

JAPONETTE

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"Watching the city lights ... waiting, listening—always listening."
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JAPONETTE

By ROBERT W. CHAMBERS

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS BY
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TO
ETHEL AND LUCILLE FOREMAN

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"Watching the city lights—watching, listening, always listening" . . . Frontispiece

"A dainty, unreal shape, exquisite as a tinted phantom stealing through a fairy tale of Old Japan"

"We *had* to spend all our money on clothes"

"My uncle's port and sherry,' he said"

"Is it because we are merely attractive that you mentioned the relationship?"

"As far as I am concerned, the matter is settled"

"I wonder just how innocent we really are?' she said"

"Mr. Rivett took in Diana, his son Silvette"

"'Wouldn't it be odd if Jim married that girl?'"

"Presently she caught his eye and made him a pretty gesture"

"'Diana!' she exclaimed softly"

"Glancing up, she beheld Jack Rivett"

"She looked around, pen poised"

"The colonel puffed his cigar in smiling silence"

"'I want to gossip with you,' he said abruptly"

"'Oh, dear,' she said, 'there's somebody down there already'"

"Dineen slowly revolved his thumbs and squinted at a sunbeam"

"'Your loyalty to honor deceived a very gentle heart,' he said"

"That night at dinner she was very gay—a charming, sparkling, bewildering creature"

"'So *this* is your apartment?' he said"

"'Health, happiness, prosperity to them'"

JAPONETTE

CHAPTER I IN FORMA PAUPERIS

The failure of the old-time firm of Edgerton, Tennant & Co. was unusual only because it was an honest one—the bewildered creditors receiving a hundred cents on a dollar from property not legally involved.

Edgerton had been dead for several years; the failure of the firm presently killed old Tennant, who was not only old in years, but also old in fashion—so obsolete, in fact, were the fashions he clung to that he had used his last cent in a matter which he regarded as involving his personal honor.

The ethically laudable but materially ruinous integrity of old Henry Tennant had made matters rather awkward for his orphaned nieces. Similar traditions in the Edgerton family—of which there now remained only a single representative, James Edgerton 3d—devastated that young man’s inheritance so completely that he came back to the United States, via Boston, on a cattle steamer and arrived in New York the following day with two dollars in loose silver and a confused determination to see the affair through without borrowing.

He walked from the station to the nearest of his clubs. It was very early, and the few club servants on duty gazed at him with friendly and respectful sympathy.

In the visitors’ room he sat down, wrote out his resignation, drew up similar valedictories to seven other expensive and fashionable clubs, and then picked up his two suit cases again, declining with a smile the offered assistance from Read, the doorman who had been in service there as long as the club had existed.

“Mr. Edgerton,” murmured the old man, “Mr. Inwood is in the Long Room, sir.”

Edgerton thought a moment, then walked to the doorway of the Long Room and looked in. At the same time Inwood glanced up from his newspaper.

“Hello!” he exclaimed; “is that you, Edgerton?”

“Who the devil do you think it is?” replied Edgerton amiably.

They shook hands. Inwood said:

“What’s the trouble—a grouch, a hangover, or a lady?”

Edgerton laughed, placed his suit cases on the floor, and seated himself in a corner of the club window for the first time in six months—and for the last time in many, many months to come.

“It’s hot in town,” he observed. “How are you, Billy?”

“Blooming. Accept from me a long, cold one with a permanent fizz to it. Yes? No? A Riding Club cocktail, then? What? Nix for the rose-wreathed bowl?” Edgerton shook his head. “Nix for the bowl, thanks.”

“Well, you won’t mind if I ring for first-aid materials, will you?”

The other politely waved his gloved hand.

A servant arrived and departed with the emergency order. Inwood pushed an unpleasant and polychromatic mess of Sunday newspapers aside and reseated himself in the leather chair.

"I'm terribly sorry about what happened to you, Jim," he said. "So is everybody. We all thought it was to be another gay year of that dear Paris for you—"

"I thought so, too," nodded Edgerton; "but what a fellow thinks hasn't anything to do with anything. I've found out that."

Inwood emptied his glass and gazed at the frost on it, sentimentally.

"The main thing," he said, "is for your friends to stand by you—"

"No; the main thing is for them to stand aside—kindly, Billy—while I pass down and out for a while."

"My dear fellow—"

"While I pass *out*," repeated Edgerton. "I may return; but that will be up to me—and not up to them."

"Well, what good is friendship?"

"Good to believe in—no good otherwise. Let it alone and it's the finest thing in the world; use it, and you will have to find another name for it."

He smiled at Inwood.

"Friendship must remain always the happiest and most comforting of all—theories," he said. "Let it alone; it has a value inestimable in its own place—no value otherwise."

Inwood began to laugh.

"Your notion concerning friends and friendship isn't the popular one."

"But my friends will sleep the sounder for knowing what are my views concerning friendship."

"That's cynical and unfair," began the other, reddening.

"No, it's honest; and you notice that even my honesty puts a certain strain on our friendship," retorted Edgerton, still laughing.

"You're only partly in earnest, aren't you?"

"Oh, I'm never really in earnest about anything. That's why Fate extended an unerring and iron hand, grasped me by the slack of my pants, shook me until all my pockets turned inside out, and set me down hard on the trolley tracks of Destiny. Just now I'm crawling for the sidewalk and the skirts of Chance."

He laughed again without the slightest bitterness, and looked out of the window.

The view from the club window was soothing: Fifth Avenue lay silent and deserted in the sunshine of an early summer morning.

Inwood said: "The papers—everybody—spoke most glowingly of the way your firm settled with its creditors."

"Oh, hell! Why should ordinary honesty make such a stir in New York? Don't let's talk about it; I'm going home, anyway."

"Where?"

"To my place."

"It's been locked up for over a year, hasn't it?"

"Yes, but there's a janitor—"

"Come down to Oyster Bay with me," urged Inwood; "come on, Jim, and forget your troubles over Sunday."

"As for my troubles," returned the other, rising with a shrug and pulling on his gloves, "I've had leisure on the ocean to classify and pigeonhole the lot of them. I know exactly what I'm going to do, and I'm going home to begin it."

"Begin what?" inquired Inwood with a curiosity entirely friendly.

"I'm going to find out," said Edgerton, "whether any of what my friends have called my 'talents' are real enough to get me a job worth three meals a day, or whether they'll merely procure for me the hook."

"What are you thinking of trying?"

"I don't know exactly. I thought of turning some one of my parlor tricks into a future profession—if people will let me."

"Writing stories?"

"Well, that, or painting, or illustrating—music, perhaps. Perhaps I could write a play, or act in some other fellow's; or do some damn thing or other—" he ended vaguely. And for the first time Inwood saw that his friend's eyes were weary, and that his face seemed unusually worn. It was plain enough that James Edgerton 3d had already journeyed many a league with Black Care, and that he had not yet outridden that shadowy horseman.

"Jim," said Inwood seriously, "why won't you let me help you—" But Edgerton checked him in a perfectly friendly manner.

"You *are* helping me," he said; "that's why I'm going about my business. Success to yours, Billy. Good-by! I'll be back"—glancing around the familiar room—"sometime or other; back here and around town, everywhere, as usual," he added confidently; and the haunted look faded. He smiled and nodded with a slight gesture of adieu, picked up his suit cases, and, with another friendly shake of his head for the offers of servants' assistance, walked out into the sunshine of Fifth Avenue, and west toward his own abode in Fifty-sixth Street.

When he arrived there, he was hot and dusty, and he decided to let Kenna carry up his luggage. So he descended to the area.

Every time he pulled the basement bell he could hear it jingle inside the house somewhere, but nobody responded, and after a while he remounted the area steps to the street and glanced up at the brown-stone façade. Every window was shut, every curtain drawn. That block on Fifty-sixth Street on a Sunday morning in early summer is an unusually silent and deserted region. Edgerton looked up and down the sunny street. After Paris the city of his birth seemed very mean and treeless and shabby in the merciless American sunshine.

Fumbling for his keys he wondered to what meaner and shabbier street he

might soon be destined, now that fortune had tripped him up; and how soon he would begin to regret the luxury of this dusty block and the comforts of the house which he was now about to enter. And he fitted his latch-key to the front door and let himself in.

It was a very clumsy and old-fashioned apartment house, stupidly built, five stories high; there was only one apartment to a floor, and no elevator. The dark and stuffy austerity of this out-of-date building depressed him anew as he entered. Its tenants, of course, were away from town for the summer—respectable, middle-aged people—stodgy, wealthy, dull as the carved banisters that guarded the dark, gas-lit well of the staircase. Each family owned its own apartment—had been owners for years. Edgerton inherited his floor from an uncle—widely known among earlier generations as a courtly and delightful old gentleman—an amateur of antiquities and the possessor of many very extraordinary things, including his own private character and disposition.

Carrying his suit cases, which were pasted all over with tricolored labels, the young man climbed the first two flights of stairs, and then, placing his luggage on the landing, halted to recover his breath and spirits.

The outlook for his future loomed as dark as the stair well. He sat down on the top step, lighted a cigarette, and gazed up at the sham stained glass in the skylight above. And now for the first time he began to realize something of the hideousness of his present position, his helplessness, unfitted as he was to cope with financial adversity or make an honest living at anything.

If people had only let him alone when he first emerged from college as mentally naked as anything newly fledged, his more sensible instincts probably would have led him to remain in the ancient firm of his forefathers, Edgerton, Tennant & Co., dealers in iron.

But fate and his friends had done the business for him, finally persuading him to go abroad. He happened, unfortunately, to possess a light, graceful, but not at all unusual, talent for several of the arts; he could tinkle catchy improvisations on a piano, sketch in oil and water colors, model in clay, and write the sort of amateur verse popular in college periodicals. Women often evinced an inclination to paw him and tell him their troubles; fool friends spoke vaguely of genius and "achieving something distinctly worth while"—which finally spoiled a perfectly good business man, especially after a third-rate periodical had printed one of his drawings, and a fourth-rate one had published a short story by him; and the orchestra at the Colonnade had played one of his waltzes, and Bernstein of the Frivolity Theater had offered to read any libretto he might send.

So he had been ass enough to take a vacation and offer himself two years' study abroad; and he had been away almost a year when the firm went to the wall, carrying with it everything he owned on earth except this apartment and

its entailed contents, which he could neither cast into the melting pot for his creditors nor even sell for his own benefit. However, the creditors were paid dollar for dollar, and those finer and entirely obsolete points of the Edgerton honor remained silver bright; and the last of the Edgertons was back once more in New York with his apartment, his carvings, tapestries and pictures, which the will forbade him to sell, and two dollars change in his pockets.

Presently he cast his cigarette from him, picked up his suit cases, and started upward, jaw set. It was a good thing for him that he had a jaw like that. It was his only asset now. So far in life, however, he had never used it.

Except the echo of his tread on the uncarpeted staircase, not another sound stirred in the house. Every landing was deserted, every apartment appeared to be empty and locked up for the summer. Dust lay gray on banister and landing; the heated atmosphere reeked with the odor of moth balls and tar paper seeping from locked doors.

On the top floor a gas jet flickered as usual in the corridor which led to his apartment. By its uncertain flame he selected a key from the bunch he carried, and let himself into his own rooms; and the instant he set foot across the threshold he knew that something was wrong.

Whether it had been a slight sound which he fancied he heard in the private passage-way, or whether he imagined some stealthy movement in the golden dusk beyond, he could not determine; but a swift instinct halted and challenged him, and left him listening.

As he stood there, checked, slowly the idea began to possess him that there was somebody else in the apartment. When the slight but sudden chill had left him, and his hair no longer tingled on the verge of rising, he moved forward a step, then again halted. For a moment, still grasping both suit cases, he stood as though at bay, listening, glancing from alcove to corridor, from one dim spot of light to another where a door ajar here and there revealed corners of empty rooms.

Whether or not there was at that moment another living being except himself in the place he did not know, but he did know that otherwise matters were not as he had left them a year ago in his apartment.

For one thing, here, under his feet, was spread his beautiful, antique Daghestan runner, soft as deep velvet, which he had left carefully rolled up, sewed securely in burlap, and stuffed full of camphor balls. For another thing, his ear had caught a low, rhythmical sound from the mantel in his bedroom. It was his frivolous Sèvres clock ticking as indiscreetly as it had ever ticked in the boudoir of its gayly patched and powdered mistress a hundred and fifty years ago—which

was disturbing to Edgerton, as he had been away for a year, and had left his apartment locked up with orders to Kenna, the janitor, to keep out until otherwise instructed by letter or cable.

Listening, eyes searching the dusk, he heard somewhere the rustle of a curtain blowing at an open window; and, stepping softly to his dining-room door, he turned the knob cautiously and peered in.

No window seemed to be open there; the place was dark, the furniture still in its linen coverings.

As he moved silently to the butler's pantry, where through loosely closed blinds the sunshine glimmered, making an amber-tinted mystery of the silence, it seemed for a moment to him as though he could still hear somewhere the stir of the curtain; and he turned and retraced his steps through the library.

In the twilight of the place, half revealed as he passed, he began now to catch glimpses of a state of things that puzzled him.

Coming presently to his dressing room, he opened the door, and, sure enough, there was a window open, and beside it a curtain fluttered gayly. But what completely monopolized his attention was a number of fashionable trunks—wardrobe trunks, steamer trunks, hat trunks, shoe trunks—some open, and the expensive-looking contents partly visible; some closed and covered. And on every piece of this undoubtedly feminine luggage were the letters D.T. or S.T.

And on top of the largest trunk sat a live cat.

CHAPTER II

CORPUS DELICTI

The cat was pure white and plummy, and Persian. Out of its wonderful sky-blue eyes it looked serenely at Edgerton; and the young man gazed back, astonished. Then, suddenly, he caught a glimpse of the bedroom beyond, and froze to a statue.

The object that appeared to petrify him lay flung across his bed—a trailing garment of cobweb lace touched here and there with rose-tinted ribbons.

For a moment he stared at it hypnotized; then his eyes shifted wildly to his dresser, which seemed to be covered with somebody else's toilet silver and crystal, and—*what* was that row of cunning little commercial curls!—that chair heaped with fluffy stuffs, lacy, intimate things, faintly fragrant!

With a violent shiver he turned his startled eyes toward the parted tapestry

[image]

"A dainty, unreal shape, exquisite as a tinted phantom stealing through a fairy tale of Old Japan."

gently stirring in the unfelt summer wind.

From where he stood he could see into the great studio beyond. A small, flowered silk slipper lay near the threshold, high of heel, impertinent, fascinating; beyond, on the corner of a table stood a bowl full of peonies, ivory, pink, and salmon-tinted; and their perfume filled the place.

Somebody had rolled up the studio shades. Sunshine turned the great square window to a sheet of dazzling glory, and against it, picked out in delicate silhouette, a magic shadow was moving—a dainty, unreal shape, exquisite as a tinted phantom stealing through a fairy tale of Old Japan.

Suddenly the figure turned its head and saw him, and stood motionless against the flare of light—a young girl, very slim in her shimmering vestments of blossom-sprayed silk.

The next moment he walked straight into the studio.

Neither spoke. She examined him out of wide and prettily shaped eyes; he inspected her with amazed intentness. Everything about her seemed so unreal, so subtly fragrant—the pink peonies like fluffy powder-puffs above each little close-set ear, the rose-tinted silhouette of her, the flushed cheeks, soft bare arms, the silk-sheathed feet shod in tiny straw sandals tied with vermilion cords.

"Who are you?" she asked; and her voice seemed to him as charmingly unreal as the rest of the Japanese fairy tale that held him enthralled.

"Will you please go out again at once!" she said, and he woke up partly.

"This—this is perfectly incredible," he said slowly.

"It is, indeed," she said, placing a snowy finger upon an electric button and retaining it there.

He regarded her without comprehension, muttering:

"I—I simply cannot realize it—that cat—those g-garments—you—"

"There is another thing you don't realize," she said with heightened color, "that I am steadily ringing the janitor's bell—and the janitor is large and violent and Irish, and he is probably halfway upstairs by this time—"

"Do you take me for a malefactor?" he asked, astounded.

"I am not afraid of you in the least," she retorted, still keeping her finger on the bell.

"Afraid of *me*? Of course you are not."

"I am *not!* Although your two suit cases are probably packed with the silver from my dressing stand."

"What!"

"Then—then—what have you put into your suit cases? *What* are you doing in this apartment? And will you please leave your suit cases and escape immediately?"

Her voice betrayed a little unsteadiness now, and Edgerton said:

"Please don't be frightened if I seem to remain——"

"You *are* remaining!"

"Of course, I am." He forced an embarrassed smile. "I've got to; I haven't any other place to go. There are all kinds of complications here, and I think you had better listen to me and stop ringing. The janitor is out anyway."

"He is *not!*" she retorted, now really frightened; "I can hear him coming up the stairway—probably with a p-pistol——"

Edgerton turned red. "When I next set eyes on that janitor," he said, "I'll probably knock his head off.... *Don't* be frightened! I only meant it humorously. Really, you must listen to me, because you and I have some rather important matters to settle within the next few minutes."

In his growing perplexity and earnestness he placed his suit cases on the rug and advanced a step toward her, and she shrank away, her hands flat against the wall behind her, the beautiful, frightened eyes fixed on his—and he halted.

"I haven't the slightest notion who you are," he said, bewildered; "but I'm pretty sure that I'm James Edgerton, and that this is my apartment. But how you happen to be inhabiting it I can't guess, unless that rascally janitor sublet it to you supposing that I'd be away for another year and never know it."

"*You!*—James Edgerton!" she exclaimed.

"My steamer docked yesterday."

"*You* are James Edgerton?—of Edgerton, Tennant & Co.?"

He began to laugh.

"I *was* James Edgerton, of Edgerton, Tennant & Co.; I am now only a silent partner in Fate, Destiny & Co.... If you don't mind—if you please—who are *you?*"

"Why, I'm Diana Tennant!"

"*Who?*"

"Diana Tennant! Haven't you ever heard of my sister and me?"

"You mean you're those two San Francisco nieces?" he asked, astonished.

"I'm one of them. Silvette is sitting on the roof."

"On—the *roof!*"

"Yes; we have a roof garden—some geraniums and things, and a hammock. It's just a makeshift until we secure employment.... Is it possible that you are really James Edgerton? And didn't you know that we had rented your apartment

by the month?"

He passed an uncertain hand over his eyes.

"Will you let me sit down a moment and talk to you?" he said.

"Please—of course. I *do* beg your pardon, Mr. Edgerton.... You must understand how startling it was to look up and see a man standing there with two suit cases."

He began to laugh; and after a moment she ventured to smile in an uncertain, bewildered way, and seated herself in a big velvet chair against the light.

They sat looking at each other, lost in thought: he evidently absorbed in the problem before him; she, unquiet, waiting, the reflex of unhappy little perplexities setting her sensitive lips aquiver at moments.

"You did rent this apartment from the janitor?" he said at length.

"My sister and I—yes. Didn't he have your permission?"

"No.... But don't worry.... I'll fix it up somehow; we'll arrange—"

"It is perfectly horrid!" she exclaimed. "What in the world can you think of us? ... But we were quite innocent—it was merely chance. Isn't it strange, Mr. Edgerton!—Silvette and I had walked and walked and walked, looking for some furnished apartment within our means which we might take by the month; and in Fifty-sixth Street we saw the sign, 'Apartment and Studio to let for the summer,' and we inquired, and he let us have it for almost nothing.... And we never even knew that it belonged to *you!*"

"To whom did you draw your checks for the rent?"

"We were to pay the janitor."

"Have you done so?" he asked sharply.

"N-no. We arranged—not to pay—until we could afford it—"

"I'm glad of that! Don't you pay that scoundrel one penny. As for me, of course I couldn't think of accepting—"

"Oh, dear! oh, dear!" she said in pretty despair; "I've got to tell you everything now! Several humiliating things—circumstances—very tragic, Mr. Edgerton."

"No; you need not tell me a single thing that is likely to distress you."

"But I've got to! You don't understand. That wretched janitor has put us in a position from which there is absolutely no escape. Because I—we ought to go away instantly—b-but we—can't!"

"Not at all, Miss Tennant. I ought to leave you in possession, and I—I'm trying to think out how to—to do it."

"How can we ask *you* to do such a—"

"You don't ask; I've got to find some means—ways—expedients—"

"But we *can't* turn you out of your own place!"

"No; but I've got to turn myself out. If you'll just let me think—"

"I will—oh, I will, Mr. Edgerton; but please, *please* let me explain the dreadful and humiliating conditions first, so that you won't consider me absolutely shameless."

"I don't!"

"You will unless I tell you—unless I find courage to tell you how it is with my sister and me."

"I'd like to know, but you must not feel obliged to tell me."

"I do feel obliged! I *must!* We're poor. We've spent all our money, and we *can't* go anywhere else very well!"

Edgerton glanced at the luxury in the next room, astonished; then his gaze reverted to the silk-clad figure before him.

"You don't understand, of course," she said, flushing. "How could you suppose us to be almost penniless living here in such a beautiful place with all those new trunks and gowns and pretty things! But *that* is exactly why we are doing it!"

She leaned forward in her chair, the tint of excitement in her cheeks.

"After the failure, Silvette and I hadn't anything very much!—*you* know how everything of uncle's went—" She stopped abruptly. "Why—why, probably everything of yours went, too! Did it?"

He laughed: "Pretty nearly everything."

"Oh! oh!" she cried; "what a perfectly atrocious complication! Perhaps—perhaps you haven't money enough to—to go somewhere else for a while. Have you?"

"Well, I'll fix it somehow."

"Mr. Edgerton!" she said excitedly, "Silvette and I have *got* to go!"

"No," he said laughing, "you've only got to go on with your story, Miss Tennant. I am a very interested and sympathetic listener."

"Yes," she said desperately, "I must go on with that, too. Listen, Mr. Edgerton; we thought a long while and discussed *everything*, and we concluded to stake everything on an idea that came to Silvette. So we drew out all the money we had and we paid all our just debts, and we parted with our chaperone—who was a perfect d-darling—I'll tell you about her sometime—and we took Argent, our cat, and came straight to New York, and we hunted and hunted for an apartment until we found this! And then—do you know what we did?" she demanded excitedly.

"I couldn't guess!" said Edgerton, smiling.

"We bought clothes—beautiful clothes! And everything luxurious that we didn't have we bought—almost frightened to death while we were doing it—and *then* we advertised!"

"Advertised!"

"From *here!* Can you *ever* forgive us?"

[image]

"We had to spend all our money on clothes."

"Of course," he said, mystified; "but what did you advertise?"

"Ourselves!"

"What?"

"Certainly; and we've had replies, but we haven't liked the people so far. Indeed, we advertised in the most respectable daily, weekly and monthly papers—" She sprang to her feet, trotted over to the sofa, picked up an illustrated periodical devoted to country life, and searching hastily through the advertising pages, found and read aloud to him, still standing there, the following advertisement:

"Two ladies of gentle birth and breeding, cultivated linguists, musicians, thoroughly conversant with contemporary events, efficient at auction bridge, competent to arrange dinners and superintend decorations, desire employment in helping to entertain house parties, week-ends, or unwelcome but financially important relatives and other visitations, at country houses, camps, bungalows, or shooting boxes.

"For terms write to or call at Apartment Five—"

She turned her flushed face toward him.

"Your address in full follows," she said. "Can you ever bring yourself to forgive us?"

His astonished gaze met hers. "That doesn't worry me," he said.

"It is generous and—splendid of you to say so," she faltered. "You understand now, don't you? *We had* to spend all our money on clothes; and we thought ourselves so fortunate in this beautiful apartment because it was certain to impress people, and nobody could possibly suspect us of poverty with that great picture by Goya over the mantel and priceless tapestries and rugs and porcelains in every direction—and our cat to make it look as though we really belonged here." Her voice trembled a moment on the verge of breaking and her eyes grew brilliant as freshly washed stars, but she lifted her resolute little head and caught the tremulous lower lip in her teeth. Then, the crisis over, she dropped the illustrated paper, came slowly back to her chair and sank down, extending her arms along the velvet upholstery in silence.

Between them, on the floor, a sapphire rug stretched its ancient Persian folds. He looked at it gravely, thinking that its hue matched her eyes. Then he considered more important matters, plunging blindly into profound abstraction; and found nothing in the depths except that he had no money to go anywhere, but that he must go nevertheless.

He looked up after a moment.

"Would you and your sister think it inhospitable of me if I ask when you—I mean—if I—"

"I know what you mean, Mr. Edgerton. Silvette and I are going at once.

"You can't. Do you think I'd permit it? Please remember, too, that you've advertised from here, and you've simply got to remain here. All I meant to ask was whether you think it might be for a week or two yet, but, of course, you can't tell—and forgive me for asking—but I was merely trying to adjust several matters in my mind to conditions—"

"Mr. Edgerton, we cannot remain. There is not in my mind the slightest doubt concerning your financial condition. If you *could* let us stay until we secured employment, I'd ask it of you—because you are James Edgerton; but you can't"—she rose with decision—"and I'm going up to the roof to tell Silvette."

"If you stir I'll take those suit cases and depart for good."

"You are very generous—the Edgertons always were, I have heard, but we cannot accept—"

He interrupted, smiling: "I think the Tennants never needed instruction concerning the finer points of obligation." ... He stood a moment thoughtfully, turning over and over the two dollars in his pocket; then with a laugh he walked across the studio and picked up his suit cases.

"Don't do that!" she said in a grave voice.

"There is nothing else to do, Miss Tennant."

"There's another bedroom."

They stood, not regarding one another, considering there in the sunshine.

"Will you wait until I return?" she asked, looking up. "I want to talk to Silvette.... I'd like to have Silvette see you. Will you wait? Because I've come to one of my quick conclusions—I'm celebrated for them, Mr. Edgerton. Will you wait?"

"Yes," he said, smiling.

So she trotted away in her little straw sandals and flowery vestments and butterfly sash; and he began to pace the studio, hands clasped behind him, trying to think out matters and ways and means—trying to see a way clear which offered an exit from this complication without forcing him to do that one thing of which he had a steadfast horror—borrow money from a friend.

Mingled, too, with his worried cogitations was the thought of Henry Tennant's nieces—these young California girls of whom he had vaguely heard without any particular interest. New Yorkers are never interested in relatives they never saw; seldom in any relatives at all. And, long ago, there had been marriage between Tennant and Edgerton—in colonial days, if he remembered correctly; and, to his own slight surprise, he felt it now as an added obligation. It was not

enough that he efface himself until they found employment; more than that was due them from an Edgerton. And, as he had nothing to do it with, he wondered how he was to do anything at all for these distant cousins.

Standing there in the sunshine he cast an ironical glance around him at the Beauvais tapestries, the old masters, the carved furniture of Charles II's time, rugs dyed with the ancient splendor of the East, made during the great epoch when carpets of Ispahan, Damascus—and those matchless hues woven with gold and silver which are called Polish—decorated the palaces of Emperor and Sultan.

Not one thing could he sell under the will of Peter Edgerton to save his body from starvation or his soul from anything else; and he jingled the two dollars in his pocket and thought of his talents, and wondered what market there might be for any of them in a city where bricklayers were paid higher wages than school teachers, and where the wealthy employed others to furnish their new and gorgeous houses with everything from pictures and books to the ancient plate from which they ate.

And, thinking of these things, his ears caught a slight rustle of silk; and he lifted his head as Diana Tennant and her sister Silvette came toward him through the farther room.

CHAPTER III

SUB JUDICE

"Isn't this a mess!" said Silvette in a clear, unembarrassed voice, giving him her hand. "Imagine my excitement up on the roof, Mr. Edgerton, when Diana appeared and told me what a perfectly delightful man had come to evict us!"

"I didn't say it that way," observed Diana, her ears as pink as the powder-puff peonies above them. "My sister," she explained, "is one of those girls whose apparent frankness is usually nonsense. I'm merely warning you, Mr. Edgerton."

Silvette—a tall, free-limbed, healthy, and plumper edition of her sister—laughed. "In the first place," she said, "suppose we have luncheon. There is a fruit salad which I prepared after breakfast. Our maid is out, but we know how to do such things, having been made to when schoolgirls."

"You'll stay, won't you?" asked Diana.

"Poor Mr. Edgerton—where else is he to go?" said Silvette calmly. "Diana, if you'll set places for three at that very beautiful and expensive antique table, I'll

bring some agreeable things from the refrigerator.”

”Could I be of any use?” inquired Edgerton, smiling.

”Indeed, you can be. Talk to Diana and explain to her how respectable we are and you are, and how everything is certain to be properly arranged to everybody’s satisfaction. Diana has a very wonderful idea, and she’s come to one of her celebrated snap-shot conclusions—a conclusion, Mr. Edgerton, most flattering to you. Ask her.” And she went away toward the kitchenette not at all embarrassed by her pretty morning attire nor by the thick braid of golden hair which hung to her girdle.

Diana cast a swift glance at Edgerton, and, seeing him smile, smiled, too, and set about laying places for three with snowy linen, crystal, silver, and the lovely old Spode porcelain which had not its match in all the city.

”It’s like a play or a novel,” she said; ”the hazard of our coming here the way we did, and of you coming back to America; but, of course, the same cause operated in both cases, so perhaps it isn’t so remarkable after all! And”—she repressed a laugh—”to think that I should mistake you for a malefactor! Did it seem to you that I behaved in a silly manner?”

”On the contrary, you exhibited great dignity and courage and self-restraint.”

”Do you really mean it? I was nearly scared blue, and I was perfectly certain you’d stuffed your suit cases full of our toilet silver. *Wasn’t* it funny, Mr. Edgerton! And *what* did you think when you looked into your studio and saw a woman?”

”I was—somewhat prepared.”

”Of course—after a glimpse into our bedroom! But that must have astonished you, didn’t it?”

”Slightly. The first thing I saw was a white cat staring at me from the top of a trunk.”

She laughed, arranging the covers with deft touch.

”And what next did you see?”

”Garments,” he explained briefly.

”Oh! Yes, of course.”

”Also a silk-flowered slipper with a very high heel on the threshold.”

”Mine,” she said. ”You see, in the days of our affluence, I used to have a maid. I forget, and throw things about sometimes.”

”You’ve a maid now, haven’t you?”

”Oh, just a combination cook and waitress until we can find employment. She’s horridly expensive, too, but it can’t be helped, because it would create an unfavorable impression if Silvie or I answered the door bell.”

”You’re quite right,” he said; ”people have a curious aversion to employing

those who really need it. Prosperity never lacks employment. It's odd, isn't it?"

"It's rather cruel," she said under her breath.

Silvette came in bringing a chilled fruit salad, bread and butter, cold chicken, and tea. "We'll have to put it all on at once. You don't mind, do you, Mr. Edgerton?"

He said smilingly but distinctly: "One's own family can do no wrong. That is my creed."

Diana looked up at him.

"I wondered whether you knew we were relations," she said, flushing deliriously.

"You see," added Silvette, "it was not for us to remind you."

"Of our kinship? Why not?"

"Because you might have considered it an added obligation toward us," said Diana, blushing.

"I do—a delightful one; and it is very gracious of you to acknowledge it."

"But we don't mean to presume on it," interrupted Silvette hastily. "Some day we really do mean to regulate our financial obligations toward you."

"There are no such obligations. Please remember what roof covers you——"

"Mr. Edgerton!"

"And whose salt——"

"It's our salt, anyway," said Diana; "I bought it myself!"

They seated themselves, laughing; then suddenly Edgerton remembered, and he went away with a hasty excuse, only to return again with a brace of decanters.

"My uncle's port and sherry," he said.

[image]

"My uncle's port and sherry," he said.

Silvette jumped up and found half-a-dozen old-time glasses; and the luncheon continued.

"Isn't it ridiculous!" observed the young fellow, glancing around the studio; "here am I surrounded by a fortune in idiotic antiquities, lurching from a table that the Metropolitan Museum inherits after my death, sipping a sherry which came from the cellars of a British monarch—with two dollars and several cents in my pockets, and not the slightest idea where to get more. *Isn't it funny!*"

Silvette forced a smile, then glanced significantly at her sister. Diana said, gravely:

"We have several hundred dollars. Would you be kind enough to let us offer you what you require for immediate use until—"

"Why, you blessed child!" he said, laughing, "that isn't what worries me now!"

"Then—what is it?" inquired Silvette.

"You and your sister."

"What do you mean, Mr. Edgerton?"

"I mean that I'm worried over your prospects!"

"Why, they are perfectly bright!" exclaimed Diana; "In a few days somebody will employ us to help entertain a number of stupid and wealthy people. We'll make a great deal of money, I expect; don't you, Silvie?"

"Certainly; but I'm wondering what Mr. Edgerton is going to do with two dollars in his pocket and us in his apartment."

"So am I," said Diana.

"It's perfectly charming of you to care."

"What an odd thing to say to us! Is it not very natural to care? Besides your being related, you have also been so considerate and so nice to us that we'd care anyway, I think. Don't you, Silvie?"

Silvette nodded her golden-crowned head.

"The thing to do for the present," she said, "is for you to take that farther room. It was Diane's idea, and I entirely agree with her—after seeing you."

"That was the sudden conclusion of which I spoke to you," explained Diana. "Such things come to me instinctively. I thought to myself, 'If he mentions the kinship between us, then we'll ask him to remain.' And you did. And we do ask you; don't we, Silvie?"

"Certainly. If two old maids wish to entertain their masculine cousin for a week or two, whose affair is it? Let Mrs. Grundy shriek; I don't care. Do you, Diane?"

"No, I don't. Besides," she added naïvely, "she's out of town."

They all laughed. The germ of a delightful understanding was beginning to take shape; it had already become nascent and was developing in every frank smile, every candid glance, every unembarrassed question and reply.

"We have no parents," said Diana gravely. "You have none, have you?"

"No," he said.

"Then it seems natural to me, our being here together; but"—and Diana glanced sideways at him—"in the East, I believe, people consider relationship of little or no importance."

He sipped his sherry, reflecting.

"As a rule," he said; "but"—and he laughed—"if any Easterner even suspected he had two such California cousins, he'd start for the Pacific coast without

his breakfast!"

"Did you ever hear anything half as amiable?" asked Silvette, laughing.

"I never did," replied Diana; "especially as we're probably his twenty-second cousins."

"That distance may lend an enchantment to the obligations of kinship!" he said gayly.

Diana looked up, grave as a youthful Japanese goddess.

"You don't mean that, do you?"

"No, I don't," he said, reddening. "If I did, the janitor ought to throw me out."

Silvette nodded seriously.

"We know you said it in joke; but the only straw to float Diane's idea is our kinship, Mr. Edgerton. And we grasped at it—for your sake."

"Please cling to it for your own sakes," too, he said, also very serious now; "it may become a plank to float us all.... I realize the point you are straining out of kindness to me. If I accept shelter here for a day or two, I shall know very well what it costs you to offer it."

"It doesn't cost us anything," interrupted Diana hastily. "Silvette meant only that you should understand why our consciences and common sense sanction your remaining if we remain."

"*You* must remain anyway!" he said.

"So must you, cousin," said Silvette, laughing. "Anyway, you've probably sent your trunks here—haven't you?"

"By jinks! I forgot that!" he exclaimed. "I believe that racket on the stairs means that my trunks are arriving!"

It did mean exactly that. And when Edgerton went out to the landing he encountered two expressmen staggering under the luggage, and, behind them, the terrified janitor who had returned, and who, on the advent of the baggage, had hurried upstairs to summarily evict the illegal lodgers before Edgerton's arrival.

Now, at sight of Edgerton himself, the Irishman turned white with horror and clung to the banisters for support; but Edgerton only said pleasantly: "Hello, Mike! I hope you've made my cousins comfortable. I'll be here for a day or two. Bring up any mail there may be for me, and see that the landing is properly dusted after this."

He came back to the studio intensely amused.

"I thought that guilty Irishman would faint on the stairs when he saw me," he said. "I merely said that I hoped he'd looked out for my cousins' comfort.... You know," he added laughingly, "I'm anything except angry at him."

Silvette rose from the table and strolled over toward him.

"Are you really glad to know us?" she asked curiously. "We've heard that

New Yorkers are not celebrated for their enthusiasm over poor relatives from the outer darkness.”

”New Yorkers,” he said, ”are not different from any other creatures segregated in a self-imposed and comfortable captivity. People who have too much of anything are spoiled to that extent—ignorant to that degree—selfish and prejudiced according to the term of their imprisonment. All over the world it is the same; the placidity of self-approval and self-absorption is the result of local isolation. We’re not stupid; we merely have so much to look at that we don’t care what may take place outside our front gate. But if anybody opens our gate and comes in, he’ll have no trouble, because he’ll be as much of a New Yorker as anybody really is.”

Silvette laid her head on one side and, drawing the heavy burnished braid of hair over her left shoulder, rebraided the end absently.

”Is it,” she inquired, ”because we are merely attractive that you mentioned the relationship?”

[image]

”Is it because we are merely attractive that you mentioned the relationship?”

”I’m afraid it’s—partly that,” he admitted, reddening and glancing askance at Diana.

”Stop tormenting him!” said Diana. ”He’s candid, anyhow. It’s very fortunate all around, anyway,” she added naïvely; though exactly why she considered it fortunate to meet a man with two dollars in his pocket and the legal right to evict her, she did not explain to herself.

Silvette, caressing her braid with deft fingers, mused aloud: ”It’s very noble of him to claim relationship with two poverty-stricken old maids from the Pacific coast. Don’t you think so, Diane?” And she glanced up with a bewitching smile that had in it a glint of malice.

”*Stop tormenting him!*” repeated Diana. ”We’re pretty and young, and he knows it and we know it. What’s the use in speculating about what he might have done if we were not attractive? He’s perfectly satisfied with his western cousins—aren’t you?” glancing up.

”Perfectly,” he said.

Diana nodded emphatically.

”Do you hear, Silvie? He says he is perfectly satisfied with us, and he is a typical New Yorker. Therefore, we need not be at all disturbed about our capacity

for entertaining anybody, if somebody will only offer us employment.”

Silvette looked around at him. “I’d like to have you see us in our afternoon gowns; I believe you’d really be rather proud of the relationship.”

“Good Lord!” he exclaimed, half laughing, half annoyed; “I’m proud of it anyway. What on earth do you think a New Yorker is?”

“We’ve seen *some*,” said Diana meaningly. “Several came here in answer to our advertisement. But we knew, of course, that your type existed, too.”

“Have you been—annoyed?”

Silvette laughed. “One man, of very red complexion, inquired if Diana would act as his housekeeper. He had several country places, he said.”

“There was a woman came; we didn’t care for her,” added Diana thoughtfully. Then, lifting her head, she looked at Edgerton with a gaze so pure and sweet, so exquisitely candid, that he felt his heart stop for a moment. Then the blood mounted to his face—to the roots of his hair.

“Take me into your partnership,” he said impulsively; “will you?”

“What!”

“Can you? Is it all right?”

“I don’t know what you mean!” said Diana.

“Why couldn’t I help entertain week-ends with you?”

The proposition seemed to astound them all, even the young fellow who had made it.

For a moment they all stood silent; then, pursuing his own impulsive idea toward a plausible conclusion, he said: “Why not, after all? It would make a better combination than two young girls alone. I’ve clothes—two trunks in there, two more at the customs—London made and duty paid! Why not? It’s a good combination. The more I think of it the better I like it!”

He began to pace to and fro nervously.

“I know a lot of people—the right kind. I’m not ashamed to ask them to employ me. There is no reason why a Tennant or an Edgerton should not be in their houses—”

“But,” said Silvette quietly, “the *right* sort of people, as you call them, have no need of asking anybody to aid them in entertaining. It is very generous of you, Mr. Edgerton, but don’t you see that services of our kind will be accepted only by—by newcomers, newly wealthy people—those whose circle is small and not very select.”

“Yes, that is so,” he said so forlornly that Diana watched him curiously, and a delicate color came into her cheeks as he looked up again, eager, radiant.

“That’s true,” he repeated; “but if I can’t do anything in that way for us among the right sort, at least the other kind will have a man to reckon with”—he glanced at Diana grimly now—“when they inquire about housekeepers, and

when women whom you do not care for reply to your advertisements.”

”That is rather a nice thing to say,” observed Silvette, looking at him out of her dark eyes. ”But we know—a number of things. We are not a bit afraid, and—you would not care to—endure the kind of people likely to employ us.”

”I can endure what you can. I’d like to do it.... Would you rather not have me?”

”Why, I—it would be delightful—charming—but we had not even dreamed of such a thing.”

He turned to Diana. ”Will you let me try?”

She said, confused: ”I hadn’t thought of such a thing.... Could it be done?”

”Why not?” asked Silvette, immensely interested. ”When people come, we can say, ’We and our cousin, Mr. Edgerton, are associated as social entertainers.’”

”Oh, if you put it that way they’ll think he does Punch and Judy and we dance queer dances!” exclaimed Diana in consternation.

Edgerton threw back his head and laughed, utterly unable to control his merriment, and Silvette caught the infection, and her clear, delicious laughter filled the sunny studio. She showed her white teeth when she laughed.

”Oh, it is perfectly horrid of me to think of such a thing, but I can’t help thinking of three trained acrobats,” said Silvette, breathless. ”Does it seem funny for three of us to be associated in entertaining guests? Does it, Mr. Edgerton? Or am I only frivolous?”

After their laughter had ceased, and their breath had returned, he said: ”Wherever we go—whoever employs us—the other guests will suppose us to be guests, too. Only the guilty millionaire from outer darkness with a new house on Fifth Avenue and a newer one in the country will know.”

Silvette said: ”Do you realize that it is perfectly dear of you to propose such a thing?”

Diana said nothing.

Silvette went on: ”I know perfectly well and you know, too—that your name would be worth almost anything to the wealthy snob who employs us.”

Diana said nothing.

”To have an Edgerton as a guest would elevate our prospective employer to the seventh heaven of snobbery,” said Silvette. ”Diane and I would shine serenely in the reflected relationship—”

”Don’t make fun of me,” he said.

”Why, I’m not. I really mean it. My instincts have been so warped and materialized and commercialized that here I am seriously proposing to make family capital out of the name of one branch of the family. I really do mean it, Mr. Edgerton.”

”No,” said Diana quietly.

He turned toward her.

"Do you vote against me?"

"Yes."

"Don't, please," he said, looking at her.

She met his eye calmly for a moment, then looked at her sister.

"Do you think it a decent thing to do?" she asked; "our making plans to live on Mr. Edgerton?"

"Good heavens!" he said impatiently, "my being part of a family combination isn't going to alter your success in any way."

"Your name makes it sure."

"Your youth and beauty and good breeding make it sure. My name has nothing to do with it."

"Then why do you propose it?"

He laughed. "Because I've got to make a living, too."

"There are less humiliating ways of making a living—for you," said Diana steadily.

He looked first at Silvette, then at her, deliberately, and his face altered.

"I want to look out for you," he said, "and that's the plain truth."

"That," observed Silvette, "is the nicest thing he's said yet, Diane." She walked up to him and stood serenely inspecting him.

"I vote for you. Diane, let's admit him. We're a poverty-stricken family, and we ought to combine. Besides, I like him to feel the way he does about us—not that it's necessary, of course—but it's—pleasant."

"I haven't any cash," said Edgerton, "but I've this apartment, which nobody can take away even if I starve; and I've some very fine clothes.... Won't you vote for me, Diana?" he added so naturally that neither seemed to notice his use of her first name.

Silvette waited a moment, watching her sister; then she said briskly: "Let's dress. We'll inspect your beautiful British clothing, cousin, and you shall see our prettiest afternoon gowns. Then we can tell better how such a combination would look. Shall we?"

Edgerton said to Diana: "Don't you *want* me?"

She replied slowly: "I—don't—know," looked up at him, straight at him, thoughtfully.

"People may come at any time after two o'clock," said Silvette. "If they find you in flowered silk and a butterfly sash and me in a pigtail, they will certainly expect dances from us and probably Punch and Judy from our cousin."

She laughed, and extended her hand to Edgerton.

"I like you, cousin; Diane does, too. When you're dressed in your best, come back to the studio and we'll arrive at some kind of a conclusion."

Diana nodded to him as she passed with her sister. The questioning gravity of her expression reminded him of a child who has not yet made up its mind to like you. She wore the bluest eyes he had ever seen, and the most enchanting mouth—the unspoiled mouth of childhood.

When they entered their room he went out by the hallway to his.

Standing there, fumbling with tie and collar, his absent gaze followed the checkered sun spots moving on the wall as the curtain moved; and, gradually, there in the half light, the blue eyes seemed to take winsome shape and hue, and he said aloud to himself:

“Anyway, somebody ought to look after her.... She can’t go roaming about like this.”

CHAPTER IV IN LOCO PARENTIS

Shaved, bathed, and his person adorned with his most fashionable lounging suit for a summer afternoon, Edgerton sauntered out of his room and met the maid in the hallway. She had returned in time to answer the door; evidently also she had already been enlightened as to his identity, so he passed her with a nod and a smile, and entered the studio just as the door bell rang.

Neither Silvette nor Diana had yet appeared, nor had he been instructed what to say to those who might call in answer to the advertisement. He looked up doubtfully as the maid announced a Mr. Rivett and a Colonel Curmew, and he stepped forward as these two gentlemen were ushered in.

“How d’you do?” he said pleasantly. “My cousins will be in directly. I am James Edgerton 3d.”

Colonel Curmew, a jaunty gentleman of less than middle height and age, looked at him out of a pair of eyes slightly inclined to pop. He appeared to be rather a good-looking man at first glance, with a perceptible military cut which, however, seemed to threaten something akin to a strut. He didn’t exactly strut when he stepped, but he held himself very erect—the more so perhaps because he seemed to lack something else—perhaps height.

He knew Edgerton perfectly well by sight and reputation; and when he sat down he was still looking at him out of his full, pale eyes.

Mr. Rivett also seated himself—a little man with a walrus mustache who

somehow looked as though, under his loosely cut clothes, his slight physique was steel framed.

He put on his glasses and looked at Edgerton out of two little unwinking eyes which reminded the young fellow of holes burned in a blanket.

"I came," he said cautiously, "in answer to a somewhat unusual advertisement."

"Yes," said Edgerton pleasantly, "we advertised."

"If I recollect," continued Mr. Rivett, "you did not figure in the advertisement."

"No," replied Edgerton, smiling; "my cousins possess the family talents; I'm supernumerary—merely thrown in. My services are not worth very much; I ride and shoot, of course, and all that, but I don't talk very well and my dancing is the limit."

"I see."

Edgerton nodded serenely.

Colonel Curmew passed a carefully gloved hand over his trimly curled military mustache. Edgerton glanced at him and wondered just what was the matter with his face, which ought to have been good-looking. Perhaps the short, closely cropped side whiskers extending to the lobes of the ears slightly cheapened the mustache, and vulgarized the man a little.

Colonel Curmew said:

"I have never had the honor of knowing you, Mr. Edgerton, but your name and face are very familiar to me on Fifth Avenue."

"My people have lived on Fifth Avenue for—some time," replied the young fellow, smiling; and caught Mr. Rivett's burnt-brown gaze fixed steadily upon him.

"Everybody," said Colonel Curmew, sitting very erect, but not exactly swaggering, "everybody in town regretted to hear of your family's financial misfortune, Mr. Edgerton."

"It's very good of them to regret it. Naturally, also, that unexpected catastrophe explains my cousins' desire for employment as well as my own."

"I see," said Mr. Rivett, never taking his eyes off Edgerton.

There was a pause; Colonel Curmew stroked his mustache and stared around at the tapestries and pictures. He evidently realized what they might bring at auction.

"You are a lover of the antique, sir," he observed.

"Oh, I don't exactly love it. These things belonged to my uncle. The museum gets them ultimately."

"Ah! a case of the dead hand?"

"Mort main," nodded the young man indifferently.

"I see," said Mr. Rivett; and suddenly it occurred to Edgerton that this explanation was, perhaps, one of the unuttered questions with which Mr. Rivett's bony countenance seemed crowded. But the little man had not yet asked a single one; and it may have been in response to the steady, silent interrogation of those gimlet eyes that Edgerton was moved to further explanation.

"My cousins are Californians; I am a New Yorker, as you know. We have combined forces from economical and family motives. It is necessary that we find employment, so—" and he smiled at Mr. Rivett—"we have asked for it."

Mr. Rivett sat impassive behind his big, round spectacles. His walrus mustache prevented anybody from seeing his mouth; his eyes now resembled two little charred holes. It was utterly impossible to divine what he might be thinking about, or even whether he was doing anything at all except waiting. Somehow, it occurred to Edgerton that Mr. Rivett had done a great deal of waiting in his career.

Colonel Curmew had now risen, and was strolling about examining the antiquities when the folding doors slid back and Silvette and Diana came into the studio.

[image]

"As far as I am concerned, the matter is settled."

Edgerton rose and presented Mr. Rivett and the colonel; the young girls spoke to them with quiet self-possession, and presently everybody was again seated. Except for the colonel, the attitude of everybody suggested a business gathering of people pleasantly receptive to any business proposition, but that jaunty warrior's pale eyes popped and his smile was of the sort termed "killing"; and he curled his mustache continually with caressing fingers, and presently shot his cuffs.

Mr. Rivett broke the silence somewhat abruptly:

"As far as I am concerned, the matter is settled."

There was another silence; then Silvette ventured: "I beg your pardon. I don't think we understood."

"I say, as far as *I* am concerned, the matter is settled," repeated Mr. Rivett. "I ask no further information regarding these young ladies"—turning slightly toward Edgerton—"nor about you, sir. I am satisfied, and Mrs. Rivett will be."

Diana and Silvette seemed surprised; Edgerton wore a preoccupied expression, his eyes narrowing on the big eyeglasses of Mr. Rivett which reflected the studio window on their convex surface.

"About myself," continued Mr. Rivett with more abruptness, "I have a house in New York, which is closed, and one or two others; one in particular where my family is living—my wife, son, and daughter. It's called Adriutha Lodge; I don't know why—my wife named it. It's comfortable and big enough to entertain in."

He looked at Silvette without a particle of expression in his face.

"I would like you—both of you young ladies—and your cousin, Mr. Edgerton, to help us entertain. If we knew how to entertain successfully we wouldn't ask anybody to show us how. It is better to be plain about it. We are plain folk from a small town in the West. We know very few people; we mean to know more. I've come to this city to remain; I want to make as few mistakes as possible socially. What I wish you to do is to help me out. Will you?"

After a moment Diana asked: "Where is Adriutha Lodge?"

"In the Berkshires. Will you come?"

She glanced at the colonel, but he was staring so fixedly at her that she looked away.

"We might consider it," said Silvette, turning toward Edgerton.

"Couldn't you consider it at once?" asked Mr. Rivett. Evidently this little man with his glasses and his protuberant mustache had his own methods of accelerating business.

"You have mentioned no terms," said Edgerton.

"Oh! Am I to mention them? I expected you had your own ideas on that subject. Very well, then." And the offer he made left them silent and a little shy. It seemed too much.

Edgerton said laughingly to Diana:

"Suppose we consult in your room—if Mr. Rivett doesn't mind our withdrawing for a moment."

"Go ahead," nodded Rivett energetically; "that's exactly what I want—quick action. I like quick results."

So Silvette and Diana and Edgerton rose and entered the room in single file, closing behind them the folding doors.

"Well!" breathed Diana, sitting down on the edge of the bed, "did you ever before see a man of that kind?"

Silvette turned to Edgerton. "What do you think of him, cousin?"

"Why, I rather like that dried-up little chip," he said. "He's about the grade of citizen we expected."

"We?" repeated Diana meaningly; "do you expect to go with us?"

"Are you going to force me out of this perfectly good combination, Diana?"

The girl sat silent on the bed's edge regarding him, but not answering.

"There's one thing which ought to be settled now," observed Silvette; "if our cousin, Mr. Edgerton, is to remain in this firm, we've got to call him Jim, if

only for appearance' sake. Otherwise people would chatter."

"Jim?" repeated Diana; "very well, it doesn't embarrass me to call him Jim—or Tom or Bill, for that matter," she added indifferently.

"It doesn't worry me, either," said Edgerton; "call me anything but early."

"Such a poor joke!" said Silvette; "if we ever call you, cousin, it will be a very late affair—and with nothing under a full house."

"Poker!—and *you!* What an incredible combination!" he said.

Diana interrupted coolly: "If you please, Mr. Edgerton, what is your valuable and masculine opinion concerning this munificent offer for the summer?" And she let her glance rest slowly and sideways on her sister.

"Take it," he said; "it's a good offer."

"Is that your vote?" inquired Silvette.

"Have I a vote?" he asked of Diana; but she merely said: "I say we try the Rivetts of Adriutha. That is *my* vote."

"Then—so do I say so," nodded Silvette. "Is it settled?"

Diana looked up at Edgerton.

"Are you really expecting to come with us?"

"If you will let me."

She remained a moment in thought, then sprang lightly to her feet.

"Who is going to be our spokesman?" she asked; "you, sister?"

"Jim," said Silvette, tranquilly leading the way. "It looks better, I think."

So Edgerton politely informed Mr. Rivett of their unanimous decision, and that little man got briskly to his feet.

"I'm satisfied," he said. "Come to Adriutha as soon as you are ready. Bring all the luggage you want to bring; there's plenty of room. *Don't* bring any servants; there are more than enough there now. My wife and I receive you as guests; my son and daughter are about your ages; nobody can prophesy what you'll think of them or they of you.... Colonel—if you are ready.... Good-by, ma'am," to Silvette, offering a dry little hand; and he took his leave of Diana and of Edgerton, and pulled the colonel unceremoniously out of a most elegant attitude, ruining a jaunty bow which he had not intended to finish so abruptly.

"Well," exclaimed Silvette with a sigh and a laugh as the door closed, "it's settled! Let's forget it.... What do you think of our gowns, cousin James?"

"Corking," he replied; "but my cousin Diana was very fetching in her Japanese dress this morning."

"That's like a man!" observed Diana. "I was a mess, Silvie—with two ragged peonies over my ears and those old straw sandals of yours—"

"You were a vision of Japanese fairyland," he insisted. "I may be weak-minded, but I simply cannot get that vision of you out of my head."

"Try some tea," as the maid brought it; "weak tea and feeble intellects agree."

"Oh, I'll try tea or anything else, but if you think I'm likely to forget the first moment I ever saw you—a slender, Japanese shadow shape against the sun!—ethereal, vaguely tinted, exquisite—"

"You *are* a poet, Jim," said Silvette admiringly. "I read one of your rhymes in *Life* once, and didn't think so."

"Diana made me a poet. If you'd seen her as she came stealing across the window, which was all glittering like a Japanese sunburst, you'd have become a poet, too!" He began to laugh. "I even created a name for you, Diana; it came to me—was already on my lips—"

"What name?" she asked, looking composedly at him.

"Japonette! ... I never before heard such a name. I don't believe there ever was such a name before it suddenly twitched at my lips for utterance! Japonette!"

"Why didn't you utter it if you were so enchanted with your discovery?"

"Because you seemed to be sufficiently scared as it was."

She shrugged, and handed him his tea. "Japonette," she repeated reflectively; "I don't know whether or not I care for it. It sounds frivolous."

"Which you are not!"

She lifted her blue eyes to his.

"You think I am," she said.

"No, I don't."

"You *know* I am," she said, and presented herself with a small tea cake. Into it she bit once; then raised her eyes, watching her sister manipulating the alcohol lamp.

"Do you suppose," she said, "that we'll ever have the slightest personal interest in these Rivett people?"

"Probably not," said her sister. "What of it? I wonder whether that colonel is likely to figure as a guest."

Diana shrugged again. "Figure! He seems to be all figure. I thought him rather odious."

"Did you? He seemed anxious to be agreeable. Who is he, cousin Jim?"

"I don't know.... Perhaps I may have heard of him—a militia colonel of some kind, I don't remember. He's probably a decent sort; I rather like him."

"I wonder," said Diana reflectively, "whether you are anything of a snob?"

Edgerton reddened, then sat still looking at her.

"I was going to resent that," he said after a moment, "but I can't; because what you just said set me thinking."

"Are you unaccustomed to thinking?" she asked too innocently; and he reddened again.

"Stop tormenting him," said Silvette, pouring herself more tea. "You're a tease, Diane."

"You both seem a little in that way," he suggested; "you jeer at me and then look pained, and tell each other to stop."

"We're too intelligent," said Silvette calmly; "that's the trouble with us; and when, by degrees, we add a little more experience to our intelligence we'll be either exceedingly unpopular or—successfully married."

"Why those terrible alternatives?" he asked, laughing.

"Because the man who is able to endure us will probably be worth the bother of marrying—when we've finished dissecting him. We don't know just how to dissect men yet, but we're rapidly learning. It's only a matter of practice and experience."

He laughed again, and so did Silvette, but Diana scarcely smiled, lying back in her velvet armchair and watching Edgerton and her sister alternately with grave, incurious eyes.

"How old are you, anyway?" he said, looking straight at her.

"Twenty-seven," she answered calmly. "Don't jump, please."

"What!" he exclaimed incredulously.

"I look about nineteen, don't I?"

"Certainly you do—about eighteen!"

"Well, I am twenty-seven; Silvette is twenty-five. Don't bother with compliments."

"Good Lord! Are *you* the elder?"

"Tread lightly there," cautioned Silvette, amused, "or you'll presently involve yourself with two indignant spinsters. You've behaved very cleverly. Let well enough alone."

"If you hadn't told me," he began, astonished, "I'd have taken Silvette for nineteen and you for eighteen. I—well, I simply can't realize it."

"How old may *you* be, cousin?" inquired Silvette with a malicious sweetness impossible to describe.

"I'm thirty-two," he said.

"We thought you less," remarked Diana; then she ventured to glance at him, and the enchanting smile broke suddenly from her lips and eyes.

"Don't you know we *do* like you, cousin James, or we wouldn't torment you?" said Silvette, laughing.

"A woman at twenty-seven is centuries older than a man at thirty," added Diana, "except, of course, in some things. Theoretically, Silvie and I are highly instructed; practically, the man of thirty is more specifically intelligent, which is no compliment to the man of thirty."

Edgerton, still astonished, sat back in his chair, considering.

"Do you know," he said, "I never suspected I had two such relatives in the world, who wear the appearance of *débutantes* with an assurance that convinces

until their wit and wisdom convict them. Where were you educated, anyway?"

"In a southern boarding school and in a western university. After that, Silvette studied law and was admitted to the bar. I am entitled to practice medicine," she added demurely. "Does *that* scare you?"

"Do you think it has spoiled us?" asked Silvette so naively that he made no attempt to control his laughter.

"Why on earth don't you do those two things?" he managed to ask at last. "If you're entitled to exercise professions, why don't you?"

"We only studied out of curiosity," explained Diana. "We never intended to follow it up. Of course, we expected to remain always in pleasant financial circumstances."

"Anyway," added Silvette, "it's too late now to sit in an office and wait for clients and patients. Besides, it's a stuffy life. We dance better, and we decorate a drawing-room to more advantage than an office building."

"You *have* thoroughly scared me," he said, looking at them admiringly.

Diana glanced up, then flushed.

"I was afraid for a moment that you meant it," she said.

"I do. What was it you asked me a few moments ago—whether or not I was something of a snob? And I was about to resent it—politely, of course—when it occurred to me that there was, after all, no more finished snob than the man who is so convinced of his own position that he can afford to like everybody; and I told you I liked that militia gentleman. I really didn't; I thought him the limit... Diana, you seem to be a sort of truth compeller."

"I'm a liar, occasionally—to speak with accuracy instead of elegance," said Diana frankly. "I've managed to convey to you an idea that I am indifferent to your joining the firm of Tennant and Tennant. As a matter of fact, I'm flattered and happy. It's my conscience that protests."

"Your—what?"

"Conscience. Never mind—you won't understand, and I won't tell you.... After all, you are thirty-two, even if you happen to be an Edgerton."

"Are you jeering at me?"

"No, I am not. I'm flattered because you wear a distinguished name; I'm happy because I'm entirely inclined to like you. In fact, I'm a kind of a happy, little snob myself. There! we're all tarred with the same snobbish brush, cousin. Shall we take off our masks for a while and cool our faces?"

She rose with a gay little laugh and a bewitching gesture as though sweeping from her face an invisible vizard.

"Behold me as I am, cousin! Just what you have already divined me, with your eyes too humorous and too wise for a man of thirty—frivolous, feminine, not insensible to flattery, wise only in theory, a novice in practice—"

She hesitated, looking at him, the bright color in her cheeks.

"What silenced and incensed me was that you divined it. I would have liked to have played a part with you vis-à-vis—"

"You're playing it now," observed Silvette. "Jim doesn't know what you are now; even I have doubts."

Diana laughed deliciously.

"Do I puzzle you, cousin?"

"Are you trying to?"

"Of course."

"Well, you've succeeded. You're perfectly right, Silvette; I don't know anything about her now. Are there any more roles you can assume, Japonette?"

"Many, monsieur. One of them *is* Japonette, if I choose."

"Play it," he said, "if you ever want to tie me to your Obi."

"You behave," observed Silvette tranquilly, "like two rather ordinary young persons flirting."

"We are," nodded Diana, "but it won't last, Silvie. It's only my kimono and his thirty-odd years and the unconventionality that attracts him." She strolled about airily waving her fan. "Not that I mind being picked up—"

"Di! You'll give him a perfectly horrid impression of yourself!"

"Why, he knows I didn't mind it. It's past helping now."

"How can a man 'pick up,' as you so disgustingly put it, his own cousin?"

"That *was* a triumph, wasn't it, Jim?" she asked innocently. "It remained for an Edgerton to accomplish the weird and impossible; but an Edgerton can do anything in New York—n'est ce pas? Bien, sure! Sure, Mike!"

"Diana!"

"Dearest, I *feel* slangy; and cousin James is so thoroughly a man of the world that he doesn't care. He wouldn't care what I did. I could perform a pas seul or a flip-flap or a cart wheel, and *he* wouldn't care. It's done in the best circles here, isn't it, cousin?"

"Frequently," he said gravely, "varied occasionally by voloplanning down the banisters."

She looked about her wistfully.

"There are no banisters here. Perhaps there are at the Rivetts'. Do you think it would entertain his guests? You know we are employed for that purpose."

"You and I ought to practice some acrobatic turns," he suggested. "Do you think you could learn to throw a double somersault standing on my shoulders?"

"I can try—"

"Di! what on earth are you talking about!" said Silvette, turning from the piano to encounter their unrestrained laughter.

"Oh, dear," said Diana, "I didn't know I could ever be silly again. I thought

that losing all our money a year ago had frightened it out of me; but it's there, cousin Jim—the same frivolity which *you* instantly discovered in me, and which the Rivetts will probably and properly quench.... Silvie, this studio floor is delightfully waxed.... Cousin, do you dance?"

"Rottenly."

"Never mind.... Silvie, dear—one little waltz, please? *Please?* Thank you. Pull away that rug, cousin. Are you ready?"

She laid her arm on his, her hand in his; Silvette, playing, turned her head to watch them.

"He *is* a rotten dancer," she said critically.

"I can't help that," said Diana; "it was the time and the hour. I needed it! ... Jim, don't step on my toe, please, and don't *think* of stopping. You do well enough, really, you do.... No man who counts dances like a Turveydrop.... We use dancing men for dancing purposes only.... Of course you are flattered; I meant to flatter you, so you wouldn't be horrid enough to stop.... Please finish glaring at me; you are really giving me a great deal of pleasure."

"I begin to wonder whether I was not created for that, Japonette."

"To amuse me? Unintentionally? perhaps."

"So that you notice me at all, it doesn't matter," he said under his breath.

"Goodness! what meekness! Only that you're a typical man and don't mean it, I'd hate you for it.... A meek man—from him, good Lord, deliver us! ... No, cousin, there is that in your eye which—and in your general make-up—"

"What?"

"Oh, I don't know—thirty-odd masculine years—*very* masculine!—or I'd not be dancing with you, or I'd not be in this house at this moment; or, rather, *you* wouldn't. Stop mincing along in a horrid sort of self-satisfied prance! ... And don't hop, either! Are you tiring?"

"No," he said bravely.

"I'll let you go in a moment, before you swoon and I have to drag you to a chair.... You dance well enough. I like it, really ... and—thank you very much indeed!"

They parted, breathless. She stood a moment waving her fan against her bright cheeks and touching her hair with cleft fingers. He extracted a handkerchief from his sleeve and used it frankly.

"It's hot in here," he said; "show me your roof garden."

"Silvette," she called over her shoulder, "will you come up to the roof?"

Silvette nodded and continued playing an air from "Armide"; and they waited for her a moment, then went out into the hallway and up to the roof.

"The garden of a thousand delights!" she said with a sweep of her hand and a curtsy. "The Japanese fairy, Japonette, welcomes the true prophet of her

frivolity.”

He looked around at the flowers in pots—geraniums, verbenas, fuchsias, heliotrope—homely, old-fashioned blossoms.

”I bought them from a peddler; I stopped his wagon in the street and made him carry them up here. They only cost two dollars; and I was economical at the market,” she explained.

He glanced up at the awning gay with yellow and white stripes.

”Macy’s,” she admitted guiltily; ”I’ll starve you at dinner to-night to pay for it.”

He looked at her rather queerly, she thought.

”There are things I’d starve for—and people.”

”And awnings, cousin?”

”Yours.”

”That’s very nice and gallant and obvious,” she said in such a tormenting tone that he broke out almost impatiently:

”Japonette, can’t you ever take me seriously?”

”I hope not, cousin.”

For an instant the smile remained stamped on their lips; then the slight strain became perceptible, a moment only, for she turned lightly away and seated herself on the edge of a big hanging seat.

”More Macy,” she nodded ruefully. ”We’ll all have to fast to-morrow.... You may sit here, too, if you wish.”

A family of starlings were nesting in the cornices of the roof across the way, and the two young people watched the old birds for a while flying to the park and returning with food for their invisible young.

”Horrid, isn’t it?” observed Diana. ”But that’s the way of things. No sooner are you married and happy than—zip! the scene changes, and you turn into a wretched purveyor of nourishment for the next generation. *Carpe diem!*”

”Cede Deo! It’s probably good fun,” commented Edgerton.

”What? Slaving for others just when you are all ready for real happiness?”

”*That’s* happiness, or nobody would do it—not even those birds.”

”It’s instinct!”

”Maybe with birds. Instincts are all right for birds, but we humans are usually arrested when we follow our instincts.”

She laughed. ”That *is* true; it’s neither instinct nor happiness that makes us slaves to babies:—it’s duty.”

”If that were all it is,” he said, ”the state would be nourishing the majority of infants. No; it’s probably fun, Diana. That’s the only possible explanation.”

She shrugged her dainty shoulders and looked at the westering sun above Staten Island; and in the gesture she seemed, in pantomime, to discard all fem-

inine duties, cares, and responsibilities forever. Then as she rested there, cheek on hand, her blue eyes grew vaguer.

"I am glad you came into our lives," she said; "I mean it this time."

"I am glad, too," he said seriously.

"You are now; I can see that.... How soon will you be sorry?"

"Why?"

She turned toward him.

"How soon will the novelty tire you?"

"I have not considered you as a novelty."

"But I am; I'm a mechanical toy. My paint soon comes off, cousin."

"You're my own kin. There's no novelty, as you call it, in kinship, nothing evanescent."

She said: "Do you really and deliberately desire to stand by that extremely tenuous and attenuated tie? An attitude of that sort entails duties. You may have much to overlook in us—even much to forgive. Are you aware of your responsibilities?"

"I assumed them when I asked to be admitted to your partnership."

"Why *did* you ask to join?"

"The real reason?"

She hesitated, looking at him.

"Yes, the real one."

"You."

"What exactly do you mean by that answer?"

"I don't know, myself, Japonette," he said laughingly; "I've tried to analyze it, too. The instinct of relationship may have counted."

"I hope it did," said she.

"I hope so. God knows, and men are selfish.... And *that* counted, too."

"What?"

"Selfishness."

"I don't believe there is very much in you."

"That is where your heart is still a child's heart, Japonette."

"Oh, I'm no altruist, but there's selfishness *and* selfishness.... What were we talking about? Oh! why you desired to join——"

"No, we got past that."

"Oh, yes; well, then, you say it was because of me. Why?"

"I told you I didn't know exactly why; but the root of it all was you.... And when you told me about some people who had come here—that fellow who spoke about a housekeeper——"

"Jim Edgerton!"

"What!"

"I believe—but you *can't* be as nice as that! You simply can't!"

"Oh, I'm not nice," he protested, reddening; but she interrupted:

"You *are!* I certainly believe you thought that Silvie and I required somebody masculine in our vicinity—to throw the housekeeping man downstairs, for example. Did you?"

"No. I only——"

"*Did* you?"

"Of course not."

"Do you know," she said seriously, "you're a perfect dear in one way, and I don't know what you are in others. *Now* be flattered, for *that* makes you interesting. And you know it's all up with a woman who finds a man interesting."

She was laughing at him now, and he scarcely knew how to take what she said except to take it with a grin.

"You're a terrible torment, Diana," he said. "My value in my own estimation, since I've known you, has fluctuated between a dollar and a half and thirty cents."

"You *said* you had two dollars! I believe you're one of these wealthy men who are always singing poor!"

"How many other kinds of things do you think I am?" he asked resignedly.

"I don't know. I think I'll amuse myself by finding out."

"Meanwhile," he said, smiling, "remember I am always what I was when I first set eyes on you—no!—the next second *after* I had seen you."

"A lightning change, cousin?"

"Like lightning, Diana."

"The lightning of the gods?"

"Diana's own shaft.... 'The sun shall not smite thee by day, nor the moon by night,' but I stand betwixt the rising sun of Japan and—you, Diana. *Somebody's* shot me, that's all."

"You are perfectly delightful, but do you realize that I'm dissecting you all the while?"

"You once said——"

"Never mind that," she interrupted hastily; and blushed until it infuriated her to calmness. And to heal the sting with the cause of it she said:

"You're perfectly right, cousin; any man who can endure our scalpel will be worth seizing and dragging to the parson. But—you are perfectly safe for a while. It takes a lifetime to properly dissect a man of your sort. I'll be eighty before I make up my mind about you."

"Eighty years is not beyond the statute of limitations."

"You'd marry me at eighty! Do you know you're beginning to trouble me? I told you I was thoroughly feminine, and susceptible to flattery. I am; it's too bad I'm so intelligent that I've really got to satisfy that intelligence by spending

years and years in dissecting you. Otherwise, I'd run away with you now."

"In your Japanese silks and little straw sandals?"

"Oh, yes, if you were sentimental enough to insist."

"I would."

She shrugged. "I knew you were a dreamer—captivated by a vision. Suppose you had to see me pinning on store curls?"

"I'd help pin 'em."

"Well, there are plenty of other things to disillusion you. I adore onions."

"So do I," he said.

They laughed together.

She was near enough for him to be aware of the faint scent of her breath, or it may have been a fragrance from her gown which stirred slightly in the evening breeze, or the delicate fresh perfume of her hair and skin—something indefinable, some exquisite emanation of youth which had stolen subtly into his senses—something of her, and as distinctly and inviolably hers as the occult atmosphere of a virgin planet.

"Cousin," she said, "I thought we were to remove our masks in the family circle. They seem to be on as closely as ever."

He looked at her a moment.

"We never will remove them," he said.

"Never?"

"Never, Japonette."

"Why not?"

"Because, for example, in my case I want you to believe me everything I'd like to be. I know what I am. All people know what they are.... Does anybody ever really unmask? ... Could they if they wished to? There would be only another mask beneath.... We can't ever get rid of masks.... I don't care how hard we try, how honestly we try, how intimate two people become, how deeply they may love—there's always a mask, and it grows there; and our own eyes are the slits. Even a mother with her first born in her arms looks down into its eyes in vain—those blue and transparent veils of a secret soul which sits behind them, impenetrable, inviolable."

After a silence she said:

"Silvette was right; you are a poet, Jim.... How dusky it is growing over the river. Silvette is probably superintending dinner preparations. Shall we go

down?”

CHAPTER V

DE MOTU PROPRIO

They arrived at Adriutha two days later in a roaring downpour of June rain. A maid conducted Silvette and Diana to their rooms, a valet piloted Edgerton to another wing of the house devoted to bachelors' quarters over the vast billiard room.

At the eastern end of the house Silvette stood beside the window while the maid assigned to them undressed her. Diana, already in her pajamas and sandals, lay flat on the bed, one knee crossed over, swinging her slim, bare foot and looking out at the rain.

It was a wet outlook across the meadows, over a low range of rocky and wooded hills, behind which the invisible sun had already set. In the drenched foreground, beyond the meadow's matted edge, the Deerfield River tossed and foamed, swollen a deeper amber by the rain—a wide, swift stream set with spray-dashed bowlders, and bordered alternately by ledges dripping with verdure and sandy stretches full of low rain-beaten willows. The world, through its limpid veil of rain, looked like a silvery aquarelle framed by a window.

Tea was presently served. Silvette in her silk lounging suit came over and seated herself on the edge of the bed; the maid finished drawing the bath, and retired until again summoned.

“Well,” sighed Silvette, pouring the tea, “here we are, Di. How do you feel about it now?”

“Depressed,” said Diana briefly.

“So do I, somehow.... I wish we were back in New York, with just enough to live on.”

Diana swung her foot gently, but made no reply.

Presently she kicked off her sandal, lay thinking a moment, and then sat up and accepted the cup of tea offered by her sister. They sipped their tea in silence for a while, nibbled toast and cakes until sufficiently refreshed.

“After all,” observed Silvette, “what we are doing for a living is purely a matter of personal taste. It ought not to depress us.”

“We should have told him! That is the only thing that worries me,” re-

marked Diana. "Still, it is really none of his business what we do for a living."

"After all," repeated Silvette, "what is there to tell him? Keno, Nevada, has nothing to learn from New York in frivolity, I fancy. There are several pretty women in every set who'd starve if they didn't play cards better than their neighbors."

"I rather wish we'd told him about our year there; yet, what is there to tell? Probably it resembled plenty of years with which he is perfectly familiar."

"Do we have to account to Jim Edgerton anyway?" asked Silvette impatiently.

"He wanted to come with us," mused Diana. "When he wants to go, he'll go fast enough, I fancy. It isn't what he might think, or his possible disapproval, that worries me; it's that he ought to have been told more about us in the beginning... But how were we to tell him?"

"He didn't ask, did he?"

"No; but, somehow or other, we ought to have put him au courant, and then he could have had his choice about recognizing the relationship or ignoring it. That's what bothers me a little."

"How could we possibly have told him all about ourselves the first afternoon we ever set eyes on him?"

"There were two other afternoons; one is just ending... I don't know; I might easily have created a situation in which it would have seemed natural enough to mention our programme to him."

"Why didn't you, Di?"

"Cowardice," said the girl frankly; and she stretched herself out flat on the bed again.

"Do you think as much of Jim Edgerton's opinion as that?"

"I seem to.... I didn't want to take the risk of his disapproval. I'm beginning to realize that we've been dishonest with him."

"That is an ugly word, little sister."

"I don't know any way to soften it. A girl is either honest or the contrary. I was not honest with Jim Edgerton."

"He might not disapprove, after all. He is no provincial."

"Yes—and he might disapprove. Men of his kind who stand for almost anything in outsiders are finicky about their own relatives. They really don't care what imprudence other people commit; they may even admire it—even do it themselves—but there's a difference as soon as it involves one of the family. I've an idea he is like that."

"Isn't it stretching a thin tie of kinship too far to speak of Jim Edgerton and ourselves in a family sense? Are you and I not rather inclined to abuse that word cousin, Diana?"

"He first used it to us," she said warmly; "it is his choice. He's a very impulsive and generous boy; do you know it?"

"Yes, I do.... Isn't it a thousand pities?"

"What about?"

"His losing everything—being so wretchedly poor.... And our being poor, too."

"Yes," said Diana simply.

"And he'll never, never recoup. He is full of talent, and nothing else. What a pity! He isn't the successful sort. It's a pity, isn't it, Di?"

"Yes."

"Because he is already quite mad about you, Di—he's a perfect boy about you... How can men of his age retain their niceness and charm and freshness, after what they usually pass through. With all his undesirable wisdom and his masculine worldly experiences, he's practically as innocent as we are."

Diana suddenly sat up cross-legged on the bed and gathered her ankles in her hands.

[image]

"I wonder just how innocent we really are," she said.

"I wonder just how innocent we really are," she said, "with all those things which we have been obliged to know about in our higher education? And—speaking of education—there was our last year in Keno. That year did some curious things to us. Do you realize our development, our worldly evolution since the beginning of last year—how familiar we became with that doubtful worldly wisdom which is supposed to be part of the make-up of a woman of the world? ... Do you realize that it was a year of *laissez faire*, of revelation, of laxity and acquiescence in relaxation, a year of paradox, of ceremony sans façon, of schooling oneself to overlook and accept, of an education in morals and their immoral variations? How aloof have we kept ourselves from what we have learned to tolerate?—and how much was due to fastidiousness, how much to expediency, how much to common sense, and how much to spiritual conviction?"

"Does your conscience really trouble you?" asked Silvette anxiously.

"No; only in regard to Jim Edgerton. I'd rather he knew how we regard life before he reclaims relationship in public; that's all."

Silvette said: "We are merely wiser; merely less provincial and more honest and tolerant of a world that isn't any too goody-goody. We've learned to distinguish between mock modesty, false shame, hypocrisy, and honest conviction.

Take Keno, for instance; before we lived there we were inclined to look askance on what the world accepts with indifference and perfect good nature. I mean, on the rather lurid gayeties of a little world where attractive divorcées make up the bulk of society—where the eternal cry in the ballroom is 'Change partners! Ladies change!'—and where nobody plays cards except for stakes. After all, Keno is merely a section of New York temporarily transplanted. He'd probably feel at home there."

Diana turned, deliberately rolled across the bed, landing lightly on her feet.

"All right," she said; "only, some day somebody will tell Jim Edgerton that those two cousins of his are outpacing propriety. We're just a dash too pretty, Silvie, and we've simply got to be careful. There's one enemy you and I will always have to reckon with—our own sex."

She walked to the window, looked out, and stood watching the rain, her childish mouth troubled. And, presently, speaking again without turning around:

"Our programme, as we have arranged it, was to be a general one—to win out, go in for everything, play the game as hard as it can be played, meet the gayer world face to face squarely, and take from it honestly all it has to offer."

"Except love."

"Except—that."

"Love, per se, we can't afford," said Silvette gayly; "however, it may even be included. Who knows? Material masculine eligibility need not necessarily exclude that agreeable passion, need it? Many a worthy heart beats beneath the waistcoat of the plutocrat."

"The chances are against any deal in hearts, as far as we are concerned."

"You're not thinking of Jim Edgerton, are you, Di?"

Diana stood, hands clasped behind her back, staring at the rain. Suddenly she pivoted on her sandals.

"Yes, I am thinking of him. I'm thinking of him all the time."

"That is very unwise," said Silvette gently.

"I am thinking of him, but it's only thinking.... I like him. I never liked any man better, or as well, perhaps.... And I've known him three days. Give me a day or two grace, and I'll stop thinking about him."

"You were quite mad over young Inwood in Keno," mused Silvette.

"Yes.... I realize that I like men. I enjoy them; if I had my way, I'd carry on like the deuce with every man who took my fancy, before I come to the final decision and spoil life for myself."

"You carry on like the deuce *now*, sister," said Silvette, laughing.

"I don't do it enough," retorted Diana fiercely; "what have I got to look forward to, after all?—a homeless life of social employment, an old age of gossip and cards!—or, if I win out, a loveless middle age wearing some wealthy man's

name and pearls, and all the rest dashed out—the brightness, the youth of things, the hope of things, children—”

”You don’t want children!” exclaimed Silvette, horrified; ”grubby little things! I thought you hated them!”

”Grubby little things,” repeated the girl slowly; ”so I do, in theory.”

”You don’t know anything about them practically.”

”Except at the Maternity Hospital.... Oh, Silvie, it *is* ghastly.... It’s horrid! horrid!—it’s devilishly unfair! ... Young girls in the springtide of youth crept in and out of that dreadful place like the white ghosts of murdered souls! If maternity didn’t slay them, it killed the better part of them. Then the world ended for them—youth, hope, freedom ended with the first thin cry of the tyrant that dooms all women.... Yes, I—hate children!” She stood a moment, slim hands on her hips, head lowered with the brown locks clustering against her cheeks; then, looking up:

”But I mean to have one of my own sometime. Life to the full, dregs and all, before I die. That is my programme.”

Silvette laughed. ”This is a new and recent development, isn’t it?”

”I’m developing like lightning.”

”Lightning develops quickly, but it doesn’t last, dear.”

Diana, lost in retrospection again, smiled vaguely. Then, lifting her pretty eyes:

”Did you ever see starlings feeding their young? A pair nested opposite the studio. I found their evolutions rather interesting.”

”No doubt,” said her sister. ”Is that what has aroused the maternal instinct? Come, who is to bathe first. Pull down the shade and turn on the electricity, and ring for the maid, dear. She ought to lay out our gowns at once.”

Diana did as she was bidden; then, on impulse, sat down at the little fly-away desk and scribbled a note:

”Take it to Mr. Edgerton,” she said to the maid.

Edgerton, dressing leisurely, read the note where he stood under the electric cluster:

”DEAR JIM: The rain, the world, and things oppress me. So do you sometimes.... There’s a long future ahead of me. I dread it—who was eager for the plunge a few days since. I seem to be standing on the threshold of things in general, waiting for my cue to enter, but with little heart for the stage now. Alas, I am already tired before the overture has ended.

"If we dance to-night, ask me. Probably I'm the only girl in the house who could stand a dance with you—and I'm not so certain about myself.... But if we play Bridge, continue not to sit at our table. I ask it of you for reasons which are none of your business. Indulge my whim, please.

"JAPONETTE."

He finished dressing, then scribbled a note to her, and sent it by the valet:

"Japonette, dear, I'm as rotten at cards as I am dancing. I won't permit indiscreet infatuation to interfere with your Bridge.... And, by the way, in this sort of a house the chances are they'll play for stakes—probably high stakes. My limit is a cent a point—or was in days of affluence—but our host will scarcely expect us to risk our salaries, I fancy. So even if you have no objection to playing for stakes—which probably, however, you have—you need not feel obliged to. Our duties here do not include losing money to Mr. Rivett's assorted guests, you know. Feel perfectly at liberty to let the table carry you and Silvette.

"Shall I wait and go down with you both?

"J.E."

She read the note; then handed it silently to Silvette, who read it also in silence.

"You see," said Diana, "it's exactly what I told you. He doesn't wish us to play for stakes."

"He says nothing here about his wishes.... Besides, it would be an impertinence for him to make any such suggestion to either you or me."

"His attitude is plain enough—if you think it impertinent."

"I don't think it is. He indicates that he supposes we do not play for stakes, and adds that, anyway, we need not if we don't wish to. That is all the note expresses. Anyway, it doesn't matter, does it?"

Diana shook her disheveled head, seated herself and wrote a hasty answer, sending it away by the valet, who was waiting outside the door.

"Don't wait for us; we're not hooked up yet. We're quite accustomed to play for stakes, you funny boy, so that need cause you no uneasiness.... And please don't forget to ask me, if they dance."

Edgerton stood thinking for a moment before his fireplace after reading the missive; then struck a match and lit the two notes, holding them together until almost consumed, and lingered still to watch the edge of yellow flame on the hearth licking up the remaining margins of the paper.

Then he went downstairs and into a green and gold drawing-room, where his hostess received him shyly, almost timidly—a small gray-haired woman all over jewels whose thin little hand trembled slightly in his.

It was a frail hand, fragile of bone, yet never the hand of generations of leisure, for the joints were hard and accented, and the fingers rather worn than thin—as though once not unaccustomed to household labor; and, without knowing just why, he retained the diamond-laden hand in his firm, warm clasp for a moment as though to reassure her.

"It is nice of you to ask us," he said gently. "You have made everything very easy and comfortable for us. My cousins will be down in a few moments; they asked me to come first."

The little gray woman looked up into his pleasant, well-cut face as though confused; he smiled down at her, still retaining her hand.

"My husband has told me who you are," she said. "I didn't expect you to be just like this.... You and your cousins are our very welcome and honored guests.... Our *guests*," she repeated almost tremulously, "and none more welcome under our roof."

"It is gracious and kind of you to say so," he said, touched by the simplicity and the mild, faded face upturned.

Then Mr. Rivett came forward, cautiously treading the velvet, his two burned-brown eyes fixed behind the big concave eyeglasses.

"It's wet weather," he said, shaking hands. "I hope your quarters are comfortable."

"Most luxurious, thank you—with a beautiful outlook."

Mrs. Rivett's gentle voice sounded at his elbow presenting him to her daughter and son, and after that to several others who, for the moment, he made no effort to distinguish one from another except that he recognized Colonel Curmew in superb form and obtrusive pearl studs decorating a fluted shirt front.

A moment later Silvette and Diana entered, slender and youthful, with all the softly flushed charm of eighteen and the winning composure of a wider experience than eighteen years can ever lend.

Colonel Curmew presently outflanked Silvette, forcing her skillfully into a momentary retreat toward the recess of a window, where he blockaded her and curled his mustache with satisfaction and shot his cuffs, and prepared to drive in her outer pickets.

Diana remained in quiet conversation with Mrs. Rivett, the latter shy, wist-

ful, and ill at ease by turns; the former sweet and deferential, yet all the while composedly taking the measure of the others in the room, and of the room itself, vaguely aware in her apparently smiling preoccupation that she was winning a perplexed and timid heart.

Cocktails were served—unusual ones that had a scent like the original Ricky, that is, the aromatic odor of wild blossoms.

The little gray woman barely tasted hers, with that same inborn instinct, perhaps, that impelled those old-time hostesses in the days when viands and wines sometimes proved fatal.

Then Edgerton relieved her of her scarcely touched glass; took Diana's, too, which was still half full. Mrs. Rivett rose and gave him her arm, to his surprise; Mr. Rivett took in Diana, his son Silvette. The name of Edgerton had counted heavily.

[image]

"Mr. Rivett took in Diana, his son Silvette."

In the dining room everything was grossly overdone except the cookery—the sort of thing most calculated to annoy and bore the very man most accustomed to it in town; profusion akin to the plethora which offends; effort impossible to disguise which stirs even in the most good-natured and generous an unwilling contempt.

Edgerton let his eyes rest for a moment, outside the silver and crystal-set circle of light, on gold, heavy carving, gilded tapestry and picture, and withdrew his gaze gravely. Men servants swarmed, bothering him; the scent of greenhouse blossoms, forced before their time; the heavy magnificence out of place—all slightly disgusted him, though much of it was about what he had expected of such people.

Little Miss Rivett, on his left, dissected her terrapin with the healthy attention of youth and hunger; and presently he turned to look at her with amused but wholly amiable curiosity.

He saw a small, plump, dainty maid, with exceedingly clear and bright brown eyes, and a softly brilliant complexion, looking back at him with unconcealed interest.

There was a moment's silence, then they both smiled.

"Do you think you'll like us?" she asked saucily; "or do you hate us already?"

"Not the slightest doubt of my liking you, Miss Rivett; but how about your

liking us?"

"Your cousins are most bewitching and bewildering.... You seem to be nice—are you?"

"Very," he said, laughing. "I'm glad you gave me an opportunity of saying so, because otherwise it might not have been perfectly clear to you."

"I *am* rather fastidious," she said. "How well do you dance?"

"My grace in that praiseworthy pastime is ursine."

"Really?"

"Unbearably."

"You are very British, aren't you?"

"Do you refer to my little play upon words?"

"No, generally; that was merely a touch of local color. Naturally, also, you fishshootridetohoundsandplaypolo; do you?"

"Also gawf, dear lady."

"Perfectly symmetrical and indistinguishable from others of your kind. I thought so. Crocky, too?"

"Certainly, crocky," he admitted; "also no bank account. You may call me m'lud with impunity."

"Perhaps you're not entirely qualified. How do you stand on the heiress question, Mr. Edgerton?"

"I can't qualify there."

"Then you're a sham. Besides, you're neither clever nor gallant. *I* am an heiress."

"Then I qualify at once as a fortune hunter," he said, laughing, "and I'll cable for my solicitors."

"What *are* you saying?" asked Mrs. Rivett in her gentle, uncertain voice.

"Mother, Mr. Edgerton and I are going to be friends. Perhaps he isn't sure of it, but I am. Tell him what happens when I am sure of anything."

"Dear, perhaps Mr. Edgerton doesn't quite understand your manner of saying things."

"That's just it; he *does* understand! He is going to turn out exceedingly nice, mother; watch him!"

"Christine! Please be a little less personal and abrupt."

They turned, smiling, toward the other end of the table where much laughter sounded. Evidently Diana and Silvette were becoming very popular, and, somehow, it occurred to Edgerton that perhaps this great room had not often resounded with mirth.

But the chatter and laughter were incessant now; so were the servants' ministrations, and Edgerton was glad enough to give his arm to the faded little woman beside him and take her to her great, gilded chair in the drawing-room,

and follow the men to another room, where blue smoke from cigars presently floated to the ceiling.

Jack Rivett, rather too plump and smooth, moved into a chair beside Edgerton; and the latter, who had prejudged him from his appearance, was slightly surprised to find the youth widely read, widely traveled, with a mind and even a wit entirely his own, and an original but sometimes callow comment for any subject brought up.

In a desultory conversation it presently transpired that young Rivett was a candidate for the Patroon's Club.

"You're a member, I believe; are you not?" he asked Edgerton.

"I have resigned."

"Oh! I thought that was the one club from which nobody ever resigned. I beg your pardon, Edgerton!" he added, turning red; "don't think me a cad."

"No offense," smiled Edgerton; "I resigned because I couldn't afford it. It's a good club; hope you make it soon."

"I hope I do.... But we're rather recent additions—if we *are* additions—to New York. You never can tell what New Yorkers will do to people like us," he added laughingly.

"New York is practically composed of recent residents," said Edgerton, smiling.

"They're the most pitiless to newcomers. I wouldn't be very much afraid if we had only your sort to encounter. If you old residents like a man, he gets his hat check ultimately, and passes in; but it lies with the sidewalk speculators now. The seats of the mighty are in their hands."

Edgerton was much amused.

"Not entirely," he said; "even we older residents are asked about now and then."

"Into which of the three circles—Smart, Knickerbocker, or Old Testament?"

Edgerton was laughing so frankly that Rivett senior turned his convex glasses on him; and, deciding that the laughter was genuine and not included in services, went on with his business conversation with a Mr. Snaith—a large, soft-skinned gentleman deeply immersed in oil and cotton.

Colonel Curmew came over briskly, expelling smoke.

"What are you youngsters playing this evening? Auction or Chinese Kahn?"

"However, they choose to make up the tables," said Jack Rivett lazily. Then, as though on an after thought: "I doubt whether Mr. Edgerton bothers with cards; do you?"

"I don't mind, except that I've cut out playing for stakes," replied Edgerton, perfectly aware of Jack Rivett's kindly consideration in giving him a chance to

escape gracefully, and a trifle amused, too, that the young man should suppose he cared what anybody in the place might think of him.

Servants were now arranging the old-fashioned colonial card tables in the noticeably old-fashioned colonial card room. A young girl or two appeared at the arched doorway, lingering on the threshold as several of the men came out to gossip.

Then the hostess appeared with the others; groups formed, shifted, and gradually subsided into seats; seals of fresh packs were broken, scores penciled, the first hands dealt at auction.

Diana, Colonel Curmew, a very pretty Mrs. Wemyss, and Mr. Rivett sat together; at another table Silvette, Mr. Snaith, Christine Rivett, and a Mr. Dineen—a gentleman weighing some two hundred pounds and wearing an attractive snub nose and a pair of merry gray-blue eyes.

And the awful hush of auction descended without a sound.

Edgerton and his hostess and a Judge Wicklow and a Mrs. Lorrimore—a fair, fat, blue-eyed thing with a cupid-bow mouth as sweet as the smile that abode there—settled themselves to Chinese Kahn, a game spelled in various ways and played in several more.

"Stakes?" inquired Mrs. Lorrimore with businesslike directness.

"Your pleasure," replied Judge Wicklow in the deep, thick voice celebrated and feared where judicial procedures are thickest and most unimportant.

"Neither Mr. Edgerton nor I care to gamble—I think," said Mrs. Rivett timidly.

The judge turned his bovine countenance on Edgerton. The only anomaly in it seemed to be his eyebrows. Cows have no eyebrows.

"I'm sorry," said Edgerton.

The judge seemed sorry, too, but he shuffled the two packs in his enormous and hairy hands, dealt, and deposited the surplus in a pile with a single card separate and face upward—the ace of hearts.

Mrs. Lorrimore promptly picked it up, laid down three aces, four fours, a small sequence interiorly made possible by a joker, and sat back triumphantly with her depleted suit in her gemmed fingers, which were pressed comfortably to an ample bosom.

"Discard," rumbled the judge.

"Oh, I *beg* pardon!" She laughed, and laid down a nine.

Nobody ever wants a nine, somehow. The judge snorted, helped himself, discarded, and turned his heavy countenance on his hostess.

"Dear me," she said in her humble little voice, "I—I'm afraid—*afraid* I'm going out!"

"What!" thundered his honor. "Nobody ever goes out first hand, madam!"

But she timidly did that very thing to the suppressed fury of his honor, who had cherished a long sequence, according to rule, and was further nursing the other joker and three kings.

"It's too bad," she ventured, looking around at Edgerton, whose entire hand was being minutely counted by Mrs. Lorrimore.

"I don't mind!" said the young fellow, laughing; and he leaned a trifle nearer and added under his breath: "But suppose I *had* played for stakes!"

Into her timid and faded eyes came the ghost of a glimmer—the momentary sparkle of fun, and went out very quickly.

But it had been there for a second; and thereafter Edgerton found a curious pleasure in making it come back at intervals. She even laughed—even ventured to provoke his laughter—rather scared at trying until his quick mirth set her at momentary ease again.

Luck bedeviled his honor; the fair Mrs. Lorrimore won steadily without the least respect for the law and no consideration at all for the sanctity of the bench; and the judge became peevish. He was a very rich man.

Presently he had enough of it—letters to write for the morning mail—and got himself out and upstairs with the dignity of a fly-pestered ox.

"Horrid old screw," observed Mrs. Lorrimore in Edgerton's ear, and laughed her peculiarly sweet and captivating laugh as a servant returned with his honor's check in an angrily scrawled envelope.

Mrs. Rivett had passed into a farther room, where the high gilded pipes of an organ glimmered in the subdued light. Edgerton saw her seated there—a thin, bejeweled little figure beneath the tall gothic majesty of the pipes.

After a while the low harmony of an old-time hymn stole into the card room.

Those at the bridge tables remained silent and absorbed, except Mr. Rivett, who cautiously turned his sphinxlike countenance toward the farther dusk where his wife was seated.

Edgerton stood behind Diana's chair, watching. Presently he went over to Silvette, lingered for a while, then came back to Diana again.

An hour later Mr. Rivett said abruptly: "Does anybody care to dance?"

The effect was like a pistol shot on lotus eaters. Slowly the players came out of their absorption; color returned faintly to white, tense faces.

"I suppose I may ask it?" added Mr. Rivett dryly. "I'm a heavy loser."

"Sure thing, dad," said Jack with a laugh. "I'm about even, and I venture to ask it, too. *Does anybody here want to dance? You surely won't object,*" he added mischievously to Silvette.

"I have no right to say anything at all," she laughed.

"Every right—the right of the conqueror! Accept my bow and spear—and

speak! ... How is it with your sister?"

"I'm afraid I haven't any voice in the matter, either," said Diana serenely. "It is for the losers to decide."

They decided to dance. Mrs. Rivett came from the dim music room and stood watching them with her little worn hands folded, while servants lighted and cleared the larger drawing-room, designed for a ballroom, with its little gilded balcony aloft and the great concert grand in its carved and gilded foliations sprawling like a bedizened elephant in the corner.

A servant was sent for "mademoiselle"—evidently somebody who lived somewhere in the house whose duties included dance music. Meanwhile Edgerton sat down at the piano, and began a fascinating Spanish waltz.

"Traitor," whispered a fresh, young voice at his elbow, and he looked up into the winning eyes of Diana.

"Hello," he said; "how went the battle?"

"The cards?"

"Yes."

"As usual, thank you."

"Oh! And how do they usually go with you, fair cousin?"

"Well enough," she said briefly.

She stood leaning on the piano.

"You play cleverly," she observed.

"Oh, yes—cleverly. There's nothing else to anything I do."

"Isn't that enough?"

"Is it, Diana?"

"Enough as far as music is concerned," she said impatiently. "Did you ever see a musical virtuoso whom a real man didn't want to kick? And as for you," she added, "you are a traitor. You said you would ask me to dance. Now, if you ask me, I *won't!*"

Still playing, he continued to look up at her smilingly.

"What do you really care about me anyway?" he said. "I wish you'd tell me, Diana."

"Honestly, or flippantly?"

"Honestly."

"Masks off, you mean?"

"Yes—as far off as they'll come."

"I care a lot about you."

"You say it too frankly," he laughed.

"What I say, I say.... Did you find Christine Rivett agreeable at dinner?"

"She's interesting."

"Is *that* all!" evidently disappointed.

"Well, she's very fetching."

"That is far more serious."

"Indeed, it is. I've qualified as an aspirant for her hand and fortune already."

"I don't doubt it," she returned calmly. "That's one reason her father decided to employ us."

She said it unsmiling, and after he had looked up at her once or twice he said: "Of course you are joking."

"Ob, yes; it's one kind of a jest. Meanwhile here comes a young person in black—doubtless mademoiselle.... I'm not going to dance with you; don't compose your features in that smug fashion. You're a traitor, and I won't."

She turned on her heel and advanced leisurely toward Colonel Curmew, who immediately began to twirl his mustache and shoot his cuffs, when, without warning, she sheered off into the receptive arms of Jack Rivett, and was presently drifting across the room in a Viennese waltz.

Others were dancing now; Edgerton went over and asked his hostess—an old New York custom now obsolete—who colored and smiled at him, explaining that she had renounced that art with the advent of rheumatism. So, after a while, he took out her daughter Christine—also an obsolete custom—who soon, however, had enough of him as a dancer, and took him into the conservatory.

The others danced until supper time; midnight found them separating on the stairs. Edgerton and Christine Rivett had rather a prolonged leave-taking, then shook hands cordially in plain view of everybody.

Diana, passing with Silvette, said a careless good night to him. Silvette, retaining her sister's arm, detained him for a moment in conversation; then they went away together, Diana dismissing him with an inattentive nod.

But, as he was prepared for his pillow, a servant brought an envelope to his door and tucked it under the sill.

Inside was a single line:

"Good night, Jim."

The handwriting was now familiar to him.

CHAPTER VI

PACTA CONVENTA

Guests arrived and guests departed from Adriutha, but the original gathering

remained.

The people who came and went were about the kind that Edgerton had expected to encounter—people identified with nothing in particular except money, and not always with that.

For, into the social mess at Adriutha an author or two was occasionally stirred as seasoning; sometimes an artist became temporarily englutened over a week-end, emerging on Monday well fed and satiated with hope of material results from cohabitation with wealth—which never materialized.

Edgerton was inclined to take them all as cheerfully as he found them—at their face value; and they were not always pretty.

Loyalty to obligation was inherent in his race, perhaps the strongest trait in him; and all his inclinations toward what was easiest, his content with the superficial, his tendency to drift, had not yet radically altered this trait, nor perhaps other qualities latent under the froth.

For a few days in the beginning, humorous curiosity, the novelty of his anomalous position, the very rawness of the experience, amused him; but the veneer of everything soon wore thin, revealing the duller surface underneath. Then came uneasiness and impatience; but loyalty to his bargain and to his kindred were matters of course, and he determined to find in these people something to interest him and render his sojourn among them at least endurable.

After that first stormy night in June, the splendor of a limpid, rain-washed morning had revealed to him the gross outward impossibility of this place of millions—the vast, new "villa," red-tiled and yellow-walled, hideous in its multiplicity of roofs, angles, terraces and bays, with outlying works of rubble, concrete, and railroad-station floral embellishment.

Scarring the green crypt of nature, staining the glass of the stream with painted reflections of its architectural deformities, Adriutha Lodge sprawled monsterlike and naked in the summer sunshine.

Garage, hothouses, stables, barns, a farm, a model dairy, like grewsome spawn of a common architectural dam, affronted the woods and meadows of this little valley set among the remote Berkshires.

There was no reticence left in that desecrated valley all vibrant with the scream of discordant color, texture, and design. Motor cars, too, were noisy along the road; all day the silver-mounted trappings of horses flashed in the sun. Staccato echoes from power boats on the artificial lake offended. The House of Rivett challenged the Eternal patience with a hundred lightning rods.

Edgerton, walking his horse beside Diana's, suddenly drew bridle with an uncontrollable gesture of disgust.

"Listen to me," he said; "where man's despoiling labor pollutes nature, sadness and resignation make heavy the hearts of her true lovers, but where man's

abominable ignorance desecrates, reigns a more shocking desolation which no modest heart ever forgives!”

Diana, surprised by the sudden and unexpected outburst, drew bridle beside his standing horse.

A moment previous they had been amiably exchanging idle gossip from their saddles, gradually falling back behind the others—Silvette, Christine, Jack, and Colonel Curmew—who had cantered on forward; and now, suddenly out of a clear sky, not apropos of anything, Edgerton had flashed out the bolt of his contempt for the House of Rivett—for his ox, his ass, his servants, and all that was Rivett’s.

“Jim,” she remarked, “isn’t it rather bad taste of you to say that?”

“Why? I am paid for being here.” But he realized that she was right, and it made him sullen.

“His roof shelters you none the less,” she said quietly.

“Yours is rather a fine-drawn sense of hospitality, it seems to me,” he retorted.

“I can’t snap at the hand that feeds me.”

“Good Lord! May a man not have his own ideas?”

“Under lock and key, yes.”

“All right,” he said, reddening; “only I supposed I could be frank with you.”

“Are we actually on any such footing?” she asked quietly.

“I thought so—even a footing on which I permit myself to accept such a rebuke from you.”

She turned in her saddle.

“Permit yourself?” she repeated. “Do you mean *condescend*?”

“I mean what I say,” he retorted sulkily, still smarting under her rebuke.

Her cheeks were bright with anger, her lips compressed as though silence had become an effort. Presently, however, she looked across at him with perfect sweetness and composure.

“No, you don’t mean what you say, Jim. If you did, you would be at a disadvantage with me, and you don’t want to be that; nor do I wish to be, ever.”

He said obstinately: “I’m getting sick of this Adriutha business.”

“I predicted you would.”

“Well, I am.... It isn’t false pride; I don’t care what they think about me. If I chose to be a waiter in a Broadway café, their opinion wouldn’t concern me.... I’m simply weary of the place, the majority of the people—what they think and do, their private life, their mere coming in and going out.... It isn’t the pitiable absurdity of their offensive environment alone, the horror of the architecture, the gilded entrails of their abode—it’s the whole bally combination! ... I’m sick—sick! And that’s the truth, Diana.”

"I think," she said, smiling, "that you are also a little bit bored with us."

He looked up at her, perplexed, already beginning to be very much ashamed of his outburst, already conscious of a painful reaction from his unrestraint.

"Diana," he said impulsively, "I'm just a plain brute, and rather a vulgar one; but, do you know, there isn't anybody else in the world I'd have permitted to hear that outburst—whether you take it as a compliment or not."

"You mean you don't care what I think of you?"

He thought for a moment. "I can't mean that, of course."

"You might, very easily."

"I couldn't; I do care what you think of me. Probably what I meant was that I—dare say things to you; that I've a sort of instinct that I can come to you in an emergency—"

"In other words, that I'll stand anything from you?" she said, smiling. "I don't know about that, my friend."

He looked at her curiously. "I believe you'll stand a good deal from me—and still like me. I, somehow, count on it."

She met his gaze directly, unsmiling now.

"A hair divides my sentiments concerning you," she said. "Extremes lie on either side."

"Extremes?"

"I think so. It would take very little to fix definitely my opinion of you."

Sobered, but still curious, he sat his saddle more firmly while the horses paced forward, shoulder against shoulder, along the forest road.

"I didn't suppose you had any very violent opinions concerning me one way or another," he said lightly.

"I haven't—yet."

"Or would ever develop them, either," he added, laughing.

"I probably never shall."

He said, after another silence: "What was it about a hair dividing your sentiments, and that extremes lay on either side?"

"I said that, Jim."

"Extremes of what?"

"Dislike—friendship—I suppose.... I'm a person addicted to extremes."

"Hatred is one extreme. Did you mean that, Japonette?"

"It is conceivable, fair sir."

"And—the other extreme?"

"Which?"

"The opposite extreme to hate.... Is that conceivable, too?"

"Do you mean love?" she asked coolly.

"Yes, love, for example."

"Well, for example, ask yourself how likely I am to entertain that sentimental extreme in your regard."

"Oh," he said; "then all you threaten me with is hatred!"

"Absolutely all, cousin James."

"Hobson's choice for mine. No matter how agreeable I may be, placid friendship is my only reward; and if I'm not agreeable, hatred. Is that it?"

"Are you not satisfied?" she asked, lifting her prettily shaped eyes.

He made no reply.

Yet, he had been satisfied, except at intervals during the first flush of their unconventional friendship, when she was still a fascinating novelty to him, when the charming memory of the surprise was still vivid.

But since then, recently in fact, other matters, somehow, had intervened—the dawning distaste for his own position, the apparent absence of any future prospect, the gradual conviction that he had no real capacity for decently earning a living, no ability—perhaps no character.

His silence seemed to be her answer now; she spurred forward, accepting it. He put his horse to a canter, to a gallop, and they raced away through the woods until they came in sight of the others. Colonel Curmew joined her; Edgerton rode forward with Christine Rivett.

That afternoon there was some tennis played; a number of commonplace and very rich people departed, leaving as residue the original house party which Edgerton and his cousins had found there on their arrival, and who now knew one another well enough to separate into sympathetic groups.

Thus, Judge Wicklow, Mrs. Rivett, and Mrs. Lorrimore played Chinese Kahn under the terrace awning; Colonel Follis Curmew, who had been rash enough to discard his coat and reveal an unlooked-for excess of abdomen, played tennis with Silvette against Jack Rivett and Mrs. Wemyss; Mr. Rivett and Mr. Snaith indulged in laborious clock golf and talked of oil; and Christine and Edgerton, down by the river's edge, continued a conversation begun the evening previous, and which was near enough to meaning something to stimulate their attention.

From his clock golf on the lawn above, Mr. Rivett turned his convex glasses on them occasionally; from one card table on the terrace, her mother, drawing the white wool shawl closer around her slight shoulders, watched her daughter from moment to moment.

Later, the game ended, Mrs. Lorrimore victorious, and his honor unusually

peevish. Mrs. Rivett rose and, advancing to the terrace edge, gazed down at the river bank, where her daughter and Edgerton still sat in the floating canoe, holding it inshore by grasping willow branches overhead.

For a few moments the little old lady watched them, one hand gathering the fleece shawl over the magnificent sapphire at her breast; then she turned quietly away into the house, wandering through it from one gorgeous room to another, until at last she came to the high organ.

Here her husband found her in the semi-dusk, sitting motionless and silent under the tall pipes, hands folded in her lap.

"Well, mother?" he said in a voice which nobody else ever had the privilege of listening to.

She lifted her head, smiled, and laid one hand over his as he seated himself beside her in the demi-twilight.

"Are you happy?" he asked, patting the worn fingers.

"Yes, Jacob—when you and the children are."

"Does that damn Sims bother you?"

No, the housekeeper did not bother her; neither did Noonan, general superintendent.

"Are you sure you are feeling perfectly well?"

"Yes, dear."

"And you are enjoying the people?"

"Yes.... The Tennant girls are so kind to me."

"Why the devil shouldn't they be?" he said harshly. "They never met a better woman!"

"Jacob, dear, don't speak that way."

"Well, then—don't be so eternally surprised if people are nice to you, mother. They'd better be!"

She smiled. "I am a rather plain and unattractive old woman to young people—to most people. I have little to say, but Diana Tennant and her sister are very sweet to me. Poor, motherless girls! I wonder—it troubles me—sometimes—a great deal—"

"What?" he asked grimly.

"Their being so entirely alone, and so unusually attractive.... And they're *good* girls, Jacob."

"I assume that they are," he said dryly.

"They *are*; a woman knows at once.... They've made everybody—all our guests—enjoy their visits so much. Don't you think so?"

"They've earned their salaries.... People seem to like 'em.... I'm wondering how much Jack likes the younger one—Silvette."

"Have *you* thought so, too?"

"I'm asking you, Sarah."

There was a silence; then she said timidly:

"Do you know anything more about them?"

"They're rather learned," he said grimly. "One, I understand, is entitled to practice medicine—the other law.... They scarcely look it."

"Those babies!"

"Certainly. Snaith was at Keno on business last winter; he heard of 'em there. Also—I've inquired."

"You have learned nothing to their discredit, I am sure," she said confidently.

"No; as the fast world wags, they're respectable enough—"

"Fast! Jacob!"

"Oh, Sarah, I didn't mean it in any sinister sense.... They're merely rather gay—into everything everywhere—dancing all night, riding, motoring all over the shop.... They're pretty girls, and good ones, too, I guess.... But the world has gone by us, mother. It's developed speed. That's what I mean by fast."

"If it were not for the children's sake, I would be glad to be left behind," she said, smiling.

"So would I. Damn this gim-crack fol-de-rol!"

"Jacob!"

"Excuse me.... We'll do what we ought to; the children want New York, and I'm going to give it to them if I can.... So I guess you'd better caution Jack about that girl."

"About Miss Tennant?"

"Silvette; yes. Tell him to keep away."

"But she is Mr. Edgerton's cousin."

"It's too far off to count; besides, it's not a good enough gamble. As far as that goes, I'm not satisfied that Jim Edgerton is good enough."

"Oh, Jacob! You *said*—"

"If I'd stuck to all I've said, you'd still be doing the family cooking, dear. Jim Edgerton does, or did, go everywhere in New York.... I wonder how far he could take our daughter with him? ... Wait, Sarah—I'm not reflecting on Christine; I'm only speculating. How do I know about the customs and habits of the New York fauna? I want to go slow. I don't care how little money he has, or even how much he might have had; *I'll* do that part. But, first, I want to know exactly where he can take Christine. The knot hole may be too big for her."

"They sent you a report from New York, dear. You have a full list of all his relatives."

"I know—I know. If he had none, I wouldn't be afraid. It's a man's relatives who act nasty, not his friends.... Does Christine seem to like him?"

"The child is frankly devoted to him.... I don't know if it means anything

more than friendship. Christine is a strange girl. There was young Inwood—”
 ”Everybody’s beau! Glad she shipped him.... But to return to Jack—what’s your opinion?”

”I don’t know. He is with Silvette so much; he is such a dear boy—”

”Tell him plainly we don’t want her. I like her myself, but there’s better material.... Other things aside, I don’t want my boy to marry a girl who plays cards the way she does.”

”Jacob! You don’t mean—”

”No, no! She’s as square as a die; but she wins too much, stakes too much—smokes too much, drinks too many cocktails—she and her sister, too. Why, they’ve won steadily at cards from the beginning. They’ve a genius for it. I never saw such playing. Poor cards don’t worry them; and they never take the shadow of advantage, never whine, never ask questions; there’s never an impatient word, a look of protest—and the judge and the colonel are beasts to play with!—and if there ever seems to be the slightest doubt or indication of a dispute over any point, those girls instantly concede it—cheerfully, too! They’re clean-cut sports—thoroughbred.... But, by God! I don’t want Jack to marry a gambler!”

He stood up, his glasses glistening, his little burned eyes fixed on space.

”No,” he said; ”I’ve done all the gambling that will be done in this family. I’ll do a little more—enough to put the bits on one or two men in New York whose wives could make it easy for my children, if they cared to. Then I’m done, mother.”

She bent her head, and her lips moved.

”What?” he said, hand to his ear.

”I was only thinking, Jacob, that I would be happy when you have finished with—business.”

”Don’t worry, dear.” He put one arm around her—a thin arm in its loose coat sleeve, thin as a tempered steel rod. She laid her faded face against it, comforted by its inflexibility.

”Some day,” she said, ”when the children are happy—with their families—”

”Yes, yes,” he nodded; ”a smaller house for you and me—just a little one.” He smiled; few people ever had seen him smile. ”Just a little house for two little old people,” he said; ”only one horse to take us about, one servant to feed us—eh, Sarah?”

She looked around her, smiling vaguely at the magnificence.

”I like to dust,” she said, coloring up prettily, ”and to make jelly.... I’ve wanted to a long while.”

”You shall do it; I swear you shall. By God! I’ll be glad when that chef is fired!”

”You know, Jacob,” she said timidly, ”with knitting and dusting and—and a

little kitchen work—and you—the day passes very nicely.”

”Some day you’ll make some more of those crullers!” he predicted; ”mark my words!”

”And the cinnamon shells,” she added, slightly excited.

”Oh, Lord! Why can’t that fool of a chef make ’em!” he burst out. ”Well, I’ll wait.... It gives us something more to wait for, doesn’t it?”

He laughed. Only his wife had ever heard the dry cackle which was his manifestation of mirth.

Contented, she lifted her face, and he kissed her.

He went to New York that evening to remain over Wednesday as usual.

In the small company remaining at Adriutha a certain intimacy had developed, enough to make any effort at entertainment superfluous. There was now a decided inclination to laziness in the evening, and a preference for the billiard room and its easy informality.

It was a big room with open fires and the inevitable trophies of somebody else’s chase—the heads of big game mounted, staring at nothing out of their glass eyes; weapons of a vanished age on the oaken wainscoting, modern guns in racks as well as cues, and leather lounges and seats and wide-armed chairs everywhere.

Hither Mrs. Rivett now brought her embroidery or knitting; and around her, within a radius more or less distant, the others gathered or circled in temporary orbits, and games were played and music made and youth flirted and age gossiped much as they did when she was a young girl in Mills Corners, and her husband taught in the red schoolhouse next door.

Sometimes Diana came and sat beside her and knitted a tie destined, she admitted, for nobody in particular; sometimes Edgerton drew his chair beside hers and told her of student life in Paris—watching always for her delightfully timid smile, the shy laugh that she sometimes ventured, the curiously pretty flush that came at times into her cheeks, making them and the faded eyes almost beautiful.

Once or twice it happened that Christine settled herself on a footstool on the other side of her mother to listen, too; and the little old lady experienced a furtive content with the situation as Edgerton and her daughter exchanged pleasantries and volleys of gay badinage across her knitting.

But listen as demurely as she might, feign inattention and unconsciousness as she might, she could detect in neither her daughter nor in Edgerton any hint of a subtler understanding, any omen of anything for the future beyond a frank camaraderie and the undisguised pleasure in it.

And she sighed sometimes—not understanding, not venturing even to admit to herself the desire that was beginning to establish itself in her gentle breast.

As for Edgerton and Christine, they were now on terms of intimacy almost careless. With Diana he was different.

The day of his bitter outbreak when riding with Diana, Edgerton, terribly ashamed of himself, had gone once more to her and admitted that her rebuke was a just one; that he was an ungrateful dog, disloyal to the hand that fed him, and not worthy of Diana's regard.

And the girl had forgiven him very sweetly, not with much enthusiasm, for his rapidly advancing intimacy with Christine had begun to perplex her, nor could she exactly understand his apparently happy acquiescence in conditions lately so irritating.

Not that he neglected her; in his amiable way he was charming to her and to Silvette; was often with them; drove, rode, walked with them; and often, when the opportunity happened, met them in family conclave to discuss future prospects for business.

But his intimacy with Christine advanced very swiftly; so rapidly that Diana became fully aware of it only when it was already in complete flower.... And she wondered a little—and, looking at the girl, wondered less. Also, knowing Edgerton less than she supposed she did, she wondered as to his motive began to trouble her.

Whatever Diana really thought of Edgerton, she did not think him unusually strong in character; was not absolutely convinced of his sincerity—was not any too sure of his motives. Yet, to doubt him always hurt her, and to question his sincerity now made her ashamed of herself. But Christine Rivett was very, very rich, and the only thing she did not have was a name like Edgerton's to insure her future for all time. Thinking of this, the girl was ashamed to think it, and put it resolutely from her mind; but it returned at intervals, even when he was most charming to her sister and herself.

Meanwhile a silent but decisive little duel had been fought in her vicinity, and Jack Rivett definitely replaced Colonel Follis Curmew at Silvette's side; and that warrior, being unfamiliar with the fortunes of war, first sulked, then began to appear frequently in Diana's vicinity—sending out, as it were, pickets of observation and foraging parties, and finally appearing in superb force with warlike intentions not to be misunderstood, although Diana contrived entirely to misunderstand them.

"Do you know," she said to Silvette one night as they were preparing for bed, "I believe that he is actually falling in love with me."

He was; but, nevertheless, Diana entirely misunderstood him.

And so the early summer days passed at Adriutha, and Edgerton, always prone

to accommodate himself to circumstances, found it easier and easier to keep his pact with Mr. Rivett.

Perhaps he was too easily colored by his surroundings; for this place and these people—toward whom, under other circumstances, his instinct would have been antagonistic—were becoming very agreeable to him, and he had handy no standards of comparison from his own world—merely memories, which are always inadequate.

He never became entirely reconciled to the architecture of Adriutha, but the interior magnificence disturbed him less and less; besides, he had very little real love for decoration, and knew little about its harmonies. All the art that was in him consisted in a cleverness and facility for expressing what was actually of slight importance.

So he became amiably reconciled to his surroundings, to his own position. Probably the lack of responsibility and the pleasant idleness had much to do with it.

Still, he really liked Jack Rivett and Christine. In prosperous days the chances would have been against his ever giving himself the opportunity of liking them. But chance had taken charge of his career for the moment; he had met them, and liked them—was inclined to like Rivett senior, too, and began to experience a certain tenderness toward his frail little hostess—something he had never noticed in himself since his mother's death many years ago.

For the others he had no particular feelings. He knew, without troubling himself to think about it, that Colonel Curmew was what his own friends would call a bounder; and the remaining guests were of no greater importance to him than strangers inclined to be civil.

As for Silvette and Diana, they were not only kindred, and so to be automatically cherished, but they also were very charming and delightful young girls; and Diana aroused his curiosity.

During the first days of their acquaintance, the circumstances of his encounter with Diana had inclined him to sentiment. Now that had been merged into a nice friendship—a friendship so frank and pleasant that, in his idea, it permitted privileges of an intimacy which at first perplexed and disturbed Diana, and which, presently, she began to silently resent without exactly knowing why.

What her ideas concerning Edgerton really were, she herself had not entirely decided. She had been as vividly conscious of the charm of their first encounter as had he; being a woman, she still remembered it vividly, whereas, with him, it had dissolved into the mistiest of dream-tinted memories—charming, but vague.

Too, she remembered his attitude toward her in those first three days in the studio—the golden magic of them, the little roof garden, the starlings, the sunset

beyond the river. Under such circumstances, the things men say and look, men usually forget; but women remember longer.

Then she remembered, too, the first days of their arrival at Adriutha.... There was nothing in particular to recall—a note or two from her to him, from him to her.... Perhaps a something in his voice and eyes which, somehow, had died out since.... Yet, *had* it been anything in particular? And, granting that it had, what had she done to encourage it?

She had fallen into the habit of thinking about these things in her bedroom while preparing for the night. She often thought, too, about this new friendship of his for Christine Rivett. It perplexed her, saddened, irritated her by turns, and it distressed her to even question his motives.

But Silvette said one evening, after they had undressed and the maid had left:

“Wouldn’t it be odd if Jim married that girl?”

[image]

”*Wouldn’t it be odd if Jim married that girl?*”

”Married—*her*?” repeated Diana, startled out of a reverie not entirely happy.

”He’s becoming very attentive to her. She is pretty, of course,” Silvette smiled.

”Why shouldn’t he marry her if he finds that he cares for her?” asked Diana with some heat.

”I was merely surprised that he should care for her in that way. She is not his sort.”

”Sort! sort! What does that matter!” said Diana hotly. ”It never stopped a thoroughbred from mating. He can afford to love where he chooses, I fancy.”

”Or marry what he chooses, anyway.”

”Silvie! Do you imagine he’d do a thing like that—not loving her!”

”I don’t know,” said Silvette coolly; ”he’s a dear boy, and nice to us, but I don’t credit him with superhuman qualities.... And *she* inherits millions.”

”It isn’t in him to do it.... And there are plenty of his own sort who would be glad enough—”

”Why do you become so animated, Di? Have you noticed any particular strength of character in Jim Edgerton?”

”Yes.... He is as true as steel, underneath the amiable exterior of a drifter and dilettante.... He has ideals.... I am not one of them—I know that.”

”Do you care particularly?”

"No.... I don't know whether I do or not.... I never seem to know what to say to him these days. We talk together like two men. I'd like to know what he thinks about me—the kind of woman I am, compared to others in his own set.... I'd like to know what he thinks about my gambling and cocktails and cigarettes, which you and I have got to stop! What he *really* thinks of our position in this house—in the world! I don't believe he thinks much of it."

"Does his position differ from ours?" asked Silvette gently; "why are you so excited, little sister?"

"I'm not excited.... Things—various matters have occurred to me—recently; and I've made up my mind that I don't like to see him here. This is no place for him, no position. He is capable of doing better things, more important things, nobler things. He slips into a life like this too easily; he is too easily reconciled, too quickly content."

Silvette seated herself on a rocking chair and, leaning back, sat rocking and inspecting her sister, who stood by the bed, her brown locks clustering against her cheeks.

"There *is* something to Jim," she insisted. "He *can* do things—respectable, dignified things—and make his living. It humiliates me to see him here in such a capacity—"

"As ours?" added Silvette, smiling.

"Yes, as ours. He is a man, and it does not become him."

"We are respectively physician and lawyer, but our talents and fortunes lie in this profession."

Diana flushed. "If we were anything except the frivolous, ease-loving, and pleasure-craving little beasts that we are, we wouldn't be here."

"No; we'd starve, respectably, in our several offices. Do you want Jim to starve?"

"I don't know," said Diana, almost fiercely; "I'd rather see him in want, I think, than doing this kind of thing."

"I don't believe he will do it very long—on a salary," laughed Silvette. "Christine evidently adores him."

Diana was silent; her sister laughed, and rose, putting one arm around her.

"Don't be sentimental over Jim Edgerton," she said; "he is a lightweight, Di."

"You are wrong; and I am not sentimental."

"Well, I believe you did get over it; but you're a loyal and generous little thing, Di, and you're worrying over a man who is entirely capable of looking out for himself."

"That's what I want him to do."

"He's doing it, very gracefully. Later, with equal and fetching grace he'll

let some wealthy girl do it for him.”

”That would be contemptible; he isn’t.”

”Now, does the world so consider an advantageous marriage, little sister? Besides, that is exactly what we have planned for ourselves, isn’t it?”

”We? What are we, anyway, compared to a man who can count in the world!” flashed out Diana, surprised at her own vehemence, aware that her sister was even more astonished and chagrined.

”What on earth are you saying?” she exclaimed. ”Are you in love with that man?”

”No.”

”One might infer as much.”

”You may infer it if you choose.”

”Di!”

”What?”

”Why do you speak to me that way?”

”Because—I don’t—know.”

She turned and moved toward the bed, encountered the soft, open arms of her sister. They closed around her; she laid her head on Silvette’s shoulder.

”Darling! Little Di!” whispered Silvette in sorrowful consternation. ”Has this really happened to you?”

”I don’t know—I don’t know.... I am not happy; I don’t understand.... At moments I cannot believe it.... He is not my ideal of a man; I am stronger in many ways—I am wiser than he. He is only a boy, Silvie—careless, ease loving, with nothing but smatterings—nothing but the social experience of a man of his class behind him. Nothing real has ever happened to him in life.... And, somehow, I know—I *know* that if it only did, he would become a man—a real man. I *know* it; I can’t bear to see him waste his life—fall into easy ways of thinking—make no effort.... I want him to strive; I want him to fight life.... He ought to. The making of him is in a battle with circumstances. This life is ruin to him—this house, these people, any people who will employ him in such a capacity!”

She caught her breath, almost in a sob.

”I *have* cared for him—a little—from the very first.... I am not—fitted for him—in many ways.”

”Di!”

”I am *not*! I care for him unselfishly. I don’t know why I should, but I do; and he ought not to marry me even if he—ever—wished to.”

”You are talking wildly, darling! *You*—not good enough for *him*! What a silly—”

”Not good enough, I tell you!” repeated the girl fiercely. ”I care too much for what he finds agreeable—all this ease and relaxation.... I wish I were different.

I wish I could arouse him; I'd do it. I'd do it somehow—I'd do it now if I could——”

She caught her breath, stood perfectly motionless a moment, then Silvette felt her tremble slightly.

After a while she lifted her head from her sister's shoulder.

”I *am* going to do what I can for him,” she said excitedly. ”I am going to see what can be done to arouse the man in him. All he needs is the initial shock—a—stinging one.”

”What do you mean? If there was anything in him, the shock of the firm's failure would have brought it out.”

”It was not enough. It was only the loss of money! There are worse things—
—”

”Di! What are you going to do?”

Suddenly the girl's face grew radiant.

”I know now,” she said breathlessly.

”What?”

But Diana only kissed her sister, laughing, flushed, excited, and, extending her arm, turned off the light, plunging the room and her brilliant cheeks in darkness.

CHAPTER VII

FLOS VENERIS

Edgerton and Christine, ensconced in the corners of a window seat, and partly visible through the leaded panes, were too deeply absorbed in each other to be aware of the curious glances shot toward them from the tennis court outside, where Silvette, Colonel Curmew, Mrs. Lorrimore, and Jack Rivett were playing, while Diana, perched aloft with her knitting in the umpire's seat, resolutely ignored the spectacle in the window, which was plainer to her than to anybody else.

Perfectly oblivious to any extraneous interest they aroused, sitting almost nose to nose and knee to knee in the deep recess, Christine and Edgerton remained in close consultation, preoccupied, possibly indifferent, to view or comment. Christine bent forward, and drew a carnation through his buttonhole, saying:

”Anyway, you are a perfect dear, Jim Edgerton. Somehow or other, I haven't

any blushes for what I've taken so many weeks to tell you. I never thought I could know anybody well enough to say such a thing to, but you *are* different; there's nobody like you, Jim. Do you wonder I adore you?"

"You sweet little thing, I've a mind to kiss you for that!"

"I may let you at the psychological moment. *Do* you think me absolutely shameless?—but I've asked you that before about a dozen times.... You *don't* think so, do you?"

"If other women displayed the common honesty and common sense that you display, there'd be a good deal less unhappiness in the world."

"But how *can* other women, when there is only one Jim Edgerton! Oh, I liked you so much—as soon as I saw you; and before I had known you a week, I was ready to tell you anything—and now I've done it!"

"It took several weeks before you came to the point," he said, laughing.

"I know, but, oh! it was such a terrible thing to do!—I don't even now understand how I ever came to tell you."

"You didn't; I extracted it, seeing that you were in pain."

She blushed.

"Yes, it was pain.... Not one of my own family suspected it. Father doesn't dream of such a thing; Jack doesn't, of course. As for dear little mother, you know what she thinks about you and me."

Edgerton smiled almost tenderly.

"She is very nice to me," he said. "I almost wish I could verify her charming theory."

"Concerning *us*?"

"Certainly.... As it is, I believe I'm more than half in love with you, anyway, Christine."

She blushed again, looking at him with her pretty, frank, brown eyes; and they both laughed happily.

"It's the first time in all my life that I've been of any use in the world," he said.

"You *did* ask father?" she inquired, still charmingly flushed; "didn't you?"

"I certainly did. He said: 'Is young Inwood such a particular friend of yours?' I said: 'He is!' He said: 'All right; ask my wife.' So I asked your mother, and she said: 'Oh, please, Mr. Edgerton, invite anybody you wish to.' So I wrote Billy Inwood, and your bully little mother inclosed my letter in the sweetest note of her own; and now he has telegraphed—"

"Telegraphed?"

"I've just received the message."

He fished it out of his coat pocket, and handed it to her, and she read:

"On my way!

"BILL."

"Is *that* all?" she asked, half laughing, half excited.

"He telegraphed your mother the substance of a moderate-sized letter. She's probably in her room now, reading it. She showed it to me in amazement, but I didn't have time to follow all his polite and grateful meanderings."

"I wish to see it!" said the girl excitedly.

"Go ahead; your mother has it. I was anxious to let you know how matters had turned out, first."

"You're a dear!" she repeated, and her voice was not any too steady. "I am happy; I am happier than I've been for—" She checked herself, and bent her head for a moment; he pretended to reread the telegram.

"It will be all right now," he observed.

"I wish I knew," she said under her breath.

"Don't you?"

She lifted her honest eyes to his. "How can I know, Jim? I don't know how men are. It all happened over a year ago.... I was no wiser than a schoolgirl. What experience had I—with such episodes—such conditions—or with anything?"

"You did act like a schoolgirl—to send him about his business," said Edgerton with a shrug.

"I wouldn't have if I hadn't—hadn't—"

"Cared for him?"

"Loved him," she said steadily.

"You're a corker, Christine!" he said in genuine admiration.

"Am I? Thank you, Jim."

"Yes, you are; and so is Billy Inwood—the real Billy. Young men like to chase about with married women. They love to delude themselves into the pleasing belief that they are sad dogs—"

"There was more to it than that," said the girl; "he went to Keno to see her. That is what confounded me."

"While she was getting her divorce?"

"Yes."

"Then you can bet that there was nothing in it, you little goose.... Who was she, anyway?"

"A Mrs. Atherstane. Do you know her?"

"No," said Edgerton; "and you certainly did act like a schoolgirl."

"I know I did, and I was twenty.... I asked him to come, to Hot Springs; she

requested him to go to Keno. He took his choice; he had a perfect right to.... And then I wrote him that letter, dismissing him."

"Ought never to have done it, sweetness," said Edgerton gravely. "There are no fetters to hold a man like absolute freedom. He was probably bound to her in various ways, innocently enough, of course; but she was probably lonely and in trouble—and—noblesse oblige. I tell you a young man has to pay for sympathizing with an unhappily married woman! And she usually sees that he does."

Christine sat back, nursing her knees, eyes downcast.

"He was right," she said. "She was his friend."

"Perhaps he was more right than you realize, Christine. When a man's man friend is battered and used up, the man still clings to him—anyway, until he borrows money; but when his woman friend becomes slightly the worse for wear, he is inclined to discard her as naively as he would a worn-out coat. That is the rule—romance to the contrary.... Inwood proved the exception, that's all."

"Yes," said the girl in a low voice.

"He proved the exception to me, too," said Edgerton, smiling.

"To you, Jim?"

"Certainly; wanted to lend me money when I arrived in town on my uppers."

The girl smiled.

"Oh, he's all right," said Edgerton; "I've known him since he was six and I twelve."

"He—is—all—right," repeated Christine slowly; "but—am I, Jim?"

"You know you are—*kleine Fischerin!*"

"But I wrote him that wretched letter. If it hurt him as it hurt me—" She ceased abruptly, and turned her face toward the window.

"You were years younger, then."

"One year," tremulously.

"*Years*, sweetness.... Do you think your father will ever stand for him?"

"He scarcely knows him. He did not understand why Mr. Inwood never came to Hot Springs, or why I never again saw him. Probably he supposes I lost interest."

"So your father believes that you are all over that affair, doesn't he?"

"Yes; but he probably remembers that Mr. Inwood was to have come to Hot Springs, and didn't. Fathers usually remember such things, and sometimes ask why."

"Well, Christine," he said, smiling, "you'll have to fix it with your father; and I think you can."

"Why do you think so?"

"Because there is much of your father in you—steel under the velvet skin

of that pretty figure, or I miss my guess.”

The girl said thoughtfully: “I am, perhaps, more like father than Jack is.... That is not really what concerns me.... Has Mr. Inwood changed—in appearance?”

“Within a year? No! Nor otherwise, I’ll wager.”

“Do you—think—?”

“I don’t know; I don’t know, little girl. Men are protean creatures; God knows what incarnation they’ll assume next! ... But if a woman really cares for a man, and if he isn’t in love with anybody else, it *ought* to be a cinch—even if he had as many incarnations as Albert Chevallier!”

“Jim!”

“Well, I know my sex,” he said; “the cleverest of them are boobs in the hands of yours—”

“Jim! You are becoming horrid!”

“That means I’m becoming truthful. Hooray! I see Bill’s happy finish.” He picked up her soft little hand and kissed it. “Velvet and steel,” he said—“the hand that rocks the world! Yes? No? Good-by, you little wretch! I’m going canoeing with my cousin Diana.”

“Did you say that mother has that telegram?” she asked naïvely, sliding from the window-sill to the floor.

“Yes; and it’s a mile long—a bally serial, Christine—to be continued this evening, I expect.”

They clasped hands at the threshold; then she ran upstairs, and he sauntered out to the tennis court, where Diana still sat on her high perch knitting the silken tie, although below her the game had ended and the players had gone to the terrace for iced tea.

“Well, of all pretty monuments!” he exclaimed. “You have the other one on the Madison Square tower beaten to a froth!”

“Beware of my arrows,” she said, smiling, as the wind blew her scarf into a silvery arc from her shoulders.

“Arrows? No, I’m wrong; you look like the Angel of the Central Park Fountain.”

“I feel like the dickens,” she said, folding her knitting and descending the steps.

“Headache?”

“No; I merely sat up too late, and I’m sleepy. It’s perfectly horrid that you can’t stop when you’re winning.... What did you wish me to do, Jim—canoe with you?”

“I thought you wanted to.”

“Is *that* why you asked me?”

"I wanted to, also. Why do you always put me in wrong, Diana?"

"Jim, *do* I put you in wrong, as you call it?"

"Sometimes."

"Well, it's horrid of me. Forgive me. I do try to be such good friends with you, and somehow I don't succeed."

"You—we *are* good friends," he said; "you know perfectly well how I feel about you."

They had walked as far as the river's edge, where several green-hulled canvas canoes lay on the grass.

"Suppose we walk," she said; "shall we? I'm too lazy to paddle. I'm sleepy, Jim. A walk ought to wake me up."

"I know a ledge where you can take a cat nap," he said. "Accept forty winks from me, and we'll paddle afterwards."

So they strolled along the river path, fragrant with mint and vine and blossom; and presently the cool green of the woods enveloped them, and their feet pressed the moist, springy leaves of a forest path that led over little brooks and up a slope of young growth, all checkered with sun spots, to a vast overhanging ledge of rocks.

"Just look at that moss!" exclaimed Diana. "I believe I'll sit down on it this minute. Jim, do sit down. It's like velvet, and there's miles of it; and here is the most enchanting silver birch tree for my back to rest on, and some wood lilies to look at.... Isn't this heavenly!"

"Out of sight," he said lazily, stretching himself at her feet and glancing up at her. "Go ahead with your cat nap. I'll time you half an hour."

After a moment he laughed, and her eyebrows went up in a silent question. He said: "I never noticed it before. It's odd."

"Noticed what?"

"How funny they are in outline—your eyes, I mean."

"Thank you, Jim."

"Oh, they're most engaging eyes, Diana."

"More thanks, thank you!"

"I mean that they tip up a trifle—just a trifle, Japonette."

"They don't!"

"They do. Like a pretty Japanese girl's. Only yours are blue.... They're very blue—unusually—like the sky—that sort of blue."

"Young man," she said with mock seriousness, "don't you know what comes of speculating in ladies' eyes?"

"Bankruptcy of the heart," he nodded.

"Then choose some safer and preferred stock, please."

He lay smiling up at her, watching the shades of expression varying in

her youthful face—watching the delicate shape of her mouth, which had always fascinated him with its unspoiled purity.

"Do you know," he said, partly to himself, "that when I first set eyes on you, Japonette, I knew I had never seen anything half as beautiful."

"You didn't think so long," she returned, laughing. "Christine is goddess of beauty just now."

"I have always thought so," he repeated.

"Then—why don't you ever say it to me?"

His smile changed a little.

"What would be the use of my telling you that you are beautiful?"

"Use?"

"What good would it do for me to become sentimental over your beauty?"

"Lots of good—to me, Jim. You can't tell a girl too often that she is pretty—when you really think so.... And I almost believe you do think so." She glanced at him sideways, laughed a little, then her blue eyes wandered and she leaned back, pensive, twisting a green oak leaf between idle fingers.

"Do you know," he said after a moment, "that, just now, you are like Japonette again. I haven't seen you so like the real Japonette for a long while."

"How *can* I be Japonette again? I lack the sandals and butterfly sash and the peonies over my ears, Jim. And—that was about all you saw in Japonette, wasn't it?"

"Almost all. Her face was only a shadowy flower against the sunshine, and its enchantment turned the world to fairyland."

"Alas! the spell was temporary. The victim of my spells fled to the roof, and told me stories about starlings and—and children.... But, somehow, I let him get away from me, and I don't know how to find him again."

Edgerton watched her. She had plaited a sash out of green oak leaves and fitted it around her slender waist; and now, absently, she was placing in her hair, above each little close-set ear, a scarlet wood lily.

Presently she caught his eye, and made him a pretty gesture.

[image]

"Presently she caught his eye, and made him a pretty gesture."

"You see I am trying my best to return with you to yesterday.... It is a long path—back over the hours and minutes to yesterday, back to a land of dreamy suns and forgotten skies, and unremembered thoughts.... Shall I try to guide you?"

"Yes," he said, not smiling.

"We may lose our way among the phantoms," she warned him gayly; then became preternaturally solemn, resting her chin in one hand.

Her seriousness enchanted him—her youthful grace as she bent slightly above him, one warning finger uplifted as when a nurse speaks of mysteries to a child in the quiet of twilight.

"Join hands with me in spirit, and I'll try to lead you," she said.... "Now, follow me, while we make our way through the throng of strange faces, treading a path silently, discreetly, avoiding this pretty girl with her bright brown eyes."

"Christine," he thought, and started to speak.

"Hush!" she cautioned him; "for we mustn't speak yet—not until we're in the land of yesterday.... And we are passing over the minutes and hours and days and weeks—and it's like treading on formless mist; so hold tightly to my hand, and follow me—through a golden ballroom, around a great gilded piano, then out into the June rain, Jim.... Have you let go my hand?"

"No."

"Then we are very near the land of yesterday.... I thought I heard a starling whistle. Surely! and there is the sunset over the river—and now we are in the house, Jim. And it is not sunset, after all; it is sunrise—the sunburst of Japan! And there, against it—"

"You!" he said in a voice not very firm.

"Hush! Those two figures we see are only phantoms. Let us stand here by the door and listen to what they might have said."

"They *did* say things!"

"Ah! but it is to what they might have said that we must try to listen. Be very silent, now. Look at that girl in her silk and sandals and the flowers in her hair! Look at that young fellow, rooted to the floor, amazed at the apparition! Can you hear what he *might* have said to her in his astonishment?"

"He might have said: 'Your loveliness confounds me. You are the most beautiful vision I have ever dreamed.' ... What does *she* say, Japonette?"

"She says: 'For a moment I was afraid you'd filled your suit cases with our silver; but you are so obviously nice that I am not alarmed any more. I'm merely ashamed to be caught here in this theatrical dress.' What might he have said to that, Jim?"

"He might have said: 'Is it a heavenly possibility that you are real, and not a vision? Allah is merciful to the believer in dreams. Your name is Youth and Beauty; I will call you Japonette, but the high white gods have named you Diana.' ... And what does *she* say, Japonette?"

"She *might* have answered: 'O youth with the engaging smile, out of my breast you have charmed the winged heart, and it is fluttering there above you,

restless, uncertain—just beyond your reach.’ ... And what does—*might* he have answered, Jim?”

“He might have said: ‘I love you, but my outward self does not know it yet—will not know it, even on the roof garden—even when the sun hangs low and the starlings pipe, and all the west is a glory of gold and rose; and I shall never know it until you lead me back from to-morrow, through the magic path of days and hours, to the true world of yesterday.’ ... What answer does she make Diana?”

His voice had grown very unsteady; he lay there looking at her, the smile stamped on his lips. And her faint smile had become fixed, too.

“She made no answer,” said Diana.

“She might have.... Remember, all this is what they *might* have said.”

“And did not.... I don’t know what she might have said.” ... Suddenly she flung the green sash of leaves from her body, tore the scarlet wood lilies from her hair, and flung them away with a gay, little laugh.

“What an idle, silly pair we are,” she said. “I’ve had my nap. I’m awake, now.”

“Was all that a dream?”

“You know it was.... It began with a fable—which sent me off to sleep.”

“It ended in truth—and an awakening—for one of us.”

“Jim, you’re not pretending to be serious, are you? Goodness!” she added impatiently; “can’t I pretend with you, and not be misunderstood?”

He sat up, sprang to his feet, and began to pace the moss.

She, resting against the silver birch, watched him, already a little frightened, her heart beginning to beat high and fast.

Suddenly he came back and, resting on one knee, bent over beside her.

“Did you mean nothing of that? *Nothing?*”

“Nothing; why should you be silly enough to suppose—”

“I did suppose for a moment.”

“Jim, you are not pretending to court me, are you?”

“Not pretending.... No, I’m not doing it.... How can a beggar think of such a thing as courtship?”

“Beggars court most ardently—sometimes,” she said, laughing tremulously. “But it’s not hearts they usually court.”

He knelt there, thinking a moment, head bent. Then he looked up at her.

“I have no reason to believe that you care for me,” he said—“more than for any other man, I mean.”

“You have no reason to believe so,” she repeated, now thoroughly alarmed at what she’d done; and yet it was what she had deliberately set out to do. Her breath came unevenly. She strove to retain her composure, to recover the ground

he seemed to have gained.

"Jim," she said, "you are too easily affected by your surroundings. A few trees, a summer sky, and a girl are destruction to you."

"You don't think that," he said quietly.

"I do, indeed. Witness my fate, and the plight of Christine."

He said, watching her: "Do you suppose that there is any sentimentality between Christine Rivett and me?"

"Oh, Jim! don't shuffle——"

"She is in love with another man," he said.

"Nonsense!" But a strange thrill shot through and through her, and, confused, she bent forward, looking him straight in the face.

"Diana! Diana!" he said under his breath, "did you care?"

"I?" she said, reddening. "Jim, I am not a baby.... I thought—as everybody thought—but it was of no consequence—except that she is a sweet girl, and you are my friend."

She recovered herself with a little laugh—or would have, had his hand not closed on hers. She gave it a friendly and vigorous pressure, and attempted to drop it; but he placed the other hand over it, inclosing her slender fingers, which frightened her into pretense of unconsciousness.

Now she stood on the threshold. Now she was on the eve of that daybreak from which she had prayed that the shadows might flee away; and she shrank from the coming light, afraid, while dawn threatened her with what, as yet, she had left undone. And even through the confused sense of expectancy and consternation ran a fierce flame of happiness.

Then, unable to endure it longer, she flung the mask from her, facing the tempest she had sown.

"Let me go, Jim," she said in a colorless voice.

But he held her hand closely imprisoned, and the next moment her body. The rapid racket of her heart seemed to stifle her; she tried to speak—lay inert, crushed against his shoulder, dumb, scarlet, under his kiss.

"I love you," he said; "I've always loved you.... I'm a blackguard to say it—penniless nobody that I am—without much chance to be anything else, apparently. But I say it for better or worse.... I love you. You like me, but you think lightly of me.... With sufficient reason, God knows.... And I have no right to touch you—no right in decency or law, Diana."

She forced herself away from him, but, somehow, held his hands clasped convulsively in hers.

"You—shouldn't have kissed me," she managed to say. "You mustn't do it again—ever."

He laid his face against their clasped hands; her own tightened.

"Nevertheless," he said, "I love you."

"You mustn't speak that way—" She dropped her flushed face; he lifted it, and kissed her again.

When he released her, she leaned back against the silver birch, head lowered, silent and did not move her hands from the moss as he bent and kissed them, too.

When at last she found her voice, she spoke so low that he bent his head closer to listen.

"That is the one imprudence I have never before committed—contact with any man. You must not do it to me again.... I don't know how to take it. *I can't* love you. You know that." She looked up at him. "Don't you know it?"

"Yes," he said stubbornly.

"You *do* know that I can't; don't you? And that you cannot really love me?"

"I suppose it ought to be that way; but it isn't."

And now the moment had come to make her desire a certainty—and finish what she had set herself to do—for this man's sake. She said:

"You *can't* care for me, Jim! What am I anyway? A shallow, pleasure-loving nobody, who sells her frivolous social gifts because it is pleasanter and easier to make a living that way than to exercise a decent profession. How can such a man as you really fall in love with such a woman?"

She rose to her feet and stood leaning against the tree; and he rose, too, releasing her fingers.

She touched her hair, passed her hands slowly over her eyes, let them fall idly by her side; then, after a moment, looked up at him, faintly smiling.

"Melodrama is no use, is it?" she said. "You are not impressed by it; I can't act it. Life is less serious than the stage. Shall we come back together along the road to yesterday, and find our old, safe footing? ... And—shall I forgive you what you've done this summer day?"

"I want you to marry me," he said between compressed lips. "I'll make good, yet."

"What!" she exclaimed in apparent amazement. "*You!*"

"Will you marry me?"

How she forced the light laughter she never understood; and she saw her gayety bring the blood to his face like a whip lash.

"Marry! No, I won't marry you," she laughed. "Mercy on the man! Does he suppose I wish to marry a professional entertainer?—a generally useful gentleman—a big, strong, healthy, well-built, intelligent fellow, too indolent to rouse himself and make a respectable living?—too self-indulgent to start in a manly career and fight the world—take it by the throat and shake a decent living out of its sinful old pockets?"

A deeper flush of astonishment and mortification swept his face, settling to the roots of his hair.

She did not seem to notice it or his silence.

"Nonsense," she laughed; "a girl, with any humor, simply *couldn't* love such a man, even if she wanted to, Jim. Because, how can she respect him? ... You're a dear, generous fellow—nice to everybody, perfectly sweet to Silvette and to me, and I *do* like you—even *love* you, in a certain sense—and I didn't really mind being kissed any more than as though Silvette had done it. But I'm simply not fashioned to lose my head over a man who is hired by the month to be socially pleasant." She laughed again, and laid her hand carelessly on his arm; and under her touch she felt it was rigid and hard as iron.

"You see, don't you?" she said sweetly. "You're not grown up yet, Jim. It takes more than you yet are to satisfy me."

He managed to force his voice out of his quivering throat.

"You're right," he said. "I didn't know what I was talking about. You are worth trying for."

They turned away together; she slipped one hand confidently through his arm, leaning on him lightly as they walked.

"You're not hopelessly offended, are you, Jim?"

"No—good God, no."

"I'd love you if I could," she said soothingly, "but the instincts of mating with anything resembling servitude are wanting in me. Besides, two slaves are enough for one family—Silvette and I... You are not hurt or angry at my very horrid frankness?"

"No... What you said is all right." He lifted his eyes and looked his punishment squarely in the face; and her heart failed her, so that she turned her head swiftly, the tears stinging her throat.

They walked soberly on through the meadow up to the house. She gave him her hand at parting; then went leisurely to her room to dress for dinner.

And Silvette found her there alone on her knees beside the window, partly undressed, her head buried in her arms, the brown locks clustering against her pale and tear-stained face.

"Diana!" she exclaimed softly. "What is the matter, child?"

[image]

"Diana!" she exclaimed softly.

The girl got up wearily, keeping her face out of the flood of light from the

electric brackets.

"Nothing much," she said; "I've only been very horrid to Jim."

"I thought you were going to be kinder," said Silvette, astonished.

"I have been; but he doesn't know it."

Her sister stood silent, looking at her with sorrowful eyes.

"Don't sympathize with me; I—I can't bear it, Silvie."

"No—if you don't wish it, dear.... Shall I fix your bath? ... And—*who* do you suppose is downstairs?"

Diana looked up inquiringly.

"The man you flirted with so outrageously at Keno!"

"Which?" asked Diana naïvely.

"Billy Inwood!"

Diana brightened a little.

"At least," she said with sad satisfaction, "I can occupy my mind with him for a while. He got away before he was thoroughly disciplined. *I* believe there was another girl somewhere.... I think I'll obliterate her—unless I approve of her. There's the making of a man in that boy, Silvette."

But she decided otherwise a few moments before dinner was announced, when Inwood made his appearance in the drawing-room and greeted his hostess. Then, catching sight of her, he came hastily toward her with both hands outstretched.

"Diana!" he exclaimed; "*isn't* this jolly! I'm terribly glad to see you again... And Silvette! Oh, this is simply too delightful! I—"

Speech stopped, perhaps froze on his lips; then he turned fiery red as he stepped forward to greet Mrs. Wemyss. A year ago she had been a comparatively slim and pretty divorcée; to-day even the embarrassing opulence and prodigality of her charms had not altered the doll-like perfection of her features. He knew her instantly, and, in his brain, chaos menaced him.

"How do you do," he said; "this is most delightful and surprising. Lilly—"

"Charming," murmured Mrs. Wemyss; and, under her smile, she lowered her voice: "I'm Lilly Wemyss; I've taken my maiden name. Don't forget, and call me Mrs. Atherstane."

He nodded, the fixed smile imprinted on his features; and it remained there as they stood in conversation until dinner was announced.

He took in Christine. The girl's arm rested lightly as a feather on his sleeve. During dinner she talked to him pleasantly, but without animation; and, somehow, all seemed to go wrong with him, for he found scarcely anything to say to Christine—anything that was not trite and banal. And his haunted eyes reverted again and again to Mrs. Wemyss.

"Oh, Lord!" he thought, "what a horrible mess; and is Lilly going to expect

me to—to—”

But his scared wits could speculate no farther, and he sat beside Christine, worried, unhappy, penitent, too miserable to enjoy the moment to which he had looked forward so impetuously all day long—a moment which, two days ago, he dared not believe would ever again come into his life.

CHAPTER VIII

MILLE MODI VENERIS

A number of matters had been slightly disturbing Colonel Curmew's intellect and digestion. One thing, he had lost money at cards—a thing he hated as heartily as Judge Wicklow hated it. Another matter—Jack Rivett had fairly driven him out of Silvette's vicinity. True, an easily transferred devotion to her sister already consoled him; the one was as ornamental as the other, but he liked young Rivett no better.

He desired to ingratiate himself with Jack because the boy had never liked him, and he neither understood why nor became reconciled to it; and he was always making advances and assuming, under the jocular familiarity of an older man, that there existed between himself and Jack a delightful and cordial understanding, which Jack coolly ignored; and the colonel disliked him the more.

Then, there was another matter which occupied him—had occupied him, now, for several years. He meant to marry Christine Rivett some day. For the present he was satisfied to treat her with the same jovial familiarity with which he treated her brother; and now it seemed to him that Christine, whom he feared might become too much interested in Edgerton, was veering toward this young Inwood fellow who had just arrived.

Colonel Curmew was not actually alarmed; he was merely bored, and now and then a trifle uneasy, because he had to take this and other matters into his calculations in being attentive to Diana Tennant.

No, he was not worried. He had become cheerfully convinced that both these matters could be properly attended to. Let Christine have her fling and grow up. Her fortune kept pace with her, anyway.

But about Diana Tennant he had not yet entirely made up his mind—and yet he had made it up, too, after a fashion.

There were, including Diana's youth and beauty, several things about her

which were likely to attract the attention of such a man as Follis Curmew. First of all, she was poor. Also, she was self-supporting and alone in the world except for a similarly situated sister who didn't count, and a very distant relative who didn't really count, either.

She was beautiful and clever; men appreciate such women. Such women, he also believed, deeply appreciated the kind of things they could not afford.... And, furthermore, he did not hesitate to believe that such women were perfectly capable of appreciating middle-aged military gentlemen of discretion, fortune, and liberality in reason.

So he contrived to get as close to Diana as he could on all occasions; and very often, to her surprise, she found him at her heels or seated unnaturally near her, pale eyes slightly protruding, his curling mustache and little side whiskers faintly redolent of brilliantine.

Amused, and not yet uneasy, she mentioned his assiduity to her sister, and thought nothing further of it; nor did Silvette, preoccupied with an episode of her own which threatened to become something approaching a problem.

Instinct told her that Jack Rivett preferred her to anybody at Adriutha; and she liked him well enough to find his attention agreeable. But little by little it became more marked—to her, if not to others—and she experienced a slight uneasiness concerning this very rich and idle only son, the ambition of whose father had now become plain to her.

So Silvette at first very pleasantly discouraged him, and kept out of tête-à-têtes as much as possible, in which maneuvers she was not very successful. For the girl found in this lazy, witty, good-humored, self-indulgent young fellow a cool and confident adversary—resistless because of his charming manner toward her and his unvarying cheerfulness under rebuffs which were becoming more frequent and more severe—and, alas, more useless.

About a week after Inwood's arrival, while writing a letter in the rose-garden pavilion, a shadow checkered the lattice work and fell across her note paper; and, glancing up, she beheld Jack Rivett, hands in his coat pockets, the breeze ruffling his blond hair.

[image]

"Glancing up, she beheld Jack Rivett."

"I'm writing," she said, annoyed.

"I'll sit down on the sundial," he rejoined with a bow and a smile as though accepting a delightful invitation.

"But I'll be writing about two hours," she observed coldly.

"Writing about two hours?" he repeated. "But why write about hours at all, dear lady. An hour is an arbitrary division of time, interesting only to the unhappy."

"Very witty," she said. "Go and scratch it on the sundial."

And she resumed her letter, trying not to be aware of the blond young man seated just outside the summer house, where the sun gilded his hair and the wind mussed it into a most becoming mop.

Several times she bit the pearl tip of her penholder, frowning; but he always seemed to catch her eye at such moments, and her deepening frown only produced on his face an expression which was so very humble that it became almost mischievous.

"Jack!"

He hurriedly rose, and looked all around him among the roses as though eagerly searching for the person who had called him.

"*Jack!*" she repeated emphatically.

He pretended to discover her for the first time, and hurried joyously to the lattice door.

"Jack—you perfect idiot! I want to write, and I simply can't, with you sitting around in that martyred manner."

"How far away shall I retire?" he inquired, so sad and crestfallen, that between amusement and annoyance she did not reply, but merely sat tapping with her pen and inspecting her letter.

As she did not speak again, very cautiously—and holding up one hand as an unwelcome dog holds up one beseeching paw to ward off calamity—he ventured to seat himself on a bench outside the summer house.

She was perfectly aware of the inimitable pantomime, and a violent desire to laugh seized her, but she only bit her lip and resolutely dipped her pen into the ink once more.

She wrote obstinately, knowing all the while that she'd have to rewrite it. His excessive stillness began to get on her nerves; and, after a quarter of an hour's preternatural silence, she could endure it no longer.

"Jack!"

"Dear lady?" he replied patiently.

"Why don't you say something?"

"I was forbidden the exquisite consolation of noise."

"It's horribly hot and still out here. Why don't the birds sing?"

"They're moulting, dear lady. All their little pin feathers have become unfastened, and their bills are probably full of pins while they make themselves tidy again."

"So that is why they don't sing in July?" she said.

"That is why," he explained seriously.

"Well, then, why don't *you* sing? *You* are not untidy."

"Nothing could suit my pensive and melancholy mood better," he said sadly.

A moment later, sitting outside her door, he began with deep emotion to sing one of Kirk's melting melodies:

*"With head bowed low a dentist stood
 Before his office chair;
 A handsome lady customer
 Into his eyes did stare.
 He tried to fake a careless smile
 And hide his drooping jaw,
 But all in vain because his guilt
 Was plainly to be saw.
 His voice was choked with shame and fear,
 He said, 'Forgive me, miss!'
 But when he begged her pardon there
 The lady then did hiss:*

Chorus.

*"Take back them teeth you made me! I
 Won't wear them in my face!
 Go hang them in your parlor as
 A badge of your disgrace.
 You swore them crowns was solid gold!
 You're false—like teeth and men!
 Take back them teeth, you lobster!
 Never speak to me again!
 Take back—take ba-ack—take ba-a-a——"*

"Jack!" she exclaimed, "that is the most—most degraded thing I ever heard you utter!"

"I'm accustoming you, by degrees, to my repertoire. With infinite precautions you will, in time, be able to endure much worse than this," he explained kindly. "Now, what shall we try next, dear lady? I have a little song called: 'Only a pint of shoe strings!'"

"Don't you dare attempt it! ... Jack, *please* go away. Won't you, when I ask

it?"

"She mutters the unthinkable," he said, shaking his head. "My music has unseated her reason. By and by she will begin to moan and revive."

"It's perfectly outrageous," she said, tearing up what she had written, and moving aside a little so that sufficient space remained for—her sister, perhaps. So he entered the summer house and waited for an invitation, bland, cheerful, irresistible.

"I had no idea I was so pitifully weak-minded," she said.

He accepted the avowal as his invitation, and seated himself.

"Silvette," he said genially, "what are we going to do to-day?"

"Who?"

"Why, you and I. Who cares what the others do in this mad world, dear lady?"

"I don't know about the world," she said, "but there's one girl in it who is mad; and she's going to her room to write letters."

"When?"

"Now!"

"Don't."

"Indeed, I shall!"

"Shall, or will?" he inquired, guilelessly, "People mix up those two auxiliaries so persistently that there's no telling what anybody really means in these days."

She considered a moment, then turned and looked at him.

"Jack," she said sweetly, "don't follow me about?"

"I? Follow *you!* That's more madness, dear lady. Who on earth ever whispered to you that I could ever do such a—"

"Won't you be serious, please?"

Her pretty, dark eyes were serious enough, even appealing. He became solemn at once.

"You have forced me to say this," she ventured. "I didn't wish to; I thought you'd understand, but you don't seem to. So I am compelled to say to you that—it is—better taste for you to—not to—"

She hesitated, glanced up at him, colored brightly.

"You know perfectly well what I mean! And there you sit, letting me try to tell you as nicely as I can—"

"About what, dear lady?"

"About you and me!" she said, incensed. "You know perfectly well that I've been obliged to avoid being alone with you."

"Why?"

"Because," she said, intensely annoyed, "I am employed by your parents,

and you are an only son of Mr. Jacob Rivett.... Is that unmistakable?"

He said nothing.

She went on: "You know I like you, Jack. You seem to like me. If you do, you'll understand that this—this continually seeking me out, separating me from the others, isn't fair to me.... I'm trying not to talk nonsense about it. I know you mean nothing but kindness; but it isn't wise, and it is not agreeable, either. So let us enjoy our very delightful friendship as freely among others as we do when alone together—" She stopped abruptly, blushed to her hair, furious at herself, astonished that her tongue could have blundered so. The next instant she understood that he was too decent to notice her blunder. Indeed, to look at him, she almost persuaded herself that he had not even heard her speak, so coolly remote were his eyes, so preoccupied his air as he sat facing the far hills, blue in the July haze.

Presently he looked up at her.

"What was it you were lecturing me about?" he asked cheerfully.

"About our twosing, Jack."

"Did you say you *did* prefer it, or otherwise?"

"Otherwise—you monkey!" she said, laughing, free of the restraint and of the bright color that had made even her neck hot.

"Very well," he said briskly; "keep your distance! Don't start running after me the moment I come in sight across the landscape. Will you promise?"

"I promise," she said solemnly.

"Thank you. I shall have a little leisure now. I'll have so much I won't know what to do with it. Can you advise me?"

"I cannot."

"Then I'll have to think for myself.... I'll have to do something, of course.... Suppose you and I take a canoe—"

"Canoes hold only two, Jack."

"By Jove! What am I thinking of! Thank you for saving me from incredible suffering.... So suppose we don't take a canoe, you and I, but we take the red runabout?"

"Jack!"

"What?"

"The red runabout holds two, only."

"I must be demented!" he said with a shudder.... "Silvette, I'll tell you what we'll do—we'll take a walk, you and I. There's room all around us for millions of other people. They can come if they like; if they don't, why, it's up to them!"

"No, Jack."

"Won't it do?"

"No. Why won't you be a little bit serious about a matter that, after all,

concerns me very nearly.”

”I *am* serious,” he said. ”It concerns me, too.”

”No, it doesn’t.”

”Indeed, it does. Two people are not to go twosing any more; *I’m* one of those people. Therefore, it concerns me, doesn’t it?”

She looked at him, confused, half smiling, half reluctant.

”Don’t you know,” she said, ”that your attention to me is worrying your father and mother?”

He thought a moment, then slowly turned toward her a sober and youthful face, from which all humor had departed; and she looked back at him out of grave young eyes that met his very sweetly, but inexorably.

”Do you mean it, Silvette?”

”About your parents?”

”Yes.”

”Yes, I do, Jack.”

He said, partly to himself: ”I had not noticed it.”

”I have. It’s a woman’s business to notice such things. Otherwise, she’ll find herself in trouble.... Inclination is a silly guide, Jack.”

”For me?”

”For—us both.... I will be frank with you all the way through. I do like you. I enjoy our tête-à-têtes. They are perfectly honest and harmless, and without significance—the significance, alas, that others will surely attach to them.... It isn’t that there’s anything wrong with you and me, Jack.... It’s the World that is wrong.... But—it’s the World; and you and I must conform to its prejudices as long as we inhabit it—at least *I* must.”

”I suppose you must,” he said. Then, leaning a little nearer, he took her hand, held it lightly across his palm, looked at it a moment, then at her.

”Will you let me tell father and mother that I am in love with you, and wish to marry you?” he said.

”Jack!” she exclaimed in consternation.

”Will you let me?”

”No, I won’t! ... Jack! Don’t be foolish. I had no idea you had arrived as far as that. I had no reason to think so—to suppose for one moment—because it has always been the jolliest and most unsentimental—and—you never even touched me before.”

Her color brightened, and her breath came irregularly. She tried to laugh, and failed.

”You know perfectly well that they have other ambitions for you.”

”I know.... How is it with you, Silvette?”

”With me? What do you mean?”

"Could you care for me?"

"I—I haven't even thought about such a—I haven't really, Jack. You know that, don't you? You must try to look back on our very brief friendship—try to recollect how brief it has been—try to remember—remember how happy and amusing and confident that friendship has been—with no suspicion of sentiment to embarrass or vex—"

"I know.... Isn't there any hope for me?"

"Hope? No.... Don't put it that way, Jack.... I *don't* love you.... I oughtn't to, and, thank Heaven, I don't. And you don't really love me—you dear, sweet fellow! It's just part of your niceness—your generous attitude toward a girl—"

"I'm in love with you.... But that mustn't worry you. It had to be. You need feel no self-reproach. You didn't do anything—you were just yourself—and I"—he laughed a little—"started in to love you as soon as I saw you.... I'm glad you know it, anyway. We won't say anything more about it—"

"Jack, we *will!* Do you understand that you have distressed me dreadfully? Do you realize what a girl's responsibilities are when a nice man loves her? Do you think she can merely shrug her shoulders and go about her daily frivolities without another thought?"

She rose to her feet, looking at him earnestly.

"Oh, Jack! Jack!" she said, nervously clasping and unclasping her hands; "why did you do this? Why *did* you?"

He forced a laugh. "I won't do it again—ever," he said. "Promise you never to fall-in-love-again-hope-I-may-die'n-cross m'heart."

But there were no smiles left in her now.

"If you don't behave," he threatened, "I'll lock us both inside and sing songs to you!" ... But the smile died out on his face. "I was a gink to tell you. Don't feel unhappy about it," again the engaging humor glimmered in his eyes. "Cheer up, Silvette; you may fall in love with me yet!"

She looked up, the smile dawning, distressed, yet sweet.

"Don't let me, Jack.... Because I'm all right, so far.... And you know what your father wishes for you. I want to deal honorably by him."

"All right," he said quietly.

They walked slowly back to the house together, and the girl went directly to her room, where she found her sister mending stockings.

CHAPTER IX

NON SEQUITUR

Silvette dropped into an armchair, crossed her knees, and sat swinging her foot and gazing through the open window in silence until Diana's head, lifted from time to time in smiling interrogation, could be no longer ignored.

"Jack Rivett has asked me to marry him," she said in an expressionless voice.

Diana laughed in frank surprise:

"That infant!"

"Yes."

"What an absurdity!"

Her sister said nothing.

"How did it come—out of a clear sky?"

"Yes.... I knew he liked me. I had no idea he wanted to marry me."

"You're not going to, are you?"

"No."

"I should think not. It would be sheer cradle snatching."

"He's a year older than I am."

"In years, yes; but, intellectually, he ought to be playing marbles. Moreover, that sort of a boy *never* grows up."

"I don't think he will.... God bestows that gift sometimes."

"What gift?"

"The gift of eternal youth.... I haven't it.... But I believe it can be shared."

She gazed thoughtfully at the distant hills. "Years and years slip from me when that boy and I talk nonsense together."

"Better talk sense with him, and wake up, sweetness, or you'll relapse into your second childhood."

"I have just been talking sense to him.... I'm awake," she said dreamily.

"Do you mean to admit that the interview has seriously affected you?"

"Oh, I don't know yet."

"Better investigate," said Diana. "You know what his parents expect of their children. And if we are to remain here, I think, dear, that you had better see a little less of Jack Rivett than you have been seeing. Don't you?"

"I am sure of it."

"Otherwise," continued Diana calmly, "it would be playing the game fairer for you and me to seek another business engagement. These people have been very honorable toward us. We can scarcely permit them to outdo us."

Silvette looked up calmly, her cheek resting on her hand.

"How dishonorable would it be?" she asked.

"What?"

"To—let him fall in love with me?"

"Ask yourself. You know their social ambitions."

"I know; but, after all, you and I started out to make of life a successful business proposition. I thought a desirable marriage was to be part of the programme."

"Do you consider Jack Rivett desirable? He could take you nowhere. With all his wealth, where could you take him? And anyway, it's not playing the game, Silvie. It's kidnaping." She laughed. "Take a man of your size—and of the world, little sister; and if he isn't of the world, and is poor, defy him to take *you!*—give him battle—put up a good fight with foot, horse, and artillery. The best one of you will always win, and the other get what's coming."

Silvette went to the desk, supplied herself with pen and paper, and prepared to resume her interrupted correspondence. Presently she looked around, pen poised.

[image]

"Presently she looked around, pen poised."

"Did the best man win between you and Jim Edgerton?" she asked.

Diana bent lower over her sewing.

"I'm afraid so, Silvie."

"Then *you* won."

"I think so.... I have fought it over every day since—alone."

"You poor little thing," said Silvette softly.

Diana looked up with a slight smile. "Perhaps you misunderstood me, dear. I told you I was winning.... Which means, I think, that Jim Edgerton isn't going to remain very long at Adriutha."

"Where is he going?"

"I don't know that he is going at all; he doesn't know it, either.... But, somehow, I dare believe that he *is* going."

"Where?"

"Into a man's world to engage in a man's business."

"It isn't in him, Diana.... You are taking a great responsibility on your shoulders. Do you realize that you are?"

"Yes."

"And that a man with no more force of character and real ability than he has may starve? That the world will probably break his heart, anyway?"

"Let it, then.... Only a real man's heart breaks. I'll know he's one if it does;

and so will he. And that's worth all the rest."

"That's a stern creed, little sister, considering the pleasure-loving lips that utter it."

"Out of the mouth of fools, wisdom. It doesn't matter what I am. The thing that is important is what he shall become."

"If he become what you desire, he may have little further interest in you."

"He will have none, if he becomes what he could become," said the girl steadily. "Did you suppose my—ambition for him was selfish?"

"Little breaker of images, are you going to shatter your own under his very eyes?"

"He will be the iconoclast some day.... Probably I'll be married before that—as soon, anyway, as it's best for him.... I've plenty of time." ... She smiled without a trace of mirth in her eyes. "Mr. Snaith has already indicated his noiseless entry into the lists. He and Colonel Curmew are at lance points. Materially speaking, a girl ought to consider both of them."

"But, child, we have many another business engagement before us yet, I trust.... You wouldn't think of taking the first—the first—"

"Million offered?" asked Diana, laughing. "No, of course not, silly. I'm merely observing the manners and customs of the creature man."

Silvette laughed, too. "How are you getting on with Billy Inwood?" she asked demurely—"speaking of more agreeable matters."

"Perfectly; after the initial shock at encountering me here, he behaved most reasonably. I have an idea that he came here on Christine's account, and he seemed to be rather nervous as to his obligations to me, but I set that right at the first opportunity. I said: 'Billy, if I don't tell you, somebody else will, that Silvette and I are here practicing our profession, which is—to be amiable to the guests and help entertain them. So I'm going to be just as amiable to you as I know how, but it need not frighten you because I have no designs on you.'"

They both laughed. Diana, mending her stocking, continued:

"I think he was very much relieved, though he pretended not to be. I wonder if he *did* come here to see Christine? The girl is cool enough with him, and he is inclined to follow her about in an aimless sort of way, as though he had something on his mind."

"He seems to be equally attentive to Christine and Mrs. Wemyss," observed Silvette. "It appears that he and that ample beauty are old friends."

"Who is Mrs. Wemyss, anyway?"

Silvette smiled. "I asked Mrs. Rivett, saying that there was something familiar about Mrs. Wemyss, and that I had an idea I had seen her somewhere; but Mrs. Rivett didn't know who she was. She had met her last winter at the Plaza, which is the kind of thing one might have expected—even of Mrs. Rivett, who

is as dear a little woman as ever wore sapphires at breakfast.... What a horrid, cynical thing I'm turning into! ... And now I'm going to turn into an imitation of a young girl dressing for luncheon. Heigho! I wish other people were what they ought to be and I were what I'd like to be. The world would wag very well, then."

Luncheon was the usual animated, gossipy, and amusing function that Silvette and Diana and Jack Rivett always made it, and at which Colonel Curmew assiduously assisted according to his notions of jollity.

Edgerton for the last week or so had remained rather silent among the others, amiable and nice always and perfectly receptive when spoken to, but not volunteering very much, and not, according to Colonel Curmew's idea, earning his salary. However, as the colonel didn't like him, that fact may have colored his judgment when he spoke to Mr. Rivett about it after luncheon in the privacy of that silent man's study.

"He's turned into what I knew he was—a damned snob!" said the colonel, sitting with widened legs, a rich cigar tucked in under his military mustache, and furtively loosening the rear buckle of his white waistcoat.

"He doesn't pay for his keep," he went on. "What use to you is a man who sits around looking unapproachable?"

"I have no difficulty in approaching him," observed Mr. Rivett.

"You pay him. To look at him, one would think he paid you."

"He pays me his services."

"Ah, but he doesn't! He's off with that little Diana girl half the time."

"That's their affair."

"By gad! Is it? They're both here on a salary if it comes to that, Jake.... Say, did it ever strike you as funny—this cousin business he puts up?"

Mr. Rivett's burned-brown eyes fixed themselves on the jaunty colonel.

"How?"

"Oh, nothing.... They're rather distant relatives, that's all.... Not but what she seems to be straight—as far as I know."

"What does anybody else know about her?"

"Oh, nothing—nothing," said the colonel, waving his cigar and heavy seal ring. "But it's curious.... You can't really say a word against an Edgerton, rich or poor; but, as far as I can see the girl is only a little adventuress looking for trouble.... She'll probably get it some day," he added with a tenor laugh peculiarly ungrateful to the auditory mechanism of Mr. Rivett.

The colonel puffed his cigar in smiling silence for a while; then, expelling another laugh and a large volume of blue smoke, slapped his knee, straightened his tie and waistcoat and shot his cuffs.

[image]

"The colonel puffed his cigar in smiling silence."

"She'll be all right to take about town, eh, Jake?" he said.

Mr. Rivett said nothing.

"Now, there's old Parke Ellingford," continued the colonel; "he's never had as good looking a girl, and, b'gad! I've seen 'em all—known most of 'em," he added with a leer. "And take any of the men you and I know—Wallowby, Dankland, and that hatchet-faced Van Wyne! They've never had any better-looking girl than that little Diana."

Mr. Rivett said nothing.

"B'gad!" said the colonel, with a laugh that approached the falsetto, "if she doesn't cut a dash in town' this winter, I miss my guess."

"Oh—are you to be in town?" inquired Mr. Rivett.

"I? No; Palm Beach," said the colonel hastily, watching the other out of his pale and protruding eyes. "And then—I don't go in for such capers," he explained with a pained expression. "What a man jokes about, he never bothers with."

"I've joked many a man out of half a million," observed Rivett grimly.

"That's different.... I'm a settled citizen." He looked cautiously at Rivett, hesitated, then said carelessly: "I mean to marry, some day."

"Do you?"

"I do, certainly.... And I flatter myself that the woman I marry will receive her equivalent, sir."

"Her moral equivalent?"

"Certainly. Perhaps not her—ah—financial equivalent." He looked up at Rivett to see how he took it. Rivett neither took it nor rejected it, apparently, and the colonel probed further.

"I expect to wait a year or two—"

"Aren't you getting on, Follis?"

"No, sir, I am *not* getting on!" said the colonel shortly. "I am forty-five. No man is fit to marry before he's forty-seven, in my opinion. At that age he's able to treat his wife intelligently. Intelligence is what a young girl most deeply appreciates in a man."

"A—*young* girl?"

"I prefer a youthful wife. Youth is susceptible of being moulded. I propose to make a perfect specimen of womanhood out of whatever charming and adolescent material fortune bestows upon me." The colonel slightly lifted his eyes

until they protruded toward the ceiling. "I shall consider my wife as a sacred trust, a soul for which I am responsible."

"Very good idea," said Rivett without the slightest trace of expression on his face. "Why not marry the little Diana—and mould her into the ideal?"

"Marry her!" blurted out Curmew. "What! Marry a hired—a paid—employee!"

His countenance became crimson and congested, and his eyes popped and popped.

Rivett rose. "My wife worked in her uncle's kitchen when I married her," he said indifferently, and walked out.

On the stairway he joined Diana, also descending.

"Well," he said, looking at her through his round glasses, "you *look* happy enough."

"I am, thank you," said the girl, smiling.

"Don't thank me for it," he said dryly.

"You're to be thanked, too," she laughed—"or ought to be. But you don't like it, I know, so I tell your wife how very pleasant you are making Adriutha for my sister and myself."

"Do you find it pleasant?"

"Yes, I do."

"Like the people?"

They had halted on the stairs.

She looked up at him.

"Some of them I like," she said frankly.

"Which?"

"That is bad manners! ... But I like you and your wife and Christine and Jack."

"All of us?"

"Unreservedly—except in your case."

"What's the matter with me?" he asked grimly.

"Why, I don't know you very well," she said, "so how can—"

"Come and talk it over," he said.

They resumed the descent of the stairway together, and, side by side, walked out to a seat on the terrace overlooking the river.

"Sit down, ma'am," he said, dusting the marble bench with his drab-colored soft hat. She seated herself with decorum, inwardly amused. He dusted a place for himself, and sat down beside her.

"Now," he said, "what's the matter with me, Miss Tennant?"

She laughed deliciously. "Nothing that I have ever discovered."

"You're not much of an explorer, are you?"

"A rather good one, Mr. Rivett. But—you know there are still certain peaks in the world that defy approach," she added audaciously.

"I'm a peak, am I?"

He came so near to smiling that the girl watched him with increasing interest.

"You know," she said, "that you *are* not exactly talkative, Mr. Rivett. How is a girl to form any definite idea of a—a—sphinx?"

"That's two names you've called me already"—he looked at his watch—"in the last four minutes—a peak and a sphinx."

She was laughing so unrestrainedly now that the corners of his eyes began to wrinkle a trifle.

He said: "What do you think of a self-made man who was once schoolmaster, day laborer, donkey-engine tender, foreman—all kinds of things, and whose wife was washing out a wood shed when he first met her?"

"Is that you?"

"It is. What do you think of such a man's chances in New York?"

"Financial?"

"Social."

"I don't know New York."

"You're highly connected there?"

"It is a very distant connection.... Mr. Edgerton chooses to acknowledge it."

"He's a snob, isn't he?"

"Not in the slightest," she said pleasantly; but the blood mounted to her cheeks and betrayed her.

"You like him?"

"Naturally."

"Unnaturally, too?"

"Kinship has little to do with my liking him."

"He's rather easy-going, isn't he?"

She flushed up again, and turned her clear eyes on his little brown ones.

"Don't you like him?" she asked.

"Isn't he easy-going?"

"He has not yet found himself. He is an intelligent, warm-hearted, high-minded man, capable of taking an honorable position in the world.... And I do not doubt that he will one day take and keep it."

"He was in iron, was he not—Edgerton, Tennant & Co.?"

"Yes."

Mr. Rivett thought for a while. "By the way," he said, "I neglected to answer your question. I'll answer it now. I like Mr. Edgerton."

"Thank you," said Diana, not perfectly aware of what she said.

Mr. Rivett sat buried in meditation for fully five minutes; at the end of that period he turned his glasses on her.

"I want to gossip with you," he said abruptly.

[image]

"I want to gossip with you," he said abruptly.

She began to laugh again.

"How did you discover that I am such a dreadful gossip? Begin at once, please. I adore picking to pieces my absent acquaintances."

"Yes—tearing 'em to tatters, the way you demolished Mr. Edgerton just now," he said grimly. "Well, I'll begin the scandal bee. Where did you know Mr. Inwood?"

"In Keno, Nevada," she said coolly, wondering what was impending.

"Know him long?"

"One winter."

"In Keno?"

"In Keno."

"Like him?"

"Immensely."

"Oh! So you're going to tear him to tatters, too?"

"Just as I demolished Mr. Edgerton. They're the two nicest men I ever knew. It's odd, isn't it, that I didn't know they were such intimate friends before Mr. Inwood came here?"

"Are they?"

"I understand so."

"And you didn't know it?"

"How should I? I never saw Mr. Inwood except that winter in Keno; and I don't know my cousin intimately."

"How well *do* you know your cousin?"

The girl sat thinking for a moment, then looked up frankly.

"Perhaps you can judge," she said, and told him the history of her friendship with Edgerton from their meeting in his studio to their arrival at Adriutha. And Mr. Rivett listened without a shade of expression on his face, but his little dark eyes seemed to bore her through and through.

"That," she said, "is the situation." She hesitated, then meeting his gaze candidly, but with a slight increase of color in her cheeks:

"I told you this because I wanted to be fair to Mr. Edgerton—in case—in the

event of you—your family—people here not considering us of much importance. Mr. Edgerton is not responsible for us.... I think he came from some boyish impulse—some chivalrous notion that my sister and I, being alone, might receive perhaps more consideration if a man of our family accompanied us.”

”I see.”

”I wanted you to see. I’m glad I’ve had an opportunity to make the matter plain that Mr. Edgerton is in no way responsible for any shortcomings on our part.”

”Nobody complains of you.”

”Oh, no; everybody is nice to us. But—we—do things—which—women of his family—perhaps would not do.”

”Smoke?”

”Yes. Cocktails, too. Also we gamble, dreadfully.”

”Wouldn’t his people?”

”I don’t know,” said the girl. ”I don’t know New York. One reads about these rather harmless vices being universal there. But Silvette and I are really provincial. Provincials usually go too far in either direction. It was only that I did not wish people to judge Mr. Edgerton from us.”

Mr. Rivett scraped the gravel with his cane for a moment, then:

”So you like Inwood?”

”Very much.”

”Wasn’t he mixed up in some mess or other?”

”I never heard so,” she said, surprised.

”Oh! What was he doing in Keno?”

She laughed. ”Visiting, as we were, I suppose. You know we weren’t being divorced.”

”Glad to hear it.”

”You didn’t *think* so!” she exclaimed.

His eyes twinkled.

”No,” he said, ”I didn’t. But you can’t throw a stone into a crowd and give odds on its not hitting a divorced person.”

”Does divorce shock you?”

”Not in the least; I’m past shocks, young lady. Who is Mrs. Wemyss?”

”Your own guest?”

He winced. ”I’m asking you. We made her acquaintance at the Plaza last winter.... It seems that she and young Inwood knew each other in Keno.”

”*That* is where I’ve seen her!” said Diana with innocent conviction. ”I knew I’d seen her somewhere.... But she was very much slighter—oh, very much—and extremely pretty.”

”Divorcée?”

"Isn't she a widow?"

"I guess so.... No matter." ... He stood up briskly; she rose, too, understanding that the interview was ended—feeling slightly uncomfortable because she had permitted herself to be so thoroughly pumped. Yet there seemed to be nothing significant in the operation or results.

"I'm going for a ride with my wife"—he meant drive—"just a buggy and an old plug. She and I enjoy it, Miss Tennant."

To her surprise he took her hand between his own dry little palms and pressed it.

"You're a good girl," he said; "you and your sister—and Edgerton—he's all right—you're good children—and all off the same tree, little lady—all off the same old block in the beginning—that's plain as preaching.... Do you really like my Christine?"

"Yes, I do."

"And Jack?"

"Exceedingly."

"That's right; they like you, too. They ought to. They're good children, and so are you. Good-by."

CHAPTER X COMPOS MENTIS

As Diana put her pony to a full gallop and rode him off, Edgerton's mount fell, and the young fellow lay sprawling on the sod.

He was on his feet immediately; so was his polo pony. When Diana pulled up, whirled her mount and came scurrying back, Edgerton had picked up his mallet and stood resting against his saddle.

"All right, Jim?" she asked briefly.

"All right, thanks."

The color had left his face under the tan, and his expression was queer.

"You look rather white," she insisted. "Did Parsnip kick you?"

"It's nothing," he said, smiling. "Put Jack in; I've got some business to talk over with Mr. Rivett."

"You're *sure* you're all right?"

"What a fuss you are!" he said, leading Parsnip across the field toward a

groom.

The girl looked after him, saw the groom slip a white wool polo coat over the young man's shoulders and take the pony, saw Edgerton drop his hands into the pockets and stroll across the field toward the terrace; then, lifting her mallet, she hailed Jack Rivett in a clear, ringing call, and cantered away up field.

As Mr. Rivett senior stood waiting for his wife at the foot of the terrace steps, wrapped in his old-fashioned linen duster and pulling on a pair of worn driving gloves, Edgerton, in white from head to foot, came across the lawn, the youthful antithesis of the older man—tall, powerfully built, his smooth skin and short, thick hair burned by the summer sun—a graceful, leisurely figure agreeable to see on anybody's lawn.

"Good morning!" he said pleasantly, stopping on the gravel drive.

"Good morning, Mr. Edgerton. Are the young people amusing themselves?"

"I think so—thoroughly."

"You came a cropper?"

"I sometimes do."

"You are amusing yourself?"

"I always do."

"So do I," nodded Rivett, buttoning his gloves. "Never was bored in my life—poor compliment to oneself, Mr. Edgerton, to find life a bore."

Edgerton smiled and stood with his left hand in his coat pocket, looking out at the flat field beyond, where half a dozen young people on lively ponies swung their mallets and cantered leisurely about in pretense of practice.

Presently Diana, Christine, and Inwood swung their ponies, and came driving pell-mell down the field after the ball.

"Your cousins seem to be up to anything," commented Rivett.

"They were bred to everything worth while."

"Oh! Is polo worth while, as you call it?"

"Do you wish to start such a complex discussion?" asked Edgerton, laughing.

"No; my wife will be here in a moment.... You're looking very pale, young man," he added abruptly. "Did that pony hurt you?"

"A little.... Mr. Rivett, do you need my services any longer?"

"I don't *need* anybody's services," said the little man dryly. "I never *needed* anybody in all my life—except my wife. There's no such thing as a necessary man. No man ever lived who couldn't be replaced.... What's the matter?"

Edgerton said slowly: "I thought I'd go back to town and hunt up a job."

"Why?"

"Because there's no reason for my being here. There never was any reason.

You knew it when I asked you to take me, but I didn't—because I didn't know you and your family."

"That's a compliment, isn't it?"

"It's just the truth. I'm glad my cousins are with you.... I'd like to go back now."

"Tired of us?"

"You don't have to ask that."

"More compliments," said Rivett. "What is wrong, then?"

"I am."

"Hadn't noticed it."

Edgerton smiled faintly. "More compliments? ... Mr. Rivett, I want to go to town and hunt up a job, and get in the game. That's all."

"Can't you wait a month and see us through the October shooting?"

Edgerton stepped nearer.

"I would, merely because you ask me, but I can't. I just want to get away quietly, and not bother anybody.... I've broken my arm."

Mr. Rivett swung sharply and his eye-glasses glittered.

"Which?" he demanded.

"The left.... I'll just run down to town and have it fixed up. Don't say anything about it until I've left."

"Won't you stay here and let us look after you?"

"I knew you'd say that. You've been very nice to me. Ask me again as a guest. I'll be glad to come as a friend if you care for me that way."

Mr. Rivett's unchanging eyes watched him.

"We'll ask you. My wife likes you. So do I.... I don't want to interfere with a man who knows his own mind.... But do you think you can stand the journey?"

Edgerton's white lips were compressed.

"Yes," he said.

"Very well; we'll stop at Fern Center. Billings can reduce the fracture."

"Are you going with me?"

"I certainly am," said the elder man.

With a valet's aid he got into his clothes. His swollen wrist lay in a sling.

"I won't bother the others now," he said to Mrs. Rivett who was on the edge of tears because he would not remain and let her take care of him. "Please say good-by for me when they come in, and say that I'm all right and hope to see them all again.... Good-by! ... It's been a real happiness to know you—and yours. Will you let me continue the friendship?"

"Please do," she said tremulously. "Jacob, you will tell Holmes to drive carefully, won't you?"

"Yes, mother. Billings is going to put him in good shape."

So they drove away in a big red touring car, Edgerton sick with pain, but perfectly cheerful; Rivett taciturn, twirling his gloved thumbs, seeming to muse gloomily in his walrus mustache.

Dr. Billings reduced the fracture—a simple one—Edgerton refusing anaesthetics. He fainted during the short operation, and came to with his head on Rivett's shoulder.

Half an hour later he was on his way to New York, lying back in a chair in the drawing-room car, feverish lids closed. Rivett sat in the chair opposite.

"I was going, anyway," he said briefly in reply to the young fellow's protest.

And together they made the journey, not only to the city, but to Edgerton's apartment, where Rivett quietly turned himself into a valet, helped the young man to bed, called up his physician, Dr. Ellis, lingered to learn what condition the patient was in, and silently vanished. And for two or three days Edgerton forgot about him, for Ellis kept him pretty quiet, and the nurse who had been summoned knew her business.

He managed, however, to write his bread-and-jam letter to Mrs. Rivett, and another to Diana:

"MY DEAR COUSIN:

"They've probably told you that I've been ass enough to snap a bone in my left arm. It's nothing, as you hunting people understand. I was a bit stupid with it, so I ran down to town to have it fixed up—and, incidentally, hunt up a job; and I wasn't up to explaining and saying by-by to everybody, so I just slunk off—ill mannered pup that I am; but people are indulgent to dogs.

"This is just a line to take leave of you and Silvette, and to ask you to remember that, in any and all interims, this apartment is a family joint, so don't go elsewhere and pay perfectly good rent. Your room and Silvette's is always ready for you—useless unless you use it.

"When I nail a job, I'll report to the family. If you make new plans, may I hear from you?

"Wishing you both a jolly and successful autumn,

"Your cousin, "JAMES EDGERTON 3d."

Her reply came by return mail:

"Jim, dear, I feel very badly about your injury. It was my fault; I cannoned into you. You behaved as only a man of your sort always does. I won't say any more about it.

"By this time I hope you are freer from pain. The first two days are the limit; I know from experience and two mended ribs. But—I hate to think of you in bed this glorious autumn day—and the little fool who sent you there idling in the sunshine of these lovely hills.

"Jim, dear, it is generous and entirely like you to ask us to make your place our headquarters between engagements.

"If we do it, it will be only because we all would be happier en famille. Even we, hardened materialists that we are, could not bring ourselves to use you. You know that, don't you? So I have assumed that your offer is not only a kindness, but a genuine expression of regard for us; and we return to the full whatever you feel for us.

"Jim, there are many things that I am denying myself to say to you; and I find self-denial hard. It's a worthy and laudable virtue which Silvette and I are trying to acquire in our old age, and it isn't easy.

"There's no news. Mrs. Wemyss seems to have fascinated your friend, Mr. Inwood. He's a curious sort of man—rather melancholy of temperament, I fancy.

"We play a languid sort of polo now and then, dawdle in canoes, and sit up too late at cards.

"A lot of men are coming for the shooting. Mr. Rivett's manager turned out several thousand pheasants and Hungarian partridges, it seems. The latter, they say, have vanished; the former seem disposed to wander into the front yard.

"Mrs. Lorrimore has departed with much of Judge Wicklow's salary. Her stouter and prettier friend, Mrs. Wemyss, despoiled almost everybody except Silvette and me. This letter is degenerating into gossip. It had to, or I might have been even more indiscreet.

"Jim, you are a good type of citizen when you're at your best. Let me lecture you, won't you? Anyway, you're helpless and in bed and miles away, and you can't prevent me.

"So—be yourself. Go into a man's business. Disregard your accomplishments, your cleverness at paraphrasing art. It doesn't count in real life, all this facility with paint and pen and paper—your gay imitation of painter, writer, composer. They're little gifts, Jim—meant for an hour of light leisure among the leisured—pleasant, but unimportant accomplishments. When you court some nice girl, some day, you'll understand their full value—which is to amuse her, and later, I prophesy, the jolly little family of a home-returning business man.

"The years are before you still, Jim. Open the battle when you're well enough. You will win out, for you are really not the man I have known. I wish I

might have been a woman to bring out what you really are. Some woman will. Meanwhile give a friendly hand and a generous lift to a fellow who deserves your respect and consideration—your other self.

”Good-by and good luck.

”Your cousin, ”DIANA TENNANT.”

In a few days Edgerton began to experience the intolerable sensations of a bone which is mending itself.

He had become very restless and impatient; and, finally, the doctor let him wear his arm in a sling and go out to hunt for a job.

He had no trouble in securing one—a small clerkship with Close & Co., ornamental iron work. He might have done even better. All iron men knew who James Edgerton 3d must be. Many friends of the old firm of Edgerton, Tennant & Co. might have offered him easier work and higher salary, but he not only went to none of them—he even avoided them. He had decided to discover what he really was worth.

It rather surprised him to find out that the big, blue-eyed, snub-nosed Irishman, Mr. Dineen, whom he had met at Adriutha, was a director in Close & Co. Later, he discovered that Mr. Dineen was also interested in his own old firm, Edgerton, Tennant & Co., now reconstructed, but still bearing the ancient name. And after a while he learned that Mr. Dineen seemed to be interested in almost every house in New York that dealt in structural or ornamental iron.

Edgerton’s duties began with ledger work. And the evening that he drew his first pay, he wrote Diana:

”DEAR Di:

”I’m getting fifteen dollars a week with Close & Co., ornamental iron. I have my first week’s wages in my pocket. As I pay no rent, I can live on it.

”It’s not uninteresting work. Somebody said something about my going into the designing department as a draughtsman. That’s pretty quick advancement—if it comes. I’ll let you know if it does.

”My arm is about well. It’s still mummified, of course, but that maddening sensation is gone. Town isn’t so bad. Of course, it’s rather hot and dusty, and, as usual, it looks dingy and mean in its characteristic October shabbiness—meaner for the glorious blue overhead and the pitiless sun exposing its few withered trees and its many architectural shams in the remorseless light of high heaven.

"But I am peculiarly happy. I have no servant; I dine at a French restaurant for seventy-five cents, and I prepare my own breakfast in the studio. Crackers and milk compose my luncheon at the price of ten pennies. And I never felt better. All this in case you are interested in such details.

"To answer your letter—I did not intend to write until I had nailed down a job and received my first pay envelope. Now I feel that I may.

"First, regarding your comments upon my artistic ability, you are perfectly right. I ought to have known it; I did know it, deep inside of me. I'm not the stuff that artists are made of. *Eviter les contrefaçons!* I was an imitation. I was not even a good amateur; I'm not even equipped to really appreciate the best work in others. All I had was a monkey-like cleverness and the blank facility of a receptive parrot; and I was idiot enough to contemplate an idle life of dabbling and fiddling with professions that better men dignify.

"I tell you, Di, I bid fair to turn into one of those horrors—a cultivated talker!—the lowest type of incompetent. Drawing-rooms, studios, cafés are full of them, all telling one another what is what and how to do it. I was heading straight that way. My peers and companions would have been smatterers, instructors in arts which the instructors couldn't master—or they wouldn't have become instructors!—men of one picture, or none at all; of one book, one story, or of none at all, or of dozens, all still in their minds, or in unpublished manuscripts; men of one waltz, or several grand operas—I mean ideas for grand operas—all failures, all men who had mistaken their professions, self-deceived men, incompetent, hopeless, pitiable.

"You said in your letter that one day I might meet a woman who could appreciate, at their real value, my very slim talents. Haven't I met her, Di? Those clear eyes of yours pierced the flimsy fabric long since; the trenchant sweetness of your tongue cut more than one knot for me.

"If you demur, my answer is that I am here. Who sent me? A flanneled satrap, already insidiously beguiled by idleness, already reconciled to the status quo—how long before, and by what process of evolution, would my real self have awakened? Or would the degeneracy have ended only with life?

"I don't know; all I know is that you sent me about my business in the world. I walked to it in my sleep; awake, I follow it. Thus far, so far, Diana of the far white gods!

"Yours is the stronger character, so far. Let us await events. It may be, as you say, that the years will twist my path toward the possible woman you predict for me. I dined with Dr. Ellis last evening. His daughter will certainly grow up to be such a woman as you and I delight in. I told her that I hoped my path would twist toward her. She said she hoped so, too, very shyly. She is only fifteen—alas!

"In the meanwhile my path runs straight to Close & Co., and I shall con-

tinue to travel it every day with my shovel and dinner pail—thanks to you, my loyal little cousin, who were plucky enough and merciful enough to tell me the merciless truth.

”Give my love to Silvette. My remembrances to all. Accept for yourself my friendship. Do you remember those photographs I made of you as Japonette the day after we first met? I’ve developed them. Here is one.

”Yours sincerely, ”JAMES EDGERTON 3d.”

Which letter resulted in an immediate interchange of notes:

”DEAR JIM:

”Fifteen and eighteen are not far apart. A man can help Chance to twist his path through life. The resulting route is called the Path of Destiny. I think you have already started to travel it. I hope you are better.

”DIANA.”

He replied:

”DEAR DI:

”You meant that path which leads to Close & Co., didn’t you?

”J. E. 3d.”

She answered:

”DEAR JIM:

”No, I meant the other path you mentioned. Follow it for the next three years. Mr. Inwood says that little Miss Ellis is the most beautiful and winsome and intelligent and cultivated child he ever knew. Life is all before you, Jim.

"DIANA."

He wrote:

"I'm in the designing department as draughtsman! Mr. Rivett's friend, Mr. Dineen, dropped in to have a chat with me. He's a very decent fellow.... You don't think that Mr. Rivett has inspired him to show me any unmerited favors, do you? It would make havoc of my present complacency. Try to find out.

"JIM."

She answered:

"Mr. Rivett isn't to be pumped. I tried it. I'll never try it again. Anyway, Jim, no favor can inject brains into a man; it can only stimulate what intellect he has. Don't worry about favors. Neither Mr. Rivett nor Mr. Dineen are the men to injure their own affairs by the incompetent service of others. You can be perfectly certain that you are worth what is offered you if they have anything to do with it.

"Why don't you fall in love with Christine? She's one of the sweetest girls I ever knew. I supposed she and you were on delightful terms once. Also, once, I thought she was inclined toward Mr. Inwood. But he seems to be monopolized by Mrs. Wemyss; and the poor child comes into my room in a forlorn sort of way—so white and limp these days that I'm wondering what this change in her means. *Does* it mean your absence? You'd tell me, wouldn't you? But I know you're not the sort of man to win a young girl's heart, and then coolly walk out of her life. It looks to me as though she had something on her mind. Dr. Billings has been here several times, and her mother is worried sick.

"That's all the gossip, except that the shooting is in full blast here. A number of men came up for it—the usual sort of men who shoot, except one. He's a Mr. Wallace, and very nice and a poor shot. He and I go out together sometimes, and he is forever making fun of himself and his perfectly rotten marksmanship, and he and I don't care two raps whether we get anything or not.

"Mr. Inwood is the saddest young man I ever had the pleasure (?) of trying to animate. Are all your friends as melancholy and temperamental? He haunts the terrace like a lost soul until Mrs. Wemyss annexes him. Christine does not

seem to care for him; she doesn't seem to care for anybody these days.

"Colonel Curmew is a funny man. He has, apparently, devoted himself to me, and I have the greatest difficulty in getting away from him long enough to take a stroll with Mr. Wallace. Such a funny, strutting, sentimentally elaborate little man!—with a rather horrid habit of staring. But he's a crack shot, and popular here with the men.

"Good night, "DIANA."

She wrote next day, also:

"Jim! My little Christine is in love—that's what's the matter! I *know* it; I'm absolutely sure of it. And with—oh, ye humorous gods and dryads!—with your melancholy friend, Mr. Inwood.

"And I want to tell you, Jim, that I don't *like* Mrs. Wemyss. She's fat and selfish and—why does she drag that boy about with her all the time? I don't believe he likes it. I don't believe he's so enamored of her. Maybe his low spirits come from too much of that fair and ample lady. I'm going to find out. I won't have my little Christine ignored by any melancholy idiot who ever lived.

"Write me what you know about Mr. Inwood.

"How is Chance, and the twisted path, and little Miss Ellis?

"Scott Wallace and I managed to shoot a grouse. We both fired, and neither of us were inclined to claim the poor, dead, little thing. A keeper put it in his pocket. Mr. Wallace and I are going to take up target shooting hereafter.

"DIANA."

He wrote: "Inwood is all right. Who *is* Mrs. Wemyss?

"JIM."

A week later he heard from her: "I've found out from people in Keno. She was a Mrs. Atherstane—divorced hubby, and resumed her maiden name of Wemyss with the prefix Mrs. Did you ever hear of her? Scott Wallace and I detest her.

"DIANA."

He did not reply, partly because the constant recurrence of Wallace's name in her letters had begun to annoy him—partly because what he had to say must be said to Inwood; and at that miserable young man he launched the following:

"DEAR BILLY:

"You're a fine specimen. What are you, anyway—a lap dog or a Chow pup? Get rid of that woman! I don't care whether or not you made an ass of yourself over her by sympathizing with her. Old Atherstane had no more mistresses than the majority of church pillars and public benefactors in town; and, anyway, it was not up to you to dry her weeps.

"Don't make any mistake—the ci-devant Mrs. Atherstane can look out for herself. She needs no consideration from you; she doesn't deserve any, either. What kind of a woman is she, anyhow—taking advantage of a chivalrous and conscientious boy who never did more than hold her hand and pat it, at most, when she told him she was lonely and unhappy, and needed a good man's moral support?

"Rot! You're not responsible for her. You're not in honor bound to sit around and await her pleasure, now that she's free to marry. She wouldn't have you, anyway.

"You probably made an ass of yourself—probably talked too much. You're not in honor bound, I tell you. And don't make any mistake—she's not going to marry. She's having too good a time. I know that kind of woman, Billy. They never put their heads into the noose a second time; but they harpoon all the men they can, and they trail around with a lot of silly ginks like you.

"If you don't believe me, I'll tell you how to put yourself out of your misery. Ask her to marry you; ask her flatly. You'll wake up, then. I know what I'm saying. You do what I tell you, and then get back to first principles, and clear up all this nightmare between a sweet and plucky little girl and your own dam-fool self. Clear it up, I tell you. I know you, Billy. You have nothing to confess in regard to Mrs. Wemyss. Of course, you wouldn't confess, anyway; but, thank God! there's nothing to say except that you were a silly ass, and have learned better.

"Now, I've told you how to get clear of this petty and miserable affair. If you don't do it, for Christine's sake as well as for your own, you're no man.

”JIM EDGERTON.”

CHAPTER XI

QUOD ERAT FACIENDUM

With the daily advent of men arriving for the flight-shooting, now imminent, Lillian Wemyss seemed to grow prettier and slimmer every day until the perfectly visible metamorphosis had produced radiant and brand-new creature.

For the men who were now accumulating in billiard room and card room, who haunted stable and garage and kennel, were the sort of men who inspired the very breath of life in a woman of her sort—big, handsome, ruddy-faced, thick-necked men with large, indiscriminating tastes and an eternal readiness for anything from a half-broken horse to an unbroken woman, but heartily preferring them both bridewise and registered.

They tramped all over the place, on the terrace, over the lawn, in to dinner; and the house echoed with large bantering voices, loud unfeigned laughter—and they rode hard and drank hard and played for heavy stakes, and were up and tramping all over the place by sunrise, sniffing for the frost which would bring the first night flight of woodcock from the north into the far-famed coverts of the Adriutha hills.

And the best-looking, most humorous, and most reckless among them was Scott Wallace, a young giant of infinite jest, who began by pleasing himself with Diana and, out of the sheer perversity of humorous animal spirits, pretended to her that he scarcely knew one end of a shotgun from the other, which gave him a pretext for dawdling over the country with her, and making love to her until such time as the flight might send him seriously afield.

So, as he cared nothing for the scattered pheasants and wilder and scarcer grouse, he amused himself and Diana by playing Winkle, now and then consoling himself with a difficult shot, which satisfied him and left the girl none the wiser.

But on Wallace Mrs. Wemyss had her blue eyes fixed with all the veiled alertness and objectless intensity of the sort of woman she was—a woman who would never be dunce enough to marry again.

In the meanwhile, already exceedingly popular with the shooting fraternity, she kept a mechanical hold on Inwood for no more reason than the matter-of-fact impulse which had prompted her to snap a leash on his collar the moment

she set eyes on him after many months' separation.

To take him away from Christine had not been her object; she had no idea that he was interested in anybody except herself. She was perfectly confident that, given half a chance, men preferred her to any other woman; and there was really no particular malice in her desire to give Scott Wallace an opportunity to follow at her heels instead of Diana's.

For Mrs. Wemyss really needed nothing of men except admiration and uninterrupted attention. No deeper passion had ever moved her. She was ignorant of love, although apparently fashioned for it; immune to its lawlessness, although lid and ear and lip seemed to chorus the contrary. In the slightly veiled eyes there was really no promise, no significance in the full, sweet mouth—nothing to her except the superficial provocation which all men mistook, and the laughing and ready friendship offered so prettily that no man ever refused.

Inwood, searching the house and terrace over for Christine, discovering her at last in the moonlit rose garden, and, not daring to join her after all, so faint hearted he had become, walked moodily into the billiard room where a noisy lot of people were enjoying themselves.

Wallace, standing between Diana and Lillian Wemyss, his broad back against a billiard table, was evidently having a splendid time; and Inwood halted, irresolute, one hand in his pocket crushing Edgerton's letter into a wad.

Lillian Wemyss caught sight of him, smiled instinctively, but her blue eyes reverted to Wallace. There was something in her attitude, as she stood in the full splendor of her somewhat ample beauty, that subtly repelled Inwood; and he swung on his heel, somber young head bent, moving toward the door by which he had entered.

"Mr. Inwood!" called Diana across the hubbub, "will you play bottle pool with us?"

He turned, smiling to her.

"Thanks, I'm not up to it," and resumed his way out.

"Billy!" said Mrs. Wemyss, "I wish you to play!"

"No, thanks," he returned coolly, and continued toward the door.

It was his first exhibition of insubordination, and Lillian Wemyss, surprised, did not propose to stand it, particularly in the presence of these two people. Scott Wallace seemed to be almost ready for his leash; it was a bad example for him, this insubordination of young Inwood.

She looked anxiously at Diana.

"I'm afraid Billy Inwood is not well," she said. "I've thought so for several days. Those swamps where you men shoot must be full of malaria."

"Not a bit," said Wallace, laughing.

"How do you know?" asked Diana. "You never go into them, you lazy

thing!"

Mrs. Wemyss hesitated, listening to the banter that passed between Diana and Scott Wallace, which slightly excluded her for the moment.

Then she made up her mind that her authority over Inwood must be asserted at once, and that she had time enough to eliminate Diana later.

She turned and saw Inwood passing the windows outside on the terrace. The next moment she was on the terrace, too, and he turned slowly to confront her.

"Billy," she said gently, "are you feeling perfectly well?"

"Perfectly, thanks."

"Then why didn't you remain at my request?"

"I didn't care to."

"But *I* asked you," she said, surprised.

"Yes, I know you did."

"Well?" she asked, astonished.

He had been looking away from her out over the misty moonlit river. Now he turned.

"Lillian," he said, "do you honestly care for me?"

"Billy, what a question!"

"Yes, it's one kind of question.... *Do* you?"

"You know I do. How can you ask such a—"

"Do you *love* me?"

"What!"

"*Do* you?"

"Billy, what on earth is—"

"Wait, please. Let me ask you again, Lillian. Are you honestly in love with me?"

"I don't know what you mean by suddenly and abruptly questioning—demanding—"

"Please answer."

"You have no right to doubt it. You know perfectly well what we have been to each other—even before—"

"What *have* we been?"

"I supposed we had been in love," she said with sad dignity. "I wrote you while I was abroad, and—I don't write many letters."

"Then you *are* in love with me.... We are in love. Is that true as you understand it?"

"You silly boy—of course!"

He stood stock still for a moment, tasting all the misery he had stored up for himself. Finally, he found his voice.

"If that is so," he said, "we ought to be engaged."

"Oh, Billy! Are you jealous?"

She laughed, radiant, delighted to feel the leash tighten in her soft little hand once more.

"No," he said, "I am not jealous; but, if we are to marry, it is time people understood it."

"Do you mean these people?"

"I mean everybody."

"You don't mean to announce our engagement this winter?" she asked uneasily.

"I mean to announce it now."

"Here!"

"Here—to-night."

"I—I don't wish to," she faltered. "You are unreasonable."

"Is there any reason why people shouldn't know it?"

"My dear boy, one doesn't announce such important matters on the impulse of the moment."

"If I'm going to marry you, I want people to know it now!" he said.

"I've explained that I did not wish it."

"Why?"

"Why? There are a million perfectly good reasons."

"Give me one, Lillian."

She stood considering, her crook'd finger under her chin, blue eyes taking his measure from time to time. Evidently happiness too long deferred had made him unmanageable. She never thought of doubting her power. Probably he needed discipline. It was most annoying to be annoyed at such a time, with all these men here, and Scott Wallace already left too long alone with Diana at the billiard table. Discipline was certainly what Inwood needed.

"Billy," she said, "come in and play bottle pool."

"Am I to tell them that we are to be married?"

"No," she said petulantly.

"When may I tell them?"

"Not at all. Do you think a year of liberty is sufficient for a woman who has suffered what I have? I don't wish to marry you or anybody—yet. I haven't made up my mind to do it at all," she added with a tiny flash of rare anger, for her not very sensitive nerves were beginning to feel the pressure.

"Lillian, I want to know now. It is only square to me to——"

"Billy, if you continue to insist, you will end by seriously offending me. You have annoyed me enough already."

"By asking you to set a definite date for our impending marriage?"

"It is *not* impending!" she retorted, exasperated, as Diana and Wallace came out together and walked toward the farther end of the terrace.

"Do you refuse to marry me?"

"Yes, I do; I am sorry. I really cannot help how you feel about it. This year of liberty has been a year of happiness. I don't wish to marry. I don't know when I may wish to. I am perfectly contented; and that's the truth, Billy."

"So—you refuse me?"

"For the present—yes."

"No; you must answer me for all time, to-night."

She nodded. "Very well, then; I refuse definitely—and for all time.... And, Billy Inwood, you have brought this calamity upon yourself."

But Lillian's anger was always short-lived; she was already sorry for him. Besides, she was convinced that he would continue to dangle. It had been her experience with men that they were never reconciled to the unobtainable.

So with one of her swift, smiling changes of feeling she held out her hand to Inwood. He took it.

"Are you very angry?" she asked.

"No."

"Do we part—friends?"

"We do, indeed," he said so sincerely that the smile faded on her face, and into her limited mind flickered a momentary doubt. But, no, it was not possible; for Lillian had never really been able to doubt herself. Certain, once more, that this young man would appear at heel when whistled for, she returned his friendly pressure with an encouraging one, laughed, and turned lightly toward the house. He accompanied her to the door and bowed her in.

Then the strength seemed to ooze out of his back and legs; he dropped on to a marble bench, and sat there in the moonlight, his face buried in his hands.

How long he had been there he did not know, when a light touch and a soft voice close to his ear aroused him, and, looking up, he saw Diana inspecting him.

"As dejected as all that, Mr. Inwood?" she asked, as he rose to his feet.

"Not dejected, Miss Tennant."

"Why, then, these attitude? Wherefore those woe, young sir?"

"I don't know," he said listlessly.

But she did—or thought she did; so she took his arm in friendly fashion and strolled about with him in the moonlight until she pretended that the beauty of the night tempted her toward the garden.

He was alarmed for an instant, and hung back, scanning the rose garden with anxious eyes; but he could see nothing of Christine, and presently succumbed to Diana's whim.

To and fro among the late roses they paced, the girl light-heartedly rallying

him on his soberness and lack of animation, until he laughed a little and squared his shoulders, and drew in a full deep breath of the soft air.

"I thought every man flirted if offered an opportunity," said Diana, "but I've flung myself at your head in vain, young man. Evidently there's some caterpillar at work on that damask cheek, or I'd be more generously appreciated."

He laughed again, and tried to tell her how deeply he was appreciating her, but she shook her head and finally dropped his arm.

"I'm going to the house," she said. "There's an arbor across the garden. If you'll wait for me there, perhaps I'll return. Will you?"

"Certainly," he said.

So she turned and sped away among the roses, and he stood and watched her until she crossed the terrace and vanished into the house.

For a few minutes he remained where he was standing; then, with a sigh, he swung on his heel and started toward the arbor, fumbling for his cigarette case as he walked.

At the entrance he paused to strike a light—and remained motionless until the match burned close to his fingers. Then it fell on the gravel; he dropped the cigarette beside it.

As he entered the arbor, a white figure, lying full length on a swinging seat, lifted its head from its arms, then sat up hastily.

"Is that you, Miss Rivett?"

"Yes." ... She rose to her feet, holding to one of the swinging chains. Moonlight fell across her white, confused face.

"May I remain?" he asked unsteadily. "Would you rather have me go?"

"No.... I am going.... My gown is damp.... I will go immediately."

"Were you asleep?"

She hesitated; but there was in her only honesty.

"No," she said.

"Then you must have heard my step on the gravel?"

She shook her head.

"Then what were you doing out here all alone with your head buried in your arms?"

"Thinking," she said.... "Would you care to walk to the house with me, Mr. Inwood?"

"Would you mind remaining here a little while?"

"My gown is damp with dew."

"Then perhaps we had better go?"

"I think so."

Neither stirred.

"It is so warm and beautiful to-night," he said, "that I can't imagine anybody

taking cold out here.”

”It is a bad outlook for the flight shooters.”

”Yes, indeed. There is no frost in this wind.”

”It may shift overnight,” she said. ”If to-morrow is a magnificent and cloudless day, with just a hint of silver in the horizon blue, then it means a frost and a flight to-morrow night.”

”And that,” he said, ”would mean an end to—the roses.”

”Yes.”

”An end to anybody sitting out here again this year.”

”Probably.”

”So it seems a pity,” he went on, ”not to enjoy it while we may, Miss Rivett.”

”I have enjoyed it—for an hour.”

”You are not very generous.”

”Why? You may remain another hour if you wish?” she said, smiling.

”Alone?”

”I was alone during my hour.”

”I have been alone for an entire year,” he said under his breath.

”What?”

She had heard him, but her abrupt question seemed to have been beaten out sharply from her startled heart.

He made no reply; she stood, one hand clasping the chain, not looking at him, conscious of the clamor of her heart.

”Miss Rivett,” he said, ”am I too much of a fool—too hopeless a thing for you to listen to?”

”What do you mean?” she said faintly.

”I mean that—this night, now, for the first time since I knew you—I can use, decently, honorably, whatever liberty of speech you permit me.”

Presently her white hand relaxed, the chain slipped through her fingers; she sank down on the swinging seat.

After a moment he stepped toward her. She raised her head in the moonlight, and he saw the tears in her eyes.

”Christine,” he said under his breath.

”Are we free to speak to each other?” she faltered.

”Thank God, yes!”

”Thank God,” she whispered.

But for a long, long while they did not use the inestimable privilege of free, articulate speech. There seemed to be no need of it further than apparently irrelevant fragments such as, ”My darling!” and, ”Oh, Billy, if you only knew!”

Far away beyond them Diana came out on the terrace with young Wallace, and gazed very earnestly down at the rose garden.

"Shall we walk there?" he said persuasively.

[image]

"Oh, dear," she said, 'there's somebody down there already.'"

Suddenly Diana's face sparkled. "Oh, dear," she said, "there's somebody down there already—two of them! And—and it looks to me as though they were spooning. What a world this is, Mr. Wallace! I think I'd better go in and play bottle pool."

That night she wrote to Edgerton:

"DEAR JIM:

"You have not answered my letter—but men were made to pardon.

"Somehow—and I don't quite know how—that wretched and melancholy Inwood man, fortified by a gentle push from me, contrived to get up sufficient momentum to carry my little Christine by assault. The darling has just been in here to whisper her happiness to me. We wept together, which is our feminine fashion of uttering three cheers.

"There is, of course, papa to inform. I don't envy Christine. Papa has a will of his own, but so has his infant daughter.

"Even yet I can't understand why this Inwood boy has lost all this time dinging and dangling around Mrs. Wemyss. Evidently he wasn't doing it because he was having a good time. I was inclined to suppose him either blighted or a mooner.

"But you should see the change in your intimate friend *now*! Why, Jim, he fairly pranced up to me as I was saying good night, and he wrung my hand and said, 'Thanks, awf'ly, Miss Tennant!' And all I had done was to give him a rendezvous with me in an arbor, and then go off to walk with Scott Wallace.

"Scott's a nice boy. You'd like him; he's a terrible tease. It seems that he's really a dead wing shot, and has just been jollying me all this time. I really enjoy him, which is more than I can say for the remainder of the sporting fraternity now investing this place. They're a hard young lot, without, perhaps, being really very hard; but they are a loud, careless, irresponsible bunch of wealthy young men who, as far as I can learn, spend their entire time in shooting at something or other, including clay birds.

"They seem to be Wall Street men when occupied at all, and all betray a

very healthy respect for Mr. Rivett. People say he is a factor to be reckoned with in New York; but I don't care. He's nice to me, and his wife is adorable. As for Christine, I dearly love her, Jim. No girl is more fitted for happiness, and I'm glad she's got her Inwood boy at last.

"And now, Jim, dear, there are two matters which very sorely perplex me; and, somehow, I turn to you to help me solve them.... No, only one of them, because I shall not bother about the other matter yet.

"But about the matter which is really nearer my heart, Jim—we must leave this place; and the reason is this: Jack Rivett is making himself miserable over Silvette.

"Silvette doesn't love him; at least, I don't think she does. She couldn't do it honorably, anyway. She told me so, and I quite see it, because she and I are employed here under the Rivetts' roof, practically in a position of trust, and dedicated to their service.

"It is not a loyal thing to permit the son of the house to lose his head, and Silvette tries so hard not to let him. But he's doing it, and she can't keep him from being nice to her; and she and I know perfectly well what his father's plans for him are, and that they include a fashionable marriage.

"Of course, that argues well for Christine. The Inwoods are fashionable people, are they not? But poor Silvie! Alas! her connection with your race isn't near enough to impress Jack's father; besides, Silvette doesn't love him, and the boy is in a bad way all around.

"Now, what ought we to do? If we offer to sever social and business relations with Mr. Rivett, he will ask why we do it.

"Shall we tell him? Is that square to poor Jack? Or shall we lie? Or shall we simply remain and let Jack suffer and make Silvie miserable?

"Oh, wise young sir, inform a suppliant at your knee!

"There is nothing more to tell you about, except that your progress makes me very happy. You are doing only what you would ultimately have done without any impudent advice from me. You have found yourself, Jim; you are climbing the rungs very quickly.

"Jim, I am not yet very old—but I might easily be younger.... I was thinking the other day—and to-night—that sometime I shall be too old and unattractive to practice this not very dignified profession; and I'm disinclined to do anything more strenuous. I don't want to struggle and grub and starve along respectably as a feminine physician. It's too late for that, anyway.

"So I don't know what to do, ultimately, unless I accomplish what I started out to do—marry a wealthy man. I mean the first agreeable one I encounter.

"Well, I won't bother with that problem to-night; my head aches a little.

"Good night, Jim.

"JAPONETTE."

Diana finished her letter, sealed and stamped it, and kissed the superscription. She always did when she wrote his name.

Then she laid her aching temples on her arms and, leaning limply on the desk, thought about him.

Hers was a strange, sweet pride in him—a fierce jealousy lest he should not take the place in the world to which he was entitled, and prove himself every inch a man.

Nor did she pretend to hide from herself what his return among his own friends must ultimately mean. If the love he had offered her had not been totally extinguished by her light mockery and smiling insolence, then this return to his own set would do it ultimately. The standards that measured women there would be fatal to her; nor could he choose but apply them, sooner or later.

She knew this when she sent him back among his own sort. She realized perfectly that if any love for her survived her irony and flippancy—her airy but trenchant scorn—it could not survive very long when he came to his cool-headed and reasoning self, and looked around him at the women, and at the families and relatives of the women among whom he had always lived.

Already he had spoken of little Aliss Ellis—a mere child, of course—yet—yet it was a straw prophesying a change in the wind to her.

She knew; she had accomplished what she had desired. She had done this thing to herself, to her whole life, for his sake. What more could she wish for?

Sick at heart, she lifted her throbbing head and kissed his name once more where she had written it on the envelope. Then she placed it on the desk, and lay down on the bed to wait for Silvette before ringing for the maid who attended them; and after a little while she fell asleep.

CHAPTER XII

NUNC AUT NUNQUAM

Warm weather continued; no flight occurred. The men thrashed about with the dogs after grouse and a few native woodcock bred in the willows along the river, or rode, motored, and played cards. One or two had to give up, and return to the

city.

Colonel Curmew was at his best on these gay occasions—gallant, jocose, busy, everybody’s friend, including Jack Rivett’s, who quietly began to hate him.

In the midst of the general tension and expectancy concerning the long-awaited flight, Christine one morning entered her father’s study and found the author of her being conferring with Mr. Dineen.

”This won’t do, Christine,” he said. ”I’m busy.”

”No, it won’t do,” she admitted, looking so significantly at Mr. Dineen that the jolly, big Irishman laughed.

”You want *me* to go out!” he said, shaking an enormous forefinger at her.

”Please—for a few minutes.”

”Sure,” said Mr. Dineen with an amused glance at Rivett, who sat inspecting his offspring with a face entirely devoid of expression.

When the big Mr. Dineen had closed the door behind him, Christine, a trifle pale, walked resolutely to her father and laid her hand on his shoulder.

”Dad?”

”What?”

”I’ve practically asked Billy Inwood to marry me.”

Her father’s eyes bored through and through her.

”Who did the asking, Chrissy?”

”Both of us.”

”What?” he barked.

”It wasn’t asking, exactly. I have loved him for a year, and he has loved me. There has been a misunderstanding.”

”About what?”

His daughter’s eyes never flinched.

”About a point of honor, father,” she said quietly.

He grunted.

She went on, still resting her hand on his shoulder.

”We were very unhappy; but the point of honor involved straightened itself out.... I happened to be in the rose arbor that evening. He came in by accident.... After we had talked a little, he told me that he was free to speak if I would listen to him.... Then, somehow, we merely looked at each other, and—and presently—presently we kissed each other.... I don’t remember much else ... except that I said I would marry him—before he asked me——”

”Did you also set the date?” inquired her father sarcastically.

”No.... Mother and I are considering.... Are you happy over it, dad?”

”Not violently.”

”Why?”

”I don’t know anything about him,” he snapped.

"Yes, you know that I'm in love with him."

"Certainly; of course. Very worthy young man, no doubt."

"Also," continued his daughter calmly, "you know that Jim Edgerton is his closest friend."

"That," said Rivett, "counts some."

"And mother likes him," concluded the girl.

Her father sat staring at her in silence. Suddenly she put her arms around his neck, and the little man hid his spectacles on her breast for a second.

"Thank you, dad, darling," she whispered.

"Chrissy—Chrissy—so soon! I wanted you awhile yet." ... He jerked his head free, produced a handkerchief, and began busily to polish his eyeglasses.

"All right," he said brusquely, "I'll talk it over with your mother.... She knows.... She knows more than I do. They wouldn't believe that in Wall Street, but it's true."

"Dad?"

"Yes, child."

"Couldn't we live with you and mother?"

"Sure. D'you think I'd let any young jackanapes take you entirely away? You tell him I'll scalp him if he talks that kind of thing to you." ... He laughed harshly. "But I'm a fool, Chrissy; you and I are talking foolish.... You won't come back to stay. You won't want to."

"I will!"

"No, dear; you don't know yet.... Your mother and I made our own home. It was a rough one, Chrissy, but it was ours. You'll do the same ultimately. It's part of the game.... Tell your young man to come here."

The girl slipped away; in a few moments Inwood knocked and entered. Mr. Rivett gave him a level and murderous look.

"How about that complication you got yourself into?" he asked harshly.

Inwood turned scarlet.

"I'm out of it."

"With honor?"

"Honorably."

"What was it?"

"You don't mean to ask me that?"

"Yes, I do! ... But I didn't expect an answer.... Can you support my little girl decently?"

"Decently."

"Not in the style to which I have accustomed her?"

"No, sir."

"All right," he snapped.

After a silence the young fellow said:

"Do you disapprove of me?"

"How the devil can I? I don't know you. If you make my little girl a good husband, I'll love you like a son; if you don't, I'll—kill you. You *look* all right; but there's no use talking.... You show me what stuff you're made of, and I'll do my part."

"All right," said Inwood, smiling.

Something in his smile interested Rivett.

"Was your mother a Lawrence?" he demanded suddenly.

"She was born Elizabeth Lawrence."

"Betty Lawrence," he repeated, staring at the younger man.

"Did you know her?" asked Inwood.

"I taught her in school.... Betty Lawrence.... Only two people ever smiled like that—you and your mother.... You have good blood in you, Inwood.... I know your father—in Wall Street. We are on good terms.... Don't ever be a fool again, will you?"

"No, sir."

They shook hands seriously. As Inwood left, Dineen came in.

Rivett looked at Dineen without speaking for a full minute, then he said slowly:

"My daughter is going to be married."

"God bless my soul!" ejaculated the big Irishman—"not *that* child!"

"Yes; I guess she means business, John."

"When?—in the name of the saints!"

"When she's ready, I presume.... She's a good girl.... They're good children. They've stayed as long as they could. Their time is nearly up.... But the smallest hut is a big barn when the children have taken wing.... I wish I could have seen more of my father and mother.... But I had to go out into a lean world and hunt a living."

"The best of us have passed that way," observed Dineen; and, after a moment: "Who's the lucky divil, Jacob?"

"Young Inwood."

"Stuart Inwood's boy?"

"That's the one."

Dineen lit a cigar and, drawing it into vaporous action, ruminated with enormous thumbs joined.

"It's good stock," he said, finally; "none better betwixt the Bowling Green and Patroon Van Courtlandt's old shebang. There's money, too; and an opera box and a bit of a shack at Newport. What kind of a lad is it?"

"He can look me in the face," said Rivett. "Otherwise he looks like ev-

erybody else of his sort, and probably resembles them, too. Ah!"—he broke out angrily—"these sleek-headed, tailor-made, smooth-faced young pups from New York, with their pleasant manners when they want anything, and their ways and means and by-ways and ten-cent brains—God! Dineen, do they really ever turn into men? Answer me that! You've lived long enough to see a new-born snob grow to be thirty. Do they ever turn into anything except the harmless fools they're born?"

Dineen slowly revolved his thumbs and squinted at a sunbeam, while the smoke from the cigar in his cheek rose to the ceiling in a straight, thin column.

[image]

"Dineen slowly revolved his thumbs and squinted at a sunbeam."

"Some of them become men," he said deliberately. "The most o' them is born spots and rots; or, if they're not, college addles 'em. But, God be praised! if it wasn't for them the good people of Reno, Palm Beach, and Paris, France, would starve entirely.... Jacob, they say there's a use even for the San José scale; and cursing would become a lost art barring the mosquito."

"What do you know about young Inwood?" asked Rivett.

"Nothing; he's a broker."

"Then we've nothing to learn, I guess," said Rivett dryly, "unless he gets into the papers.... Well, my wife likes him.... She's always right, John. I'll go and talk to her presently.... What were you saying about young Edgerton before my daughter came?"

"I said that he's the same as all the Edgertons. By jimmy! I started him on ink wells to see would he stand for it, and he was there every morning at seven; and he cleaned those ink wells and desks till nobody knew them—with his busted arm and all. Then I set him at the ledgers, and I let him stew for a week. A week was enough to see a good man wasting his fist and eyes at fifteen per.

"G'wan into the designing room,' I said to him, using Doolan as meejum for my remarks; and I let him stew there with his compass and his tracing paper, dopping out the work of worse than he.

"Then I gave Williamson the kitty-wink. 'Give us a pair of gates for a gentleman's estate,' said Williamson, very damn polite, knowing who was backin' the lad for a place.... They're using the sketch now."

"I told you so," said Rivett calmly.

"Ah, go on! I told you so! Let it go at that, Jacob. So I talked to Everly, and Everly sent him into the laboratory. When he isn't there he's nosing around the

shops, or asking questions of Cost and McCorkle over in Jersey, or he's investigating the Holmes Construction plant."

"He's got his eye on the game."

"Sure; it's in him. There's iron in every Edgerton. They're all full of ore. He's taken longer to open his eyes than the usual litter, that's all.... Got playing the art game, you say—like a kitten with a paper ball.... There's art in him, too, I guess. Those gates were all right.... But—you mean to give him his chance?"

Rivett nodded. "I am Edgerton, Tennant & Co. I'd like to have Edgerton go back there some day.... They were square people.... I might have used them a little easier.... My wife likes Edgerton.... She wishes it."

"She wants him to have his chance," mused Dineen.

"What she wants, I want," said Rivett.... "And I might have been easier on Edgerton, Tennant & Co.... I would have been—if we hadn't needed the plant."

Dineen nodded gravely.

"Sure! A poor corporal of industry like you, Jake, needs what he can pick up out o' the ash can."

For a full minute neither spoke. A slight flush faded from Rivett's cheek bones.

"You damned Irishman," he said, wincing, "when are you going back?"

"To-night, I think.... There's an ash can I haven't raked over—the Carrol-Baker Company."

"You'd better fix that," said Rivett dryly; "there may be a lump of slag or two we can use for filling in ballast."

Dineen winked, rose, deposited the ashes from his cigar on the window ledge, and sauntered forth—to meet Jack walking swiftly and firmly toward his father's study.

"Hello, young man!" exclaimed Dineen, "is the house afire, or has the brown jug below run dry?"

"No fear," said the young man, smiling, but continuing on his way. Dineen looked after him with shrewd, blue eyes.

"I'm a monkey," he said to himself, "if that young man isn't on some such errand as took his sister to the same place an hour ago. If he is, God help him! for Jacob's still sore all over with the news from the front stoop."

Jack knocked, and his father, who had settled himself for five minutes' hard thinking, rapped out: "Who's there?"

"It's Jack. May I come in?"

"Come on," said his father grimly, "I am—" but catching sight of his son's face he stopped short.

"Father?"

"What?" snapped Rivett senior, instinctively squaring his shoulders.

"May I talk to you as two men ought to talk together, or must I assume the attitude of a child to its father?"

"Talk as you feel. I had a notion that you were still my son—maybe I'm mistaken. In that case you may try to bully me if you care to. Go on."

"I didn't mean that, dad."

"I know you didn't; but you've come in here with your mind already made up that I won't do what you want me to do. That's no good, Jack. Go into everything cocksure that you'll win out. It's the only way you stand any chance at all. Proceed."

The boy sat down and gazed absently out of the window; after a few moments he turned his head and looked at his father.

"Dad," he said, "I'm in love."

Rivett senior regarded him in angry amazement, for a second only; then the grim mask of a face resumed its weasel-eyed and expressionless immobility.

"Babies have to go through teething, too," he observed.

Jack said pleasantly: "Wouldn't you rather I came to you and told you about it?"

"Yes; a boy is all right who tells his parents. Who is the girl?"

"Silvette."

An unaccustomed color dyed Mr. Rivett's pallid temples.

"Oh! Have you informed her?"

"Yes."

Rivett's teeth met under the walrus mustache, parted, met, and ground together; but his son saw only the jaw muscles move slightly in the lean face.

"Silvette is a—an interesting young girl," said Rivett with an effort; "but she is one of my employees, and not the sort of woman I wish my son to marry."

"So she says," observed Jack quietly.

"*Who says what?*"

"Silvette said exactly what you have just said—that she is your employee, and her sense of honor will not permit her to listen to me."

"Oh! ... She said that, did she? ... Oh! ... Did she tell you to tell me her answer?"

"No; she told me that if I uttered one word on the subject to you, she would leave your service in twenty-four hours."

His father's eyes fairly bored into him like augers.

"And yet you've done it?"

"I've taken the chance—yes."

"Why?"

"Because I love her."

"You'll have that kind of pip several times before you pick the right one,

Jack."

"No; I'm like you."

"What's that?"

"I say that I am like you, dad.... I don't believe there was ever anybody but mother. Was there?"

"How about that little Beaumont girl you met at Hot Springs?" asked his father.

"I taught her to shoot a pistol. I liked her, but that was all. Silvette is different."

Somehow, the memory of a girl he had once taught came into Mr. Rivett's mind—Betty Lawrence—who smiled as nobody else ever had smiled except her own son—years afterwards—years and years afterwards.

He raised his sunken head and looked hard at his son.

"I don't want you to marry her, Jack," he said.

"Why?"

"I had other plans for you. There are girls in New York who——"

"There are girls everywhere, but only one Silvette Tennant; and I am like you, father."

"You don't show it now," retorted Rivett sharply. "Do you think I'd spoil my chances—no, my certainty in New York, as you are trying to do?"

"You only got as far as Mills Corners, dad; and you had not even seen New York."

"I don't want you to marry her," repeated his father doggedly.

"Why?—once more."

"Because—I don't know anything about her. She gambles, too!"

"Would you care whether the girl you meant to pick out for me plays cards for stakes?"

"I certainly—" He stopped abruptly, then: "She smokes and drinks like a man!"

"Get some woman to ask you to dine with her at the Convent Club some evening," said Jack, smiling.

"Who is Silvette Tennant, anyway?" demanded his father.

"You ought to know something about the Tennants, dad. You reorganized their firm."

"I never heard of her or her sister before I hired them," said his father, reddening.

"Dad, be square with me. Do you like her?"

"What?"

"Do you like Silvette?"

"I like her sister."

"And Silvette?"

"Yes, damn it, I do!"

Jack laughed.

"So do I," he said; "but she has refused me."

"She knew enough to do it; she is a girl of sense. Certainly, I like her. She knows well enough that she has no right to encourage you."

"She knows something else, too."

"What's that?"

"She knows that she doesn't care for me anyway," said the boy with a quiet simplicity that, somehow, left a confused and restless resentment in Mr. Rivett's breast.

"Doesn't care for you?" repeated his father slowly. "She'd care for you fast enough if she dared."

"Dared!" Jack laughed. "If she had cared for me, she'd have told me—and sent me about my business all the same; don't worry about that. But she doesn't care about me.... I think, sweet and generous as she is, she does not consider our family as particularly desirable for an alliance."

"What! My employee!"

"Why, dad, our employing her puts us at her mercy. Didn't you realize that?"

The elder man sat silent, glaring at his son through his great convex spectacles.

"So *that* is why this girl wouldn't listen to you?" he said.

"Her reason was that she, being in your employment, occupied a position of trust, and that it would be dishonest in her to take advantage of it by encouraging your only son."

"Did she say that?"

"Almost word for word."

"When?"

"Long ago."

"Oh! So this has been going on a long while?"

"I've bothered her a long while; I've contrived to make her miserable. She does her best to keep away from me. I don't know what to do," said the boy miserably.

"Well, you've done it now, anyway; you've come to me, and told me against her orders. Now, she'll go—if I tell her."

"I shall tell her; I couldn't do this without being honest enough to tell her that I've done it."

"But—you say she'll go away."

"She certainly will, unless you ask her to remain."

"I?"

"Yes; you, dad."

"Do you think I'm going to deliberately bite my own head off?"

Jack smiled forlornly. "If you don't ask her to stay, you'll be biting my head off; but I won't need a head if she goes, so bite away, dad, if you're going to."

Rivett stared at him in stony silence.

"Do you know what your sister has done?"

"Yes; Inwood is a corker. I'm terribly glad."

"Oh, *are* you!"

"Aren't you?"

"Confound it! how do I know whether I'm glad or not to see the house emptying itself of all your mother and I care for—" He stopped with a dry catch in his throat, then resumed more cautiously:

"I thought Chrissy's tale of woe was sufficient for one morning, but here you come galloping in with one that beats hers to a batter! How do you suppose I like it? I expected to have my children with me for a while.... Yesterday you were in the cradle.... To-day you're up and off and out into the world with a girl I never saw before last June! Jack! Jack! what the devil's the matter with everything!"

"Isn't everything about as it was when you were my age, father?"

"No, it isn't. If anybody had predicted these times, he'd have been locked up for a lunatic! What with luxury, and fashions, and folderol, and high finance, and cards, and cocktails, and cigarettes——"

"I don't mean the details, dad; but isn't it all about the same—the birth, growth, courtship, parting? Isn't it?"

The older man was silent.

Jack rose and stood by the window watching the big clouds drifting across the sky.

"Jack," said his father, "why did you come here to tell me this?"

"Mother said I had better."

"Your *mother!*" he exclaimed, horrified.

"Yes; I told her first, of course—even before I spoke to Silvette."

"She never said—one—word to me," murmured Rivett vacantly.

"She promised not to before I would tell her."

"Do you mean to say that your mother *approves?*"

"She said she would if you did.... And all I ask of you is to invite Silvette to overlook what I've said and done, and request her to remain."

"If she doesn't care for you," said Mr. Rivett, "what do you want her to remain for?"

Jack's eye met his father's.

"So that I can have a chance to win her," he said doggedly, "with my parents'

full approval.”

Rivett rose, furious.

”You stay here until I’ve talked to your mother!” he barked, and went out slamming the door.

Jack sat down prepared to wait, but it was not five minutes before his father came in.

”I’ve seen your mother. Clear out of here! That young lady of yours is coming.”

”Here?”

”Yes, here. If you don’t go out, I’ll drop you out of the window—old as I am.”

”Dad! You’re a brick!”

”Well, you’ll get that brick in the neck if you don’t hustle!”

Jack laughed and held out his hand; his father took it, tried to speak—only succeeded in swearing. The boy went out. When the girl entered, Mr. Rivett was standing by the window, wiping his glasses for the second time that morning.

He turned, nodded, placed a chair for Silvette, but remained standing.

”I don’t suppose you’ve any notion why I’ve asked you to come in here. Have you?”

”Not the slightest,” she said, smiling.

”I suppose you think it’s on business?”

”Naturally.”

”Why naturally?”

”Because,” said Silvette, laughing, ”our relations are on a business basis.”

”Do you consider them entirely so?”

”I—am obliged to, am I not?”

”Don’t you like us?” he asked bluntly.

”What an odd question! Of course, I do. I’m in love with your wife.”

”*Not* with me?”

She laughed gayly. ”You’ve evidently discovered that Diana and I like you immensely.”

”Do you? Really?”

”Of course; you’ve been very charming to us. As for Christine, we care a great deal for her—very sincerely and deeply, Mr. Rivett.”

”What about Jack?” asked Mr. Rivett casually.

A slight tinge of color rose and spread in the girl’s pretty cheeks.

”Everybody likes Jack,” she said briefly.

”Do *you*?”

”Certainly.”

”That’s what I wanted to find out. That’s why I asked you to come here.”

The girl looked at him, startled, incredulous of her own hearing.

"I don't understand," she said.

"Then I'll be plainer. Jack has told me that he wishes to marry you."

The crimson stained her from throat to temple, but she rose with perfect self-possession.

"I think," she said quietly, "that this severs our business relations."

"Not unless you wish it."

"I do wish it."

"Why?"

"Because I warned Jack that one word of this matter to you would mean my leaving Adriutha."

"Why?"

"Because I am employed here by you, and Jack is your son," she said coldly.

"Do you mean to leave us?"

"I must."

"You need not."

"You are very kind, but my service is of no further value."

"I ask you to remain," he said slowly. "You have already rendered me service I could never pay for. I ask you to remain with us—as our guest, if you must; as Jack's betrothed, if you will."

She flushed again, brightly, astonished.

"But—but I don't—I am not in love—with Jack!" she stammered. "He knows it. I have told him so.... I like him immensely.... he is a dear boy—generous, clever, charming, considerate.... I never liked any man better.... But I *don't* love him, Mr. Rivett."

"That's up to him, isn't it?" asked Rivett dryly. "I can't make you love my boy; neither can his mother. Mothers can do most things. Probably Jack is young enough to think she can make you love him; but I can't help that, Miss Tennant. All I can do is to ask you to remain.... And to say—that if you ever come to care for Jack, my only boy, his mother will welcome you as our daughter—and so will I."

Then Silvette did a curious thing. She sat down at Mr. Rivett's desk and bent her head over the blotter, and sat so, with her small handkerchief against her eyes.

There was not a sound from her nor from Mr. Rivett.

For a long while she sat there, finally burying her face in her handkerchief and both hands.

Mr. Rivett bent over her presently.

"Silvette?"

She merely nodded in sign that she had heard him.

He said quietly: "You *are* in love with Jack."

She sat motionless.

"Your loyalty to honor deceived a very gentle heart," he said; "you loved him all the time."

[image]

"Your loyalty to honor deceived a very gentle heart," he said."

She made no sign, no movement.

"We could ask no better woman for our daughter," he said. "I was very blind. Jack knew, but his mother knew best of all. My wife is very wise, Silvette—far wiser than I.... And I have—I am in debt—to the name you bear. I thought by giving you my boy I was canceling it.... You put me under obligations I am unable to meet—unless you can accept my—affection—as collateral. Can you, child?"

Her hand moved slightly—moved farther across the polished surface of the desk. His hand fell over it.

"Thank you," he said.

They remained silent for a few moments; then he gently relinquished her hand and went out, leaving the door just ajar.

When Silvette lifted her head from the desk, she knew that Jack had entered.

Tall and quiet, he stood looking at her; tall and pale, she rose, looked at him steadily, came toward him as he moved toward her, and laid both hands fearlessly in his.

"I didn't know," she said. "I wouldn't let myself even think of you.... Do you want me, Jack?"

Then down he went on one knee, and kissed hers, and her hands, and her gown; and, confused, she drew away, then waited as he rose waited, looking at him as his arm encircled her.

Very gravely they exchanged their first kiss.

That seemed to break the divine spell, for they found their tongues very quickly now, and, sitting perched on his father's desk, side by side, feet hanging, and hand in hand, they succumbed to the rapture of garrulity, asking Love's same old questions with all the ardor of neophytes, and answering as Love has answered for many a century, and will answer for many more—trite, passion-

ately, and with that incurable redundance of which lovers alone are masters.

CHAPTER XIII

CUI MALO

For the present, it was decided between Mr. Rivett and his wife that the engagements of both their children should be kept secret.

Except those immediately concerned, only the parents, Diana, and Mr. Di-neen knew; and Edgerton, as the nearest male relative of Silvette, was to be informed.

It had been left to Diana to inform him. Silvette wrote a hasty and cordial note for her sister to inclose; then Diana took her writing materials up to the mossy ledge in the woods from where Edgerton and she had once taken the Path to Yesterday on that sun-drenched morning so long—so long ago.

She had never been there since. Once, strolling with Scott Wallace, he had espied the ledge, climbed thither, and called to her to join him in a new-found wonderland.

But it was not new-found to her, and the wonder of it had departed; and she continued on along the river bank below, heedless of his enthusiasm and persuasion.

Now something drew her there. What the sentiment was she did not analyze. Perhaps it was because the girl knew no spot as intimate, no fitter place in which to write him of her sister's happiness.

The place had changed with the season; yellowing leaves clothed the trees; the beds of moss had turned to vast reaches of golden velvet; naked branches crossed and recrossed above in delicate network against the sky.

Here was the silver birch against which she had leaned when his arms were round her and her lips touched his; there he had lain at her feet, stretched across that bed of gilded moss—only a boy then, smiling, idle, unawakened.

She seated herself exactly as she had sat that day, and looked at the empty place where once, so long ago, life had begun and ended for her—the place of self-sacrifice, the altar where her heart had died to appease the Fates and mollify the mischief of the far white gods.

Among the yellow leaves a blue jay screamed through the stillness; and presently she saw him for a moment, a flash of azure and silver, high-winging

from his invaded sanctuary.

Behind him he left a silence, deeper for the constant whisper of falling leaves, stranger for the far sighing of the unseen stream below.

She bent over and searched for the imprint of her fingers in the moss where he had kissed them unrebuked. Many a sun and moon and rain had smoothed out that delicate sign manual long since. Only upon her heart the imprint of his lips remained.

Then—for the path was easy to her; alas! too easy—she sent her spirit back along the Road to Yesterday; and soon she heard the starlings piping and saw the sky all rose and gold above the river; and she saw him, and heard his voice, talking of starlings and of children.

If a single bright tear fell, the moss buried it; and when at last she could see her letter paper through glimmering lashes, she inked her pen and set her small, sun-tanned hand resolutely to the task before her:

"Jim, dear, Silvette is going to marry Jack Rivett. She is supremely happy. I inclose her note to you.

"Only the families concerned know about it yet. It is to be announced in December. The date of the wedding has not yet been fixed.

"I write you this pleasant news because you are our nearest relative.

"In my last letter I told you that Silvette did not love him. I was wrong; she did love him all the while, but she was too decent to know it. So how on earth was I to suspect it? I didn't, and she didn't, and if it hadn't been for Jack kicking over the traces and cantering away out of bounds, there probably would have been a tragedy in the family; for Silvette and I had your kind and sensible letter, saying that the only honorable thing to do was to take the first opportunity to withdraw from Adriutha, and we had decided you were right.

"But man proposes, Jim, and the far gods laugh at him—not unkindly, sometimes. My little sister is radiantly happy. Jack is a dear; so is his sister and parents.

"It amuses me to realize that I have come to be a purveyor of marital news to you. First, it was Christine and Mr. Inwood; now it's Silvette and Jack. The nearest I can come to rounding out the classical triad of the blessed is to inform you, monsieur, that the symptoms of Colonel Curmew are becoming acute. He tried to take my hand in the billiard room—not my bridge hand, either.

"He retains my hand too long when he helps me into a canoe. The other day I was horribly tempted to tip him into the river; he said such silly things and popped his eyes and went into rhapsodies over my ankles—which was slightly infringing les convenances, wasn't it?

"But he's merely a foolish, pompous, well-meaning man, slightly silly about all women, but with a very kind heart, I fancy. He is always doing things for me, always strutting around me and shooting his cuffs and curling his mustaches.

Half the time I don't understand his talk—his jokes and apparently witty innuendoes, which perhaps are very funny, for he laughs at them himself, and I have to smile and pretend I am not stupid.

"No flight has occurred, although there was a white frost Saturday night.

"The shooting brotherhood are anxious and gloomy. Some even declare that a flight did occur Saturday night; that the birds remained with us over Sunday, when nobody could shoot, and left Sunday night, which was bitter cold and froze water in the garden.

"I don't know about such things—and don't care very much. It seems to me that these big, red-faced men make a ridiculous to-do about the migrations of a few small birds.

"Scott Wallace is the laziest man—which reminds me in time, Jim, to speak about your apparent attitude toward Scott. I merely wrote you that you would like him if you knew him.

"To my surprise, you wrote that you, personally, had no use for the kind of man I described.

"Was that a snub for me or for Scott? I'm sorry I spoke of him. To me he is a nice, wholesome, amusing fellow, so friendly to everybody that, somehow, your letter—what you said in it about a man you never met—hurt me. You *would* like him if you knew him. So, with this feminine prerogative, I close my lips about Scott Wallace for the present and the future.

"I am glad your arm is practically well; but what makes me entirely contented is what you say of your constant and bewildering promotions. Best of all is what I read between the lines—that you really love the business—the business of generations of Edgertons; and you, the last of them—but not the last, God willing!—are plunging into the game up to your neck, interested, optimistic, enthusiastic, fitting yourself for that dignified place which is yours, Jim, by every right.

"Now that it's over, and the mist blown clear of your path forever, I want to confess to you how dreadfully I felt to see you here in such a capacity. More than that, your light talk about the arts, your light and graceful accomplishments in them, your tendency to drift back toward a career for which you are no more fitted than I—all these things troubled me deeply, so that, sometimes, I even dreamed of them, and finally came to regard your facility with actual fear, so jealous was I for your real career, so anxious was I that you should become your real self.

"I suppose you will scarcely believe it, Jim, when I tell you that this feeling began from the very moment when you offered to go with Silvette and me to Adriutha. Somehow, blindly, I understood even then that it was not the thing for you to do; and, remember, I knew you scarcely at all.

"Yet my instinct resented your going, and if I did not actually protest, perhaps you may recollect that my attitude was not cordial; that you had to ask me many times for my vote; that, after all, I never cast it, but simply refrained from voting at all.

"I suppose this was cowardly in me; yet, Jim, what else could I have done? I scarcely knew you; I dared not appear ungrateful after your kindness to Silvette and to me.

"Forgive this self-defense. I merely wanted you to know; I only wish you to understand that, at heart anyway, I have been, from the beginning, loyal to the best interests of a friend and a kinsman who was most kind to two girls alone in the world."

"This is a still, golden, autumn world—autumn no longer, alas! for we are already well along in November. But autumn lingers in this land of hills and waters, and the frost was not severe enough to blacken the late roses. If the weather is unseasonable, it is also charming, and I love it. Russet and gold always did fascinate me—like the hangings and tapestries in your studio, with the dusty sunlight falling over all.

"Eh bien, monsieur, I must conclude my monologue. You are a brave man if you have read as far as the name you gave me once—centuries ago.

"JAPONETTE."

She closed and sealed her letter, wrote his name on the envelope, rested awhile, blue eyes seeing nothing; then, touching the envelope with her lips, she laid it between the leaves of her portfolio.

Since that day in this very place, Edgerton had spoken no more of love to her. She knew that he never would again, that what had begun here on the Path to Yesterday had ended where the path ended. Never again would he retrace those steps with her; never again travel them alone. For it was a lost road to him, a blind trail already overgrown with briars. The days made it fainter, the months were hiding it, the years would obliterate it for him. But for her, alas—she had many a pilgrimage yet to make along that briar-grown path; and many a scar, yet unmade, must heal before that path closed before her pilgrim feet, and shut out forever from her eyes the hidden shrine it led to, where the sky was rosy above the river and the starlings called through the golden light of Paradise.

And now, as she stood up, the subtle scent of autumn hung heavy in the air—a faint odor of ripening, hinting of decay and death. Summer had gone

indeed—on earth and in her heart.

Never again would life be the same to her after this day, in this place, alone with memory; never again would she be the same. How old her heart had become—how old—how old! O amari dies! O flebiles noctes!

She rode that afternoon with Colonel Curmew, accepting him instead of another because she thought his chatter might leave her freer to follow her own thoughts.

But after a while it seemed to her as though she could no longer endure them, and that the colonel's inanities were preferable.

They were riding down a mountain road, the horses picking a cautious way among the scattered stones.

He was paying court to her, as usual, and she had been riding on, smiling absently, preoccupied with her own thoughts and mentally oblivious to him, when there came a clatter of stones from behind, and Scott Wallace galloped recklessly up at the risk of his horse's neck as well as his own.

"Halloo!" he said cheerfully; "hope I'm not smashing a twosome, colonel."

The colonel glanced sourly at him. Diana laughed with pleasure: "Not at all, Scott! Colonel Curmew and I are old acquaintances, and the resources of sentiment were long ago exhausted between us. Where are you going?"

"Nowhere; I just felt like a gallop. All the chaps are kickin' over the flight, which either isn't goin' to materialize or passed over Sunday and made boobs of the bunch of us. Where are *you* goin'?"

"Nowhere in particular; come with us. My nerves needed soothing, so I took the colonel along."

"As a tonic or quieter?" asked Wallace so seriously that Diana threw back her pretty head and the woodlands were melodious.

The colonel laughed loudly, too, and began to hate young Wallace with a hatred that passes all understanding.

Wallace turned to her. "What's wrong with *your* nerves? I supposed you hadn't any."

"I didn't know it either, Scott. Probably I've played with cards and cigarettes too hard. For all the sunshine, to-day has been a gray one for me.... Shall we gallop?"

She launched her horse into a trot, a canter, then into a dead run. Behind her tore the two men through the afternoon sunlight, on, on, until their winded mounts topped the homeward crest of the hill and they looked down on the meadows of Adriutha.

They wended their way down the mountain in silence—Diana, grave and apparently tired; Wallace smiling slightly, and glancing at her from moment to

moment; Colonel Curmew pop-eyed, expressionless, curling his mustache with gloved fingers.

He was furious with Diana, with Wallace, with himself. Yet even he could not see how he might have resented the young man's intrusion otherwise than by the lack of cordiality which he had certainly manifested. Besides Diana had invited him to remain with them. Of what low tricks women are capable! Because she knew well enough that he had desired and sought a tête-à-tête.

Curling his mustache tighter, he rode on, a good figure in the saddle always—ruminating, considering, angry because of the interruption.

For Colonel Follis Curmew had for days, now, been carefully preparing the way for something he meant to say to Diana. He was a cautious man with women; he reconnoitered by degrees, inch by inch, carefully watching effect. Hint, innuendo, double meanings, sly feelers, veiled intent, was the strategy he usually employed at first, skirmishing as close to the dead line as he dared; furtive, alert, ready always for a brilliant and resistless climax at the psychological moment.

A few minutes ago he had believed that the psychological moment was approaching. He had said one or two things so cleverly that not the least resentment had altered her smile; but how was he to know that, if she had heard him at all, she had not in the least understood him? It takes more than one to play a game of that kind. The trouble was that her smiling inattention had deceived him—had always deceived him. He was entirely persuaded that she had drifted into the game long ago.

Surely, surely the psychological moment had been close at hand when that big fool of a boy had come clattering downhill and smashed their approaching understanding into smithereens for the moment. The colonel silently damned him as he rode. It took time and patience to gather up and piece together the fragments and smithereens; it took skill and watchfulness to choose another such propitious day and hour—to select the scenery and the moment for what he meant to say to this young girl.

As he dismounted her at the foot of the terrace he pressed her arm significantly, and said under his breath:

"Can we get away for a moment together this evening?"

Wallace was close by, and the colonel spoke so low and pinched so discreetly that she neither understood nor noticed his amenities, so she merely nodded smilingly, thanked him for his escort, and ran up the steps beside Wallace.

"I'll be in the billiard room later, if that interests you," she called back over her shoulder to Wallace as she ascended the stairs.

"It certainly does!" he replied promptly, and went away to change.

Diana continued on to her own room, disturbing Jack and Silvette on the

stairs, and gaily jeering at them as she banged the door. A curious reaction had set in from the sadness of the morning—a feverish desire to escape from herself, from the misery that lay always heavy in her breast, the relentless hours that weighted her heart so that its dull beating had become a burden.

The bath refreshed her; so did the tea. She put on her little Japanese gown and her straw sandals, and curled up by the window, sipping her tea and watching the declining sun.

Dusk came swiftly, and with it Silvette who bent over and kissed her, and tasted the tea, and wandered about the rooms gossiping, too full of the joy of living to endure silence in herself or in anybody else.

Pangs of swift remorse and self-reproach stabbed her at intervals when she thought of her own happiness and remembered Diana's late unhappy affair.

How far Diana had cured herself, she did not know, but she knew that her sister was still more or less unhappy about Edgerton.

"Did you send him my note?" she inquired.

"Yes: I wrote him, and inclosed it."

"He's a dear boy.... How well he must be doing! He ought to go down on his knees and thank you every day of his life for what he is turning out to be."

"He would have turned out all right anyway, sooner or later."

"Well, he's a horrid pig if he isn't grateful to you.... I don't suppose he has the slightest idea what his regeneration cost you."

"Don't talk that way, Silvie."

"What way? I'm merely saying—"

"Don't say it, dear.... If it cost me anything, he is never going to know it."

Silvette looked at her wistfully. "If I could only see you as happy as I am, Di... Sometimes I can scarcely bear to be as happy as I am, and remember that you are not sharing it."

"True," said Diana, smiling; "Jack can't marry us both, so we can't share your happiness, dear."

Silvette came and sat on the arm of the chair, drawing one arm about Diana's neck.

"Do you still care for him very much?" she asked sorrowfully.

"Very much."

"Do you think it will last?"

"Yes."

"What are you going to do?"

"Nothing."

"Isn't there something to do?"

"Nothing."

"Perhaps, all this time he really cares for you."

"There is not the slightest possibility. I had my chance; he cared for me—at that moment—when he told me so.... Those men out there"—she made a vague gesture toward the unseen hills—"are no more deadly cool when they shoot than was I when I deliberately killed in him whatever love he may have had for me.... I slew it, I tell you. There is no resurrection for dead things."

Silvette sighed heavily, and laid her smooth cheek against her sister's hair.

"Still," she murmured half to herself, "there are miracles."

"There *were*."

"There may be others yet."

"No; I wounded his pride."

"You aroused it."

"By wounding it, and at the expense of what fell dead beside it. Love died that day, little sister, and for that death there is no reincarnation."

Again the feverish desire for escape came over her, seeming to burn through every vein, and she sprang to her feet and rang for the maid.

"I'm likely to do almost anything to-night," she said. "Shall I make it a double event when you're ready?"

"A double—what?"

"Double event—double wedding? I can easily do so. Is it a good way to drown your griefs, Silvie? Because the prospect of being alone after you and Jack marry actually terrifies me."

"You little goose, you'll live with us!"

"I see myself doing it!—the superfluous spinster to be reckoned with, counted in at dinners, mollified by kindness, secretly feared for her acidulated tongue, to be employed later in either bribing or disciplining the children."

"Di!"

"What?"

"If—in the—the——"

"Course of human events——"

"Jack and I have children," continued Silvette, flushing, "we'll also have nurses to look out for the grubby little things."

"Grubby! You don't know what you're saying. You'll be the most adoring—and adorable mother——"

"Well, please don't talk about it.... I don't care for children now.... I don't know how I'll feel later."

Diana stood in the middle of the room—the smile fading from her face, her small hands clenching.

"I've learned to like children," she said. "I've learned to love them, somehow—even babies.... I want one of my own," she added fiercely. "I wish for one very much; and if I can't have one—and it's impossible, of course—I—I'll

marry some man and have one!”

”Good heavens!” exclaimed Silvette, horrified, ”what are you talking about? I’ll let you have one of mine!”

”I don’t want yours! How do you know you’ll have any? How do you know you’ll have more than one?”

Her eyebrows were bent inward, her lips compressed; she turned her head and stared out at the stars—from where, they say, all babies come, and where they all return at last.

”You know,” she said calmly, ”that I wouldn’t really do such a thing—even to have what I care for so much.... And yet—if a woman is tired, hopeless, alone, isn’t marrying some man a help to her? Can’t she stand the passing years better? Doesn’t it give her some respite from the eternal pain—here”—she laid a slim hand on her breast—”doesn’t it give her something to live for, especially if children should come? I don’t know, Silvie; I ask you because I’m tired and confused with the pain of it.”

”My darling!”

She dropped her head on Silvette’s shoulder for a moment; then, as the maid knocked, lifted it calmly and bade her come in.

That night at dinner she was very gay—a charming, sparkling, bewildering creature. Through and through Colonel Curmew shot intermittent pangs of jealousy and doubt, mercifully assuaged by hope; through and through Scott Wallace her blue eyes seemed to penetrate, exposing to her laughing gaze his youthful and very susceptible heart.

[image]

”That night at dinner she was very gay—a charming, sparkling, bewildering creature.”

”Certainly I’m bowled over,” he admitted cheerfully to himself. ”She is the cunnin’est thing that ever missed a pheasant; but she’s found me, all right, with both barrels, and the sky’s full of feathers, and I’m on the sod, kickin’.”

He managed to tell her so that evening, in language sportsmanlike and picturesque, before they cut for partners at auction. She was standing on the stairs, two steps up; he below her, with his handsome face lifted.

”All you’ve got to do is to send your dogs forward, and retrieve me, Diana. I’m grassed in the open in plain sight.”

"Suppose I *should* take you up, Scott?"

"Is it a go?"

She smiled down at him.

"Take care, young man. I'm approaching spinsterhood at a terrifying speed. How do you know that I may not clutch wildly at you?"

"For Heaven's sake, clutch!" he urged her.

"How? Shall I roll up my eyes and whisper, 'Oh, Scott!'—or shall I take a flying leap at you from here, and rope you before you can get away? Instruct me, please, because I really don't know as much about such customs as perhaps you think I do."

"Take the flyer, Diana; I'll catch you. Are you ready? Come on; be a sport!"

"I can't be a sport, Scott. I try; I make a brave effort to be cigaretteful and naughty, but—I'm ashamed to say it isn't in me. Now you'll run, I suppose."

"After you—yes.... Diana, I do love you. I haven't said it right, that's all. Will you marry me and make somethin' out of me besides a loafin' lout in puttees?"

"Oh, Scott, you're so beautiful in puttees! I wouldn't make anything else out of you if I could; you must be perfectly gorgeous in pink."

"Come down to the next hunt ball and see. They're a fine bunch at Meadowbrook. You'll like 'em; maybe you'll learn to like me."

"I do now, you scatter-brain! I adore you, Scott; but, you know, love is a different game."

"That'll come all right," he protested. "When you're the missus, and you see me come a cropper over five bars, you'll suddenly wake up to find you love hubby. And I won't be hurt, but you'll think I am, and you'll pull up and scramble down and look me over, and cover my pale and beautiful face with kisses and—I'll play foxy and let you," he ended with pleased satisfaction.

The smile on her face had suddenly become fixed: for what he was saying had conjured up a vision of the polo field, and a young fellow in white picking himself up from the trampled sod.

Wallace, looking around to see that the hall was empty, sprang up the two steps and took her hand in his.

"Diana, I do love you dearly," he said. "Will you take me on for a trial gallop?"

"Do you mean an engagement?" she said, looking him over.

"Yes, I do; will you?"

"What kind of an engagement?"

"The regular—with a sparkler on the side. Will you, Di?"

"No, you very slangy young man, I won't."

"Well, then—then—what kind of an engagement do you suggest?" he asked cheerfully. "Just the circingle and halter kind?"

"What kind is that, Scott?"

"Oh, an understanding that you're not bitted and bridled yet."

"You mean that the engagement lasts during my pleasure?"

"Yes, that's it."

"And ends in marriage—or a very, very kind note?" she asked, laughing.

"Sure thing! Am I on?"

She considered him, smilingly.

"If you like," she said.

"Oh, I *do* like! It's awf'ly good of you, Diana.... Would you be gracious enough to wear a sparkler?"

"Not yet, Scott."

"Oh, that's all right—whenever you say." He looked up at her, blushing. "Do you mind if I kiss you?"

She looked at him for a second, then impulsively bent forward and kissed him squarely.

"You nice boy," she said gently; "you nice, nice boy. I wish the world were fuller of your sort.... I don't love you, Scott.... I don't suppose I shall.... But if you knew what I feel for you, I believe you wouldn't exchange it for any love I could ever give you.... Shall we go into the billiard room? I'm playing at Colonel Curmew's table, and he's probably perfectly furious at being kept waiting."

She gave his hand a friendly pressure as he released it, laughed, blushed, and turned away toward the billiard room, where the clamor was already audible.

They parted at the door, where she met her sister in conversation with Mr. Rivett.

"Diana," she said, "Mr. Rivett and I are going to town on the early train. You know he goes every week, and I've simply got to do some shopping. Will you come with us?"

Diana's heart gave a bound. To her, New York had become merely the abiding place of Edgerton, and every mention of it started her pulses.

"Oh, do come, Di," urged her sister. "If you'll come, we'll have Jim to dinner at the Plaza. All the theaters are open, too, and we can have a jolly time."

"How on earth is Jack going to bear it?" asked Diana, laughing.

"Bear it? Did you suppose Jack wasn't coming?" asked Silvette so naïvely that the corners of Mr. Rivett's eyes cracked into wrinkles.

"All right, I'll come," said Diana, with never a thought for Scott Wallace; but, thinking of Edgerton, she had meant to go from the first.

As Silvette, on her future father-in-law's arm, walked on toward the drawing-room, Colonel Curmew appeared from the billiard room.

"Oh," said Diana, "I am so sorry to have kept you waiting. I was talking to my sister about going to town to-morrow."

"I want to see you before you go," said Curmew in a low voice. "It can't be done now—they're waiting for us, and Mrs. Wemyss is developing a temper. When can I see you?"

"Why, I don't know," she said, smiling. "What have you to say to me that cannot be said now?"

The colonel's eyes popped, and he leered at her, not doubting her coquetry.

"On the terrace after cards," he said, curling his mustache. "Is that understood?"

"Indeed, it is not, Colonel Curmew!" she said, amused. "I shall retire early, because I have an early train to catch."

The colonel's face darkened. There were limits to coquetry.

"When did you decide to go?"

"A few minutes ago."

"You knew I had something to say to you?"

"I knew nothing of the sort. And what has it to do with my going to town, anyway?"

The colonel had only a few moments to decide.

"How long will you be in town?"

"I don't know."

"Where will you be?"

He wearied her, and to be rid of him she thoughtlessly gave him the address at the Plaza.

"I'll be in town for a day or two," he said, leering at her once more.

If she heard, she paid no heed, for she was already entering the billiard room with a gay gesture and a smile for Wallace, who waved his hand in reply, and looked volumes at her across the hubbub.

CHAPTER XIV DESUNT CÆTERA

Silvette and Diana, in one of Mr. Rivett's town limousines, had shopped to their hearts' satisfaction, inspected fashions for the coming winter in hats and furs and gowns and various intimate affairs of flimsier fabric, had whirled away down town to lunch with Mr. Rivett and Mr. Dineen at the Iron and Steel Club, then whirled up town again to resume the delicious exploration of those glittering

Fifth Avenue shops which line that thoroughfare from Madison Square to the gilded battle horse and its rider in two almost unbroken ranks.

In that magic land, where trousseaux are assembled and garnered by pretty brides to be, Silvette lingered, fascinated; but her rapid, intelligent survey was only preliminary as yet. She and Diana were merely en vidette; official inspection and an advance in force would follow later.

But, oh, the jewels and the furs and the lovely laces and the heavenly hats!

Every shop was now in full swing toward the culminating, scintillating transformation of Christmas; the avenue was crowded with flashing automobiles and carriages, the florists' windows were beautiful, the sidewalks crowded.

Men sold violets everywhere at street corners or offered enormous, orange-tinted chrysanthemums nodding on long stems; giant policemen on foot kept busy ward at every crossing; superb mounted police calmly stemmed the twin torrents and, with lifted hand, quieted the maelstrom. Far to the south, in snowy magnificence against the sky, the huge marble tower brooded under its golden lantern above the city's roar; northward the naked trees of the park turned ruddy and golden in the eye of the level sun.

And all of it the two young girls beheld, and part of it they were—sometimes afoot in the throng, sometimes in their limousine, looking out with enchanted eyes upon all this magic—magic only, alas! to the unspoiled eyes of youth.

From time to time Silvette had stopped at any convenient place to telephone Edgerton, calling him up at his various points of possible contact. She had telegraphed him the morning that they left Adriutha, which was the day before, but, as time passed, it became evident that he had not yet received the telegram.

Some days ago he had gone to Pittsburg at Mr. Dineen's suggestion. On his way back he was to stop at Philadelphia and Jersey City.

Rivett said at luncheon that he'd probably return to his rooms before dining, and find their telegram in time to join them at the Plaza for dinner.

But he didn't come, nor did any word arrive from him; and Silvette and Jack went off to the New Theater to see "The Thunderbolt" matchlessly staged and acted in a matchless theater; and Rivett offered to take Diana anywhere.

But the girl was sick at heart under her smiling, feverish gayety, and the brilliant darkness of the streets seemed to mock her as she looked out into them.

Also, there was a chance that Edgerton might arrive late and telephone to somebody—perhaps even to her.

It was merely a chance, but her chances were few these days, and she durst not pass one by, no matter how unlikely it looked.

So she thanked Mr. Rivett, and preferred her room in the pretty suite to which he had invited Silvette and herself; and there she sat in her silken dinner gown, sunk into the velvety depths of a chair, watching the city lights from

the window, waiting, listening—always listening with a hope that died and lived with her unquiet breathing; fading, flowering, waxing, waning, dead and alive between two heartbeats—the hope forever new—the only living thing which cannot die while the sad world endures.

Below her, far below, the lights of motors ran swiftly like passing meteors; the lights of carriages and hansoms streamed to and fro, yellower and slower; the lighted windows of street cars glided across her line of vision in endless, level repetition.

To the west the gemmed façade of the New Theater sparkled above the trees; northward the lighted streets spread away like linked jewels under the winter stars.

Into the high silence where she lay and looked out into the night, only a faint rumor of the city mounted from below; a tongue of flame rustled on the hearth; the clock ticked.

Suddenly, silence was shattered in her ears; she sprang to her feet, one hand against her heart, her stunned senses deafened by the clamor of the telephone.

The next instant she was at the receiver—the receiver pressed convulsively to her ear.

"Yes," she said faintly.

* * * * *

"Yes; this is Miss Tennant."

* * * * *

"Yes—Diana Tennant. Who is it?"

* * * * *

"Yes; I will hold the wire."

She rested against the shelf, relaxing from the tension; then, rigid, electrified:

"Yes! Is that you, Jim?"

"Of course!" he replied. "Are you at the Plaza?"

"Yes—all alone. Oh, Jim! I am so glad to hear your voice!"

"It's bully of you to say it. I'm delighted to hear yours. I have just come in and found Silvette's telegram on my desk. Shall I come around?"

"Will you?"

She could hear him laughing, then:

"Watch me," he said, "if the dust doesn't obscure the spectacle, I'll be with you in five minutes. Is that right, Diana?"

"It is perfectly right."

As though dazed she hung up the receiver in its nickel wishbone, and began walking aimlessly up and down the room trying to collect her wits and calm her senses. Outwardly composed, inwardly facing chaos, she threw open the window

and turned her face to the coolness of the winter stars.

Then behind her the telephone sounded again. It was only the announcement of his arrival, and she closed the door of her room and went into the pretty parlor, where a maid was already turning on the electric lights.

His ring sounded; the maid admitted him to the outer hall, took his hat and coat, and ushered him in. Diana rose to receive him with smiling composure as the maid retired to the bedroom.

"This is very prompt of you, Jim—and promptness is the most subtle of flatteries.... How thin and white you look! ... Are you perfectly well?"

"Perfectly. I need not ask that question of you, Rose of the Berkshires!"

"Do I really look well?"

"Flawless and dewy fresh—a trifle slim, perhaps. Don't they keep you in pheasants?"

"They do, kind sir. It's fashion, not slenderness, you behold. Never mind how it's accomplished. But, Jim, you don't look well. Are they working you to death?"

"Not so you'd notice my decease," he said laughingly. "I'm in the game, up to the neck, and swimming strongly. It's a fine game, Diana. No doubt generations of Edgertons on high look down on me and sing in unison the Anvil Chorus. It's a great game—this iron one. The iron is in me; I'm lanced through and through—it's flowing in my blood; it's in my bones. Iron! iron! There is nothing to compare with it in all the world, Diana."

"Let me see your arm, Jim."

"Shall I take off my coat and—"

"No; I'll just feel it—very gently."

"It's mended. Squeeze all you please."

"Was it here?"

"Higher."

"Here?"

"Lower."

"*Here?*"

"Higher."

"Jim, I believe you're just letting me fondle your old arm and waste oceans of sympathy on it!"

They laughed; he showed her where the fracture had occurred. She, gravely curious, explored his sleeve with timid fingers.

"Doesn't hurt at all, Jim?"

"Damp weather," he said briefly. "How long do you remain in town, Diana?"

"Only over to-morrow."

"Good Lord! Is that all?"

"We've been here two days."

"And I was in Pittsburg, dammit!"

"You certainly were, my friend; but, could I help that? I did my best. We wired you, and we have telephoned you steadily every minute since we've been here.... Jim, do you know, in the excitement we've quite forgotten to sit down."

They laughed again; he placed a chair for her, but she chose the lounge, and made a place for him beside her. Within the half hour a physical transformation had changed her to a flushed and radiant young girl, shy and audacious by turns, brilliant of eye and lip, and charmingly alert to his every word and smile. From her shoulders the robe of care seemed to have fallen, shriveling, as it fell, in the soft fire of her youth and spring-tide, leaving visible only her fresh, unstained, and winsome beauty.

She told him all that had occurred at Adriutha—all except what had happened between herself and young Wallace; and for the time she really forgot that such a man existed.

Then she asked eager questions; and he laid open the first pages of his new life before her proud, happy, sympathetic eyes, tracing it paragraph by paragraph for her since he had entered into man's estate, and had put away childish things.

The clock ticked; the tongue of flame flickered low among its ashes. They talked on, heeding nothing except each other.

"I thought you and Silvette were to use the apartment when you come to town. Your room is ready; but here you are in white marble and palatial grandeur overlooking the park. Explain those phenomena, pretty maid!"

"We're guests of Mr. Rivett, Jim. Otherwise, no palatial grandeur for us. We *wanted* to go to the studio apartment; I was perfectly crazy to go. But we saw it would hurt Mr. Rivett's feelings, and that he had set his kind old heart on entertaining us.... Oh, Jim, I don't want to seem ungrateful, but if older people only knew that the less they entertain the young, the better they are beloved!"

"That's a rather sad truth, but it's the truth," he said. "Rivett handed me one black eye, too, bless his heart. I had so counted on your being in the apartment.... Well, you'll come sometime—" He hesitated, looked at her, troubled.

"When is Silvette to be married?"

"They think in the spring; they haven't settled it yet."

"Then you and she will be in the apartment this winter?"

"If you want us," she said almost shyly.

"*Want* you! It will be paradise! I'll make my salary go as far as it will."

"Indeed, you *won't!* Silvette and I chip in pro rata, or we refuse your marble halls!"

"I'm afraid I'll have to agree, Japonette. My poverty, not my will, consents!"

After a moment she said: "It is a long while since you have called me that."

"What?"

"Japonette. I like it. There's a sort of an irresponsible frou-frou to the name which suits me. That's all I am, Jim," she added with a laugh—"just a swish of scented skirts."

He glanced up at her, half smiling.

"I know what you are," he said.

"Do you? *I don't*. Reveal me to myself, O Cagliostro!"

"Not now."

"Why?"

"Not now," he repeated.

"When?" she insisted.

"Some particularly sunny day in June, perhaps."

"June! Listen to this man! The very nearest June is seven months off!"

"And I don't believe it will be next June, either," he said with a grin.

"Jim!"

"Yes?"

"You're a plain masculine brute! You say you know what I am. If you do, tell me *now!* I maintain that I'm only a silken rustle and a hint of scent. Am I a louder episode than that, Jim?"

"The vault of heaven rings with you!" he assured her, laughing.

"Harmoniously?"

"Entrancingly."

"Well, that's better," she nodded dubiously. "Evidently I'm not the kind of a noise that gets arrested. Jim, when the others come in, shall we have supper?"

"Tons of it, dear lady. They'll have to push me out of this hotel before I consent to go."

"Do you mean it?"

"Militantly—truculently!"

"*Are* you glad to see me?"

He glanced at her with an odd expression, then turned aside to set his cigarette afire.

"Yes, I'm glad," he said.

She took one of his cigarettes, lighted it, savored it daintily, then leaned back watching mm. Their eyes encountered, and they smiled.

"Where are the others, Diana?"

"Jack and Silvette are at the New Theater. Mr. Rivett and Mr. Dineen are sitting somewhere, cheek by jowl, looking wealthy."

"How does one look wealthy?"

"*You* always do, Jim."

"Thank fortune for that. It ought to land me somewhere on the grandstand."

"Haven't you noticed," she said, "that some people always *look* wealthy? I don't know exactly what it is about them; it has nothing to do with breeding, or clothes, or careful grooming."

"Neither has wealth," he smiled.

"That's trite; you're becoming too prosperous to remain clever. But, oh, Jim! *isn't* it fine!" she exclaimed impulsively.

"What is fine?"

"Why, your success, of course! Your splendid interest in the business—your fitting yourself for a position of honor among your peers! It is fine! fine! And it is the happiest thing that has ever happened in my life!"

He looked at her.

"You dear girl," he said quietly.

"I? It was none of my doing. You're mistaken if you think so. Once you said something of that sort in a letter to me; but it isn't true, Jim. You have found yourself; the credit is yours alone."

"I give credit to the far white gods.... In that Olympian Pantheon one is known as Diana."

"She of the Ephesians—yes. She was great, wasn't she? Did you ever hear of the fly who said, 'I lie on my back in space, balancing the world on my six legs'? The fly was quite right; there's no top or bottom point to this sphere—or to your logic, Jim."

He smiled quietly.

"Did *you* ever hear of that Chinese goddess of the lotus, Kwan-Yin, who, from her blossom throne in the Happy Isles, rescues lost souls?"

"With how many incarnations are you going to endow me, Jim?"

"Do you think I am endowing you with anything you do not already possess?"

"What do I possess?" she laughed; "blue eyes and a fair skin and a heart as mercenary as a Persian pussy's. Warmed in the sunshine of life, I radiate purrs; but I'm a slit-eyed opportunist in storm and stress."

After a moment he said:

"What are your plans when Silvette marries?"

"I suppose I'll marry somebody," she said, thinking of Wallace for the first time. "Old age alone doesn't attract me; in fact, I've been hedging already," she added.

"Hedging?"

"Practically; I've told a man I'd marry him if it suited me to do so some day; but, meanwhile, he must consider himself padlocked. Isn't that a nice, thrifty, feminine contract?"

"Are you serious?"

"Entirely."

"Who is he?"

She glanced at him uncertainly.

"I think you've heard me speak of him, Jim."

"Wallace?"

"That is the youth."

"Are you in love with him?"

"Oh, more than that, Jim. I *like* him."

"Enough to marry him?"

"Not at present.... But you never can tell. I await the event. I haven't anything else to do."

He nodded, smiling.

"I rather imagined him to be the sort of man you'd come to care for.... I've heard one or two men speak of him recently."

"You mean that you made inquiries?"

A tint of red touched the city pallor of his skin.

"Yes, I took that, liberty."

"It was a friendly one. The reports were excellent, of course."

"Excellent. He must be a good deal of a man."

Her eyes were fixed on him, expressionless, considering. The slightest smile edged her lips.

"He is young—and nice.... I don't know how much of a man he may become.... I know nothing about him, and haven't studied him very minutely yet."

"You will—before you marry him."

"I may not.... A girl often misuses a microscope. I think I have, frequently. Do you remember King Gama's song?—

*"And interested motives
I'm delighted to detect!"*

"No, Jim; my snooping days are about over. Dissection wearies; the clinic is a bore. I'm beginning to be content with the surface of things; I'm tending toward impressionism and the elimination of detail—toward the blessed serenity of stupidity. There is rest, there."

"Rest," he repeated, smiling. "Of what are you already tired?"

"I am tired of intelligence. It's too exacting. It forms a liaison with conscience, and affronts inclination. I'm tired of rule and precept with which an occult and inborn tyranny shackles me. I'm tired of more than that—but isn't that sufficient to fatigue a girl?"

"Heavy chains," he said, looking at the figures on the carpet, tracing them with an incurious eye.

"So I think I'll file away a few links."

"You can't."

He rose, walked to the window, drew the curtain, and looked out at the November stars. Limpid, inexorable, the countless eyes of the night met his. Whatever message they held for him he seemed to understand it, for, presently he came quietly back to her.

"Yes," he said, "it's a good game, after all. The main thing is to get into it and stay there—in *medeas res*—squarely." He looked up, smiling. "Your superb interference put me there. Why do you deny it?"

"Does it please you that I should not deny it?"

"Yes, Diana."

"Then I affirm and deny nothing—which makes me sufficient of a nonentity to suit you, I hope."

"I am suited."

A moment later the bell rang, and Silvette and Jack, followed by Mr. Rivett, came laughing through the hall and into the little parlor.

"Jim! At last!" cried Silvette, giving him both hands.

"How are you, cousin! How are you, Mr. Rivett! Hello, Jack!" he said as they surrounded him with lively greetings.

"How goes it?" inquired Mr. Rivett dryly.

"First rate."

"Did you see McMillan in Pittsburgh?"

"By jove, I did! He was tremendously interesting—and exceedingly cordial to me."

Mr. Rivett nodded. He might have said that he kept McMillan in his vest pocket, but he only stared at Edgerton through his big, round glasses.

They all had supper together, later; Jack and Silvette bubbled enthusiasm over the play and the splendid cast; Dineen came in and talked business to Rivett in casual undertones; Diana and Edgerton were quieter, even inclined to silence.

Meanwhile Jack was consulting Silvette about theater plans for the following evening, and Edgerton said that he would return from business in time to join them.

"You'll be in Jersey, won't you?" asked Rivett.

"Yes."

"Well, try to get back in time to dress and join us at dinner."

"I don't believe I can do that."

Rivett looked at him. "Try," he said briefly.

But Edgerton said aside to Diana:

"I can't get back to the studio before eight.... By the way, you have a key, you know, if you wish to go there at any time."

"Thank you, Jim. I may look in to-morrow sometime. I want to see—" She flushed, and hesitated; then calmly: "We left two trunks there, you know."

He nodded. "Go and rummage. The janitor has orders. He has taken splendid care of that big white cat of yours. You'll find everything in order, and quite comfortable."

So he made his adieux and went his way; and Mr. Dineen followed, and Jack and his father retired to their suite, and Silvette and Diana went to theirs.

"Little sister," whispered Silvette, leaning over Diana's pillow, where she lay, eyes closed; "are you any happier than you were this morning?"

"Yes."

"Very much?"

"Very much."

And that was all. Silvette looked down at the white face and closed eyes, sighed, and extinguished the night light.

The eyes of happiness close only in sleep, or in the arms of the best beloved.

Silvette's excited heart began to sing with the first ray of the morning sun. Also she arose, dressed, and breakfasted with her equally reckless affianced, which showed that theirs was a hopeless case, and a recent one.

Dineen came and took Rivett away. Diana tasted a grape fruit in bed, and lay thinking until noon brought luncheon and her maid pro tem.

Jack and Silvette, unable to persuade her, drifted off somewhere into the sparkling confusion of the metropolis, promising to return and take her for a drive through the Park.

About five o'clock she summoned her maid.

"Please say that I have gone to the studio apartment to get some things from my trunks," she said; and wrote out the address in case either Mr. Rivett or Mr. Dineen wished to communicate with her.

Then, in furs, walking skirt and veil, and her tired little heart already outstripping her feet, she went out into the sunset world upon the pilgrimage so long desired, so long and wistfully deferred.

Her pulse beat fast as she entered *his* street. The sight of the house filled her with sudden trepidation, but she knew that he was not there. She had nearly three hours alone before her, unless the others, returning to find her note, might telephone and interrupt her.

Her key turned smoothly in the lock; she crossed the threshold, holding her breath.

A dull, mellow light filled the studio. In the stillness a faint fragrance of tobacco hung in the air. Step by step she advanced, looking at each familiar object as she came to it and passed it—pausing to lay a gloved hand on the sofa where, ages ago, two very young people sat, touching with lingering fingers the empty silver bowl which once, on a summer day, had been almost hidden under a fragrant load of peonies.

Something behind her—and it was not a sound—made her turn. The white cat sat looking at her with no recognition in its solemn eyes; and when she moved forward, hand outstretched in wistful appeal, it calmly retreated into the demi light of the bedroom beyond.

The well of desolation was filling fast now; she sank into a wide chair by the tea table and, lifting her veil, touched her eyes with her handkerchief. Then, disciplined, controlled, she lay back looking into the bedroom where she and her sister had slept and awakened through those three magic days which even Fate allowed before foreclosing on her destiny forever.

Pink bars of sunlight slanted on the wall, warming the painted armor of a forgotten dead man—forgotten no more than some among the living. A great lady, painted in her jewels, seemed to flush and smile as a rosy bar crept across her cheek. Doubtless she, too, had loved before she died.

The girl extended her arm listlessly along the upholstered arm of her chair, and looked at her white-gloved hand.

In the hollow of that hand she had once held Love, and had smilingly released it. Out of that little palm Love had flown far beyond her ken; and there was no returning for that winged thing.

Then, very quietly, she bowed her head, eyes sheltered by her hand, and remained so, motionless, for a long while.

The outer bell had sounded twice before she realized that it was the bell of the apartment. Dazed, she rose, stood a moment collecting herself, then walked to the door and opened it.

Colonel Curmew stepped jauntily in.

So astonished was she that she scarcely understood what he was about before they both were on the studio threshold—she instinctively retreating, he advancing, wreathed in a smile so remarkable that it fascinated her.

"What an odd thing of you to do," she said, still confused by the suddenness of his invasion, groping instinctively for the reason.

"You left word at the Plaza; *I* understood," he said, his eyes fairly popping at her, then palely roving around the place.

"So *this* is your apartment?" he said. "What a discreet and charming little nest!"

"I think you don't understand," she said; "this is Mr. Edgerton's apartment."

[image]

”So *this is your apartment?*” he said.”

He looked at her oddly, then burst into laughter.

”You clever girl!” he chuckled.

”What!” she said, bewildered.

But he only smirked at her.

”Look here, little girl,” he said, ”suppose you begin to make your eyes behave, and come down to actualities. You know what I want; *I* know what you want. We’ve been wasting time all summer. I’m no fool; neither are you, as you show by selecting this nice, little nook for a good, sensible talk.”

She only stared at him, thinking he had gone mad, and he laughed and twirled his mustache.

”Nix for the baby stare,” he said reprovingly. ”I tell you I know what a girl like you wants—privacy, discretion, *and* the usual ... And I’ve got it, little girl—wads of it!”

The grotesqueness of the dream seemed to make her stupid; she tried to find some sense and reason in what this man was saying to her, strove to comprehend him, his visit, his words.

”Are you asking me to—marry you,” she said, confused.

”*Marry you!*” he repeated, his expressive features suddenly blank, then jocular again.

”Then—what—”

And, suddenly staring into the sinister smirk, she comprehended, and turned ashy white.

Even he could not mistake the genuineness of that white horror.

”You—you d-don’t understand,” he stammered, his effrontery shaken.... ”I—perhaps I didn’t understand you, either.... But I thought—I supposed—”

His top hat fell clattering on the floor; he stooped and picked it up, lifting a redder and more impudent countenance to confront her.

”After all,” he said with a sneer, ”I had a right to think you knew what you were about—a girl, alone, who lives on her wits.”

He hesitated, malignant now, writhing internally under her pallid contempt.

”By God!” he said, ”you’re nothing better than any other hired woman! I helped hire you myself.” And added, between his teeth: ”You little clawing cat! I know damned well you’re an adventuress, but your game is beyond me—”

He swung insolently on his heel, and found himself looking straight into the eyes of Jacob Rivett.

"Go out!" said Mr. Rivett in a low voice.

The colonel stared at him, confounded.

"Go out!" repeated Rivett softly.

The colonel, flushed and utterly discountenanced, started toward the door. Mr. Rivett followed him out into the hall, closing the door behind him.

Diana stood stock still, as though turned to stone. There had been a crash outside; then, in rather rapid but irregular succession, a series of thuds. It was Colonel Curmew's impact with wall and floor; Mr. Dineen had been patiently knocking him down until that battered and half-senseless warrior took the count. Then one careful and heavy kick sent him down the first of the flights of stairs, and a moment later Diana heard the door bell.

She opened; Mr. Rivett walked in slowly, as though abstracted; Mr. Dineen came behind, straightening his scarf-pin.

"You left the door ajar, so we walked in," observed Rivett, ignoring his previous entrance. He strolled about, glancing up at the pictures and tapestries. Then his manner changed.

"Well, my dear," he said briskly, "Mr. Dineen and I stopped at the hotel, and your maid told us you had come here to get things out of your trunks. So, if you've finished rummaging, the car is below, and Jack and Silvette are waiting tea for us at the St. Regis."

"Thank you," she said in a low voice.

"Had you rather not come?"

"I had rather not—if you don't mind."

He walked over to her, took both her hands, and looked into her eyes.

"I am at your service, my dear," he said.

"I know it.... My heart will always be in yours."

His face grew grimmer.

"I guess we understand each other, child.... Next to my own—Silvette—and you.... Shall the car wait for you?"

"I will walk back."

"Dinner at seven," he said, releasing her hands.

She nodded, forcing a smile.

"At seven," she repeated, offering her hand to Mr. Dineen, who squeezed it shamelessly while unfeigned admiration transfigured his broad face.

So they left her there in the studio, standing in the dusk, head held high, and in her eyes that dauntless courage that remains though lips quiver and the hot tears sting the straining throat.

Cautiously, lest self-control slip the leash, she reseated herself and lay back

in the chair, closing her eyes. Whatever battle raged within her was fought out there in darkness and in silence. She lay motionless, never stirring save for the slow clenching and relaxing of her fingers; and at last even that ceased.

Then the steel nerves and iron will that had mastered the storm and soothed it, turned traitor, tricking her, furtively relaxing in the wake of exhaustion.

In the dark the white cat stole in, hesitated, looked at her; then, satisfied, stretched out on a Persian rug in front of her.

Long ago all sound had ceased in her ears; her heart beat quietly, her breath came and went as evenly and softly as the respiration of a sleeping child.

Through the tall windows the starlight touched her; at her feet the white cat dozed, dreaming of nothing.

Confused, the brilliancy of electric light in her eyes, Diana found herself sitting bolt upright, clutching the arms of her chair, and staring at a dark figure which leaned over her—a man, laughing, still amazed, still a little incredulous.

"Jim!" she faltered.

"Certainly. What do you mean by going to sleep in my favorite chair?"

"Oh, dear! Oh, Jim!" she wailed, dropping back helplessly into the depths of the chair, "I must be perfectly crazy to do such a thing! What time is it? I came in here to—to get something"—she pressed her hands to her temples—"to find—to look— Oh, I don't know what I'm talking about!"

Her hands dropped; she gazed hopelessly up at him.

"Did you *ever* hear of such a perfect fool?" she said. "What time is it?—if you think I can bear the information."

"It's only eight."

"Eight! Jim, dear, *will* you go to that telephone and inform Mr. Rivett that I have not been run over, murdered, or arrested?"

He went over and telephoned, adding: "Don't wait for either of us. Leave the tickets on Diana's dresser. We'll be along pretty soon."

"What did you mean, Jim?" she asked, struggling with her veil.

"It's so late," he said, "that you'd better wait for me to get into my jeans, and then I'll take you over and you can get into yours, and then we'll dine together, and go in for the last act if we have time."

"I've spoiled your evening," she said.

"Do you think so?"

"Oh, I know it. *Did* Mr. Rivett think me an utter lunatic?"

"He didn't say so over the wire."

"What *did* he say, Jim?"

"Nothing that meant anything."

"*Tell* me!"

"All he said was for me to take care of you. You perceive the irony, don't

you?"

"Irony?" she repeated, looking at him.

"Why? Aren't you capable of doing it?"

"Do you need anybody to look after you?" he asked, smiling.

Slowly she lifted her eyes to his; his smile died out. Never had he looked into such a desolate face.

"What is it?" he said, astonished; "what on earth is the matter, Diana? Has anything happened?"

"Nothing—unusual—I suppose."

"You are not ill, are you?"

The tears were slowly blinding her, and she turned her head, standing so, fighting for self-mastery.

"Diana—"

She motioned him to silence. He stood it as long as he could, then stepped over beside her and touched her arm.

"Tell me, dear?" he said under his breath.

She strove to speak—could not, yet; motioned him aside, but he would have none of such commands.

"You took my troubles on your slender shoulders," he said; "may I not help you to carry one or two of yours?" ... And, as she made no answer: "Dear, if you have not loved me, you have done for me, perhaps, even more than love might have done."

She had dried her eyes; now she turned to him quietly.

"It was love.... But don't mistake it, Jim.... It was a love that asked for nothing that it had not—desired nothing that you had not already given.... I thought it best to tell you—because—it is a world of men; and women—sometimes—are held—lightly in it—"

Her lip quivered, but she, somehow, managed to meet his eyes and smile.

"All that happened long ago, Jim."

"Did love—die?"

"Yours," she said, smiling. "I slew it very neatly for you."

"I mean yours, Diana?"

"Mine? Why, I gave you something better than that," she began gaily. Then her face altered; she fell silent, watching him—at first incredulous, then a little dazed.

"Didn't you know that I loved you?" he said.

"You mean—last summer.... Yes."

"Now! Didn't you *know* it?"

"I—no."

Far in the chaos of her brain she heard his words echoing, reëchoing in

confused reiteration.

He was saying, slowly: "There has never been a moment since that day that my life has not been yours—that you have not possessed my heart, my mind, filled them, owned them, overwhelmingly inspired me with love and adoration for you alone. What I am, and will be, I am, and shall be by grace of you.

"But gratitude is not the love of man for woman; it is not even part of it; it is a separate passion—a shrine by itself. I worship you there in my own fashion.

"But you, Diana—Japonette—" He flung one arm around her body. She placed a firm hand on his wrist as though to break the clasp, looked at him, and began to tremble.

"Can you love me, Japonette?"

"Can you?"

"Yes."

Her hand tightened over his wrist as he drew her close, crushing her to him. She looked up blindly into his eyes as he kissed her; then her lids unclosed and her silent lips moved, forming his name.

They neither dressed for the theater nor went to it. They dined together at an outrageous hour in an unfashionable haunt of his.

Silvette, Jack, Mr. Rivett, and Mr. Dineen found them at supper in the little parlor when they arrived from the play.

"Di!" cried Silvette, "what on earth has possessed you and Jim?"

Her voice failed her at sight of her sister's face.

"*That!*" she exclaimed; "has *that* happened? Darling! My little Di—my little, little girl!" she murmured, dropping on her knees beside her.

Mr. Dineen looked foolishly at Mr. Rivett.

"Say it later, John," whispered Mr. Rivett dryly. "We'll go downstairs for a while."

"You won't!" said Diana, turning laughingly on them. "You will wish us happiness, and drink to it, too." She rose, flushed and radiant. Silvette sprang to her feet and kissed her; Jack seized her with determination, and made no ceremony about it.

Then Diana walked straight up to Mr. Rivett, and held out both hands; and the little man kissed her grimly.

Mr. Dineen's blue eye sparkled; she looked at the big, jolly Irishman, audaciously delighted.

"What man has done, man may do," she said.

"Faith, I'll see if a woman can do it, too!" he said, saluting her with all the reckless grace of his race.

Then Edgerton's hand was shaken and his shoulder patted, and Jack summoned legions of waiters from the regions below.

Rivett's burned-brown eyes bored through and through Edgerton as he took his hand.

"I thought you'd do it," he said.

"Did you? I wasn't very hopeful myself," said the young fellow, laughing.

"I was.... They're good children—good children—like my own.... If you will excuse me, I will go and telegraph my wife.... It will be a happiness to her—a great happiness."

Jack thrust a glass into his hand. "What's this?" demanded his father.

"We are to drink health to them, dad."

Mr. Rivett inspected his glass, hesitated, while all waited; then, lifting it:

[image]

"Health, happiness, prosperity to them."

"They're good children," he said. "Health, happiness, prosperity to them—and—to the house of Edgerton, Tennant and Company! ... Break your glasses!"

THE END

* * * * *

Works of Robert W. Chambers

Japonette

The Common Law

The Adventures of a Modest Man

Ailsa Paige

The Danger Mark

Special Messenger

The Firing Line

The Younger Set
The Fighting Chance
Some Ladies in Haste
The Tree of Heaven
The Tracer of Lost Persons
A Young Man in a Hurry
Lorraine
Maids of Paradise
Ashes of Empire
The Red Republic
Outsiders
The Green Mouse
Iole
The Reckoning
The Maid-at-Arms
Cardigan
The Haunts of Men
The Mystery of Choice
The Cambric Mask
The Maker of Moons
The King in Yellow
In Search of the Unknown
The Conspirators
A King and a Few Dukes
In the Quarter

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