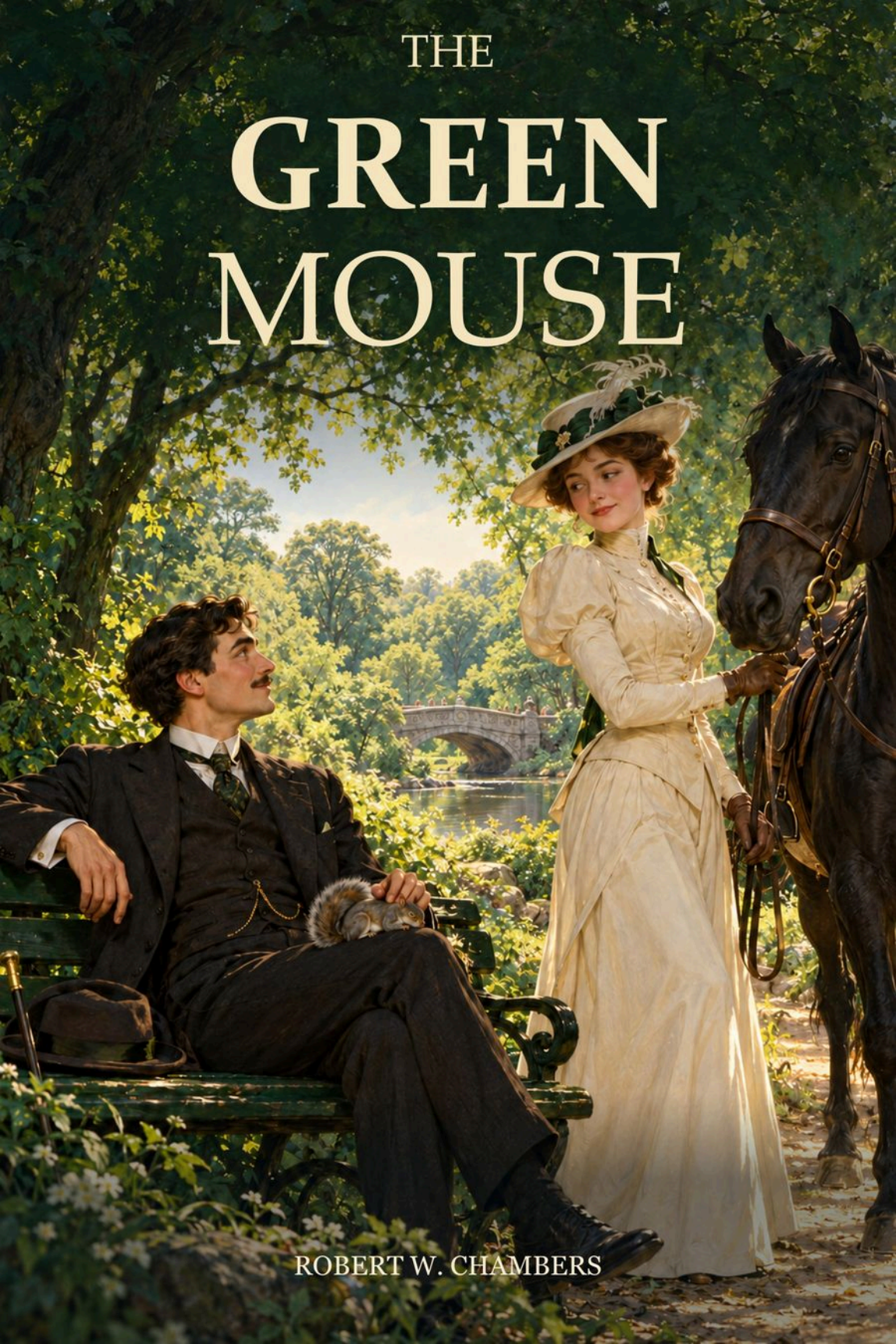
THE GREEN MOUSE



ROBERT W. CHAMBERS

The Green Mouse

Robert W. Chambers

THE AUTHOR



Robert W. Chambers

1865 - 1933

AI-created interpretation after Photograph in Little Pilgrimages, 1903, p. 97.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Robert W. Chambers

Robert William Chambers was an American artist and writer whose fiction ranged across romance, historical adventure and supernatural horror. Born in 1865, he became a prolific novelist, producing a large body of work for a popular readership. Today his name is most closely associated with *The King in Yellow*, published in 1895.

That collection brings together stories of differing kinds. Its opening tales revolve around a disturbing fictional play, also called *The King in Yellow*. The play is never presented in full; fragments and references allow its influence to spread through the stories without entirely explaining it.

Chambers uses uncertainty to unsettling effect. A work of art, an unfamiliar sign or an apparently ordinary encounter may begin to undermine a character's sense of reality. The reader must weigh what is observed against what may be imagined, feared or misunderstood. His background as an artist also makes the lives of painters a recurring subject.

Although later readers have especially valued his early fantastic fiction, it represents only part of his career. Historical and romantic novels occupied much of his output. The contrast helps explain his range: atmospheric strangeness and popular storytelling developed within the same working life. He died in 1933.

Biographical references: The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction; Wikipedia. Portrait source: Photograph in Little Pilgrimages, 1903, p. 97. Full source records retained in the edition archive.

TO

MY FRIEND

JOHN CORBIN

Folly and Wisdom, Heavenly twins,
Sons of the god Imagination,
Heirs of the Virtues--which were Sins
Till Transcendental Contemplation
Transmogrified their outer skins--
Friend, do you follow me? For I
Have lost myself, I don't know why.
    Resuming, then, this erudite
And decorative Dedication,--
Accept it, John, with all your might
In Cinquecentic resignation.
You may not understand it, quite,
But if you've followed me all through,
You've done far more than I could do.

PREFACE

To the literary, literal, and scientific mind purposeless fiction is abhorrent. Fortunately we all are literally and scientifically inclined; the doom of purposeless fiction is sounded; and it is a great comfort to believe that, in the near future, only literary and scientific works suitable for man, woman, child, and suffragette, are to adorn the lingerie-laden counters in our great department shops.

It is, then, with animation and confidence that the author politely offers to a regenerated nation this modern, moral, literary, and highly scientific work, thinly but ineffectually disguised as fiction, in deference to the prejudices of a few old-fashioned story-readers who still survive among us.

R. W. C.

I

AN IDYL OF THE IDYL

In Which a Young Man Arrives at His Last Ditch and a Young Girl Jumps Over It

Utterly unequipped for anything except to ornament his environment, the crash in Steel stunned him. Dazed but polite, he remained a passive observer of the sale which followed and which apparently realized sufficient to satisfy every creditor, but not enough for an income to continue a harmlessly idle career which he had supposed was to continue indefinitely.

He had never earned a penny; he had not the vaguest idea of how people made money. To do something, however, was absolutely necessary.

He wasted some time in finding out just how much aid he might expect from his late father's friends, but when he understood the attitude of society toward a knocked-out gentleman he wisely ceased to annoy society, and turned to the business world.

Here he wasted some more time. Perhaps the time was not absolutely wasted, for during that period he learned that he could use nobody who could not use him; and as he appeared to be perfectly useless, except for ornament, and as a business house is not a kindergarten, and furthermore, as he had neither time nor money to attend any school where anybody could teach him anything, it occurred to him to take a day off for minute and thorough self-examination concerning his qualifications and even his right to occupy a few feet of space upon the earth's surface.

Four years at Harvard, two more in postgraduate courses, two more in Europe to perfect himself in electrical engineering, and a year at home attempting to invent a wireless apparatus for intercepting and transmitting psychical waves had left him pitifully unfit for wage earning.

There remained his accomplishments; but the market was overstocked with assorted time-killers.

His last asset was a trivial though unusual talent--a natural manual dexterity cultivated since childhood to amuse himself--something he never took seriously. This, and a curious control over animals, had, as the pleasant years flowed by, become an astonishing skill which was much more than sleight of hand; and he, always as good-humored as well-bred, had never refused to amuse the frivolous, of which he was also one, by picking silver dollars out of space and causing the proper card to fall fluttering from the ceiling.

Day by day, as the little money left him melted away, he continued his vigorous mental examination, until the alarming shrinkage in his funds left him staring fixedly at his last asset. Could he use it? Was it an asset, after all? How clever was he? Could he face an audience and perform the usual magician tricks without bungling? A slip by a careless, laughing, fashionable young amateur amusing his social equals at a house party is excusable; a bungle by a hired professional meant an end to hope in that direction.

So he rented a suite of two rooms on Central Park West, furnished them with what remained from better days, bought the necessary paraphernalia of his profession, and immured himself for practice before entering upon his contemplated invasion of Newport, Lenox, and Bar Harbor. And one very lovely afternoon in May, when the Park from his windows looked like a green forest, and puff on puff of perfumed air fluttered the curtains at his opened windows, he picked up his gloves and stick, put on his hat, and went out to walk in the Park; and when he had walked sufficiently he sat down on a bench in a flowery, bushy nook on the edge of a bridle path.

Few people disturbed the leafy privacy; a policeman sauntering southward noted him, perhaps for future identification. The spectacle of a well-built, well-groomed, and fashionable young man sitting moodily upon a park bench was certainly to be noted. It is not the fashion for fashionable people to sit on park benches unless they contemplate self, as well as social, destruction.

So the policeman lingered for a while in the vicinity, but not hearing any revolver shot, presently sauntered on, buck-skinned fist clasped behind his broad back, squinting at a distant social gathering composed entirely of the most exclusive nursemaids.

The young man looked up into the pleasant blue above, then his preoccupied gaze wandered from woodland to thicket, where the scarlet glow of Japanese quince mocked the colors of the fluttering scarlet tanagers; where orange-tinted orioles flashed amid tangles of golden Forsythia; and past the shrubbery to an azure corner of water, shimmering under the wooded slope below.

That sense of languor and unrest, of despondency threaded by hope which fair skies and sunshine and new leaves bring with the young year to the young, he felt. Yet there was no bitterness in his brooding, for he was a singularly generous young man, and there was no vindictiveness mixed with the memories of his failures among those whose cordial respect for his father had been balanced between that blameless gentleman's wealth and position.

A gray squirrel came crawling and nosing through the fresh grass; he caught its eyes, and, though the little animal was plainly bound elsewhere on important business, the young man soon had it curled up on his knee, asleep.

For a while he amused himself by using his curious power, alternately waking the squirrel and allowing it to bound off, tail twitching, and then calling it back, slowly but inexorably to climb his trousers and curl up on his knee and sleep an uncanny and deep sleep which might end only at the young man's pleasure.

He, too, began to feel the subtle stillness of the drowsing woodland; musing there, caressing his short, crisp mustache, he watched the purple grackle walking about in iridescent solitude, the sun spots waning and glowing on the grass; he heard the soft, garrulous whimper of waterfowl along the water's edge, the stir of leaves above.

He thought of various personal matters: his poverty, the low ebb of his balance at the bank, his present profession, his approaching début as an entertainer, the chances of his failure. He thought, too, of the astounding change in his life, the future, vacant of promise, devoid of meaning, a future so utterly new and blank that he could find in it nothing to speculate upon. He thought also, and perfectly impersonally, of a girl whom he had met now and then upon the stairs of the apartment house which he now inhabited.

Evidently there had been an ebb in her prosperity; the tumble of a New Yorker's fortune leads from the Avenue to the Eighties, from thence through Morristown, Staten Island, to the West Side. Besides, she painted pictures; he knew the aroma of fixitive, siccative, and burnt sienna; and her studio adjoined his sky drawing-room.

He thought of this girl quite impersonally; she resembled a youthful beauty he had known--might still know if he chose; for a man who can pay for his evening clothes need never deny himself the society he was bred to.

She certainly did resemble that girl--she had the same bluish violet eyes, the same white and deeply fringed lids, the same free grace of carriage, a trifle too boyish at times--the same firmly rounded, yet slender, figure.

"Now, as a matter of fact," he mused aloud, stroking the sleeping squirrel on his knee, "I could have fallen in love with either of those girls--before Copper blew up."

Pursuing his innocuous meditation he nodded to himself: "I rather like the poor one better than any girl I ever saw. Doubtless she paints portraits over solar prints. That's all right; she's doing more than I have done yet.... I approve of those eyes of hers; they're like the eyes of that waking Aphrodite in the Luxembourg. If she would only just look at me once instead of looking through me when we pass one another in the hall----"

The deadened gallop of a horse on the bridle path caught his ear. The horse was coming fast--almost too fast. He laid the sleeping squirrel on the bench, listened, then instinctively stood up and walked to the thicket's edge.

What happened was too quick for him to comprehend; he had a vision of a big black horse, mane and tail in the wind, tearing madly, straight at him--a glimpse of a white face, desperate and set, a flutter of loosened hair; then a storm of wind and sand roared in his ears; he was hurled, jerked, and flung forward, dragged, shaken, and left half senseless, hanging to nose and bit of a horse whose rider was picking herself out of a bush covered with white flowers.

Half senseless still, he tightened his grip on the bit, released the grasp on the creature's nose, and, laying his hand full on the

forelock, brought it down twice and twice across the eyes, talking to the horse in halting, broken whispers.

When he had the trembling animal under control he looked around; the girl stood on the grass, dusty, dirty, disheveled, bleeding from a cut on the cheek bone; the most bewildered and astonished creature he had ever looked upon.

"It will be all right in a few minutes," he said, motioning her to the bench on the asphalt walk. She nodded, turned, picked up his hat, and, seating herself, began to smooth the furred nap with her sleeve, watching him intently all the while. That he already had the confidence of a horse that he had never before seen was perfectly apparent. Little by little the sweating, quivering limbs were stilled, the tense muscles in the neck relaxed, the head sank, dusty velvet lips nibbled at his hand, his shoulder; the heaving, sunken flanks filled and grew quiet.

Bareheaded, his attire in disorder and covered with slaver and sand, the young man laid the bridle on the horse's neck, held out his hand, and, saying "Come," turned his back and walked down the bridle path. The horse stretched a sweating neck, sniffed, pricked forward both small ears, and slowly followed, turning as the man turned, up and down, crowding at heel like a trained dog, finally stopping on the edge of the walk.

The young man looped the bridle over a low maple limb, and leaving the horse standing sauntered over to the bench.

"That horse," he said pleasantly, "is all right now; but the question is, are you all right?"

She rose, handing him his hat, and began to twist up her bright hair. For a few moments' silence they were frankly occupied in restoring order to raiment, dusting off gravel and examining rents.

"I'm tremendously grateful," she said abruptly.

"I am, too," he said in that attractive manner which sets people of similar caste at ease with one another.

"Thank you; it's a generous compliment, considering your hat and clothing."

He looked up; she stood twisting her hair and doing her best with the few remaining hair pegs.

"I'm a sight for little fishes," she said, coloring. "Did that wretched beast bruise you?"

"Oh, no----"

"You limped!"

"Did I?" he said vaguely. "How do you feel?"

"There is," she said, "a curious, breathless flutter all over me; if that is fright, I suppose I'm frightened, but I don't mind mounting at once-- if you would put me up----"

"Better wait a bit," he said; "it would not do to have that horse feel a fluttering pulse, telegraphing along the snaffle. Tell me, are you spurred?"

She lifted the hem of her habit; two small spurs glittered on her polished boot heels.

"That's it, you see," he observed; "you probably have not ridden cross saddle very long. When your mount swerved you spurred, and he bolted, bit in teeth."

"That's exactly it," she admitted, looking ruefully at her spurs. Then she dropped her skirt, glanced interrogatively at him, and, obeying his grave gesture, seated herself again upon the bench.

"Don't stand," she said civilly. He took the other end of the seat, lifting the still slumbering squirrel to his knee.

"I--I haven't said very much," she began; "I'm impulsive enough to be overgrateful and say too much. I hope you understand me; do you?"

"Of course; you're very good. It was nothing; you could have stopped your horse yourself. People do that sort of thing for one another as a matter of course."

"But not at the risk you took----"

"No risk at all," he said hastily.

She thought otherwise, and thought it so fervently that, afraid of emotion, she turned her cold, white profile to him and studied her horse, haughty lids adroop. The same insolent sweetness was in her eyes when they again reverted to him. He knew the look; he had encountered it often enough in the hallway and on the stairs. He knew, too, that she must recognize him; yet, under the circumstances, it was for her to speak first; and she did not, for she

was at that age when horror of overdoing anything chokes back the scarcely extinguished childish instinct to say too much. In other words, she was eighteen and had had her first season the winter past--the winter when he had not been visible among the gatherings of his own kind.

"Those squirrels are very tame," she observed calmly.

"Not always," he said. "Try to hold this one, for example."

She raised her pretty eyebrows, then accepted the lump of fluffy fur from his hands. Instantly an electric shock seemed to set the squirrel frantic, there was a struggle, a streak of gray and white, and the squirrel leaped from her lap and fairly flew down the asphalt path.

"Gracious!" she exclaimed faintly; "what was the matter?"

"Some squirrels are very wild," he said innocently.

"I know--but you held him--he was asleep on your knee. Why didn't he stay with me?"

"Oh, perhaps because I have a way with animals."

"With horses, too," she added gayly. And the smile breaking from her violet eyes silenced him in the magic of a beauty he had never dreamed of. At first she mistook his silence for modesty; then--because even as young a maid as she is quick to divine and fine of instinct--she too fell silent and serious, the while the shuttles of her reason flew like lightning, weaving the picture of him she had conceived--a gentleman, a man of her own sort, rather splendid and wise and bewildering. The portrait completed, there was no room for the hint of presumption she had half sensed in the brown eyes' glance that had set her alert; and she looked up at him again, frankly, a trifle curiously.

"I am going to thank you once more," she said, "and ask you to put me up. There is not a flutter of fear in my pulse now."

"Are you quite sure?"

"Perfectly."

They arose; he untied the horse and beckoned it to the walk's edge.

"I forgot," she said, laughing, "that I am riding cross saddle. I can mount without troubling you--" She set her toe to the stirrup which

he held, and swung herself up into the saddle with a breezy "Thanks, awfully," and sat there gathering her bridle.

Had she said enough? How coldly her own thanks rang in her ears--for perhaps he had saved her neck--and perhaps not. Busy with curb and snaffle reins, head bent, into her oval face a tint of color crept. Did he think she treated lightly, flippantly, the courage which became him so? Or was he already bored by her acknowledgment of it? Sensitive, dreading to expose youth and inexperience to the amused smile of this attractive young man of the world, she sat fumbling with her bridle, conscious that he stood beside her, hat in hand, looking up at her. She could delay no longer; the bridle had been shifted and reshifted to the last second of procrastination. She must say something or go.

Meeting his eyes, she smiled and leaned a little forward in her saddle as though to speak, but his brown eyes troubled her, and all she could say was "Thank you--good-by," and galloped off down the vista through dim, leafy depths heavy with the incense of lilac and syringa.

II

THE IDLER

Concerning the Young Man in the Ditch and His Attempts to Get Out of It

Although he was not vindictive, he did not care to owe anything to anybody who might be inclined to give him a hearing on account of former obligations or his social position. Everybody knew he had gone to smash; everybody, he very soon discovered, was naturally afraid of being bothered by him. The dread of the overfed that an underfed member of the community may request a seat at the table he now understood perfectly. He was learning.

So he solicited aid from nobody whom he had known in former days; neither from those who had aided him when he needed no aid, nor those who owed their comfortable position to the generosity of his father--a gentleman notorious for making fortunes for his friends.

Therefore he wrote to strangers on a purely business basis--to amazing types lately emerged from the submerged, bulging with coal money, steel money, copper money, wheat money, stockyard money--types that galloped for Fifth Avenue to build town houses; that shook their long cars and frisked into the country and built "cottages." And this was how he put it:

"*Madam:* In case you desire to entertain guests with the professional services of a magician it would give me pleasure to place my very unusual accomplishments at your disposal."

And signed his name.

It was a dreadful drain on his bank account to send several thousand engraved cards about town and fashionable resorts. No replies came. Day after day, exhausted with the practice drill of his profession, he walked to the Park and took his seat on the bench by the bridle path. Sometimes he saw her cantering past; she always acknowledged his salute, but never drew bridle. At times, too, he passed her in the hall; her colorless "Good morning" never varied except when she said "Good evening." And all this time he never inquired her name from the hall servant; he was that sort of

man--decent through instinct; for even breeding sometimes permits sentiment to snoop.

For a week he had been airily dispensing with more than one meal a day; to keep clothing and boots immaculate required a sacrifice of breakfast and luncheon--besides, he had various small pensioners to feed, white rabbits with foolish pink eyes, canary birds, cats, albino mice, goldfish, and other collaborateurs in his profession. He was obliged to bribe the janitor, too, because the laws of the house permitted neither animals nor babies within its precincts. This extra honorarium deprived him of tobacco, and he became a pessimist.

Besides, doubts as to his own ability arose within him; it was all very well to practice his magic there alone, but he had not yet tried it on anybody except the janitor; and when he had begun by discovering several red-eyed rabbits in the janitor's pockets that intemperate functionary fled with a despondent yell that brought a policeman to the area gate with a threat to pull the place.

At length, however, a letter came engaging him for one evening. He was quite incredulous at first, then modestly scared, perplexed, exultant and depressed by turns. Here was an opening--the first. And because it was the first its success or failure meant future engagements or consignments to the street, perhaps as a white-wing. There must be no faltering now, no bungling, no mistakes, no amateurish hesitation. It is the empty-headed who most strenuously demand intelligence in others. One yawn from such an audience meant his professional damnation--he knew that; every second must break like froth in a wine glass; an instant's perplexity, a slackening of the tension, and those flaccid intellects would relax into native inertia. Incapable of self-amusement, depending utterly upon superior minds for a respite from ennui, their caprice controlled his fate; and he knew it.

Sitting there by the sunny window with a pair of magnificent white Persian cats purring on either knee, he read and reread the letter summoning him on the morrow to Seabright. He knew who his hostess was--a large lady lately emerged from a corner in lard, dragging with her some assorted relatives of atrophied intellects and a husband whose only mental pleasure depended upon the speed attained by his racing car--the most exacting audience he could dare to confront.

Like the White Knight he had had plenty of practice, but he feared that warrior's fate; and as he sat there he picked up a bunch of silver hoops, tossed them up separately so that they descended linked in a glittering chain, looped them and unlooped them, and, tiring, thoughtfully tossed them toward the ceiling again, where they vanished one by one in mid-air.

The cats purred; he picked up one, molded her carefully in his handsome hands; and presently, under the agreeable massage, her purring increased while she dwindled and dwindled to the size of a small, fluffy kitten, then vanished entirely, leaving in his hand a tiny white mouse. This mouse he tossed into the air, where it became no mouse at all but a white butterfly that fluttered 'round and 'round, alighting at last on the window curtain and hung there, opening and closing its snowy wings.

"That's all very well," he reflected, gloomily, as, at a pass of his hand, the air was filled with canary birds; "that's all very well, but suppose I should slip up? What I need is to rehearse to somebody before I face two or three hundred people."

He thought he heard a knocking on his door, and listened a moment. But as there was an electric bell there he concluded he had been mistaken; and picking up the other white cat, he began a gentle massage that stimulated her purring, apparently at the expense of her color and size, for in a few moments she also dwindled until she became a very small, coal-black kitten, changing in a twinkling to a blackbird, when he cast her carelessly toward the ceiling. It was well done; in all India no magician could have done it more cleverly, more casually.

Leaning forward in his chair he reproduced the two white cats from behind him, put the kittens back in their box, caught the blackbird and caged it, and was carefully winding up the hairspring in the white butterfly, when again he fancied that somebody was knocking.

III

THE GREEN MOUSE

Showing the Value of a Helping Hand When It Is White and Slender

This time he went leisurely to the door and opened it; a girl stood there, saying, "I beg your pardon for disturbing you--" It was high time she admitted it, for her eyes had been disturbing him day and night since the first time he passed her in the hall.

She appeared to be a trifle frightened, too, and, scarcely waiting for his invitation, she stepped inside with a hurried glance behind her, and walked to the center of the room holding her skirts carefully as though stepping through wet grass.

"I--I am annoyed," she said in a voice not perfectly under command. "If you please, would you tell me whether there is such a thing as a pea-green mouse?"

Then he did a mean thing; he could have cleared up that matter with a word, a smile, and--he didn't.

"A green mouse?" he repeated gently, almost pitifully.

She nodded, then paled; he drew a big chair toward her, for her knees trembled a little; and she sat down with an appealing glance that ought to have made him ashamed of himself.

"What has frightened you?" inquired that meanest of men.

"I was in my studio--and I must first explain to you that for weeks and weeks I--I have imagined I heard sounds--" She looked carefully around her; nothing animate was visible. "Sounds," she repeated, swallowing a little lump in her white throat, "like the faint squealing and squeaking and sniffing and scratching of--of live things. I asked the janitor, and he said the house was not very well built and that the beams and wainscoting were shrinking."

"Did he say that?" inquired the young man, thinking of the bribes.

"Yes, and I tried to believe him. And one day I thought I heard about one hundred canaries singing, and I know I did, but that idiot janitor said they were the sparrows under the eaves. Then one day when your door was open, and I was coming up the stairway, and it was dark in the entry, something big and soft flopped across the

carpet, and--it being exceedingly common to scream--I didn't, but managed to get past it, and"-- her violet eyes widened with horror--"do you know what that soft, floppy thing was? It was an owl!"

He was aware of it; he had managed to secure the escaped bird before her electric summons could arouse the janitor.

"I called the janitor," she said, "and he came and we searched the entry; but there was no owl."

He appeared to be greatly impressed; she recognized the sympathy in his brown eyes.

"That wretched janitor declared I had seen a cat," she resumed; "and I could not persuade him otherwise. For a week I scarcely dared set foot on the stairs, but I had to--you see, I live at home and only come to my studio to paint."

"I thought you lived here," he said, surprised.

"Oh, no. I have my studio--" she hesitated, then smiled. "Everybody makes fun of me, and I suppose they'll laugh me out of it, but I detest conventions, and I did hope I had talent for something besides frivolity."

Her gaze wandered around his room; then suddenly the possible significance of her unconventional situation brought her to her feet, serious but self-possessed.

"I beg your pardon again," she said, "but I was really driven out of my studio--quite frightened, I confess."

"What drove you out?" he asked guiltily.

"Something--you can scarcely credit it--and I dare not tell the janitor for fear he will think me--queer." She raised her distressed and lovely eyes again: "Oh, please believe that I *did* see a bright green mouse!"

"I do believe it," he said, wincing.

"Thank you. I--I know perfectly well how it sounds--and I know that horrid people see things like that, but"--she spoke piteously--"I had only one glass of claret at luncheon, and I am perfectly healthy in body and mind. How could I see such a thing if it was not there?"

"It was there," he declared.

"Do you really think so? A green--bright green mouse?"

"Haven't a doubt of it," he assured her; "saw one myself the other day."

"Where?"

"On the floor--" he made a vague gesture. "There's probably a crack between your studio and my wall, and the little rascal crept into your place."

She stood looking at him uncertainly: "Are there really such things as green mice?"

"Well," he explained, "I fancy this one was originally white. Somebody probably dyed it green."

"But who on earth would be silly enough to do such a thing?"

His ears grew red--he felt them doing it.

After a moment she said: "I am glad you told me that you, too, saw this unspeakable mouse. I have decided to write to the owners of the house and request an immediate investigation. Would--would it be too much to ask you to write also?"

"Are you--you going to write?" he asked, appalled.

"Certainly. Either some dreadful creature here keeps a bird store and brings home things that escape, or the house is infested. I don't care what the janitor says; I did hear squeals and whines and whimpers!"

"Suppose--suppose we wait," he began lamely; but at that moment her blue eyes widened; she caught him convulsively by the arm, pointing, one snowy finger outstretched.

"Oh-h!" she said hysterically, and the next instant was standing upon a chair, pale as a ghost. It was a wonder she had not mounted the dresser, too, for there, issuing in creepy single file from the wainscoting, came mice--mice of various tints. A red one led the grewsome rank, a black and white one came next, then in decorous procession followed the guilty green one, a yellow one, a blue one, and finally--horror of horrors!--a red-white-and-blue mouse, carrying a tiny American flag.

He turned a miserable face toward her; she, eyes dilated, frozen to a statue, saw him advance, hold out a white wand--saw the uncanny procession of mice mount the stick and form into a row, tails hanging down--saw him carry the creatures to a box and dump them in.

He was trying to speak now. She heard him stammer something about the escape of the mice; she heard him asking her pardon. Dazed, she laid her hand in his as he aided her to descend to the floor; nerveless, speechless, she sank into the big chair, horror still dilating her eyes.

"It's all up with me," he said slowly, "if you write to the owners. I've bribed the janitor to say nothing. I'm dreadfully mortified that these things have happened to annoy you."

The color came back into her face; amazement dominated her anger. "But why--why do you keep such creatures?"

"Why shouldn't I?" he asked. "It is my profession." "Your--what?"

"My profession," he repeated doggedly.

"Oh," she said, revolted, "that is not true! You are a gentleman--I know who you are perfectly well!"

"Who am I?"

She called him by name, almost angrily.

"Well," he said sullenly, "what of it? If you have investigated my record you must know I am as poor as these miserable mice."

"I--I know it. But you are a gentleman----"

"I am a mountebank," he said; "I mean a mountebank in its original interpretation. There's neither sense nor necessity for me to deny it."

"I--I don't understand you," she whispered, shocked.

"Why, I do monkey tricks to entertain people," he replied, forcing a laugh, "or rather, I hope to do a few--and be paid for them. I fancy every man finds his own level; I've found mine, apparently."

Her face was inscrutable; she lay back in the great chair, watching him.

"I have a little money left," he said; "enough to last a day or two. Then I am to be paid for entertaining some people at Seabright; and," he added with that very attractive smile of his from which all bitterness had departed, "and that will be the first money I ever earned in all my life."

She was young enough to be fascinated, child enough to feel the little lump in her throat rising. She knew he was poor; her sisters had told her that; but she had supposed it to be only comparative

poverty--just as her cousins, for instance, had scarcely enough to keep more than two horses in town and only one motor. But want--actual need--she had never dreamed of in his case--she could scarcely understand it even now--he was so well groomed, so attractive, fairly radiating good breeding and the easy financial atmosphere she was accustomed to.

"So you see," he continued gayly, "if you complain to the owners about green mice, why, I shall have to leave, and, as a matter of fact, I haven't enough money to go anywhere except--" he laughed.

"Where?" she managed to say.

"The Park. I was joking, of course," he hastened to add, for she had turned rather white.

"No," she said, "you were not joking." And as he made no reply: "Of course, I shall not write--now. I had rather my studio were overrun with multicolored mice--" She stopped with something almost like a sob. He smiled, thinking she was laughing.

But oh, the blow for her! In her youthful enthusiasm she had always, from the first time they had encountered one another, been sensitively aware of this tall, clean-cut, attractive young fellow. And by and by she learned his name and asked her sisters about him, and when she heard of his recent ruin and withdrawal from the gatherings of his kind her youth flushed to its romantic roots, warming all within her toward this splendid and radiant young man who lived so nobly, so proudly aloof. And then--miracle of Manhattan!--he had proved his courage before her dazed eyes--rising suddenly out of the very earth to save her from a fate which her eager desire painted blacker every time she embellished the incident. And she decorated the memory of it every day.

And now! Here, beside her, was this prince among men, her champion, beaten to his ornamental knees by Fate, and contemplating a miserable, uncertain career to keep his godlike body from actual starvation. And she--she with more money than even she knew what to do with, powerless to aid him, prevented from flinging open her check book and bidding him to write and write till he could write no more.

A memory--a thought crept in. Where had she heard his name connected with her father's name? In Ophir Steel? Certainly; and

was it not this young man's father who had laid the foundation for her father's fortune? She had heard some such thing, somewhere.

He said: "I had no idea of boring anybody--you least of all--with my woes. Indeed, I haven't any sorrows now, because to-day I received my first encouragement; and no doubt I'll be a huge success. Only--I thought it best to make it clear why it would do me considerable damage just now if you should write."

"Tell me," she said tremulously, "is there anything--anything I can do to--to balance the deep debt of gratitude I owe you----"

"What debt?" he asked, astonished. "Oh! that? Why, that is no debt-- except that I was happy--perfectly and serenely happy to have had that chance to--to hear your voice----"

"You were brave," she said hastily. "You may make as light of it as you please, but I know."

"So do I," he laughed, enchanted with the rising color in her cheeks.

"No, you don't; you don't know how I felt--how afraid I was to show how deeply--deeply I felt. I felt it so deeply that I did not even tell my sisters," she added naively.

"Your sisters?"

"Yes; you know them." And as he remained silent she said: "Do you not know who I am? Do you not even know my name?"

He shook his head, laughing.

"I'd have given all I had to know; but, of course, I could not ask the servants!"

Surprise, disappointment, hurt pride that he had had no desire to know gave quick place to a comprehension that set a little thrill tingling her from head to foot. His restraint was the nicest homage ever rendered her; she saw that instantly; and the straight look she gave him out of her clear eyes took his breath away for a second.

"Do you remember Sacharissa?" she asked.

"I do--certainly! I always thought----"

"What?" she said, smiling.

He muttered something about eyes and white skin and a trick of the heavy lids.

She was perfectly at ease now; she leaned back in her chair, studying him calmly.

"Suppose," she said, "people could see me here now."

"It would end your artistic career," he replied, laughing; "and fancy! I took you for the sort that painted for a bare existence!"

"And I--I took you for----"

"Something very different than what I am."

"In one way--not in others."

"Oh! I look the mountebank?"

"I shall not explain what I mean," she said with heightened color, and rose from her chair. "As there are no more green mice to peep out at me from behind my easel," she added, "I can have no excuse from abandoning art any longer. Can I?"

The trailing sweetness of the inquiry was scarcely a challenge, yet he dared take it up.

"You asked me," he said, "whether you could do anything for me."

"Can I?" she exclaimed.

"Yes."

"I will--I am glad--tell me what to do?"

"Why, it's only this. I've got to go before an audience of two hundred people and do things. I've had practice here by myself, but--but if you don't mind I should like to try it before somebody--you. Do you mind?"

She stood there, slim, blue-eyed, reflecting; then innocently: "If I've compromised myself the damage was done long ago, wasn't it? They're going to take away my studio anyhow, so I might as well have as much pleasure as I can."

And she sat down, gracefully, linking her white fingers over her knees.

IV

AN IDEAL IDOL

A Chapter Devoted to the Proposition that All Mankind Are Born of Woman

He began by suddenly filling the air with canary birds; they flew and chirped and fluttered about her head, until, bewildered, she shrank back, almost frightened at the golden hurricane.

To reassure her he began doing incredible things with the big silver hoops, forming chains and linked figures under her amazed eyes, although each hoop seemed solid and without a break in its polished circumference. Then, one by one, he tossed the rings up and they vanished in mid-air before her very eyes.

"How did you do that?" she cried, enchanted.

He laughed and produced the big, white Persian cats, changed them into kittens, then into birds and butterflies, and finally into a bowl full of big, staring goldfish. Then he picked up a ladle, dipped out the fish, carefully fried them over an electric lamp, dumped them from the smoking frying pan back into the water, where they quietly swam off again, goggling their eyes in astonishment.

"That," said the girl, excitedly, "is miraculous!"

"Isn't it?" he said, delighted as a boy at her praise. "What card will you choose?"

And he handed her a pack.

"The ace of hearts, if you please."

"Draw it from the pack."

"Any card?" she inquired. "Oh! how on earth did you make me draw the ace of hearts?"

"Hold it tightly," he warned her.

She clutched it in her pretty fingers.

"Are you sure you hold it?" he asked.

"Perfectly."

"Look!"

She looked and found that it was the queen of diamonds she held so tightly; but, looking again to reassure herself, she was astonished to find that the card was the jack of clubs. "Tear it up," he said. She tore it into small pieces.

"Throw them into the air!"

She obeyed, and almost cried out to see them take fire in mid-air and float away in ashy flakes.

Face flushed, eyes brilliant, she turned to him, hanging on his every movement, every expression.

Before her rapt eyes the multicolored mice danced jigs on slack wires, then were carefully rolled up into little balls of paper which immediately began to swell until each was as big as a football. These burst open, and out of each football of white paper came kittens, turtles, snakes, chickens, ducks, and finally two white rabbits with silly pink eyes that began gravely waltzing round and round the room.

"Please stand up and shake your skirts," he said.

She rose hastily and obeyed; a rain of silver coins fell, then gold, then banknotes, littering the floor. Then precious stones began to drop about her; she shook them from her hair, her collar, her neck; she clenched her hands in nervous amazement, but inside each tight little fist she felt something, and opening her fingers she fairly showered the floor with diamonds.

"Can't you save one for me?" he asked. "I really need it." But when again she looked for the glittering heap at her feet, it was gone; and, search as she might, not one coin, not one gem remained.

Glancing up in dismay she found herself in a perfect storm of white butterflies--no, they were red--no, green!

"Is there anything in this world you desire?" he asked her.

"A--a glass of water----"

She was already holding it in her hands, and she cried out in amazement, spilling the brimming glass; but no water fell, only a rain of little crimson flames.

"I can't--can't drink this--can I?" she faltered.

"With perfect safety," he smiled, and she tasted it.

"Taste it again," he said.

She tried it; it was lemonade.

"Again."

It was ginger ale.

"Once more."

She stared at the glass, frothing with ice-cream soda; there was a long silver spoon in it, too.

Enchanted, she lay back, savoring her ice, shyly watching him.

He went on gayly doing uncanny or charming things; her eyes were tired, dazzled, but not too weary to watch him, though she scarcely followed the marvelous objects that appeared and vanished and glittered and flamed under his ceaselessly busy hands.

She did notice with a shudder the appearance of an owl that sat for a while on his shoulder and then turned into a big fur muff which was all right as long as he held it, but walked away on four legs when he tossed it to the floor.

A shower of brilliant things followed like shooting stars; two or three rose trees grew, budded, and bloomed before her eyes; and he laid the fresh, sweet blossoms in her hands. They turned to violets later, but that did not matter; nothing mattered any longer as long as she could lie there and gaze at him--the most splendid man her maiden eyes had ever unclosed upon.

About two thousand yards of brilliant ribbons suddenly fell from the ceiling; she looked at him with something perilously close to a sigh. Out of an old hat he produced a cage full of parrots; every parrot repeated her first name decorously, monotonously, until packed back into the hat and stuffed into a box which was then set on fire.

Her heart was pretty full now; for she was only eighteen and she had been considering his poverty. So when in due time the box burned out and from the black and charred *débris* the parrots stepped triumphantly forth, gravely repeating her name in unison; and when she saw that the entertainment was at an end, she rose, setting her ice-cream soda upon a table, and, although the glass instantly changed into a teapot, she walked straight up to him and held out her hand.

"I've had a perfectly lovely time," she said. "And I want to say to you that I have been thinking of several things, and one is that it is perfectly ridiculous for you to be poor."

"It is rather ridiculous," he admitted, surprised. "Isn't it! And no need of it at all. Your father made a fortune for my father. All you have to do is to let my father make a fortune for you."

"Is that all?" he asked, laughing.

"Of course. Why did you not tell him so? Have you seen him?"

"No," he said gravely.

"Why not?"

"I saw others--I did not care to try--any more--friends."

"Will you--now?"

He shook his head.

"Then I will."

"Please don't," he said quietly. Her hand still lay in his; she looked up at him; her eyes were starry bright and a little moist.

"I simply can't stand this," she said, steadying her voice.

"What?"

"Your--your distress--" She choked; her sensitive mouth trembled.

"Good Heavens!" he breathed; "do you care!"

"Care--care," she stammered. "You saved my life with a laugh! You face st-starvation with a laugh! Your father made mine! Care? Yes, I care!"

But she had bent her head; a bright tear fell, spangling his polished shoes; the pulsating seconds passed; he laid his other hand above both of hers which he held, and stood silent, stunned, scarcely daring to understand.

Nor was it here he could understand or even hope--his instinct held him stupid and silent. Presently he released her hands.

She said "Good-by" calmly enough; he followed her to the door and opened it, watching her pass through the hall to her own door. And there she paused and looked back; and he found himself beside her again.

"Only," she began, "only don't do all those beautiful magic things for any--anybody else--will you? I wish to have--have them all for myself--to share them with no one----"

He held her hands imprisoned again. "I will never do one of those things for anybody but you," he said unsteadily.

"Truly?" Her face caught fire.

"Yes, truly."

"But how--how, then, can you--can----"

"I don't care what happens to me!" he said. To look at him nobody would have thought him young enough to say that sort of thing.

"I care," she said, releasing her hands and stepping back into her studio.

For a moment her lovely, daring face swam before his eyes; then, in the next moment, she was in his arms, crying her eyes out against his shoulder, his lips pressed to her bright hair.

And that was all right in its way, too; madder things have happened in our times; but nothing madder ever happened than a large, bald gentleman who came up the stairs in a series of bounces and planted his legs apart and tightened his pudgy grip upon his malacca walking stick, and confronted them with distended eyes and waistband.

In vigorous but incoherent English he begged to know whether this scene was part of an education in art.

"Papah," she said calmly, "you are just in time. Go into the studio and I'll come in one moment."

Then giving her lover both hands and looking at him with all her soul in her young eyes: "I love you; I'll marry you. And if there's trouble"--she smiled upon her frantic father--"if there is trouble I will follow you about the country exhibiting green mice----"

"What!" thundered her father.

"Green mice," she repeated with an adorable smile at her lover--"unless my father finds a necessity for you in his business--with a view to partnership. And I'm going to let you arrange that together. Good-by."

And she entered her studio, closing the door behind her, leaving the two men confronting one another in the entry.

For one so young she had much wisdom and excellent taste; and listening, she heard her father explode in one lusty Saxon word. He always said it when beaten; it was the beginning of the end, and the

end of the sweetest beginning that ever dawned on earth for a maid since the first sunbeam stole into Eden.

So she sat down on her little camp stool before her easel and picked up a hand glass; and, sitting there, carefully removed all traces of tears from her wet and lovely eyes with the cambric hem of her painting apron.

"Damnation!" repeated Mr. Carr, "am I to understand that the only thing you can do for a living is to go about with a troupe of trained mice?"

"I've invented a machine," observed the young man, modestly. "It ought to be worth millions--if you'd care to finance it."

"The idea is utterly repugnant to me!" shouted her father.

The young man reddened. "If you wouldn't mind examining it--" He drew from his pocket a small, delicately contrived bit of clockwork. "This is the machine----"

"I don't want to see it!"

"You *have* seen it. Do you mind sitting down a moment? Be careful of that kitten! Kindly take this chair. Thank you. Now, if you would be good enough to listen for ten minutes----"

"I don't want to be good enough! Do you hear!"

"Yes, I hear," said young Destyn, patiently. "And as I was going to explain, the earth is circumscribed by wireless currents of electricity----"

"I--dammit, sir----"

"But those are not the only invisible currents that are ceaselessly flowing around our globe!" pursued the young man, calmly. "Do you see this machine?"

"No, I don't!" snarled the other.

"Then--" And, leaning closer, William Augustus Destyn whispered into Bushwyck Carr's fat, red ear.

"What!!!"

"Certainly."

"You can't *prove* it!"

"Watch me."

Ethelinda had dried her eyes. Every few minutes she glanced anxiously at the little French clock over her easel.

"What on earth can they be doing?" she murmured. And when the long hour struck she arose with resolution and knocked at the door.

"Come in," said her father, irritably, "but don't interrupt. William and I are engaged in a very important business transaction."

V

SACHARISSA

Treating of Certain Scientific Events Succeeding the Wedding Journey of William and Ethelinda

Sacharissa took the chair. She knew nothing about parliamentary procedure; neither did her younger, married sister, Ethelinda, nor the recently acquired family brother-in-law, William Augustus Destyn.

"The meeting will come to order," said Sacharissa, and her brother-in-law reluctantly relinquished his new wife's hand--all but one finger.

"Miss Chairman," he began, rising to his feet.

The chair recognized him and bit into a chocolate.

"I move that our society be known as The Green Mouse, Limited."

"Why limited?" asked Sacharissa.

"Why not?" replied her sister, warmly.

"Well, what does your young man mean by limited?"

"I suppose," said Linda, "that he means it is to be the limit. Don't you, William?"

"Certainly," said Destyn, gravely; and the motion was put and carried.

"Rissa, dear!"

The chair casually recognized her younger sister.

"I propose that the object of this society be to make its members very, very wealthy."

The motion was carried; Linda picked up a scrap of paper and began to figure up the possibility of a new touring car.

Then Destyn arose; the chair nodded to him and leaned back, playing a tattoo with her pencil tip against her snowy teeth.

He began in his easy, agreeable voice, looking across at his pretty wife:

"You know, dearest--and Sacharissa, over there, is also aware--that, in the course of my economical experiments in

connection with your father's Wireless Trust, I have accidentally discovered how to utilize certain brand-new currents of an extraordinary character."

Sacharissa's expression became skeptical; Linda watched her husband in unfeigned admiration.

"These new and hitherto unsuspected currents," continued Destyn modestly, "are not electrical but psychical. Yet, like wireless currents, their flow eternally encircles the earth. These currents, I believe, have their origin in that great unknown force which, for lack of a better name, we call fate, or predestination. And I am convinced that by intercepting one of these currents it is possible to connect the subconscious personalities of two people of opposite sex who, although ultimately destined for one another since the beginning of things, have, through successive incarnations, hitherto missed the final consummation-- marriage!--which was the purpose of their creation."

"Bill, dear," sighed Linda, "how exquisitely you explain the infinite."

"Fudge!" said Sacharissa; "go on, William."

"That's all," said Destyn. "We agreed to put in a thousand dollars apiece for me to experiment with. I've perfected the instrument--here it is."

He drew from his waistcoat pocket a small, flat jeweler's case and took out a delicate machine resembling the complicated interior of a watch.

"Now," he said, "with this tiny machine concealed in my waistcoat pocket, I walk up to any man and, by turning a screw like the stem of a watch, open the microscopical receiver. Into the receiver flow all psychical emanations from that unsuspicious citizen. The machine is charged, positively. Then I saunter up to some man, place the instrument on a table--like that--touch a lever. Do you see that hair wire of Rosium uncoil like a tentacle? It is searching, groping for the invisible, negative, psychical current which will carry its message."

"To whom?" asked Sacharissa.

"To the subconscious personality of the only woman for whom he was created, the only woman on earth whose psychic personality is

properly attuned to intercept that wireless greeting and respond to it."

"How can you tell whether she responds?" asked Sacharissa, incredulously. He pointed to the hair wire of Rosium:

"I watch that. The instant that the psychical current reaches and awakens her, crack!--a minute point of blue incandescence tips the tentacle. It's done; psychical communication is established. And that man and that woman, wherever they may be on earth, surely, inexorably, will be drawn together, even from the uttermost corners of the world, to fulfill that for which they were destined since time began."

There was a semirespectful silence; Linda looked at the little jewel-like machine with a slight shudder; Sacharissa shrugged her young shoulders.

"How much of this," said she, "is theory and how much is fact?--for, William, you always were something of a poet."

"I don't know. A month ago I tried it on your father's footman, and in a week he'd married a perfectly strange parlor maid."

"Oh, they do such things, anyway," observed Sacharissa, and added, unconvinced: "Did that tentacle burn blue?"

"It certainly did," said Destyn.

Linda murmured: "I believe in it. Let's issue stock."

"To issue stock is one thing," said Destyn, "to get people to buy it is another. You and I may believe in Green Mouse, Limited, but the rest of the world is always from beyond the Mississippi."

"The thing to do," said Linda, "is to prove your theory by practicing on people. They may not like the idea, but they'll be so grateful, when happily and unexpectedly married, that they'll buy stock."

"Or give us testimonials," added Sacharissa, "that their bliss was entirely due to a single dose of Green Mouse, Limited."

"Don't be flippant," said Linda. "Think what William's invention means to the world! Think of the time it will save young men barking up wrong trees! Think of the trouble saved--no more doubt, no timidity, no hesitation, no speculation, no opposition from parents."

"Any of our clients," added Destyn, "can be instantly switched on to a private psychical current which will clinch the only girl in the world. Engagements will be superfluous; those two simply can't get away from each other."

"If that were true," observed Sacharissa, "it would be most unpleasant. There would be no fun in it. However," she added, smiling, "I don't believe in your theory or your machine, William. It would take more than that combination to make me marry anybody."

"Then we're not going to issue stock?" asked Linda. "I do need so many new and expensive things."

"We've got to experiment a little further, first," said Destyn.

Sacharissa laughed: "You blindfold me, give me a pencil and lay the Social Register before me. Whatever name I mark you are to experiment with."

"Don't mark any of our friends," began Linda.

"How can I tell whom I may choose. It's fair for everybody. Come; do you promise to abide by it--you two?"

They promised doubtfully.

"So do I, then," said Sacharissa. "Hurry up and blindfold me, somebody. The bus will be here in half an hour, and you know how father acts when kept waiting."

Linda tied her eyes with a handkerchief, gave her a pencil and seated herself on an arm of the chair watching the pencil hovering over the pages of the Social Register which her sister was turning at hazard.

"*This* page," announced Sacharissa, "and *this* name!" marking it with a quick stroke.

Linda gave a stifled cry and attempted to arrest the pencil; but the moving finger had written.

"Whom have I selected?" inquired the girl, whisking the handkerchief from her eyes. "What are you having a fit about, Linda?"

And, looking at the page, she saw that she had marked her own name.

"We must try it again," said Destyn, hastily. "That doesn't count. Tie her up, Linda."

"But--that wouldn't be fair," said Sacharissa, hesitating whether to take it seriously or laugh. "We all promised, you know. I ought to abide by what I've done."

"Don't be silly," said Linda, preparing the handkerchief and laying it across her sister's forehead.

Sacharissa pushed it away. "I can't break my word, even to myself," she said, laughing. "I'm not afraid of that machine."

"Do you mean to say you are willing to take silly chances?" asked Linda, uneasily. "I believe in William's machine whether you do or not. And I don't care to have any of the family experimented with."

"If I were willing to try it on others it would be cowardly for me to back out now," said Sacharissa, forcing a smile; for Destyn's and Linda's seriousness was beginning to make her a trifle uncomfortable.

"Unless you want to marry somebody pretty soon you'd better not risk it," said Destyn, gravely.

"You--you don't particularly care to marry anybody, just now, do you, dear?" asked Linda. "No," replied her sister, scornfully.

There was a silence; Sacharissa, uneasy, bit her underlip and sat looking at the uncanny machine.

She was a tall girl, prettily formed, one of those girls with long limbs, narrow, delicate feet and ankles.

That sort of girl, when she also possesses a mass of chestnut hair, a sweet mouth and gray eyes, is calculated to cause trouble.

And there she sat, one knee crossed over the other, slim foot swinging, perplexed brows bent slightly inward.

"I can't see any honorable way out of it," she said resolutely. "I said I'd abide by the blindfolded test."

"When we promised we weren't thinking of ourselves," insisted Ethelinda.

"That doesn't release us," retorted her Puritan sister.

"Why?" demanded Linda. "Suppose, for example, your pencil had marked William's name! That would have been im--immoral!"

"*Would* it?" asked Sacharissa, turning her honest, gray eyes on her brother-in-law.

"I don't believe it would," he said; "I'd only be switched on to Linda's current again." And he smiled at his wife.

Sacharissa sat thoughtful and serious, swinging her foot.

"Well," she said, at length, "I might as well face it at once. If there's anything in this instrument we'll all know it pretty soon. Turn on your receiver, Billy."

"Oh," cried Linda, tearfully, "don't you do it, William!"

"Turn it on," repeated Sacharissa. "I'm not going to be a coward and break faith with myself, and you both know it! If I've got to go through the silliness of love and marriage I might as well know who the bandarlog is to be.... Anyway, I don't really believe in this thing.... I can't believe in it.... Besides, I've a mind and a will of my own, and I fancy it will require more than amateur psychical experiments to change either. Go on, Billy."

"You mean it?" he asked, secretly gratified.

"Certainly," with superb affectation of indifference. And she rose and faced the instrument.

Destyn looked at his wife. He was dying to try it.

"Will!" she exclaimed, "suppose we are not going to like Rissa's possible f--fiance! Suppose father doesn't like him!"

"You'll all probably like him as well as I shall," said her sister defiantly. "Willy, stop making frightened eyes at your wife and start your infernal machine!"

There was a vicious click, a glitter of shifting clockwork, a snap, and it was done.

"Have you now, *theoretically*, got my psychical current bottled up?" she asked disdainfully. But her lip trembled a little.

He nodded, looking very seriously at her.

"And now you are going to switch me on to this unknown gentleman's psychical current?"

"Don't let him!" begged Linda. "Billy, dear, how *can* you when nobody has the faintest idea who the creature may turn out to be!"

"Go ahead!" interrupted her sister, masking misgiving under a careless smile.

Click! Up shot the glittering, quivering tentacle of Rosium, vibrating for a few moments like a thread of silver. Suddenly it was tipped with a blue flash of incandescence.

"Oh, dear! Oh, dear! There he is!" cried Linda, excitedly. "Rissy! Rissy, little sister, *what* have you done?"

"Nothing," she said, catching her breath. "I don't believe that flash means anything. I don't feel a bit different--not the least bit. I feel perfectly well and perfectly calm. I don't love anybody and I'm not going to love anybody--until I want to, and that will probably never happen."

However, she permitted her sister to take her in her arms and pet her. It was rather curious how exceedingly young and inexperienced she felt. She found it agreeable to be fussed over and comforted and cradled, and for a few moments she suffered Linda's solicitude and misgivings in silence. After a while, however, she became ashamed.

"Nothing is going to happen, Linda," she said, looking dreamily up at the ceiling; "don't worry, dear; I shall escape the bandarlog."

"If something doesn't happen," observed Destyn, pocketing his instrument, "the Green Mouse, Limited, will go into liquidation with no liabilities and no assets, and there'll be no billions for you or for me or for anybody."

"William," said his wife, "do you place a low desire for money before your own sister-in-law's spiritual happiness?"

"No, darling, of course not."

"Then you and I had better pray for the immediate bankruptcy of the Green Mouse."

Her husband said, "By all means," without enthusiasm, and looked out of the window. "Still," he added, "I made a happy marriage. I'm for wedding bells every time. Sacharissa will like it, too. I don't know why you and I shouldn't be enthusiastic optimists concerning wedded life; I can't see why we shouldn't pray for Sacharissa's early marriage."

"William!"

"Yes, darling."

"You *are* considering money before my sister's happiness!"

"But in her case I don't see why we can't conscientiously consider both."

Linda cast one tragic glance at her material husband, pushed her sister aside, arose and fled. After her sped the contrite Destyn; a distant door shut noisily; all the elements had gathered for the happy, first quarrel of the newly wedded.

"Fudge," said Sacharissa, walking to the window, slim hands clasped loosely behind her back.

VI

IN WRONG

Wherein Sacharissa Remains In and a Young Man Can't Get Out

The snowstorm had ceased; across Fifth Avenue the Park resembled the mica-incrusted view on an expensive Christmas card. Every limb, branch, and twig was outlined in clinging snow; crystals of it glittered under the morning sun; brilliantly dressed children, with sleds, romped and played over the dazzling expanse. Overhead the characteristic deep blue arch of a New York sky spread untroubled by a cloud. Her family--that is, her father, brother-in-law, married sister, three unmarried sisters and herself--were expecting to leave for Tuxedo about noon. Why? Nobody knows why the wealthy are always going somewhere. However, they do, fortunately for story writers.

"It's quite as beautiful here," thought Sacharissa to herself, "as it is in the country. I'm sorry I'm going."

Idling there by the sunny window and gazing out into the white expanse, she had already dismissed all uneasiness in her mind concerning the psychical experiment upon herself. That is to say, she had not exactly dismissed it, she used no conscious effort, it had gone of itself--or, rather, it had been crowded out, dominated by a sudden and strong disinclination to go to Tuxedo.

As she stood there the feeling grew and persisted, and, presently, she found herself repeating aloud: "I don't want to go, I *don't* want to go. It's stupid to go. Why should I go when it's stupid to go and I'd rather stay here?"

Meanwhile, Ethelinda and Destyn were having a classical reconciliation in a distant section of the house, and the young wife had got as far as:

"Darling, I am *so* worried about Rissa. I *do* wish she were not going to Tuxedo. There are so many attractive men expected at the Courlands'."

"She can't escape men anywhere, can she?"

"N-no; but there will be a concentration of particularly good-looking and undesirable ones at Tuxedo this week. That idle, horrid, cynical crowd is coming from Long Island, and I *don't* want her to marry any of them."

"Well, then, make her stay at home."

"She wants to go."

"What's the good of an older sister if you can't make her mind you?" he asked.

"She won't. She's set her heart on going. All those boisterous winter sports appeal to her. Besides, how can one member of the family be absent on New Year's Day?"

Arm in arm they strolled out into the great living room, where a large, pompous, vividly colored gentleman was laying down the law to the triplets--three very attractive young girls, dressed precisely alike, who said, "Yes, pa-*pah!*" and "No pa-*pah!*" in a grave and silvery-voiced chorus whenever filial obligation required it.

"And another thing," continued the pudgy and vivid old gentleman, whose voice usually ended in a softly mellifluous shout when speaking emphatically: "that worthless Westbury--Cedarhurst--Jericho-- Meadowbrook set are going to be in evidence at this housewarming, and I caution you now against paying anything but the slightest, most superficial and most frivolous attention to anything that any of those young whip-snapping, fox-hunting cubs may say to you. Do you hear?" with a mellow shout like a French horn on a touring car.

"Yes, pa-*pah!*"

The old gentleman waved his single eyeglass in token of dismissal, and looked at his watch.

"The bus is here," he said fussily. "Come on, Will; come, Linda, and you, Flavilla, Drusilla, and Sybilla, get your furs on. Don't take the elevator. Go down by the stairs, and hurry! If there's one thing in this world I won't do it is to wait for anybody on earth!"

Flunkies and maids flew distractedly about with fur coats, muffs, and stoles. In solemn assemblage the family expedition filed past the elevator, descended the stairs to the lower hall, and there drew up for final inspection.

A mink-infested footman waited outside; valets, butlers, second-men and maids came to attention.

"Where's Sacharissa?" demanded Mr. Carr, sonorously.

"Here, dad," said his oldest daughter, strolling calmly into the hall, hands still linked loosely behind her.

"Why haven't you got your hat and furs on?" demanded her father.

"Because I'm not going, dad," she said sweetly.

The family eyed her in amazement.

"Not going?" shouted her father, in a mellow bellow. "Yes, you are! Not *going!* And why the dickens not?"

"I really don't know, dad," she said listlessly. "I don't want to go."

Her father waved both pudgy arms furiously. "Don't you feel well? You look well. You *are* well. Don't you *feel* well?"

"Perfectly."

"No, you don't! You're pale! You're pallid! You're peaked! Take a tonic and lie down. Send your maid for some doctors--all kinds of doctors--and have them fix you up. Then come to Tuxedo with your maid to-morrow morning. Do you hear?"

"Very well, dad."

"And keep out of that elevator until it's fixed. It's likely to do anything. Ferdinand," to the man at the door, "have it fixed at once. Sacharissa, send that maid of yours for a doctor!"

"Very well, dad!"

She presented her cheek to her emphatic parent; he saluted it explosively, wheeled, marshaled the family at a glance, started them forward, and closed the rear with his own impressive person. The iron gates clanged, the door of the opera bus snapped, and Sacharissa strolled back into the rococo reception room not quite certain why she had not gone, not quite convinced that she was feeling perfectly well.

For the first few minutes her face had been going hot and cold, alternately flushed and pallid. Her heart, too, was acting in an unusual manner--making sufficient stir for her to become uneasily aware of it.

"Probably," she thought to herself, "I've eaten too many chocolates." She looked into the large gilded box, took another and ate it reflectively.

A curious languor possessed her. To combat it she rang for her maid, intending to go for a brisk walk, but the weight of the furs seemed to distress her. It was absurd. She threw them off and sat down in the library.

A little while later her maid found her lying there, feet crossed, arms stretched backward to form a cradle for her head.

"Are you ill, Miss Carr?"

"No," said Sacharissa.

The maid cast an alarmed glance at her mistress' pallid face.

"Would you see Dr. Blimmer, miss?"

"No."

The maid hesitated:

"Beg pardon, but Mr. Carr said you was to see some doctors."

"Very well," she said indifferently. "And please hand me those chocolates. I don't care for any luncheon."

"No luncheon, miss?" in consternation.

Sacharissa had never been known to shun sustenance.

The symptom thoroughly frightened her maid, and in a few minutes she had Dr. Blimmer's office on the telephone; but that eminent practitioner was out. Then she found in succession the offices of Doctors White, Black, and Gray. Two had gone away over New Year's, the other was out.

The maid, who was clever and resourceful, went out to hunt up a doctor. There are, in the cross streets, plenty of doctors between the Seventies and Eighties. She found one without difficulty--that is, she found the sign in the window, but the doctor was out on his visits.

She made two more attempts with similar results, then, discovering a doctor's sign in a window across the street, started for it regardless of snowdrifts, and at the same moment the doctor's front door opened and a young man, with a black leather case in his hand, hastily descended the icy steps and hurried away up the street.

The maid ran after him and arrived at his side breathless, excited:

"Oh, *could* you come--just for a moment, if you please, sir! Miss Carr won't eat her luncheon!"

"What!" said the young man, surprised.

"Miss Carr wishes to see you--just for a----"

"Miss Carr?"

"Miss Sacharissa!"

"Sacharissa?"

"Y-yes, sir--she----"

"But I don't know any Miss Sacharissa!"

"I understand that, sir."

"Look here, young woman, do you know my name?"

"No, sir, but that doesn't make any difference to Miss Carr."

"She wishes to see *me!*"

"Oh, yes, sir."

"I--I'm in a hurry to catch a train." He looked hard at the maid, at his watch, at the maid again.

"Are you perfectly sure you're not mistaken?" he demanded.

"No, sir, I----"

"A certain Miss Sacharissa Carr desires to see *me?* Are you certain of that?"

"Oh, yes, sir--she----"

"Where does she live?"

"One thousand eight and a half Fifth Avenue, sir."

"I've got just three minutes. Can you run?"

"I--yes!"

"Come on, then!"

And away they galloped, his overcoat streaming out behind, the maid's skirts flapping and her narrow apron flickering in the wind. Wayfarers stopped to watch their pace--a pace which brought them to the house in something under a minute. Ferdinand, the second man, let them in.

"Now, then," panted the young man, "which way? I'm in a hurry, remember!" And he started on a run for the stairs.

"Please follow me, sir; the elevator is quicker!" gasped the maid, opening the barred doors.

The young man sprang into the lighted car, the maid turned to fling off hat and jacket before entering; something went fizz-bang! snap! clink! and the lights in the car were extinguished.

"Oh!" shrieked the maid, "it's running away again! Jump, sir!"

The ornate, rococo elevator, as a matter of fact, was running away, upward, slowly at first. Its astonished occupant turned to jump out--too late.

"P-push the third button, sir! Quick!" cried the maid, wringing her hands.

"W-where is it!" stammered the young man, groping nervously in the dark car. "I can't see any."

"Cr-rack!" went something.

"It's stopped! It's going to fall!" screamed the maid. "Run, Ferdinand!"

The man at the door ran upstairs for a few steps, then distractedly slid to the bottom, shouting:

"Are you hurt, sir?"

"No," came a disgusted voice from somewhere up the shaft.

Every landing was now noisy with servants, maids sped upstairs, flunkeys sped down, a butler waddled in a circle.

"Is anybody going to get me out of this?" demanded the voice in the shaft. "I've a train to catch."

The perspiring butler poked his head into the shaft from below:

"'Ow far hup, sir, might you be?"

"How the devil do I know?"

"Can't you see nothink, sir?"

"Yes, I can see a landing and a red room."

"'E's stuck hunder the library!" exclaimed the butler, and there was a rush for the upper floors.

The rush was met and checked by a tall, young girl who came leisurely along the landing, nibbling a chocolate.

"What is all this noise about?" she asked. "Has the elevator gone wrong again?"

Glancing across the landing at the grille which screened the shaft she saw the gilded car--part of it--and half of a perfectly strange young man looking earnestly out.

"It's the doctor!" wailed her maid.

"That isn't Dr. Blimmer!" said her mistress.

"No, miss, it's a perfectly strange doctor."

"I am *not* a doctor," observed the young man, coldly.

Sacharissa drew nearer.

"If that maid of yours had asked me," he went on, "I'd have told her. She saw me coming down the steps of a physician's house--I suppose she mistook my camera case for a case of medicines."

"I did--oh, I did!" moaned the maid, and covered her head with her apron.

"The thing to do," said Sacharissa, calmly, "is to send for the nearest plumber. Ferdinand, go immediately!"

"Meanwhile," said the imprisoned young man, "I shall miss my train. Can't somebody break that grille? I could climb out that way."

"Sparks," said Miss Carr, "can you break that grille?"

Sparks tried. A kitchen maid brought a small tackhammer--the only "'ammer in the 'ouse," according to Sparks, who pounded at the foliated steel grille and broke the hammer off short.

"Did it 'it you in the 'ead, sir?" he asked, panting.

"Exactly," replied the young man, grinding his teeth.

Sparks 'oped as 'ow it didn't 'urt the gentleman. The gentleman stanched his wound in terrible silence.

Presently Ferdinand came back to report upon the availability of the family plumber. It appeared that all plumbers, locksmiths, and similar indispensable and free-born artisans had closed shop at noon and would not reopen until after New Year's, subject to the Constitution of the United States.

"But this gentleman cannot remain here until after New Year's," said Sacharissa. "He says he is in a hurry. Do you hear, Sparks?"

The servants stood in a helpless row.

"Ferdinand," she said, "Mr. Carr told you to have that elevator fixed before it was used again!"

Ferdinand stared wildly at the grille and ran his thumb over the bars.

"And Clark"--to her maid--"I am astonished that you permitted this gentleman to risk the elevator."

"He was in a hurry--I thought he was a doctor." The maid dissolved into tears.

"It is now," broke in the voice from the shaft, "an utter impossibility for me to catch any train in the United States."

"I am dreadfully sorry," said Sacharissa.

"Isn't there an ax in the house?"

The butler mournfully denied it.

"Then get the furnace bar."

It was fetched; nerve-racking blows rained on the grille; puffing servants applied it as a lever, as a battering-ram, as a club. The house rang like a boiler factory.

"I can't stand any more of that!" shouted the young man. "Stop it!"

Sacharissa looked about her, hands closing both ears.

"Send them away," said the young man, wearily. "If I've got to stay here I want a chance to think."

After she had dismissed the servants Sacharissa drew up a chair and seated herself a few feet from the grille. She could see half the car and half the man--plainer, now that she had come nearer.

He was a young and rather attractive looking fellow, cheek tied up in his handkerchief, where the head of the hammer had knocked off the skin.

"Let me get some witch-hazel," said Sacharissa, rising.

"I want to write a telegram first," he said.

So she brought some blanks, passed them and a pencil down to him through the grille, and reseated herself.

VII

THE INVISIBLE WIRE

In Which the Telephone Continues Ringing

When he had finished writing he sorted out some silver, and handed it and the yellow paper to Sacharissa.

"It's dark in here. Would you mind reading it aloud to me to see if I've made it plain?" he asked.

"Certainly," said Sacharissa; and she read:

MRS. DELANCY COURLAND,

Tuxedo.

I'm stuck in an idiotic elevator at 1008-1/2 Fifth Avenue. If I don't appear by New Year's you'll know why. Be careful that no reporters get hold of this.

KILLIAN VAN K. VANDERDYNK.

Sacharissa flushed deeply. "I can't send this," she said.

"Why not?" demanded the young man, irritably.

"Because, Mr. Vanderdynk, my father, brother-in-law, married sister, and three younger sisters are expected at the Courlands'. Imagine what effect such a telegram would have on them!"

"Then cross out the street and number," he said; "just say I'm stuck in a strange elevator."

She did so, rang, and a servant took away the telegram.

"Now," said the heir apparent to the Prince Regency of Manhattan, "there are two things still" possible. First, you might ring up police headquarters and ask for aid; next, request assistance from fire headquarters."

"If I do," she said, "wouldn't the newspapers get hold of it?"

"You are perfectly right," he said.

She had now drawn her chair so close to the gilded grille that, hands resting upon it, she could look down into the car where sat the scion of the Vanderdynks on a flimsy Louis XV chair.

"I can't express to you how sorry I am," she said. "Is there anything I can do to--to ameliorate your imprisonment?"

He looked at her in a bewildered way.

"You don't expect me to remain here until after New Year's, do you?" he inquired.

"I don't see how you can avoid it. Nobody seems to want to work until after New Year's."

"Stay in a cage--two days and a night!"

"Perhaps I had better call up the police."

"No, no! Wait. I'll tell you what to do. Start that man, Ferdinand, on a tour of the city. If he hunts hard enough and long enough he'll find some plumber or locksmith or somebody who'll come."

She rang for Ferdinand; together they instructed him, and he went away, promising to bring salvation in some shape.

Which promise made the young man more cheerful and smoothed out the worried pucker between Sacharissa's straight brows.

"I suppose," she said, "that you will never forgive my maid for this--or me either."

He laughed. "After all," he admitted, "it's rather funny."

"I don't believe you think it's funny."

"Yes, I do."

"Didn't you want to go to Tuxedo?"

"I!" He looked up at the pretty countenance of Sacharissa. "I *did* want to--a few minutes ago."

"And now that you can't your philosophy teaches you that you *don't* want to?"

They laughed at each other in friendly fashion.

"Perhaps it's my philosophy," he said, "but" I really don't care very much.... I'm not sure that I care at all.... In fact, now that I think of it, why should I have wished to go to Tuxedo? It's stupid to want to go to Tuxedo when New York is so attractive."

"Do you know," she said reflectively, "that I came to the same conclusion?"

"When?"

"This morning."

"Be-before you--I----"

"Oh, yes," she said rather hastily, "before you came----"

She broke off, pink with consternation. What a ridiculous thing to say! What on earth was twisting her tongue to hint at such an absurdity?

She said, gravely, with heightened color: "I was standing by the window this morning, thinking, and it occurred to me that I didn't care to go to Tuxedo.... When did you change *your* mind?"

"A few minutes a--that is--well, I never *really* wanted to go. It's jollier in town. Don't you think so? Blue sky, snow--er--and all that?"

"Yes," she said, "it is perfectly delightful in town to-day."

He assented, then looked discouraged.

"Perhaps you would like to go out?" he said.

"I? Oh, no.... The sun on the snow is bad for one's eyes; don't you think so?"

"Very.... I'm terribly sorry that I'm giving you so much trouble."

"I don't mind--really. If only I could do something for you."

"You are."

"I?"

"Yes; you are being exceedingly nice to me. I am afraid you feel under obligations to remain indoors and----"

"Truly, I don't. I was not going out."

She leaned nearer and looked through the bars: "Are you quite sure you feel comfortable?"

"I feel like something in a zoo!"

She laughed. "That reminds me," she said, "have you had any luncheon?"

He had not, it appeared, after a little polite protestation, so she rang for Sparks.

Her own appetite, too, had returned when the tray was brought; napkin and plate were passed through the grille to him, and, as they lunched, he in his cage, she close to the bars, they fell into conversation, exchanging information concerning mutual acquaintances whom they had expected to meet at the Delancy Courlands'.

"So you see," she said, "that if I had not changed my mind about going to Tuxedo this morning you would not be here now. Nor I.... And we would never have--lunched together."

"That didn't alter things," he said, smiling. "If you hadn't been ill you would have gone to Tuxedo, and I should have seen you there."

"Then, whatever I did made no difference," she assented, thoughtfully, "for we were bound to meet, anyway."

He remained standing close to the grille, which, as she was seated, brought his head on a level with hers.

"It would seem," he said laughingly, "as though we were doomed to meet each other, anyway. It looks like a case of Destiny to me."

She started slightly: "What did you say?"

"I said that it looks as though Fate intended us to meet, anyhow. Don't you think so?"

She remained silent.

He added cheerfully: "I never was afraid of Fate."

"Would you care for a--a book--or anything?" she asked, aware of a new constraint in her voice.

"I don't believe I could see to read in here.... Are you--going?"

"I--ought to." Vexed at the feeble senselessness of her reply she found herself walking down the landing, toward nowhere in particular. She turned abruptly and came back.

"Do you want a book?" she repeated.

"Oh, I forgot that you can't see to read. But perhaps you might care to smoke."

"Are you going away?"

"I--don't mind your smoking."

He lighted a cigarette; she looked at him irresolutely.

"You mustn't think of remaining," he said. Whereupon she seated herself.

"I suppose I ought to try to amuse you--till Ferdinand returns with a plumber," she said.

He protested: "I couldn't think of asking so much from you."

"Anyway, it's my duty," she insisted. "I ought."

"Why?"

"Because you are under my roof--a guest."

"Please don't think----"

"But I really don't mind! If there is anything I can do to make your imprisonment easier----"

"It is easy. I rather like being here."

"It is very amiable of you to say so."

"I really mean it."

"How can you *really* mean it?"

"I don't know, but I do." In their earnestness they had come close to the bars; she stood with both hands resting on the grille, looking in; he in a similar position, looking out.

He said: "I feel like an occupant of the Bronx, and it rather astonishes me that you haven't thrown me in a few peanuts."

She laughed, fetched her box of chocolates, then began seriously: "If Ferdinand doesn't find anybody I'm afraid you might be obliged to remain to dinner."

"That prospect," he said, "is not unpleasant. You know when one becomes accustomed to one's cage it's rather a bore to be let out."

They sampled the chocolates, she sitting close to the cage, and as the box would not go through the bars she was obliged to hand them to him, one by one.

"I wonder," she mused, "how soon Ferdinand will find a plumber?"

He shrugged his shoulders.

She bent her adorable head, chose a chocolate and offered it to him.

"Are you not terribly impatient?" she inquired.

"Not--terribly."

Their glances encountered and she said hurriedly:

"I am sure you must be perfectly furious with everybody in this house. I--I think it is most amiable of you to behave so cheerfully about it."

"As a matter of fact," he said, "I'm feeling about as cheerful as I ever felt in my life."

"Cooped up in a cage?"

"Exactly."

"Which may fall at any--" The idea was a new one to them both. She leaned forward in sudden consternation. "I never thought of that!" she exclaimed. "You don't think there's any chance of its falling, do you?"

He looked at the startled, gray eyes so earnestly fixed on his. The sweet mouth quivered a little--just a little--or he thought it did.

"No," he replied, with a slight catch in his voice, "I don't believe it's going to fall."

"Perhaps you had better not move around very much in it. Be careful, I beg of you. You will, won't you, Mr. Vanderdynk?"

"Please don't let it bother you," he said, stepping toward her impulsively.

"Oh, don't, don't move!" she exclaimed. "You really must keep perfectly still. Won't you promise me you will keep perfectly still?"

"I'll promise you anything," he said a little wildly.

Neither seemed to notice that he had overdone it.

She drew her chair as close as it would go to the grille and leaned against it.

"You *will* keep up your courage, won't you?" she asked anxiously.

"Certainly. By the way, how far is it to the b-basement?"

She turned quite white for an instant, then:

"I think I'd better go and ring up the police."

"No! A thousand times no! I couldn't stand that."

"But the car might--drop before----"

"Better decently dead than publicly paragraphed.... I haven't the least idea that this thing is going to drop.... Anyway, it's worth it," he added, rather vaguely.

"Worth--what?" she asked, looking into his rather winning, brown eyes.

"Being here," he said, looking into her engaging gray ones.

After a startling silence she said calmly: "Will you promise me not to move or shake the car till I return?"

"You won't be very long, will you?"

"Not--very," she replied faintly.

She walked into the library, halted in the center of the room, hands clasped behind her. Her heart was beating like a trip hammer.

"I might as well face it," she said to herself; "he is--by far--the most thoroughly attractive man I have ever seen.... I--I *don't* know what's the matter," she added piteously.... "if it's that machine William made I can't help it; I don't care any longer; I wish----"

A sharp crack from the landing sent her out there in a hurry, pale and frightened.

"Something snapped somewhere," explained the young man with forced carelessness, "some unimportant splinter gave way and the thing slid down an inch or two."

"D-do you think----"

"No, I don't. But it's perfectly fine of you to care."

"C-care? I'm a little frightened, of course.... Anybody would be.... Oh, I wish you were out and p-perfectly safe." "If I thought you could ever really care what became of a man like me----"

Killian Van K. Vanderdynk's aristocratic senses began gyrating; he grasped the bars, the back of his hand brushed against hers, and the momentary contact sent a shock straight through the scion of that celebrated race.

She seated herself abruptly; a delicate color grew, staining her face.

Neither spoke. A long, luminous sunbeam fell across the landing, touching the edge of her hair till it glimmered like bronze afire. The sensitive mouth was quiet, the eyes, very serious, were lifted from time to time, then lowered, thoughtfully, to the clasped fingers on her knee.

Could it be possible? How could it be possible?--with a man she had never before chanced to meet--with a man she had seen for the first time in her life only an hour or so ago! Such things didn't happen outside of short stories. There was neither logic nor common decency in it. Had she or had she not any ordinary sense remaining?

She raised her eyes and looked at the heir of the Vanderdynks.

Of course anybody could see he was unusually attractive--that he had that indefinable something about him which is seldom, if ever, seen outside of fiction or of Mr. Gibson's drawings--perhaps it is entirely confined to them--except in this one very rare case.

Sacharissa's eyes fell.

Another unusual circumstance was engaging her attention, namely, that his rather remarkable physical perfection appeared to be matched by a breeding quite as faultless, and a sublimity of courage in the face of destruction itself, which----

Sacharissa lifted her gray eyes.

There he stood, suspended over an abyss, smoking a cigarette, bravely forcing himself to an attitude of serene insouciance, while the basement yawned for him! Machine or no machine, how could any girl look upon such miraculous self-control unmoved? *She* could not. It was natural that a woman should be deeply thrilled by such a spectacle--and William Destyn's machine had nothing to do with it--not a thing! Neither had psychology, nor demonology, nor anything, with wires or wireless. She liked him, frankly. Who wouldn't? She feared for him, desperately. Who wouldn't? She----

"C-r-rack!"

"Oh--*what* is it!" she cried, springing to the grille.

"I don't know," he said, somewhat pale. "The old thing seems--to be sliding."

"Giving way!"

"A--little--I think----"

"Mr. Vanderdynk! I *must* call the police----"

"Cr-rackle--crack-k-k!" went the car, dropping an inch or two.

With a stifled cry she caught his hands through the bars, as though to hold him by main strength.

"Are you crazy?" he said fiercely, thrusting them away. "Be careful! If the thing drops you'll break your arms!"

"I--I don't care!" she said breathlessly. "I can't let----"

"Crack!" But the car stuck again.

"I *will* call the police!" she cried.

"The papers may make fun of *you*."

"Was it for *me* you were afraid? Oh, Mr. Vanderdynk! What do I care for ridicule compared to--to----"

The car had sunk so far in the shaft now that she had to kneel and put her head close to the floor to see him.

"I will only be a minute at the telephone," she said. "Keep up courage; I am thinking of you every moment."

"W-will you let me say one word?" he stammered.

"Oh, what? Be quick, I beg you."

"It's only goodbye--in case the thing drops. May I say it?"

"Y-yes--yes! But say it quickly."

"And if it doesn't drop after all, you won't be angry at what I'm going to say?"

"N-no. Oh, for Heaven's sake, hurry!"

"Then--you are the sweetest woman in the world!... Goodbye--Sacharissa-- dear."

She sprang up, dazed, and at the same moment a terrific crackling and splintering resounded from the shaft, and the car sank out of sight.

Faint, she swayed for a second against the balustrade, then turned and ran downstairs, ears strained for the sickening crash from below.

There was no crash, no thud. As she reached the drawing-room landing, to her amazement a normally-lighted elevator slid slowly down, came to a stop, and the automatic grilles opened quietly.

As Killian Van K. Vanderdynk crept forth from the elevator, Sacharissa's nerves gave way; his, also, seemed to disintegrate; and they stood for some moments mutually supporting each other, during which interval unaccustomed tears fell from the gray eyes, and unaccustomed words, breathed brokenly, reassured her; and, altogether unaccustomed to such things, they presently found themselves seated in a distant corner of the drawing-room, still endeavoring to reassure each other with interclasped hands.

They said nothing so persistently that the wordless minutes throbbed into hours; through the windows the red west sent a glowing tentacle into the room, searching the gloom for them.

It fell, warm, across her upturned throat, in the half light.

For her head lay back on his shoulder; his head was bent down, lips pressed to the white hands crushed fragrantly between his own.

A star came out and looked at them with astonishment; in a little while the sky was thronged with little stars, all looking through the window at them.

Her maid knocked, backed out hastily and fled, distracted. Then Ferdinand arrived with a plumber.

Later the butler came. They did not notice him until he ventured to cough and announce dinner.

The interruptions were very annoying, particularly when she was summoned to the telephone to speak to her father.

"What is it, dad?" she asked impatiently.

"Are you all right?"

"Oh, yes," she answered, carelessly; "we are all right, dad. Goodbye."

"We? Who the devil is 'We'?"

"Mr. Vanderdynk and I. We're taking my maid and coming down to Tuxedo this evening together. I'm in a hurry now."

"What!!!"

"Oh, it's all right, dad. Here, Killian, please explain things to my father."

Vanderdynk released her hand and picked up the receiver as though it had been a live wire.

"Is that you, Mr. Carr?" he began--stopped short, and stood listening, rigid, bewildered, turning redder and redder as her father's fluency increased. Then, without a word, he hooked up the receiver.

"Is it all right?" she asked calmly. "Was dad--vivacious?"

The young man said: "I'd rather go back into that elevator than go to Tuxedo.... But--I'm going."

"So am I," said Bushwyck Carr's daughter, dropping both hands on her lover's shoulders.... "Was he really very--vivid?"

"Very."

The telephone again rang furiously.

He bent his head; she lifted her face and he kissed her.

After a while the racket of the telephone annoyed them, and they slowly moved away out of hearing.

VIII

"IN HEAVEN AND EARTH"

The Green Mouse Stirs

"I've been waiting half an hour for you," observed Smith, dryly, as Beekman Brown appeared at the subway station, suitcase in hand.

"It was a most extraordinary thing that detained me," said Brown, laughing, and edging his way into the ticket line behind his friend where he could talk to him across his shoulder; "I was just leaving the office, Smithy, when Snuyder came in with a card."

"Oh, all right--of course, if----"

"No, it was not a client; I must be honest with you."

"Then you had a terrible cheek to keep me here waiting."

"It was a girl," said Beekman Brown.

Smith cast a cold glance back at him over his left shoulder.

"What kind of a girl?"

"A most extraordinary girl. She came on--on a matter----"

"Was it business or a touch?"

"Not exactly business."

"Ornamental girl?" demanded Smith.

"Yes--exceedingly; but it wasn't that----

"Oh, it was not that which kept you talking to her half an hour while I've sat suffocating in this accursed subway!"

"No, Smith; her undeniably attractive features and her--ah--winning personality had nothing whatever to do with it. Buy the tickets and I'll tell you all about it."

Smith bought two tickets. A north bound train roared into the station. The young men stepped aboard, seated themselves, depositing their suitcases at their feet.

"Now what about that winning-looker who really didn't interest you?" suggested Smith in tones made slightly acid by memory of his half hour waiting.

"Smith, it was a most unusual episode. I was just leaving the office to keep my appointment with you when Snuyder came in with a card----"

"You've said that already."

"But I didn't tell you what was on that card, did I?"

"I can guess."

"No, you can't. Her name was not on the card. She was not an agent; she had nothing to sell; she didn't want a position; she didn't ask for a subscription to anything. And what do you suppose was on that card?"

"Well, what was on the card, for the love of Mike?" snapped Smith. "I'll tell you. The card seemed to be an ordinary visiting card; but down in one corner was a tiny and beautifully drawn picture of a green mouse."

"A--what?"

"A mouse."

"G-green?"

"Pea green.... Come, now, Smith, if you were just leaving your office and your clerk should come in, looking rather puzzled and silly, and should hand you a card with nothing on it but a little green mouse, wouldn't it give you pause?"

"I suppose so."

Brown removed his straw hat, touched his handsome head with his handkerchief, and continued:

"I said to Snuyder: 'What the mischief is this?' He said: 'It's for you. And there's an exceedingly pretty girl outside who expects you to receive her for a few moments.' I said: 'But what has this card with a green mouse on it got to do with that girl or with me?' Snuyder said he didn't know and that I'd better ask her. So I looked at my watch and I thought of you----"

"Yes, you did."

"I tell you I did. Then I looked at the card with the green mouse on it.... And I want to ask you frankly, Smith, what would *you* have done?"

"Oh, what you did, I suppose," replied Smith, wearily. "Go on."

"I'm going. She entered----"

"She was tall and squeenly; you probably forgot that," observed Smith in his most objectionable manner.

"Probably not; she was of medium height, as a detail of external interest. But, although rather unusually attractive in a merely superficial and physical sense, it was instantly evident from her speech and bearing, that, in her, intellect dominated; her mind, Smithy, reigned serene, unsullied, triumphant over matter."

Smith looked up in amazement, but Brown, a reminiscent smile lighting his face, went on:

"She had a very winsome manner--a way of speaking--so prettily in earnest, so grave. And she looked squarely at me all the time----"

"So you contributed to the Home for Unemployed Patagonians."

"Would you mind shutting up?" asked Brown.

"No."

"Then try to listen respectfully. She began by explaining the significance of that pea-green mouse on the card. It seems, Smith, that there is a scientific society called The Green Mouse, composed of a few people who have determined to apply, practically, certain theories which they believe have commercial value."

"Was she," inquired Smith with misleading politeness, "what is known as an 'astrologist'?"

"She was not. She is the president, I believe, of The Green Mouse Society. She explained to me that it has been indisputably proven that the earth is not only enveloped by those invisible electric currents which are now used instead of wires to carry telegraphic messages, but that this world of ours is also belted by countless psychic currents which go whirling round the earth----"

"*What* kind of currents?"

"Psychic."

"Which circle the earth?"

"Exactly. If you want to send a wireless message you hitch on to a current, don't you?--or you tap it--or something. Now, they have discovered that each one of these numberless millions of psychic currents passes through two, living, human entities of opposite sex; that, for example, all you have got to do to communicate with the person who is on the same psychical current that you are, is to attune

your subconscious self to a given intensity and pitch, and it will be like communication by telephone, no matter how far apart you are."

"Brown!"

"What?"

"Did she go to your office to tell you that sort of--of--information?"

"Partly. She was perfectly charming about it. She explained to me that all nature is divided into predestined pairs, and that somewhere, at some time, either here on earth or in some of the various future existences, this predestined pair is certain to meet and complete the universal scheme as it has been planned. Do you understand, Smithy?"

Smith sat silent and reflective for a while, then:

"You say that her theory is that everybody owns one of those psychic currents?"

"Yes."

"I am on a private psychic current whirling around this globe?"

"Sure."

"And some--ah--young girl is at the other end?"

"Sure thing."

"Then if I could only get hold of my end of the wire I could--ah--call her up?"

"I believe that's the idea."

"And--she's for muh?"

"So they say."

"Is--is there any way to get a look at her first?"

"You'd have to take her anyway, sometime."

"But suppose I didn't like her?"

The two young men sat laughing for a few moments, then Brown went on:

"You see, Smith, my interview with her was such a curious episode that about all I did was to listen to what she was saying, so I don't know how details are worked out. She explained to me that The Green Mouse Society has just been formed, not only for the purpose of psychical research, but for applying practically and using

commercially the discovery of the psychic currents. That's what The Green Mouse is trying to do: form itself into a company and issue stocks and bonds----"

"What?"

"Certainly. It sounds like a madman's dream at first, but when you come to look into it--for instance, think of the millions of clients such a company would have. As example, a young man, ready for marriage, goes to The Green Mouse and pays a fee. The Green Mouse sorts out, identifies, and intercepts the young man's own particular current, hitches his subconscious self to it, and zip!--he's at one end of an invisible telephone and the only girl on earth is at the other.... What's the matter with their making a quick date for an introduction?"

Smith said slowly: "Do you mean to tell me that any sane person came to you in your office with a proposition to take stock in such an enterprise?"

"She did not even suggest it."

"What did she want, then?"

"She wanted," said Brown, "a perfectly normal, unimaginative business man who would volunteer to permit The Green Mouse Society to sort out his psychic current, attach him to it, and see what would happen."

"She wants to experiment on *you?*"

"So I understand."

"And--you're not going to let her, are you?"

"Why not?"

"Because it's--it's idiotic!" said Smith, warmly. "I don't believe in such things--you don't, either--nobody does--but, all the same, you can't be perfectly sure in these days what devilish sort of game you might be up against."

Brown smiled. "I told her, very politely, that I found it quite impossible to believe in such things; and she was awfully nice about it, and said it didn't matter what I believed. It seems that my name was chosen by chance--they opened the Telephone Directory at random and she, blindfolded, made a pencil mark on the margin opposite one of the names on the page. It happened to be my name. That's all."

"Wouldn't let her do it!" said Smith, seriously.

"Why not, as long as there's absolutely nothing in it? Besides, if it pleases her to have a try why shouldn't she? Besides, I haven't the slightest intention or desire to woo or wed anybody, and I'd like to see anybody make me."

"Do you mean to say that you told her to go ahead?"

"Certainly," said Brown serenely. "And she thanked me very prettily. She's well bred--exceptionally."

"Oh! Then what did you do?"

"We talked a little while."

"About what?"

"Well, for instance, I mentioned that curiously-baffling sensation which comes over everybody at times--the sudden conviction that everything that you say and do has been said and done by you before--somewhere. Do you understand?"

"Oh, yes."

"And she smiled and said that such sensations were merely echoes from the invisible psychic wire, and that repetitions from some previous incarnation were not unusual, particularly when the other person through whom the psychic current passed, was near by."

"You mean to say that when a fellow has that queer feeling that it has all happened before, the--the predestined girl is somewhere in your neighborhood?"

"That is what my pretty informant told me."

"Who," asked Smith, "is this pretty informant?"

"She asked permission to withhold her name."

"Didn't she ask you to subscribe?"

"No; she merely asked for the use of my name as reference for future clients if The Green Mouse Society was successful in my case."

"What did you say?"

Brown laughed. "I said that if any individual or group of individuals could induce me, within a year, to fall in love with and pay court to any living specimen of human woman I'd cheerfully admit it from the house- tops and take pleasure in recommending The Green Mouse to everybody I knew who yet remained unmarried."

They both laughed.

"What rot we've been talking," observed Smith, rising and picking up his suitcase. "Here's our station, and we'd better hustle or we'll lose the boat. I wouldn't miss that week-end party for the world!"

"Neither would I," said Beekman Brown.

IX

A CROSS-TOWN CAR

Concerning the Sudden Madness of One Brown

As the two young fellows, carrying their suitcases, emerged from the subway at Times Square into the midsummer glare and racket of Broadway and Forty-second Street, Brown suddenly halted, pressed his hand to his forehead, gazed earnestly up at the sky as though trying to recollect how to fly, then abruptly gripped Smith's left arm just above the elbow and squeezed it, causing the latter gentleman exquisite discomfort.

"Here! Stop it!" protested Smith, wriggling with annoyance.

Brown only gazed at him and then at the sky.

"Stop it!" repeated Smith, astonished. "Why do you pinch me and then look at the sky? Is--is a monoplane attempting to alight on me? *What* is the matter with you, anyway?"

"That peculiar consciousness," said Brown, dreamily, "is creeping over me. Don't move--don't speak--don't interrupt me, Smith."

"Let go of me!" retorted Smith.

"Hush! Wait! It's certainly creeping over me."

"What's creeping over you?"

"You know what I mean. I am experiencing that strange feeling that all-- er--all *this*--has happened before."

"All what?--confound it!"

"All *this!* My standing, on a hot summer day, in the infernal din of some great city; and--and I seem to recall it vividly--after a fashion--the blazing sun, the stifling odor of the pavements; I seem to remember that very hackman over there sponging the nose of his horse--even that pushcart piled up with peaches! Smith! What is this maddeningly elusive memory that haunts me--haunts me with the peculiar idea that it has all occurred before?... Do you know what I mean?"

"I've just admitted to you that everybody has that sort of fidget occasionally, and there's no reason to stand on your hindlegs about it. Come on or we'll miss our train."

But Beekman Brown remained stock still, his youthful and attractive features puckered in a futile effort to seize the evanescent memories that came swarming--gnatlike memories that teased and distracted.

"It's as if the entire circumstances were strangely familiar," he said; "as though everything that you and I do and say had once before been done and said by us under precisely similar conditions--somewhere--sometime."

"We'll miss that boat at the foot of Forty-second Street," cut in Smith impatiently. "And if we miss the boat we lose our train."

Brown gazed skyward.

"I never felt this feeling so strongly in all my life," he muttered; "it's--it's astonishing. Why, Smith, I *knew* you were going to say that."

"Say what?" demanded Smith.

"That we would miss the boat and the train. Isn't it funny?"

"Oh, very. I'll say it again sometime if it amuses you; but, meanwhile, as we're going to that week-end at the Carringtons we'd better get into a taxi and hustle for the foot of West Forty-second Street. Is there anything very funny in that?"

"I knew *that*, too. I knew you'd say we must take a taxi!" insisted Brown, astonished at his own "clairvoyance."

"Now, look here," retorted Smith, thoroughly vexed; "up to five minutes ago you were reasonable. What the devil's the matter with you, Beekman Brown?"

"James Vanderdynk Smith, I don't know. Good Heavens! I knew you were going to say that to me, and that I was going to answer that way!"

"Are you coming or are you going to talk foolish on this broiling curbstone the rest of the afternoon?" inquired Smith, fiercely.

"Jim, I tell you that everything we've done and said in the last five minutes we have done and said before--somewhere--perhaps on some other planet; perhaps centuries ago when you and I were Romans and wore togas----"

"Confound it! What do I care," shouted Smith, "whether we were Romans and wore togas? We are due this century at a house party on

this planet. They expect us on this train. Are you coming? If not--kindly relax that crablike clutch on my elbow before partial paralysis ensues."

"Smith, wait! I tell you this is somehow becoming strangely portentous. I've got the funniest sensation that something is going to happen to me."

"It will," said Smith, dangerously, "if you don't let go my elbow."

But Beekman Brown, a prey to increasing excitement, clung to his friend.

"Wait just one moment, Jim; something remarkable is likely to occur! I--I never before felt this way--so strongly--in all my life. Something extraordinary is certainly about to happen to me."

"It has happened," said his friend, coldly; "you've gone dippy. Also, we've lost that train. Do you understand?"

"I knew we would. Isn't that curious? I--I believe I can almost tell you what else is going to happen to us."

"*I'll* tell *you*," hissed Smith; "it's an ambulance for yours and ding-dong to the funny-house! *What* are you trying to do now?" With real misgiving, for Brown, balanced on the edge of the gutter, began waving his arms in a birdlike way as though about to launch himself into aerial flight across Forty-second Street.

"The car!" he exclaimed excitedly, "the cherry-colored cross-town car! Where is it? Do you see it anywhere, Smith?"

"What? What do you mean? There's no cross-town car in sight. Brown, don't act like that! Don't be foolish! What on earth----"

"It's coming! There's a car coming!" cried Brown.

"Do you think you're a racing runabout and I'm a curve?"

Brown waved him away impatiently.

"I tell you that something most astonishing is going to occur--in a cherry-colored tram car.... And somehow there'll be some reason for me to get into it."

"Into what?"

"Into that cherry-colored car, because--because--there'll be a wicker basket in it--somebody holding a wicker basket--and there'll be--there'll be--a--a--white summer gown--and a big white hat----"

Smith stared at his friend in grief and amazement. Brown stood balancing himself on the gutter's edge, pale, rapt, uttering incoherent prophecy concerning the advent of a car not yet visible anywhere in the immediate metropolitan vista.

"Old man," began Smith with emotion, "I think you had better come very quietly somewhere with me. I--I want to show you something pretty and nice."

"Hark!" exclaimed Brown.

"Sure, I'll hark for you," said Smith, soothingly, "or I'll bark for you if you like, or anything if you'll just come quietly."

"The cherry-colored car!" cried Brown, laboring under tremendous emotion. "Look, Smithy! That is the car!"

"Sure, it is! I see it, old man. They run 'em every five minutes. What the devil is there to astonish anybody about a cross-town cruiser with a red water line?"

"Look!" insisted Brown, now almost beside himself. "The wicker basket! The summer gown! Exactly as I foretold it! The big straw hat!--the--the *girl!*"

And shoving Smith violently away he galloped after the cherry-colored car, caught it, swung himself aboard, and sank triumphant and breathless into the transverse seat behind that occupied by a wicker basket, a filmy summer frock, a big, white straw hat, and--a girl--the most amazingly pretty girl he had ever laid eyes on. After him, headlong, like a distracted chicken, rushed Smith and alighted beside him, panting, menacing.

"Wha'--dyeh--board--this--car--for!" he gasped, sliding fiercely up beside Brown. "Get off or I'll drag you off!"

But Brown only shook his head with an infatuated smile.

"Is it that girl?" said Smith, incensed. "Are you a--a Broadway Don Juan, or are you a respectable lawyer with a glimmering sense of common decency and an intention to keep a social engagement at the Carringtons' to-day?"

And Smith drew out his timepiece and flourished it furiously under Brown's handsome and sun-tanned nose.

But Brown only slid along the seat away from him, saying:

"Don't bother me, Jim; this is too momentous a crisis in my life to have a well-intentioned but intellectually dwarfed friend butting into me and running about under foot."

"Intellectually d-d--do you mean *me?*" asked Smith, unable to believe his ears. "*Do* you?"

"Yes, I do! Because a miracle suddenly happens to me on Forty-second Street, and you, with your mind of a stockbroker, unable to appreciate it, come clattering and clamoring after me about a house party--a common-place, every-day, social appointment, when I have a full-blown miracle on my hands!"

"What miracle?" faltered Smith, stupefied.

"What miracle? Haven't I been telling you that I've been having that queer sense that all this has happened before? Didn't I suddenly begin-- as though compelled by some unseen power--to foretell things? Didn't I prophesy the coming of this cross-town car? Didn't I even name its color before it came into sight? Didn't I warn you that I'd probably get into it? Didn't I reveal to you that a big straw hat and a pretty summer gown----"

"Confound it!" almost shouted Smith, "There are about five thousand cherry-colored cross-town cars in this town. There are about five million white hats and dresses in this borough. There are five billion girls wearing 'em----!" "Yes; but the *wicker basket*" breathed Brown. "How do you account for *that?*... And, anyway, you annoy me, Smith. Why don't you get out of the car and go somewhere?"

"I want to know where you are going before I knock your head off."

"I don't know," replied Brown, serenely.

"Are you actually attempting to follow that girl?" whispered Smith, horrified.

"Yes.... It sounds low, doesn't it? But it really isn't. It is something I can't explain--you couldn't understand even if I tried to enlighten you. The sentiment I harbor is too lofty for some to comprehend, too vague, too pure, too ethereal for----"

"I'm as lofty and ethereal as you are!" retorted Smith, hotly. "And I know a--an ethereal Lothario when I see him, too!"

"I'm not--though it looks like it--and I forgive you, Smithy, for losing your temper and using such language."

"Oh, you do?" said Smith, grinning with rage.

"Yes," nodded Brown, kindly. "I forgive you, but don't call me that again. You mean well, but I'm going to find out at last what all this maddening, tantalizing, unexplained and mysterious feeling that it all has occurred before really is. I'm going to trace it to its source; I'm going to compare notes with this highly intelligent girl."

"You're going to *speak* to her?"

"I am. I must. How else can I compare data."

"I hope she'll call the police. If she doesn't *I* will."

"Don't worry. She's part of this strange situation. She'll comprehend as soon as I begin to explain. She is intelligent; you only have to look at her to understand that."

Smith choking with impotent fury, nevertheless ventured a swift glance. Her undeniable beauty only exasperated him. "To think--to *think*," he burst out, "that a modest, decent, law-loving business man like me should suddenly awake to find his boyhood friend had turned into a godless votary of Venus!"

"I'm not a votary of Venus!" retorted Brown, turning pink. "I'll punch you if you say it again. I'm as decent and respectable a business man as you are! And my grammar is better. And, thank Heaven! I've intellect enough to recognize a miracle when it happens to me.... Do you think I am capable of harboring any sentiments that might bring the blush of coquetry to the cheek of modesty? Do you?"

"Well--well, *I* don't know what you're up to!" Smith raised his voice in bewilderment and despair. "I don't know what possesses you to act this way. People don't experience miracles in New York cross-town cars. The wildest stretch of imagination could only make a coincidence out of this. There are trillions of girls in cross-town cars dressed just like this one."

"But the basket!"

"Another coincidence. There are quadrillions of wicker baskets."

"Not," said Brown, "with the contents of this one."

"Why not?"

Smith instinctively turned to look at the basket balanced daintily on the girl's knees.

He strove to penetrate its wicker exterior with concentrated gaze. He could see nothing but wicker.

"Well," he began angrily, "what *is* in that basket? And how do *you* know it--you lunatic?"

"Will you believe me if I tell you?"

"If you can offer any corroborative evidence----"

"Well, then--there's a cat in that basket."

"A--what?"

"A cat."

"How do you know?"

"I don't know how I know, but there's a big, gray cat in that basket."

"Why a *gray* one?"

"I can't tell, but it *is* gray, and it has six toes on every foot."

Smith truly felt that he was now being trifled with.

"Brown," he said, trying to speak civilly, "if anybody in the five boroughs had come to me with affidavits and told me yesterday how you were going to behave this morning----"

His voice, rising unconsciously as the realization of his outrageous wrongs dawned upon him, rang out above the rattle and grinding of the car, and the girl turned abruptly and looked straight at him and then at Brown.

The pure, fearless beauty of the gaze, the violet eyes widening a little in surprise, silenced both young men.

She inspected Brown for an instant, then turned serenely to her calm contemplation of the crowded street once more. Yet her dainty, close-set ears looked as though they were listening.

The young men gazed at one another.

"That girl is well bred," said Smith in a low, agitated voice. "You--you wouldn't think of venturing to speak to her!"

"I'm obliged to, I tell you! This all happened before. I recognize everything as it occurs.... Even to your making a general nuisance of yourself."

Smith straightened up.

"I'm going to push you forcibly from this car. Do you remember *that* incident?"

"No," said Brown with conviction, "that incident did not happen. You only threatened to do it. I remember now."

In spite of himself Smith felt a slight chill creep up over his neck and inconvenience his spine.

He said, deeply agitated: "What a terrible position for me to be in--with a friend suddenly gone mad in the streets of New York and running after a basket containing what he believes to be a cat. A *Cat!* Good----"

Brown gripped his arm. "Watch it!" he breathed.

The lid of the basket tilted a little, between lid and rim a soft, furry, six-toed gray paw was thrust out. Then a plaintive voice said, "Meow-w!"

X

THE LID OFF

An Alliance, Offensive, Defensive, and Back-Fensive

Smith, petrified, looked blankly at the paw.

For a while he remained stupidly incapable of speech or movement, then, as though arousing from a bad dream:

"What are you going to do, anyway?" he asked with an effort. "This car is bound to stop sometime, I suppose, and--and then what?"

"I don't know what I'm going to do. Whatever I do will be the thing that ought to happen to me, to that cat and to that girl--that is the thing which is destined to happen. That's all I know about it."

His friend passed an unsteady hand across his brow.

"This whole proceeding is becoming a nightmare," he said unsteadily. "Am I awake? Is this Forty-second Street? Hold up some fingers, Brown, and let me guess how many you hold up, and if I guess wrong I'm home in bed asleep and the whole thing is off."

Beekman Brown patted his friend on the shoulder.

"You take a cab, Smithy, and go somewhere. And if I don't come go on alone to the Carringtons'.... You don't mind going on and fixing things up with the Carringtons, do you?"

"Brown, *do* you believe that The Green Mouse Society has got hold of you? *Do* you?"

"I don't know and don't care.... Smith, I ask you plainly, did you ever before see such a perfectly beautiful girl as that one is?"

"Beekman, do you believe anything queer is going to result? You don't suppose *she* has anything to do with this extraordinary freak of yours?"

"Anything to do with it? How?"

"I mean," he sank his voice to hoarser depths, "how do you know but that this girl, who pretends to pay no attention to us, *might* be a--a--one of those clever, professional mesmerists who force you to follow 'em, and get you into their power, and exhibit you, and make you eat raw potatoes and tallow candles and tacks before an audience."

He peeped furtively at Brown, who did not appear uneasy.

"All I'm afraid of," added Smith, sullenly, "is that you'll get yourself into vaudeville or the patrol wagon."

He waited, but Brown made no reply.

"Oh, very well," he said, coldly. "I'll take a cab back to the boat."

No observation from Brown.

"So, *good*-by, old fellow"--with some emotion.

"Good-by," said Beekman Brown, absently.

In fact, he did not even notice when his thoroughly offended partner left the car, so intent was he in following the subtly thrilling train of thought which tantalized him, mocked him, led him nowhere, yet always lured him to fresh endeavor of memory. *Where* had all this occurred before? When? What was going to happen next--happen inexorably, as it had once happened, or as it once should have happened, in some dim, bygone age when he and that basket and that cat and this same hauntingly lovely girl existed together on earth--or perhaps upon some planet, swimming far out beyond the ken of men with telescopes?

He looked at the girl, strove to consider her impersonally, for her youthful beauty began to disturb him. Then cold doubt crept in; something of the monstrosity of the proceeding chilled his enthusiasm for occult research. Should he speak to her?

Certainly, it was a dreadful thing to do--an offense the enormity of which was utterly inexcusable except under the stress of a purely impersonal and scientific necessity for investigating a mental phase of humanity which had always thrilled him with a curiosity most profound.

He folded his arms and began to review in cold blood the circumstances which had led to his present situation in a cross-town car. Number one, and he held up one finger:

As it comes, at times, to every normal human, the odd idea had come to him that what he was saying and doing as he emerged from the subway at Times Square was what he had, sometime, somewhere, said and done before under similar circumstances. That was the beginning.

Number two, and he gravely held up a second finger:

Always before when this idea had come to bother him it had faded after a moment or two, leaving him merely uneasy and dissatisfied.

This time it persisted--intruding, annoying, exasperating him in his efforts to remember things which he could not recollect.

Number three, and he held up a third finger:

He *had* begun to remember! As soon as he or Smith said or did anything he recollected having said or done it sometime, somewhere, or recollected that he *ought* to have.

Number four--four fingers in air, stiff, determined digits:

He had not only, by a violent concentration of his memory, succeeded in recognizing the things said and done as having been said and done before, but suddenly he became aware that he was going to be able to foretell, vaguely, certain incidents that were yet to occur--like the prophesied advent of the cherry-colored car and the hat, gown, and wicker basket.

He now had four fingers in the air; he examined them seriously, and then stuck up the fifth.

"Here I am," he thought, "awake, perfectly sane, absolutely respectable. Why should a foolish terror of convention prevent me from asking that girl whether she knows anything which might throw some light on this most interesting mental phenomenon?... I'll do it."

The girl turned her head slightly; speech and the politely perfunctory smile froze on his lips.

She held up one finger; Brown's heart leaped. *Was* that some cabalistic sign which he ought to recognize? But she was merely signaling the conductor, who promptly pulled the bell and lifted her basket for her when she got off.

She thanked him; Brown heard her, and the crystalline voice began to ring in little bell-like echoes all through his ears, stirring endless little mysteries of memory.

Brown also got off; his legs struck up a walk of their own volition, carrying him across the street, hoisting him into a north-bound Lexington Avenue car, and landing him in a seat behind the one where she had installed herself and her wicker basket.

She seemed to be having some difficulty with the wicker basket; beseeching six-toed paws were thrust out persistently; soft meows

pleaded for the right of liberty and pursuit of feline happiness. Several passengers smiled.

Trouble increased as the car whizzed northward; the meows became wilder; mad scrambles agitated the basket; the lid bobbed and creaked; the girl turned a vivid pink and, bending close over the basket, attempted to soothe its enervated inmate.

In the forties she managed to control the situation; in the fifties a frantic rush from within burst a string that fastened the basket lid, but the girl held it down with energy.

In the sixties a tempest broke loose in the basket; harrowing yowls pierced the atmosphere; the girl, crimson with embarrassment and distress, signaled the conductor at Sixty-fourth Street and descended, clinging valiantly to a basket which apparently contained a pack of firecrackers in process of explosion.

A classical heroine in dire distress invariably exclaims aloud: "Will *no* one aid me?" Brown, whose automatic legs had compelled him to follow, instinctively awaited some similar appeal.

It came unexpectedly; the kicking basket escaped from her arms, the lid burst open, and an extraordinarily large, healthy and indignant cat flew out, tail as big as a duster, and fled east on Sixty-fourth Street.

The girl in the summer gown and white straw hat ran after the cat. Brown's legs ran, too.

There was, and is, between the house on the northeast corner of Sixty-fourth Street and Lexington Avenue and the next house on Sixty-fourth, an open space guarded by an iron railing; through this the cat darted, fur on end, and, with a flying leap, took to the back fences.

"Oh!" gasped the girl.

Then Brown's legs did an extraordinary thing--they began to scramble and kick and shin up the iron railing, hoisting Brown over; and Brown's voice, pleasant, calm, reassuring, was busy, too: "If you will look out for my suitcase I think I can recover your cat.... It will give me great pleasure to recover your cat. I shall be very glad to have, the opportunity of recovering--puff--puff--your--puff--puff--c-cat!" And he dropped inside the iron railing and paused to recover his breath.

The girl came up to the railing and gazed anxiously through at the corner of the only back fence she could perceive.

"What a perfectly dreadful thing to happen!" she said in a voice not very steady. "It is exceedingly nice of you to help me catch Clarence. He is quite beside himself, poor lamb! You see, he has never before been in the city. I--I shall be distressed beyond m-measure if he is lost."

"He went over those fences," said Brown, breathing faster. "I think I'd better go after him."

"Oh--*would* you mind? I'd be so very grateful. It seems so much to ask of you."

"I'll do it," said Brown, firmly. "Every boy in New York has climbed back fences, and I'm only thirty."

"It is most kind of you; but--but I don't know whether you could possibly get him to come to you. Clarence is timid with strangers."

Brown had already clambered on to the wooden fence. He balanced himself there, astride. Whitewash liberally decorated coat and trousers.

"I see him," he said.

"W-what is he doing?"

"Squatting on a trellis three back yards away." And Brown lifted a blandishing voice: "Here, Clarence--Clarence--Clarence! Here, kitty-- kitty--kitty! Good pussy! Nice Clarence!"

"Does he come?" inquired the girl, peering wistfully through the railing.

"He does not," said Brown. "Perhaps you had better call."

"Here, puss--puss--puss--puss!" she began gently in that fascinating, crystalline voice which seemed to set tiny silvery chimes ringing in Brown's ears: "Here, Clarence, darling--Betty's own little kitty-cat!"

"If he doesn't come to *that*," thought Brown, "he *is* a brute." And aloud: "If you could only let him see you; he sits there blinking at me."

"Do you think he'd come if he saw me?"

"Who wouldn't?" thought Brown, and answered, calmly: "I think so.... Of course, you couldn't get up here."

"I could.... But I'd better not.... Besides, I live only a few houses away--Number 161--and I *could* go through into the back yard."

"But you'd better not attempt to climb the fence. Have one of the servants do it; we'll get the cat between us then and corner him."

"There are no servants in the house. It's closed for the summer--all boarded up!"

"Then how can you get in?"

"I have a key to the basement.... Shall I?"

"And climb up on the fence?"

"Yes--if I must--if it's necessary to save Clarence.... Shall I?"

"Why can't I shoo him into your yard."

"He doesn't know our yard. He's a country cat; he's never stayed in town. I was taking him with me to Oyster Bay.... I came down from a week-end at Stockbridge, where some relatives kept Clarence for us while we were abroad during the winter.... I meant to stop and get some things in the house on my way back to Oyster Bay.... Isn't it a perfectly wretched situation?... We--the entire family--adore Clarence--and--I-I'm so anxious----"

Her fascinating underlip trembled, but she controlled it.

"I'll get that cat if it takes a month!" said Brown. Then he flushed; he had not meant to speak so warmly.

The girl flushed too. I am so grateful.... But how----"

"Wait," said Brown; and, addressing Clarence in a softly alluring voice, he began cautiously to crawl along the fences toward that unresponsive animal. Presently he desisted, partly on account of a conspiracy engaged in between his trousers and a rusty nail. The girl was now beyond range of his vision around the corner.

"Miss--ah--Miss--er--er--Betty!" he called.

"Yes!"

"Clarence has retreated over another back yard."

"How horrid!"

"How far down do you live?"

She named the number of doors, anxiously adding: "Is Clarence farther down the block? Oh, please, be careful. Please, don't drive him past our yard. If you will wait I--I'll let myself into the house and--I'll manage to get up on the fence."

"You'll ruin your gown."

"I don't care about my gown."

"These fences are the limit! Full of spikes and nails.... Will you be careful?"

"Yes, very."

"The nails are rusty. I--I am h-horribly afraid of lockjaw."

"Then don't remain there an instant."

"I mean--I'm afraid of it for you."

There was a silence; they couldn't see each other. Brown's heart was beating fast.

"It is very generous of you to--think of me," came her voice, lower but very friendly.

"I ca-can't avoid it," he stammered, and wanted to kick himself for what he had blurted out.

Another pause--longer this time. And then:

"I am going to enter my house and climb up on the fence.... Would you mind waiting a moment?"

"I will wait here," said Beekman Brown, "until I see you." He added to himself: "I'm going mad rapidly and I know it and don't care.... *What*-- a--girl!"

While he waited, legs swinging, astride the back fence, he examined his injuries--thoughtfully touched the triangular tear in his trousers, inspected minor sartorial and corporeal lacerations, set his hat firmly upon his head, and gazed across the monotony of the back-yard fences at Clarence. The cat eyed him disrespectfully, paws tucked under, tail curled up against his well-fed flank--disillusioned, disgusted, unapproachable.

Presently, through the palings of a back yard on Sixty-fifth Street, Brown saw a small boy, evidently the progeny of some caretaker, regarding him intently.

"Say, mister," he began as soon as noticed, "you have tore your pants on a nail."

"Thanks," said Brown, coldly; "will you be good enough to mind your business?"

"I thought I'd tell you," said the small boy, delightedly aware that the information displeased Brown. "They're tore awful, too. That's what you get for playin' onto back fences. Y'orter be ashamed."

Brown feigned unconsciousness and folded his arms with dignity; but the next moment he straightened up, quivering.

"You young devil!" he said; "if you pull that slingshot again I'll come over there and destroy you!"

At the same moment above the fence line down the block a white straw hat appeared; then a youthful face becomingly flushed; then two dainty, gloved hands grasping the top of the fence.

"I am here," she called across to him.

The small boy, who had climbed to the top of his fence, immediately joined the conversation:

"Your girl's a winner, mister," he observed, critically.

"Are you going to keep quiet?" demanded Brown, starting across the fence.

"Sure," said the small boy, carelessly.

And, settling down on his lofty perch of observation, he began singing:

"Lum' me an' the woild is mi-on."

The girl's cheeks became pinker; she looked at the small boy appealingly.

"Little boy," she said, "if you'll run away somewhere I'll give you ten cents."

"No," said the terror, "I want to see him an' you catch that cat."

"I'll tell you what I'll do," suggested Brown, inspired. "I'll give you a dollar if you'll help us catch the cat."

"You're on!" said the boy, briskly. "What'll I do? Touch her up with this bean-shooter?"

"No; put that thing into your pocket!" exclaimed Brown, sharply. "Now climb across to Sixty-fourth Street and stand by that iron railing so that the cat can't bolt out into the street, and," he added, wrapping a dollar bill around a rusty nail and tossing it across the fence, "here's what's coming to you."

The small boy scrambled over nimbly, ran squirrel-like across the transverse fence, dipped, swarmed over the iron railing and stood on guard.

"Say, mister," he said, "if the cat starts this way you and your girl start a hollerin' like----"

"All right," interrupted Brown, and turned toward the vision of loveliness and distress which was now standing on the top of her own back fence holding fast to a wistaria trellis and flattering Clarence with low and honeyed appeals.

The cat, however, was either too stupid or too confused to respond; he gazed blankly at his mistress, and when Brown began furtively edging his way toward him Clarence arose, stood a second in alert indecision, then began to back away.

"We've got him between us!" called out Brown. "If you'll stand ready to seize him when I drive him----"

There was a wild scurry, a rush, a leap, frantic clawing for foothold.

"Now, Miss Betty! Quick!" cried Brown. "Don't let him pass you."

She spread her skirts, but the shameless Clarence rushed headlong between the most delicately ornamental pair of ankles in Manhattan.

"Oh-h!" cried the girl in soft despair, and made a futile clutch; but she could not arrest the flight of Clarence, she merely upset him, turning him for an instant into a furry pinwheel, whirling through mid-air, landing in her yard, rebounding like a rubber ball, and disappearing, with one flying leap, into a narrow opening in the basement masonry.

"Where is he?" asked Brown, precariously balanced on the next fence.

"Do you know," she said, "this is becoming positively ghastly. He's bolted into our cellar."

"Why, that's all right, isn't it?" asked Brown. "All you have to do is to go inside, descend to the cellar, and light the gas."

"There's no gas."

"You have electric light?"

"Yes, but it's turned off at the main office. The house is closed for the summer, you know."

Brown, balancing cautiously, walked the intervening fence like an amateur on a tightrope.

Her pretty hat was a trifle on one side; her cheeks brilliant with excitement and anxiety. Utterly oblivious of herself and of appearances in her increasing solicitude for the adored Clarence, she sat the fence, cross saddle, balancing with one hand and pointing with the other to the barred ventilator into which Clarence had darted.

A wisp of sunny hair blew across her crimson cheek; slender, active, excitedly unconscious of self, she seemed like some eager, adorable little gamin perched there, intent on mischief.

"If you'll drop into our yard," she said, "and place that soap box against the ventilator, Clarence can't get out that way!"

It was done before she finished the request. She disengaged herself from the fencetop, swung over, hung an instant, and dropped into a soft flower bed.

Breathing fast, disheveled, they confronted one another on the grass. His blue suit of serge was smeared with whitewash; her gown was a sight. She felt for her hat instinctively, repinned it at hazard, looked at her gloves, and began to realize what she had done.

"I--I couldn't help it," she faltered; "I couldn't leave Clarence in a city of five m-million strangers--all alone--terrified out of his senses-- could I? I had rather--rather be thought--anything than be c-cruel to a helpless animal."

Brown dared not trust himself to answer. She was too beautiful and his emotion was too deep. So he bent over and attempted to dust his garments with the flat of his hand.

"I am so sorry," she said in a low voice. "Are your clothes quite ruined?"

"Oh, I don't mind," he protested happily, "I really don't mind a bit. If you'll only let me help you corner that infern--that unfortunate cat I shall be perfectly happy."

She said, with heightened color: "It is exceedingly nice of you to say so.... I--I don't quite know--what do you think we had better do?"

"Suppose," he said, "you go into the basement, unlock the cellar door and call. He can't bolt this way."

She nodded and entered the house. A few moments later he heard her calling, so persuasively that it was all he could do not to run to her, and why on earth that cat didn't he never could understand.

XI

BETTY

In Which the Remorseless and Inexorable Results of Psychical Research Are Revealed to the Very Young

At intervals for the next ten minutes her fresh, sweet, fascinating voice came to him where he stood in the yard; then he heard it growing fainter, more distant, receding; then silence.

Listening, he suddenly heard a far, rushing sound from subterranean depths--like a load of coal being put in--then a frightened cry.

He sprang into the basement, ran through laundry and kitchen. The cellar door swung wide open above the stairs which ran down into darkness; and as he halted to listen Clarence dashed up out of the depths, scuttled around the stairs and fled upward into the silent regions above.

"Betty!" he cried, forgetting in his alarm the lesser conventions, "where are you?"

"Oh, dear--oh, dear!" she wailed. "I am in such a dreadful plight. Could you help me, please?"

"Are you hurt?" he asked. Fright made his voice almost inaudible. He struck a match with shaking fingers and ran down the cellar stairs.

"Betty! Where are you?"

"Oh, I am here--in the coal."

"What?"

"I--I can't seem to get out; I stepped into the coal pit in the dark and it all--all slid with me and over me and I'm in it up to the shoulders."

Another match flamed; he saw a stump of a candle, seized it, lighted it, and, holding it aloft, gazed down upon the most heart rending spectacle he had ever witnessed.

The next instant he grasped a shovel and leaped to the rescue. She was quite calm about it; the situation was too awful, the future too hopeless for mere tears. What had happened contained all the

dignified elements of a catastrophe. They both realized it, and when, madly shoveling, he at last succeeded in releasing her she leaned her full weight on his own, breathing rapidly, and suffered him to support and guide her through the flame-shot darkness to the culinary regions above.

Here she sank down on a chair for one moment in utter collapse. Then she looked up, resolutely steadying her voice:

"Could anything on earth more awful have happened to a girl?" she asked, lips quivering in spite of her. She stretched out what had once been a pair of white gloves, she looked down at what had been a delicate summer gown of white. "How," she asked with terrible calmness, "am I to get to Oyster Bay?"

He dropped on to a kitchen chair opposite her, clasping his coal-stained hands between his knees, utterly incapable of speech.

She looked at her shoes--once snowy white; with a shudder she stripped the soiled gloves from elbow to wrist and flung them aside. Her arms and hands formed a starling contrast to the remainder of the ensemble.

"What," she asked, "am I to do?"

"The thing to do," he said, "is to telephone to your family at Oyster Bay."

"The telephone has been disconnected. So has the water--we can't even w-wash our hands!" she faltered.

He said: "I can go out and telephone to your family to send a maid with some clothes for you--if you don't mind being left alone in an empty house for a little while."

"No, I don't; but," she gazed uncertainly at the black opening of the cellar, "but, please, don't be gone very long, will you?"

He promised fervidly. She gave him the number and her family's name, and he left by the basement door.

He was gone a long time, during which, for a while, she paced the floor, unaffectedly wringing her hands and contemplating herself and her garments in the laundry looking-glass.

At intervals she tried to turn on the water, hoping for a few drops at least; at intervals she sat down to wait for him; then, the inaction becoming unendurable, musing goaded her into motion, and she ascended to the floor above, groping through the dimness in futile

search for Clarence. She heard him somewhere in obscurity, scurrying under furniture at her approach, evidently too thoroughly demoralized to recognize her voice. So, after a while, she gave it up and wandered down to the pantry, instinct leading her, for she was hungry and thirsty; but she knew there could be nothing eatable in a house closed for the summer.

She lifted the pantry window and opened the blinds; noon sunshine flooded the place, and she began opening cupboards and refrigerators, growing hungrier every moment.

Then her eyes fell upon dozens of bottles of Apollinaris, and with a little cry of delight she knelt down, gathered up all she could carry, and ran upstairs to the bathroom adjoining her own bedchamber.

"At least," she said to herself, "I can cleanse myself of this dreadful coal!" and in a few moments she was reveling, elbow deep, in a marble basin brimming with Apollinaris.

As the stain of the coal disappeared she remembered a rose-colored morning gown reposing in her bedroom clothespress; and she found more than that there--rose stockings and slippers and a fragrant pile of exquisitely fine and more intimate garments, so tempting in their freshness that she hurried with them into the dressing room; then began to make rapid journeys up and downstairs, carrying dozens of quarts of Apollinaris to the big porcelain tub, into which she emptied them, talking happily to herself all the time.

"If he returns I can talk to him over the banisters!... He's a nice boy.... Such a funny boy not to remember me.... And I've thought of him quite often.... I wonder if I've time for just one, delicious plunge?" She listened; ran to the front windows and looked out through the blinds. He was nowhere in sight.

Ten minutes later, delightfully refreshed, she stood regarding herself in her lovely rose-tinted morning gown, patting her bright hair into discipline with slim, deft fingers, a half-smile on her lips, lids closing a trifle over the pensive violet eyes.

"Now," she said aloud, "I'll talk to him over the banisters when he returns; it's a little ungracious, I suppose, after all he has done, but it's more conventional.... And I'll sit here and read until they send

somebody from Sandcrest with a gown I can travel in.... And then we'll catch Clarence and call a cab----"

A distant tinkling from the area bell interrupted her.

"Oh, dear," she exclaimed, "I quite forgot that I had to let him in!"

Another tinkle. She cast a hurried and doubtful glance over her attire. It was designed for the intimacy of her boudoir.

"I--I *couldn't* talk to him out of the window! I've been shocking enough as it is!" she thought; and, finger tips on the banisters, she ran down the three stairs and appeared at the basement grille, breathless, radiant, forgetting, as usual, her self-consciousness in thinking of him, a habit of this somewhat harebrained and headlong girl which had its root in perfect health of body and wholesomeness of mind.

"I found some clothes--not the sort I can go out in!" she said, laughing at his astonishment, as she unlocked the grille. "So, please, overlook my attire; I was *so* full of coal dust! and I found sufficient Apollinaris for my necessities.... *What* did they say at Sandcrest?"

He said very soberly: "We've got to discuss this situation. Perhaps I had better come in for a few minutes--if you don't mind."

"No, I don't mind.... Shall we sit in the drying room?" leading the way. "Now tell me what is the matter? You rather frighten me, you know. Is--is anything wrong at Sandcrest?"

"No, I suppose not." He touched his flushed face with his handkerchief; "I couldn't get Oyster Bay on the 'phone."

"W-why not?"

"The wires are out of commission as far as Huntington; there's no use--I tried everything! Telegraph and telephone wires were knocked out in this morning's electric storm, it seems."

She gazed at him, hands folded on her knee, left leg crossed over, foot swinging.

"This," she said calmly, "is becoming serious. Will you tell me what I am to do?"

"Haven't you anything to travel in?"

"Not one solitary rag."

"Then--you'll have to stay here to-night and send for some of your friends--you surely know somebody who is still in town, don't you?"

"I really don't. This is the middle of July. I don't know a woman in town."

He was silent.

"Besides," she said, "we have no light, no water, nothing to eat in the house, no telephone to order anything----"

He said: "I foresaw that you would probably be obliged to remain here, so when I left the telephone office I took the liberty of calling a taxi and visiting the electric light people, the telephone people and the nearest plumber. It seems he is your own plumber--Quinn, I believe his name is; and he's coming in half an hour to turn on the water."

"Did you think of doing all that?" she asked, astonished.

"Oh, that wasn't anything. And I ventured to telephone the Plaza to serve luncheon and dinner here for you----"

"You *did?*"

"And I wired to Dooley's Agency to send you a maid for to-day----"

"That was perfectly splendid of you!"

"They promised to send one as soon as possible.... And I think that may be the plumber now," as a tinkle came from the area bell.

It was not the plumber; it was waiters bearing baskets full of silver, china, table linen, ice, fruits, confections, cut flowers, and, in warmers, a most delectable luncheon.

Four impressive individuals commanded by a butler formed the processional, filing solemnly up the basement stairs to the dining room, where they instantly began to lay the table with dexterous celerity.

In the drying room below Betty and Beekman Brown stood confronting each other.

"I suppose," began Brown with an effort, "that I had better go now."

Betty said thoughtfully: "I suppose you must."

"Unless," continued Brown, "you think I had better remain--somewhere on the premises--until your maid arrives."

"That might be safer," said Betty, more thoughtfully.

"Your maid will probably be here in a few minutes."

"Probably," said Betty, head bent, slim, ringless fingers busy with the sparkling drop that glimmered pendant from her neckchain.

Silence--the ironing board between them--she standing, bright head lowered, worrying the jewel with childish fingers; he following every movement, fascinated, spellbound.

After a moment, without looking up: "You have been very, very nice to me-- in the nicest possible way," she said.... "I am not going to forget it easily--even if I might wish to."

"I can never forget *you!*... I d-don't want to."

The sparkling pendant escaped her fingers; she picked it up again and spoke as though gravely addressing it:

"Some day somewhere," she said, looking at the jewel, "perhaps chance-- the hazard of life--may bring us to--togeth--to acquaintance--a more formal acquaintance than this.... I hope so. This has been a little-- irregular, and perhaps you had better not wait for my maid.... I hope we may meet--sometime."

"I hope so, too," he managed to say, with so little fervor and so successful an imitation of her politely detached interest in convention that she raised her eyes. They dropped immediately, because his quiet voice and speech scarcely conformed to the uncontrolled protest in his eyes.

For a moment she stood, passing the golden links through her white fingers like a young novice with a rosary. Steps on the stairs disturbed them; the recessional had begun; four solemn persons filed out the area gate. At the same moment, suave and respectful, her butler pro tem. presented himself at the doorway:

"Luncheon is served, madam."

"Thank you." She looked uncertainly at Brown, hesitated, flushed a trifle.

"I will stay here and admit the plumber and then--then--I'll g-go," he said with a heartbroken smile.

"I suppose you took the opportunity to lunch when you went out?" she said. Her inflection made it a question.

Without answering he stepped back to allow her to pass. She moved forward, turned, undecided.

"*Have* you lunched?"

"Please don't feel that you ought to ask me," he began, and checked himself as the vivid pink deepened in her cheeks. Then she freed herself of embarrassment with a little laugh.

"Considering," she said, "that we have been chasing cats on the back fences together and that, subsequently, you dug me out of the coal in my own cellar, I can't believe it is very dreadful if I ask you to luncheon with me.... Is it?"

"It is ador--it is," he corrected himself firmly, "exceedingly civil of you to ask me!"

"Then--will you?" almost timidly.

"I will. I shall not pretend any more. I'd rather lunch with you than be President of this Republic."

The butler pro tem. seated her.

"You see," she said, "a place had already been laid for you." And with the faintest trace of malice in her voice: "Perhaps your butler had his orders to lay two covers. Had he?"

"From me?" he protested, reddening.

"You don't suspect *me*, do you?" she asked, adorably mischievous. Then glancing over the masses of flowers in the center and at the corners of the lace cloth: "This is deliciously pretty. But you are either dreadfully and habitually extravagant or you believe I am. Which is it?"

"I think both are true," he said, laughing.

And a little while later when he returned from the basement after admitting Mr. Quinn, the plumber:

"Do you know that this is a most heavenly luncheon?" she said, greeting his return with delightfully fearless eyes. "Such Astrakan caviar! Such salad! Everything I care for most. And how on earth you guessed I can't imagine.... I'm beginning to think you are rather wonderful."

They lifted the long, slender glasses of iced Ceylon tea and regarded one another over the frosty rims--a long, curious glance from her; a straight gaze from him, which she decided not to sustain too long.

Later, when she gave the signal, they rose as though they had often dined together, and moved leisurely out through the dim,

shrouded drawing-rooms where, in the golden dusk, the odor of camphor hung.

She had taken a great cluster of dewy Bride's roses from the centerpiece, and as she walked forward, sedately youthful, beside him, her fresh, young face brooded over the fragrance of the massed petals.

"Sweet--how sweet!" she murmured to herself, and as they reached the end of the vista she half turned to face him, dreamily, listless, confident.

They looked at one another, she with chin brushing the roses.

"The strangest of all," she said, "is that it *seems* all right--and--and we *know* that it is all quite wrong.... Had you better go?"

"Unless I ought to wait and make sure your maid does not fail you.... Shall I?" he asked evenly.

She did not answer. He drew a linen-swathed armchair toward her; she absently seated herself and lay back, caressing the roses with delicate lips and chin.

Twice she looked up at him, standing there by the boarded windows. Sunshine filtered through the latticework at the top--enough for them to see each other as in a dull afterglow.

"I wonder how soon my maid will come," she mused, dropping the loose roses on her knees. "If she is going to be very long about it perhaps-- perhaps you might care to find a chair--if you have decided to wait."

He drew one from a corner and seated himself, pulses hammering his throat.

Through the stillness of the house sounded at intervals the clink of glass from the pantry. Other sounds from above indicated the plumber's progress from floor to floor.

"Do you realize," she said impulsively, "how *very* nice you have been to me? What a perfectly horrid position I might have been in, with poor Clarence on the back fence! And suppose I had dared follow him alone to the cellar? I--I might have been there yet--up to my neck in coal?"

She gazed into space with considerable emotion.

"And now," she said, "I am safe here in my own home. I have lunched divinely, a maid is on the way to me, Clarence remains somewhere safe indoors, Mr. Quinn is flitting from faucet to faucet, the electric light and the telephone will be in working order before very long--and it is *all* due to you!"

"I--I did a few things I almost w-wish I hadn't," stammered Brown, "b-because I can't, somehow, decently t-tell you how tremendously I--I--" He stuck fast.

"What?"

"It would look as though I were presuming on a t-trifling service rendered, and--oh, I can't say it; I want to, but I can't."

"Say what? Please, I don't mind what you are--are going to say."

"It's--it's that I----"

"Y-es?" in soft encouragement.

"W-want to know you most tremendously now. I don't want to wait several years for chance and hazard."

"O-h!" as though the information conveyed a gentle shock to her. Her low-breathed exclamation nearly finished Brown.

"I knew you'd think it unpardonable for me--at such a time--to venture to--to--ask--say--express--convey----"

"Why do you--how can I--where could we--" She recovered herself resolutely. "I do not think we ought to take advantage of an accident like this.... Do you? Besides, probably, in the natural course of social events----"

"But it may be years! months! weeks!" insisted Brown, losing control of himself.

"I should hope it would at least be a decently reasonable interval of several weeks----"

"But I don't know what to do if I never see you again for weeks! I c-care so much--for--you."

She shrank back in her chair, and in her altered face he read that he had disgraced himself.

"I knew I was going to," he said in despair. "I couldn't keep it--I couldn't stop it. And now that you see what sort of a man I am I'm going to tell you more."

"You need not," she said faintly.

"I must. Listen! I--I don't even know your full name--all I know is that it is Betty, and that your cat's name is Clarence and your plumber's name is Quinn. But if I didn't know anything at all concerning you it would have been the same. I suppose you will think me insane if I tell you that before the car, on which you rode, came into sight I *knew* you were on it. And I--cared--for--you--before I ever saw you."

"I don't understand----"

"I know you don't. *I* don't. All I understand is that what you and I have done has been done by us before, sometime, somewhere--part only-- down to--down to where you changed cars. Up to that moment, before you took the Lexington Avenue car, I recognized each incident as it occurred.... But when all this happened to us before I must have lost courage--for I did not recognize anything after that except that I cared for you.... *Do* you understand one single word of what I have been saying?"

The burning color in her face had faded slowly while he was speaking; her lifted eyes grew softer, serious, as he ended impetuously.

She looked at him in retrospective silence. There was no mistaking his astonishing sincerity, his painfully earnest endeavor to impart to her some rather unusual ideas in which he certainly believed. No man who looked that way at a woman could mean impertinence; her own intelligence satisfied her that he had not meant and could never mean offense to any woman.

"Tell me," she said quietly, "just what you mean. It is not possible for you to--care--for--me.... Is it?"

He disclosed to her, beginning briefly with his own name, material and social circumstances, a pocket edition of his hitherto uneventful career, the advent that morning of the emissary from The Green Mouse, his discussion with Smith, the strange sensation which crept over him as he emerged from the tunnel at Forty-second Street, his subsequent altercation with Smith, and the events that ensued up to the eruption of Clarence.

He spoke in his most careful attorney's manner, frank, concise, convincing, free from any exaggeration of excitement or emotion. And she listened, alternately fascinated and appalled as, step by step,

his story unfolded the links in an apparently inexorable sequence involving this young man and herself in a predestined string of episodes not yet ended-- if she permitted herself to credit this astounding story.

Sensitively intelligent, there was no escaping the significance of the only possible deduction. She drew it and blushed furiously. For a moment, as the truth clamored in her brain, the self-evidence of it stunned her. But she was young, and the shamed recoil came automatically. Incredulous, almost exasperated, she raised her head to confront him; the red lips parted in outraged protest--parted and remained so, wordless, silent--the soundless, virginal cry dying unuttered on a mouth that had imperceptibly begun to tremble.

Her head sank slowly; she laid her white hands above the roses heaped in her lap.

For a long while she remained so. And he did not speak.

First the butler went away. Then Mr. Quinn followed. The maid had not yet arrived. The house was very still.

And after the silence had worn his self-control to the breaking point he rose and walked to the dining room and stood looking down into the yard. The grass out there was long and unkempt; roses bloomed on the fence; wistaria, in its deeper green of midsummer, ran riot over the trellis where Clarence had basely dodged his lovely mistress, and, after making a furry pin wheel of himself, had fled through the airhole into Stygian depths.

Somewhere above, in the silent house, Clarence was sulkily dissembling.

"I suppose," said Brown, quietly coming back to where the girl was sitting in the golden dusk, "that I might as well find Clarence while we are waiting for your maid. May I go up and look about?"

And taking her silence as assent, he started upstairs.

He hunted carefully, thoroughly, opening doors, peeping under furniture, investigating clothespresses, listening at intervals, at intervals calling with misleading mildness. But, like him who died in malmsey, Clarence remained perjured and false to all sentiments of decency so often protested purringly to his fair young mistress.

Mechanically Brown opened doors of closets, knowing, if he had stopped to think, that cats don't usually turn knobs and let themselves into tightly closed places.

In one big closet on the fifth floor, however, as soon as he opened the door there came a rustle, and he sprang forward to intercept the perfidious one; but it was only the air stirring the folds of garments hanging on the wall.

As he turned to step forth again the door gently closed with an ominous click, shutting him inside. And after five minutes' frantic fussing he realized that he was imprisoned by a spring lock at the top of a strange house, inhabited only by a cat and a bewildered young girl, who might, at any moment now that the telephone was in order, call a cab and flee from a man who had tried to explain to her that they were irrevocably predestined for one another.

Calling and knocking were dignified and permissible, but they did no good. To kick violently at the door was not dignified, but he was obliged to do it. Evidently the closet was too remote for the sound to penetrate down four flights of stairs.

He tried to break down the door--they do it in all novels. He only rebounded painfully, ineffectively, which served him right for reading fiction.

It irked him to shout; he hesitated for a long while; then sudden misgiving lest she might flee the house seized him and he bellowed. It was no use.

The pitchy quality of the blackness in the closet aided him in bruising himself; he ran into a thousand things of all kinds of shapes and textures every time he moved. And at each fresh bruise he grew madder and madder, and, holding the cat responsible, applied language to Clarence of which he had never dreamed himself capable.

Then he sat down. He remained perfectly still for a long while, listening and delicately feeling his hurts. A curious drowsiness began to irritate him; later the irritation subsided and he felt a little sleepy.

His heart, however, thumped like an inexpensive clock; the cedar-tainted air in the closet grew heavier; he felt stupid, swaying as he rose. No wonder, for the closet was as near air-tight as it could be made. Fortunately he did not realize it.

And, meanwhile, downstairs, Betty was preparing for flight.

She did not know where she was going--how far away she could get in a rose-silk morning gown. But she had discovered, in a clothespress, an automobile duster, cap, and goggles; on the strength of these she tried the telephone, found it working, summoned a coupé, and was now awaiting its advent. But the maid from Dooley's must first arrive to take charge of the house and Clarence until she, Betty, could summon her family to her assistance and defy The Green Mouse, Beekman Brown, and Destiny behind her mother's skirts.

Flight was, therefore, imperative--it was absolutely indispensable that she put a number of miles between herself and this young man who had just informed her that Fate had designed them for one another.

She was no longer considering whether she owed this amazing young man any gratitude, or what sort of a man he might be, agreeable, well-bred, attractive; all she understood was that this man had suddenly stepped into her life, politely expressing his conviction that they could not, ultimately, hope to escape from each other. And, beginning to realize the awful import of his words, the only thing that restrained her from instant flight on foot was the hidden Clarence. She could not abandon her cat. She must wait for that maid. She waited. Meanwhile she hunted up Dooley's Agency in the telephone book and called them up. They told her the maid was on the way--as though Dooley's Agency could thwart Destiny with a whole regiment of its employees!

She had discarded her roses with a shudder; cap, goggles, duster, lay in her lap. If the maid came before Brown returned she'd flee. If Brown came back before the maid arrived she'd tell him plainly what she had decided on, thank him, tell him kindly but with decision that, considering the incredible circumstances of their encounter, she must decline to encourage any hope he might entertain of ever again seeing her.

At this stern resolve her heart, being an automatic and independent affair, refused to approve, and began an unpleasantly irregular series of beats which annoyed her.

"It is true," she admitted to herself, "that he is a gentleman, and I can scarcely be rude enough, after what he has done for me, to leave him without any explanation at all.... His clothes are ruined. I must remember that."

Her heart seemed to approve such sentiments, and it beat more regularly as she seated herself at a desk, found in it a sheet of notepaper and a pencil, and wrote rapidly:

"*Dear Mr. Brown:*

"If my maid comes before you do I am going. I can't help it. The maid will stay to look after Clarence until I can return with some of the family. I don't mean to be rude, but I simply cannot stand what you told me about our--about what you told me.... I'm sorry you tore your clothes.

"Please believe my flight has nothing to do with you personally or your conduct, which was perfectly ('charming' scratched out) proper. It is only that to be suddenly told that one is predestined to ('marry' scratched out) become intimately acquainted (all this scratched out and a new line begun).

"It is unendurable for a girl to think that there is no freedom of choice in life left her--to be forced, by what you say are occult currents, into--friendship--with a perfectly strange man at the other end. So I don't think we had better ever again attempt to find anybody to present us to each other. This doesn't sound right, but you will surely understand.

"Please do not misjudge me. I must appear to you uncivil, ungrateful, and childish--but I am, somehow, a little frightened. I know you are perfectly nice--but all that has happened is almost, in a way, terrifying to me. Not that I am cowardly; but you must understand. You will--won't you?.... But what is the use of my asking you, as I shall never see you again.

"So I am only going to thank you, and say ('with all my heart' crossed out) very cordially, that you have been most kind, most generous and considerate--most--most----"

Her pencil faltered; she looked into space, and the image of Beekman Brown, pleasant-eyed, attractive, floated unbidden out of vacancy and looked at her.

She stared back at the vision curiously, more curiously as her mind evoked the agreeable details of his features, resting there, chin on the back of her hand, from which, presently, the pencil fell unheeded.

What could he be doing upstairs all this while. She had not heard him for many minutes now. Why was he so still?

She straightened up at her desk and glanced uneasily across her shoulder, listening.

Not a sound from above; she rose and walked to the foot of the stairs.

Why was he so still? Had he found Clarence? Had anything gone wrong? Had Clarence become suddenly rabid and attacked him. Cats can't annihilate big, strong young men. But *where* was he? Had he, pursuing his quest, emerged through the scuttle on to the roof--and--and--fallen off?

Scarcely knowing what she did she mounted on tiptoe to the second floor, listening. The silence troubled her; she went from room to room, opening doors and clothespresses. Then she mounted to the third floor, searching more quickly. On the fourth floor she called to him in a voice not quite steady. There was no reply.

Alarmed now, she hurriedly flung open doors everywhere, then, picking up her rose-silk skirts, she ran to the top floor and called tremulously.

A faint sound answered; bewildered, she turned to the first closet at hand, and her cheeks suddenly blanched as she sprang to the door of the cedar press and tore it wide open.

He was lying on his face amid a heap of rolled rugs, clothes hangers and furs, quite motionless.

She knew enough to run into the servants' rooms, fling open the windows and, with all the strength in her young body, drag the inanimate youth across the floor and into the fresh air.

"O-h!" she said, and said it only once. Then, ashy of lip and cheek, she took hold of Brown and, lashing her memory to help her in the emergency, performed for that inanimate gentleman the rudiments of an exercise which, if done properly, is supposed to induce artificial respiration.

It certainly induced something resembling it in Brown. After a while he made unlovely and inarticulate sounds; after a while the sounds became articulate. He said: "Betty!" several times, more or less distinctly. He opened one eye, then the other; then his hands closed on the hands that were holding his wrists; he looked up at her from where he lay on the floor. She, crouched beside him, eyes still dilated with the awful fear of death, looked back, breathless, trembling.

"That is a devil of a place, that closet," he said faintly.

She tried to smile, tried wearily to free her hands, watched them, dazed, being drawn toward him, drawn tight against his lips--felt his lips on them.

Then, without warning, an incredible thrill shot through her to the heart, stilling it--silencing pulse and breath--nay, thought itself. She heard him speaking; his words came to her like distant sounds in a dream:

"I cared for you. You give me life--and I adore you.... Let me. It will not harm you. The problem of life is solved for me; I have solved it; but unless some day you will prove it for me--Betty--the problem of life is but a sorry sum--a total of ciphers without end.... No other two people in all the world could be what we are and what we have been to each other. No other two people could dare to face what we dare face." He paused: "Dare we, Betty?"

Her eyes turned from his. He rose unsteadily, supported on one arm; she sprang to her feet, looked at him, and, as he made an awkward effort to rise, suddenly bent forward and gave him both hands in aid.

"Wait--wait!" she said; "let me try to think, if I can. Don't speak to me again--not yet--not now."

But, at intervals, as they descended the flights of stairs, she turned instinctively to watch his progress, for he still moved with difficulty.

In the drawing-room they halted, he leaning heavily on the back of a chair, she, distrait, restless, pacing the polished parquet, treading her roses under foot, turning from time to time to look at him--a strange, direct, pure-lidded gaze that seemed to freshen his very soul.

Once he stooped and picked up one of the trodden roses bruised by her slim foot; once, as she passed him, pacing absently the space between the door and him, he spoke her name.

But: "Wait!" she breathed. "You have said everything. It is for me to reply--if I speak at all. C-can't you wait for--me?"

"Have I angered you?"

She halted, head high, superb in her slim, young beauty.

"Do I look it?"

"I don't know."

"Nor I. Let me find out."

The room had become dimmer; the light on her hair and face and hands glimmered dully as she passed and re-passed him in her restless progress-- restless, dismayed, frightened progress toward a goal she already saw ahead--close ahead of her--every time she turned to look at him. She already knew the end.

That man! And she knew that already he must be, for her, something that she could never again forget--something she must reckon with forever and ever while life endured.

She paused and inspected him almost insolently. Suddenly the rush of the last revolt overwhelmed her; her eyes blazed, her white hands tightened into two small clenched fists--and then tumult died in her ringing ears, the brightness of the eyes was quenched, her hands relaxed, her head sank low, lower, never again to look on this man undismayed, heart free, unafraid--never again to look into this man's eyes with the unthinking, unbelieving tranquillity born of the most harmless skepticism in the world.

She stood there in silence, heard his step beside her, raised her head with an effort.

"Betty!"

Her hands quivered, refusing surrender. He bent and lifted them, pressing them to his eyes, his forehead. Then lowered them to the level of his lips, holding them suspended, eyes looking into hers, waiting.

Suddenly her eyes closed, a convulsive little tremor swept her, she pressed both clasped hands against his lips, her own moved, but no words came--only a long, sweet, soundless sigh, soft as the breeze

that stirs the crimson maple buds when the snows of spring at last begin to melt.

From a dark corner under the piano Clarence watched them furtively.

XII

SYBILLA

Showing What Comes of Disobedience, Rosium, and Flour-Paste

About noon Bushwyck Carr bounced into the gymnasium, where the triplets had just finished their fencing lesson.

"Did any of you three go into the laboratory this morning?" he demanded, his voice terminating in a sort of musical bellow, like the blast of a mellow French horn on a touring car.

The triplets--Flavilla, Drusilla, and Sybilla--all clothed precisely alike in knee kilts, plastrons, gauntlets and masks, came to attention, saluting their parent with their foils. The Boznovian fencing mistress, Madame Tzinglala, gracefully withdrew to the dressing room and departed.

"Which of you three girls went into the laboratory this morning?" repeated their father impatiently.

The triplets continued to stand in a neat row, the buttons of their foils aligned and resting on the hardwood floor. In graceful unison they removed their masks; three flushed and unusually pretty faces regarded the author of their being attentively--more attentively still when that round and ruddy gentleman, executing a facial contortion, screwed his monocle into an angry left eye and glared.

"Didn't I warn you to keep out of that laboratory?" he asked wrathfully; "didn't I explain to you that it was none of your business? I believe I informed you that whatever is locked up in that room is no concern of yours. Didn't I?"

"Yes, Pa-*pah*."

"Well, confound it, what did you go in for, then?"

An anxious silence was his answer. "You didn't all go in, did you?" he demanded in a melodious bellow.

"Oh, no, Pa-*pah!*"

"Did two of you go?"

"Oh-h, n-o, Pa-*pah!*"

"Well, which one did?"

The line of beauty wavered for a moment; then Sybilla stepped slowly to the front, three paces, and halted with downcast eyes.

"I told you not to, didn't I?" said her father, scowling the monocle out of his eye and reinserting it.

"Y-yes, Pa-*pah*."

"But you *did?*"

"Y-yes----"

"That will do! Flavilla! Drusilla! You are excused," dismissing the two guiltless triplets with a wave of the terrible eyeglass; and when they had faced to the rear and retired in good order, closing the door behind them, he regarded his delinquent daughter in wrathy and rubicund dismay.

"What did you see in that laboratory?" he demanded.

Sybilla began to count on her fingers. "As I walked around the room I noticed jars, bottles, tubes, lamps, retorts, blowpipes, batteries----"

"Did you notice a small, shiny machine that somewhat resembles the interior economy of a watch?"

"Yes, Pa-*pah*, but I haven't come to that yet----"

"Did you go near it?"

"Quite near----"

"You didn't touch it, did you?"

"I was going to tell you----"

"*Did* you?" he bellowed musically. "Answer me, Sybilla!"

"Y-yes--I did."

"What did you suppose it to be?"

"I thought--we all thought--that you kept a wireless telephone instrument in there----"

"Why? Just because I happen to be president of the Amalgamated Wireless Trust Company?"

"Yes. And we were dying to see a wireless telephone work.... I thought I'd like to call up Central--just to be sure I could make the thing go-- *What* is the matter, Pa-*pah?*"

He dropped into a wadded armchair and motioned Sybilla to a seat opposite. Then with another frightful facial contortion he reimbedded the monocle.

"So you deliberately opened that door and went in to rummage?"

"No," said the girl; "we were--skylarking a little, on our way to the gymnasium; and I gave Brasilia a little shove toward the laboratory door, and then Flavilla pushed me--very gently--and somehow I--the door flew open and my mask fell off and rolled inside; and I went in after it. That is how it happened--partly."

She lifted her dark and very beautiful eyes to her stony parent, then they dropped, and she began tracing figures and arabesques on the polished floor with the point of her foil. "That is partly how," she repeated.

"What is the other part?"

"The other part was that, having unfortunately disobeyed you, and being already in the room, I thought I might as well stay and take a little peep around----"

Her father fairly bounced in his padded chair. The velvet-eyed descendant of Eve shot a fearful glance at him and continued, still casually tracing invisible arabesques with her foil's point.

"You see, don't you," she said, "that being actually *in*, I thought I might as well do something before I came out again, which would make my disobedience worth the punishment. So I first picked up my mask, then I took a scared peep around. There were only jars and bottles and things.... I was dreadfully disappointed. The certainty of being punished and then, after all, seeing nothing but bottles, *did* seem rather unfair.... So I--walked around to--to see if I could find something to look at which would repay me for the punishment.... There is a proverb, isn't there Pa-*pah?*--something about being executed for a lamb----"

"Go on!" he said sharply.

"Well, all I could find that looked as though I had no business to touch it was a little jeweled machine----"

"*That* was it! Did you touch it?"

"Yes, several times. Was it a wireless?"

"Never mind! Yes, it's one kind of a wireless instrument. Go on!"

Sybilla shook her head:

"I'm sure I don't see why you are so disturbingly emphatic; because I haven't an idea how to send or receive a wireless message, and I hadn't the vaguest notion how that machine might work. I tried very hard to make it go; I turned several screws and pushed all the push-buttons----"

Mr. Carr emitted a hollow, despairing sound--a sort of musical groan--and feebly plucked at space.

"I tried every lever, screw, and spring," she went on calmly, "but the machine must have been out of order, for I only got one miserable little spark----"

"You got a *spark?*"

"Yes--just a tiny, noiseless atom of white fire----"

Her father bounced to his feet and waved both hands at her distractedly.

"Do you know what you've done?" he bellowed.

"N-no----"

"Well, you've prepared yourself to fall in love! And you've probably induced some indescribable pup to fall in love with you! And *that's* what you've done!"

"In--*love!*"

"Yes, you have!"

"But how can a common wireless telephone----"

"It's another kind of a wireless. Your brother-in-law, William Destyn, invented it; I'm backing it and experimenting with it. I told you to keep out of that room. I hung up a sign on the door: *'Danger! Keep out!'*"

"W-was that thing loaded?"

"Yes, it *was* loaded!"

"W-what with?"

"Waves!" shouted her father, furiously. "Psychic waves! You little ninny, we've just discovered that the world and everything in it is enveloped in psychic waves, as well as invisible electric currents. The minute you got near that machine and opened the receiver, waves from your subconscious personality flowed into it. And the minute you touched that spring and got a spark, your psychic waves had

signaled, by wireless, the subconscious personality of some young man--some insufferable pup--who'll come from wherever he is at present--from the world's end if need be--and fall in love with you."

Mr. Carr jumped ponderously up and down in pure fury; his daughter regarded him in calm consternation.

"I am so very, very sorry," she said; "but I am quite certain that I am not going to fall in love----"

"You can't help it," roared her father, "if that instrument worked."

"Is--is that what it's f-for?"

"That's what it's invented for; that's why I'm putting a million into it. Anybody on earth desiring to meet the person with whom they're destined, some time or other, to fall in love, can come to us, in confidence, buy a ticket, and be hitched on to the proper psychic connection which insures speedy courtship and marriage--Damnation!"

"Pa-*pah!*"

"I can't help it! Any self-respecting, God-fearing father would swear! Do you think I ever expected to have my daughters mixed up with this machine? My daughters wooed, engaged and married by *machinery!* And you're only eighteen; do you hear me? I won't have it! I'll certainly not have it!"

"But, dear, I don't in the least intend to fall in love and marry at eighteen. And if--*he*--really--comes, I'll tell him very frankly that I could not think of falling in love. I'll quietly explain that the machine went off by mistake and that I am only eighteen; and that Flavilla and Drusilla and I are not to come out until next winter. That," she added innocently, "ought to hold him."

"The thing to do," said her father, gazing fixedly at her, "is to keep you in your room until you're twenty!"

"Oh, Pa-*pah!*"

Mr. Carr smote his florid brow.

"You'll stay in for a week, anyway!" he thundered mellifluously. "No motoring party for you! That's your punishment. You'll be safe for today, anyhow; and by evening William Destyn will be back from Boston and I'll consult him as to the safest way to keep you out of the path of this whippersnapper you have managed to wake

up--evoke--stir out of space-- wherever he may be--whoever he may be--whatever he chances to call himself----"

"George," she murmured involuntarily.

"*What!!*"

She looked at her father, abashed, confused.

"How absurd of me," she said. "I don't know why I should have thought of that name, George; or why I should have said it out loud--that way--I really don't----"

"Who do you know named George?"

"N-nobody in particular that I can think of----"

"Sybilla! Be honest!"

"Really, I don't; I am always honest."

He knew she was truthful, always; but he said:

"Then why the devil did you look--er--so, so moonily at me and call me George?"

"I can't imagine--I can't understand----"

"Well, *I* can! You don't realize it, but that cub's name must be George! I'll look out for the Georges. I'm glad I've been warned. I'll see that no two-legged object named George enters this house! You'll never go anywhere where there's anybody named George if I can prevent it."

"I--I don't want to," she returned, almost ready to cry. "You are very cruel to me----"

"I wish to be. I desire to be a monster!" he retorted fiercely. "You're an exceedingly bad, ungrateful, undutiful, disobedient and foolish child. Your sisters and I are going to motor to Westchester and lunch there with your sister and your latest brother-in-law. And if they ask why you didn't come I'll tell them that it's because you're undutiful, and that you are not to stir outdoors for a week, or see anybody who comes into this house!"

"I--I suppose I d-deserve it," she acquiesced tearfully. "I'm quite ready to be disciplined, and quite willing not to see anybody named George-- ever! Besides, you have scared me d-dreadfully! I--I don't want to go out of the house."

And when her father had retired with a bounce she remained alone in the gymnasium, eyes downcast, lips quivering. Later still,

sitting in precisely the same position, she heard the soft whir of the touring car outside; then the click of the closing door.

"There they go," she said to herself, "and they'll have such a jolly time, and all those very agreeable Westchester young men will be there-- particularly Mr. Montmorency.... I *did* like him awfully; besides, his name is Julian, so it is p-perfectly safe to like him--and I *did* want to see how Sacharissa looks after her bridal trip."

Her lower lip trembled; she steadied it between her teeth, gazed miserably at the floor, and beat a desolate tattoo on it with the tip of her foil.

"I am being well paid for my disobedience," she whimpered. "Now I can't go out for a week; and it's April; and when I do go out I'll be so anxious all the while, peeping furtively at every man who passes and wondering whether his name might be George.... And it is going to be horridly awkward, too.... Fancy their bringing up some harmless dancing man named George to present to me next winter, and I, terrified, picking up my débutante skirts and running.... I'll actually be obliged to flee from every man until I know his name isn't George. Oh, dear! Oh, dear! What an awful outlook for this summer when we open the house at Oyster Bay! What a terrible vista for next winter!"

She naïvely dabbed a tear from her long lashes with the back of her gauntlet.

Her maid came, announcing luncheon, but she would have none of it, nor any other offered office, including a bath and a house gown.

"You go away somewhere, Bowles," she said, "and please, don't come near me, and don't let anybody come anywhere in my distant vicinity, because I am v-very unhappy, Bowles, and deserve to be--and I--I desire to be alone with c-conscience."

"But, Miss Sybilla----"

"No, no, no! I don't even wish to hear your voice--or anybody's. I don't wish to hear a single human sound of any description. I--*what* is that scraping noise in the library?"

"A man, Miss Sybilla----"

"A *man!* W-what's his name?"

"I don't know, miss. He's a workman--a paper hanger."

"Oh!"

"Did you wish me to ask him to stop scraping, miss?"

Sybilla laughed: "No, thank you." And she continued, amused at herself after her maid had withdrawn, strolling about the gymnasium, making passes with her foil at ring, bar, and punching bag. Her anxiety, too, was subsiding. The young have no very great capacity for continued anxiety. Besides, the first healthy hint of incredulity was already creeping in. And as she strolled about, swishing her foil, she mused aloud at her ease:

"What an extraordinary and horrid machine!... *How* can it do such exceedingly common things? And what a perfectly unpleasant way to fall in love--by machinery!... I had rather not know who I am some day to--to like--very much.... It is far more interesting to meet a man by accident, and never suspect you may ever come to care for him, than to buy a ticket, walk over to a machine full of psychic waves and ring up some strange man somewhere on earth."

With a shudder of disdain she dropped on to a lounge and took her face between both hands.

She was like her sisters, tall, prettily built, and articulated, with the same narrow feet and hands--always graceful when lounging, no matter what position her slim limbs fell into.

And now, in her fencing skirts of black and her black stockings, she was exceedingly ornamental, with the severe lines of the plastron accenting the white throat and chin, and the scarlet heart blazing over her own little heart--unvexed by such details as love and lovers. Yes, unvexed; for she had about come to the conclusion that her father had frightened her more than was necessary; that the instrument had not really done its worst; in fact, that, although she had been very disobedient, she had had a rather narrow escape; and nothing more serious than paternal displeasure was likely to be visited upon her.

Which comforted her to an extent that brought a return of appetite; and she rang for luncheon, and ate it with the healthy nonchalance usually so characteristic of her and her sisters.

"Now," she reflected, "I'll have to wait an hour for my bath"--one of the inculcated principles of domestic hygiene. So, rising, she strolled across the gymnasium, casting about for something interesting to do.

She looked out of the back windows. In New York the view from back windows is not imposing.

Tiring of the inartistic prospect she sauntered out and downstairs to see what her maid might be about. Bowles was sewing; Sybilla looked on for a while with languid interest, then, realizing that a long day of punishment was before her, that she deserved it, and that she ought to perform some act of penance, started contritely for the library with resolute intentions toward Henry James.

As she entered she noticed that the bookshelves, reaching part way to the ceiling, were shrouded in sheets. Also she encountered a pair of sawhorses overlaid with boards, upon which were rolls of green flock paper, several pairs of shears, a bucket of paste, a large, flat brush, a knife and a T-square.

"The paper hanger man," she said. "He's gone to lunch. I'll have time to seize on Henry James and flee."

Now Henry James, like some other sacred conventions, was, in that library, a movable feast. Sometimes he stood neatly arranged on one shelf, sometimes on another. There was no counting on Henry.

Sybilla lifted the sheets from the face of one case and peered closer. Henry was not visible. She lifted the sheets from another case; no Henry; only G.P.R., in six dozen rakish volumes.

Sybilla peeped into a third case. Then a very unedifying thing occurred. Surely, surely, this was Sybilla's disobedient day. She saw a forbidden book glimmering in old, gilded leather--she saw its classic back turned mockingly toward her--the whole allure of the volume was impudent, dog-eared, devil-may-care-who-reads-me.

She took it out, replaced it, looked hard, hard for Henry, found him not, glanced sideways at the dog-eared one, took a step sideways.

"I'll just see where it was printed," she said to herself, drawing out the book and backing off hastily--so hastily that she came into collision with the sawhorse table, and the paste splashed out of the bucket.

But Sybilla paid no heed; she was examining the title page of old Dog-ear: a rather wonderful title page, printed in fascinating red and black with flourishes.

"I'll just see whether--" And the smooth, white fingers hesitated; but she had caught a glimpse of an ancient engraving on the next page--a very quaint one, that held her fascinated.

"I wonder----"

She turned the next page. The first paragraph of the famous classic began deliciously. After a few moments she laughed, adding to herself: "I can't see what harm----"

There was no harm. Her father had meant another book; but Sybilla did not know that.

"I'll just glance through it to--to--be sure that I mustn't read it."

She laid one hand on the paper hanger's table, vaulted up sideways, and, seated on the top, legs swinging, buried herself in the book, unconscious that the overturned paste was slowly fastening her to the spattered table top.

An hour later, hearing steps on the landing, she sprang--that is, she went through all the graceful motions of springing lightly to the floor. But she had not budged an inch. No Gorgon's head could have consigned her to immovability more hopeless.

Restrained from freedom by she knew not what, she made one frantic and demoralized effort--and sank back in terror at the ominous tearing sound.

She was glued irrevocably to the table.

XIII

THE CROWN PRINCE

Wherein the Green Mouse Squeaks

A few minutes later the paper hanging young man entered, swinging an empty dinner pail and halted in polite surprise before a flushed young girl in full fencing costume, who sat on his operating table, feet crossed, convulsively hugging a book to the scarlet heart embroidered on her plastron.

"I--hope you don't mind my sitting here," she managed to say. "I wanted to watch the work."

"By all means," he said pleasantly. "Let me get you a chair----"

"No, thank you. I had rather sit th-this way. Please begin and don't mind if I watch you."

The young man appeared to be perplexed.

"I'm afraid," he ventured, "that I may require that table for cutting and----"

"Please--if you don't mind--begin to paste. I am in-intensely interested in p-pasting--I like to w-watch p-paper p-pasted on a w-wall."

Her small teeth chattered in spite of her; she strove to control her voice--strove to collect her wits.

He stood irresolute, rather astonished, too.

"I'm sorry," he said, "but----"

"*Please* paste; won't you?" she asked.

"Why, I've got to have that table to paste on----"

"Then d-don't think of pasting. D-do anything else; cut out some strips. I am so interested in watching p-paper hangers cut out things--"

"But I need the table for that, too----"

"No, you don't. You can't be a--a very skillful w-workman if you've got to use your table for everything----"

He laughed. "You are quite right; I'm not a skillful paper hanger."

"Then," she said, "I am surprised that you came here to paper our library, and I think you had better go back to your shop and send a competent man."

He laughed again. The paper hanger's youthful face was curiously attractive when he laughed--and otherwise, more or less.

He said: "I came to paper this library because Mr. Carr was in a hurry, and I was the only man in the shop. I didn't want to come. But they made me.... I think they're rather afraid of Mr. Carr in the shop.... And this work *must* be finished today."

She did not know what to say; anything to keep him away from the table until she could think clearly.

"W-why didn't you want to come?" she asked, fighting for time. "You said you didn't want to come, didn't you?"

"Because," he said, smiling, "I don't like to hang wall paper."

"But if you are a paper hanger by trade----"

"I suppose you think me a real paper hanger?"

She was cautiously endeavoring to free one edge of her skirt; she nodded absently, then subsided, crimsoning, as a faint tearing of cloth sounded.

"Go on," she said hurriedly; "the story of your career is *so* interesting. You say you adore paper hanging----"

"No, I don't," he returned, chagrined. "I say I hate it."

"Why do you do it, then?"

"Because my father thinks that every son of his who finishes college ought to be disciplined by learning a trade before he enters a profession. My oldest brother, De Courcy, learned to be a blacksmith; my next brother, Algernon, ran a bakery; and since I left Harvard I've been slapping sheets of paper on people's walls----"

"Harvard?" she repeated, bewildered.

"Yes; I was 1907."

"*You!*"

He looked down at his white overalls, smiling.

"Does that astonish you, Miss Carr?--you are Miss Carr, I suppose----"

"Sybilla--yes--we're--we're triplets," she stammered.

"The beauti--the--the Carr triplets! And you are one of them?" he exclaimed, delighted.

"Yes." Still bewildered, she sat there, looking at him. How extraordinary! How strange to find a Harvard man pasting paper! Dire misgivings flashed up within her.

"Who are you?" she asked tremulously. "Would you mind telling me your name. It--it isn't--*George!*"

He looked up in pleased surprise:

"So you know who I am?"

"N-no. But--it isn't George--is it?"

"Why, yes----"

"O-h!" she breathed. A sense of swimming faintness enveloped her: she swayed; but an unmistakable ripping noise brought her suddenly to herself.

"I am afraid you are tearing your skirt somehow," he said anxiously. "Let me----"

"No!"

The desperation of the negative approached violence, and he involuntarily stepped back.

For a moment they faced one another; the flush died out on her cheeks.

"If," she said, "your name actually is George, this--this is the most-- the most terrible punishment--" She closed her eyes with her fingers as though to shut out some monstrous vision.

"What," asked the amazed young man, "has my name to do with----"

Her hands dropped from her eyes; with horror she surveyed him, his paste-spattered overalls, his dingy white cap, his dinner pail.

"I--I *won't* marry you!" she stammered in white desperation. "I *won't!* If you're not a paper hanger you look like one! I don't care whether you're a Harvard man or not--whether you're playing at paper hanging or not--whether your name is George or not--I won't marry you--I won't! I *won't!*"

With the feeling that his senses were rapidly evaporating the young man sat down dizzily, and passed a paste-spattered but well-shaped hand across his eyes.

Sybilla set her lips and looked at him.

"I don't suppose," she said, "that you understand what I am talking about, but I've got to tell you at once; I can't stand this sort of thing."

"W-what sort of thing?" asked the young man, feebly.

"Your being here in this house--with me----"

"I'll be very glad to go----"

"Wait! *That* won't do any good! You'll come back!"

"N-no, I won't----"

"Yes, you will. Or I--I'll f-follow you----"

"What?"

"One or the other! We can't help it, I tell you. *You* don't understand, but I do. And the moment I knew your name was George----"

"What the deuce has that got to do with anything?" he demanded, turning red in spite of his amazement.

"Waves!" she said passionately, "psychic waves! I--somehow--knew that he'd be named George----"

"Who'd be named George?"

"*He!* The--man... And if I ever--if you ever expect me to--to c-care for a man all over overalls----"

"But I don't--Good Heavens!--I don't expect you to care for--for overalls----"

"Then why do you wear them?" she asked in tremulous indignation.

The young man, galvanized, sprang from his chair and began running about, taking little, short, distracted steps. "Either," he said, "I need mental treatment immediately, or I'll wake up toward morning.... I--don't know what you're trying to say to me. I came here to--to p-paste----"

"That machine sent you!" she said. "The minute I got a spark you started----"

"Do you think I'm a motor? Spark! Do you think I----"

"Yes, I do. You couldn't help it; I know it was my own fault, and this-- *this* is the dreadful punishment--g-glued to a t-table top--with a man named George----"

"What!!!"

"Yes," she said passionately, "everything disobedient I have done has brought lightning retribution. I was forbidden to go into the laboratory; I disobeyed and--you came to hang wall paper! I--I took a b-book--which I had no business to take, and F-fate glues me to your horrid table and holds me fast till a man named George comes in...."

Flushed, trembling, excited, she made a quick and dramatic gesture of despair; and a ripping sound rent the silence.

"*Are you pasted to that table?*" faltered the young man, aghast.

"Yes, I am. And it's utterly impossible for you to aid me in the slightest, except by pretending to ignore it."

"But you--you can't remain there!"

"I can't help remaining here," she said hotly, "until you go."

"Then I'd better----"

"No! You shall *not* go! I--I won't have you go away--disappear somewhere in the city. Certainty is dreadful enough, but it's better than the awful suspense of knowing you are somewhere in the world, and are sure to come back sometime----"

"But I don't want to come back!" he exclaimed indignantly. "Why should I wish to come back? Have I said--acted--done--looked--*Why* should you imagine that I have the slightest interest in anything or in--in--anybody in this house?"

"Haven't you?"

"No!... And I cannot ignore your--your amazing--and intensely f-flattering fear that I have d-designs--that I desire--in other words, that I--er--have dared to cherish impossible aspirations in connection with a futile and absurd hope that one day you might possibly be induced to listen to any tentative suggestion of mine concerning a matrimonial alliance----"

He choked and turned a dull red.

She reddened, too, but said calmly:

"Thank you for putting it so nicely. But it is no use. Sooner or later you and I will be obliged to consider a situation too hopeless to admit of discussion."

"What situation?"

"Ours."

"I can't see any situation--except your being glued--I *beg* your pardon!--but I must speak truthfully."

"So must I. Our case is too desperate for anything but plain and terrible truths. And the truths are these: *I* touched the forbidden machine and got a spark; your name is George; *I'm* glued here, unable to escape; *you* are not rude enough to go when I ask you not to.... And now--here-- in this room, you and I must face these facts and make up our minds.... For I simply *must* know what I am to expect; I can't endure--I couldn't live with this hanging over me----"

"*What* hanging over you?"

He sprang to his feet, waving his dinner pail around in frantic circles:

"What is it, in Heaven's name, that is hanging over you?"

"Over *you*, too!"

"Over me?"

"Certainly. Over us both. We are headed straight for m-marriage."

"T-to *each other?*"

"Of course," she said faintly. "Do you think I'd care whom you are going to marry if it wasn't I? Do you think I'd discuss my own marital intentions with you if you did not happen to be vitally concerned?"

"Do *you* expect to marry *me?*" he gasped.

"I--I don't *want* to: but I've got to."

He stood petrified for an instant, then with a wild look began to gather up his tools.

She watched him with the sickening certainty that if he got away she could never survive the years of suspense until his inevitable return. A mad longing to get the worst over seized her. She knew the worst, knew what Fate held for her. And she desired to get it over--have the worst happen--and be left to live out the shattered remains of her life in solitude and peace.

"If--if we've got to marry," she began unsteadily, "why not g-get it over quickly--and then I don't mind if you go away."

She was quite mad: that was certain. He hastily flung some brushes into his tool kit, then straightened up and gazed at her with deep compassion.

"Would you mind," she asked timidly, "getting somebody to come in and marry us, and then the worst will be over, you see, and we need never, never see each other again."

He muttered something soothing and began tying up some rolls of wall paper.

"Won't you do what I ask?" she said pitifully. "I-I am almost afraid that--if you go away without marrying me I could not live and endure the--the certainty of your return."

He raised his head and surveyed her with deepest pity. Mad--quite mad! And so young--so exquisite... so perfectly charming in body! And the mind darkened forever.... How terrible! How strange, too; for in the pure-lidded eyes he seemed to see the soft light of reason not entirely quenched.

Their eyes encountered, lingered; and the beauty of her gaze seemed to stir him to the very wellspring of compassion.

"Would it make you any happier to believe--to know," he added hastily, "that you and I were married?"

"Y-yes, I think so."

"Would you be quite happy to believe it?"

"Yes--if you call that happiness."

"And you would not be unhappy if I never returned?"

"Oh, no, no! I--that would make me--comparatively--happy!"

"To be married to me, and to know you would never again see me?"

"Yes. Will you?"

"Yes," he said soothingly. And yet a curious little throb of pain flickered in his heart for a moment, that, mad as she undoubtedly was, she should be so happy to be rid of him forever.

He came slowly across the room to the table on which she was sitting. She drew back instinctively, but an ominous ripping held her.

"Are you going for a license and a--a clergyman?" she asked.

"Oh, no," he said gently, "that is not necessary. All we have to do is to take each other's hands--so----"

She shrank back.

"You will have to let me take your hand," he explained.

She hesitated, looked at him fearfully, then, crimson, laid her slim fingers in his.

The contact sent a quiver straight through him; he squared his shoulders and looked at her.... Very, very far away it seemed as though he heard his heart awaking heavily.

What an uncanny situation! Strange--strange--his standing here to humor the mad whim of this stricken maid--this wonderfully sweet young stranger, looking out of eyes so lovely that he almost believed the dead intelligence behind them was quickening into life again.

"What must we do to be married?" she whispered.

"Say so; that is all," he answered gently. "Do you take me for your husband?"

"Yes.... Do you t-take me for your--wife?"

"Yes, dear----"

"Don't say *that*!... Is it--over?"

"All over," he said, forcing a gayety that rang hollow in the pathos of the mockery and farce.... But he smiled to be kind to her; and, to make the poor, clouded mind a little happier still, he took her hand again and said very gently:

"Will it surprise you to know that you are now a princess?"

"A--*what?*" she asked sharply.

"A princess." He smiled benignly on her, and, still beaming, struck a not ungraceful attitude.

"I," he said, "am the Crown Prince of Rumtifoo."

She stared at him without a word; gradually he lost countenance; a vague misgiving stirred within him that he had rather overdone the thing.

"Of course," he began cheerfully, "I am an exile in disguise--er--disinherited and all that, you know."

She continued to stare at him.

"Matters of state--er--revolution--and that sort of thing," he mumbled, eying her; "but I thought it might gratify you to know that I am Prince George of Rumtifoo----"

"*What!*"

The silence was deadly.

"Do you know," she said deliberately, "that I believe you think I am mentally unsound. *Do* you?"

"I--you--" he began to stutter fearfully.

"*Do* you?"

"W-well, either you or I----"

"Nonsense! I *thought* that marriage ceremony was a miserably inadequate affair!... And I am hurt--grieved--amazed that you should do such a--a cowardly----"

"What!" he exclaimed, stung to the quick.

"Yes, it is cowardly to deceive a woman."

"I meant it kindly--supposing----"

"That I am mentally unsound? Why do you suppose that?"

"Because--Good Heavens--because in this century, and in this city, people who never before saw one another don't begin to talk of marrying----"

"I explained to you"--she was half crying now, and her voice broke deliciously--"I told you what I'd done, didn't I?"

"You said you had got a spark," he admitted, utterly bewildered by her tears. "Don't cry--please don't. Something is all wrong here--there is some terrible misunderstanding. If you will only explain it to me----"

She dried her eyes mechanically: "Come here," she said. "I don't believe I did explain it clearly."

And, very carefully, very minutely, she began to tell him about the psychic waves, and the instrument, and the new company formed to exploit it on a commercial basis.

She told him what had happened that morning to her; how her disobedience had cost her so much misery. She informed him about her father, and that florid and rotund gentleman's choleric character.

"If you are here when I tell him I'm married," she said, "he will probably frighten you to death; and that's one of the reasons why I wish to get it over and get you safely away before he returns. As for me, now that I know the worst, I want to get the worst over and--and live out my life quietly somewhere.... So now you see why I am in such a hurry, don't you?"

He nodded as though stunned, leaning there on the table, hands folded, head bent.

"I am so very sorry--for you," she said. "I know how you must feel about it. But if we are obliged to marry some time had we not better get it over and then--never--see--one another----"

He lifted his head, then stood upright.

Her soft lips were mute, but the question still remained in her eyes.

So, for a long while, they looked at each other; and the color under his cheekbones deepened, and the pink in her cheeks slowly became pinker.

"Suppose," he said, under his breath, "that I--wish--to return--to you?"

"*I* do not wish it----"

"Try."

"Try to--to wish for----"

"For my return. Try to wish that you also desire it. Will you?"

"If you are going to--to talk that way--" she stammered.

"Yes, I am."

"Then--then----"

"Is there any reason why I should not, if we are engaged?" he asked. "We *are*--engaged, are we not?"

"Engaged?"

"Yes. Are we?"

"I--yes--if you call it----"

"I do.... And we are to be--married?" He could scarcely now speak the word which but a few moments since he pronounced so easily; for a totally new significance attached itself to every word he uttered.

"Are we?" he repeated.

"Yes."

"Then--if I--if I find that I----"

"Don't say it," she whispered. She had turned quite white.

"Will you listen----"

"No. It--it isn't true--it cannot be."

"It is coming truer every moment.... It is very, very true--even now.... It is almost true.... And now it has come true. Sybilla!"

White, dismayed, she gazed at him, her hands instinctively closing her ears. But she dropped them as he stepped forward.

"I love you, Sybilla. I wish to marry you.... Will you try to care for me--a little----"

"I couldn't--I can't even try----"

"Dear----"

He had her hands now; she twisted them free; he caught them again. Over their interlocked hands she bowed her head, breathless, cheeks aflame, seeking to cover her eyes.

"Will you love me, Sybilla?"

She struggled silently, desperately.

"*Will* you?" "No.... Let me go----"

"Don't cry--please, dear--" His head, bowed beside hers over their clasped hands, was more than she could endure; but her upflung face, seeking escape, encountered his. There was a deep, indrawn breath, a sob, and she lay, crying her heart out, in his arms.

"Darling!"

"W-what?"

It is curious how quickly one recognizes unfamiliar forms of address.

"You won't cry any more, will you?" he whispered.

"N-n-o," sighed Sybilla.

"Because we *do* love each other, don't we?"

"Y-yes, George." Then, radiant, yet sweetly shamed, confident, yet fearful, she lifted her adorable head from his shoulder.

"George," she said, "I am beginning to think that I'd like to get off this table."

"You poor darling!"

"And," she continued, "if you will go home and change your overalls for something more conventional, you shall come and dine with us this evening, and I will be waiting for you in the drawing-room.... And, George, although some of your troubles are now over----"

"All of them, dearest!" he cried with enthusiasm.
"No," she said tenderly, "you are yet to meet Pa-*pah*."

XIV

GENTLEMEN OF THE PRESS

A Chapter Concerning Drusilla, Pa-pah and a Minion

Capital had now been furnished for The Green Mouse, Limited; a great central station of white marble was being built, facing Madison Avenue and occupying the entire block front between Eighty-second and Eighty-third streets.

The building promised to be magnificent; the plans provided for a thousand private operating rooms, each beautifully furnished in Louis XVI style, a restaurant, a tea room, a marriage licence bureau, and an emergency chapel where first aid clergymen were to be always in attendance.

In each of the thousand Louis XVI operating rooms a Destyn-Carr wireless instrument was to stand upon a rococo table. A maid to every two rooms, a physician to every ten, and smelling salts to each room, were provided for in this gigantic enterprise.

Millions of circulars were being prepared to send broadcast over the United States. They read as follows:

ARE YOU IN LOVE? IF NOT, WHY NOT?

Wedlock by Wireless. Marriage by Machinery. A Wondrous Wooer Without Words! No more doubt; no more hesitation; no more uncertainty. The Destyn-Carr Wireless Apparatus does it all for you. Happy Marriage Guaranteed or money eagerly refunded!

Psychical Science says that for every man and woman on earth there is a predestined mate!

That mate can be discovered for you by The Green Mouse, Limited.

Why waste time with costly courtship? Why frivol? Why fuss?

There is only ONE mate created for YOU. You pay us; We find that ONE, thereby preventing mistakes, lawsuits, elopements, regrets, grouches, alimony.

Divorce Absolutely Eliminated

By Our Infallible Wireless Method

Success Certain

It is now known the world over that Professor William Augustus Destyn has discovered that the earth we live on is enveloped in Psychical Currents. By the Destyn-Carr instrument these currents may be tapped, controlled and used to communicate between two people of opposite sex whose subconscious and psychic personalities are predestined to affinity and amorous accord. In other words, when psychic waves from any individual are collected or telegraphed along these wireless psychical currents, only that one affinity attuned to receive them can properly respond.

We catch your psychic waves for you. We send them out into the world.

WATCH THAT SPARK!

When you see a tiny bluish-white spark tip the tentacle of the Destyn-Carr transmitter,

THE WORLD IS YOURS!

for $25.

Our method is quick, painless, merciful and certain. Fee, twenty-five dollars in advance. Certified checks accepted.

THE GREEN MOUSE, Limited.

President PROF. WM. AUGUSTUS DESTYN.
Vice-Presidents THE HON. KILLIAN VAN K. VANDERDYNK.
THE HON. GEORGE GRAY, 3D.
Treasurer THE HON. BUSHWYCK CARR.

These circulars were composed, illuminated and printed upon vellum by what was known as an "Art" community in West Borealis, N.J. Several tons were expected for delivery early in June.

Meanwhile, the Carr family and its affiliations had invested every cent they possessed in Green Mouse, Limited; and those who controlled the stock were Bushwyck Carr; William Augustus Destyn and Mrs. Destyn, née Ethelinda Carr; Mr. Killian Van K. Vanderdynk and Mrs. Vanderdynk, née Sacharissa Carr; George Gray and Mrs. Gray, very lately Sybilla Carr; and the unmarried triplets, Flavilla and Drusilla Carr.

Remembering with a shudder how Bell Telephone and Standard Oil might once have been bought for a song, Bushwyck Carr

determined that in this case his pudgy fingers should not miss the forelock of Time and the divided skirts of Chance.

Squinting at the viewless ether through his monocle he beheld millions in it; so did William Augustus Destyn and the other sons-in-law.

Only the unmarried triplets, Flavilla and Drusilla, remained amiably indifferent in the midst of all these family financial scurryings and preparations to secure world patents in a monopoly which promised the social regeneration of the globe.

The considerable independent fortunes that their mother had left them they invested in Green Mouse, at their father's suggestion; but further than that they took no part in the affair.

For a while the hurry and bustle and secret family conferences mildly interested them. Very soon, however, the talk of psychic waves and millions bored them; and as soon as the villa at Oyster Bay was opened they were glad enough to go.

Here, at Oyster Bay, there was some chance of escaping their money-mad and wave-intoxicated family; they could entertain and be entertained by both of the younger sets in that dignified summer resort; they could wander about their own vast estate alone; they could play tennis, sail, swim, ride, and drive their tandem.

But best of all--for they were rather seriously inclined at the age of eighteen, or, rather, on the verge of nineteen--they adored sketching, in water colors, out of doors.

Scrubby forelands set with cedars, shadow-flecked paths under the scrub oak, meadows where water glimmered, white sails off Center Island and Cooper's Bluff--Cooper's Bluff from the north, northeast, east, southeast, south--this they painted with never-tiring, Pecksniffian patience, boxing the compass around it as enthusiastically as that immortal architect circumnavigated Salisbury Cathedral.

And one delicious morning in early June, when the dew sparkled on the poison ivy and the air was vibrant with the soft monotone of mosquitoes and the public road exhaled a delicate aroma of crude oil, Drusilla and Flavilla, laden with sketching-blocks, color-boxes, camp-stools, white umbrellas and bonbons, descended to the great hall, on sketching bent.

Mr. Carr also stood there, just outside on the porch, red, explosive, determined legs planted wide apart, defying several courtly reporters, who for a month had patiently and politely appeared every hour to learn whether Mr. Carr had anything to say about the new invention, rumors of which were flying thick about Park Row.

"No, I haven't!" he shouted in his mellow and sonorously musical bellow. "I have told you one hundred times that when I have anything to say I'll send for you. Now, permit me to inform you, for the hundred and first consecutive time, that I have nothing to say--which won't prevent you from coming back in an hour and standing in exactly the same ridiculous position you now occupy, and asking me exactly the same unmannerly questions, and taking the same impertinent snapshots at my house and my person!"

He executed a ferocious facial contortion, clapped the monocle into his left eye, and squinted fiercely.

"I'm getting tired of this!" he continued. "When I wake in the morning and look out of my window there are always anywhere from one to twenty reporters decorating my lawn! That young man over there is the worst and most persistent offender!"--scowling at a good-looking youth in white flannels, who immediately blushed distressingly. "Yes, you are, young man! I'm amazed that you have the decency to blush! Your insolent sheet, the Evening Star, refers to my Trust Company as a Green Mouse Trap and a *Mouse*leum. It also publishes preposterous pictures of myself and family. Dammit, sir, they even produce a photograph of Orlando, the family cat! You did it, I am told. Did you?"

"I am trying to do what I can for my paper, Mr. Carr," said the young man. "The public is interested."

Mr. Carr regarded him with peculiar hatred.

"Come here," he said; "I *have* got something to say to *you*."

The young man cautiously left the ranks of his fellows and came up on the porch. Behind Mr. Carr, in the doorway, stood Drusilla and Flavilla. The young man tried not to see them; he pretended not to. But he flushed deeply.

"I want to know," demanded Mr. Carr, "why the devil you are always around here blushing. You've been around here blushing for a month, and I want to know why you do it."

The youth stood speechless, features afire to the tips of his glowing ears.

"At first," continued Mr. Carr, mercilessly, "I had a vague hope that you might perhaps be blushing for shame at your profession; I heard that you were young at it, and I was inclined to be sorry for you. But I'm not sorry any more!"

The young man remained crimson and dumb.

"Confound it," resumed Mr. Carr, "I want to know why the deuce you come and blush all over my lawn. I won't stand it! I'll not allow anybody to come blushing around me----"

Indignation choked him; he turned on his heel to enter the house and beheld Flavilla and Drusilla regarding him, wide-eyed.

He went in, waving them away before him.

"I've taught that young pup a lesson," he said with savage satisfaction. "I'll teach him to blush at me! I'll----"

"But why," asked Drusilla, "are you so cruel to Mr. Yates? We like him."

"Mr.--Mr. *Yates!*" repeated her father, astonished. "Is that his name? And who told *you?*"

"He did," said Drusilla, innocently.

"He--that infernal newspaper bantam----"

"Pa-*pah!* Please don't say that about Mr. Yates. He is really exceedingly kind and civil to us. Every time you go to town on business he comes and sketches with us at----"

"Oh," said Mr. Carr, with the calm of deadly fury, "so he goes to Cooper's Bluff with you when I'm away, does he?"

Flavilla said: "He doesn't exactly go with us; but he usually comes there to sketch. He makes sketches for his newspaper."

"Does he?" asked her father, grinding his teeth.

"Yes," said Drusilla; "and he sketches so beautifully. He made such perfectly charming drawings of Flavilla and of me, and he drew pictures of the house and gardens, and of all the servants, and"--she

laughed--"I once caught a glimpse in his sketch-book of the funniest caricature of you----"

The expression on her father's face was so misleading in its terrible calm that she laughed again, innocently.

"It was not at all an offensive caricature, you know--really it was not a caricature at all--it was *you*--just the way you stand and look at people when you are--slightly--annoyed----"

"Oh, he is so clever," chimed in Flavilla, "and is so perfectly well-bred and so delightful to us--to Drusilla particularly. He wrote the prettiest set of verses--To Drusilla in June--just dashed them off while he was watching her sketch Cooper's Bluff from the southwest----"

"He is really quite wonderful," added Drusilla, sincerely, "and so generous and helpful when my drawing becomes weak and wobbly----"

"Mr. Yates shows Drusilla how to hold her pencil," said Flavilla, becoming warmly earnest in her appreciation of this self-sacrificing young man. "He often lays aside his own sketching and guides Drusilla's hand while she holds the pencil----"

"And when I'm tired," said Drusilla, "and the water colors get into a dreadful mess, Mr. Yates will drop his own work and come and talk to me about art--and other things----"

"He is *so* kind!" cried Flavilla in generous enthusiasm.

"And *so* vitally interesting," said Drusilla.

"And so talented!" echoed Flavilla.

"And so--" Drusilla glanced up, beheld something in the fixed stare of her parent that frightened her, and rose in confusion. "Have I said-- done--anything?" she faltered.

With an awful spasm Mr. Carr jerked his congested features into the ghastly semblance of a smile.

"Not at all," he managed to say. "This is very interesting--what you tell me about this p-pu--this talented young man. Does he--does he seem-- attracted toward you--unusually attracted?"

"Yes," said Drusilla, smiling reminiscently.

"How do you know?"

"Because he once said so."

"S-said--w-what?"

"Why, he said quite frankly that he thought me the most delightful girl he had ever met."

"What--else?" Mr. Carr's voice was scarcely audible.

"Nothing," said Drusilla; "except that he said he cared for me very much and wished to know whether I ever could care very much for him.... I told him I thought I could. Flavilla told him so, too.... And we all felt rather happy, I think; at least I did."

Her parent emitted a low, melodious sort of sound, a kind of mellifluous howl.

"Pa-pah!" they exclaimed in gentle consternation.

He beat at the empty air for a moment like a rotund fowl about to seek its roost. Suddenly he ran distractedly at an armchair and kicked it.

They watched him in sorrowful amazement.

"If we are going to sketch Cooper's Bluff this morning," observed Drusilla to Flavilla, "I think we had better go--quietly--by way of the kitchen garden. Evidently Pa-pah does not care for Mr. Yates."

Orlando, the family cat, strolled in, conciliatory tail hoisted. Mr. Carr hurled a cushion at Orlando, then beat madly upon his own head with both hands. Servants respectfully gave him room; some furniture was overturned--a chair or two--as he bounced upward and locked and bolted himself in his room.

What transports of fury he lived through there nobody else can know; what terrible visions of vengeance lit up his outraged intellect, what cold intervals of quivering hate, what stealthy schemes of reprisal, what awful retribution for young Mr. Yates were hatched in those dreadful moments, he alone could tell. And as he never did tell, how can I know?

However, in about half an hour his expression of stony malignity changed to a smile so cunningly devilish that, as he caught sight of himself in the mirror, his corrugated countenance really startled him.

"I must smooth out--smooth out!" he muttered. "Smoothness does it!" And he rang for a servant and bade him seek out a certain Mr. Yates among the throng of young men who had been taking snapshots.

XV

DRUSILLA

During Which Chapter Mr. Carr Sings and One of His Daughters Takes her Postgraduate

Mr. Yates came presently, ushered by Ferdinand, and looking extremely worried. Mr. Carr received him in his private office with ominous urbanity.

"Mr. Yates," he said, forcing a distorted smile, "I have rather abruptly decided to show you exactly how one of the Destyn-Carr instruments is supposed to work. Would you kindly stand here--close by this table?"

Mr. Yates, astounded, obeyed.

"Now," said Mr. Carr, with a deeply creased smile, "here is the famous Destyn-Carr apparatus. That's quite right--take a snapshot at it without my permission----"

"I--I thought----"

"Quite right, my boy; I intend you shall know all about it. You see it resembles the works of a watch.... Now, when I touch this spring the receiver opens and gathers in certain psychic waves which emanate from the subconscious personality of--well, let us say you, for example!... And now I touch this button. You see that slender hairspring of Rosium uncurl and rise, trembling and waving about like a tentacle?"

Young Yates, notebook in hand, recovered himself sufficiently to nod. Mr. Carr leered at him:

"That tentacle," he explained, "is now seeking some invisible, wireless, psychic current along which it is to transmit the accumulated psychic waves. As soon as the wireless current finds the subconscious personality of the woman you are destined to love and marry some day----"

"I?" exclaimed young Yates, horrified.

"Yes, you. Why not? Do you mind my trying it on you?"

"But I am already in love," protested the young man, turning, as usual, a ready red. "I don't care to have you try it on me. Suppose that machine should connect me with--some other--girl----"

"It has!" cried Carr with a hideous laugh as a point of bluish-white fire tipped the tentacle for an instant. "You're tied fast to something feminine! Probably a flossy typewriter--or a burlesque actress--somebody you're fitted for, anyway!" He clapped on his monocle, and glared gleefully at the stupefied young man.

"That will teach you to enter my premises and hold my daughter's hand when she is drawing innocent pictures of Cooper's Bluff!" he shouted. "That will teach you to write poems to my eighteen-year-old daughter, Drusilla; that will teach you to tell her you are in love with her--you young pup!"

"I am in love with her!" said Yates, undaunted; but he was very white when he said it. "I do love her; and if you had behaved halfway decently I'd have told you so two weeks ago!"

Mr. Carr turned a delicate purple, then, recovering, laughed horribly.

"Whether or not you were once in love with my daughter is of no consequence now. That machine has nullified your nonsense! That instrument has found you your proper affinity--doubtless below stairs----"

"I *am* still in love with Drusilla," repeated Yates, firmly.

"I tell you, you're not!" retorted Carr. "Didn't I turn that machine on you? It has never missed yet! The Green Mouse has got *you* in the Mouseleum!"

"You are mistaken," insisted Yates, still more firmly. "I was in love with your daughter Drusilla before you started the machine; and I love her yet! Now! At the present time! This very instant I am loving her!"

"You can't!" shouted Carr.

"Yes, I can. And I do!"

"No, you don't! I tell you it's a scientific and psychical impossibility for you to continue to love her! Your subconscious personality is now in eternal and irrevocable accord and communication with the subconscious personality of some chit of a

girl who is destined to love and marry you! And she's probably a ballet-girl, at that!"

"I shall marry Drusilla!" retorted the young man, very pale; "because I am quite confident that she loves me, though very probably she doesn't know it yet."

"You talk foolishness!" hissed Carr. "This machine has settled the whole matter! Didn't you see that spark?"

"I saw a spark--yes!"

"And do you mean to tell me you are not beginning to feel queer?"

"Not in the slightest."

"Look me squarely in the eye, young man, and tell me whether you do not have a sensation as though your heart were cutting capers?"

"Not in the least," said Yates, calmly. "If that machine worked at all it wouldn't surprise me if you yourself had become entangled in it--caught in your own machine!"

"W-what!" exclaimed Carr, faintly.

"It wouldn't astonish me in the slightest," repeated Yates, delighted to discover the dawning alarm in the older man's features. "*You* opened the receiver; *you* have psychic waves as well as I. *I* was in love at the time; *you* were not. What was there to prevent your waves from being hitched to a wireless current and, finally, signaling the subconscious personality of--of some pretty actress, for example?"

Mr. Carr sank nervously onto a chair; his eyes, already wild, became wilder as he began to realize the risk he had unthinkingly taken.

"Perhaps *you* feel a little--queer. You look it," suggested the young man, in a voice made anxious by an ever-ready sympathy. "Can I do anything? I am really very sorry to have spoken so."

A damp chill gathered on the brow of Bushwyck Carr. He *did* feel a trifle queer. A curious lightness--a perfectly inexplicable buoyancy seemed to possess him. He was beginning to feel strangely youthful; the sound of his own heart suddenly became apparent. To his alarm it was beating playfully, skittishly. No--it was not even beating; it was skipping.

"Y-Yates," he stammered, "you don't think that I could p-possibly have become inadvertently mixed up with that horrible machine--do you?"

Now Yates was a generous youth; resentment at the treatment meted out to him by this florid, bad-tempered and pompous gentleman changed to instinctive sympathy when he suddenly realized the plight his future father-in-law might now be in.

"Yates," repeated Mr. Carr in an agitated voice, "tell me honestly: *do* you think there is anything unusual the matter with me? I--I seem to f-feel unusually--young. Do I look it? Have I changed? W-watch me while I walk across the room."

Mr. Carr arose with a frightened glance at Yates, put on his hat, and fairly pranced across the room. "Great Heavens!" he faltered; "my hat's on one side and my walk is distinctly jaunty! Do you notice it, Yates?"

"I'm afraid I do, Mr. Carr."

"This--this is infamous!" gasped Mr. Carr. "This is--is outrageous! I'm forty-five! I'm a widower! I detest a jaunty widower! I don't want to be one; I don't want to----"

Yates gazed at him with deep concern.

"Can't you help lifting your legs that way when you walk--as though a band were playing? Wait, I'll straighten your hat. Now try it again."

Mr. Carr pranced back across the room.

"I *know* I'm doing it again," he groaned, "but I can't help it! I--I feel so gay--dammit!--so frivolous--it's--it's that infernal machine. W-what am I to do, Yates," he added piteously, "when the world looks so good to me?"

"Think of your family!" urged Yates. "Think of--of Drusilla."

"Do you know," observed Carr, twirling his eyeglass and twisting his mustache, "that I'm beginning not to care what my family think!... Isn't it amazing, Yates? I--I seem to be somebody else, several years younger. Somewhere," he added, with a flourish of his monocle--"somewhere on earth there is a little birdie waiting for me."

"Don't talk that way!" exclaimed Yates, horrified.

"Yes, I will, young man. I repeat, with optimism and emphasis, that *somewhere* there is a birdie----"

"Mr. Carr!"

"Yes, merry old Top!"

"May I use your telephone?"

"I don't care what you do!" said Carr, gayly. "Use my telephone if you like; pull it out by the roots and throw it over Cooper's Bluff, for all I care! But"--and a sudden glimmer of reason seemed to come over him--"if you have one grain of human decency left in you, you won't drag me and my terrible plight into that scurrilous New York paper of yours."

"No," said Yates, "I won't. And that ends my career on Park Row. I'm going to telephone my resignation."

Mr. Carr gazed calmly around and twisted his mustache with a satisfied and retrospective smile.

"That's very decent of you, Yates; you must pardon me; I was naturally half scared to death at first; but I realize you are acting very handsomely in this horrible dilemma----"

"Naturally," interrupted Yates. "I must stand by the family into which I am, as you know, destined to marry."

"To be sure," nodded Carr, absently; "it really looks that way, doesn't it! And, Yates, you have no idea how I hated you an hour ago."

"Yes, I have," said Yates.

"No, you really have not, if you will permit me to contradict you, merry old Top. I--but never mind now. You have behaved in an unusually considerate manner. Who the devil are you, anyway?"

Yates informed him modestly.

"Well, why didn't you say so, instead of letting me bully you! I've known your father for twenty years. Why didn't you tell me you wanted to marry Drusilla, instead of coming and blushing all over the premises? I'd have told you she was too young; and she is! I'd have told you to wait; and you'd have waited. You'd have been civil enough to wait when I explained to you that I've already lost, by marriage, two daughters through that accursed machine. You wouldn't entirely denude me of daughters, would you?"

"I only want one," said John Yates, simply.

"Well, all right; I'm a decent father-in-law when I've got to be. I'm really a good sport. You may ask all my sons-in-law; they'll admit it." He scrutinized the young man and found him decidedly agreeable to look at, and at the same time a vague realization of his own predicament returned for a moment.

"Yates," he said unsteadily, "all I ask of you is to keep this terrible n-news from my innocent d-daughters until I can f-find out what sort of a person is f-fated to lead me to the altar!"

Yates took the offered hand with genuine emotion.

"Surely," he said, "your unknown intended must be some charming leader in the social activities of the great metropolis."

"Who knows! She may be m-my own l-laundress for all I know. She may be anything, Yates! She--she might even be b-black!"

"Black!"

Mr. Carr nodded, shuddered, dashed the unmanly moisture from his eyeglass.

"I think I'd better go to town and tell my son-in-law, William Destyn, exactly what has happened to me," he said. "And I think I'll go through the kitchen garden and take my power boat so that those devilish reporters can't follow me. Ferdinand!" to the man at the door, "ring up the garage and order the blue motor, and tell those newspaper men I'm going to town. That, I think, will glue them to the lawn for a while."

"About--Drusilla, sir?" ventured Yates; but Mr. Carr was already gone, speeding noiselessly out the back way, through the kitchen garden, and across the great tree-shaded lawn which led down to the boat landing.

Across the distant hedge, from the beautiful grounds of his next-door neighbor, floated sounds of mirth and music. Gay flags fluttered among the trees. The Magnelius Grandcourts were evidently preparing for the brilliant charity bazaar to be held there that afternoon and evening.

"To think," muttered Carr, "that only an hour ago I was agreeably and comfortably prepared to pass the entire afternoon there with my daughters, amid innocent revelry. And now I'm in flight--pursued by furies of my own invoking--threatened with love in its most hideous

form-- matrimony! Any woman I now look upon may be my intended bride for all I know," he continued, turning into the semiprivate driveway, bordered heavily by lilacs; "and the curious thing about it is that I really don't care; in fact, the excitement is mildly pleasing."

He halted; in the driveway, blocking it, stood a red motor car--a little runabout affair; and at the steering-wheel sat a woman--a lady's maid by her cap and narrow apron, and an exceedingly pretty one, at that.

When she saw Mr. Carr she looked up, showing an edge of white teeth in the most unembarrassed of smiles. She certainly was an unusually agreeable-looking girl.

"Has something gone wrong with your motor?" inquired Mr. Carr, pleasantly.

"I am afraid so." She didn't say "sir"; probably because she was too pretty to bother about such incidentals. And she looked at Carr and smiled, as though he were particularly ornamental.

"Let me see," began Mr. Carr, laying his hand on the steering-wheel; "perhaps I can make it go."

"It won't go," she said, a trifle despondently and shaking her charming head. "I've been here nearly half an hour waiting for it to do something; but it won't."

Mr. Carr peered wisely into the acetylenes, looked carefully under the hood, examined the upholstery. He didn't know anything about motors.

"I'm afraid," he said sadly, "that there's something wrong with the magne-e-to!"

"Do you think it is as bad as that?"

"I fear so," he said gravely. "If I were you I'd get out--and keep well away from that machine."

"Why?" she asked nervously, stepping to the grass beside him.

"It *might* blow up."

They backed away rather hastily, side by side. After a while they backed farther away, hand in hand.

"I--I hate to leave it there all alone," said the maid, when they had backed completely out of sight of the car. "If there was only some safe place where I could watch and see if it is going to explode."

They ventured back a little way and peeped at the motor.

"You could take a rowboat and watch it from the water," said Mr. Carr.

"But I don't know how to row."

Mr. Carr looked at her. Certainly she was the most prepossessing specimen of wholesome, rose-cheeked and ivory-skinned womanhood that he had ever beheld; a trifle nearer thirty-five than twenty-five, he thought, but so sweet and fresh and with such charming eyes and manners.

"I have," said Mr. Carr, "several hours at my disposal before I go to town on important business. If you like I will row you out in one of my boats, and then, from a safe distance, we can sit and watch your motor blow up. Shall we?"

"It is most kind of you----"

"Not at all. It would be most kind of you."

She looked sideways at the motor, sideways at the water, sideways at Mr. Carr.

It was a very lovely morning in early June.

As Mr. Carr handed her into the rowboat with ceremony she swept him a courtesy. Her apron and manners were charmingly incongruous.

When she was gracefully seated in the stern Mr. Carr turned for a moment, stared all Oyster Bay calmly in the face through his monocle, then, untying the painter, fairly skipped into the boat with a step distinctly frolicsome.

"It's curious how I feel about this," he observed, digging both oars into the water.

"*How* do you feel, Mr. Carr?"

"Like a bird," he said softly.

And the boat moved off gently through the sparkling waters of Oyster Bay.

At that same moment, also, the sparkling waters of Oyster Bay were gently caressing the classic contours of Cooper's Bluff, and

upon that monumental headland, seated under sketching umbrellas, Flavilla and Drusilla worked, in a puddle of water colors; and John Chillingham Yates, in becoming white flannels and lilac tie and hosiery, lay on the sod and looked at Drusilla.

Silence, delicately accented by the faint harmony of mosquitoes, brooded over Cooper's Bluff.

"There's no use," said Drusilla at last; "one can draw a landscape from every point of view except looking *down* hill. Mr. Yates, how on earth am I to sit here and make a drawing looking down hill?"

"Perhaps," he said, "I had better hold your pencil again. Shall I?"

"Do you think that would help?"

"I think it helps--somehow."

Her pretty, narrow hand held the pencil; his sun-browned hand closed over it. She looked at the pad on her knees.

After a while she said: "I think, perhaps, we had better draw. Don't you?"

They made a few hen-tracks. Noticing his shoulder was just touching hers, and feeling a trifle weary on her camp-stool, she leaned back a little.

"It is very pleasant to have you here," she said dreamily.

"It is very heavenly to be here," he said.

"How generous you are to give us so much of your time!" murmured Drusilla.

"I think so, too," said Flavilla, washing a badger brush. "And I am becoming almost as fond of you as Drusilla is."

"Don't you like him as well as I do?" asked Drusilla.

Flavilla turned on her camp-stool and inspected them both.

"Not quite as well," she said frankly. "You know, Drusilla, you are very nearly in love with him." And she resumed her sketching.

Drusilla gazed at the purple horizon unembarrassed. "Am I?" she said absently.

"Are you?" he repeated, close to her shoulder.

She turned and looked into his sun-tanned face curiously.

"What is it--to love? Is it"--she looked at him undisturbed--"is it to be quite happy and lazy with a man like you?"

He was silent.

"I thought," she continued, "that there would be some hesitation, some shyness about it--some embarrassment. But there, has been none between you and me."

He said nothing.

She went on absently:

"You said, the other day, very simply, that you cared a great deal for me; and I was not very much surprised. And I said that I cared very much for you.... And, by the way, I meant to ask you yesterday; are we engaged?"

"Are we?" he asked.

"Yes--if you wish.... Is *that* all there is to an engagement?"

"There's a ring," observed Flavilla, dabbing on too much ultramarine and using a sponge. "You've got to get her one, Mr. Yates."

Drusilla looked at the man beside her and smiled.

"How simple it is, after all!" she said. "I have read in the books Pa-pah permits us to read such odd things about love and lovers.... Are we lovers, Mr. Yates? But, of course, we must be, I fancy."

"Yes," he said.

"Some time or other, when it is convenient," observed Flavilla, "you ought to kiss each other occasionally."

"That doesn't come until I'm a bride, does it?" asked Drusilla.

"I believe it's a matter of taste," said Flavilla, rising and naively stretching her long, pretty limbs.

She stood a moment on the edge of the bluff, looking down.

"How curious!" she said after a moment. "There is Pa-pah on the water rowing somebody's maid about."

"What!" exclaimed Yates, springing to his feet.

"How extraordinary," said Drusilla, following him to the edge of the bluff; "and they're singing, too, as they row!"

From far below, wafted across the sparkling waters of Oyster Bay, Mr. Carr's rich and mellifluous voice was wafted shoreward:

"*I der-reamt that I dwelt in ma-arble h-a-l-ls*."

The sunlight fell on the maid's coquettish cap and apron, and sparkled upon the buckle of one dainty shoe. It also glittered across the monocle of Mr. Carr.

"Pa-*pah!*" cried Flavilla.

Far away her parent waved a careless greeting to his offspring, then resumed his oars and his song.

"How extraordinary!" said Flavilla. "Why do you suppose that Pa-*pah* is rowing somebody's maid around the bay, and singing that way to her?"

"Perhaps it's one of our maids," said Drusilla; "but that would be rather odd, too, wouldn't it, Mr. Yates?"

"A--little," he admitted. And his heart sank.

Flavilla had started down the sandy face of the bluff.

"I'm going to see whose maid it is," she called back.

Drusilla seated herself in the sun-dried grass and watched her sister.

Yates stood beside her in bitter dejection.

So *this* was the result! His unfortunate future father-in-law was done for. What a diabolical machine! What a terrible, swift, relentless answer had been returned when, out of space, this misguided gentleman had, by mistake, summoned his own affinity! And *what* an affinity! A saucy soubrette who might easily have just stepped from the *coulisse* of a Parisian theater!

Yates looked at Drusilla. What an awful blow was impending! She never could have suspected it, but there, in that boat, sat her future stepmother in cap and apron!--his own future stepmother-in-law!

And in the misery of that moment's realization John Chillingham Yates showed the material of which he was constructed.

"Dear," he said gently.

"Do you mean me?" asked Drusilla, looking up in frank surprise.

And at the same time she saw on his face a look which she had never before encountered there. It was the shadow of trouble; and it drew her to her feet instinctively.

"What is it, Jack?" she asked.

She had never before called him anything but Mr. Yates.

"What is it?" she repeated, turning away beside him along the leafy path; and with every word another year seemed, somehow, to be added to her youth. "Has anything happened, Jack? Are you unhappy--or ill?"

He did not speak; she walked beside him, regarding him with wistful eyes.

So there was more of love than happiness, after all; she began to half understand it in a vague way as she watched his somber face. There certainly was more of love than a mere lazy happiness; there was solicitude and warm concern, and desire to comfort, to protect.

"Jack," she said tremulously.

He turned and took her unresisting hands. A quick thrill shot through her. Yes, there *was* more to love than she had expected.

"Are you unhappy?" she asked. "Tell me. I can't bear to see you this way. I--I never did--before."

"Will you love me; Drusilla?"

"Yes--yes, I will, Jack."

"Dearly?"

"I do--dearly." The first blush that ever tinted her cheek spread and deepened.

"Will you marry me, Drusilla?"

"Yes.... You frighten me."

She trembled, suddenly, in his arms. Surely there were more things to love than she had dreamed of in her philosophy. She looked up as he bent nearer, understanding that she was to be kissed, awaiting the event which suddenly loomed up freighted with terrific significance.

There was a silence, a sob.

"Jack--darling--I--I love you so!"

Flavilla was sketching on her camp-stool when they returned.

"I'm horridly hungry," she said. "It's luncheon time, isn't it? And, by the way, it's all right about that maid. She was on her way to serve in the tea pavilion at Mrs. Magnelius Grandcourt's bazaar, and her runabout broke down and nearly blew up."

"What on earth are you talking about?" exclaimed Drusilla.

"I'm talking about Mrs. Magnelius Grandcourt's younger sister from Philadelphia, who looks perfectly sweet as a lady's maid. Tea," she added, "is to be a dollar a cup, and three if you take sugar. And," she continued, "if you and I are to sell flowers there this afternoon we'd better go home and dress.... *What* are you smiling at, Mr. Yates?"

Drusilla naturally supposed she could answer that question.

"Dearest little sister," she said shyly and tenderly, "we have something very wonderful to tell you."

"What is it?" asked Flavilla.

"We--we are--engaged," whispered Drusilla, radiant.

"Why, I knew that already!" said Flavilla.

"Did you?" sighed her sister, turning to look at her tall, young lover. "I didn't.... Being in love is a much more complicated matter than you and I imagined, Flavilla. Is it not, Jack?"

XVI

FLAVILLA

Containing a Parable Told with Such Metaphorical Skill that the Author Is Totally Unable to Understand It

The Green Mouse now dominated the country; the entire United States was occupied in getting married. In the great main office on Madison Avenue, and in a thousand branch offices all over the Union, Destyn-Carr machines were working furiously; a love-mad nation was illuminated by their sparks.

Marriage-license bureaus had been almost put out of business by the sudden matrimonial rush; clergymen became exhausted, wedding bells in the churches were worn thin, California and Florida reported no orange crops, as all the blossoms had been required for brides; there was a shortage of solitaires, traveling clocks, asparagus tongs; and the corner in rice perpetrated by some conscienceless captain of industry produced a panic equaled only by a more terrible *coup* in slightly worn shoes.

All America was rushing to get married; from Seattle to Key West the railroads were blocked with bridal parties; a vast hum of merrymaking resounded from the Golden Gate to Governor's Island, from Niagara to the Gulf of Mexico. In New York City the din was persistent; all day long church bells pealed, all day long the rattle of smart carriages and hired hacks echoed over the asphalt. A reporter of the *Tribune* stood on top of the New York Life tower for an entire week, devouring cold-slaw sandwiches and Marie Corelli, and during that period, as his affidavit runs, "never for one consecutive second were his ample ears free from the near or distant strains of the Wedding March."

And over all, in approving benediction, brooded the wide smile of the greatest of statesmen and the great smile of the widest of statesmen-- these two, metaphorically, hand in hand, floated high above their people, scattering encouraging blessings on every bride.

A tremendous rise in values set in; the newly married required homes; architects were rushed to death; builders, real-estate

operators, brokers, could not handle the business hurled at them by impatient bridegrooms.

Then, seizing time by the fetlock, some indescribable monster secured the next ten years' output of go-carts. The sins of Standard Oil were forgotten in the menace of such a national catastrophe; mothers' meetings were held; the excitement became stupendous; a hundred thousand brides invaded the Attorney-General's office, but all he could think of to say was: "Thirty centuries look down upon you!"

These vague sentiments perplexed the country. People understood that the Government meant well, but they also realized that the time was not far off when millions of go-carts would be required in the United States. And they no longer hesitated.

All over the Union fairs and bazaars were held to collect funds for a great national factory to turn out carts. Alarmed, the Trust tried to unload; militant womanhood, thoroughly aroused, scorned compromise. In every city, town, and hamlet of the nation entertainments were given, money collected for the great popular go-cart factory.

The affair planned for Oyster Bay was to be particularly brilliant--a water carnival at Center Island with tableaux, fireworks, and illuminations of all sorts.

Reassured by the magnificent attitude of America's womanhood, business discounted the collapse of the go-cart trust and began to recover from the check very quickly. Stocks advanced, fluctuated, and suddenly whizzed upward like skyrockets; and the long-expected wave of prosperity inundated the country. On the crest of it rode Cupid, bow and arrows discarded, holding aloft in his right hand a Destyn-Carr machine.

For the old order of things had passed away; the old-fashioned doubts and fears of courtship were now practically superfluous.

Anybody on earth could now buy a ticket and be perfectly certain that whoever he or she might chance to marry would be the right one--the one intended by destiny.

Yet, strange as it may appear, there still remained, here and there, a few young people in the United States who had no desire to be safely provided for by a Destyn-Carr machine.

Whether there was in them some sporting instinct, making hazard attractive, or, perhaps, a conviction that Fate is kind, need not be discussed. The fact remains that there were a very few youthful and marriageable folk who had no desire to know beforehand what their fate might be.

One of these unregenerate reactionists was Flavilla. To see her entire family married by machinery was enough for her; to witness such consummate and collective happiness became slightly cloying. Perfection can be overdone; a rift in a lute relieves melodious monotony, and when discords cease to amuse, one can always have the instrument mended or buy a banjo.

"What I desire," she said, ignoring the remonstrances of the family, "is a chance to make mistakes. Three or four nice men have thought they were in love with me, and I wouldn't take anything for the--experience. Or," she added innocently, "for the chances that some day three or four more agreeable young men may think they are in love with me. One learns by making mistakes--very pleasantly."

Her family sat in an affectionately earnest row and adjured her--four married sisters, four blissful brothers-in-law, her attractive stepmother, her father. She shook her pretty head and continued sewing on the costume she was to wear at the Oyster Bay Venetian Fête and Go-cart Fair.

"No," she said, threading her needle and deftly sewing a shining, silvery scale onto the mermaid's dress lying across her knees, "I'll take my chances with men. It's better fun to love a man not intended for me, and make him love me, and live happily and defiantly ever after, than to have a horrid old machine settle you for life."

"But you are wasting time, dear," explained her stepmother gently.

"Oh, no, I'm not. I've been engaged three times and I've enjoyed it immensely. That isn't wasting time, is it? And it's *such* fun! He thinks he's in love and you think you're in love, and you have such an agreeable time together until you find out that you're spoons on somebody else. And then you find out you're mistaken and you say you always want him for a friend, and you presently begin all over again with a perfectly new man----"

"Flavilla!"

"Yes, Pa-*pah*."

"Are you utterly demoralized!"

"Demoralized? Why? Everybody behaved as I do before you and William invented your horrid machine. Everybody in the world married at hazard, after being engaged to various interesting young men. And I'm not demoralized; I'm only old-fashioned enough to take chances. Please let me."

The family regarded her sadly. In their amalgamated happiness they deplored her reluctance to enter where perfect bliss was guaranteed.

Her choice of rôle and costume for the Seawanhaka Club water tableaux they also disapproved of; for she had chosen to represent a character now superfluous and out of date--the Lorelei who lured Teutonic yachtsmen to destruction with her singing some centuries ago. And that, in these times, was ridiculous, because, fortified by a visit to the nearest Destyn-Carr machine, no weak-minded young sailorman would care what a Lorelei might do; and she could sing her pretty head off and comb herself bald before any Destyn-Carr inoculated mariner would be lured overboard.

But Flavilla obstinately insisted on her scaled and fish-tailed costume. When her turn came, a spot-light on the clubhouse was to illuminate the float and reveal her, combing her golden hair with a golden comb and singing away like the Musical Arts.

"And," she thought secretly, "if there remains upon this machine-made earth one young man worth my kind consideration, it wouldn't surprise me very much if he took a header off the Yacht Club wharf and requested me to be his. And I'd be very likely to listen to his suggestion."

So in secret hopes of this pleasing episode--but not giving any such reason to her protesting family--she vigorously resisted all attempts to deprive her of her fish scales, golden comb, and rôle in the coming water fête. And now the programmes were printed and it was too late for them to intervene.

She rose, holding out the glittering, finny garment, which flashed like a collapsed fish in the sunshine.

"It's finished," she said. "Now I'm going off somewhere by myself to rehearse."

"In the water?" asked her father uneasily.

"Certainly."

As Flavilla was a superb swimmer nobody could object. Later, a maid went down to the landing, stowed away luncheon, water-bottles and costume in the canoe. Later, Flavilla herself came down to the water's edge, hatless, sleeves rolled up, balancing a paddle across her shoulders.

As the paddle flashed and the canoe danced away over the sparkling waters of Oyster Bay, Flavilla hummed the threadbare German song which she was to sing in her rôle of Lorelei, and headed toward Northport.

"The thing to do," she thought to herself, "is to find some nice, little, wooded inlet where I can safely change my costume and rehearse. I must know whether I can swim in this thing--and whether I can sing while swimming about. It would be more effective, I think, than merely sitting on the float, and singing and combing my hair through all those verses."

The canoe danced across the water, the paddle glittered, dipped, swept astern, and flashed again. Flavilla was very, very happy for no particular reason, which is the best sort of happiness on earth.

There is a sandy neck of land which obstructs direct navigation between the sacred waters of Oyster Bay and the profane floods which wash the gravelly shores of Northport.

"I'll make a carry," thought Flavilla, beaching her canoe. Then, looking around her at the lonely stretch of sand flanked by woods, she realized at once that she need seek no farther for seclusion.

First of all, she dragged the canoe into the woods, then rapidly undressed and drew on the mermaid's scaly suit, which fitted her to the throat as beautifully as her own skin.

It was rather difficult for her to navigate on land, as her legs were incased in a fish's tail, but, seizing her comb and mirror, she managed to wriggle down to the water's edge.

A few sun-warmed rocks jutted up some little distance from shore; with a final and vigorous wriggle Flavilla launched herself and struck out for the rocks, holding comb and mirror in either hand.

Fishtail and accessories impeded her, but she was the sort of swimmer who took no account of such trifles; and after a while she drew herself up from the sea, and, breathless, glittering, iridescent, flopped down upon a flat rock in the sunshine. From which she took a careful survey of the surroundings.

Certainly nobody could see her here. Nobody would interrupt her either, because the route of navigation lay far outside, to the north. All around were woods; the place was almost landlocked, save where, far away through the estuary, a blue and hazy horizon glimmered in the general direction of New England.

So, when she had recovered sufficient breath she let down the flashing, golden-brown hair, sat up on the rock, lifted her pretty nose skyward, and poured forth melody.

As she sang the tiresome old Teutonic ballad she combed away vigorously, and every now and then surveyed her features in the mirror.

Ich weiss nicht was soll es bedeuten
Dass ich so traurig bin----

she sang happily, studying her gestures with care and cheerfully flopping her tail.

She had a very lovely voice which had been expensively cultivated. One or two small birds listened attentively for a while, then started in to help her out.

On the veranda of his bungalow, not very far from Northport, stood a young man of pleasing aspect, knickerbockers, and unusually symmetrical legs. His hands reposed in his pockets, his eyes behind their eyeglasses were fixed dreamily upon the skies. Somebody over beyond that screen of woods was singing very beautifully, and he liked it--at first.

However, when the unseen singer had been singing the Lorelei for an hour, steadily, without intermission, an expression of surprise gradually developed into uneasy astonishment upon his clean-cut and unusually attractive features.

"That girl, whoever she is, can sing, all right," he reflected, "but why on earth does she dope out the same old thing?"

He looked at the strip of woods, but could see nothing of the singer. He listened; she continued to sing the Lorelei.

"It can't be a phonograph," he reasoned. "No sane person could endure an hour of that fool song. No sane person would sing it for an hour, either."

Disturbed, he picked up the marine glasses, slung them over his shoulder, walked up on the hill back of the bungalow, selected a promising tree, and climbed it.

Astride a lofty limb the lord of Northport gazed earnestly across the fringe of woods. Something sparkled out there, something moved, glittering on a half-submerged rock. He adjusted the marine glasses and squinted through them.

"Great James!" he faltered, dropping them; and almost followed the glasses to destruction on the ground below.

How he managed to get safely to earth he never knew. "Either I'm crazy," he shouted aloud, "or there's a--a mermaid out there, and I'm going to find out before they chase me to the funny house!"

There was a fat tub of a boat at his landing; he reached the shore in a series of long, distracted leaps, sprang aboard, cast off, thrust both oars deep into the water, and fairly hurled the boat forward, so that it alternately skipped, wallowed, scuttered, and scrambled, like a hen overboard.

"This is terrible," he groaned. "If I *didn't* see what I think I saw, I'll eat my hat; if I did see what I'm sure I saw, I'm madder than the hatter who made it!"

Nearer and nearer, heard by him distinctly above the frantic splashing of his oars, her Lorelei song sounded perilously sweet and clear.

"Oh, bunch!" he moaned; "it's horribly like the real thing; and here I come headlong, as they do in the story books----"

He caught a crab that landed him in a graceful parabola in the bow, where he lay biting at the air to recover his breath. Then his boat's nose plowed into the sandy neck of land; he clambered to his feet, jumped out, and ran headlong into the belt of trees which screened the singer. Speed and gait recalled the effortless grace of the kangaroo; when he encountered logs and gullies he rose grandly, sailing into space, landing with a series of soft bounces, which presently brought him to the other side of the woods.

And there, what he beheld, what he heard, almost paralyzed him. Weak- kneed, he passed a trembling hand over his incredulous eyes; with the courage of despair, he feebly pinched himself. Then for sixty sickening seconds he closed his eyes and pressed both hands over his ears. But when he took his hands away and opened his terrified eyes, the exquisitely seductive melody, wind blown from the water, thrilled him in every fiber; his wild gaze fell upon a distant, glittering shape--white-armed, golden- haired, fish-tailed, slender body glittering with silvery scales.

The low rippling wash of the tide across the pebbly shore was in his ears; the salt wind was in his throat. He saw the sun flash on golden comb and mirror, as her snowy fingers caressed the splendid masses of her hair; her song stole sweetly seaward as the wind veered.

A terrible calm descended upon him.

"This is interesting," he said aloud.

A sickening wave of terror swept him, but he straightened up, squaring his shoulders.

"I may as well face the fact," he said, "that I, Henry Kingsbury, of Pebble Point, Northport, L.I., and recently in my right mind, am now, this very moment, looking at a--a mermaid in Long Island Sound!"

He shuddered; but he was sheer pluck all through. Teeth might chatter, knees smite together, marrow turn cold; nothing on earth or Long Island could entirely stampede Henry Kingsbury, of Pebble Point.

His clutch on his self-control in any real crisis never slipped; his mental steering-gear never gave way. Again his pallid lips moved in speech:

"The--thing--to--do," he said very slowly and deliberately, "is to swim out and--and touch it. If it dissolves into nothing I'll probably feel better----"

He began to remove coat, collar, and shoes, forcing himself to talk calmly all the while.

"The thing to do," he went on dully, "is to swim over there and get a look at it. Of course, it isn't really there. As for drowning--it really

doesn't matter.... In the midst of life we are in Long Island.... And, if it *is* there--I c-c-can c-capture it for the B-B-Bronx----"

Reason tottered; it revived, however, as he plunged into the s. w.[*] of Oyster Bay and struck out, silent as a sea otter for the shimmering shape on the ruddy rocks.

* Sparkling Waters or Sacred Waters.

Flavilla was rehearsing with all her might; her white throat swelled with the music she poured forth to the sky and sea; her pretty fingers played with the folds of burnished hair; her gilded hand-mirror flashed, she gently beat time with her tail.

So thoroughly, so earnestly, did she enter into the spirit of the siren she was representing that, at moments, she almost wished some fisherman might come into view--just to see whether he'd really go overboard after her.

However, audacious as her vagrant thoughts might be, she was entirely unprepared to see a human head, made sleek by sea water, emerge from the floating weeds almost at her feet.

"Goodness," she said faintly, and attempted to rise. But her fish tail fettered her.

"Are you real!" gasped Kingsbury.

"Y-yes.... Are you?"

"Great James!" he half shouted, half sobbed, "are you *human?*"

"V-very. Are *you?*"

He clutched at the weedy rock and dragged himself up. For a moment he lay breathing fast, water dripping from his soaked clothing. Once he feebly touched the glittering fish tail that lay on the rock beside him. It quivered, but needle and thread had been at work there; he drew a deep breath and closed his eyes.

When he opened them again she was looking about for a likely place to launch herself into the bay; in fact, she had already started to glide toward the water; the scraping of the scales aroused him, and he sat up.

"I heard singing," he said dreamily, "and I climbed a tree and saw--you! Do you blame me for trying to corroborate a thing like *you?*"

"You thought I was a *real* one?"

"I thought that I thought I saw a real one."

She looked at him hopefully.

"Tell me, *did* my singing compel you to swim out here?"

"I don't know what compelled me."

"But--you *were* compelled?"

"I--it seems so----"

"O-h!" Flushed, excited, laughing, she clasped her hands under her chin and gazed at him.

"To think," she said softly, "that you believed me to be a real siren, and that my beauty and my singing actually did lure you to my rock! Isn't it exciting?"

He looked at her, then turned red:

"Yes, it is," he said.

Hands still clasped together tightly beneath her rounded chin, she surveyed him with intense interest. He was at a disadvantage; the sleek, half-drowned appearance which a man has who emerges from a swim does not exhibit him at his best.

But he had a deeper interest for Flavilla; her melody and loveliness had actually lured him across the water to the peril of her rocks; this human being, this man creature, seemed to be, in a sense, hers.

"Please fix your hair," she said, handing him her comb and mirror.

"My hair?"

"Certainly. I want to look at you."

He thought her request rather extraordinary, but he sat up and with the aid of the mirror, scraped away at his wet hair, parting it in the middle and combing it deftly into two gay little Mercury wings. Then, fishing in the soaked pockets of his knickerbockers, he produced a pair of smart pince-nez, which he put on, and then gazed up at her.

"Oh!" she said, with a quick, indrawn breath, "you *are* attractive!"

At that he turned becomingly scarlet.

Leaning on one lovely, bare arm, burnished hair clustering against her cheeks, she continued to survey him in delighted approval which sometimes made him squirm inwardly, sometimes almost intoxicated him.

"To think," she murmured, "that *I* lured *you* out here!"

"I *am* thinking about it," he said.

She laid her head on one side, inspecting him with frankest approval.

"I wonder," she said, "what your name is. I am Flavilla Carr."

"Not one of the Carr triplets!"

"Yes--but," she added quickly, "I'm not married. Are you?"

"Oh, no, no, no!" he said hastily. "I'm Henry Kingsbury, of Pebble Point, Northport----"

"Master and owner of the beautiful but uncertain *Sappho?* Oh, tell me, *are* you the man who has tipped over so many times in Long Island Sound? Because I--I adore a man who has the pluck to continue to capsize every day or two."

"Then," he said, "you can safely adore me, for I am that yachtsman who has fallen off the *Sappho* more times than the White Knight fell off his horse."

"I--I *do* adore you!" she exclaimed impulsively.

"Of course, you d-d-don't mean that," he stammered, striving to smile.

"Yes--almost. Tell me, you--I know you are not like other men! *You* never have had anything to do with a Destyn-Carr machine, have you?"

"Never!"

"Neither have I.... And so you are not in love--are you?"

"No."

"Neither am I. Oh, I am so glad that you and I have waited, and not become engaged to somebody by machinery.... I wonder whom you are destined for."

"Nobody--by machinery."

She clapped her hands. "Neither am I. It is too stupid, isn't it? I *don't* want to marry the man I ought to marry. I'd rather take chances with a man who attracts me and who is attracted by me.... There was, in the old days--before everybody married by machinery--something not altogether unworthy in being a siren, wasn't there?... It's perfectly delightful to think of your seeing me out

here on the rocks, and then instantly plunging into the waves and tearing a foaming right of way to what might have been destruction!"

Her flushed, excited face between its clustering curls looked straight into his.

"It *was* destruction," he said. His own voice sounded odd to him. "Utter destruction to my peace of mind," he said again.

"You--don't think that you love me, do you?" she asked. "That would be too--too perfect a climax.... *Do* you?" she asked curiously.

"I--think so."

"Do--do you *know* it?" He gazed bravely at her: "Yes."

She flung up both arms joyously, then laughed aloud:

"Oh, the wonder of it! It is too perfect, too beautiful! You really love me? Do you? Are you *sure*?"

"Yes.... Will you try to love me?"

"Well, you know that sirens don't care for people.... I've already been engaged two or three times.... I don't mind being engaged to you."

"Couldn't you care for me, Flavilla?"

"Why, yes. I do.... Please don't touch me; I'd rather not. Of course, you know, I couldn't really love you so quickly unless I'd been subjected to one of those Destyn-Carr machines. You know that, don't you? But," she added frankly, "I wouldn't like to have you get away from me. I--I feel like a tender-hearted person in the street who is followed by a lost cat----"

"What!"

"Oh, I *didn't* mean anything unpleasant--truly I didn't. You know how tenderly one feels when a poor stray cat comes trotting after one----"

He got up, mad all through.

"*Are* you offended?" she asked sorrowfully. "When I didn't mean anything except that my heart--which is rather impressionable--feels very warmly and tenderly toward the man who swam after me.... Won't you understand, please? Listen, we have been engaged only a minute, and here already is our first quarrel. You can see for yourself what would happen if we ever married."

"It wouldn't be machine-made bliss, anyway," he said.

That seemed to interest her; she inspected him earnestly.

"Also," he added, "I thought you desired to take a sportsman's chances?"

"I--do."

"And I thought you didn't want to marry the man you ought to marry."

"That is--true."

"Then you certainly ought not to marry me--but, will you?"

"How can I when I don't--love you."

"You don't love me because you ought not to on such brief acquaintance.... But *will* you love me, Flavilla?"

She looked at him in silence, sitting very still, the bright hair veiling her cheeks, the fish's tail curled up against her side.

"*Will* you?"

"I don't know," she said faintly.

"Try."

"I--am."

"Shall I help you?"

Evidently she had gazed at him long enough; her eyes fell; her white fingers picked at the seaweed pods. His arm closed around her; nothing stirred but her heart.

"Shall I help you to love me?" he breathed.

"No--I am--past help." She raised her head.

"This is all so--so wrong," she faltered, "that I think it must be right.... Do you truly love me?... Don't kiss me if you do.... Now I believe you.... Lift me; I can't walk in this fish's tail.... Now set me afloat, please."

He lifted her, walked to the water's edge, bent and placed her in the sea. In an instant she had darted from his arms out into the waves, flashing, turning like a silvery salmon.

"Are you coming?" she called back to him.

He did not stir. She swam in a circle and came up beside the rock. After a long, long silence, she lifted up both arms; he bent over. Then, very slowly, she drew him down into the water.

"I am quite sure," she said, as they sat together at luncheon on the sandspit which divides Northport Bay from the s.w. of Oyster Bay, "that you and I are destined for much trouble when we marry; but I love you so dearly that I don't care."

"Neither do I," he said; "will you have another sandwich?"

And, being young and healthy, she took it, and biting into it, smiled adorably at her lover.

THE END

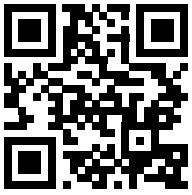
The Green Mouse

FROM THE PUBLISHER



Discover your next classic.

Explore the Pipcub collection.



pipcub.com