could to alleviate his misfortunes, but there was an inevitable remnant of amusement in their sympathy. Youth, at war, affects stoicism but not resignation: in truth, resignation was not much in Hedrick’s line, and it would be far from the fact to say that he was softened by his sufferings. He brooded profoundly and his brightest thought was revenge. It was not upon Cora that his chief bitterness turned. Cora had always been the constant, open enemy: warfare between them was a regular condition of life; and unconsciously, and without “thinking it out,” he recognized the naturalness of her seizing upon the deadliest weapon against him that came to her hand. There was nothing unexpected in that: no, the treachery, to his mind, lay in the act of Laura, that non-combatant, who had furnished the natural and habitual enemy with this scourge. At all times, and with or without cause, he ever stood ready to do anything possible for the reduction of Cora’s cockiness, but now it was for the taking-down of Laura and the repayment of her uncalled-for and overwhelming assistance to the opposite camp that he lay awake nights and kept his imagination hot. Laura was a serene person, so neutral—outwardly, at least—and so little concerned for herself in any matter he could bring to mind, that for purposes of revenge she was a difficult proposition. And then, in a desperate hour, he remembered her book.

Only once had he glimpsed it, but she had shown unmistakable agitation of a mysterious sort as she wrote in it, and, upon observing his presence, a

prompt determination to prevent his reading a word of what she had written. Therefore, it was something peculiarly sacred and intimate. This deduction was proved by the care she exercised in keeping the book concealed from all eyes. A slow satisfaction began to permeate him: he made up his mind to find that padlocked ledger.

He determined with devoted ardour that when he found it he would make the worst possible use of it: the worst, that is, for Laura. As for consequences to himself, he was beyond them. There is an Irish play in which an old woman finds that she no longer fears the sea when it has drowned the last of her sons; it can do nothing more to her. Hedrick no longer feared anything.

The book was somewhere in Laura's room, he knew that; and there were enough opportunities to search, though Laura had a way of coming in unexpectedly which was embarrassing; and he suffered from a sense of inadequacy when—on the occasion of his first new attempt—he answered the casual inquiry as to his presence by saying that he "had a headache." He felt there was something indirect in the reply; but Laura was unsuspicious and showed no disposition to be analytical. After this, he took the precaution to bring a school-book with him and she often found the boy seated quietly by her west window immersed in study: he said he thought his headaches came from his eyes and that the west light "sort of eased them a little."

The ledger remained undiscovered, although probably there has never been a room more thoroughly and painstakingly searched, without its floor being taken up and its walls torn down. The most mysterious, and, at the same time, the most maddening thing about it was the apparent simplicity of the task. He was certain that the room contained the book: listening, barefooted, outside the door at night, he had heard the pen scratching. The room was as plain as a room can be, and small. There was a scantily filled clothes-press; he had explored every cubic inch of it. There was the small writing table with one drawer; it held only some note-paper and a box of pen-points. There was a bureau; to his certain knowledge it contained no secret whatever. There were a few giltless chairs, and a white "wash-stand," a mere basin and slab with exposed plumbing. Lastly, there was the bed, a very large and ugly "Eastlake" contrivance; he had acquired a close

acquaintance with all of it except the interior of the huge mattress itself, and here, he finally concluded, must of necessity be the solution. The surface of the mattress he knew to be unbroken; nevertheless the book was there. He had recently stimulated his deductive powers with a narrative of French journalistic sagacity in a similar case; and he applied French reasoning. The ledger existed. It was somewhere in the room. He had searched everything except the interior of the mattress. The ledger was in that interior.

The exploration thus become necessary presented some difficulties. Detection in the act would involve explanations hard to invent; it would not do to say he was looking for his knife; and he could not think of any excuse altogether free from a flavour of insincerity. A lameness beset them all and made them liable to suspicion; and Laura, once suspicious, might be petty enough to destroy the book, and so put it out of his power forever. He must await the right opportunity, and, after a racking exercise of patience, at last he saw it coming.

Doctor Sloane had permitted his patient to come down stairs for an increasing interval each day. Mr. Madison crept, rather than walked, leaning upon his wife and closely attended by Miss Peirce. He spoke with difficulty and not clearly; still, there was a perceptible improvement, and his family were falling into the habit of speaking of him as almost well. On that account, Mrs. Madison urged her daughters to accept an invitation from the mother of the once courtly Egerton Villard. It was at breakfast that the matter was discussed.

“Of course Cora must go,” Laura began, “but——”

“But nothing!” interrupted Cora. “How would it look if I went and you didn’t? Everybody knows papa’s almost well, and they’d think it silly for us to give up the first real dance since last spring on that account; yet they’re just spiteful enough, if I went and you stayed home, to call me a `girl of no heart.’ Besides,” she added sweetly, “we ought to go to show Mrs. Villard we aren’t hurt because Egerton takes so little notice of poor Hedrick.”

Hedrick’s lips moved silently, as in prayer.

“I’d rather not,” said Laura. “I doubt if I’d have a very good time.”

“You would, too,” returned her sister, decidedly. “The men like to dance with you; you dance every bit as well as I do, and that black lace is the most becoming dress you ever had. Nobody ever remembers a black dress, anyway, unless it’s cut very conspicuously, and yours isn’t. I can’t go without you; they love to say nasty things about me, and you’re too good a sister to give 'em this chance, you old dear.” She laughed and nodded affectionately across the table at Laura. “You’ve got to go!”

“Yes, it would be nicer,” said the mother. And so it was settled. It was simultaneously settled in Hedrick’s mind that the night of the dance should mark his discovery of the ledger. He would have some industrious hours alone with the mysterious mattress, safe from intrusion.

Meekly he lifted his eyes from his plate. “I’m glad you’re going, sister Laura,” he said in a gentle voice. “I think a change will do you good.”

“Isn’t it wonderful,” exclaimed Cora, appealing to the others to observe him, “what an improvement a disappointment in love can make in deportment?”

For once, Hedrick only smiled.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Laura had spent some thoughtful hours upon her black lace dress with results that astonished her family: it became a ball-gown—and a splendidly effective one. She arranged her dark hair in a more elaborate fashion than ever before, in a close coronal of faintly lustrous braids; she had no jewellery and obviously needed none. Her last action but one before she left her room was to dispose of the slender chain and key she always wore round her neck; then her final glance at the mirror—which fairly revealed a lovely woman—ended in a deprecatory little "face" she made at herself. It meant: "Yes, old lady, you fancy yourself very passable in here all by yourself, don't you? Just wait: you'll be standing beside Cora in a moment!"

And when she did stand beside Cora, in the latter's room, a moment later, her thought seemed warranted. Cora, radiant-eyed, in high bloom, and exquisite from head to foot in a shimmering white dancing-dress, a glittering crescent fastening the silver fillet that bound her vivid hair, was a flame of enchantment. Mrs. Madison, almost weeping with delight, led her daughters proudly, an arm round the waist of each, into her husband's room. Propped with pillows, he reclined in an armchair while Miss Peirce prepared his bed, an occupation she gave over upon this dazzling entrance, departing tactfully.

"Look at these," cried the mother; "—from our garden, Jim, dear! Don't we feel rich, you and I?"

"And—and—Laura," said the sick man, with the slow and imperfect enunication caused by his disease; "Laura looks pretty—too."

"Isn't she adorable!" Cora exclaimed warmly. "She decided to be the portrait of a young duchess, you see, all stately splendour—made of snow and midnight!"

"Hear! hear!" laughed Laura; but she blushed with pleasure, and taking Cora's hand in hers lifted it to her lips.

“And do you see Cora’s crescent?” demanded Mrs. Madison. “What do you think of *that* for magnificence? She went down town this morning with seven dollars, and came back with that and her party gloves and a dollar in change! Isn’t she a bargainer? Even for rhinestones they are the cheapest things you ever heard of. They look precisely like stones of the very finest water.” They did—so precisely, indeed, that if the resemblance did not amount to actual identity, then had a jeweller of the town been able to deceive the eye of Valentine Corliss, which was an eye singularly learned in such matters.

“They’re—both smart girls,” said Madison, “both of them. And they look—beautiful, to-night—both. Laura is—amazing!”

When they had gone, Mrs. Madison returned from the stairway, and, kneeling beside her husband, put her arms round him gently: she had seen the tear that was marking its irregular pathway down his flaccid, gray cheek, and she understood.

“Don’t. Don’t worry, Jim,” she whispered. “Those bright, beautiful things!—aren’t they treasures?”

“It’s—it’s Laura,” he said. “Cora will be all right. She looks out for—herself. I’m—I’m afraid for—Laura. Aren’t you?”

“No, no,” she protested. “I’m not afraid for either of them.” But she was: the mother had always been afraid for Cora.

. . . . At the dance, the two girls, attended up the stairway to the ballroom by a chattering covey of black-coats, made a sensational entrance to a gallant fanfare of music, an effect which may have been timed to the premonitory tuning of instruments heard during the ascent; at all events, it was a great success; and Cora, standing revealed under the wide gilt archway, might have been a lithe and shining figure from the year eighteen-hundred-and-one, about to dance at the Luxembourg. She placed her hand upon the sleeve of Richard Lindley, and, glancing intelligently over his shoulder into the eyes of Valentine Corliss, glided rhythmically away.

People looked at her; they always did. Not only the non-dancers watched her; eyes everywhere were upon her, even though the owners gyrated, glided and dipped on distant orbits. The other girls watched her, as a rule,

with a profound, an almost passionate curiosity; and they were prompt to speak well of her to men, except in trustworthy intimacy, because they did not enjoy being wrongfully thought jealous. Many of them kept somewhat aloof from her; but none of them ever nowadays showed “superiority” in her presence, or snubbed her: that had been tried and proved disastrous in rebound. Cora never failed to pay her score—and with a terrifying interest added, her native tendency being to take two eyes for an eye and the whole jaw for a tooth. They let her alone, though they asked and asked among themselves the never-monotonous question: “Why do men fall in love with girls like that?” a riddle which, solved, makes wives condescending to their husbands.

Most of the people at this dance had known one another as friends, or antagonists, or indifferent acquaintances, for years, and in such an assembly there are always two worlds, that of the women and that of the men. Each has its own vision, radically different from that of the other; but the greatest difference is that the men are unaware of the other world, only a few of them—usually queer ones like Ray Vilas—vaguely perceiving that there are two visions, while all the women understand both perfectly. The men splash about on the surface; the women keep their eyes open under water. Or, the life of the assembly is like a bright tapestry: the men take it as a picture and are not troubled to know how it is produced; but women are weavers. There was a Beauty of far-flung renown at Mrs. Villard’s to-night: Mary Kane, a creature so made and coloured that young men at sight of her became as water and older men were apt to wonder regretfully why all women could not have been made like Mary. She was a kindly soul, and never intentionally outshone her sisters; but the perfect sumptuousness of her had sometimes tried the amiability of Cora Madison, to whom such success without effort and without spark seemed unfair, as well as bovine. Miss Kane was a central figure at the dance, shining tranquilly in a new triumph: that day her engagement had been announced to Mr. George Wattling, a young man of no special attainments, but desirable in his possessions and suitable to his happiness. The pair radiated the pardonable, gay importance of newly engaged people, and Cora, who had never before bestowed any notice upon Mr. Wattling, now examined him with thoughtful attention.

Finding him at her elbow in a group about a punch bowl, between dances, she offered warm felicitations. “But I don’t suppose you care

whether *I* care for you to be happy or not," she added, with a little plaintive laugh;—"you've always hated me so!"

Mr. Wattling was startled: never before had he imagined that Cora Madison had given him a thought; but there was not only thought, there was feeling, in this speech. She seemed to be concealing with bravery an even deeper feeling than the one inadvertently expressed. "Why, what on earth makes you think that?" he exclaimed.

"Think it? I *know* it!" She gave him a strange look, luminous yet mysterious, a curtain withdrawn only to show a shining mist with something undefined but dazzling beyond. "I've always known it!" And she turned away from him abruptly.

He sprang after her. "But you're wrong. I've never——"

"Oh, yes, you have." They began to discuss it, and for better consideration of the theme it became necessary for Cora to "cut" the next dance, promised to another, and to give it to Mr. Wattling. They danced several times together, and Mr. Wattling's expression was serious. The weavers of the tapestry smiled and whispered things the men would not have understood—nor believed.

Ray Vilas, seated alone in a recessed and softly lighted gallery, did not once lose sight of the flitting sorceress. With his elbows on the railing, he leaned out, his head swaying slowly and mechanically as she swept up and down the tumultuously moving room, his passionate eyes gaunt and brilliant with his hunger. And something very like a general thrill passed over the assembly when, a little later, it was seen that he was dancing with her. Laura, catching a glimpse of this couple, started and looked profoundly disturbed.

The extravagance of Vilas's passion and the depths he sounded, in his absurd despair when discarded, had been matters of almost public gossip; he was accounted a somewhat scandalous and unbalanced but picturesque figure; and for the lady whose light hand had wrought such havoc upon him to be seen dancing with him was sufficiently startling to elicit the universal remark—evidently considered superlative—that it was "just like Cora Madison!" Cora usually perceived, with an admirably clear head, all that

went on about her; and she was conscious of increasing the sensation, when after a few turns round the room, she allowed her partner to conduct her to a secluding grove of palms in the gallery. She sank into the chair he offered, and, fixing her eyes upon a small lamp of coloured glass which hung overhead, ostentatiously looked bored.

“At your feet, Cora,” he said, seating himself upon a stool, and leaning toward her. “Isn’t it appropriate that we should talk to music—we two? It shouldn’t be that quick step though—not dance-music—should it?”

“Don’t know ‘m sure,” murmured Cora.

“You were kind to dance with me,” he said huskily. “I dared to speak to you——”

She did not change her attitude nor the direction of her glance. “I couldn’t cut you very well with the whole town looking on. I’m tired of being talked about. Besides, I don’t care much who I dance with—so he doesn’t step on me.”

“Cora,” he said, “it is the prelude to `L’Arlesienne’ that they should play for you and me. Yes, I think it should be that.”

“Never heard of it.”

“It’s just a rustic tragedy, the story of a boy in the south of France who lets love become his whole life, and then—it kills him.”

“Sounds very stupid,” she commented languidly.

“People do sometimes die of love, even nowadays,” he said, tremulously —“in the South.”

She let her eyes drift indifferently to him and perceived that he was trembling from head to foot; that his hands and knees shook piteously; that his lips quivered and twitched; and, at sight of this agitation, an expression of strong distaste came to her face.

“I see.” Her eyes returned to the lamp. “You’re from the South, and of course it’s going to kill you.”

“You didn’t speak the exact words you had in your mind.’”

“Oh, what words did I have `in my mind’?” she asked impatiently.

“What you really meant was: `If it does kill you, what of it?’”

She laughed, and sighed as for release.

“Cora,” he said huskily, “I understand you a little because you possess me. I’ve never—literally never—had another thought since the first time I saw you: nothing but you. I think of you—actually every moment. Drunk or sober, asleep or—awake, it’s nothing but you, you, *you*! It will never be different: I don’t know why I can’t get over it—I only know I can’t. You own me; you burn like a hot coal in my heart. You’re through with me, I know. You drained me dry. You’re like a child who eats so heartily of what he likes that he never touches it again. And I’m a dish you’re sick of. Oh, it’s all plain enough, I can tell you. I’m not exciting any more—no, just a nauseous slave!”

“Do you want people to hear you?” she inquired angrily, for his voice had risen.

He tempered his tone. “Cora, when you liked me you went a pretty clipping gait with me,” he said, trembling even more than before. “But you’re infinitely more infatuated with this Toreador of a Corliss than you were with me; you’re lost in him; you’re slaving for him as I would for you. How far are you going with——”

“Do you want me to walk away and leave you?” she asked, suddenly sitting up straight and looking at him with dilating eyes. “If you want a `scene’——”

“It’s over,” he said, more calmly. “I know now how dangerous the man is. Of course you will tell him I said that.” He laughed quietly. “Well—between a dangerous chap and a desperate one, we may look for some lively times! Do you know, I believe I think about as continuously of him, lately, as I do of you. That’s why I put almost my last cent into his oil company, and got what may be almost my last dance with you!”

“I wouldn’t call it `almost’ your last dance with me!” she returned icily. “Not after what you’ve said. I had a foolish idea you could behave—well, at least decently.”

“Did Corliss tell you that I insulted him in his rooms at the hotel?”

“You!” She laughed, genuinely. “I see him letting you!”

“He did, however. By manner and in speech I purposely and deliberately insulted him. You’ll tell him every word of this, of course, and he’ll laugh at it, but I give myself the pleasure of telling you. I put the proposition of an `investment’ to him in a way nobody not a crook would have allowed to be smoothed over—and he allowed it to be smoothed over. He ate it! I felt he was a swindler when he was showing Richard Lindley his maps and papers, and now I’ve proved it to myself, and it’s worth the price.” Often, when they had danced, and often during this interview, his eyes lifted curiously to the white flaming crescent in her hair; now they fixed themselves upon it, and in a flash of divination he cried: “You wear it for me!”

She did not understand. “Finished raving?” she inquired.

“I gave Corliss a thousand dollars,” he said, slowly. “Considering the fact that it was my last, I flatter myself it was not unhandsomely done—though I may never need it. It has struck me that the sum was about what a man who had just cleaned up fifty thousand might regard as a sort of `extra’—`for lagniappe’—and that he might have thought it an appropriate amount to invest in a present some jewels perhaps—to place in the hair of a pretty friend!”

She sprang to her feet, furious, but he stood in front of her and was able to bar the way for a moment.

“Cora, I’ll have a last word with you if I have to hold you,” he said with great rapidity and in a voice which shook with the intense repression he was putting upon himself. “We do one thing in the South, where I came from. We protect our women——”

“This looks like it! Keeping me when——”

“I love you,” he said, his face whiter than she had ever seen it. “I love you! I’m your dog! You take care of yourself if you want to take care of anybody else! As sure as——”

“My dance, Miss Madison.” A young gentleman on vacation from the navy had approached, and, with perfect unconsciousness of what he was interrupting, but with well-founded certainty that he was welcome to the lady, urged his claim in a confident voice. “I thought it would never come, you know; but it’s here at last and so am I.” He laughed propitiatingly.

Ray yielded now at once. She moved him aside with her gloved forearm as if he were merely an awkward stranger who unwittingly stood between her and the claiming partner. Carrying the gesture farther, she took the latter’s arm, and smilingly, and without a backward glance, passed onward and left the gallery. The lieutenant, who had met her once or twice before, was her partner for the succeeding dance as well, and, having noted the advantages of the place where he had discovered her, persuaded her to return there to sit through the second. Then without any fatiguing preamble, he proposed marriage. Cora did not accept, but effected a compromise, which, for the present, was to consist of an exchange of photographs (his to be in uniform) and letters.

She was having an evening to her heart. Ray’s attack on Corliss had no dimming effect; her thought of it being that she was “used to his raving”; it meant nothing; and since Ray had prophesied she would tell Corliss about it, she decided not to do so.

The naval young gentleman and Valentine Corliss were the greatest of all the lions among ladies that night; she had easily annexed the lieutenant, and Corliss was hers already; though, for a purpose, she had not yet been seen in company with him. He was visibly “making an impression.” His name, as he had said to Richard Lindley, was held in honour in the town; and there was a flavour of fancied romance in his absence since boyhood in unknown parts, and his return now with a `foreign air’ and a bow that almost took the breath of some of the younger recipients. He was, too, in his way, the handsomest man in the room; and the smiling, open frankness of his look, the ready cordiality of his manner, were found very winning. He caused plenty of flutter.

Cora waited till the evening was half over before she gave him any visible attention. Then, during a silence of the music, between two dances, she made him a negligent sign with her hand, the gesture of one indifferently beckoning a creature who is certain to come, and went on talking casually to the man who was with her. Corliss was the length of the room from her, chatting gayly with a large group of girls and women; but he immediately nodded to her, made his bow to individuals of the group, and crossed the vacant, glistening floor to her. Cora gave him no greeting whatever; she dismissed her former partner and carelessly turned away with Corliss to some chairs in a corner.

“Do you see that?” asked Vilas, leaning over the balcony railing with Richard Lindley. “Look! She’s showing the other girls—don’t you see? He’s the New Man; she let ’em hope she wasn’t going in for him; a lot of them probably didn’t even know that she knew him. She sent him out on parade till they’re all excited about him; now she shows ’em he’s entirely her property—and does it so matter-of-factly that it’s rubbed in twice as hard as if she seemed to take some pains about it. He doesn’t dance: she’ll sit out with him now, till they all read the tag she’s put on him. She says she hates being talked about. She lives on it!—so long as it’s envious. And did you see her with that chap from the navy? Neptune thinks he’s dallying with Venus perhaps, but he’ll get——”

Lindley looked at him commiseratingly. “I think I never saw prettier decorations. Have you noticed, Ray? Must have used a thousand chrysanthemums.”

“Toreador!” whispered the other between his teeth, looking at Corliss; then, turning to his companion, he asked: “Has it occurred to you to get any information about Basilicata, or about the ancestral domain of the Moliterni, from our consul-general at Naples?”

Richard hesitated. “Well—yes. Yes, I did think of that. Yes, I thought of it.”

“But you didn’t do it.”

“No. That is, I haven’t yet. You see, Corliss explained to me that——”

His friend interrupted him with a sour laugh. “Oh, certainly! He’s one of the greatest explainers ever welcomed to our city!”

Richard said mildly: “And then, Ray, once I’ve gone into a thing I—I don’t like to seem suspicious.”

“Poor old Dick!” returned Vilas compassionately. “You kind, easy, sincere men are so conscientiously untruthful with yourselves. You know in your heart that Cora would be furious with you if you seemed suspicious, and she’s been so nice to you since you put in your savings to please her, that you can’t bear to risk offending her. She’s twisted you around her little finger, and the unnamed fear that haunts you is that you won’t be allowed to stay there—even twisted!”

“Pretty decorations, Ray,” said Richard; but he grew very red.

“Do you know what you’ll do,” asked Ray, regarding him keenly, “if this Don Giovanni from Sunny It’ is shown up as a plain get-rich-quick swindler?”

“I haven’t considered——”

“You would do precisely,” said Ray, “nothing! Cora’d see to that. You’d sigh and go to work again, beginning at the beginning where you were years ago, and doing it all over. Admirable resignation, but not for me! I’m a stockholder in his company and in shape to `take steps’! I don’t know if I’d be patient enough to make them legal—perhaps I should. He may be safe on the legal side. I’ll know more about that when I find out if there is a Prince Moliterno in Naples who owns land in Basilicata.”

“You don’t doubt it?”

“I doubt everything! In this particular matter I’ll have less to doubt when I get an answer from the consul-general. *I*’ve written, you see.”

Lindley looked disturbed. “You have?”

Vilas read him at a glance. “You’re afraid to find out!” he cried. Then he set his hand on the other’s shoulder. “If there ever was a God’s fool, it’s you, Dick Lindley. Really, I wonder the world hasn’t kicked you around more than it has; you’d never kick back! You’re as easy as an old shoe.

Cora makes you unhappy," he went on, and with the very mention of her name, his voice shook with passion,—"but on my soul I don't believe you know what jealousy means: you don't even understand hate; you don't eat your heart——"

"Let's go and eat something better," suggested Richard, laughing. "There's a continuous supper downstairs and I hear it's very good."

Ray smiled, rescued for a second from himself. "There isn't anything better than your heart, you old window-pane, and I'm glad you don't eat it. And if I ever mix it up with Don Giovanni T. Corliss—`T' stands for Toreador—I do believe it'll be partly on your——" He paused, leaving the sentence unfinished, as his attention was caught by the abysmal attitude of a figure in another part of the gallery: Mr. Wade Trumble, alone in a corner, sitting upon the small of his small back, munching at an unlighted cigar and otherwise manifesting a biting gloom. Ray drew Lindley's attention to this tableau of pain. "Here's a three of us!" he said. He turned to look down into the rhythmic kaleidoscope of dancers. "And there goes the girl we all *ought* to be morbid about."

"Who is that?"

"Laura Madison. Why aren't we? What a self-respecting creature she is, with that cool, sweet steadiness of hers—she's like a mountain lake. She's lovely and she plays like an angel, but so far as anybody's ever thinking about her is concerned she might almost as well not exist. Yet she's really beautiful to-night, if you can manage to think of her except as a sort of retinue for Cora."

"She *is* rather beautiful to-night. Laura's always a very nice-looking girl," said Richard, and with the advent of an idea, he added: "I think one reason she isn't more conspicuous and thought about is that she is so quiet," and, upon his companion's greeting this inspiration with a burst of laughter, "Yes, that was a brilliant deduction," he said; "but I do think she's about the quietest person I ever knew. I've noticed there are times when she'll scarcely speak at all for half an hour, or even more."

"You're not precisely noisy yourself," said Ray. "Have you danced with her this evening?"

“Why, no,” returned the other, in a tone which showed this omission to be a discovery; “not yet. I must, of course.”

“Yes, she’s really `rather’ beautiful. Also, she dances `rather’ better than any other girl in town. Go and perform your painful duty.”

“Perhaps I’d better,” said Richard thoughtfully, not perceiving the satire. “At any rate, I’ll ask her for the next.”

He found it unengaged. There came to Laura’s face an April change as he approached, and she saw he meant to ask her to dance. And, as they swam out into the maelstrom, he noticed it, and remarked that it *was* rather warm, to which she replied by a cheerful nod. Presently there came into Richard’s mind the thought that he was really an excellent dancer; but he did not recall that he had always formed the same pleasing estimate of himself when he danced with Laura, nor realize that other young men enjoyed similar self-help when dancing with her. And yet he repeated to her what Ray had said of her dancing, and when she laughed as in appreciation of a thing intended humorously, he laughed, too, but insisted that she did dance “very well indeed.” She laughed again at that, and they danced on, not talking. He had no sense of “guiding” her; there was no feeling of effort whatever; she seemed to move spontaneously with his wish, not to his touch; indeed, he was not sensible of touching her at all.

“Why, Laura,” he exclaimed suddenly, “you dance *beautifully*!”

She stumbled and almost fell; saved herself by clutching at his arm; he caught her; and the pair stopped where they were, in the middle of the floor. A flash of dazed incredulity from her dark eyes swept him; there was something in it of the child dodging an unexpected blow.

“Did I trip you?” he asked anxiously.

“No,” she laughed, quickly, and her cheeks grew even redder. “I tripped myself. Wasn’t that too bad—just when you were thinking that I danced well! Let’s sit down. May we?”

They went to some chairs against a wall. There, as they sat, Cora swung by them, dancing again with her lieutenant, and looking up trancedly into the gallant eyes of the triumphant and intoxicated young man. Visibly, she

was a woman with a suitor's embracing arm about her. Richard's eyes followed them.

"Ah, don't!" said Laura in a low voice.

He turned to her. "Don't what?"

"I didn't mean to speak out loud," she said tremulously. "But I meant: don't look so troubled. It doesn't mean anything at all—her coquetting with that bird of passage. He's going away in the morning."

"I don't think I was troubling about that."

"Well, whatever it was"—she paused, and laughed with a plaintive timidity—"why, just don't trouble about it!"

"Do I look very much troubled?" he asked seriously.

"Yes. And you don't look very gay when you're not!" She laughed with more assurance now. "I think you're always the wistfulest looking man I ever saw."

"Everybody laughs at me, I believe," he said, with continued seriousness. "Even Ray Vilas thinks I'm an utter fool. Am I, do *you* think?"

He turned as he spoke and glanced inquiringly into her eyes. What he saw surprised and dismayed him.

"For heaven's sake, don't cry!" he whispered hurriedly.

She bent her head, turning her face from him.

"I've been very hopeful lately," he said. "Cora has been so kind to me since I did what she wanted me to, that I——" He gave a deep sigh. "But if you're *that* sorry for me, my chances with her must be pretty desperate."

She did not alter her attitude, but with her down-bent face still away from him, said huskily: "It isn't you I'm sorry for. You mustn't ever give up; you must keep on trying and trying. If you give up, I don't know what will become of her!"

A moment later she rose suddenly to her feet. “Let’s finish our dance,” she said, giving him her hand. “I’m sure I won’t stumble again.”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The two girls let themselves into the house noiselessly, and, turning out the hall-light, left for them by their mother, crept upstairs on tiptoe; and went through the upper hall directly to Laura's room—Cora's being nearer the sick-room. At their age it is proper that a gayety be used three times: in anticipation, and actually, and in after-rehearsal. The last was of course now in order: they went to Laura's room to "talk it over." There was no gas-fixture in this small chamber; but they found Laura's oil-lamp burning brightly upon her writing-table.

"How queer!" said Laura with some surprise, as she closed the door. "Mother never leaves the lamp lit for me; she's always so afraid of lamps exploding."

"Perhaps Miss Peirce came in here to read, and forgot to turn it out," suggested Cora, seating herself on the edge of the bed and letting her silk wrap fall from her shoulders. "Oh, Laura, wasn't he gorgeous. . . ."

She referred to the gallant defender of our seas, it appeared, and while Laura undressed and got into a wrapper, Cora recounted in detail the history of the impetuous sailor's enthrallment;—a resume predicted three hours earlier by a gleeful whisper hissed across the maritime shoulder as the sisters swung near each other during a waltz: "*proposed*!"

"I've always heard they're horribly inconstant," she said, regretfully. "But, oh, Laura, wasn't he beautiful to look at! Do you think he's more beautiful than Val? No—don't tell me if you do. I don't want to hear it! Val was so provoking: he didn't seem to mind it at all. He's nothing but a big brute sometimes: he wouldn't even admit that he minded, when I asked him. I was idiot enough to ask; I couldn't help it; he was so tantalizing and exasperating—laughing at me. I never knew anybody like him; he's so sure of himself and he can be so cold. Sometimes I wonder if he really cares about anything, deep down in his heart—anything except himself. He seems so selfish: there are times when he almost makes me hate him; but just when I get to thinking I do, I find I don't—he's so deliciously strong, and

there's such a *big* luxury in being understood: I always feel he *knows* me clear to the bone, somehow! But, oh," she sighed regretfully, "doesn't a uniform become a man? They ought to all wear 'em. It would look silly on such a little goat as that Wade Trumble, though: nothing could make him look like a whole man. Did you see him glaring at me? Beast! I was going to be so nice and kittenish and do all my prettiest tricks for him, to help Val with his oil company. Val thinks Wade would come in yet, if I'D only get him in the mood to have another talk with Val about it; but the spiteful little rat wouldn't come near me. I believe that was one of the reasons Val laughed at me and pretended not to mind my getting proposed to. He *must* have minded; he couldn't have helped minding it, really. That's his way; he's so *mean*—he won't show things. He knows *me*. I can't keep anything from him; he reads *me* like a signboard; and then about himself he keeps me guessing, and I can't tell when I've guessed right. Ray Vilas behaved disgustingly, of course; he was horrid and awful. I might have expected it. I suppose Richard was wailing *his* tiresome sorrows on your poor shoulder ——"

"No," said Laura. "He was very cheerful. He seemed glad you were having a good time."

"He didn't look particularly cheerful at me. I never saw so slow a man: I wonder when he's going to find out about that pendant. Val would have seen it the instant I put it on. And, oh, Laura! isn't George Wattling funny? He's just *soft*! He's good-looking though," she continued pensively, adding, "I promised to motor out to the Country Club with him to-morrow for tea."

"Oh, Cora," protested Laura, "no! Please don't!"

"I've promised; so I'll have to, now." Cora laughed. "It'll do Mary Kane good. Oh, I'm not going to bother much with *him*—he makes me tired. I never saw anything so complacent as that girl when she came in to-night, as if her little Georgie was the greatest capture the world had ever seen. . . ."

She chattered on. Laura, passive, listened with a thoughtful expression, somewhat preoccupied. The talker yawned at last.

"It must be after three," she said, listlessly, having gone over her evening so often that the colours were beginning to fade. She yawned again.

“Laura,” she remarked absently, “I don’t see how you can sleep in this bed; it sags so.”

“I’ve never noticed it,” said her sister. “It’s a very comfortable old bed.”

Cora went to her to be unfastened, reverting to the lieutenant during the operation, and kissing the tire-woman warmly at its conclusion. “You’re always so sweet to me, Laura,” she said affectionately. “I don’t know how you manage it. You’re so good”—she laughed—“sometimes I wonder how you stand me. If I were you, I’m positive I couldn’t stand me at all!” Another kiss and a hearty embrace, and she picked up her wrap and skurried silently through the hall to her own room.

It was very late, but Laura wrote for almost an hour in her book (which was undisturbed) before she felt drowsy. Then she extinguished the lamp, put the book away and got into bed.

It was almost as if she had attempted to lie upon the empty air: the mattress sagged under her weight as if it had been a hammock; and something tore with a ripping sound. There was a crash, and a choked yell from a muffled voice somewhere, as the bed gave way. For an instant, Laura fought wildly in an entanglement of what she insufficiently perceived to be springs, slats and bedclothes with something alive squirming underneath. She cleared herself and sprang free, screaming, but even in her fright she remembered her father and clapped her hand over her mouth that she might keep from screaming again. She dove at the door, opened it, and fled through the hall to Cora’s room, still holding her hand over her mouth.

“Cora! Oh, Cora!” she panted, and flung herself upon her sister’s bed.

Cora was up instantly; and had lit the gas in a trice. “There’s a burglar!” Laura contrived to gasp. “In my room! Under the bed!”

“What!”

“I fell on him! Something’s the matter with the bed. It broke. I fell on him!”

Cora stared at her wide-eyed. “Why, it can’t be. Think how long I was in there. Your bed broke, and you just thought there was some one there. You

imagined it."

"No, no, no!" wailed Laura. "I *heard* him: he gave a kind of dreadful grunt."

"Are you sure?"

"*Sure*? He wriggled—oh! I could *feel* him!"

Cora seized a box of matches again. "I'm going to find out." "Oh, no, no!" protested Laura, cowering.

"Yes, I am. If there's a burglar in the house I'm going to find him!"

"We mustn't wake papa."

"No, nor mamma either. You stay here if you want to——"

"Let's call Hedrick," suggested the pallid Laura; "or put our heads out of the window and scream for——"

Cora laughed; she was not in the least frightened. "That wouldn't wake papa, of course! If we had a telephone I'd send for the police; but we haven't. I'm going to see if there's any one there. A burglar's a man, I guess, and I can't imagine myself being afraid of any *man*!"

Laura clung to her, but Cora shook her off and went through the hall undaunted, Laura faltering behind her. Cora lighted matches with a perfectly steady hand; she hesitated on the threshold of Laura's room no more than a moment, then lit the lamp.

Laura stifled a shriek at sight of the bed. "Look, look!" she gasped.

"There's no one under it now, that's certain," said Cora, and boldly lifted a corner of it. "Why, it's been cut all to pieces from underneath! You're right; there was some one here. It's practically dismembered. Don't you remember my telling you how it sagged? And I was only sitting on the edge of it! The slats have all been moved out of place, and as for the mattress, it's just a mess of springs and that stuffing stuff. He must have thought the silver was hidden there."

"Oh, oh, oh!" moaned Laura. "He *wriggled*——ugh!"

Cora picked up the lamp. “Well, we’ve got to go over the house——”

“No, no!”

“Hush! I’ll go alone then.”

“You *can’t*.”

“I will, though!”

The two girls had changed places in this emergency. In her fright Laura was dependent, clinging: actual contact with the intruder had unnerved her. It took all her will to accompany her sister upon the tour of inspection, and throughout she cowered behind the dauntless Cora. It was the first time in their lives that their positions had been reversed. From the days of Cora’s babyhood, Laura had formed the habit of petting and shielding the little sister, but now that the possibility became imminent of confronting an unknown and dangerous man, Laura was so shaken that, overcome by fear, she let Cora go first. Cora had not boasted in vain of her bravery; in truth, she was not afraid of any man.

They found the fastenings of the doors secure and likewise those of all the windows, until they came to the kitchen. There, the cook had left a window up, which plausibly explained the marauder’s mode of ingress. Then, at Cora’s insistence, and to Laura’s shivering horror, they searched both cellar and garret, and concluded that he had escaped by the same means. Except Laura’s bed, nothing in the house had been disturbed; but this eccentricity on the part of a burglar, though it indeed struck the two girls as peculiar, was not so pointedly mysterious to them as it might have been had they possessed a somewhat greater familiarity with the habits of criminals whose crimes are professional.

They finally retired, Laura sleeping with her sister, and Cora had begun to talk of the lieutenant again, instead of the burglar, before Laura fell asleep.

In spite of the short hours for sleep, both girls appeared at the breakfast-table before the meal was over, and were naturally pleased with the staccato of excitement evoked by their news. Mrs. Madison and Miss Peirce were

warm in admiration of their bravery, but in the same breath condemned it as foolhardy.

“I never knew such wonderful girls!” exclaimed the mother, almost tearfully. “You crazy little lions! To think of your not even waking Hedrick! And you didn’t have even a poker and were in your bare feet—and went down in the *cellar*——”

“It was all Cora,” protested Laura. “I’m a hopeless, disgusting coward. I never knew what a coward I was before. Cora carried the lamp and went ahead like a drum-major. I just trailed along behind her, ready to shriek and run—or faint!”

“Could you tell anything about him when you fell on him?” inquired Miss Peirce. “What was his voice like when he shouted?”

“Choked. It was a horrible, jolted kind of cry. It hardly sounded human.”

“Could you tell anything about whether he was a large man, or small, or ——”

“Only that he seemed very active. He seemed to be kicking. He *wriggled* ——ugh!”

They evolved a plausible theory of the burglar’s motives and line of reasoning. “You see,” said Miss Peirce, much stirred, in summing up the adventure, “he either jimmies the window, or finds it open already, and Sarah’s mistaken and she *did* leave it open! Then he searched the downstairs first, and didn’t find anything. Then he came upstairs, and was afraid to come into any of the rooms where we were. He could tell which rooms had people in them by hearing us breathing through the keyholes. He finds two rooms empty, and probably he made a thorough search of Miss Cora’s first. But he isn’t after silver toilet articles and pretty little things like that. He wants really big booty or none, so he decides that an out-of-the-way, unimportant room like Miss Laura’s is where the family would be most apt to hide valuables, jewellery and silver, and he knows that mattresses have often been selected as hiding-places; so he gets under the bed and goes to work. Then Miss Cora and Miss Laura come in so quietly —not wanting to wake anybody—that he doesn’t hear them, and he gets caught there. That’s the way it must have been.”

“But why,” Mrs. Madison inquired of this authority, “why do you suppose he lit the lamp?”

“To see by,” answered the ready Miss Peirce. It was accepted as final.

Further discussion was temporarily interrupted by the discovery that Hedrick had fallen asleep in his chair.

“Don’t bother him, Cora,” said his mother. “He’s finished eating—let him sleep a few minutes, if he wants to, before he goes to school. He’s not at all well. He played too hard, yesterday afternoon, and hurt his knee, he said. He came down limping this morning and looking very badly. He oughtn’t to run and climb about the stable so much after school. See how utterly exhausted he looks!—Not even this excitement can keep him awake.”

“I think we must be careful not to let Mr. Madison suspect anything about the burglar,” said Miss Peirce. “It would be bad for him.”

Laura began: “But we ought to notify the police——”

“Police!” Hedrick woke so abruptly, and uttered the word with such passionate and vehement protest, that everybody started. “I suppose you want to *kill* your father, Laura Madison!”

“How?”

“Do you suppose he wouldn’t know something had happened with a squad of big, heavy policemen tromping all over the house? The first thing they’d do would be to search the whole place——”

“Oh, no,” said Mrs. Madison quickly. “It wouldn’t do at all.”

“I should think not! I’m glad,” continued Hedrick, truthfully, “*that* idea’s out of your head! I believe Laura imagined the whole thing anyway.”

“Have you looked at her mattress,” inquired Cora, “darling little boy?”

He gave her a concentrated look, and rose to leave. “Nothin’ on earth but imagina——” He stopped with a grunt as he forgetfully put his weight on

his left leg. He rubbed his knee, swallowed painfully, and, leaving the word unfinished, limped haughtily from the room.

He left the house, gloomily swinging his books from a spare length of strap, and walking with care to ease his strains and bruises as much as possible. He was very low in his mind, that boy. His fortunes had reached the ebb-tide, but he had no hope of a rise. He had no hope of anything. It was not even a consolation that, through his talent for surprise in waylayings, it had lately been thought necessary, by the Villard family, to have Egerton accompanied to and from school by a man-servant. Nor was Hedrick more deeply depressed by the certainty that both public and domestic scandal must soon arise from the inevitable revelation of his discontinuing his attendance at school without mentioning this important change of career at home. He had been truant a full fortnight, under brighter circumstances a matter for a lawless pride—now he had neither fear nor vainglory. There was no room in him for anything but dejection.

He walked two blocks in the direction of his school; turned a corner; walked half a block; turned north in the alley which ran parallel to Corliss Street, and a few moments later had cautiously climbed into an old, disused refuse box which stood against the rear wall of the empty stable at his own home. He pried up some loose boards at the bottom of the box, and entered a tunnel which had often and often served in happier days—when he had friends—for the escape of Union officers from Libby Prison and Andersonville. Emerging, wholly soiled, into a box-stall, he crossed the musty carriage house and ascended some rickety steps to a long vacant coachman’s-room, next to the hayloft. He closed the door, bolted it, and sank moodily upon a broken, old horsehair sofa.

This apartment was his studio. In addition to the sofa, it contained an ex-bureau, three chair-like shapes, a once marble-topped table, now covered with a sheet of zinc, two empty bird cages, and a condemned whatnot. The walls were rather over-decorated in coloured chalks, the man-headed-snake motive predominating; they were also loopholed for firing into the hayloft. Upon the table lay a battered spy-glass, minus lenses, and, nearby, two boxes, one containing dried corn-silk, the other hayseed, convenient for the making of amateur cigarettes; the smoker’s outfit being completed by a neat pile of rectangular clippings from newspapers. On the shelves of the

whatnot were some fragments of a dead pie, the relics of a “Fifteen-Puzzle,” a pink Easter-egg, four seashells, a tambourine with part of a girl’s face still visible in aged colours, about two thirds of a hot-water bag, a tintype of Hedrick, and a number of books: several by Henty, “Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea,” “100 Practical Jokes, Easy to Perform,” “The Jungle Book,” “My Lady Rotha,” a “Family Atlas,” “Three Weeks,” “Pilgrim’s Progress,” “A Boy’s Life in Camp,” and “The Mystery of the Count’s Bedroom.”

The gloomy eye of Hedrick wandered to “The Mystery of the Count’s Bedroom,” and remained fixed upon it moodily and contemptuously. His own mystery made that one seem tame and easy: Laura’s bedroom laid it all over the Count’s, in his conviction; and with a soul too weary of pain to shudder, he reviewed the bafflements and final catastrophe of the preceding night.

He had not essayed the attempt upon the mattress until assured that the house was wrapped in slumber. Then, with hope in his heart, he had stolen to Laura’s room, lit the lamp, feeling safe from intrusion, and set to work. His implement at first was a long hatpin of Cora’s. Lying on his back beneath the bed, and, moving the slats as it became necessary, he sounded every cubic inch of the mysterious mattress without encountering any obstruction which could reasonably be supposed to be the ledger. This was not more puzzling than it was infuriating, since by all processes of induction, deduction, and pure logic, the thing was necessarily there. It was nowhere else. Therefore it was there. It *had* to be there! With the great blade of his Boy Scout’s knife he began to disembowel the mattress.

For a time he had worked furiously and effectively, but the position was awkward, the search laborious, and he was obliged to rest frequently. Besides, he had waited to a later hour than he knew, for his mother to go to bed, and during one of his rests he incautiously permitted his eyes to close. When he woke, his sisters were in the room, and he thought it advisable to remain where he was, though he little realized how he had weakened his shelter. When Cora left the room, he heard Laura open the window, sigh, and presently a tiny clinking and a click set him a-tingle from head to foot: she was opening the padlocked book. The scratching sound of a pen

followed. And yet she had not come near the bed. The mattress, then, was a living lie.

With infinite caution he had moved so that he could see her, arriving at a coign of vantage just as she closed the book. She locked it, wrapped it in an oilskin cover which lay beside it on the table, hung the key-chain round her neck, rose, yawned, and, to his violent chagrin, put out the light. He heard her moving but could not tell where, except that it was not in his part of the room. Then a faint shuffling warned him that she was approaching the bed, and he withdrew his head to avoid being stepped upon. The next moment the world seemed to cave in upon him.

Laura's flight had given him opportunity to escape to his own room unobserved; there to examine, bathe and bind his wounds, and to rectify his first hasty impression that he had been fatally mangled.

Hedrick glared at "The Mystery of the Count's Bedroom."

By and by he got up, brought the book to the sofa and began to read it over.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

The influence of a familiar and sequestered place is not only soothing; the bruised mind may often find it restorative. Thus Hedrick, in his studio, surrounded by his own loved bric-a-brac, began to feel once more the stir of impulse. Two hours' reading inspired him. What a French reporter (in the Count's bedroom) could do, an American youth in full possession of his powers—except for a strained knee and other injuries—could do. Yes, and would!

He evolved a new chain of reasoning. The ledger had been seen in Laura's room; it had been heard in her room; it appeared to be kept in her room. But it was in no single part of the room. All the parts make a whole. Therefore, the book was not in the room.

On the other hand, Laura had not left the room when she took the book from its hiding-place. This was confusing; therefore he determined to concentrate logic solely upon what she had done with the ledger when she finished writing in it. It was dangerous to assume that she had restored it to the place whence she obtained it, because he had already proved that place to be both in the room and out of the room. No; the question he must keep in was: What did she do with it?

Laura had not left the room. But the book had left the room.

Arrived at this inevitable deduction, he sprang to his feet in a state of repressed excitement and began to pace the floor—like a hound on the trail. Laura had not left the room, but the book had left the room: he must keep his mind upon this point. He uttered a loud exclamation and struck the zinc table-top a smart blow with his clenched fist.

Laura had thrown the book out of the window!

In the exaltation of this triumph, he forgot that it was not yet the hour for a scholar's reappearance, and went forth in haste to search the ground beneath the window—a disappointing quest, for nowhere in the yard was

there anything but withered grass, and the rubbish of other frost-bitten vegetation. His mother, however, discovered something else, and, opening the kitchen window, she asked, with surprise:

“Why, Hedrick, what on earth are you doing here?”

“Me?” inquired Hedrick.

“What are you doing here?”

“Here?” Evidently she puzzled him.

She became emphatic. “I want to know what you are doing.”

“Just standing here,” he explained in a meek, grieved way.

“But why aren’t you at school?”

This recalled what he had forgotten, and he realized the insecurity of his position. “Oh, yes,” he said—“school. Did you ask me——”

“Didn’t you go to school?”

He began to speak rapidly. “Didn’t I go to *school*? Well, where else could I go? Just because I’m here now doesn’t mean I didn’t *go*, does it? Because a person is in China right now wouldn’t have to mean he’d never been in South America, would it?”

“Then what’s the matter?”

“Well, I was going along, and you know I didn’t feel very well and——” He paused, with the advent of a happier idea, then continued briskly: “But that didn’t stop me, because I thought I ought to go if I dropped, so I went ahead, but the teacher was sick and they couldn’t get a substitute. She must have been pretty sick, she looked so pale——”

“They dismissed the class?”

“And I don’t have to go to-morrow either.”

“I see,” said his mother. “But if you feel ill, Hedrick, hadn’t you better come in and lie down?”

“I think it’s kind of passing off. The fresh air seems to be doing me good.”

“Be careful of your sore knee, dear.” She closed the window, and he was left to continue his operations in safety.

Laura had thrown the ledger out of the window; that was proved absolutely. Obviously, she had come down before daylight and retrieved it. Or, she had not. Proceeding on the assumption that she had not, he lifted his eyes and searched the air. Was it possible that the book, though thrown from the window, had never reached the ground? The branches of an old and stalwart maple, now almost divested of leaves, extended in rough symmetry above him, and one big limb, reaching out toward the house, came close to Laura’s windows. Triumph shown again from the shrewd countenance of the sleuth: Laura must have slid the ledger along a wire into a hollow branch. However, no wire was to be seen—and the shrewd countenance of the sleuth fell. But perhaps she had constructed a device of silk threads, invisible from below, which carried the book into the tree. Action!

He climbed carefully but with many twinges, finally pausing in a parlous situation not far from the mysterious window which Laura had opened the night before. A comprehensive survey of the tree revealed only the very patent fact that none of the branches was of sufficient diameter to conceal the ledger. No silk threads came from the window. He looked and looked and looked at that window; then his eye fell a little, halted less than three feet below the window-ledge, and the search was ended.

The kitchen window which his mother had opened was directly beneath Laura’s, and was a very long, narrow window, in the style of the house, and there was a protecting stone ledge above it. Upon this ledge lay the book, wrapped in its oil-skin covering and secured from falling by a piece of broken iron hooping, stuck in the mortar of the bricks. It could be seen from nowhere save an upper window of the house next door, or from the tree itself, and in either case only when the leaves had fallen.

Laura had felt very safe. No one had ever seen the book except that night, early in August, when, for a better circulation of air, she had left her door open as she wrote, and Hedrick had come upon her. He had not spoken of it again; she perceived that he had forgotten it; and she herself forgot that the

memory of a boy is never to be depended on; its forgettings are too seldom permanent in the case of things that ought to stay forgotten.

To get the book one had only to lean from the window.

* * *

Hedrick seemed so ill during lunch that his mother spoke of asking Doctor Sloane to look at him, if he did not improve before evening. Hedrick said meekly that perhaps that would be best—if he did not improve. After a futile attempt to eat, he courteously excused himself from the table—a ceremony which made even Cora fear that his case might be serious—and, going feebly to the library, stretched himself upon the sofa. His mother put a rug over him; Hedrick, thanking her touchingly, closed his eyes; and she went away, leaving him to slumber.

After a time, Laura came into the room on an errand, walking noiselessly, and, noticing that his eyes were open, apologized for waking him.

“Never mind,” he returned, in the tone of an invalid. “I didn’t sleep sound. I think there’s something the matter inside my head: I have such terrible dreams. I guess maybe it’s better for me to keep awake. I’m kind of afraid to go to sleep. Would you mind staying here with me a little while?”

“Certainly I’ll stay,” she said, and, observing that his cheeks were flushed, and his eyes unusually bright, she laid a cool hand on his forehead. “You haven’t any fever, dear; that’s good. You’ll be all right to-morrow. Would you like me to read to you?”

“I believe,” he answered, plaintively, “reading might kind of disturb my mind: my brain feels so sort of restless and queer. I’d rather play some kind of game.”

“Cards?”

“No, not cards exactly. Something’ I can do lying down. Oh, I know! You remember the one where we drew pictures and the others had to guess what they were? Well, I’ve invented a game like that. You sit down at the desk over there and take some sheets of paper. I’ll tell you the rest.”

She obeyed. “What next?”

“Now, I’ll describe some people and where they live and not tell who they are, and you see if you can guess their names and addresses.”

“Addresses, too?”

“Yes, because I’m going to describe the way their houses look. Write each name on a separate sheet of paper, and the number of their house below it if you know it, and if you don’t know it, just the street. If it’s a woman: put `Miss’ or `Mrs.’ before their name and if it’s a man write `Esquire’ after it.”

“Is all that necessary for the game?”

“It’s the way I invented it and I think you might——”

“Oh, all right,” she acquiesced, good-naturedly. “It shall be according to your rules.”

“Then afterward, you give me the sheets of paper with the names and addresses written on ’em, and we—we——” He hesitated.

“Yes. What do we do then?”

“I’ll tell you when we come to it.” But when that stage of his invention was reached, and Laura had placed the inscribed sheets in his hand, his interest had waned, it appeared. Also, his condition had improved.

“Let’s quit. I thought this game would be more exciting,” he said, sitting up. “I guess,” he added with too much modesty, “I’m not very good at inventing games. I b’lieve I’ll go out to the barn; I think the fresh air——”

“Do you feel well enough to go out?” she asked. “You do seem to be all right, though.”

“Yes, I’m a lot better, I think.” He limped to the door. “The fresh air will be the best thing for me.”

She did not notice that he carelessly retained her contributions to the game, and he reached his studio with them in his hand. Hedrick had entered the ‘teens and he was a reader: things in his head might have dismayed a Borgia.

No remotest glimpse entered that head of the enormity of what he did. To put an end to his punishing of Cora, and, to render him powerless against that habitual and natural enemy, Laura had revealed a horrible incident in his career—it had become a public scandal; he was the sport of fools; and it might be months before the thing was lived down. Now he had the means, as he believed, to even the score with both sisters at a stroke. To him it was turning a tremendous and properly scathing joke upon them. He did not hesitate.

* * *

That evening, as Richard Lindley sat at dinner with his mother, Joe Varden temporarily abandoned his attendance at the table to answer the front doorbell. Upon his return, he remarked:

“Messenger-boy mus’ been in big hurry. Wouldn’ wait till I git to door.”

“What was it?” asked Richard.

“Boy with package. Least, I reckon it were a boy. Call’ back from the front walk, say he couldn’ wait. Say he lef’ package in vestibule.”

“What sort of a package?”

“Middle-size kind o’ big package.”

“Why don’t you see what it is, Richard?” Mrs. Lindley asked of her son. “Bring it to the table, Joe.”

When it was brought, Richard looked at the superscription with surprise. The wrapper was of heavy brown paper, and upon it a sheet of white notepaper had been pasted, with the address:

“Richard Lindley, Esq.,
1218 Corliss Street.”

“It’s from Laura Madison,” he said, staring at this writing. “What in the world would Laura be sending me?”

“You might possibly learn by opening it,” suggested his mother. “I’ve seen men puzzle over the outside of things quite as often as women. Laura Madison is a nice girl.” She never volunteered similar praise of Laura

Madison's sister. Mrs. Lindley had submitted to her son's plans concerning Cora, lately confided; but her submission lacked resignation.

"It's a book," said Richard, even more puzzled, as he took the ledger from its wrappings. "Two little torn places at the edge of the covers. Looks as if it had once had clasps——"

"Perhaps it's the Madison family album," Mrs. Lindley suggested. "Pictures of Cora since infancy. I imagine she's had plenty taken."

"No." He opened the book and glanced at the pages covered in Laura's clear, readable hand. "No, it's about half full of writing. Laura must have turned literary." He read a line or two, frowning mildly. "My soul! I believe it's a novel! She must think I'm a critic—to want me to read it." Smiling at the idea, he closed the ledger. "I'll take it upstairs to my hang-out after dinner, and see if Laura's literary manner has my august approval. Who in the world would ever have thought she'd decide to set up for a writer?"

"I imagine she might have something to write worth reading," said his mother. "I've always thought she was an interesting-looking girl."

"Yes, she is. She dances well, too."

"Of course," continued Mrs. Lindley, thoughtfully, "she seldom *says* anything interesting, but that may be because she so seldom has a chance to say anything at all."

Richard refused to perceive this allusion. "Curious that Laura should have sent it to me," he said. "She's never seemed interested in my opinion about anything. I don't recall her ever speaking to me on any subject whatever—except one."

He returned his attention to his plate, but his mother did not appear to agree with him that the topic was exhausted.

"`Except one'?" she repeated, after waiting for some time.

"Yes," he replied, in his habitual preoccupied and casual tone. "Or perhaps two. Not more than two, I should say—and in a way you'd call that only one, of course. Bread, Joe."

“What two, Richard?”

“Cora,” he said, with gentle simplicity, “and me.”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Mrs. Lindley had arranged for her son a small apartment on the second floor, and it was in his own library and smoking-room that Richard, comfortable in a leather-chair by a reading-lamp, after dinner, opened Laura's ledger.

The first page displayed no more than a date now eighteen months past, and the line:

"Love came to me to-day."

The next page was dated the next day, and, beneath, he read:

"That was all I *could* write, yesterday. I think I was too excited to write. Something seemed to be singing in my breast. I couldn't think in sentences—not even in words. How queer it is that I had decided to keep a diary, and bound this book for it, and now the first thing I have written in it was *that*! It will not be a diary. It shall be *your* book. I shall keep it sacred to You and write to You in it. How strange it will be if the day ever comes when I shall show it to You! If it should, you would not laugh at it, for of course the day couldn't come unless you understood. I cannot think it will ever come—that day! But maybe—— No, I mustn't let myself hope too much that it will, because if I got to hoping too much, and you didn't like me, it would hurt too much. People who expect nothing are never disappointed—I must keep that in mind. Yet *every* girl has a *right* to hope for her own man to come for her some time, hasn't she? It's not easy to discipline the wanting to hope—since *yesterday*!

"I think I must always have thought a great deal about you without knowing it. We really know so little what we think: our minds are going on all the time and we hardly notice them. It is like a queer sort of factory—the owner only looks in once in a while and most of the time hasn't any idea what sort of goods his spindles are turning out.

"I saw You yesterday! It seems to me the strangest thing in the world. I've seen you by chance, probably two or three times a month nearly all my

life, though you so seldom come here to call. And this time wasn't different from dozens of other times—you were just standing on the corner by the Richfield, waiting for a car. The only possible difference is that you had been out of town for several months—Cora said so this morning—and how ridiculous it seems now, didn't even know it! I hadn't noticed it—not with the top part of my mind, but perhaps the deep part that does the real thinking had noticed it and had mourned your absence and was so glad to see you again that it made the top part suddenly see the wonderful truth!"

Lindley set down the ledger to relight his cigar. It struck him that Laura had been writing "very odd Stuff," but interesting; and certainly it was not a story. Vaguely he recalled Marie Bashkirtseff: hadn't she done something like this? He resumed the reading:

"You turned and spoke to me in that lovely, cordial, absent-minded way of yours—though I'd never thought (with the top part) what a lovely way it was; and for a moment I only noticed how nice you looked in a light gray suit, because I'd only seen you in black for so long, while you'd been in mourning for your brother."

Richard, disturbed by an incredible idea, read these last words over and then dismissed the notion as nonsense.

". . . While you'd been in mourning for your brother—and it struck me that light gray was becoming to you. Then such a queer thing happened: I felt the great kindness of your eyes. I thought they were full of—the only word that seems to express it at all is *charity*—and they had a sweet, faraway look, too, and I've *always* thought that a look of wistful kindness was the loveliest look in the world—and you had it, and I saw it and then suddenly, as you held your hat in your hand, the sunshine on your hair seemed brighter than any sunshine I had ever seen—and I began to tremble all over. I didn't understand what was the matter with me or what had made me afraid with you not of you—all at once, but I was so hopelessly rattled that instead of waiting for the car, as I'd just told you I meant to, I said I'd decided to walk, and got away—without any breath left to breathe with! I *couldn't* have gotten on the car with you—- and I couldn't have spoken another word.

“And as I walked home, trembling all the way, I saw that strange, dazzling sunshine on your hair, and the wistful, kind look in your eyes—you seemed not to have taken the car but to have come with me—and I was uplifted and exalted oh, so strangely—oh, how the world was changing for me! And when I got near home, I began to walk faster, and on the front path I broke into a run and rushed in the house to the piano—and it was as if my fingers were thirsty for the keys! Then I saw that I was playing to you and knew that I loved you.

“I love you!

“How different everything is now from everything before. Music means what it never did: Life has leaped into blossom for me. Everywhere there is colour and radiance that I had never seen—the air is full of perfume. Dear, the sunshine that fell upon your head has spread over the world!

“I understand, as I never understood, that the world—so dazzling to me now—was made for love and is meaningless without it. The years until yesterday are gray—no, not gray, because that was the colour You were wearing—not gray, because that is a beautiful colour. The empty years until yesterday had no colour at all. Yes, the world has meaning only through loving, and without meaning there is no real life. We live only by loving, and now that this gift of life has come to me I love *all* the world. I feel that I must be so kind, kind, *kind* to *everybody*! Such an odd thing struck me as my greatest wish. When I was little, I remember grandmother telling me how, when she was a child in pioneer days, the women made the men’s clothes—homespun—and how a handsome young Circuit Rider, who was a bachelor, seemed to her the most beautifully dressed man she had ever seen. The women of the different churches made his clothes, as they did their husbands’ and brothers.’ you see—only better! It came into my head that that would be the divinest happiness that I could know—to sew for you! If you and I lived in those old, old times—you *look* as if you belonged to them, you know, dear—and You were the young minister riding into the settlement on a big bay horse—and all the girls at the window, of course!—and I sewing away at the homespun for you!—I think all the angels of heaven would be choiring in my heart—and what thick, warm clothes I’d make you for winter! Perhaps in heaven they’ll let some of the women sew for the men they love—I wonder!

“I hear Cora’s voice from downstairs as I write. She’s often so angry with Ray, poor girl. It does not seem to me that she and Ray really belong to each other, though they *say* so often that they do.”

Richard having read thus far with a growing, vague uneasiness, looked up, frowning. He hoped Laura had no Marie Bashkirtseff idea of publishing this manuscript. It was too intimate, he thought, even if the names in it were to be disguised.

. . . “Though they *say* so often that they do. I think Ray is in love with *her*, but it can’t be like *this*. What he feels must be something wholly different—there is violence and wildness in it. And they are bitter with each other so often— always `getting even’ for something. He does care—he is frantically `*in* love’ with her, undoubtedly, but so insanely jealous. I suppose all jealousy is insane. But love is the only sanity. How can what is insane be part of it? I could not be jealous of You. I owe life to you—I have never lived till now.”

The next writing was two days later:

. . . . “To-day as I passed your house with Cora, I kept looking at the big front door at which you go in and out so often—*your* door! I never knew that just a door could look so beautiful! And unconsciously I kept my eyes on it, as we walked on, turning my head and looking and looking back at it, till Cora suddenly burst out laughing, and said: `Well, *Laura*!’ And I came to myself—and found her looking at me. It was like getting back after a journey, and for a second I was a little dazed, and Cora kept on laughing at me, and I felt myself getting red. I made some silly excuse about thinking your house had been repainted—and she laughed louder than ever. I was afraid then that she understood—I wonder if she could have? I hope not, though I love her so much I don’t know why I would rather she didn’t know, unless it is just my *feeling* about it. It is a *guardian* feeling—that I must keep for myself, the music of these angels singing in my heart—singing of You. I hope she did not understand—and I so fear she did. Why should I be so *afraid*?” . . .

. . . . “Two days since I have talked to You in your book after Cora caught me staring at your door and laughed at me—and ten minutes ago I was sitting beside the *actual* You on the porch! I am trembling yet. It was the

first time you'd come for months and months; and yet you had the air of thinking it rather a pleasant thing to do as you came up the steps! And a dizzy feeling came over me, because I wondered if it was seeing me on the street *that* day that put it into your head to come. It seemed too much happiness—and risking too much—to let myself *believe* it, but I couldn't help just wondering. I began to tremble as I saw you coming up our side of the street in the moonlight—and when you turned in here I was all panic—I nearly ran into the house. I don't know how I found voice to greet you. I didn't seem to have any breath left at all. I was so relieved when Cora took a chair between us and began to talk to you, because I'm sure I couldn't have. She and poor Ray had been having one of their quarrels and she was punishing him. Poor boy, he seemed so miserable—though he tried to talk to me—about politics, I think, though I'm not sure, because I couldn't listen much better than either of us could talk. I could only hear Your voice—such a rich, quiet voice, and it has a sound like the look you have—friendly and faraway and wistful. I have thought and thought about what it is that makes you look wistful. You have less to wish for than anybody else in the world because you have Yourself. So why are you wistful? I think it's just because you *are*!

"I heard Cora asking you why you hadn't come to see us for so long, and then she said: `Is it because you dislike me? You look at me, sometimes, as if you dislike me!' And I wished she hadn't said it. I had a feeling you wouldn't like that `personal' way of talking that she enjoys—and that—oh, it didn't seem to be in keeping with the dignity of You! And I love Cora so much I wanted her to be finer—with You. I wanted her to understand you better than to play those little charming tricks at you. You are so good, so *high*, that if she could make a real friend of you I think it would be the best thing for her that could happen. She's never had a man-*friend*. Perhaps she *was* trying to make one of you and hasn't any other way to go about it. She can be so *really* sweet, I wanted you to see that side of her.

"Afterwhile, when Ray couldn't bear it any longer to talk to me, and in his desperation brazenly took Cora to the other end of the porch almost by force, and I was left, in a way, alone with you what did you think of me? I was tongue-tied! Oh, oh, oh! You were quiet—but *I* was *dumb*! My heart wasn't dumb—it hammered! All the time I kept saying to myself such a jumble of things. And into the jumble would come such a rapture that You

were there—it was like a paean of happiness—a chanting of the glory of having You near me—I *was* mixed up! I could *play* all those confused things, but writing them doesn't tell it. Writing them would only be like this: `He's here, he's *here*! Speak, you little fool! He's here, he's here! He's sitting beside you! *speak*, idiot, or he'll never come back! He's here, he's beside you you could put out your hand and touch him! Are you dead, that you can't speak? He's here, he's here, he's *here*!'

"Ah, some day I shall be able to talk to you—but not till I get more used to this inner song. It seems to *will* that nothing else shall come from my lips till *it* does!

"In spite of my silence—my outward woodenness—you said, as you went away, that you would come again! You said `soon'! I could only nod but Cora called from the other end of the porch and asked: `*How* soon?' Oh, I bless her for it, because you said, `Day after to-morrow.' Day after tomorrow! Day after to-morrow! *Day after tomorrow*!

. . . . "Twenty-one hours since I wrote—no, *sang*—`Day after to-morrow!' And now it is `To-morrow!' Oh, the slow, golden day that this has been! I could not stay in the house—I walked—no, I *winged*! I was in the open country before I knew it—with You! For You are in everything. I never knew the sky was blue, before. Until now I just thought it was the sky. The whitest clouds I ever saw sailed over that blue, and I stood upon the prow of each in turn, then leaped in and swam to the next and sailed with *it*! Oh, the beautiful sky, and kind, green woods and blessed, long, white, dusty country road! Never in my life shall I forget that walk—this day in the open with my love—You! To-morrow! To-morrow! To-morrow! *To-morrow*!"

The next writing in Laura's book was dated more than two months later:

. . . . "I have decided to write again in this book. I have thought it all out carefully, and I have come to the conclusion that it can do no harm and may help me to be steady and sensible. It is the thought, not its expression, that is guilty, but I do not believe that my thoughts are guilty: I believe that they are good. I know that I wish only good. I have read that when people suffer very much the best thing is for them to cry. And so I'll let myself *write* out my feelings—and perhaps get rid of some of the silly self-pity I'm foolish

enough to feel, instead of going about choked up with it. How queer it is that even when we keep our thoughts respectable we can't help having absurd *feelings* like self-pity, even though we know how rotten stupid they are! Yes, I'll let it all out here, and then, some day, when I've cured myself all whole again, I'll burn this poor, silly old book. And if I'm not cured before the wedding, I'll burn it then, anyhow.

"How funny little girls are! From the time they're little bits of things they talk about marriage—whom they are going to marry, what sort of person it will be. I think Cora and I began when she was about five and I not seven. And as girls grow up, I don't believe there was ever one who genuinely expected to be an old maid. The most unattractive young girls discuss and plan and expect marriage just as much as the prettier and gayer ones. The only way we can find out that men don't want to marry us is by their not asking us. We don't see ourselves very well, and I honestly believe we all think—way deep down—that we're pretty attractive. At least, every girl has the idea, sometimes, that if men only saw the whole truth they'd think her as nice as any other girl, and really nicer than most others. But I don't believe I have any hallucinations of that sort about myself left. I can't imagine—now—*any* man seeing anything in me that would make him care for me. I can't see anything about me to care for, myself. Sometimes I think maybe I could make a man get excited about me if I could take a startlingly personal tone with him from the beginning, making him wonder all sorts of you-and-I perhapses—but I couldn't do it very well probably—oh, I couldn't make myself do it if I could do it well! And I shouldn't think it would have much effect except upon very inexperienced men—yet it does! Now, I wonder if this is a streak of sourness coming out; I don't feel bitter—I'm just thinking honestly, I'm sure.

"Well, here I am facing it: all through my later childhood, and all through my girlhood, I believe what really occupied me most—with the thought of it underlying all things else, though often buried very deep—was the prospect of my marriage. I regarded it as a certainty: I would grow up, fall in love, get engaged, and be married—of course! So I grew up and fell in love with You—but it stops there, and I must learn how to be an Old Maid and not let anybody see that I mind it. I know this is the hardest part of it, the beginning: it will get easier by-and-by, of course. If I can just manage this part of it, it's bound not to hurt so much later on.

“Yes, I grew up and fell in love with You—for you will always be You. I’ll never, never get over *that*, my dear! You’ll never, never know it; but I shall love You always till I die, and if I’m still Me after that, I shall keep right on loving you then, of course. You see, I didn’t fall in love with you just to have you for myself. I fell in love with You! And that can never bother you at all nor ever be a shame to me that I love unsought, because you won’t know, and because it’s just an ocean of good-will, and every beat of my heart sends a new great wave of it toward you and Cora. I shall find happiness, I believe, in service—I am sure there will be times when I can serve you both. I love you both and I can serve her for You and you for her. This isn’t a hysterical mood, or a fit of `exaltation’: I have thought it all out and I know that I can live up to it. You are the best thing that can ever come into her life, and everything I can do shall be to keep you there. I must be very, very careful with her, for talk and advice do not influence her much. You love her—she has accepted you, and it is beautiful for you both. It must be kept beautiful. It has all become so clear to me: You are just what she has always needed, and if by any mischance she lost you I do not know what would become——”

“Good God!” cried Richard. He sprang to his feet, and the heavy book fell with a muffled crash upon the floor, sprawling open upon its face, its leaves in disorder. He moved away from it, staring at it in incredulous dismay. But he knew.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Memory, that drowsy custodian, had wakened slowly, during this hour, beginning the process with fitful gleams of semi-consciousness, then, irritated, searching its pockets for the keys and dazedly exploring blind passages; but now it flung wide open the gallery doors, and there, in clear light, were the rows of painted canvasses.

He remembered “that day” when he was waiting for a car, and Laura Madison had stopped for a moment, and then had gone on, saying she preferred to walk. He remembered that after he got into the car he wondered why he had not walked home with her; had thought himself “slow” for not thinking of it in time to do it. There had seemed something very “taking” about her, as she stopped and spoke to him, something enlivening and wholesome and sweet—it had struck him that Laura was a “very nice girl.” He had never before noticed how really charming she could look; in fact he had never thought much about either of the Madison sisters, who had become “young ladies” during his mourning for his brother. And this pleasant image of Laura remained with him for several days, until he decided that it might be a delightful thing to spend an evening with her. He had called, and he remembered, now, Cora’s saying to him that he looked at her sometimes as if he did not like her; he had been surprised and astonishingly pleased to detect a mysterious feeling in her about it.

He remembered that almost at once he had fallen in love with Cora: she captivated him, enraptured him, as she still did—as she always would, he felt, no matter how she treated him or what she did to him. He did not analyze the process of the captivation and enrapturement—for love is a mystery and cannot be analyzed. This is so well known that even Richard Lindley knew it, and did not try!

. . . Heartsick, he stared at the fallen book. He was a man, and here was the proffered love of a woman he did not want. There was a pathos in the ledger; it seemed to grovel, sprawling and dishevelled in the circle of lamp-light on the floor: it was as if Laura herself lay pleading at his feet, and he

looked down upon her, compassionate but revolted. He realized with astonishment from what a height she had fallen, how greatly he had respected her, how warmly liked her. What she now destroyed had been more important than he had guessed.

Simple masculine indignation rose within him: she was to have been his sister. If she had been unable to stifle this misplaced love of hers, could she not at least have kept it to herself? Laura, the self-respecting! No; she offered it—offered it to her sister's betrothed. She had written that he should "never, never know it"; that when she was "cured" she would burn the ledger. She had not burned it! There were inconsistencies in plenty in the pitiful screed, but these were the wildest—and the cheapest. In talk, she had urged him to "keep trying," for Cora, and now the sick-minded creature sent him this record. She wanted him to know. Then what else was it but a plea? "I love you. Let Cora go. Take me."

He began to walk up and down, wondering what was to be done. After a time, he picked up the book gingerly, set it upon a shelf in a dark corner, and went for a walk outdoors. The night air seemed better than that of the room that held the ledger.

At the corner a boy, running, passed him. It was Hedrick Madison, but Hedrick did not recognize Richard, nor was his mind at that moment concerned with Richard's affairs; he was on an errand of haste to Doctor Sloane. Mr. Madison had wakened from a heavy slumber unable to speak, his condition obviously much worse.

Hedrick returned in the doctor's car, and then hung uneasily about the door of the sick-room until Laura came out and told him to go to bed. In the morning, his mother did not appear at the breakfast table, Cora was serious and quiet, and Laura said that he need not go to school that day, though she added that the doctor thought their father would get "better." She looked wan and hollow-eyed: she had not been to bed, but declared that she would rest after breakfast. Evidently she had not missed her ledger; and Hedrick watched her closely, a pleasurable excitement stirring in his breast.

She did not go to her room after the meal; the house was cold, possessing no furnace, and, with Hedrick's assistance, she carried out the ashes from the library grate, and built a fire there. She had just lighted it, and the

kindling was beginning to crackle, glowing rosily over her tired face, when the bell rang.

“Will you see who it is, please, Hedrick?”

He went with alacrity, and, returning, announced in an odd voice. “It’s Dick Lindley. He wants to see you.”

“Me?” she murmured, wanly surprised. She was kneeling before the fireplace, wearing an old dress which was dusted with ashes, and upon her hands a pair of worn-out gloves of her father’s. Lindley appeared in the hall behind Hedrick, carrying under his arm something wrapped in brown paper. His expression led her to think that he had heard of her father’s relapse, and came on that account.

“Don’t look at me, Richard,” she said, smiling faintly as she rose, and stripping her hands of the clumsy gloves. “It’s good of you to come, though. Doctor Sloane thinks he is going to be better again.”

Richard inclined his head gravely, but did not speak.

“Well,” said Hedrick with a slight emphasis, “I guess I’ll go out in the yard a while.” And with shining eyes he left the room.

In the hall, out of range from the library door, he executed a triumphant but noiseless caper, and doubled with mirth, clapping his hand over his mouth to stifle the effervescings of his joy. He had recognized the ledger in the same wrapping in which he had left it in Mrs. Lindley’s vestibule. His moment had come: the climax of his enormous joke, the repayment in some small measure for the anguish he had so long endured. He crept silently back toward the door, flattened his back against the wall, and listened.

“Richard,” he heard Laura say, a vague alarm in her voice, “what is it? What is the matter?”

Then Lindley: “I did not know what to do about it. I couldn’t think of any sensible thing. I suppose what I am doing is the stupidest of all the things I thought of, but at least it’s honest—so I’ve brought it back to you myself. Take it, please.”

There was a crackling of the stiff wrapping paper, a little pause, then a strange sound from Laura. It was not vocal and no more than just audible: it was a prolonged scream in a whisper.

Hedrick ventured an eye at the crack, between the partly open door and its casing. Lindley stood with his back to him, but the boy had a clear view of Laura. She was leaning against the wall, facing Richard, the book clutched in both arms against her bosom, the wrapping paper on the floor at her feet.

“I thought of sending it back and pretending to think it had been left at my mother’s house by mistake,” said Richard sadly, “and of trying to make it seem that I hadn’t read any of it. I thought of a dozen ways to pretend I believed you hadn’t really meant me to read it——”

Making a crucial effort, she managed to speak.

“You—think I—did mean——”

“Well,” he answered, with a helpless shrug, “you sent it! But it’s what’s in it that really matters, isn’t it? I could have pretended anything in a note, I suppose, if I had written instead of coming. But I found that what I most dreaded was meeting you again, and as we’ve got to meet, of course, it seemed to me the only thing to do was to blunder through a talk with you, somehow or another, and get that part of it over. I thought the longer I put off facing you, the worse it would be for both of us—and—and the more embarrassing. I’m no good at pretending, anyhow; and the thing has happened. What use is there in not being honest? Well?”

She did not try again to speak. Her state was lamentable: it was all in her eyes.

Richard hung his head wretchedly, turning partly away from her. “There’s only one way—to look at it,” he said hesitatingly, and stammering. “That is—there’s only one thing to do: to forget that it’s happened. I’m—I—oh, well, I care for Cora altogether. She’s got never to know about this. She hasn’t any idea or—suspicion of it, has she?”

Laura managed to shake her head.

“She never must have,” he said. “Will you promise me to burn that book now?”

She nodded slowly.

“I—I’m awfully sorry, Laura,” he said brokenly. “I’m not idiot enough not to see that you’re suffering horribly. I suppose I have done the most blundering thing possible.” He stood a moment, irresolute, then turned to the door. “Good-bye.”

Hedrick had just time to dive into the hideous little room of the multitudinous owls as Richard strode into the hall. Then, with the closing of the front door, the boy was back at his post.

Laura stood leaning against the wall, the book clutched in her arms, as Richard had left her. Slowly she began to sink, her eyes wide open, and, with her back against the wall, she slid down until she was sitting upon the floor. Her arms relaxed and hung limp at her sides, letting the book topple over in her lap, and she sat motionless.

One of her feet protruded from her skirt, and the leaping firelight illumined it ruddily. It was a graceful foot in an old shoe which had been re-soled and patched. It seemed very still, that patched shoe, as if it might stay still forever. Hedrick knew that Laura had not fainted, but he wished she would move her foot.

He went away. He went into the owl-room again, and stood there silently a long, long time. Then he stole back again toward the library door, but caught a glimpse of that old, motionless shoe through the doorway as he came near. Then he spied no more. He went out to the stable, and, secluding himself in his studio, sat moodily to meditate.

Something was the matter. Something had gone wrong. He had thrown a bomb which he had expected to go off with a stupendous bang, leaving him, as the smoke cleared, looking down in merry triumph, stinging his fallen enemies with his humour, withering them with satire, and inquiring of them how it felt, now *they* were getting it. But he was decidedly untriumphant: he wished Laura had moved her foot and that she hadn’t that patch upon her shoe. He could not get his mind off that patch. He began to feel very queer:

it seemed to be somehow because of the patch. If she had worn a pair of new shoes that morning. . . . Yes, it was that patch.

Thirteen is a dangerous age: nothing is more subtle. The boy, inspired to play the man, is beset by his own relapses into childhood, and Hedrick was near a relapse.

By and by, he went into the house again, to the library. Laura was not there, but he found the fire almost smothered under heaping ashes. She had burned her book.

He went into the room where the piano was, and played “The Girl on the Saskatchewan” with one finger; then went out to the porch and walked up and down, whistling cheerily.

After that, he went upstairs and asked Miss Peirce how his father was “feeling,” receiving a noncommital reply; looked in at Cora’s room; saw that his mother was lying asleep on Cora’s bed and Cora herself examining the contents of a dressing-table drawer; and withdrew. A moment later, he stood in the passage outside Laura’s closed door listening. There was no sound.

He retired to his own chamber, found it unbearable, and, fascinated by Laura’s, returned thither; and, after standing a long time in the passage, knocked softly on the door.

“Laura,” he called, in a rough and careless voice, “it’s kind of a pretty day outdoors. If you’ve had your nap, if I was you I’d go out for a walk.” There was no response. “I’ll go with you,” he added, “if you want me to.”

He listened again and heard nothing. Then he turned the knob softly. The door was unlocked; he opened it and went in.

Laura was sitting in a chair, with her back to a window, her hands in her lap. She was staring straight in front of her.

He came near her hesitatingly, and at first she did not seem to see him or even to know that she was not alone in the room. Then she looked at him wonderingly, and, as he stood beside her, lifted her right hand and set it gently upon his head.

“Hedrick,” she said, “was it you that took my book to——”

All at once he fell upon his knees, hid his face in her lap, and burst into loud and passionate sobbing.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Valentine Corliss, having breakfasted in bed at a late hour that morning, dozed again, roused himself, and, making a toilet, addressed to the image in his shaving-mirror a disgusted monosyllable.

"Ass!"

However, he had not the look of a man who had played cards all night to a disastrous tune with an accompaniment in Scotch. His was a surface not easily indented: he was hard and healthy, clear-skinned and clear-eyed. When he had made himself point-device, he went into the "parlour" of his apartment, frowning at the litter of malodorous, relics, stumps and stubs and bottles and half-drained glasses, scattered chips and cards, dregs of a night session. He had been making acquaintances.

He sat at the desk and wrote with a steady hand in Italian:

MOST ILLUSTRIOUS MOLITERNO:

We live but learn little. As to myself it appears that I learn nothing—nothing! You will at once convey to me by *cable* five thousand lire. No; add the difference in exchange so as to make it one thousand dollars which I shall receive, taking that sum from the two-hundred and thirty thousand lire which I entrusted to your safekeeping by cable as the result of my enterprise in this place. I should have returned at once, content with that success, but as you know I am a very stupid fellow, never pleased with a moderate triumph, nor with a large one, when there is a possible prospect of greater. I am compelled to believe that the greater I had in mind in this case was an illusion: my gentle diplomacy avails nothing against a small miser—for we have misers even in these States, though you will not believe it. I abandon him to his riches! From the success of my venture I reserved four thousand dollars to keep by me and for my expenses, and it is humiliating to relate that all of this, except a small banknote or two, was taken from me last night by amateurs. I should keep away from cards—they hate me, and alone

I can do nothing with them. Some young gentlemen of the place, whose acquaintance I had made at a ball, did me the honour of this lesson at the native game of poker, at which I—though also native—am not even so expert as yourself, and, as you will admit, Antonio, my friend, you are not a good player—when observed. Unaided, I was a child in their hands. It was also a painful rule that one paid for the counters upon delivery. This made me ill, but I carried it off with an air of carelessness creditable to an adopted Neapolitan. Upon receipt of the money you are to cable me, I shall leave this town and sail immediately. Come to Paris, and meet me there at the place on the Rue Auber within ten days from your reading this letter. You will have, remaining, two hundred and twenty-five thousand francs, which it will be safer to bring in cash, and I will deal well with you, as is our custom with each other. You have done excellently throughout; your cables and letters for exhibition concerning those famous oil wells have been perfection; and I shall of course not deduct what was taken by these thieves of poker players from the sum of profits upon which we shall estimate your commission. I have several times had the feeling that the hour for departure had arrived; now I shall delay not a moment after receiving your cable, though I may occupy the interim with a last attempt to interest my small miser. Various circumstances cause me some uneasiness, though I do not believe I could be successfully assailed by the law in the matter of oil. You do own an estate in Basilicata, at least your brother does—these good people here would not be apt to discover the difference—and the rest is a matter of plausibility. The odious coincidence of encountering the old cow, Pryor, fretted me somewhat (though he has not repeated his annoying call), and I have other small apprehensions—for example, that it may not improve my credit if my loss of last night becomes gossip, though the thieves professed strong habits of discretion. My little affair of gallantry grows embarrassing. Such affairs are so easy to inaugurate; extrication is more difficult. However, without it I should have failed to interest my investor and there is always the charm. Your last letter is too curious in that matter. Licentious man, one does not write of these things while under the banner of the illustrious Uncle Sam—I am assuming the American attitude while here, or perhaps my early youth returns to me—a thing very different from your own boyhood, Don Antonio. Nevertheless, I promise you some laughter in the Rue Auber. Though you will not be able to understand the

half of what I shall tell you—particularly the portraits I shall sketch of my defeated rivals—your spirit shall roll with laughter.

To the bank, then, the instant you read. Cable me one thousand dollars, and be at the Rue Auber not more than ten days later. To the bank! Thence to the telegraph office. Speed! V. C.

He was in better spirits as he read over this letter, and he chuckled as he addressed it. He pictured himself in the rear room of the bar in the Rue Auber, relating, across the little marble-topped table, this American adventure, to the delight of that blithe, ne'er-do-well outcast of an exalted poor family, that gambler, blackmailer and merry rogue, Don Antonio Moliterno, comrade and teacher of this ductile Valentine since the later days of adolescence. They had been school-fellows in Rome, and later roamed Europe together unleashed, discovering worlds of many kinds. Valentine's careless mother let her boy go as he liked, and was often negligent in the matter of remittances: he and his friend learned ways to raise the wind, becoming expert and making curious affiliations. At her death there was a small inheritance; she had not been provident. The little she left went rocketing, and there was the wind to be raised again: young Corliss had wits and had found that they could supply him—most of the time—with much more than the necessities of life. He had also found that he possessed a strong attraction for various women; already—at twenty-two—his experience was considerable, and, in his way, he became a specialist. He had a talent; he improved it and his opportunities. Altogether, he took to the work without malice and with a light heart. . . .

He sealed the envelope, rang for a boy, gave him the letter to post, and directed that the apartment should be set to rights. It was not that in which he had received Ray Vilas. Corliss had moved to rooms on another floor of the hotel, the day after that eccentric and somewhat ominous person had called to make an "investment." Ray's shadowy forebodings concerning that former apartment had encountered satire: Corliss was a "materialist" and, at the mildest estimate, an unusually practical man, but he would never sleep in a bed with its foot toward the door; southern Italy had seeped into him. He changed his rooms, a measure of which Don Antonio Moliterno would have wholly approved. Besides, these were as comfortable as the others, and so like them as even to confirm Ray's statement concerning "A

Reading from Homer”: evidently this work had been purchased by the edition.

A boy came to announce that his “roadster” waited for him at the hotel entrance, and Corliss put on a fur motoring coat and cap, and went downstairs. A door leading from the hotel bar into the lobby was open, and, as Corliss passed it, there issued a mocking shout:

“Tor’dor! Oh, look at the Tor’dor! Ain’t he the handsome Spaniard!”

Ray Vilas stumbled out, tousled, haggard, waving his arms in absurd and meaningless gestures; an amused gallery of tipplers filling the doorway behind him.

“Goin’ take Carmen buggy ride in the country, ain’t he? Good ole Tor’dor!” he quavered loudly, clutching Corliss’s shoulder. “How much you s’pose he pays f’ that buzz-buggy by the day, jeli’m’n? Naughty Tor’dor, stole thousand dollars from me—makin’ presents—diamond cresses. Tor’dor, I hear you been playing cards. Tha’s sn’t nice. Tor’dor, you’re not a goo’ boy at all—*you* know you oughtn’t waste Dick Lindley’s money like that!”

Corliss set his open hand upon the drunkard’s breast and sent him gyrating and plunging backward. Some one caught the grotesque figure as it fell.

“Oh, my God,” screamed Ray, “I haven’t got a gun on me! He *knows* I haven’t got my gun with me! *Why* haven’t I got my gun with me?”

They hustled him away, and Corliss, enraged and startled, passed on. As he sped the car up Corliss Street, he decided to anticipate his letter to Moliterno by a cable. He had stayed too long.

Cora looked charming in a new equipment for November motoring; yet it cannot be said that either of them enjoyed the drive. They lunched a dozen miles out from the city at an establishment somewhat in the nature of a roadside inn; and, although its cuisine was quite unknown to Cora’s friend, Mrs. Villard (an eager amateur of the table), they were served with a meal of such unusual excellence that the waiter thought it a thousand pities patrons so distinguished should possess such poor appetites.

They returned at about three in the afternoon, and Cora descended from the car wearing no very amiable expression.

“Why won’t you come in now?” she asked, looking at him angrily. “We’ve got to talk things out. We’ve settled nothing whatever. I want to know why you can’t stop.”

“I’ve got some matters to attend to, and——”

“What matters?” She shot him a glance of fierce skepticism.

“Are you packing to get out?”

“Cora!” he cried reproachfully, “how can you say things like that to *me*!”

She shook her head. “Oh, it wouldn’t surprise me in the least! How do *I* know what you’ll do? For all I know, you may be just that kind of a man. You *said* you ought to be going——”

“Cora,” he explained, gently, “I didn’t say I meant to go. I said only that I thought I ought to, because Moliterno will be needing me in Basilicata. I ought to be there, since it appears that no more money is to be raised here. I ought to be superintending operations in the oil-field, so as to make the best use of the little I have raised.”

“You?” she laughed. “Of course *I* didn’t have anything to do with it!”

He sighed deeply. “You know perfectly well that I appreciate all you did. We don’t seem to get on very well to-day——”

“No!” She laughed again, bitterly. “So you think you’ll be going, don’t you?”

“To my rooms to write some necessary letters.”

“Of course not to pack your trunk?”

“Cora,” he returned, goaded; “sometimes you’re just impossible. I’ll come to-morrow forenoon.”

“Then don’t bring the car. I’m tired of motoring and tired of lunching in that rotten hole. We can talk just as well in the library. Papa’s better, and

that little fiend will be in school to-morrow. Come out about ten."

He started the machine. "Don't forget I love you," he called in a low voice.

She stood looking after him as the car dwindled down the street.

"Yes, you do!" she murmured.

She walked up the path to the house, her face thoughtful, as with a tiresome perplexity. In her own room, divesting herself of her wraps, she gave the mirror a long scrutiny. It offered the picture of a girl with a hard and dreary air; but Cora saw something else, and presently, though the dreariness remained, the hardness softened to a great compassion. She suffered: a warm wave of sorrow submerged her, and she threw herself upon the bed and wept long and silently for herself.

At last her eyes dried, and she lay staring at the ceiling. The doorbell rang, and Sarah, the cook, came to inform her that Mr. Richard Lindley was below.

"Tell him I'm out."

"Can't," returned Sarah. "Done told him you was home." And she departed firmly.

Thus abandoned, the prostrate lady put into a few words what she felt about Sarah, and, going to the door, whisperingly summoned in Laura, who was leaving the sick-room, across the hall.

"Richard is downstairs. Will you go and tell him I'm sick in bed—or dead? Anything to make him go." And, assuming Laura's acquiescence, Cora went on, without pause: "Is father worse? What's the matter with you, Laura?"

"Nothing. He's a little better, Miss Peirce thinks."

"You look ill."

"I'm all right."

"Then run along like a duck and get rid of that old bore for me."

“Cora—please see him?”

“Not me! I’ve got too much to think about to bother with him.”

Laura walked to the window and stood with her back to her sister, apparently interested in the view of Corliss Street there presented. “Cora,” she said, “why don’t you marry him and have done with all this?”

Cora hooted.

“Why not? Why not marry him as soon as you can get ready? Why don’t you go down now and tell him you will? Why not, Cora?”

“I’d as soon marry a pail of milk—yes, tepid milk, skimmed! I——”

“Don’t you realize how kind he’d be to you?”

“I don’t know about that,” said Cora moodily. “He might object to some things—but it doesn’t matter, because I’m not going to try him. I don’t mind a man’s being a fool, but I can’t stand the absent-minded breed of idiot. I’ve worn his diamond in the pendant right in his eyes for weeks; he’s never once noticed it enough even to ask me about the pendant, but bores me to death wanting to know why I won’t wear the ring! Anyhow, what’s the use talking about him? He couldn’t marry me right now, even if I wanted him to—not till he begins to get something on the investment he made with Val. Outside of that, he’s got nothing except his rooms at his mother’s; she hasn’t much either; and if Richard should lose what he put in with Val, he couldn’t marry for years, probably. That’s what made him so obstinate about it. No; if I ever marry right off the reel it’s got to be somebody with——”

“Cora”—Laura still spoke from the window, not turning—“aren’t you tired of it all, of this getting so upset about one man and then another and ——”

“*Tired*!” Cora uttered the word in a repressed fury of emphasis. “I’m sick of *everything*! I don’t care for anything or anybody on this earth—except—except you and mamma. I thought I was going to love Val. I thought I *did*—but oh, my Lord, I don’t! I don’t think I *can* care any more. Or else there isn’t any such thing as love. How can anybody tell whether there is or not?

You get kind of crazy over a man and want to go the limit—or marry him perhaps—or sometimes you just want to make him crazy about you—and then you get over it—and what is there left but hell!" She choked with a sour laugh. "Ugh! For heaven's sake, Laura, don't make me talk. Everything's gone to the devil and I've got to think. The best thing you can do is to go down and get rid of Richard for me. I *can't* see him!"

"Very well," said Laura, and went to the door.

"You're a darling," whispered Cora, kissing her quickly. "Tell him I'm in a raging headache—make him think I wanted to see him, but you wouldn't let me, because I'm too ill." She laughed. "Give me a little time, old dear: I may decide to take him yet!"

It was Mrs. Madison who informed the waiting Richard that Cora was unable to see him, because she was "lying down"; and the young man, after properly inquiring about Mr. Madison, went blankly forth.

Hedrick was stalking the front yard, mounted at a great height upon a pair of stilts. He joined the departing visitor upon the sidewalk and honoured him with his company, proceeding storkishly beside him.

"Been to see Cora?"

"Yes, Hedrick."

"What'd you want to see her about?" asked the frank youth seriously.

Richard was able to smile. "Nothing in particular, Hedrick."

"You didn't come to tell her about something?"

"Nothing whatever, my dear sir. I wished merely the honour of seeing her and chatting with her upon indifferent subjects."

"Why?"

"Did you see her?"

"No, I'm sorry to——"

"She's home, all right," Hedrick took pleasure in informing him.

“Yes. She was lying down and I told your mother not to disturb her.”

“Worn out with too much automobile riding, I expect,” Hedrick sniffed. “She goes out about every day with this Corliss in his hired roadster.”

They walked on in silence. Not far from Mrs. Lindley’s, Hedrick abruptly became vocal in an artificial laugh. Richard was obviously intended to inquire into its cause, but, as he did not, Hedrick, after laughing hollowly for some time, volunteered the explanation:

“I played a pretty good trick on you last night.”

“Odd I didn’t know it.”

“That’s why it was good. You’d never guess it in the world.”

“No, I believe I shouldn’t. You see what makes it so hard, Hedrick, is that I can’t even remember seeing you, last night.”

“Nobody saw me. Somebody heard me though, all right.”

“Who?”

“The nigger that works at your mother’s—Joe.”

“What about it? Were you teasing Joe?”

“No, it was you I was after.”

“Well? Did you get me?”

Hedrick made another somewhat ghastly pretence of mirth. “Well, I guess I’ve had about all the fun out of it I’m going to. Might as well tell you. It was that book of Laura’s you thought she sent you.”

Richard stopped short; whereupon Hedrick turned clumsily, and began to stalk back in the direction from which they had come.

“That book—I thought she—sent me?” Lindley repeated, stammering.

“She never sent it,” called the boy, continuing to walk away. “She kept it hid, and I found it. I faked her into writing your name on a sheet of paper,

and made you think she’d sent the old thing to you. I just did it for a joke on you.”

With too retching an effort to simulate another burst of merriment, he caught the stump of his right stilt in a pavement crack, wavered, cut in the air a figure like a geometrical proposition gone mad, and came whacking to earth in magnificent disaster.

Richard took him to Mrs. Lindley for repairs. She kept him until dark: Hedrick was bandaged, led, lemonaded and blandished.

Never in his life had he known such a listener.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

That was a long night for Cora Madison, and the morning found her yellow. She made a poor breakfast, and returned from the table to her own room, but after a time descended restlessly and wandered from one room to another, staring out of the windows. Laura had gone out; Mrs. Madison was with her husband, whom she seldom left; Hedrick had departed ostensibly for school; and the house was as still as a farm in winter—an intolerable condition of things for an effervescent young woman whose diet was excitement. Cora, drumming with her fingers upon a window in the owl-haunted cell, made noises with her throat, her breath and her lips not unsuggestive of a sputtering fuse. She was heavily charged.

“Now what in thunder do *you* want?” she inquired of an elderly man who turned in from the sidewalk and with serious steps approached the house.

Pryor, having rung, found himself confronted with the lady he had come to seek. Ensued the moment of strangers meeting: invisible antennae extended and touched;—at the contact, Cora’s drew in, and she looked upon him without graciousness.

“I just called,” he said placatively, smiling as if some humour lurked in his intention, “to ask how your father is. I heard downtown he wasn’t getting along quite so well.”

“He’s better this morning, thanks,” said Cora, preparing to close the door.

“I thought I’d just stop and ask about him. I heard he’d had another bad spell—kind of a second stroke.”

“That was night before last. The doctor thinks he’s improved very much since then.”

The door was closing; he coughed hastily, and detained it by speaking again. “I’ve called several times to inquire about him, but I believe it’s the first time I’ve had the pleasure of speaking to you, Miss Madison. I’m Mr. Pryor.” She appeared to find no comment necessary, and he continued:

“Your father did a little business for me, several years ago, and when I was here on my vacation, this summer, I was mighty sorry to hear of his sickness. I’ve had a nice bit of luck lately and got a second furlough, so I came out to spend a couple of weeks and Thanksgiving with my married daughter.”

Cora supposed that it must be very pleasant.

“Yes,” he returned. “But I was mighty sorry to hear your father wasn’t much better than when I left. The truth is, I wanted to have a talk with him, and I’ve been reproaching myself a good deal that I didn’t go ahead with it last summer, when he was well, only I thought then it mightn’t be necessary —might be disturbing things without much reason.”

“I’m afraid you can’t have a talk with him now,” she said. “The doctor says——”

“I know, I know,” said Pryor, “of course. I wonder”—he hesitated, smiling faintly—“I wonder if I could have it with you instead.”

“Me?”

“Oh, it isn’t business,” he laughed, observing her expression. “That is, not exactly.” His manner became very serious. “It’s about a friend of mine —at least, a man I know pretty well. Miss Madison, I saw you driving out through the park with him, yesterday noon, in an automobile. Valentine Corliss.”

Cora stared at him. Honesty, friendliness, and grave concern were disclosed to her scrutiny. There was no mistaking him: he was a good man. Her mouth opened, and her eyelids flickered as from a too sudden invasion of light—the look of one perceiving the close approach of a vital crisis. But there was no surprise in her face.

“Come in,” she said.

* * *

. . . . When Corliss arrived, at about eleven o’clock that morning, Sarah brought him to the library, where he found Cora waiting for him. He had the

air of a man determined to be cheerful under adverse conditions: he came in briskly, and Cora closed the door behind him.

“Keep away from me,” she said, pushing him back sharply, the next instant. “I’ve had enough of that for a while I believe.”

He sank into a chair, affecting desolation. “Caresses blighted in the bud! Cora, one would think us really married.”

She walked across the floor to a window, turned there, with her back to the light, and stood facing him, her arms folded.

“Good heavens!” he exclaimed, noting this attitude. “Is it the trial scene from a faded melodrama?” She looked steadily at him without replying. “What’s it all about to-day?” he asked lightly. “I’ll try to give you the proper cues if you’ll indicate the general nature of the scene, Cora mine.”

She continued to look at him in silence.

“It’s very effective,” he observed. “Brings out the figure, too. Do forgive me if you’re serious, dear lady, but never in my life was I able to take the folded-arms business seriously. It was used on the stage of all countries so much that I believe most new-school actors have dropped it. They think it lacks genuineness.”

Cora waited a moment longer, then spoke. “How much chance have I to get Richard Lindley’s money back from you?”

He was astounded. “Oh, I say!”

“I had a caller, this morning,” she said, slowly. “He talked about you—quite a lot! He’s told me several things about you.”

“Mr. Vilas?” he asked, with a sting in his quick smile.

“No,” she answered coolly. “Much older.”

At that he jumped up, stepped quickly close to her, and swept her with an intense and brilliant scrutiny.

“Pryor, by God!” he cried.

“He knows you pretty well,” she said. “So do I now!”

He swung away from her, back to his chair, dropped into it and began to laugh. “Old Pryor! Doddering old Pryor! Doddering old ass of a Pryor! So he did! Blood of an angel! what a stew, what a stew!” He rose again, mirthless. “Well, what did he say?”

She had begun to tremble, not with fear. “He said a good deal.”

“Well, what was it? What did he tell you?”

“I think you’ll find it plenty!”

“Come on!”

“*You*!” She pointed at him.

“Let’s have it.”

“He told me”—she burst out furiously—“he said you were a professional sharper!”

“Oh, no. Old Pryor doesn’t talk like that.”

She came toward him. “He told me you were notorious over half of Europe,” she cried vehemently. “He said he’d arrested you himself, once, in Rotterdam, for smuggling jewels, and that you were guilty, but managed to squirm out of it. He said the police had put you out of Germany and you’d be arrested if you ever tried to go back. He said there were other places you didn’t dare set foot in, and he said he could have you arrested in this country any time he wanted to, and that he was going to do it if he found you’d been doing anything wrong. Oh, yes, he told me a few things!”

He caught her by the shoulder. “See here, Cora, do you believe all this tommy-rot?”

She shook his hand off instantly. “Believe it? I know it! There isn’t a straight line in your whole soul and mind: you’re crooked all over. You’ve been crooked with *me* from the start. The moment that man began to speak, I knew every word of it was true. He came to me because he thought it was

right: he hasn’t anything against you on his own account; he said he *liked* you! I *knew* it was true, I tell you.”

He tried to put his hand on her shoulder again, beginning to speak remonstratingly, but she cried out in a rage, broke away from him, and ran to the other end of the room.

“Keep away! Do you suppose I like you to touch me? He told me you always had been a wonder with women! Said you were famous for `handling them the right way’—using them! Ah, that was pleasant information for *me*, wasn’t it! Yes, I could have confirmed him on that point. He wanted to know if I thought you’d been doing anything of that sort here. What he meant was: Had you been using me?”

“What did you tell him?” The question rang sharply on the instant.

“Ha! That gets into you, does it?” she returned bitterly. “You can’t overdo your fear of that man, I think, but *I* didn’t tell him anything. I just listened and thanked him for the warning, and said I’d have nothing more to do with you. How *could* I tell him? Wasn’t it I that made papa lend you his name, and got Richard to hand over his money? Where does that put *me*?” She choked; sobs broke her voice. “Every—every soul in town would point me out as a laughing-stock—the easiest fool out of the asylum! Do you suppose *I* want you arrested and the whole thing in the papers? What I want is Richard’s money back, and I’m going to have it!”

“Can you be quiet for a moment and listen?” he asked gravely.

“If you’ll tell me what chance I have to get it back.”

“Cora,” he said, “you don’t want it back.”

“Oh? Don’t I?”

“No.” He smiled faintly, and went on. “Now, all this nonsense of old Pryor’s isn’t worth denying. I have met him abroad; that much is true—and I suppose I have rather a gay reputation——”

She uttered a jeering shout.

“Wait!” he said. “I told you I’d cut quite a swathe, when I first talked to you about myself. Let it go for the present and come down to this question of Lindley’s investment——”

“Yes. That’s what I want you to come down to.”

“As soon as Lindley paid in his check I gave him his stock certificates, and cabled the money to be used at once in the development of the oil-fields ——”

“What! That man told me you’d `promoted’ a South American rubber company once, among people of the American colony in Paris. The details he gave me sounded strangely familiar!”

“You’d as well be patient, Cora. Now, that money has probably been partially spent, by this time, on tools and labour and——”

“What are you trying to——”

“I’ll show you. But first I’d like you to understand that nothing can be done to me. There’s nothing `on’ me! I’ve acted in good faith, and if the venture in oil is unsuccessful, and the money lost, I can’t be held legally responsible, nor can any one prove that I am. I could bring forty witnesses from Naples to swear they have helped to bore the wells. I’m safe as your stubborn friend, Mr. Trumble, himself. But now then, suppose that old Pryor is right—as of course he isn’t—suppose it, merely for a moment, because it will aid me to convey something to your mind. If I were the kind of man he says I am, and, being such a man, had planted the money out of reach, for my own use, what on earth would induce me to give it back?”

“I knew it!” she groaned. “I knew you wouldn’t!”

“You see,” he said quietly, “it would be impossible. We must go on supposing for a moment: if I had put that money away, I might be contemplating a departure——”

“You’d better!” she cried fiercely. “He’s going to find out everything you’ve been doing. He said so. He’s heard a rumour that you were trying to raise money here; he told me so, and said he’d soon——”

“The better reason for not delaying, perhaps. Cora, see here!” He moved nearer her. “Wouldn’t I need a lot of money if I expected to have a beautiful lady to care for, and——”

“You idiot!” she screamed. “Do you think I’m going with you?”

He flushed heavily. “Well, aren’t you?” He paused, to stare at her, as she wrung her hands and sobbed with hysterical laughter. “I thought,” he went on, slowly, “that you would possibly even insist on that.”

“Oh, Lord, Lord, Lord!” She stamped her foot, and with both hands threw the tears from her eyes in wide and furious gestures. “He told me you were married——”

“Did you let him think you hadn’t known that?” demanded Corliss.

“I tell you I didn’t let him think *anything*! He said you would never be able to get a divorce: that your wife hates you too much to get one from you, and that she’ll never——”

“See here, Cora,” he said harshly, “I told you I’d been married; I told you before I ever kissed you. You understood perfectly——”

“I did not! You said you *had* been. You laughed about it. You made me think it was something that had happened a long time ago. I thought of course you’d been divorced——”

“But I told you——”

“You told me after! And then you made me think you could easily get one—that it was only a matter of form and——”

“Cora,” he interrupted, “you’re the most elaborate little self-deceiver I ever knew. I don’t believe you’ve ever faced yourself for an honest moment in——”

“Honest! *you* talk about `honest’! You use that word and face *me*?”

He came closer, meeting her distraught eyes squarely. “You love to fool yourself, Cora, but the role of betrayed virtue doesn’t suit you very well. You’re young, but you’re a pretty experienced woman for all that, and you

haven’t done anything you didn’t want to. You’ve had both eyes open every minute, and we both know it. You are just as wise as——”

“You’re lying and *you* know it! What did *I* want to make Richard go into your scheme for? You made a fool of me.”

“I’m not speaking of the money now,” he returned quickly. “You’d better keep your mind on the subject. Are you coming away with me?”

“What for?” she asked.

“What *for*?” he echoed incredulously. “I want to know if you’re coming. I promise you I’ll get a divorce as soon as it’s possible——”

“Val,” she said, in a tone lower than she had used since he entered the room; “Val, do you want me to come?”

“Yes.”

“Much?” She looked at him eagerly.

“Yes, I do.” His answer sounded quite genuine.

“Will it hurt you if I don’t?”

“Of course it will.”

“Thank heaven for that,” she said quietly.

“You honestly mean you won’t?”

“It makes me sick with laughing just to imagine it! I’ve done some hard little thinking, lately, my friend—particularly last night, and still more particularly this morning since that man was here. I’d cut my throat before I’d go with you. If you had your divorce I wouldn’t marry you—not if you were the last man on earth!”

“Cora,” he cried, aghast, “what’s the matter with you? You’re too many for me sometimes. I thought I understood a few kinds of women! Now listen: I’ve offered to take you, and you can’t say——”

“Offered!” It was she who came toward him now. She came swiftly, shaking with rage, and struck him upon the breast. “`Offered’! Do you think I want to go trailing around Europe with you while Dick Lindley’s money lasts? What kind of a life are you `offering’ me? Do you suppose I’m going to have everybody saying Cora Madison ran away with a jail-bird? Do you think I’m going to dodge decent people in hotels and steamers, and leave a name in this town that—Oh, get out! I don’t want any help from you! I can take care of myself, I tell you; and I don’t have to marry *you*! I’d kill you if I could—you made a fool of me!” Her voice rose shrilly. “You made a fool of me!”

“Cora——” he began, imploringly.

“You made a fool of me!” She struck him again.

“Strike me,” he said. “I love you!”

“Actor!”

“Cora, I want you. I want you more than I ever——”

She screamed with hysterical laughter. “Liar, liar, liar! The same old guff. Don’t you even see it’s too late for the old rotten tricks?”

“Cora, I want you to come.”

“You poor, conceited fool,” she cried, “do you think you’re the only man I can marry?”

“Cora,” he gasped, “you wouldn’t do that!”

“Oh, get out! Get out *now*! I’m tired of you. I never want to hear you speak again.”

“Cora,” he begged. “For the last time——”

“*No*! You made a fool of me!” She beat him upon the breast, striking again and again, with all her strength. “Get out, I tell you! I’m through with you!”

He tried to make her listen, to hold her wrists: he could do neither.

“Get out—get out!” she screamed. She pushed and dragged him toward the door, and threw it open. Her voice thickened; she choked and coughed, but kept on screaming: “Get out, I tell you! Get out, get out, damn you! Damn you, *damn* you! get out!”

Still continuing to strike him with all her strength, she forced him out of the door.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Cora lost no time. Corliss had not closed the front door behind him before she was running up the stairs. Mrs. Madison, emerging from her husband's room, did not see her daughter's face; for Cora passed her quickly, looking the other way.

"Was anything the matter?" asked the mother anxiously. "I thought I heard——"

"Nothing in the world," Cora flung back over her shoulder. "Mr. Corliss said I couldn't imitate Sara Bernhardt, and I showed him I could." She began to hum; left a fragment of "rag-time" floating behind her as she entered her own room; and Mrs. Madison, relieved, returned to the invalid.

Cora changed her clothes quickly. She put on a pale gray skirt and coat for the street, high shoes and a black velvet hat, very simple. The costume was almost startlingly becoming to her: never in her life had she looked prettier. She opened her small jewel-case, slipped all her rings upon her fingers; then put the diamond crescent, the pendant, her watch, and three or four other things into the flat, envelope-shaped bag of soft leather she carried when shopping. After that she brought from her clothes-pantry a small travelling-bag and packed it hurriedly.

Laura, returning from errands downtown and glancing up at Cora's window, perceived an urgently beckoning, gray-gloved hand, and came at once to her sister's room.

The packed bag upon the bed first caught her eye; then Cora's attire, and the excited expression of Cora's face, which was high-flushed and moist, glowing with a great resolve.

"What's happened?" asked Laura quickly. "You look exactly like a going-away bride. What——"

Cora spoke rapidly: "Laura, I want you to take this bag and keep it in your room till a messenger-boy comes for it. When the bell rings, go to the

door yourself, and hand it to him. Don’t give Hedrick a chance to go to the door. Just give it to the boy;—and don’t say anything to mamma about it. I’m going downtown and I may not be back.”

Laura began to be frightened.

“What is it you want to do, Cora?” she asked, trembling.

Cora was swift and business-like. “See here, Laura, I’ve got to keep my head about me. You can do a great deal for me, if you won’t be emotional just now, and help me not to be. I can’t afford it, because I’ve got to do things, and I’m going to do them just as quickly as I can, and get it over. If I wait any longer I’ll go insane. I *can*’T wait! You’ve been a wonderful sister to me; I’ve always counted on you, and you’ve never once gone back on me. Right now, I need you to help me more than I ever have in my life. Will you——”

“But I must know——”

“No, you needn’t! I’ll tell you just this much: I’ve got myself in a devil of a mess——”

Laura threw her arms round her: “Oh, my dear, dear little sister!” she cried.

But Cora drew away. “Now that’s just what you mustn’t do. I can’t stand it! You’ve got to be *quiet*. I can’t——”

“Yes, yes,” Laura said hurriedly. “I will. I’ll do whatever you say.”

“It’s perfectly simple: all I want you to do is to take charge of my travelling-bag, and, when a messenger-boy comes, give it to him without letting anybody know anything about it.”

“But I’ve got to know where you’re going—I can’t let you go and not ——”

“Yes, you can! Besides, you’ve promised to. I’m not going to do anything foolish ——”

“Then why not tell me?” Laura began. She went on, imploring Cora to confide in her, entreating her to see their mother—to do a dozen things altogether outside of Cora’s plans.

“You’re wasting your breath, Laura,” said the younger sister, interrupting, “and wasting my time. You’re in the dark: you think I’m going to run away with Val Corliss and you’re wrong. I sent him out of the house for good, a while ago——”

“Thank heaven for that!” cried Laura.

“I’m going to take care of myself,” Cora went on rapidly. “I’m going to get out of the mess I’m in, and you’ve got to let me do it my own way. I’ll send you a note from downtown. You see that the messenger——”

She was at the door, but Laura caught her by the sleeve, protesting and beseeching.

Cora turned desperately. “See here. I’ll come back in two hours and tell you all about it. If I promise that, will you promise to send me the bag by the——”

“But if you’re coming back you won’t need——”

Cora spoke very quietly. “I’ll go to pieces in a moment. Really, I do think I’d better jump out of the window and have it over.”

“I’ll send the bag,” Laura quavered, “if you’ll promise to come back in two hours.”

“I promise!”

Cora gave her a quick embrace, a quick kiss, and, dry-eyed, ran out of the room, down the stairs, and out of the house.

She walked briskly down Corliss Street. It was a clear day, bright noon, with an exhilarating tang in the air, and a sky so glorious that people outdoors were continually conscious of the blue overhead, and looked up at it often. An autumnal cheerfulness was abroad, and pedestrians showed it in their quickened steps, in their enlivened eyes, and frequent smiles, and in the colour of their faces. But none showed more colour or a gayer look than

Cora. She encountered many whom she knew, for it was indeed a day to be stirring, and she nodded and smiled her way all down the long street, thinking of what these greeted people would say to-morrow. "*I* saw her yesterday, walking down Corliss Street, about noon, in a gray suit and looking fairly radiant!" Some of those she met were enemies she had chastened; she prophesied their remarks with accuracy. Some were old suitors, men who had desired her; one or two had place upon her long list of boy-sweethearts: she gave the same gay, friendly nod to each of them, and foretold his morrow's thoughts of her, in turn. Her greeting of Mary Kane was graver, as was aesthetically appropriate, Mr. Wattling's engagement having been broken by that lady, immediately after his drive to the Country Club for tea. Cora received from the beautiful jilt a salutation even graver than her own, which did not confound her.

Halfway down the street was a drug-store. She went in, and obtained appreciative permission to use the telephone. She came out well satisfied, and went swiftly on her way. Ten minutes later, she opened the door of Wade Trumble's office.

He was alone; her telephone had caught him in the act of departing for lunch. But he had been glad to wait—glad to the verge of agitation.

"By George, Cora!" he exclaimed, as she came quickly in and closed the door, "but you *can* look stunning! Believe me, that's some get-up. But let me tell you right here and now, before you begin, it's no use your tackling me again on the oil proposition. If there was any chance of my going into it which there wasn't, not one on earth—why, the very fact of your asking me would have stopped me. I'm no Dick Lindley, I beg to inform you: I don't spend my money helping a girl that I want, myself, to make a hit with another man. You treated me like a dog about that, right in the street, and you needn't try it again, because I won't stand for it. You can't play *me*, Cora!"

"Wade," she said, coming closer, and looking at him mysteriously, "didn't you tell me to come to you when I got through playing?"

"What?" He grew very red, took a step back from her, staring at her distrustfully, incredulously.

“I’ve got through playing”, she said in a low voice. “And I’ve come to you.”

He was staggered. “You’ve come——” he said, huskily.

“Here I am, Wade.”

He had flushed, but now the colour left his small face, and he grew very white. “I don’t believe you mean it.”

“Listen,” she said. “I was rotten to you about that oil nonsense. It *was* nonsense, nothing on earth but nonsense. I tell you frankly I was a fool. I didn’t care the snap of my finger for Corliss, but—oh, what’s the use of pretending? You were always such a great `business man,’ always so absorbed in business, and put it before everything else in the world. You cared for me, but you cared for business more than for me. Well, no woman likes *that*, Wade. I’ve come to tell you the whole thing: I can’t stand it any longer. I suffered horribly because—because——” She faltered. “Wade, that was no way to *win* a girl.”

“Cora!” His incredulity was strong.

“I thought I hated you for it, Wade. Yes, I did think that; I’m telling you everything, you see just blurting it out as it comes, Wade. Well, Corliss asked me to help him, and it struck me I’d show that I could understand a business deal, myself. Wade, this is pretty hard to say, I was such a little fool, but you ought to know it. You’ve got a right to know it, Wade: I thought if I put through a thing like that, it would make a tremendous hit with you, and that then I could say: `So this is the kind of thing you put ahead of *me*, is it? Simple little things like this, that *I* can do, myself, by turning over my little finger!’ So I got Richard to go in—that was easy; and then it struck me that the crowning triumph of the whole thing would be to get you to come in yourself. That *would* be showing you, I thought! But you wouldn’t: you put me in my place—and I was angry—I never was so angry in my life, and I showed it.” Tears came into her voice. “Oh, Wade,” she said, softly, “it was the very wildness of my anger that showed what I really felt.”

“About—about *me*?” His incredulity struggled with his hope. He stepped close to her.

“What an awful fool I’ve been,” she sighed.

“Why, I thought I could show you I was your *equal*! And look what it’s got me into, Wade!”

“What has it got you into, Cora?”

“One thing worth while: I can see what I really am when I try to meet you on your own ground.” She bent her head, humbly, then lifted it, and spoke rapidly. “All the rest is dreadful, Wade. I had a distrust of Corliss from the first; I didn’t like him, but I took him up because I thought he offered the chance to show *you* what I could do. Well, it’s got me into a most horrible mess. He’s a swindler, a rank——”

“By George!” Wade shouted. “Cora, you’re talking out now like a real woman.”

“Listen. I got horribly tired of him after a week or so, but I’d promised to help him and I didn’t break with him; but yesterday I just couldn’t stand him any longer and I told him so, and sent him away. Then, this morning, an old man came to the house, a man named Pryor, who knew him and knew his record, and he told me all about him.” She narrated the interview.

“But you had sent Corliss away first?” Wade asked, sharply.

“Yesterday, I tell you.” She set her hand on the little man’s shoulder. “Wade, there’s bound to be a scandal over all this. Even if Corliss gets away without being arrested and tried, the whole thing’s bound to come *out*. I’ll be the laughing-stock of the town—and I deserve to be: it’s all through having been ridiculous idiot enough to try and impress you with my business brilliancy. Well, I can’t stand it!”

“Cora, do you——” He faltered.

She leaned toward him, her hand still on his shoulder, her exquisite voice lowered, and thrilling in its sweetness. “Wade, I’m through playing. I’ve come to you at last because you’ve utterly conquered me. If you’ll take me away to-day, I’ll *marry* you to-day!”

He gave a shout that rang again from the walls.

“Do you want me?” she whispered; then smiled upon his rapture indulgently.

Rapture it was. With the word “marry,” his incredulity sped forever. But for a time he was incoherent: he leaped and hopped, spoke broken bits of words, danced fragmentarily, ate her with his eyes, partially embraced her, and finally kissed her timidly.

“Such a wedding we’ll have!” he shouted, after that.

“No!” she said sharply. “We’ll be married by a Justice of the Peace and not a soul there but us, and it will be now, or it never will be! If you don’t ____”

He swore she should have her way.

“Then we’ll be out of this town on the three o’clock train this afternoon,” she said. She went on with her plans, while he, growing more accustomed to his privilege, caressed her as he would. “You shall have your way,” she said, “in everything except the wedding-journey. That’s got to be a long one —I won’t come back here till people have forgotten all about this Corliss mix-up. I’ve never been abroad, and I want you to take me. We can stay a long, long time. I’ve brought nothing—we’ll get whatever we want in New York before we sail.”

He agreed to everything. He had never really hoped to win her; paradise had opened, dazing him with glory: he was astounded, mad with joy, and abjectly his lady’s servant.

“Hadn’t you better run along and get the license?” she laughed. “We’ll have to be married on the way to the train.” “Cora!” he gasped. “You angel!”

“I’ll wait here for you,” she smiled. “There won’t be too much time.”

He obtained a moderate control of his voice and feet. “Enfield—that’s my cashier—he’ll be back from his lunch at one-thirty. Tell him about us, if I’m not here by then. Tell him he’s got to manage somehow. Good-bye till I come back Mrs. Trumble!”

At the door he turned. “Oh, have you—you——” He paused uncertainly. “Have you sent Richard Lindley any word about——”

“Wade!” She gave his inquiry an indulgent amusement. “If I’m not worrying about him, do you think you need to?”

“I meant about——”

“You funny thing,” she said. “I never had any idea of really marrying him; it wasn’t anything but one of those silly half-engagements, and——”

“I didn’t mean that,” he said, apologetically. “I meant about letting him know what this Pryor told you about Corliss, so that Richard might do something toward getting his money back. We ought to—”

“Oh, yes,” she said quickly. “Yes, that’s all right.”

“You saw Richard?”

“No. I sent him a note. He knows all about it by this time, if he has been home this morning. You’d better start, Wade. Send a messenger to our house for my bag. Tell him to bring it here and then take a note for me. You’d really better start—dear!”

“*Cora*!” he shouted, took her in his arms, and was gone. His departing gait down the corridor to the elevator seemed, from the sounds, to be a gallop.

Left alone, Cora wrote, sealed, and directed a note to Laura. In it she recounted what Pryor had told her of Corliss; begged Laura and her parents not to think her heartless in not preparing them for this abrupt marriage. She was in such a state of nervousness, she wrote, that explanations would have caused a breakdown. The marriage was a sensible one; she had long contemplated it as a possibility; and, after thinking it over thoroughly, she had decided it was the only thing to do. She sent her undying love.

She was sitting with this note in her hand when shuffling footsteps sounded in the corridor; either Wade’s cashier or the messenger, she supposed. The door-knob turned, a husky voice asking, “Want a drink?” as the door opened.

Cora was not surprised—she knew Vilas's office was across the hall from that in which she waited—but she was frightened.

Ray stood blinking at her.

"What are you doing here?" he asked, at last.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

It is probable that he got the truth out of her, perhaps all of it. That will remain a matter of doubt; Cora's evidence, if she gave it, not being wholly trustworthy in cases touching herself. But she felt no need of mentioning to any one that she had seen her former lover that day. He had gone before the return of Enfield, Mr. Trumble's assistant, who was a little later than usual, it happened; and the extreme nervousness and preoccupation exhibited by Cora in telling Enfield of his employer's new plans were attributed by the cashier to the natural agitation of a lady about to wed in a somewhat unusual (though sensible) manner.

It is the more probable that she told Ray the whole truth, because he already knew something of Corliss's record abroad. On the dusty desk in Ray's own office lay a letter, received that morning from the American Consul at Naples, which was luminous upon that subject, and upon the probabilities of financial returns for the investment of a thousand dollars in the alleged oil-fields of Basilicata.

In addition, Cora had always found it very difficult to deceive Vilas: he had an almost perfect understanding of a part of her nature; she could never far mislead him about herself. With her, he was intuitive and jumped to strange, inconsistent, true conclusions, as women do. He had the art of reading her face, her gestures; he had learned to listen to the tone of her voice more than to what she said. In his cups, too, he had fitful but almost demoniac inspirations for hidden truth.

And, remembering that Cora always "got even," it remains finally to wonder if she might not have told him everything at the instance of some shadowy impulse in that direction. There may have been a luxury in whatever confession she made; perhaps it was not entirely forced from her, and heaven knows how she may have coloured it. There was an elusive, quiet satisfaction somewhere in her subsequent expression; it lurked deep under the surface of the excitement with which she talked to Enfield of her imminent marital abduction of his small boss.

Her agitation, a relic of the unknown interview just past, simmered down soon, leaving her in a becoming glow of colour, with slender threads of moisture brilliantly outlining her eyelids. Mr. Enfield, a young, well-favoured and recent importation from another town, was deliciously impressed by the charm of the waiting lady. They had not met; and Enfield wondered how Trumble had compassed such an enormous success as this; and he wished that he had seen her before matters had gone so far. He thought he might have had a chance. She seemed pleasantly interested in him, even as it was—and her eyes were wonderful, with their swift, warm, direct little plunges into those of a chance comrade of the moment. She went to the window, in her restlessness, looking down upon the swarming street below, and the young man, standing beside her, felt her shoulder most pleasantly though very lightly—in contact with his own, as they leaned forward, the better to see some curiosity of advertising that passed. She turned her face to his just then, and told him that he must come to see her: the wedding journey would be long, she said, but it would not be forever.

Trumble bounded in, shouting that everything was attended to, except instructions to Enfield, whom he pounded wildly upon the back. He began signing papers; a stenographer was called from another room of his offices; and there was half an hour of rapid-fire. Cora’s bag came, and she gave the bearer the note for Laura; another bag was brought for Wade; and both bags were carried down to the automobile the bridegroom had left waiting in the street. Last, came a splendid cluster of orchids for the bride to wear, and then Wade, with his arm about her, swept her into the corridor, and the stirred Enfield was left to his own beating heart, and the fresh, radiant vision of this startling new acquaintance: the sweet mystery of the look she had thrown back at him over his employer’s shoulder at the very last. “Do not forget *me*!” it had seemed to say. “We shall come back—some day.”

The closed car bore the pair to the little grim marriage-shop quickly enough, though they were nearly run down by a furious police patrol automobile, at a corner near the Richfield Hotel. Their escape was by a very narrow margin of safety, and Cora closed her eyes. Then she was cross, because she had been frightened, and commanded Wade cavalierly to bid the driver be more careful.

Wade obeyed sympathetically. “Of course, though, it wasn’t altogether his fault,” he said, settling back, his arm round his lady’s waist. “It’s an outrage for the police to break their own rules that way. I guess they don’t need to be in a hurry any more than *we* do!”

The Justice made short work of it.

As they stood so briefly before him, there swept across her vision the memory of what she had always prophesied as her wedding:—a crowded church, “The Light That Breathed O’er Eden” from an unseen singer; then the warm air trembling to the Lohengrin march; all heads turning; the procession down the aisle; herself appearing—climax of everything—a delicious and brilliant figure: graceful, rosy, shy, an imperial prize for the groom, who in these foreshadowings had always been very indistinct. The picture had always failed in outline there: the bridegroom’s nearest approach to definition had never been clearer than a composite photograph. The truth is, Cora never in her life wished to be married.

But she was.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Valentine Corliss had nothing to do but to wait for the money his friend Antonio would send him by cable. His own cable, anticipating his letter, had been sent yesterday, when he came back to the hotel, after lunching in the country with Cora.

As he walked down Corliss Street, after his tumultuous interview with her, he was surprised to find himself physically tremulous: he had not supposed that an encounter, however violent, with an angry woman could so upset his nerves. It was no fear of Pryor which shook him. He knew that Pryor did not mean to cause his arrest—certainly not immediately. Of course, Pryor knew that Cora would tell him. The old fellow's move was a final notification. It meant: "Get out of town within twenty-four hours." And Corliss intended to obey. He would have left that evening, indeed, without the warning; his trunk was packed.

He would miss Cora. He had kept a cool head throughout their affair until the last; but this morning she had fascinated him: and he found himself passionately admiring the fury of her. She had confused him as he had never been confused. He thought he had tamed her; thought he owned her; and the discovery of this mistake was what made him regret that she would not come away with him. Such a flight, until to-day, had been one of his apprehensions: but now the thought that it was not to be, brought something like pain. At least, he felt a vacancy; had a sense of something lacking. She would have been a bright comrade for the voyage; and he thought of gestures of hers, turns of the head, tricks of the lovely voice; and sighed.

Of course it was best for him that he could return to his old trails alone and free; he saw that. Cora would have been a complication and an embarrassment without predictable end, but she would have been a rare flame for a while. He wondered what she meant to do; of course she had a plan. Should he try again, give her another chance? No; there was one point upon which she had not mystified him: he knew she really hated him.

. . . The wind was against the smoke that day; and his spirits rose, as he walked in the brisk air with the rich sky above him. After all, this venture upon his native purlieus had been fax from fruitless: he could not have expected to do much better. He had made his coup; he knew no other who could have done it. It was a handsome bit of work, in fact, and possible only to a talented native thoroughly sophisticated in certain foreign subtleties. He knew himself for a rare combination.

He had a glimmer of Richard Lindley beginning at the beginning again to build a modest fortune: it was the sort of thing the Richard Lindleys were made for. Corliss was not troubled. Richard had disliked him as a boy; did not like him now; but Corliss had not taken his money out of malice for that. The adventurer was not revengeful; he was merely impervious.

At the hotel, he learned that Moliterno's cable had not yet arrived; but he went to an agency of one of the steamship lines and reserved his passage, and to a railway ticket office and secured a compartment for himself on an evening train. Then he returned to his room in the hotel.

The mirror over the mantelpiece, in the front room of his suite, showed him a fine figure of a man: hale, deep-chested, handsome, straight and cheerful.

He nodded to it.

"Well, old top," he said, reviewing and summing up his whole campaign, "not so bad. Not so bad, all in all; not so bad, old top. Well played indeed!"

At a sound of footsteps approaching his door, he turned in casual expectancy, thinking it might be a boy to notify him that Moliterno's cable had arrived. But there was no knock, and the door was flung wide open.

It was Vilas, and he had his gun with him this time. He had two.

There was a shallow clothes-closet in the wall near the fireplace, and Corliss ran in there; but Vilas began to shoot through the door.

Mutilated, already a dead man, and knowing it, Corliss came out, and tried to run into the bedroom. It was no use.

Ray saved his last shot for himself. It did the work.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

There is a song of parting, an intentionally pathetic song, which contains the line, “All the tomorrows shall be as to-day,” meaning equally gloomy. Young singers, loving this line, take care to pronounce the words with unusual distinctness: the listener may feel that the performer has the capacity for great and consistent suffering. It is not, of course, that youth loves unhappiness, but the appearance of it, its supposed picturesqueness. Youth runs from what is pathetic, but hangs fondly upon pathos. It is the idea of sorrow, not sorrow, which charms: and so the young singer dwells upon those lingering tomorrows, happy in the conception of a permanent wretchedness incurred in the interest of sentiment. For youth believes in permanence.

It is when we are young that we say, “I shall never,” and “I shall always,” not knowing that we are only time’s atoms in a crucible of incredible change. An old man scarce dares say, “I have never,” for he knows that if he searches he will find, probably, that he has. “All, all is change.”

It was an evening during the winter holidays when Mrs. Lindley, coming to sit by the fire in her son’s smoking-room, where Richard sat glooming, narrated her legend of the Devil of Lisieux. It must have been her legend: the people of Lisieux know nothing of it; but this Richard the Guileless took it for tradition, as she alleged it, and had no suspicion that she had spent the afternoon inventing it.

She did not begin the recital immediately upon taking her chair, across the hearth from her son; she led up to it. She was an ample, fresh-coloured, lively woman; and like her son only in being a kind soul: he got neither his mortal seriousness nor his dreaminess from her. She was more than content with Cora’s abandonment of him, though, as chivalrousness was not demanded of her, she would have preferred that he should have been the jilt. She thought Richard well off in his release, even at the price of all his savings. But there was something to hope, even in that matter, Pryor wrote from Paris encouragingly: he believed that Moliterno might be frightened or

forced into at least a partial restitution; though Richard would not count upon it, and had “begun at the beginning” again, as a small-salaried clerk in a bank, trudging patiently to work in the morning and home in the evening, a long-faced, tired young man, more absent than ever, lifeless, and with no interest in anything outside his own broodings. His mother, pleased with his misfortune in love, was of course troubled that it should cause him to suffer. She knew she could not heal him; but she also knew that everything is healed in time, and that sometimes it is possible for people to help time a little.

Her first remark to her son, this evening, was that to the best of her memory she had never used the word “hellion.” And, upon his saying gently, no, he thought it probable that she never had, but seeking no farther and dropping his eyes to the burning wood, apparently under the impression that the subject was closed, she informed him brusquely that it was her intention to say it now.

“What is it you want to say, mother?”

“If I can bring myself to use the word `hellion’,” she returned, “I’m going to say that of all the heaven-born, whole-souled and consistent ones I ever knew Hedrick Madison is the King.”

“In what new way?” he inquired.

“Egerton Villard. Egerton used to be the neatest, best-mannered, best-dressed boy in town; but he looks and behaves like a Digger Indian since he’s taken to following Hedrick around. Mrs. Villard says it’s the greatest sorrow of her life, but she’s quite powerless: the boy is Hedrick’s slave. The other day she sent a servant after him, and just bringing him home nearly ruined her limousine. He was solidly covered with molasses, over his clothes and all, from head to foot, and then he’d rolled in hay and chicken feathers to be a *gnu* for Hedrick to kodak in the African Wilds of the Madisons’ stable. Egerton didn’t know what a gnu was, but Hedrick told him that was the way to be one, he said. Then, when they’d got him scraped and boiled, and most of his hair pulled out, a policemen came to arrest him for stealing the jug of molasses at a corner grocery.”

Richard nodded, and smiled faintly for comment. They sat in silence for a while.

“I saw Mrs. Madison yesterday,” said his mother. “She seemed very cheerful; her husband is able to talk almost perfectly again, though he doesn’t get downstairs. Laura reads to him a great deal.”

He nodded again, his gaze not moving from the fire.

“Laura was with her mother,” said Mrs. Lindley. “She looked very fetching in a black cloth suit and a fur hat—old ones her sister left, I suspect, but very becoming, for all that. Laura’s `going out’ more than usual this winter. She’s really the belle of the holiday dances, I hear. Of course she would be”, she added, thoughtfully—“now.”

“Why should she be `now’ more than before?”

“Oh, Laura’s quite blossomed,” Mrs. Lindley answered. “I think she’s had some great anxieties relieved. Of course both she and her mother must have worried about Cora as much as they waited on her. It must be a great burden lifted to have her comfortably settled, or, at least, disposed of. I thought they both looked better. But I have a special theory about Laura: I suppose you’ll laugh at me——”

“Oh, no.”

“I wish you would sometimes,” she said wistfully, “so only you laughed. My idea is that Laura was in love with that poor little Trumble, too.”

“What?” He looked up at that.

“Yes; girls fall in love with anybody. I fancy she cared very deeply for him; but I think she’s a strong, sane woman, now. She’s about the steadiest, coolest person I know—and I know her better, lately, than I used to. I think she made up her mind that she’d not sit down and mope over her unhappiness, and that she’d get over what caused it; and she took the very best remedy: she began going about, going everywhere, and she went gayly, too! And I’m sure she’s cured; I’m sure she doesn’t care the snap of her fingers for Wade Trumble or any man alive. She’s having a pretty good time, I imagine: she has everything in the world except money, and she’s

never cared at all about *that*. She's young, and she dresses well—these days—and she's one of the handsomest girls in town; she plays like a poet, and she dances well——"

"Yes," said Richard;—reflectively, "she does dance well."

"And from what I hear from Mrs. Villard," continued his mother, "I guess she has enough young men in love with her to keep any girl busy."

He was interested enough to show some surprise. "In love with Laura?"

"Four, I hear." The best of women are sometimes the readiest with impromptu statistics.

"Well, well!" he said, mildly.

"You see, Laura has taken to smiling on the world, and the world smiles back at her. It's not a bad world about that, Richard."

"No," he sighed. "I suppose not."

"But there's more than that in this case, my dear son."

"Is there?"

The intelligent and gentle matron laughed as though at some unexpected turn of memory and said:

"Speaking of Hedrick, did you ever hear the story of the Devil of Lisieux, Richard?"

"I think not; at least, I don't remember it."

"Lisieux is a little town in Normandy," she said. "I was there a few days with your father, one summer, long ago. It's a country full of old stories, folklore, and traditions; and the people still believe in the Old Scratch pretty literally. This legend was of the time when he came to Lisieux. The people knew he was coming because a wise woman had said that he was on the way, and predicted that he would arrive at the time of the great fair. Everybody was in great distress, because they knew that whoever looked at him would become bewitched, but, of course, they had to go to the fair. The wise woman was able to give them a little comfort; she said some one was

coming with the devil, and that the people must not notice the devil, but keep their eyes fastened on this other—then they would be free of the fiend's influence. But, when the devil arrived at the fair, nobody even looked to see who his companion was, for the devil was so picturesque, so vivid, all in flaming scarlet and orange, and he capered and danced and sang so that nobody could help looking at him—and, after looking once, they couldn't look away until they were thoroughly under his spell. So they were all bewitched, and began to scream and howl and roll on the ground, and turn on each other and brawl, and `commit all manner of excesses.' Then the wise woman was able to exorcise the devil, and he sank into the ground; but his companion stayed, and the people came to their senses, and looked, and they saw that it was an angel. The angel had been there all the time that the fiend was, of course. So they have a saying now, that there may be angels with us, but we don't notice them when the devil's about."

She did not look at her son as she finished, and she had hurried through the latter part of her "legend" with increasing timidity. The parallel was more severe, now that she put it to him, than she intended; it sounded savage; and she feared she had overshot her mark. Laura, of course, was the other, the companion; she had been actually a companion for the vivid sister, everywhere with her at the fair, and never considered: now she emerged from her overshadowed obscurity, and people were able to see her as an individual—heretofore she had been merely the retinue of a flaming Cora. But the "legend" was not very gallant to Cora!

Mrs. Lindley knew that it hurt her son; she felt it without looking at him, and before he gave a sign. As it was, he did not speak, but, after a few moments, rose and went quietly out of the room: then she heard the front door open and close. She sat by his fire a long, long time and was sorry—and wondered.

When Richard came home from his cold night-prowl in the snowy streets, he found a sheet of note paper upon his pillow:

"Dearest Richard, I didn't mean that anybody you ever cared for was a d—-l. I only meant that often the world finds out that there are lovely people it hasn't noticed."

. . . He reproached himself, then, for the reproach his leaving her had been; he had a susceptible and annoying conscience, this unfortunate Richard. He found it hard to get to sleep, that night; and was kept awake long after he had planned how he would make up to his mother for having received her “legend” so freezingly. What kept him awake, after that, was a dim, rhythmic sound coming from the house next door, where a holiday dance was in progress—music far away and slender: fiddle, ‘cello, horn, bassoon, drums, all rollicking away almost the night-long, seeping through the walls to his restless pillow. Finally, when belated drowsiness came, the throbbing tunes mingled with his half-dreams, and he heard the light shuffling of multitudinous feet over the dancing-floor, and became certain that Laura’s were among them. He saw her, gliding, swinging, laughing, and happy and the picture did not please him: it seemed to him that she would have been much better employed sitting in black to write of a hopeless love. Coquetting with four suitors was not only inconsistent; it was unbecoming. It “suited Cora’s style,” but in Laura it was outrageous. When he woke, in the morning, he was dreaming of her: dressed as Parthenia, beautiful, and throwing roses to an acclaiming crowd through which she was borne on a shield upon the shoulders of four Antinouses. Richard thought it scandalous.

His indignation with her had not worn off when he descended to breakfast, but he made up to his mother for having troubled her. Then, to cap his gallantry, he observed that several inches of snow must have fallen during the night; it would be well packed upon the streets by noon; he would get a sleigh, after lunch, and take her driving. It was a holiday.

She thanked him, but half-declined. “I’m afraid it’s too cold for me, but there are lots of nice girls in town, Richard, who won’t mind weather.”

“But I asked *you*!” It was finally left an open question for the afternoon to settle; and, upon her urging, he went out for a walk. She stood at the window to watch him, and, when she saw that he turned northward, she sank into a chair, instead of going to give Joe Varden his after-breakfast instructions, and fell into a deep reverie.

Outdoors, it was a biting cold morning, wind-swept and gray; and with air so frosty-pure no one might breathe it and stay bilious: neither in body

nor bilious in spirit. It was a wind to sweep the yellow from jaundiced cheeks and make them rosy; a wind to clear dulled eyes; it was a wind to lift foolish hearts, to lift them so high they might touch heaven and go winging down the sky, the wildest of wild-geese.

. . . When the bell rang, Laura was kneeling before the library fire, which she had just kindled, and she had not risen when Sarah brought Richard to the doorway. She was shabby enough, poor Cinderella! looking up, so frightened, when her prince appeared.

She had not been to the dance.

She had not four suitors. She had none.

He came toward her. She rose and stepped back a little. Ashes had blown upon her, and, oh, the old, old thought of the woman born to be a mother! she was afraid his clothes might get dusty if he came too close.

But to Richard she looked very beautiful; and a strange thing happened: trembling, he saw that the firelight upon her face was brighter than any firelight he had ever seen.

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