

The Project Gutenberg eBook of No. 13 Washington Square, by Leroy Scott

This ebook is for the use of anyone anywhere in the United States and most other parts of the world at no cost and with almost no restrictions whatsoever. You may copy it, give it away or re-use it under the terms of the Project Gutenberg License included with this ebook or online at www.gutenberg.org. If you are not located in the United States, you'll have to check the laws of the country where you are located before using this eBook.

Title: No. 13 Washington Square

Author: Leroy Scott

Illustrator: Irma Dérèmeaux

Release date: October 24, 2004 [EBook #13844]

Most recently updated: December 18, 2020

Language: English

*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK NO. 13 WASHINGTON SQUARE ***

E-text prepared by Charles Aldarondo, Alison Hadwin,
and the Project Gutenberg Online Distributed Proofreading Team

[Frontispiece]



"I NEVER SUSPECTED I'D END IN SUCH A LITTLE BLAZE" (p. 48)

WASHINGTON SQUARE

BY LEROY SCOTT

1914

CONTENTS

- I. THE GREAT MRS. DE PEYSTER 1
- II. ENTER AN AMIABLE YOUNG GENTLEMAN 18
- III. MISTRESS OF HER HOUSE 32
- IV. A SLIGHT PREDICAMENT 49
- V. THE HONOR OF THE NAME 61
- VI. BEHIND THE BLINDS 73
- VII. NOT IN THE PLAN 85
- VIII. THE HONEYMOONERS 95
- IX. THE FLIGHT 114
- X. PEACE—OF A SORT 126
- XI. THE REVEREND MR. PYECROFT 133
- XII. HOME AGAIN 146
- XIII. THE HAPPY FAMILY 158
- XIV. THE ATTIC ROOM 173
- XV. DOMESTIC SCENES 183
- XVI. THE MAN IN THE CELLULOID COLLAR 196
- XVII. A QUESTION OF IDENTITY 211
- XVIII. THE THIRD FLIGHT 225
- XIX. A PLEASANT HERMITAGE 232
- XX. MATILDA BREAKS IT GENTLY 242
- XXI. THE VEILED LADY 251
- XXII. A FAMILY REUNION 262
- XXIII. MR. PYECROFT TAKES CHARGE 270

ILLUSTRATIONS

- "I NEVER SUSPECTED I'D END IN SUCH A LITTLE BLAZE" (page 48)
frontispiece
- "WHAT'S THAT YOU'RE CARRYING?" 108
- "IT IS REALLY A REMARKABLE LIKENESS" 138
- MATILDA UNLOCKED THE SERVANTS' DOOR 146

[pg 1]

NO. 13

WASHINGTON SQUARE

CHAPTER I

THE GREAT MRS. DE PEYSTER

It was a raw, ill-humored afternoon, yet too late in the spring for the ministration of steam heat, so the unseasonable May chill was banished from Mrs. De Peyster's sitting-room by a wood fire that crackled in the grate; crackled most decorously, be it added, for Mrs. De Peyster's fire would no more have forgotten itself and shown a boisterous enthusiasm than would one of her admirably trained servants. Beside a small steel safe, whose outer shell of exquisite cabinet-work transformed that fortress against burglarious desire into an article of furniture that harmonized with the comfortable elegance of a lady's boudoir, sat Mrs. De Peyster herself—she was born a De Peyster—carefully transferring her jewels from the trays of the safe to leathern cases. She looked quite as Mrs. De Peyster should have looked: with an aura of high dignity that a sixty-year-old dowager of the first water could not surpass, yet with a freshness of person that (had it not been for her dignity) might have made her early forties seem a blossomy thirty-five.

[pg 2]

Before the well-bred fire sat a lady whose tears had long since dried that she had shed when she had bid good-bye to thirty. She was—begging the lady's pardon—a trifle spare, and a trifle pale, and though in a manner well enough dressed her clothes had an air of bewilderment, of general irresolution, as though each article was uncertain in its mind as to whether it purposed to remain where it had been put, or casually wander away on blind and timorous adventures.

A dozen years before, Mrs. De Peyster, then in the fifth year of her widowhood, had graciously undertaken to manage and underwrite the début of her second cousin (not of the main line, be it said) and had tried to discharge her duty in the important matter of securing her a husband. But her efforts had been futile, and to say that Mrs. De Peyster had not succeeded was to admit that poor Olivetta Harmon was indeed a failure. She had lacked the fortune to attract the conservative investor who is looking for a sound business proposition in her he promises to support; she had lacked the good looks to lure on the lover who throws himself romantically away upon a penniless pretty face; and she had not been clever enough to attract the man so irrationally bold as to set sail upon the sea of matrimony with a woman of brains. And so, her brief summer at an end, she had receded to those remote and undiscovered shores on which dwell the poor relations of the Four Hundred; whereon she had lived respectably, as a lady (for that she should ever appear a lady was due the position of Mrs. De Peyster), upon an almost microscopic income; and from which bleak and distant land of second-cousindom she came in glad and proud obedience to fill an occasional vacant place at one of Mrs. De Peyster's second-best dinner parties.

[pg 3]

She had arrived but the moment before to bid her exalted cousin adieu and wish her *bon-voyage*, and was now silently gazing in unenvious admiration at the jewels Mrs. De Peyster was transferring to their traveling-cases—with never a guess that perturbation might exist beneath her kinswoman's composed exterior. As a matter of fact, under the trying circumstances which confronted Mrs. De Peyster, any other household would have been in confusion, any lesser woman might have been headed toward hysteria. But centuries of having had its own will had established the De Peyster habit of believing that things would eventuate according to the De Peyster wish; it was not in the De Peyster blood to give way. And yet, though self-control might restrain worry from the surface, it could not banish it from the private chambers of her being.

Mrs. De Peyster glanced at the open door of her bedroom—hesitated—then called: "Miss Gardner!"

A trim and pretty girl stepped in. "Yes, Mrs. De Peyster."

[pg 4]

"Will you please call up Judge Harvey's office once more, and inquire if there is any news about my son. And ask when Judge Harvey will be here."

Miss Gardner crossed to Mrs. De Peyster's desk and took up the telephone.

"Why, Cousin Caroline, has Jack—"

"One moment, Olivetta,"—motioning toward the telephone,— "until Miss Gardner is through."

They sat silent until the receiver was hung up. Mrs. De Peyster strove to keep anxiety from her voice.

"Well, Miss Gardner,—any trace of my son yet?"

"They have learned nothing whatever."

"And—and Judge Harvey? When will he be here?"

"His office said he was at a meeting of the directors of the New York and New England Railroad, and that he was coming here straight after the meeting."

"Thank you, Miss Gardner. You may now go on with the packing. I'll have the jewels ready very shortly, and Matilda will be in to help you as soon as she is through arranging with the servants."

"Why, Cousin Caroline, what is it about Jack?" burst out Olivetta with an excited flutter after Miss Gardner had gone into the bedroom. "I hadn't heard anything of it before! Has—has anything happened to him?"

Olivetta, an intimate, a relative, and a worshipful inferior, was one of the few persons with whom Mrs. De Peyster could bring herself to unbend and be confidential. "That is what I do not know. About a week ago Jack suddenly disappeared—"

"Disappeared!"

"Oh, he left a note, telling me not to worry. But not a word has been heard from him since. Of course, it may only be some wild escapade, but then he knew we were going on shipboard this evening, and he should have been home long before this."

"How terrible!" cried the sympathetic Olivetta, pushing into place a few of the inconstant hairpins that threatened to bestrew the floor. "Went a week ago!" And then suddenly: "Why, that was about the time that first rumor was printed of his engagement to Ethel Quintard. And again this morning—in the 'Record'—did you see it?"

"I never give thought to the newspapers," was Mrs. De Peyster's somewhat stiff response.

"You have—have told the police?"

"The police, of course not! But I have advised with Judge Harvey, and he has a firm of private detectives on the case."

"And they have clues?"

"They have nothing, as you just heard Miss Gardner report."

"Cousin Caroline! With all these—these thugs and hold-up men we read about—and all the accidents—"

"Olivetta! Don't!" And then in a more composed voice: "I am hoping it is merely some boyish prank. But even that will be bad enough, if he misses the boat."

"Yes, I see. You told me about arranging with Mrs. Quintard also to sail on the Plutonia."

"I had counted on the trip—Jack and Ethel being thrown together, you know."

"Indeed, it was very clever of you!"

"I am hoping it may be only some boyish prank," Mrs. De Peyster repeated. "You may not have noticed it, Olivetta," she continued, permitting a sigh to escape her, "but of late Jack has acted at times—well, rather queerly."

"Queerly! How?"

"He has been far from being himself. In fact, I have observed a number of things not at all natural to a De Peyster."

"Caroline! What a worry he must be to you!"

"Yes. But I am hoping for the best. And now, please, we will say no more about it."

They were silent for a moment. Miss Gardner entered, took the jewels which in the mean time Mrs. De Peyster had finished putting in their cases, and went again into the bedroom. Olivetta's eyes followed her.

"You are still pleased with Miss Gardner?"

"Thus far she has proved herself competent. I consider myself very fortunate in finding a secretary who is not above some of the duties of a lady's maid. It is a very happy combination for traveling."

[pg 7]

"She seems almost too good to be true," mused Olivetta. "She's really very pretty. I hope Jack hasn't—"

"Olivetta! How can you! Jack has never paid her the slightest attention, nor she him."

"Pardon me, Caroline! But she's so pretty, and she's just the sort of girl who attracts men—and—and"—a bit wistfully—"gets engaged and gets married."

"Nonsense, Olivetta. When she first came to me I asked her if she were in love or engaged. She said she was not, and I told her my rules. She is a very sensible girl."

"At any rate, she must be a great relief after that Marie you had."

Mrs. De Peyster flushed, as though at some disagreeable memory.

"Have you learned yet whether Marie was actually a spy for Mrs. Allistair?" inquired Olivetta.

"She confessed that she was getting money besides the wages I paid her. That is proof enough."

"I believe it of Mrs. Allistair! She wouldn't stop at anything to win your place as social leader. But she could never fill it!"

"She will never win it!" Mrs. De Peyster returned with calm confidence.

At that moment the door from the hallway opened and there entered a woman of middle age, in respectable dull-hued black, with apron of black silk and a white cap.

[pg 8]

"Ah, Matilda," remarked Mrs. De Peyster. "The servants, are they all gone yet?"

"The last one, the cook, is just going, ma'am. There's just William and me left. And the men have already come to board up the windows and the door."

"You paid the servants board wages as I instructed, and made clear to them about coming to Newport when I send orders?"

"Yes, ma'am. And they all understand."

"Good," said Mrs. De Peyster. "You have Mr. Jack's trunks packed?"

"All except a few things he may want to put in himself."

"Very well. You may now continue helping Miss Gardner with my things."

But Matilda did not obey. She trembled—blinked her eyes—choked; then stammered:—

"Please, ma'am, there's—there's something else."

"Something else?" queried Mrs. De Peyster.

"Yes, ma'am. Downstairs there are six or seven young men from the newspapers. They want—"

"Matilda," interrupted Mrs. De Peyster in stern reproof, "you are well enough acquainted with my invariable custom regarding reporters to have acted without referring this matter to me. It is a distinct annoyance," she added, "that one cannot make a single move without the newspapers following one!"

[pg 9]

"Indeed it is!" echoed the worshipful and indignant Olivetta. "But that is because of your position."

"I tried to send them away," said Matilda hurriedly. "And I told them you were never interviewed. But," she ended helplessly, "it didn't do any good. They're all sitting downstairs waiting."

"I shall not see them," Mrs. De Peyster declared firmly.

"There was one," Matilda added timorously, "who drew me aside and whispered that he didn't want an interview. He wants your picture."

"Wants my picture!" exclaimed Mrs. De Peyster.

"Yes, ma'am. He said the pictorial supplement of his paper a week from Sunday was going to have a page of pictures of prominent society women who were sailing for Europe. He said something about calling the page 'Annual Exodus of Social Leaders.' He wants to print that painting of you by that new foreign artist in the center of the page." And Matilda pointed above

the fireplace to a gold-framed likeness of Mrs. De Peyster—stately, aloof, remote, of an ineffable composure, a masterpiece of blue-bloodedness.

"You know my invariable custom; give him my invariable answer," was Mrs. De Peyster's crisp response.

"Pardon me, but—but, Cousin Caroline," put in Olivetta, with eager diffidence, "don't you think this is different?"

[pg 10]

"Different?" asked Mrs. De Peyster. "How?"

"This isn't at all like the ordinary offensive newspaper thing. A group of the most prominent social leaders, with you in the center of the page—with you in the center of them all, where you belong! Why, Caroline,—why—why—" In her excitement for the just glorification of her cousin, Olivetta's power of speech went fluttering from her.

"Perhaps it may not be quite the same," admitted Mrs. De Peyster. "But I see no reason for departing from my custom."

"If not for your own sake, then—then for the artist's sake!" Olivetta pursued, a little more eagerly, and a little more of diffidence in her eagerness. "You have taken up M. Dubois—you have been his most distinguished patron—you have been trying to get him properly started. To have his picture displayed like that, think how it will help M. Dubois!"

Mrs. De Peyster gave Olivetta a sharp look, as though she questioned the entire disinterestedness of this argument; then she considered an instant; and in the main it was her human instinct to help a struggling fellow being that dictated her decision.

"Matilda, you may give the man a photograph of the picture. And as I treat the papers without discrimination, you may give photographs to all the reporters who wish them. But on the understanding that M. Dubois is to have conspicuous credit."

"Very well, ma'am."

"And send all of them away."

[pg 11]

"I'll do what I can, ma'am." And Matilda went out.

"What time does the Plutonia sail?" inquired Olivetta, with the haste of one who is trying to get off of very thin ice.

"At one to-night. Matilda will get me a bit of dinner and I shall go aboard right after it."

"How many times does this make that you've been over?"

"I do not know," Mrs. De Peyster answered carelessly. "Thirty or forty, I dare say."

Olivetta's face was wistful with unenvious envy. "Oh, what a pleasure!"

"Going to Europe, Olivetta, is hardly a pleasure," corrected Mrs. De Peyster. "It is a duty one owes one's social position."

"Yes, I know that's true with you, Cousin Caroline. But with me—what a joy! When you took me over with you that summer, we only did the watering-places. But now"—a note of ecstatic desire came into her voice, and she clasped her hands—"but now, to see Paris!—the Louvre!—the Luxembourg! It's the dream of my life!"

Mrs. De Peyster again gave her cousin a suspicious look.

"Olivetta, have you been allowing M. Dubois to pay you any more attention?"

"No, no,—of course not," cried Olivetta, and a sudden color tinted the too-early autumn of her cheeks. "Do you think, after what you said—"

[pg 12]

"M. Dubois is a very good artist, but—"

"I understand, Cousin Caroline," Olivetta put in hastily. "I think too much of your position to think of such a thing. Since you—since then—I have not spoken to him, and have only bowed to him once."

"We will say no more about it," returned Mrs. De Peyster; and she kissed Olivetta with her duchess-like kindness. "By the by, my dear, your comb is on the floor."

"So it is. It's always falling out."

Olivetta picked it up, put it into place, and with nervous hands tried to press into order loose-flying locks of her rather scanty hair.

Mrs. De Peyster arose; her worry about her missing son prompted her to seek the relief of

movement. "I think I shall take a turn about the house to see that everything is being properly closed. Would you like to come with me?"

Olivetta would; and, talking, they went together down the stairs. As they neared the ground floor, Matilda's voice arose to them, expostulating, protesting.

"What can that be about?" wondered Mrs. De Peyster, and following the voice toward its source she stepped into her reception-room. Instantly there sprang up and stood before her a young man with the bland, smiling, excessively polite manner of a gentleman-brigand. And around her crowded five or six other figures.

[pg 13]

Matilda, pressing through them, glared at these invaders in helpless wrath, then at her mistress in guilty terror.

"I—I did my best, ma'am. But they wouldn't go." And before punishment could fall she discreetly fled.

"Pardon this seeming intrusion, Mrs. De Peyster," the foremost young man said rapidly, smoothly, appeasingly. "But we could not go, as you requested. The sailing of Mrs. De Peyster, under the attendant circumstances, is a piece of news of first importance; in fact, almost a national event. We simply had to see you. I trust you perceive and appreciate our professional predicament."

Mrs. De Peyster was glaring at him with devastating majesty.

"This—this is an outrage!"

"Perhaps it may seem an outrage to you," said the young man swiftly, politely, and thoroughly undevastated. "But, really, it is only our duty. Our duty to our papers, and to the great reading public. And when newspaper men are doing their duty they must necessarily fail, to their great personal regret, in the observance of some of the nicer courtesies."

Mrs. De Peyster was almost inarticulate.

"Who—who are you?"

"Mayfair is my name. Of the 'Record.'"

"The 'Record'! That yellow, radical paper!"

Mr. Mayfair stepped nearer. His voice sank to an easy, confidential tone.

[pg 14]

"You are misled by appearances, Mrs. De Peyster. Every paper has got to have a policy; we're the common people's paper—big circulation, you know; and we so denounce the rich on our editorial page. But as a matter of fact we give our readers more live, entertaining, and respectful matter about society people than any other paper in New York. It's just what the common people love. And now"—easily shifting his base—"about this reported engagement of your son and Miss Quintard. As you know, it's the best 'romance in high life' story of the season. Will you either confirm or deny the report?"

"I have nothing whatever to say," flamed out Mrs. De Peyster. "And will you leave this house instantly!"

"Ah, Miss Quintard's mother would not deny it either," commented Mr. Mayfair with his polite imperturbability. His sharp eyes glinted with satisfaction. Young Mr. Mayfair admired himself as being something of the human dynamo. Also it was his private opinion that he was of the order of the super-reporter; nothing ever "got by him." "And so," he went on without a pause, "since the engagement is not denied, I suppose we may take it as a fact. And now"—again with his swift change of base—"may I ask, as a parting word before you sail, whether it is your intention next season to contest with Mrs. Allistair—"

"I have nothing whatever to say!"

[pg 15]

"Quite naturally you'd prefer not to say anything," appeasingly continued the high-g geared Mr. Mayfair, "but of course you are going to fight her." Again his sharp, unfoolable eyes glinted. "'Duel for social leadership'—pardon me for speaking of it as such, but that's what it is; and most interesting, I assure you; and I, for one, trust that you will retain your supremacy, for I know—I know," he repeated with emphasis—"that Mrs. Allistair has used some methods not altogether—sportsmanlike, may I say? And now"—rapidly shifting once more—"I trust I will not seem indelicate if I inquire whether it is in the scope of your present plans, perhaps at house-parties at the estates of titled friends, to meet the Duke de—"

"I have nothing whatever to say!" gasped Mrs. De Peyster, glaring with consuming fury.

"Naturally. We could hardly expect a categorical 'yes' or 'no.' We understand that your position requires you to be non-committal; and you, of course, understand that we newspaper men interpret a refusal to speak as an answer in the affirmative. Thank you very much for the interview you have given us. And I can assure you that we shall all handle the story with the utmost good taste. Good afternoon."

He bowed. And the next moment the place where he had stood was vacant.

"Of—of all the effrontery!" exploded Mrs. De Peyster.

[pg 16]

"Isn't it terrible!" shudderingly gasped the sympathetic Olivetta. "I hope they won't really drag in that horrible Duke de Crécy!"

Mrs. De Peyster shuddered, too. The episode of the Duke de Crécy was still salt in an unhealed social wound. The Duke had been New York's most distinguished titled visitor the previous winter; Mrs. De Peyster, to the general envy, had led in his entertainment; there had been whispers of another international marriage. And then, after respectful adieus, the Duke had sailed away—and within a month the papers were giving columns to his scandalous escapades with a sensational Spanish dancer of parsimonious drapery. Whereupon the rumors of Mrs. De Peyster's previously gossiped-of marriage with the now notorious Duke were revived—by the subtle instigation, and as an act of social warfare, so Mrs. De Peyster believed, of her aspiring rival, Mrs. Allistair. And there was one faint rumor, still daringly breathed around, that the Duke had proposed—had been accepted—had run away: in blunt terms, had jilted Mrs. De Peyster.

"We will not speak of this again, Olivetta," Mrs. De Peyster remarked with returning dignity, "but while the matter is up, I will mention that the Duke did propose to me, and that I refused him."

[pg 17]

With a gesture she silenced any comment from Olivetta. In a breath or two she was entirely her usual poised self. Too many generations had her blood been trained to ways of dignity, and too long had she herself been drilled in composure and self-esteem and in a perfect confidence in the thing that she was, for an invasion of newspaper creatures to disturb her for longer than a few moments.

She was moving with stately tread toward the dining-room when Matilda came hurrying up from the nether regions of the house. "Did you know, ma'am," Matilda fluttered eagerly, "that Mr. Jack is home?"

"My son back!" There was vast relief in Mrs. De Peyster's voice. "When did he come?"

"A few minutes ago."

"Did—did he say anything?"

"I haven't seen him, ma'am. He came in the back way, through the stable. William told me about it."

Mrs. De Peyster's voice became composed, severe. "I shall see what he has to say for himself." Majestically, somewhat ominously, she turned and began to mount the stairs, followed by Olivetta and Matilda. But as she passed the library's closed door, she heard Miss Gardner's voice and a second voice—and the second voice was the voice of a man.

Startled, she paused. She caught a few fragments of phrases. Indignation surged up within her. Resolutely she stepped to the door; but by instinct she was no eavesdropper, and she would not come upon people in compromising attitudes without giving them fair warning. So she knocked, waited a moment—then opened the door and entered.

[pg 18]

CHAPTER II

ENTER AN AMIABLE YOUNG GENTLEMAN

Half an hour earlier, across in Washington Square, a young gentleman was sauntering about taking the crisp May air. He was fashionably but quietly dressed, and in his chamois-gloved hand he swung a jaunty wand of a cane; a slender, lithe young gentleman, with a keen face that had an oddly wide but yet attractive mouth: a young man emanating an essence of lightness both of body and of spirit. He might have been the very person of agreeable, irresponsible Spring, if Spring is ever of the male gender, out for a promenade.

It seemed most casual, the saunter of this pleasant idler; the keenest observer would never have guessed purpose in his stroll. But never for longer than an instant were the frank gray eyes of this young gentleman away from the splendid stone steps, with their carved balustrade, and the fine old doorway of Mrs. De Peyster's house at No. 13 Washington Square.

Presently he noted three men turn up Mrs. De Peyster's steps. Swiftly, but without noticeable haste, he was across the street. The trio had no more than touched the bell when he was beside them.

"What papers are you boys with?" he inquired easily, merging himself at once with the party.

[pg 19]

One man told him—and looked him up and down. "Thought I knew all the fellows," added the speaker, a middle-aged man, "but never ran into you before. What's your rag?"

"Town Gossip," replied the agreeable young gentleman.

"Town Gossip!" The old reporter gave a grunt of contempt. "And you've come to interview Mrs. De Peyster?"

"Yes."

"First time I ever knew that leprous scandal-scavenger and black-hander to send a man out in the open to get a story." Evidently the old reporter, whom the others addressed as "colonel," had by his long service acquired the privilege of surly out-spokenness. "Thought 'Town Gossip' specialized in butlers and ladies' maids and such—or faked up its dope in the office."

"This is something special." The young gentleman's smiling but unassuming *camaraderie* seemed unruffled by the colonel's blunt contempt, and though they all drew apart from him he seemed to be untroubled by his journalistic ostracism.

[pg 20]

The next moment the door was opened by a stout, short-breathed woman, hat, jacket, and black gloves on. All stepped in. The three late-arriving reporters, seeing in the reception-room beyond a group of newspapermen about a servant,—Matilda making her first futile effort to rid the house of this pestilential horde, generated by Mr. Mayfair,—started quickly toward the members of their fraternity. But the young gentleman remained behind with their stout admittance.

"Huh—thought that was really your size—tackling a servant!" commented the caustic colonel.

But the reporter from "Town Gossip" smiled and did not reply; and the three disappeared into the reception-room. The young gentleman, very politely, half pushed, half followed the stout woman out of the reception-room's range of vision.

"Just leaving, I suppose," he remarked with pleasant matter-of-factness.

"Yes, sir. My bags are down at the basement door. When I heard the ring, I just happened—"

"I understand. You wouldn't have answered the door, if almost all the regular servants had not been gone. Now, I'd say," smiling engagingly, "that you might be the cook, and a mighty good cook, too."

He had such an "air," did this young man,—the human air of the real gentleman,—that, despite the unexpectedness of his overture, the stout woman, instead of taking offense, flushed with pleasure.

"I ought to be a good one, sir; that's what I'm paid for."

"Seventy-five a month?" estimated the young gentleman.

"Eighty," corrected the cook.

[pg 21]

"That's mighty good—twenty dollars a week. But, Mrs. Cook,"—again with his open, engaging smile,—"pardon me for not knowing your proper name,—could I induce you to enter my employment—at, say, twenty dollars a minute?"

"What—what—"

"For only a limited period," continued the young gentleman—"to be exact, say one minute. Light work," he added with a certain whimsicality, "short hours, seven days out—unusual opportunity."

"But what—what am I to do?" gasped the cook, and before she could gasp again one surprised black glove was clutching two ten-dollar bills.

"Arrange for me to see Miss Gardner—alone. It's all right. She and I are old friends."

"But—but how?" helplessly inquired this mistress of all non-intrigantes.

"Isn't there some room where nobody will come in?"

"The library might be best, sir," pointing up the stairway at a door.

"The library, then! And arrange matters so that no one will know we're meeting."

"But, sir, I don't see how—"

"Most simple, Mrs. Cook. Before you go, you, of course, want to bid Miss Gardner good-bye. Just request the lady in black in there with the reporters to tell Miss Gardner that you want to speak to her and will be waiting in the library. When you've said that, you've earned the money. Then just watch your chance until the somber lady isn't looking, and continue with your original plan of leaving the house."

[pg 22]

"Perhaps it will work," hesitated the cook. But with a gesture in which there was no hesitation she slipped her minute's pay between the buttons of her waist.

The young gentleman went lightly and swiftly up the stairs and through the mahogany door that had been pointed out to him. Curiously he looked about the spacious, dark-toned room of splendid dignity. He had the ease of the man to whom the world is home, and seemed not one whit abashed by the exclusive grandeur of the great chamber. With a watchful eye on the door, he glanced at the rows and rows of volumes: well-bred authors whom time had elevated to a place among literary "old families." Also he examined some old Chinese ivory carvings with a critical, valuating, meditative eye. Also in passing—and this he did absently, as one might do from habit—he tried the knob of a big safe, but it was locked.

The next moment there was a sound at the door. Instantly he was out of sight behind the brown velvet hangings of a recessed French window. Miss Gardner entered, saw upon the embarrassed edges of none of the shrouded chairs a plump and short-breathed Susan. Surprised, she was turning to leave when a cautious but clear whisper floated across the room.

"Clara!"

She whirled about. At sight of the young gentleman, who had stepped forth, she went pale, then red, then pale again.

[pg 23] "Eliot—Mr. Bradford!" she exclaimed. Then in a husky frightened whisper: "How did you get in here?"

He sought to take one of her hands, but she put both behind her back. At this repulse the young gentleman winced, then smiled gravely, then pleasantly,—and then with a whimsical upward twist to his wide mouth.

"Via the cook," he answered, and told her the rest.

"Did any one else belonging to the house see you?"

"Besides you and my excellent old friend, the cook, no one."

"But don't you realize that this house is one of the most dangerous places in the world for you?" she cried in a low voice. "Why, Judge Harvey himself is expected here any minute!"

"Judge Harvey!" The equable young man gave a start. But the next moment his poise came back.

"And after what I saw only to-day in the papers about Thomas Preston—! Don't you know you are this moment standing on a volcano?"

"Yes—but what of it?" he answered cheerfully. "It's the most diverting indoor or outdoor sport I've ever indulged in—dodging eruptions. Besides, in standing on this volcano I have the advantage of also standing near you."

"Didn't I tell you I never wanted to see you again!" she flamed at him. "How dared you come here?"

[pg 24] "I had to come, dear." His voice was pleading, yet imperturbably pleasant. "You refused to answer the letters I wrote you begging you to meet me somewhere to talk things over. I read that Mrs. De Peyster was sailing to-night, and I knew that you were sailing with her. Surely you understand, before she went, I had to see my wife."

"I refuse to recognize myself as such!" cried Miss Gardner.

"But, my dear, you married—"

"Yes, after knowing you just two days! Oh, you can be charming and plausible, but that shows just how foolish a girl can be when she's a bit tired and lonesome, and then gets a bit of a holiday."

"But, Clara, you really liked me!"

"That was because I didn't know who you were and what you were!"

"But, Clara," he went on easily—he could not help talking easily, though his tone had the true ring of sincerity. There seemed to be no bit of aggressive self-assurance about this young gentleman; he seemed to be just quietly, pleasantly, whimsically, unobtrusively his natural self. "But, Clara, you must remember that it was as sudden with me as with you. I hardly thought about explaining. And then, I'll be frank, I was afraid if I did tell, you wouldn't have me. I did side-step a bit, that's a fact."

"You admit this, and yet you expect me to accept as my husband a man who admits he is a crook!"

[pg 25] "My dear Clara," he protested gently, "I never admitted I was such an undraped, uneuphonious, square-cornered word as that."

"Well, if a forger isn't a crook, then who is? The business of those forged letters of Thomas

Jefferson, do you think I can stand for that?"

The young man was in earnest, deadly earnest; yet he could not help his wide mouth tilting slightly upward to the right. Plainly there was something here that amused him.

"But, Clara, you don't seem to understand that business—and you don't seem to understand me."

"No, I must say I don't!" she said caustically.

"Well, perhaps I can't blame you," he admitted soothingly, "for I don't always understand myself. But really, my dear, you're not seeing this in the right light. Oh, I'm not going to defend myself. It's sad, very sad, but I'll confess I'm no chromo of sweet and haloed rectitude to be held up for the encouragement and beatification of young John D. Rockefeller's Bible Class. Still, I get my living quite as worthily as many of the guests who grace"—with a light wave of his hand about the great chamber—"this noble habitation. Though," in a grieved tone, "I'll confess some of my methods are not yet adequately recognized and protected by law."

"Won't you ever take anything seriously?" she cried in exasperation.

"Besides yourself, what is there to take seriously?"

[pg 26]

"Don't consider me in your calculations, if you please!" And then with sudden suspicion: "See here—you're not here to try any of your tricks on this house, or on Mrs. De Peyster!"

"I was thinking," said he, smiling about the room, "that you might hide me here till the police become infatuated with some other party. A fashionable house closed for the summer—nothing could possibly be superior for my purposes."

"I'd never do it! Besides, Mrs. De Peyster's housekeeper will be here."

"But Mrs. De Peyster's housekeeper would never know I was here."

"I can't stand your talk another minute," she burst out. "Go!"

He did not stir; continued to smile at her pleasantly. "Oh, I'm not really asking the favor, Clara. I'm pretty safe where I'm staying."

"Go, I say! And if you don't care for your own danger, then at least consider mine."

"Yours?"

"I've told you of Mrs. De Peyster's attitude toward married—"

"Then leave her, my dear. Even though it wouldn't be safe for you to be with me till the police resume their interrupted nap—still, you can have your own flat and your own bank account. Nothing would make me happier."

"Understand this, Mr. Bradford,—I'm going to have nothing to do with you!"

[pg 27]

For a moment he sobered. "Come, Clara: give me a chance to make good—"

"Will you turn straight?" she caught him up sharply. "And will you fix up the affair of the Jefferson letters?"

"That last is a pretty stiff proposition; I don't see how it's to be done. As to the first—but, really, Clara,—smiling again appeasingly,—“really, you take this thing altogether too seriously."

"Too seriously!" She almost choked. "Why—why—I'm through with you! That's final! And I don't dare stay here another minute! Good-bye."

"Wait, Clara." He caught her hand as she turned to go, and spoke rapidly. "I don't think I'm so bad as you think I am—honest. You may change your mind; I hope you do, dear; and if you do, write me, 'phone me, telegraph me, cable me, wireless me. But, of course, not to me direct; the police, you know. Address me in care of the Reverend Mr. Pycroft." Tense though the moment was to him, the young man could not restrain his odd whimsical smile. "The Reverend Mr. Pycroft has taken an interest in me; like you he is trying to make me a better man. He'll see that I get your message. Herbert E. Pycroft—P-y-e-c-r-o-f-t—remember his name. Here's a card of the boarding-house at which he is staying." He thrust the bit of pasteboard into her free hand. "Remember, dear, I really am your husband."

[pg 28]

With an outraged gesture she flung the card to the floor. "There'll be no message!" Her voice was raised; she trembled in fierce humiliation, and in scorn of him. "You ... my husband!"

"Yes, your husband!" he said firmly. "And I'm going to make you love me!"

It was at just this moment that Mrs. De Peyster, ascending from her scene with the reporters, was passing without, and it was these last words that she overheard. And it was at just this moment that her knock sounded upon the door.

"Quick, you mustn't be seen here!" breathed Miss Gardner. "The French windows there, and out the back way through the stable!"

With a cat's silent swiftness he was at the windows, Miss Gardner beside him. But in the backyard stood William, the coachman, sunning himself. That way was closed.

"Into the study," whispered Miss Gardner, pointing at a door, "and watch your chance to get out!"

In the same instant the heavy sound-proof mahogany door closed softly behind him—leaving Miss Gardner in the middle of the room, with heightened color, breathing rapidly. Into the library swept Mrs. De Peyster, followed by Olivetta and Matilda.

There was a lofty sternness in Mrs. De Peyster's manner. "Miss Gardner, I believe I heard you speaking with a man."

"You did." Miss Gardner was stiff, proudly erect, for she sensed what might be coming.

[pg 29] "Where is he?"

"He went out through the window," said Miss Gardner.

"Ah, he did not want me to find out about you. But by chance I overheard him say he was your husband."

"He is." Then with an effort: "But husband or no husband, Mrs. De Peyster, I believe I would be of equal value—"

"I desire no scene, no argument," interrupted Mrs. De Peyster, dignified, not a strident note in her voice—for she never lost her self-possession or the true grand manner. "I believe you will remember, Miss Gardner, that when you applied for your present position two months ago, I told you that I made it a rule to have no servants or employees of any kind who were married. As I desired that you should understand my reasons, I informed you that I had once had a cook and a footman who were married, and who paid so much attention to one another that they had time to pay no attention to me. I then asked you if you were married. You informed me you were not."

"And I was not, at that time."

[pg 30] "Indeed! Then you have married since. That makes your deception all the worse. Remember, Miss Gardner, it was on the distinct understanding that you were unmarried that I employed you. I have no desire to pass judgment upon you. I try to be fair and just and generous with all my employees. If you had been what you declared yourself to be, and remained such, you could have stayed with me indefinitely. Matilda there came to me as my son's nurse over twenty years ago, and has been with me ever since—happy, as she will tell you, with no desire to change her state whatever."

"N—no—none—none at all!"

Matilda hastily dropped her eyes. Mechanically her eyes noted the rejected card Mr. Bradford had tendered Miss Gardner. Her long habit of perfect orderliness, and perhaps the impulse to hide the slight confusion that suddenly had seized upon her, prompted her to bend over and secure this bit of litter. She glanced at it, would have put it in the waste-basket had that receptacle not been across the room, then thrust it into the capacious slit-pocket of her black skirt.

Mrs. De Peyster continued in her tone of exact justice: "Miss Gardner, you have the perfect right to be married or unmarried. I have the perfect right to have the sort of employees I prefer. But since you are not what you declared yourself to be, I no longer require your service."

Miss Gardner bowed stiffly.

"Matilda, see that Miss Gardner is paid in full to the end of her month; and also pay her one month in advance. And telephone about until you can find me a maid—do not bother about the secretary part of it—a maid who is *not* married, and who can come at once. That is all."

[pg 31] Matilda, still somewhat pale and agitated, started to follow out the proud Miss Gardner, who gave a swift glance at the study door—while Mrs. De Peyster looked on with her invariable calm majesty.

[pg 32]

CHAPTER III

MISTRESS OF HER HOUSE

But at just this moment there was a smart rap at the library door, it was partly opened, and a cheery masculine voice called out:—

"May I come in, mother?"

"You, Jack. You may," was the somewhat eager response from Mrs. De Peyster.

The door swung entirely open, Miss Gardner stepped out, and there entered a young man of twenty-two or three, good-natured confidence in his manner, flawlessly dressed, with hands that were swathed in bandages. He crossed limpingly to Mrs. De Peyster, who, her affection now under control, stood regarding him with reproving and sternly questioning eyes.

"Good-morning, mother,—glad to get back," he said, imprinting an undaunted kiss upon her stately cheek.

Her reply was a continuance of her reproving look. The young man turned to Mrs. De Peyster's faithful satellite.

"Hello, Olivetta. Hands out of commission. You'll have to shake my elbow." And he held out his angled arm.

[pg 33]

"Good-morning, Jack," responded Olivetta, in trepidation, hardly daring to be gracious where Mrs. De Peyster had been cool.

Jack slipped an arm across Matilda's shoulders. "How are you, Matilda? Glad to see you again."

"And I'm glad to see you again, Mr. Jack," returned Matilda, with a look of stealthy affection.

"Please go, Matilda," said Mrs. De Peyster crisply. "And now, Jack," she continued with frigid dignity after Matilda had withdrawn, "I trust that you will explain your absence, and your long silence."

"Certainly, mother," said Jack, pushing a slip-covered chair before the fireplace—for an open wood fire burned here as in her sitting-room above—and letting himself down into the chair slowly and with extreme care and crossing his legs. "I got a sudden invitation from Reggie Atwater to—"

"You know I do not approve of that young scape-grace!"

"I know you don't. I suppose that's one reason I didn't tell you beforehand what I was up to."

"What have you been doing?"

"Reggie asked me to go on a long trip to try out his new car. It's a hummer. Hundred-and-twenty horse-power—bloody-eyed, fire-spitting devil—"

"Such cars are dangerous," severely commented Mrs. De Peyster, who still kept to her horses and carriage as better maintaining old-family distinction.

"I know. That's another reason I didn't tell you—especially since we were planning a thousand-mile lark."

[pg 34]

"What's the matter with your hands?" suddenly demanded Mrs. De Peyster.

Jack gazed meditatively at the bandaged members.

"You were right about that car being dangerous, mother," said he. "I'll confess the whole business. We were whizzing around a corner coming into Yonkers this morning when the machine skidded. I did a loop-the-loop and lit on my hands. But the skin of my palms—"

"Oh!" shuddered Olivetta.

"Were you much hurt?" asked Mrs. De Peyster, for a moment forgetting her reproving manner in her affectionate concern.

"Mother, with your love for old lace, you certainly would like the openwork effect of my skin. But—the patient will recover."

"I trust this experience has been a lesson to you!" said Mrs. De Peyster with returned severity.

"Oh, it has—a big lesson!" Jack heartily agreed.

"Then I trust you will do nothing of the kind again."

"I trust I won't have to!"

There was rather an odd quality in Jack's tone.

"Won't have to? What do you mean?"

"You've questioned me a lot, mother. I'd like to put a few leading questions to you. And—u'm—alone. Olivetta," he remarked pleasantly, "do you know that Sherlock Holmes found it an

instructive and valuable occupation to count the stair-steps in a house? Suppose you run out for five minutes and count 'em. I'll bet you a box of—"

Olivetta had risen, somewhat indignantly.

"I never eat candy!"

"A box of hairpins," continued Jack, clumsily picking up one from the floor, "that there aren't more than seventy-five."

"Oh, if you want me out of the way, all right!" said Olivetta, sticking the pin into place.

"Here, is that your purse?" asked Jack, fishing an open purse from beneath the chair Olivetta had just vacated.

"Yes, I'm always dropping it. I lost two—"

"I must say, Olivetta," put in Mrs. De Peyster reprovingly, "that you really must not be so careless!"

Jack was looking at a card that had fallen from the purse.

"Hello! And a ticket to the exhibition of paintings of—"

"Give it to me!" And Olivetta, with suddenly crimson face, snatched purse and card from Jack's hands. "I'll wait up in your bedroom, Caroline, and look at your new gowns." And with a rapidity that approached instantaneity she disappeared.

"Jack," his mother demanded suspiciously, "what was that card?"

"Just an old admission ticket to varnishing day at the spring exhibit of the American Society of Painters," said Jack easily. And without giving Mrs. De Peyster an instant in which to pursue the matter further, he awkwardly pushed her favorite chair toward the fire to a place beside his own. "Come sit down, mother. There's a lot of things I want to tell you."

Mrs. De Peyster lowered herself into the chair. "Yes?"

Jack's eyes had meditatively followed Olivetta. "Do you know, mother, that Olivetta would really be an awfully good sort if she only had the right chance?"

"The right chance?"

"Yes. Think of her living on and on in that deadly proper little hotel—chuck full of primed and crimped and proud poor relations who don't dare draw a single full-sized breath without first considering whether such a daring act might not disturb the social standing of somebody over on Fifth Avenue or down here on Washington Square—Oh, I say, mother, five more years of that life and Olivetta will be choked—dessicated—salted away—a regular forever-and-ever-amen old maid. But if—" He hesitated.

"Yes—if?"

"If Olivetta were only to marry some one—some decent fellow—she'd blossom out, grow as young as she actually is—and, who knows, perhaps even her hairpins might stay in."

"Marry, yes. But whom?"

"I've seen a few things—there's a certain party—and—" He stumbled a bit, conscious that he was becoming indiscreet. "And, oh, well, just on general principles marriage is a good thing."

"That is just the opinion I have been urging upon you in regard to yourself," returned his mother in her even, confident tone.

"U'm—yes," Jack said hastily. "But that was not—not the first thing I wanted to speak about."

"I believe you did say there were several matters."

"So there are." He rubbed his face tentatively with his bandaged hand; then smiled blandly at his mother. "Yes, there are a few."

"Well?"

"Well, first of all, mother, I want to make a kick."

She frowned. "How often must I request you not to use such common expressions!"

"All right, all right," said he. "Suppose I say, then, that I'm dissatisfied."

"Dissatisfied!" She straightened up. "Dissatisfied! What about? Do I not allow you all the money you want?"

"Yes."

"And have I not practically arranged a match between you and Ethel Quintard? Ethel will have three millions some day. And there is no better family to marry into; that is, except our own."

"Yes, yes,—I know."

"And yet you say you are dissatisfied!" She stared. "What more can you want?"

"Well, for one thing, to go to school," was Jack's amiable response.

[pg 38]

"Go to school! Why—why, you've already had the best of educations! Exeter—Yale—not to speak of private tutors!"

"And what did I learn? That is," he added, "over and above being a fairly decent half-back and learning how to spend money—u'm—pretty thoroughly."

"I trust," said Mrs. De Peyster with all her dignity, "that you learned to be a gentleman!"

"Oh, I suppose I learned that all right," Jack acquiesced. "And I've been working hard at the profession ever since—sixteen to twenty hours a day, no half-holidays and no Sundays off. I can't stand it any longer. So I've decided to go on strike."

"Strike?" exclaimed his mother, bewildered.

"Yes. For better conditions. I'm tired loafing such long hours. I'd like a little leisure in which to work."

"Work!" repeated his mother—and human voice could hardly express amazement greater than did hers. "Work! Jack—you're not in earnest?"

He held upon her a clear-eyed, humorous, but resolute face.

"Don't I look in earnest?"

He did; and his mother could only dazedly repeat, "Work! You go to work!"

[pg 39]

"Oh, not at once. No, thank you! I want to ask you to give me a little proper education first that will equip me to do something. You've spent—how much have you spent on my education, mother? Tens and tens of thousands, I know. Pretty big investment, on the whole. Now, how large returns do you suppose I can draw on that investment?"

"I was not thinking about dividends; I was thinking about fitting you for your station," returned his mother stiffly.

"Well, as for me, I've been thinking of late about how much I could get out of that investment. I've wanted to test myself and find what I was worth—as a worker." He leaned a little closer. "I say, mother," he said confidentially, "you remember that little explanation I just gave you of my absence."

"About your trip in that high-powered automobile?"

"That was just a high-powered fib. Just a bit of diplomatic romance—for Olivetta's consumption."

"Then where have you been?" demanded Mrs. De Peyster.

"Prospecting. Prospecting to find out just how much that hundred thousand or two or three you've sunk in me is worth. And I've found out. It's present value is not quite nine a week."

"You mean?"

"I mean," he said pleasantly, "I've been at work."

"At work!"

Mrs. De Peyster slowly rose and looked down at him with staring, loose-fallen face.

"At work!" she gasped again. "At work!"

[pg 40]

"Yes, mother. At work."

"But—but that skidding automobile? Those hands?"

"Blisters, mother dear. Most horrible blisters."

"You've worked—you've worked—at what?"

"Well, you see, mother, if I could have knocked out a home run, say a job as a railroad president, when I stepped up to the plate in the first inning, I suppose I wouldn't have backed away from the

chance. But I wanted to find my real value, so I wore cheap clothes and kept clear of my friends. 'What could I do?' every one asked me. You know my answer. And *their* answer! I thought only sub-way guards could say, 'Step lively,' like that. Lordy, how I tramped! But finally I met a kind gentleman who gave me a chance."

"A gentleman?"

"About the size of your piano—only he had a red mustache and a red shirt and I should say his complexion needed re-decorating. Irish—foreman on a water-main trench."

"And you—you took it?"

"Took it? I grabbed it!"

"J—a—c—k D—e P—e—y—s—t—e—r!" his appalled mother slowly exclaimed—so slowly that each letter seemed to shiver out by itself in horrified disjunction. "Well, at any rate," she declared with returning vigor, "I'm glad you have had enough of it to bring you to your senses and bring you home!"

[pg 41]

"Oh, I've had enough all right. My cubic contents of ache is—well, you wouldn't believe a man of my size could hold so much discomfort. But that isn't the only thing that brought me home. It was—er—I might say, mother, that it was suggested to me."

"Suggested? I do not understand."

"If you will permit the use of so inelegant an expression, I was 'fired.'"

"Fired?"

"Yes. The foreman intimated—I won't repeat his language, mother, but the muscles stood out on his profanity in regular knots—he intimated, in a way that left no doubt as to his meaning, that I was not quite up to the nine per week standard. I'll be honest with you and admit that I didn't lean against the pay-shed and weep. I still wanted to work, but I decided that I didn't want to start life at its pick-and-shovel end—if I could help it. So here I am, mother, asking you to give me a little real education—say as a mining engineer, or something like that."

Mrs. De Peyster was trembling with indignation.

"J—a—c—k D—e P—e—y—s—t—e—r!" again a letter at a time. "J—a—c—k D—e P—e—y—s—t—e—r! I'm astounded at you!"

"I thought you might be—a little," he admitted.

"I think you might have some consideration for me! And my position!"

[pg 42]

"I suppose it is rather selfish of me to want to earn my own living. But you don't know what dreary hard work being a gentleman becomes."

"I won't have it!" cried Mrs. De Peyster wrathfully. "This is what comes of your attending that Intercollegiate Socialist thing in college! I protested to the president against the college harboring such unsettling influences, and urged him to put it out."

"Well, dear old prexy did his best to comply."

"It's that Socialist thing! As for what you propose, I simply will not have it!"

"No? I could have started in up at Columbia, and kept it from you. But I wanted to be all on the level—"

"I won't have it!"

"You really mean that you are not going to add a few thousand more to my hundred thousands' worth of education?"

"I certainly shall not!"

"Then," said Jack regretfully, "I suppose after all I've got to start in at the pick-and-shovel end."

"No, you will not! I have reared you to be a gentleman! And you are going to be a gentleman!"

"Well, if that's the way you feel about it," he sighed, "we'll drop the matter—temporarily."

"We'll drop it permanently!" said Mrs. De Peyster decisively. "Besides, all this talk is utterly footless. You seem to forget that you are sailing with me to Europe to-morrow."

[pg 43]

"That brings me to the second point. I was hoping," Jack said mildly, "that you would consent to take my regrets to Europe. Don't you think Europe might be willing to overlook my negligence—just this once?"

"Jack—I can't endure your facetiousness!"

"I'm not facetious, mother dear. I'm most confoundedly and consummately serious. I really want you to let me off on this Europe business. Won't you—there's a dear?"

"No!"

"No?"

"Why, your passage is paid for, and my plans—You know Ethel Quintard and her mother are sailing on the same boat. No, most certainly I shall not let you off!"

"Well, if that's the way you feel about it," he sighed again, "perhaps we'd better drop this matter also—temporarily."

"This matter we'll also drop permanently," his mother said, again with her calm, incontrovertible emphasis.

"Well, that brings us to the third point." He drew a copy of the "Record" from his pocket and pointed to a paragraph. "Mother, this is the second time my engagement to Ethel Quintard has been in print. I must say that I don't think it's nice of Ethel and Mrs. Quintard to let those rumors stand. I would deny them myself, only it seems rather a raw thing for a fellow to do. Mother, you must deny them."

"Jack, this marriage is bound to come!"

[pg 44]

"Mother, you are simply hypnotizing yourself into the belief that I am going to marry Ethel Quintard. When"—he painfully recrossed his legs, and smiled pleasantly at his mother—"when, as a matter of fact, what I have been trying to lead up to is to tell you that I shall never lead Ethel's three millions to the altar."

"What's that?"

"It's all off."

"Off?"

Jack slowly nodded his head. "Yes, all off."

"And why, if you please?"

"Oh, for several reasons," he returned mildly. "But one of the reasons is, that I happen to be engaged to someone else."

"Engaged!" gasped Mrs. De Peyster, falling back. "And without my knowing it! Who is she?"

"Mary Morgan."

"Mary Morgan! I never heard of her. Who's her father?"

"First name Henry, I believe."

"I don't mean his name. But who is he—what's his family—his financial affiliations?"

"Oh, I see. Mary told me he runs a shoe store up in Buffalo."

"A shoe store! A shoe store!"

"Or perhaps," Jack corrected, "it was a grocery. I'm not certain."

"Oh!" gasped Mrs. De Peyster. "Oh! And—and this—this—Mary person—"

[pg 45]

"She plays the piano, and is going to be a professional."

For a moment Mrs. De Peyster's horror was inarticulate. Then it began to regain its power of speech.

"What—you throw away—Ethel Quintard—for a little pianist! You compare a girl like—like that—to Ethel Quintard!"

"Compare them? Not for one little minute, mother, dear! For Mary has brains and—"

"Stop!" exploded Mrs. De Peyster, in majestic rage. "Young man, have you considered the social disgrace you are plunging us all into? But—but surely you cannot be in earnest!"

He looked imperturbably up into her face. "Not in earnest, mother? I'm as earnest as a preacher on Sunday."

"Then—then—"

She choked with her words. Before she could get them out, Jack was on his feet and had an arm around her shoulders.

"Come, mother, don't be angry—please!" he cried with warm boyish eagerness. "Before you say another word, let me bring Mary to see you. I can get her here before you go on board. The sight of her will show you how right I am. She is the dearest, sweetest—"

"Stop!" She caught his arm. "I shall not see this—this Mary person!"

"No?"

[pg 46]

She was the perfect figure of wrath and pride and confident power of domination. "I shall never see her! Never! And what is more," she continued, with the energy of one who believes her will to be equivalent to the accomplished fact, "you are going to give up, yes, and entirely forget, all those foolish things you have just been speaking of!"

He gazed squarely back into her flashing eyes. His face had tightened, and at that moment there was a remarkable likeness between the two faces, usually so dissimilar.

"Pardon me, mother; you are mistaken," he said quietly. "I am going to give up nothing."

"What, you defy me?" she gasped.

"I am not defying you. I tried to tell you in as pleasant a way as I could what my plans are. But everything I said, I am going to do."

"Then—then—" At first the words would not come forth; she stood trembling, clutching the back of her chair. "Then I beg to inform you," she was saying thickly in her outraged majesty, when Matilda opened the hall door and ushered in an erect, slender man of youngish middle age and with graying hair and dark mustache, and with a pleasant, distinguished face.

"I beg pardon; I fear I come inopportunist," he said, as he sighted Mrs. De Peyster's militant attitude. "But I was told to come right up. I'll just wait—"

[pg 47]

"Do not go, Judge Harvey," Mrs. De Peyster commanded, as he started to withdraw. "On the other hand, your arrival is most opportunist. Please come here."

"Good-morning, Uncle Bob," Jack said cheerfully. "Excuse me for not shaking hands. Just a little automobile accident."

"Jack, you home!" cried the Judge. "My boy, but you have given us all a scare!" And then in affectionate concern, noticing his hands: "Nothing serious, I hope?"

"Nothing serious about the accident," said Jack, glancing at his mother.

Mrs. De Peyster glared at her son, then crossed to the safe, larger and more formidable than the one above from which she had been removing her jewels, took out a document and returned to the two men. She had something of the ominous air of a tragedy queen who is foreshadowing an approaching climax.

"Judge Harvey, I do not care to go into explanations," said she. "But I desire to give you an order and to have you be a witness to my act."

"Of course, I am at your service, Caroline."

"In the first place," she said, striving to speak calmly, "I beg to request my son to move such of his things as he may wish out of this house—and within the hour."

"Certainly, mother," Jack said pleasantly.

"And to you, Judge Harvey,—I wish my son's allowance, which is paid through your office, to be discontinued from this moment."

[pg 48]

"Why—of course—just as you say," said the astonished Judge. "But perhaps if the case were—"

"This paper is my will," interrupted Mrs. De Peyster, holding up the document she had taken from the safe. "As my man of affairs, I believe you are acquainted with its contents."

"I am."

"It gives the bulk of my fortune to my son here."

"Why, yes," admitted the Judge with increasing bewilderment.

"His share amounts to two millions, or thereabouts."

"Thereabouts."

Mrs. De Peyster took two rustling, majestic steps toward her fireplace. "Until my son gives me

very definite assurance that his conduct will be more suitable to me and my position, he is no longer my son." And so saying she tossed the will upon the fire. She allowed a moment of effective silence to elapse. "That is all, Jack. You are excused."

Jack stood and watched the flaming will flicker down to a glowing ash. One bandaged hand slowly smoothed his blond hair.

"Gee! I've seen people burning up money, and I've burnt up quite a bit myself, but I never saw two millions go as quick! Well, mother," he sighed, shaking his head, "I never suspected I'd end in such a little blaze. With such a pile I could have made a bigger bonfire than that."

[pg 49]

CHAPTER IV

A SLIGHT PREDICAMENT

For several moments after Jack had withdrawn, Mrs. De Peyster stood in majestic silence beside the mantelpiece.

"We will forget this incident, Judge Harvey," she said at length. "Be seated, if you please."

Judge Harvey took a chair, as ordered. Out in the world, Judge Harvey was a disconcerting personality, though a respected one; a judge who had resigned his judgeship, with the bold announcement that law-courts were in the main theaters for farces; a thinker who rejected all labels, who was daring enough to perceive and applaud what was good even in the conventional.

"But, Caroline," he began hesitantly, "weren't you perhaps a little too stern with Jack?"

"As I said, Judge Harvey, I do not care to explain the situation."

"I understood it—a little—anyhow. See here, you don't want Jack to grow up to be a member of that geranium-cheeked, leather-chair brigade that stare out of Fifth Avenue Club windows, their heaviest labor lifting a whiskey-and-soda all the way up to their mouths?"

[pg 50]

"I certainly do not propose to accept the alternative he proposed!" she retorted. "I assure you, such severity as I used was necessary. Nothing will bring a young man to his senses so quickly and so surely as having his resources cut off." Her composure, her confidence in her judgment, were now fully returned. "Jack will come around all right. What I did was imperative to save myself; and certainly it was best for him."

"I trust so. But I hope you don't mind if I'm a bit sorry for the boy, for, you know,"—in a lower voice, and with a stealthy look at her,— "Jack's the nearest thing to a son I've ever had."

She did not answer. In the silence that ensued an uneasiness crept into his manner.

"Caroline," bracing himself, "there is something—something you were perhaps not expecting to hear—that I must tell you."

"I trust, Judge Harvey,"—somewhat stiffly,— "that you are not about to propose to me again."

"I am not." His face flushed; then set grimly. "But I'm going to again, sometime, and I'd do it now if I thought it would do any good."

"It will not."

"Oh, I know I wouldn't fit into your present scheme of life." Bitterness and contempt had risen like a tide in the Judge's voice. "I know I'm no social figure; at least, not up to your dimensions. I know it would be a come-down to change from Mrs. De Peyster to Mrs. Harvey. Not that I'm so infernally humble, Caroline, that I don't consider myself a damned lot better than most of the men you might possibly think about marrying."

[pg 51]

He rose abruptly, and with a groaning burst of impatience that had a tinge of anger: "Oh, for God's sake, Caroline, why don't you throw overboard all this fashionable business, this striving to keep an empty position, and be—and be—"

"And be what?" put in Mrs. De Peyster with glittering eye.

"And be just yourself!" he cried defiantly, squarely facing her. "There, at last I've said it! And I'm going to say the rest of it. This Mrs. De Peyster that heads everything isn't at all the simple, natural gracious Carrie De Peyster that John De Peyster and I made love to! You're not the real Mrs. De Peyster; you only think you are. This Mrs. De Peyster the world knows is something that's been built by and out of the obligation which you accepted to maintain the De Peyster dignity. She's only a surface, a shell, a mask! If your mother hadn't died, and then your mother-in-law, and thrown upon you this whole infernal family business and this infernal social leadership, why, you'd have been an entirely different person—"

"Judge Harvey!"

[pg 52]

"You'd then have been the real Mrs. De Peyster!" he rushed hotly on. "Oh, all this show, this struggle for place, this keeping up a front, I know it's only a part of the universal comedy of our pretending to be what we're not,—every one of us is doing the same, in a big way, or a little way,—but it makes me sick! For God's sake, Caroline, chuck it—chuck it all and be just the fine human woman that there is in you!"

She was trembling with suppressed wrath. Never before—not to her face, at least—had such criticism been directed at her.

"And ultimately be Mrs. Harvey—no, thank you!" she replied, in a choking, caustic voice. "But while you are at it, have you any further suggestions for my conduct?"

"Yes," said he determinedly. "You have been spending too much money, and spending it on utterly worthless purposes. This social duel—that's just what it is—between you and Mrs. Allistair, besides being nonsense, will be absolutely ruinous if you keep it up. Mrs. Allistair is as unprincipled in a social way as her husband has been in a business way; her ambition will hesitate to use no means, you know that—and, don't forget this, she can spend fifty dollars to your one!"

"I believe," with blazing hauteur, yet still controlled, "that I possess something superior to Mrs. Allistair's dollars."

"Yes," groaned the Judge, "your confounded old-family business!"

[pg 53]

"And speaking of money," continued Mrs. De Peyster in her cuttingest, most withering, most annihilatory grand manner, "perhaps I should have spent my money worthily, like Judge Harvey, upon a gift of Thomas Jefferson letters to the American Historical Society."

The shaft of sarcasm quivered into the center of Judge Harvey's sorest spot. Those recently discovered letters of Thomas Jefferson which Judge Harvey had presented to the Historical Society, and which had been so widely discussed as throwing new light upon the beginnings of the United States Republic, had a month before been pronounced and proved to be clever but arrant forgeries. The newspaper sensation and the praise that had attended the discovery and gift—warming and exalting Judge Harvey's very human pride—had been followed by an anticlimax of gibes and jeers at his gullibility. Whenever the hoax was spoken of, Judge Harvey writhed with personal humiliation, and with anger against the person who had recalled his discomfiture, and with a desire for vengeance against the perpetrator of the swindle.

"Remember this, that the first experts pronounced those letters genuine," he retorted in a hot, trembling voice. "And I'm going to get that scoundrel—you see! Only to-day I had word from the Police Commissioner that his department at last had clues to that fellow Preston. And, besides," he ended cuttingly, "though I was deceived, I at least made an effort to spend my money upon a worthy object."

[pg 54]

They glared into one another's eyes; old friends now thoroughly aroused against each other. They might be sarcastic or out-spoken; but their self-respect, their good-breeding, would not permit them to become vituperative, to lose themselves in outbursts of wrath—though such might have been the healthier course. They knew how to plug the volcano. So for a space, though they quivered, they were silent.

Mrs. De Peyster it was who first spoke. Her voice had recovered its most formal, frigid tone.

"Please recall, Judge Harvey, that you are here at the present moment not as a friend but as my man of affairs."

"All right," he said grimly. "But at least I've told you what I thought as a friend."

"As my man of affairs," she continued with her magnificent iciness, "you may now tell me what you have been able to do for me about a cottage in Newport."

"Very well, here goes as your man of affairs: You said you wished to be in Newport from the middle of July to early in September."

"Yes."

"The house, of those available, which I thought would come nearest suiting you is 'The Heron's Nest.'"

"You mean the cottage Mrs. Van der Grift had last season?"

"The same."

"You need not describe it then. I know it perfectly. It is exactly what I desire; elegant, but not showy. And the terms?"

[pg 55]

"Ten thousand for the season."

"Quite satisfactory. I hope you have taken a lease."

"I have an option till to-morrow."

"Then close it. I suppose you have brought my letters of credit?"

"That," said he in formal lawyer tone, "brings me back to the news which, as your man of affairs, I was trying to break to you when you thought, as a friend, I was trying to propose."

"What news?"

"You will recall that the money with which I was to buy your letters of credit was money which I was to draw for you, to-day, as dividends on the stock you hold in the New York and New England Railroad."

"Certainly—though I do not see the drift of your remarks."

"And I hardly need remind you that the bulk of your fortune is invested in this railroad."

"A perfectly good stock, I believe," Mrs. De Peyster commented.

"Perfectly good—perfectly sound," Judge Harvey agreed. "But there has existed a certain possibility in the company's affairs for some time of which I hesitated to inform you. I did not wish to give you any unnecessary concern, which would have been the case if I had spoken to you and if the situation had terminated happily."

"And what is the situation to which you refer?"

[pg 56]

"You are doubtless aware that all the railroads have been complaining about bad business, owing to increased wages on the one side and governmental regulation of rates on the other. That's the way the officers explain it; but the truth is, the roads have been abominably mismanaged."

"Yes, I have vaguely heard something about bad business," said Mrs. De Peyster with a bored air. "But what does all this lead to?"

"I am trying to lead you gently, Mrs. De Peyster, to realize the possibility that, in view of its alleged bad business, the New York and New England might decide to pass dividends for this quarter."

Mrs. De Peyster started forward. "Do you mean to say, Judge Harvey, that such a possibility exists?"

"It's rather more than a possibility."

"More than a possibility?"

"Yes. In fact, it's a—a fact."

"A fact?"

"I have just come from the meeting of the directors. They have voted to pay no dividends."

"No dividends!" Mrs. De Peyster gazed stupefied into the face of Judge Harvey. "No dividends! Then—then—my income?"

"I am very sorry," said Judge Harvey.

Mrs. De Peyster sank back in her chair and laid one hand across her eyes. For a moment she was dazed by this undreamed-of disaster; so overwhelmed that she did not even hear Judge Harvey, whose anger had ere this begun to relax, try to reassure her with remarks about the company being perfectly solvent. But it was not befitting the De Peyster dignity to exhibit consternation. Instinct, habit, ruled. So, after a moment, she removed her hand, and, though all her senses were floundering, she remarked with an excellent imitation of calm:—

[pg 57]

"Thank you very much, Judge Harvey, for your information."

Judge Harvey, though still resentful, was by now feeling contrite for his share of their quarrel and looked unusually handsome in his contrition. And in his concern he could not help pointing the way out.

"I trust you have enough in your bank for your present plans. And if not, your bank will readily advance you what you need."

"Of course," said she with her mechanical composure.

"Or if there is any difficulty," he continued, desirous of making peace, "I shall be glad to arrange a loan for you."

She was too blinded by disaster to think, to realize her needs. And dazed though she was by this

reverse, her anger against Judge Harvey for daring to criticize burned as high as before. And then, too, she remembered the haughtiness with which she had just refused his advice and put him in his place. At that moment, the person of all persons in the world from whom it would have been most humiliating to her to accept even a finger's turn of assistance was Judge Harvey.

"Thank you. I shall manage very well."

"And the Newport house?"

"I shall send you my instructions concerning it later."

He hesitated, waiting for her to speak. But she did not.

"Then that is all?" he queried.

"Quite all," she replied.

He still lingered. He was not to see her again for three months. And he didn't like to part like this; even if—

"After all, Caroline," he said impulsively, holding out his hand, "let's forget what we said and be friends. At any rate, I certainly hope you have a most enjoyable time in Europe."

"Thank you. I am sure I shall have."

Her words were cool, calm; the hand she gave him was without pressure. Stiffening again, he made her the briefest of bows and angrily walked out.

At the sound of the closing door, announcing that Judge Harvey's eyes were outside the room, Mrs. De Peyster unloosed the mantle of dignity, which with so great an effort she had kept folded about her person, let her face fall forward into her hands, and slumped down into her chair, a loose, inert bundle. Several lifeless minutes dragged by.

A little before, during a silence between Judge Harvey and Mrs. De Peyster, the study door had slowly opened and there had appeared the reconnoitering face of the entrapped Mr. Bradford. Though their attention had apparently been too centered on each other for them to be observant of what happened beyond their very contracted horizon, that had seemed to him no promising moment to try for an escape. With high curiosity, eyes amused and alight with delectable danger, he had studied Judge Harvey a moment, and then the duchess-like Mrs. De Peyster in her most magnificent towering attitude of wrathful hauteur. Then quickly and soundlessly the heavy door had closed.

Now again the heavy, sound-proof door of the study began to open—noiselessly, inch by inch. Again the light, humorous, but shrewd, very shrewd, face of Mr. Bradford appeared in the crack. This time the face did not withdraw. He watched the bowed figure of the solitary Mrs. De Peyster for several moments; considered; measured the distance to the door of escape; evaluated the silencing quality of the deep library rug; then slipped through the door, closed it, and with tread as soft as a bird's wing against the air started across the room.

At Mrs. De Peyster's back curiosity checked him and he turned his whimsical face down upon the motionless figure. The great Mrs. De Peyster! He wondered what had thus changed her from the all-commanding presence of a few moments since; for within that perfection of a study he had overheard nothing. An instant he stood thus at her back, alert to disappear upon the warning of a changing breath—the two but an arm's reach apart, and apparently about to go their separate ways forever—she unconscious of him, and he equally unconscious of the seed of a common drama which their own acts had already sown—with never a thought that ships that pass in the night may possibly alter their courses and meet again in the morning.

He slipped on out of the room, closing the door without a sound. In the hallway he paused. He wished to see Miss Gardner again, ignorant of the sudden fate that had befallen her. But he decided little would be gained by trying for another meeting. Certainly she must have relented sufficiently to have picked up the card he had given her; and perhaps she would change her mind and send him a message in care of the Reverend Mr. Pyecroft. Anyhow, that was his best hope.

Lightly, and with a light heart—for the presence of danger was to him a stimulant—he went down the stairs, eyes and ears on guard against unfortunate rencontres, and eyes also instinctively noting doors and passages and articles worth a gentleman's while. At the front door he waited a moment until the sidewalk was empty; then he let himself out, and went down Mrs. De Peyster's noble stone steps, his face pleasant and frank-gazing, and with the easy self-possession of departing from a call to wish a friend *bon-voyage*.

CHAPTER V

THE HONOR OF THE NAME

After a time Mrs. De Peyster rose tottering from the sheeted library chair, mounted weakly to the more intimate asylum of her private sitting-room, and sat down and stared into her fire. She was still dazed by Judge Harvey's announcement of the decision of the New York and New England to pay no dividends.

She was not rich, as the rich count riches. Nor did she desire a greater wealth; at least not much greater. In fact, she looked down upon the possessors of those huge fortunes acquired during the last generation as upon beings of an inferior order. It was blood-discs that gave her her supremacy, not vulgar discs of gold. She had enough to maintain the De Peyster station, but just enough; and she had so adjusted her scale of living that her expenses exactly consumed her normal income—no more, no less.

[pg 62]

That is, had exactly consumed it, except during the last year or two. One reason she had so resented Judge Harvey's criticism of her manner of living was that the criticism had the unfortunate quality of being based on truth. Of late, the struggle to maintain her inherited and rightful leadership had involved her in greatly increased expenditure, and this excess she had met in ways best known to herself.

The collapsed Mrs. De Peyster heard Matilda enter, pause, then pass into the bedroom, but did not look up; nor a moment later when Olivetta reentered from the bedroom, did she at first raise her dejected head.

"Why, what's the matter, Cousin Caroline?" cried Olivetta.

There was no occasion for maintaining an appearance before Olivetta, who was almost as faithful and devoted as though a very member of her body. So Mrs. De Peyster related her misfortune, interrupted by frequent interjections from her sympathetic cousin.

"Do you realize what it means, Olivetta?" she concluded in a benumbed voice. "It means that, except for less than a thousand which I have on hand,—a mere nothing,—I am penniless until more dividends are due—perhaps months! I cannot go to Europe! I cannot go to Newport!"

Olivetta was first stunned, then was ejaculative with consternation.

"But, Caroline," she cried after a moment, "why not have Judge Harvey get you the money?"

"Out of the question, Olivetta; I do not care to explain." She would never unbend to Judge Harvey! Never!

"Then, why not borrow the money from the bank, as you say Judge Harvey suggested?"

[pg 63]

"Olivetta, you should know that that is against my principles." She tried to instill proud rebuke into her voice. But just here was the pinch—or one of them. To cover the excess in her expenses she had already borrowed—secretly, for she would never have had it come to Judge Harvey's knowledge—from her bank to the very limit of her personal credit.

Olivetta's distressed eyes fell upon one of the jewel cases which Marie had left in the sitting-room.

"There are your jewels, Caroline. But, of course you wouldn't consider raising money—"

"On my jewels! How can you think of such a thing!"

"Of course not, of course not," fluttered Olivetta. "Please forgive me, Caroline. I do so admire your strict principles!"

Mrs. De Peyster accepted apology and tribute with a forgiving nod. But just here was another of the pinches. The previous spring, while in Paris, she had had her jewels most confidentially replaced with excellent imitations; and the original stones were at this moment lying as pledges in the vaults of a Parisian banker.

"But, Caroline," pursued the sympathetic Olivetta, "can't you cut down expenses and remain in town? What with your credit, you have enough for that!"

[pg 64]

"Remain in town, when everybody is leaving?" cried Mrs. De Peyster. "Are you out of your senses Olivetta? Why, people would never stop talking about it!"

"Of course—you're right—forgive me," stammered Olivetta. "But you might go to some modest resort for the summer—or—or—go to Europe in a more modest way."

"Olivetta, you grow more absurd every moment!" exclaimed Mrs. De Peyster. "You know it has long been my custom to spend the first half of the summer in Europe, in a style befitting me, and to spend the second half in Newport. To do less would set people talking, and might endanger my position."

"Of course! Of course!" cried the humbled Olivetta.

"I hope you fully realize my dilemma."

"It is terrible—terrible!" Olivetta's tone was slow, and full of awed dismay. "You must maintain your social position and there is no money!"

"Just so."

Detailed horrors of the situation began to move in spasmodic procession through Olivetta's mind.

"And your passage is taken on the Plutonia—and it has been widely announced that you are leaving for Europe—and that newspaper is going to print your picture among the social leaders who have sailed—and, oh, Caroline, all those reporters are going to fill the papers with long articles about your going!"

[pg 65]

A new horror, that till then had escaped Mrs. De Peyster's inventory, a horror out-climaxing any in Olivetta's tragic list, burst suddenly upon Mrs. De Peyster. Her face went pale, fell loose.

"Mrs. Allistair!" she barely articulated.

"Mrs. Allistair?" Olivetta repeated blankly.

"Don't you see—if I stay at home—don't sail—Mrs. Allistair will use it as capital against me—and she'll ride over me to—"

"Caroline!" gasped the appalled Olivetta.

Mrs. De Peyster stood up, rigid with desperation.

"I simply must sail!" she cried.

"Of course you must! Can't you think of some way out of it? I never knew you unequal to an emergency!"

Mrs. De Peyster, her brow knitted with agitated thought, walked slowly to one of her windows and stood looking down into the pleasant bustle of Washington Square. Olivetta watched her intently, waiting for the brilliant plan that would be the result of her cousin's cogitations.

But the minutes passed, Mrs. De Peyster did not move, and Olivetta's gaze wandered about the large, luxurious sitting-room. Her mind roamed afar to the desolate realm which she inhabited, and she thought of her own sitting-room, dark and stingily furnished, and rather threadbare, in which she was expecting to spend the summer, save for a few weeks at a respectable, poor-relations' resort. She sighed.

"If it wasn't for your social position," she said, half to herself, "it really wouldn't be so bad to spend the summer here."

[pg 66]

Mrs. De Peyster must have heard, for she turned slowly about and gazed at Olivetta—gazed at her steadily. And gradually, as she gazed, her whole appearance changed. The consternation on her face was succeeded by calm resolution. Poise and dignity returned.

"You have an idea, Caroline?" cried Olivetta, struck by her look.

"Wait!"

Mrs. De Peyster stood silent for yet a few more moments. Then, completely her dignified and composed self, she stepped toward her bedroom. Olivetta's eyes followed her in wondering, worshipful fascination.

Mrs. De Peyster opened the door.

"Matilda!"

The housekeeper instantly appeared.

"Yes, Mrs. De Peyster."

"Matilda, call William and have him waiting in the hall till I summon him. Come back immediately."

"But, Cousin Caroline, what is it?" asked Olivetta excitedly, as Matilda went out.

"Wait!" said Mrs. De Peyster in a majestic tone.

A minute passed, Mrs. De Peyster standing composedly by the fireplace, Olivetta gazing at her in throbbing suspense. Then Matilda returned. Her Mrs. De Peyster summoned to her side.

[pg 67]

"Matilda, you have proved your loyalty to me by twenty years of service," she began, "and you, Olivetta, I know are completely devoted to me. So I know you both will faithfully execute my requests. But I must ask you not to breathe a word of what I tell you, and what we do."

"I?" cried Olivetta. "Never a syllable!"

"Nor I, ma'am,—never!" declared Matilda.

"But first, Matilda, I must acquaint you with a situation that has just arisen." And Mrs. De Peyster outlined such details of her predicament as she thought Matilda needed to know. "And now, here are my orders, Matilda. The house, of course, is being boarded up as usual. All the servants are sent away except William; and that order, if you have given it, for a maid for me is to be countermanded. You, Matilda, are to remain here alone in charge of the house as has been your custom. The report that I am sailing is to be allowed to stand. But in reality—"

"Yes, in reality?" cried the excited Olivetta.

"In reality," continued Mrs. De Peyster calmly, for she knew how a *déroulement* is heightened by a quiet manner—"in reality, I shall, during the entire summer, stay here in my own house."

"Stay here!" ejaculated Olivetta.

"Stay here!" exclaimed Matilda.

"Stay here. Chiefly in my suite. Secretly, of course. No one but you two will ever know of it. By staying here, I shall be practically at no expense. But the world will think I am in Europe, and my position will be saved."

[pg 68] Staggered as she was, Olivetta had remaining a few fragments of reason.

"But—but, Caroline! You cannot merely announce that you are going abroad! You are a person of importance—your every move is observed. People will see that you do not sail. How will you get around that?"

It sounded a poser. But Mrs. De Peyster was unruffled.

"Very simply, Olivetta. You shall sail in my stead."

"Me!" cried Olivetta, yet more bewildered.

"Yes, you."

"But—but, if you cannot afford Europe for yourself, how can you afford it for me?"

"It would take a great many thousands for me to go in the manner that is expected of me. I cannot afford that. For you, Olivetta, since the passage is already paid, it would take but a few hundred—and that I can afford."

"You—you mean that I am to pass for you?"

"Yes."

"But I never can! People will know the difference!"

"People will never see you," returned the calm voice of Mrs. De Peyster. "The *Plutonia* sails at one to-night. You will go on board with my trunks late this evening, heavily veiled. Since no one must see you on the way over, you must of course, keep to your cabin. You must be seasick."

[pg 69] "But I am never seasick!" cried Olivetta.

"Then you must stay in your berth anyhow and pretend to be. You are to be too ill to receive any friends who may chance to be on board. Your stewardess will bring your meals to your stateroom. When the boat arrives, you must wait till every one else is off, and when you land you must again be heavily veiled and be too sick to speak to any one. Once you are in Paris—"

"Yes, there's the difficulty!"

"Not so great as you think. I shall give you full directions what to do. Once you are in Paris, you quietly disappear. It will become known that Mrs. De Peyster has gone off on a long motor trip through unvisited portions of Europe and will not return for the Newport season. With Mrs. De Peyster started on this trip, you become yourself, and you see Europe just as you please."

"Oh!" ejaculated Olivetta, drawing in a deep breath.

"But please, ma'am," put in Matilda, "why could you not go over yourself and then slip away to some modest resort?"

"So many people know me I should be sure to be seen and recognized. And then think of the talk! No, that would never do. I have considered all possibilities. My plan is best."

"Of course, you're right, ma'am," agreed Matilda.

[pg 70] "On the way back, Olivetta, you are to preserve the same precautions as on the way over. And to avoid any possible difficulty in getting into the house, I shall provide you with a key to the house

and one to my sitting-room."

"But you, ma'am," objected Matilda, "in the mean time you cannot stay cooped up all summer in this room!"

"I do not intend to," returned Mrs. De Peyster with her consummate calm, which assured her co-conspirators that they could lean untroubled upon her unblundering brain. "Matilda, will you now please have William come in?"

Matilda, bewildered but obedient, stepped to the door and a moment later followed in the most clean-shaven, the most stiffly perpendicular, the most deferentially dignified, the most irreproachably expressionless of men-servants. He was the ultimate development of his kind. It seems almost a sacrilege to add that he was past man's perfect prime, and to hint that perhaps his scanty, unstreaked hair sought surreptitious rejuvenation in a drug-store bottle.

"William, Matilda will acquaint you with certain alterations in my plans," began his mistress. "I desire to add that she will remain in the house alone during my absence; that you are to keep to your quarters in the stable and not enter the house; and that you are to arrange to take, at my expense, all your meals outside."

William inclined his body slightly, as if to say, "Yes, my lady."

[pg 71]

"And in order to give the horses proper exercise, and to relieve Matilda's monotony, I desire you to take Matilda out driving every evening."

Again William bowed a "Yes, my lady."

"You understand this perfectly?"

William's lips executed one of their rare movements.

"Perfectly, Mrs. De Peyster."

"Very well."

Mrs. De Peyster dismissed him with a wave of her hand, and William made the exit of a minister from his queen.

"You don't mean—" began Matilda, almost breathless.

"Yes, I mean that I shall go out driving nightly in your clothes," responded Mrs. De Peyster.

"But—but—" gasped Matilda.

"Have no fear. I shall, of course, be veiled, and William is the best-trained, the most incurious of servants."

Mrs. De Peyster, looking her most majestic, stood waiting for the outburst of approval, just tribute to one who has conceived a supernally clever and flawless scheme.

"Well, now, Matilda," she prompted, "what do you think of the whole plan?"

"Since you thought it out, I—I—suppose it's all right," stammered Matilda.

"And you, Olivetta, what do you think?"

[pg 72]

"Me!" cried Olivetta, who for the last minute had with difficulty restrained her ecstasy. "Paris!—the Louvre!—the Luxembourg!—Versailles!" She flung her arms about Mrs. De Peyster's neck amid a shower of hairpins. "Oh, Caroline—Caroline. It's—it's simply glorious!"

[pg 73]

CHAPTER VI

BEHIND THE BLINDS

It was the next day.

Olivetta had mailed a few hurried notes to friends about her sudden departure for a complete rest in the utter seclusion of an unnamed spot in Maine—Jack De Peyster had moved out—the front door way and the windows had been boarded up—the house wore the proper countenance of respectable desertion—and up in her sitting-room, lighted only by little diamond panes in her thick shutters, sat Mrs. De Peyster reading a newspaper. From this she gleaned that Mrs. De Peyster had sailed that morning on the Plutonia, having gone on board late the night before. Also she learned that Mrs. De Peyster would not be back as was her custom for the Newport season, but was going to make an extended motor trip off the main-traveled roads, perhaps penetrating as far as the beautiful but rarely visited Balkan States.

Mrs. De Peyster was well satisfied as she rested at ease in her favorite chair. It would not be too much to say that she was very proud; for hers was certainly a happy plan, a plan few intellects could have evolved. And thus far it had worked to perfection, and there was no doubt but that it would work so to the end; for, although Olivetta, to be sure, was rather careless, the instructions given her, the arrangements made in her behalf, were so admirable and complete that any miscarriage could not possibly have Olivetta for its source.

Also Mrs. De Peyster was at heart honestly contented. She had spoken truly when she had told Olivetta that Europe was old to her and had become merely a social duty. Of that fatiguing obligation to her position she was glad to be relieved. The past season, with its struggle with Mrs. Allistair and that Duke de Crécy affair, had been a trying one, and she was tired. By the present arrangement, which she regarded as nothing short of an inspiration, her social prestige was secure, her financial difficulties were taken care of, and she herself would have the desired opportunity for a sorely needed rest. She would have her books, she would have the society of Matilda (for Matilda had in the long years grown to be more than a mere servant—she was a companion, a confidant)—her creature comforts would be well seen to by Matilda,—she would have the whole house to roam over at her will during the day, and every night she would have the pleasant relaxation of a drive behind the peerless William.

It seemed to her, as she looked forward to it, the most desirable of vacations.

Her mind was quite at ease concerning Jack. Severity, as she had said, had been necessary. A bit of privation would do him good, would bring him to his senses; she had no slightest doubt of that. And when they met again, he would be in a mood to fit into the place she had carefully prepared for him. Of course, she would let him off in the matter of Ethel Quintard, if he really didn't care for Ethel. There were other nice girls of good families. She wouldn't be hard on him.

Also she felt easier in her mind in the matter of the quarrel with Judge Harvey. The sting and humiliation of his words she had now cast out of her system; she was really superior to such criticism. There remained only Judge Harvey's offense. Certainly he had been inexcusably outspoken and officious. Her resentment had settled down into a calm, implacable, changeless attitude. She would be polite to him, since they must continue to meet in the future. But she would keep him coldly at a distance. She would never unbend. She would never forgive.

Next to the column recording her departure she had noted a few paragraphs giving the progress of the police in their search for James Preston, the forger of the Jefferson letters. What a fool Judge Harvey had been in that affair!...

And yet, in a way, she was sorry. She had liked Judge Harvey; had liked him very much. In fact, there had been relaxed moods in which she had dallied pleasantly with the thought of marrying him. She might, indeed, have married him already had it not been for the obvious social descent.

Also, she thought for a moment of Miss Gardner. In this matter she had likewise been quite right. However, aside from the deception Miss Gardner had practiced, she had seemed a nice girl; and Mrs. De Peyster was lenient enough to feel a very honest wish that the husband, who had so rapidly disappeared, was a decent sort of man. Perhaps later she might favor them with some trifling present.

She had a light luncheon, for it was her custom to eat but little at midday, and spent part of the afternoon with a comfortable sense of improvement over one of John Fiske's volumes of colonial history; popular novels she abhorred as frivolities beneath her. And then she took upon her lap a large volume, weighing perhaps a dozen pounds, entitled "Historic Families in America," in which first place was given to an account of the glories of the De Peysters. Though premiership was no better than the family's due, she was secretly pleased with her forebears' place in the volume—in a sublimated way it was the equivalent of going in first to dinner among distinguished guests. She liked frequently to glance leisurely through the pages, tasting here and there; and now, as she did whenever she read the familiar text, she lingered over certain passages of the deferential genealogist—whom, hardly conscious of the act of imagination, she could almost see in tight satin breeches, postured on his knees, holding out these tributes to her on a golden salver:—

"In 1148 Archambaud de Paster" ... "From an early period of the fourteenth century the De Peysters were among the richest and most influential of the patrician families of Ghent" ... "The exact genealogical connection between the De Peysters of the fourteenth century and the above-noted sixteenth and seventeenth century ancestors of the American De Peysters has not been traced, as the work of translating and analyzing the records of the intervening period is still incompleting. Sufficient has been ascertained, however, to leave no doubt of the continual progress of the family in possessions, social dignity, and public consequence" ... "The first man in New Amsterdam who had a family carriage" ... "The chief people of the city and province, and stately visitors from the Old World, were often grouped together under this roof"....

Such august and ample phrases could but nourish and exalt her sense of worthiness; could but add to her growing sense of satisfaction. She closed the ceremonious volume, and her eyes, lifting, rested for a gratifying moment on a framed steel engraving from the painting of Abraham De Peyster, Mayor of New York from 1691 to 1693. The picture pleased her, with its aristocratically hooked nose, its full wig, its smile of amiable condescension. But fortunately she had forgotten, or perhaps preferred not to learn, that when this ancestor was New York's

foremost figure, the city had had within its domain somewhat less than one one-thousandth of its present subjects.

[pg 78]

And then her eyes wandered to the three-quarters portrait of herself by M. Dubois, hung temporarily in this room. Yes, it was good. M. Dubois had caught the peculiar De Peyster quality. One looked at it and instinctively thought of generations processioning back into a beginningless past. "In 1148 Archambaud de Paster" ...

Toward five o'clock she rose and, a stately figure in lavender dressing-gown, strolled through the velvet hush of the great darkened house: over foot-flattering rugs, through silken hangings that rustled discreet homage at her passing, by dark tapestries lit with threads of gold, among shadowy bronzes and family portraits and pier-glasses and glinting cut-glass candlesticks and chandeliers. So exaltative yet so soothing, this opulent silence, this spacious solitude!

And for an almost perfect hour she sat in her rear drawing-room, lightly, ever so cautiously, touching bits of Grieg and Tchaikowsky out of her Steinway Grand—just dim whispers of music that did not breathe beyond the door. She played well, for she loved the piano and had a real gift for instrumentation. Often when she played for her friends, she had to hold herself in consciously, had to play below her ability; for to have allowed herself to play her best might have been to suggest that she was striving to be as good as a professional, and that would have caused comment and been in bad taste.

Her piano was going to be another comfort to her.

[pg 79]

She was complacent—even happy—even exultant. It was all so restful. And before her were three months—three beautiful months—of this calm, this rest, this security.

At seven o'clock Matilda announced that her dinner was ready, and she swept back into the great dining-room, high-ceilinged, surfaced completely with old paneling of Flemish oak. The room was dimly illuminated by a single shaded electric bulb. The other lighting had all been switched off; during the summer the illumination would, of course, have to be unsuspectingly meager. To a mortal of a less exalted sphere the repast would have seemed a banquet. Mrs. De Peyster, though an ascetic at noon, was something of an epicure at night; she liked a comfortable quantity, and that of many varieties, and these of the best. Under the ministrations of Matilda she pleurably disposed of clear soup, whitebait, a pair of squabs on toast with asparagus tips, and an alligator pear salad.

"Really, Matilda," she remarked with benign approval as she leisurely began on her iced strawberries, "I had quite forgotten that you were such a wonderful cook. Most excellent!"

"Thank you, ma'am," In her enjoyment Mrs. De Peyster had not noticed that throughout the meal her faithful attendant had worn a somewhat troubled look.

"Just give me food up to this standard, and I shall be most happy, my dear. My summer may grow somewhat tedious toward the end; I shall count a great deal on good meals to keep it pleasant."

[pg 80]

"Of course—of course—" and then a salad plate slipped from Matilda's hands. "Oh, ma'am, I—I—"

"What is the matter, Matilda?" demanded Mrs. De Peyster, a trifle stern at this ineptness.

"Nothing, ma'am. Nothing at all. I'll see that you get it, b—but I don't know how I'll get it."

"Don't know how?"

"You see, ma'am, the butcher, the grocer, everybody thinks I'm the only person in the house. We've always traded with these same people, and I've stayed here alone now for fifteen summers, and they know I eat very little and care only for plain food. And so to-day when I ordered all these things, they—they grinned at me. And the butcher said, 'Living pretty high, while the missus is away.'"

Mrs. De Peyster had dropped her dessert spoon, and was staring at her confederate. "I never thought about food!" she exclaimed in dismay.

"Nor did I, ma'am, till the butcher spoke. And, besides, William received the goods, and—and he smiled at me and said—"

"It does look suspicious!" interrupted Mrs. De Peyster.

"I think it does, ma'am."

"If you keep on having so much food sent in—"

"And such high quality, ma'am."

"Some one may suspect—become curious—and might find out—might find out—"

"That's what I was thinking of, ma'am."

Mrs. De Peyster had risen.

[pg 81]

"Matilda, we cannot run that risk!"

"Perhaps—perhaps, ma'am, we'd better change our butcher and grocer."

"That would do no good, for the new ones would find out that there was supposed to be only a single person here, No, such ordering has got to be stopped!"

"If you can stand it, I think it would be safer, ma'am. But what will you eat?"

There was a brief silence. Mrs. De Peyster's air grew almost tragic.

"Matilda, do you realize that you and I have got to live for the summer, for the entire summer, upon the amount you have been accustomed to ordering for yourself!"

"It looks that way, ma'am."

The epicure in Mrs. De Peyster spoke out in a voice of even deeper poignancy.

"Two persons—do you realize that, Matilda!—two adult persons will have to live for three months upon the rations of one person!"

"And what's worse," added Matilda, "as I told you, I don't eat much. I've usually had just a little tea and now and then a chop."

"A little tea and a chop!" Mrs. De Peyster looked as though she were going to faint. "A little tea and a chop!... For three months!... Matilda!"

[pg 82]

It seemed plain, however, that this was the only way out. But standing over the remains of the last genuine meal she expected to taste until the summer's end, her brow began slowly to clear.

"Matilda," she said after a moment, in a rebuking tone, "I'm surprised you did not see the solution to this!"

"Is there one, ma'am? What is it?"

"You are so fixed in the habit of sending your orders to the tradespeople that your mind cannot conceive of any other procedure. You are to go out in person, at night, if you like, to shops where you are not known, pay cash for whatever you want, and carry your purchases home with you. It is really extremely simple."

"Why, of course, ma'am," meekly agreed Matilda.

With the specter of famine thus banished, confidence, good humor, and the luxurious expectancy of a reposeful summer returned to Mrs. De Peyster. Soon she was being further diverted by the mild excitement of being dressed in one of Matilda's sober housekeeper gowns, the twin of the dress Matilda now wore, for her evening ride with William. They were fortunately of nearly the same figure, though, of course, there was a universe of difference in how those two figures were carried.

[pg 83]

Matilda, the competent, skilled Matilda, was inexplicably incompetent at this function. So clumsy, so nervous was she, that Mrs. De Peyster was moved to ask with a little irritation what was the matter. Matilda hastily assured her mistress that there was nothing—nothing at all;—and buttoned a few more buttonholes over the wrong buttons. As she followed the fully garbed and thickly veiled Mrs. De Peyster, now looking the most stately of stately housekeepers, down the stairway, her nervousness increased.

"I wish—I wish—" she began at the door. "What *is* the matter with you, Matilda?" demanded Mrs. De Peyster severely.

"I—I rather wish you—you wouldn't go out, ma'am."

"You are afraid I may be recognized?"

"No, I wasn't thinking of that, ma'am. I—I—"

"What else is there to be afraid of?"

"Nothing, ma'am, nothing. But I wish—"

"I am going, Matilda; we will not discuss it," said Mrs. De Peyster, in a peremptory tone intended to silence Matilda. "You may first clear away the dishes," she ordered. "But I believe I left a squab and some asparagus. You might put them, and any other little thing you have, on the dining-room table; I shall probably be hungry on my return from my drive. And then put my rooms in order. I believe the tea-tray is still in my sitting-room; don't forget to bring it down."

"Certainly, ma'am. But—but—" "Matilda"—very severely—"are you going to do as I bid you?"

"Yes, ma'am,"—very humbly. "But excuse me for presuming to advise you, ma'am, but if you want to pass for me you must remember to be very humble and—"

"I believe I know how to play my part," Mrs. De Peyster interrupted with dignity. Then she softened; it was her instinct to be thoughtful of those who served her. "We shall both try to get to bed early, my dear. You especially need sleep after last night's strain in getting Olivetta away. We shall have a long, restful night."

Mrs. De Peyster opened the door, unlocked the door in the boarding and locked it behind her, and stepped into her brougham, which had been ordered and was waiting at the curb. "Up Fifth Avenue and into the Park, William," she said. She settled back into the courtly embrace of the cushions; she breathed deep of the freedom of the soft May night. The carriage turned northward into the Avenue. Rolling along in such soothing ease—a crowd streaming on either side of her—yet such solitude—so entirely unknown.

Restful, yes. And spiced with just the right pinch of mild adventure.

It really could not possibly have been better.

CHAPTER VII

NOT IN THE PLAN

As she rolled northward behind the miraculously erect and rigid William, the emotion which had been so mildly exciting when she had left her door grew in potency like a swiftly fermenting liquor. It was both fearful and delightful. She was all a-flutter. This was a daring thing that she was doing—the nearest to a real adventure that she had engaged in since her girlhood. Suppose, just suppose, that some one should recognize her from the sidewalk!

The thought sent a series of pricking shivers up and down her usually tranquil spine.

Just as that fear thrummed through her, she saw, a few doors ahead, a man come out of a residence hotel. He sighted the De Peyster carriage, and paused. Mrs. De Peyster's heart stood still, for the man was Judge Harvey. If he should try to stop her and speak to her—!

But Judge Harvey merely bowed, and the carriage rolled on past him.

Mrs. De Peyster's heart palpitated wildly for a block. Then she began to regain her courage. Judge Harvey had, of course, thought her Matilda. A few blocks, and she had completely reassured herself. There was no danger of her discovery. None. Almost every one she knew was out of town; she herself was known to be upon the high seas bound for Europe; Matilda's gown and veil were a most unsuspecting disguise; and William, her paragon of a William, so rigidly upright on the seat before her—William's statuesque, unapproachable figure diffused about her a sense of absolute security. She relaxed, sank back into the upholstery of the carriage, and began fully to enjoy the rare May night.

But a surprise was lying in wait for her as she came into a comparatively secluded drive of Central Park. In itself the surprise was the most trifling of events—so slight a matter as a person twisting his vertebrae some hundred-odd degrees, and silently smiling. But that person was William!

For a moment she gasped with amazed indignation. To think of William daring to smile at her! But quickly she recognized that William, of course, supposed her to be Matilda, and that the smile was no more than the friendly courtesy that would naturally pass between two fellow-servants. Her indignation subsided, but her wonderment remained. To think that William could smile, William in whose thoroughly ironed dignity she had never before detected a wrinkle!

Just as she had re-composed herself, they rolled into another unpeopled stretch of the drive. Again William's vertebrae performed a semicircle and again William smiled.

"Fine night, Matilda," he remarked in a pleasant voice.

Mrs. De Peyster shrank back into the cushions. She had the presence of mind to nod her head, and William faced about. To put it temperately, the situation was becoming very trying. Mrs. De Peyster now realized that she had been guilty of a lack of forethought. It had not occurred to her, in working out this plan of hers, that her frigidly proper William could entertain a friendliness toward any one. What she should have done was to have given William a vacation and secured an entirely strange coachman for the summer who would have had no friendly sentiments to give play to.

But her desire was now all to escape from William's amiable attentions.

"Take me home," she said presently, muffling her voice behind her hand and veil, and withdrawing from it its accustomed tone of authority.

Half an hour later, to her great relief, the carriage turned again into Washington Square and drew up before her house. She stepped quickly out.

"Good-night—thank you," she said in a smothered imitation of Matilda's voice, and hurried up her steps.

She had unlocked the door in the boarding and had stepped into the dark entry, when she became aware that William had deserted his horses and was stepping in just behind her. As though it were a matter of long custom, William slipped an arm about her waist and imprinted a kiss upon her veil.

[pg 88]

Mrs. De Peyster let out a little gasping cry, and struggled to free herself.

"Don't be scared, Matilda," William reassured her. "Nobody can see us in here." And he patted her on the shoulder with middle-aged affection.

Mrs. De Peyster, after her first outburst, realized that she dared not cry out, or rebuff William. To do so would reveal her identity. And horrified as she was, she realized that there must have long existed between William and Matilda a carefully concealed affair of the heart.

"It's all right, dear," William again reassured her, with his staid ardor. "It's mighty good to be with you like this, Matilda!" He heaved a love-laden sigh. "We've had it mighty hard, haven't we, with only being able to steal a minute with each other now and then—always afraid of Mrs. De Peyster. It's been mighty hard for me. Hasn't it been hard for you?"

Mrs. De Peyster remained silent.

"Hasn't it been hard for you, dear?" William insisted tenderly.

"Ye—yes," very huskily.

"Why, what's the matter, Matilda? I know; you're tired, dear; your nerves are all worn out with the strain of getting Mrs. De Peyster off." Again his voice became tenderly indignant. "Just see how she treated that Miss Gardner; and wouldn't she have done the same to us, if she'd found us out? To think, dear, that but for her attitude you and me might have been married and happy! I know you are devoted to her, and wouldn't leave her, and I know she's kind enough in her way, but I tell you, Matilda,"—William's voice, so superbly without expression when on duty, was alive with conviction,—"I tell you, Matilda, she's a regular female tyrant!"

[pg 89]

There was a mighty surging within Mrs. De Peyster, a premonition of eruption. But she choked it down. William, launched upon the placid sea of his elderly affection, did not heed that his supposed inamorata was making no replies.

"She's a regular tyrant!" he repeated. "But now that she's away," he added in a tender tone, "and left just us two here, Matilda dear, we'll have a lot of nice little times together." And urged by his welling love he again embraced her and again pressed a lovely kiss upon Matilda's veil.

This was too much. The crater could be choked no longer. The eruption came.

"Let me go!" Mrs. De Peyster cried, struggling; and her right hand, striking wildly out, fell full upon William's sacred cheek.

He drew back amazed.

"What's the matter?" he demanded.

Mrs. De Peyster searched frantically for the keyhole to the inner door.

"Matilda, I'm not the man to take that!" he declared irefully. "What do you mean?"

[pg 90]

"Go! Go!" she gasped.

He drew back wrathfully, but with an awful dignity.

"Very well, Miss Simpson. But I'm not a man that forgives. You'll be sorry for this!"

As he started stiffly away Mrs. De Peyster found the keyhole. She turned her key, opened the door, and closed it quickly behind her. Gasping, shivering, she groped in the dusky hall until she found a chair. Into this she sank, half fainting, and sat shaking with astoundment, with horror, with wrath.

Wrath swiftly became the ruling emotion. It began to fulminate. She would discharge William! She would send him flying the very next morning, bag and baggage!

Then an appalling thought shot through her. She could not discharge William!

She could not discharge William, because she was not there to discharge him! She was upon the Atlantic highroad, speeding for Europe, and would not be home for many a month! And during all those months, whenever she dared appear, she would be subject to William's lovely attention!

She sat rigid with the horror of this new development. But she had not yet had time to realize its full possibilities—for hardly a minute had passed since she had entered—when she heard a key slide into the lock of the front door and saw a vague figure enter the unlighted hall. She arose in added terror. Had that William come back to—

"Oh, there you are, Matilda," softly called a voice, and the vague figure came toward her.

Mrs. De Peyster's terror took suddenly a new turn. For the voice was not the voice of her coachman.

"J-a-c-k!" she breathed wildly.

Jack threw an arm about Mrs. De Peyster's shoulders.

"Ho, ho, that's the time I caught you, Matilda," said he, in teasing reproof. "U'm, I saw those tender little love passages between you and William!"

Mrs. De Peyster stood a pillar of ice.

"Better not let mother find it out," he advised. "If she got on to this! But I'll never tell on you, Matilda." He patted her shoulder assuringly. "So don't worry."

Mrs. De Peyster's lips opened. If her voice sounded unlike Matilda's voice, the difference was unconsciously attributed by Jack to agitation due to his discovery.

"How—how do you come here?" she asked.

"With an almighty lot of trouble!" grumbled he. "Came around the corner an hour ago just in time to see you drive off with William. I've got a key to the inside door, but none to the door in the boarding; and as I knew there was nobody in the house I could rouse up, there was nothing for it but to wait till you and William came back. So we've been sitting out there on a park bench ever since."

There was one particular word of Jack's explanation that drummed against Mrs. De Peyster's ear.

"We?" she ejaculated. "We?" Then she noticed that another shadowy figure had drawn nearer in the dark. "Who—who's that?"

"Mary," was Jack's prompt and joyous answer.

"Mary! Not that—that Mary Morgan?"

"She used to be. She's Mary de Peyster now."

"You're not—not married?"

"To-day," he cried in exultation. "We slipped out to Stamford; everything was done secretly there, and it's to be kept strictly on the quiet for a time." He bent down close to Mrs. De Peyster's ear. "Don't let Mary know how mother objected to her; I have n't told her, and she doesn't guess it. And oh, Matilda," he bubbled out enthusiastically, "she's the kind of a little sport that will stick by a chap through anything, and she's clever and full of fun, and a regular little dear!"

He turned. "Come here, Mary," he called softly. "This is Matilda."

The next instant a slight figure threw its arms about Mrs. De Peyster and kissed her warmly.

"I'm so glad to meet you at last, Matilda!" exclaimed a low, clear voice. "Jack has told me how good you have been to him ever since he was a baby. I know we shall be the very, very best of friends!"

"And so—you're—you're married!" mumbled Mrs. De Peyster.

Jack was too excited by his happiness to have noticed Mrs. De Peyster's voice had it been a dozen-fold more unlike Matilda's than it was. "Yes!" he cried. "And wouldn't it surprise mother if she knew! Mother, sailing so unsuspectingly along on the Plutonia!" He gave a chortle of delight. "But oh, I say, Matilda," he cried suddenly, "you mustn't write her!"

Mrs. De Peyster did not answer.

"We don't want her to know yet," Jack insisted; "that's one reason we've done the whole thing so quietly." Then he added jocosely: "If you tell, there's a thing I might tell her about you. About—u'm—about you and William. Want me to do that—eh? Better promise not to tell."

"I won't," whispered Mrs. De Peyster.

"It's a bargain, then. But there's something else that would surprise her, too. I'm going to work."

"But not at once," put in Mary de Peyster, *née* Mary Morgan, in her soft contralto voice,

that seemed to effervesce with mischief. "Tell Matilda what you're doing to do."

[pg 94]

"I've already told you, Matilda, about my little experiment in the pick-and-shovel line. I decided that I didn't care for that profession. I've saved a few hundred out of my allowance. Monday I'm going to enter the School of Mines at Columbia—am going to study straight through the summer—night and day till the money gives out. By that time I ought to be able to get a job that will support us. And then I'll study hard of nights till I become a real mining engineer!"

"But we've got to live close! Oh, but we've got to live close!" exclaimed Mary joyously, as though living close were one of the chiefest pleasures of life.

"Yes, we've certainly got to live close!" emphasized Jack. "That's why we're here."

"Why you're here?" repeated Mrs. De Peyster in a low, dazed tone.

"Yes." Jack gave a gleeful, excited laugh. "I had an inspiration how to economize. Says I to Mary, 'Mary, since mother is away, and this big house is empty except for you, Matilda, why pay rent?' So here we are, and here we're going to live all summer—on the 'q t,' of course." He slipped an arm about Mary and one about Mrs. De Peyster, and again laughed his gleeful, excited laugh. "Just you, and Mary, and me—and, oh, say, Matilda, won't it be a lark!"

[pg 95]

CHAPTER VIII

THE HONEYMOONERS

Again Jack's arm tightened about Mrs. De Peyster in his convulsive glee, and again he exclaimed, "Oh, Matilda, won't it be a lark!"

Only the embrace of Jack's good left arm kept Mrs. De Peyster from subsiding into a jellied heap upon her parqueted floor. It had ever been her pride, and a saying of her admirers, that she always rose equal to every emergency. But at the present moment she had not a thought, had not a single distinct sensation. She was wildly, weakly, terrifyingly dizzy—that was all; and her only self-control, if the paralysis of an organ may be called controlling it, was that she held her tongue.

[pg 96]

Fortunately, at first, there was little necessity for her speaking. The bride and groom were too joyously loquacious to allow her much chance for words, and too bubbling over with their love and with the spirit of daring mischief to be observant of any strangeness in her demeanor that the darkness did not mask. As they chattered on, Mrs. De Peyster began to regain some slight steadiness—enough to consider spasmodically how she was to escape undiscovered from the pair, how she was to extricate herself from the predicament of the moment—for beyond that moment's danger she had not the power to think. She had decided that she must somehow get away from the couple at once; in the darkness slip unobserved into her sitting-room; lock the door; remain there noiseless;—she had decided so much, when suddenly her wits were sent spinning by a new fear.

The real Matilda! Mrs. De Peyster's ears, at that moment frantically acute, registered dim movements of Matilda overhead.

Suppose the real Matilda should hear their voices; suppose she should come walking down into the scene! With two Matildas simultaneously upon the stage—

Mrs. De Peyster reached out and clutched the banister of the stairway with drowning hands.

[pg 97]

The pair talked on to her, answering themselves. They would take the rooms above Mrs. De Peyster's suite, they said—they would give her, Matilda, no trouble at all—they would attend to their own housework, everything—and so on, and so on, with Mrs. De Peyster hearing nothing, but reaching aurally out for Matilda's exposing tread. To forestall this exposure, she started weakly up the stairs, only to be halted by the slipping of Jack's arm around her shoulder. The couple chattered on about their household arrangements, and Mrs. De Peyster the prisoner of Jack's affectionate arm, stood gulping, as though her soul were trying to swallow itself, ready to sink through her floor at the faintest approach of her housekeeper's slippers.

And then again the arm of the exuberant Jack tightened about her. "Oh, say, what a wild old time we're going to have! Won't we, Matilda?"

"Ye—yes," Mrs. De Peyster felt constrained to answer.

"But it's mighty dangerous!" cried the little figure, with a shivery laugh.

"Dangerous!" chuckled Jack with his mischievous glee. "Well, rather! And that's half the fun. If the newspapers were to get on to the fact that the son of *the* Mrs. De Peyster had secretly married without his mother's knowledge, and that the young scamp and his wife were secretly living in her house—can't you just see the reporters jimmying open every window to get at us!"

"Oh!" breathed Mrs. De Peyster faintly.

"Really, Jack," protested the girlish voice, "I think it's scandalous of us to be doing this!"

[pg 98] "Come, now, Mary, nobody's going to be any the worse, or any the wiser, for it. We're just using something that would otherwise be wasted—and we'll vanish at the first news that mother's coming back. But, of course, Matilda, we've certainly got to be all-fired careful. I'll leave the house only in the early mornings—by the back way—through Washington Mews—either when the coast is clear or there's a crowd. There are so many artists and chauffeurs and stablemen coming and going through the Mews that I'm sure I can manage it without being noticed. And I'll come back in the same way; and our food I'll smuggle in of nights."

"And I, Matilda, I shall not mind staying in at all," bubbled the Mary person. "It will give me a splendid chance to practice. You see, I hope to go on a concert tour this fall."

"By the way, Matilda, about the row Mary'll be making on the piano. Couldn't you just casually mention to anybody you see that mother had bought one of these sixty-horse-power, steam-hammer piano-players and you were the engineer, running it a lot to while away the lonesome months?"

"Do you want to intimate, sir," demanded Mary with mock hauteur, "that my playing sounds like a —"

"What I want to intimate, madam, is that I'd like to avoid having our happy home raided by the police. Matilda, you could do that, couldn't you—just casually?"

"Yes—M—Mr. Jack," mumbled Mrs. De Peyster.

"There, everything's settled. We'll go up to our rooms. You wouldn't mind helping us a bit, Matilda?"

Mrs. De Peyster had one supreme thought. If they went upstairs, they might run into the other Matilda. The frantic, drowning impulse to put off disaster every possible moment caused her to clutch Jack's arm.

[pg 99] "There's—something to eat—in the dining-room. Perhaps you'd like—"

"Great idea, Matilda! Lead on."

Mrs. De Peyster gave thanks that all the lights but one had been switched off. And fortunately the light from that one shaded bulb was almost lost in the great dining-room. Subconsciously Mrs. De Peyster recalled Matilda's injunction to "be humble," and she let her manner slump—though at that moment she had no particular excess of dignity to discard.

Jack sighted the food Matilda had left upon the table. With a swoop he was upon it.

"Oh, joy! Squabs! Asparagus!" And he seized a squab by the legs, with a hand that was still bandaged. "Here you are, my dear," tearing off a leg and handing it to Mary, who accepted it gingerly. With much gusto Jack took a bite of bird and a huge bite of bread. "Great little wedding supper, Matilda! Thanks. But I say, Matilda, you haven't yet spoken up about *meine liebe Frau*. Don't you think she'll do?"

"Now, Jack dear, don't be a fool!"

"Mrs. Jack de Peyster, I'll have you understand your husband can't be a fool! Come now, Matilda, —my bonny bride, look at her. Better lift your veil."

Mrs. De Peyster did not lift her veil. But helplessly she gave a glance toward this new wife Jack had thus brought home: a glance so distracted that it could see nothing but vibrating blurs.

[pg 100] "Well? Well?" prompted Jack. "Won't she do?"

"Yes," in a husky whisper.

"And don't you think, when mother sees her, she'll say the same?"

"I'm sure—I'm sure—" her choking voice could get out no more.

"Oh, but I shall be so afraid!" cried Mary, again with that shivery little laugh.

"Nothing to be afraid of, Mary. Mother's really a good sort."

"Jack! To call one's mother a 'good sort!'"

"Why not? She's bug-house on this social position business, but aside from that she's perfectly human."

"Jack!" in her scandalized tone. "Isn't he awful Matilda?"

"Ye—yes, ma'am."

"Don't call me 'ma'am,' Matilda. Since we're to be together constantly this summer, call me Mary."

"Yes, ma'a—Mary."

"That's right, Matilda," put in Jack. "We're going to run this place as a democracy. You're to have all your meals with us."

"And I'll help you get them!" Mary cried excitedly. "You'll find me tagging around after you most of the time. For, think of it, you're the only woman I'm going to see in months!"

"Ye—yes, Mary."

[pg 101]

"Jack, you run along, there's a dear," commanded Mary, "and unpack your things. Matilda and I want to have a little chat."

"Married six hours, and bossed already," grumbled Jack happily. "All right. But that bit of a squab I ate was nothing. I'm starved. I'll be back in five minutes and then we'll get a real supper down in the kitchen."

"Yes, all three of us," agreed Mary.

Jack picked up his bag. Frantically Mrs. De Peyster tried to think of some way of holding him back from a possible damnatory encounter with Matilda upon the stairway. But she could think of nothing. Jack went out.

Mary ordered Mrs. De Peyster into a chair, and sat down facing her.

Mrs. De Peyster strained her ears for the surprised voices that would announce the disastrous meeting. But there sounded from above no startled cries. Jack must have got to his room, unnoticed by Matilda. Mrs. De Peyster breathed just a little easier. The evil moment was put off.

"Matilda," began Mary, "I want you to tell me the honest truth about something. I think Jack's been trying to deceive me. To make me feel better, the dear boy, he's been telling me there'd not be the least doubt about his mother being reconciled to our marriage. Do you think she ever will be?"

"Well—well—"

"Please! Will she, or won't she?"

"You can only—only hope—for the best."

[pg 102]

"I hope she will, for Jack's sake!" sighed Mary deeply. She picked up an evening paper Jack had brought in. "Did you know his mother was very ill at the time she sailed? This paper says she was so sick that she was unable to see a single one of her friends who came to see her off. That was too bad, wasn't it!" There was a great deal of genuine feeling in the voice of the small person.

Mrs. De Peyster remained silent.

"Why, you don't seem at all sympathetic, Matilda!"

Mrs. De Peyster put a hand to her lips. "I'm—I'm very sorry, ma'am," she mumbled between her fingers, trying to assume Matilda's humility.

"Why, what's the matter with your voice? It seems husky."

"It's just"—Mrs. De Peyster swallowed—a little summer cold I caught to-day. It's—it's nothing, ma'am."

"I'm sorry!" exclaimed the little person. "But, Matilda, how many more times have I got to tell you I don't like your 'ma'aming' me. Call me Mary."

"Very well—Mary."

"That's right. And now, as to Jack's mother; the paper says society is very much concerned over her condition."

[pg 103]

On the whole, Mrs. De Peyster's concern over her condition was rather more acute than society's. But she had begun to recover in a degree, and was now, though palpitant within, making a furtive study of Mary. Such light as there was fell full upon that small person. Mrs. De Peyster saw a dark, piquant face, with features not regular, but ever in motion and quick with expression—eyes of a deep, deep brown, with a glimmer of red in them, eyes that gave out an ever-changing sparkle of sympathy and mischief and intelligence—and a mass of soft dark hair, most unstylishly, most charmingly arranged, that caught some of the muffled light and softly glowed with a reddish tone. If there was anything vulgar, or commonplace, about Jack's wife, the shaded bulb was too kindly disposed to betray it to Mrs. De Peyster's scrutiny.

Suddenly Mary laughed—softly, musically.

"If Jack's mother ever dreamed what Jack and I are doing here! Oh—oh! Some day, after she's forgiven us—if ever she does forgive us—You've said you're sure she'll forgive us, Matilda; do you honestly, truly, cross-your-heartly, believe she will?"

"Y-e-s," said Mrs. De Peyster's numb lips.

"I do hope so, for Jack's sake!" sighed the little person. "After she forgives us, I'm going to 'fess up everything. Of course she'll be scandalized—for what we're doing is simply awful!—but all the same I'll tell her. And after she's forgiven us, I'll make her forgive you, too, Matilda, for your part in harboring us here. We'll see that you do not suffer."

Mrs. De Peyster realized that she should have expressed thanks at this point. But silence she considered better than valor.

[pg 104] "This paper prints that picture of her by M. Dubois again. Really, Matilda, is she as terribly dignified as that makes her look?"

Mrs. De Peyster had to speak. "I—I—hardly, ma'am."

"There you go with that 'ma'am' again!"

"Hardly, Mary," mumbled Mrs. De Peyster.

"Because if she looks anything like that picture, it must simply scare you to death to live with her. Did she ever bend her back?"

Silence.

"Or smile?"

Silence.

"Or forget that she was a De Peyster?"

Silence.

"The lady of that picture never did!" declared the little person with conviction. "She's just dignity and pride—calm, remote, lofty, iceberg pride. She can say her ancestors backwards. Why, she's her family tree, petrified!"

Mrs. De Peyster did not feel called upon to add to these remarks.

"I don't see how she can possibly like me!" cried the little person. "Do you, Matilda?"

"I suppose—you can—only wait—and see," replied Mrs. De Peyster.

[pg 105] "I haven't got any dignity, or any money, or any ancestors; only a father and a couple of grandfathers—though I dare say there were some Morgans before them. No, she'll never care for me—never!" wailed the little person. "She couldn't! Why, she's carved out of a solid block of dignity! She never did an un-De-Peyster thing in her life!"

Mrs. De Peyster felt herself choking. She had to get out of the room, or die.

Just then Jack walked back in. For a few moments she had forgotten Jack. The terror arising from the menace upstairs returned to her. But Jack's happy face was assurance that as yet he knew nothing of the second Matilda.

Yes, she had to get out, or die. And Jack's reappearance gave her frantic mind a cue for an unbetraying exit.

"I'll go to the kitchen—and start supper," she gulped, and hurried into the butler's pantry.

"Jack," she heard Mary's perplexed voice, "Matilda, somehow, seems rather queer to me."

"She doesn't seem quite herself," agreed Jack.

Mrs. De Peyster sank into a chair beside the door, and sat there motionless, hardly daring to breathe—shattered by the narrowness of her escape, and appalled by this new situation that had risen around her—too appalled even to consider what might be the situation's natural developments. Soon amid the wild churning of various emotions, anger began to rise, and outraged pride. Such cool, dumbfounding impudence!

[pg 106] Then curiosity began to stir. Instinct warned her, incoherently, for all her faculties were too demoralized to be articulate, that this was no place for her. But those two persons in there—her son, and this daughter-in-law who had burst out of a fair cloud upon her—a daughter-in-law whom she would never recognize—what were they doing? Cautiously, ever so cautiously, she

pushed open the pantry door till there was a slight crack giving into the other room.

Jack had his arms about Mary's shoulders.

"Well, little lady," she heard him ask with tremulous fondness—the young fool!—"What do you think of our honeymoon?"

"I think, sir, that it's something scandalous!" (Not such an unpleasant voice—but then!)

"U'm! Has the fact occurred to you"—very solemnly—"that you haven't kissed me since we have been in this room?"

"Was it written in the bond that I had to kiss you in every room?"

"No matter about the bond. A kiss or a divorce. Take your choice."

"It isn't worth divorcing you, since you may be too poor to pay alimony. So"—sighing and turning her face up to him.

(Sentimental idiots!)

"Mary"—after a moment of clinging lips—"you think you can really be happy with me?"

"I know I shall be, dear!"

"Even if things don't go right between mother and me, and even if for a long time I shall be awfully, awfully poor?"

"It's just you I care for, Jack,—just you!"

[pg 107] Jack stared at her; then suddenly:

"Do you know what I feel like?"

"No."

"Like kissing you again."

"Now don't be—"

"Mary!"

His voice was tremulous. Slowly their lips came together; they embraced; then drew apart, and holding hands, stood gazing at each other.

"You're a dear, dear fool!" said Mary softly.

"And you're a dear, dear another!" softly said Jack.

(Outrageous fools, both! agreed Mrs. De Peyster.)

They were still gazing at each other when in the wide doorway at their back appeared Matilda, carrying the tray of tea-things that had been in Mrs. De Peyster's sitting-room. For the last few moments Mrs. De Peyster's danger had been forgotten in her indignation. But at sight of Matilda, regained its own.

Matilda stopped short. The tea-things almost rattled from the tray. Jack wheeled about.

"Hello, Matilda. Thought you'd gone down to the kitchen."

"Why—why—if it isn't Mr. Jack!" stammered Matilda.

[pg 108] Mrs. De Peyster trembled. What more likely than that Matilda, in her amazement, should reveal the house's secret? But the half-light of the room was a very obliging ally against such unsuspection as her son's.

"Of course, it's Jack," said he. "Who else did you suppose it was? But say, what's the matter, Matilda?"

"Yes, what's the matter, Matilda?" asked Mary with great concern.

"Ma'am—ma'am"—staring wildly at Mary—"I—I don't know, ma'am."

"What, have you already forgotten what I told you about calling me Mary!"

"Ma—Mary?" gasped Matilda blankly.

"Jack," said Mary in a low voice, "I said awhile ago that she seemed queer."

"Where have you put your head, Matilda? Yes—Mary!—Mary!—Mary! Mary De Peyster—Mrs.

Jack De Peyster—my wedded wife—whom it cost me four thirty-nine to make my own. Understand?"

"P-per-perfectly, Mr. Jack."

"Well, that's happy news. What's that you're carrying?"

"It's—ah—er—my breakfast," explained Matilda.

"Your breakfast!" exclaimed Jack. "What are you doing with it here?"

"I was—I was—er—was going to—to get it all ready to—to take up to myself to-morrow."

Jack took the tray from Matilda's nerveless hands.



"WHAT'S THAT YOU'RE CARRYING?"

[pg 109] "Sit down, Matilda," firmly pressing her into a chair. "Mary, have you some salts in that bag."

"Yes, Jack." In an instant Mary had a bottle from her bag and was holding it beneath Matilda's nose. "You'll be all right in just a moment. Take it easy. The surprise must have been too much for you. For it was a big surprise, wasn't it?"

"Yes, ma'am," replied Matilda, for the first time speaking with no hesitancy.

"Matilda, it's almost provoking the way you ignore my request to call me Mary."

"Ah—er—" staring wildly—"yes, Mary."

Jack moved to the wall near the door, where were several buttons.

"Mary, I'm going to ring for William—we'd better take him into this thing straight off, or he may stumble on the fact that extra people are in the house and call in the police."

At her crack in the pantry door, Mrs. De Peyster grew even more apprehensive.

Jack and Mary cooed; Matilda sat all of a heap; and presently William walked in. To her other emotions, Mrs. De Peyster had added a new shock. For William the peerless—fit coachman for an emperor—William, whom till that night she could not have imagined, had she imagined about such things at all, other than as sleeping in a high collar and with all his brass buttons snugly buttoned—William was coatless, and collarless, and slouching from his mouth was an old pipe!

[pg 110] He came in with a haughty glower, for he had supposed the ring to be Matilda's. But at sight of Jack and Mary his face went blank with amazement.

"Why, why, Mr. Jack!" Hastily he jerked his pipe into his pocket and began buttoning the open collar of his shirt. "I—I beg pardon, sir."

"Hello, William! This is Mrs. Jack, William. Just married. We've come to spend the summer with you."

"Yes, sir."

"But on the quiet, William. Understand? If you leak a word about our being here—well, I know about the heart-throb business between you and Matilda. If you drop one word—one single word, I put mother next to what's doing between you two."

"Yes, sir."

"Just wanted you to know we were here, William, so you wouldn't by any chance throw a surprise that would give us away. That's all. Keep mum about us"—with a sly wink at him and another at Matilda—"and you two can goo-goo at each other like a popular song. Good-night."

Jack turned his back; and Mary, whose heart went out to all lovers, delicately turned hers.

"William," fluttered Matilda, taking an eager, hesitating step toward him.

He stared at her haughtily—as haughtily as is in the power of a mere mortal who has no collar on.

"William," she cried bewildered, "what is it?"

[pg 111]

"I believe you know what it is, Miss Simpson," he replied witheringly, and stalked out under full majesty.

She stood dumbfounded; but only for a moment.

"Matilda," spoke up Jack, "have you got supper things started yet in the kitchen?"

"Er—er—what?" stammered poor Matilda.

"Say, see here—what the dickens *is* the matter with you?" Jack exploded in exasperation. "You just promised to start supper in the kitchen, and now—"

"Of course—of course," gulped Matilda, "I forgot. I'll do it right away."

Matilda was reeling. But she perceived that here was her chance to get out of the room—and for the moment that was her supreme and only desire. She started for the door of the butler's pantry.

"We'll be down with you in about five minutes," Jack called after her.

In the darkness of the pantry a hand fell upon her arm. "Matilda," breathed her mistress's voice, and Matilda had enough control not to cry out, or was too far gone. Clutching hands, they went down the winding stairs that led from the butler's pantry to the kitchen.

"Oh, ma'am, ma'am!" moaned Matilda in the darkness.

"Matilda"—in awed breathlessness—"isn't this terrible?"

"Oh, ma'am! ma'am!"

[pg 112]

"If Jack should learn that I am here—" She could not express the horror of it.

"Oh, ma'am!"

Mrs. De Peyster's voice rang out with wild desperation.

"Matilda, there is only one thing to do! We must leave the house!"

"I think we'd better, ma'am," Matilda snuffled hysterically, "for with all of you here, and this keeping up, I—I don't think I'd last a day, ma'am."

"And we must leave at once! We've not a second to spare. They said they were coming right down. We must be out of the house before they come!"

"Oh, ma'am, yes! This minute! But where—"

"There's no time to think of anything now but getting out," cried Mrs. De Peyster with frantic energy. "Slip up the front stairway, Matilda, and get your hat. And here are my keys. Lock my sitting-room, so they can't see any one's been living in it. You can manage it without them seeing you. And for heaven's sake, hurry!"

Two minutes later these things were done, and Matilda, bonneted, was hurrying forward hand in hand with Mrs. De Peyster through the black hallway of the basement. Behind them, descending the stairs from the butler's pantry, sounded the chatter and laughter of the larking

[pg 113]

honeymooners; and then from the kitchen came the surprised and exasperated call: "Hello, Matilda—See here, where the dickens are you?"

But at just that moment the twin, unbreathing figures in black slipped through the servants' door and noiselessly closed it behind them.

[pg 114]

CHAPTER IX

THE FLIGHT

The two dark figures stood an instant, breathless, in the dark mouth of the cavern beneath the marble balustraded stairway that ascended with chaste dignity to Mrs. De Peyster's noble front door. Swiftly they surveyed the scene. Not a policeman was in sight: no one save, across the way on Washington Square benches, a few plebeian lovers enjoying the soft calm of a May eleven o'clock.

The pair, with veils down, each looking a plagiarism of the other, slipped out of the servants' entrance, through the gate of the low iron fence, and arm clutching arm hastened eastward to University Place. Thus far no one had challenged them. Here they turned and went rapidly northward: past the Lafayette, where Mrs. De Peyster's impulse to take a taxicab was instantly countermanded by the fear that so near her home there was danger of recognition: and onward, onward they went, swiftly, wordlessly, their one commanding impulse to get away—to get away.

At Fourteenth Street they passed a policeman. Again they choked back their breath; shiveringly they felt his eyes upon them. And, indeed, his eyes were—interestedly; for to that Hibernian, with his native whimsicality, they suggested the somewhat unusual phenomenon of the same person out walking with herself. But he did not speak.

[pg 115]

At the head of Union Square they caught a roving taxicab. Their next thought, after bare escape, was necessarily concerned with shelter, a hiding-place. To the chauffeur's "Where to, ladies?" Mrs. De Peyster said, "Hotel Dauphin." The instinct, the Mrs. De Peyster of habit, which was beneath her surface of agitation, said the Dauphin because the Dauphin was quite the most select hotel in New York. In fact, six months before, when Mrs. De Peyster desired to introduce and honor the Duke de Crécy in a larger way than her residence permitted, it was at the Dauphin that she had elected to give the ball that had brought her so much deferential praise—which occasion was the first and only time she had departed from her strict old-family practice of limiting her social functions to such as could be accommodated within her own house. She had then been distinctly pleased; one could hardly have expected good breeding upon so large a scale. And her present subconscious impression of the Dauphin was that it was ducal, if not regal, in its reserved splendor, in its manner of subdued, punctilious ceremony.

She could remain at the Dauphin, in seclusion, until she had time to think. Then she could act.

As she sped smoothly up Fifth Avenue—her second ride on the Avenue that night—she began, in the cushioned privacy of the taxi, to recover somewhat from the panic of dire necessity that had driven them forth. Other matters began to flash spasmodically across the screen of her mind. One of these was William. And there the film stopped. The cold, withering look William had given Matilda a few minutes before remained fixed upon the screen. That look threatened her most unpleasantly as to the future. What if William should learn who was the real Matilda to whom he had made love!

[pg 116]

"Matilda," she began, calling up her dignity, "I desire to instruct you upon a certain matter."

"Yes, ma'am," whispered Matilda.

"I expressly instruct you not to mention or hint to any one, particularly William, that it was I and not you who went out driving with him to-night."

"I'll not, ma'am."

"You swear?"

"I swear, ma'am. Never!"

"Remember, Matilda. You have sworn." And relieved of that menace, she leaned back.

The taxi drew up before the Dauphin. A grenadier-lackey, who seemed bulk and brass buttons and braid of gold, handed them out with august white gloves.

"Pay the fare, Matilda," ordered Mrs. De Peyster.

Mrs. De Peyster's bills, when she had a servant with her, were always paid by the attendant. Matilda did so, out of a square black leather bag that was never out of Matilda's fingers when Matilda was out of the house; it seemed almost a flattened extension of Matilda's hand.

[pg 117]

They entered the Dauphin, passing other white-gloved lackeys, each a separate perfection of punctiliousness; and passed through a marble hallway, muted with rugs of the Orient, and came into a vast high chamber, large as a theater—marble walls and ceiling, tapestries, moulded plaster and gilt in moderation, silken ropes instead of handrails on the stairways, electric lights so shaded that each looked a huge but softly unobtrusive pearl. The chamber was pervaded by, was dedicated to, splendid repose.

Mrs. De Peyster, Matilda trailing, headed for a booth of marble and railing of dull gold—the latter, possibly, only bronze, or gilded iron—within which stood a gentleman in evening dress, with the bearing of one no lower than the first secretary of an embassy.

"A suite," Mrs. De Peyster remarked briefly across the counter, "with sitting-room, two bed-rooms and bath."

"Certainly," said the distinguished gentleman. "I have a most desirable suite on the fifteenth floor, with a splendid outlook over the park."

"That will do."

"The name, please?" queried the gentleman, reaching for a pen.

"Mrs. David Harrison," invented Mrs. De Peyster.

[pg 118] "When do your employers wish to occupy the suite?" pursued the courtly voice of the secretary of the embassy.

"Our employers!" repeated Mrs. De Peyster. And then with wrathful hauteur: "The apartment is for ourselves. We desire to occupy it at once."

The gentleman glanced her up and down; then up and down his eyes went over Matilda, just behind her. There was no doubting what Matilda was; and since the two were patently the same, there could be no doubt as to what Mrs. De Peyster was.

"I'm sorry—but, after all, the suite is not available," he said courteously.

"Not available?" cried Mrs. De Peyster. "Why not?"

"I prefer to say no more."

"But I insist!"

"Since you insist—the Dauphin does not receive servants, even of the higher order, as regular guests." The hotel clerk's voice was silken with courtesy; there was no telling with what important families these two were connected; and it would not do to give offense. "We receive servants only when they accompany their employers, and then assign them to the servants' quarters. You yourself must perceive the necessity of this," he added hastily, seeing that Mrs. De Peyster was shaking, "to preserve the Dauphin's social tone—"

"The servants' quarters!" gasped Mrs. De Peyster. "You mean—"

[pg 119] "You'll excuse me, please," interrupted the clerk, and with a bow ended the scene and moved to the rear of the office where he plainly busied himself over nothing at all.

Mrs. De Peyster, quivering, gulping, glared through her veil at him. A hotel clerk had turned his back on her! And this mere clerk had dared refuse her a room! *Refuse her!* Because she, *she*, Mrs. De Peyster had not the social tone!

Nothing like it had ever happened to her before.

Her desire to annihilate that clerk with the suave ambassadorial look, and the Dauphin, and all therein and all appertaining thereunto, was mounting toward explosion, when Matilda clutched her arm.

"It's awful, ma'am,—but let's go," she whispered. "What else can we do?"

Yes, what else could they do? Mrs. De Peyster's wrath was still at demolitory pressure, but she saw the sense in that question. The next moment the two figures, duplicates of somberness, one magnificently upright, the other shrinking, were re-passing over the muting rugs, through the corridor of noble marble, by the lackeys between whose common palms and the hands of patrician guests was the antiseptic intermediary of white thread gloves.

"Perhaps it's just as well, ma'am," Matilda began tremulously as soon as they were in the street, before Mrs. De Peyster's black storm could burst. "How much would that suite have been?"

"Perhaps fifty dollars a day."

[pg 120] "I only just now thought about it—but—but please, ma'am, did you happen to bring your purse?"

"My purse!" Mrs. De Peyster stopped short. "Matilda!"—in a voice chilled with dismay—"I never

thought of my purse until this moment! There wasn't time! I haven't a cent!"

"And after paying for the cab, ma'am, I have only a little over fifteen dollars."

"Matilda!"

"Perhaps, ma'am," repeated Matilda, "it was just as well they wouldn't take us."

Mrs. De Peyster did not speak.

"And what's worse," Matilda faltered, as though the blame was hers, "the hotels won't trust you unless you have baggage. And we have no baggage, ma'am."

"Matilda!" There was now real tragedy in Mrs. De Peyster's voice. "What *are* we going to do?"

They walked along the Park, whispering over their unforeseen and unforeseeable predicament. It had many aspects, their situation; it was quickly clear to them that the most urgent aspect was the need of immediate refuge. Other troubles and developments could be handled as they arose, should any such arise. But a place to hide, to sleep, had to be secured within the hour. Also they needed two or three days in which to think matters over calmly, and to apply to them clear reason. And they had only the fifteen dollars in Matilda's black bag.

[pg 121] "It seems to me, ma'am," ventured Matilda, "that a rooming-house or a boarding-house would be cheapest."

"A boarding-house!" exclaimed Mrs. De Peyster. "But where?"

Matilda remembered and reached into her slit pocket. "Yesterday I happened to pick up the card of a boarding-house in the library—I've no idea how it came there. I saved it because my sister Angelica, who lives in Syracuse, wrote me to look up a place where she might stay."

They examined the address upon the card, and twenty minutes later, now close upon midnight, Matilda was pressing the bell of a house on the West Side. Visible leadership Mrs. De Peyster had resigned to Matilda, for they were entering a remote and lowly world whose ways Mrs. De Peyster knew not. In all her life she had never been inside a boarding-house.

The door opened slightly. A voice, female, interrogated Matilda. Then they were admitted into a small hall, lighted by an electric bulb in a lantern of stamped sheet-iron with vari-colored panes and portholes. From this hall a stairway ascended, and from it was a view into a small rear parlor, where sat a clergyman. The lady who had admitted them was the mistress; a Junoesque, superior, languid sort of personage, in a loose dressing-gown of pink silk with long train. To her Matilda made known their desire.

[pg 122] "Excuse me, Mr. Pyecroft," she called to the clergyman. "So you and your friend want board and room," the landlady repeated in a drawling tone, yet studying them sharply with heavy-penciled eyes. "I run a select house, so I've got to be careful about whom I admit. Consequently you will not object to answering a few questions. You and your friend are working-women?"

"Yes."

The heavy eyes had concluded their inventory. "Perhaps both housekeepers?"

"Ye—yes."

Matilda had a double impulse to explain, first to clear Mrs. De Peyster of this unmerited indignity, and second to prevent their being once more turned away as servants. But something kept her still. And perhaps it was just as well. Mrs. Gilbert, considering the two, did have a moment's thought about refusing them; she, too, liked to maintain the social tone of her establishment, and certainly servants as guests did not help; but then the arid season for boarding-houses was at hand, and she was not one to sacrifice real money to mere principle.

"How long do you want to stay?"

"We don't know yet. Per—perhaps several months."

This was agreeable news to Mrs. Gilbert. But it was not boarding-house policy to show it.

"When would you want to come in?"

"Now."

"To-night!" The penciled eyebrows lifted in surprise. "And your baggage?"

[pg 123] "We came to New York without any," Matilda lied desperately. "We're—we're going to buy some things here."

"Naturally, then, you expect to pay in advance."

"Ah—er—at least a deposit."

"One room or two?"

"One." One would come cheaper.

"Excuse me, Mr. Pyecroft," she called again to the clergyman. "This way." And she collected her silken skirt, and swished up two flights of stairs and into a bedroom at the back, where she turned on the light. "A very comfortable room," she went on in the voice of a tired and very superior auctioneer. "Just vacated by a Wall Street broker and his wife; very well-connected people. Bed and couch; easy-chairs; running hot and cold water. And for it I'm making a special summer rate, with board, of only twenty-five dollars a week for two."

"We'll take it," said Matilda.

"Very well. Now the deposit—how much can you pay?"

"Ah—er—say fifteen dollars?"

Mrs. Gilbert's hands that tried to seem indifferent to money and that yet were remarkably prompt, took the bills Matilda held out and thrust them into the folds of her voluminous gown.

"Thank you. Breakfast Sunday mornings from eight to ten. Good-night." And with that her large pink-tinted ladyship made a rustling exit.

[pg 124]

Mrs. De Peyster sank overcome into a chair, drew up her veil, and gazed about her. The other of Mrs. Gilbert's "easy"-chairs had a seat of faded and frayed cotton tapestry; there was a lumpy and unstable-looking couch; a yellow washstand with dandruffy varnish and cracked mirror; wall-paper with vast, uncataloguable flowers gangrenous in suggestion; on the ceiling a circle of over-plump dancing Cupids; and over against one wall a huge, broad, dark box that to Mrs. De Peyster's amazed vision suggested an upended coffin, contrived for the comfort of some deceased with remarkable width of shoulder.

"Matilda!" she shiveringly ejaculated. "I didn't know there was anything like it in the world!"

"I know, ma'am, that it's not fit for you," grieved Matilda. "But—it's better than nothing."

"And that thing there!" pointing a shaking finger at the abnormal coffin. "What's that?"

"That's your bed, ma'am."

"My bed!"

"It lets down, ma'am. Like this."

Whereupon Matilda proceeded to let down that *sine qua non* of a profitable boarding-house, while Mrs. De Peyster, dismayed, looked for the first time in her life upon the miracle of the unfolding of a folding-bed. Her mistress's slumber prepared for Matilda then softened the inaccuracies of the couch's surface for her own more humble repose.

[pg 125]

Neither felt like talking; there was too much to talk about. So soon both were in their beds, the lights out. Mrs. De Peyster lay dazed upon this strange bed that operated like a lorgnette: tremulously existing, awake, yet hardly capable of coherent thought.

For a space she heard Matilda toss about, draw long, tremulous breaths; then from the couch of that elderly virgin sounded the incontrovertible tocsin of deep sleep. But for Mrs. De Peyster there was no sleep; not yet.

She now was thinking; casting up accounts. Exactly twenty-four hours since, she had officially sailed. Jack and that Mary person were now in sweet and undisturbed possession of her house; Olivetta, on board the *Plutonia*, was this minute reposing at ease amid the luxuries of her *cabin de luxe*; and she, herself, Mrs. De Peyster, was lying on a folding-bed, a most knobby bed,—the man who invented cobblestone paving must have got his idea from such a bed as this,—in a boarding-house the like of which till this night she had never imagined to exist.

And only twenty-four hours!...

She stared up toward where, in the dark, the corpulent Cupids were dancing their aerial May-ring ... and stared ... and stared....

[pg 126]

CHAPTER X

PEACE—OF A SORT

The next morning there was a long, whispered discussion as to whether Mrs. De Peyster should go down to breakfast or have all her meals sent up to this chamber of distempered green. In the end two considerations decided the matter. In the first place, meals sent to the room would

undoubtedly be charged extra. In the second, it was possible that Mrs. De Peyster's remaining in her room might rouse suspicion. It seemed the cheaper and safer course to try to merge herself, an unnoticed figure, in the routine of the house.

The dining-room was low-ceilinged and occupied the front basement and seemed to be ventilated solely through the kitchen. Mrs. De Peyster hazily saw perhaps a dozen people; from among whom a bare arm, slipping from the sleeve of a pink silk wrapper, languidly waved toward a small table. Into the two chairs Mrs. Gilbert indicated the twain sank.

[pg 127]

A colored maid who had omitted her collar dropped before Mrs. De Peyster a heavy saucer containing three shriveled black objects immured in a dark, forbidding liquor that suggested some wry tincture from a chemist's shop. In response to Mrs. De Peyster's glance of shrinking inquiry Matilda whispered that they were prunes. Next the casual-handed maid favored them with thin, underdone oatmeal, and with thin, bitter coffee; and last with two stacks of pancakes, which in hardly less substantial incarnation had previously been served them by every whiff of kitchen air.

While she pretended to eat this uneatable usurper of her dainty breakfasts, Mrs. De Peyster glanced furtively at the company. Utterly common. And with such she had to associate—for months, perhaps!—she who had mixed and mingled only with the earth's best!

Mrs. Gilbert—naturally Mrs. Gilbert was a widow—did not give Mrs. De Peyster a second glance. The other boarders, after their first scrutiny, hardly looked at her again. The effect was as if all had turned their backs upon her.

Certainly this was odd behavior.

Then, in a flash, she understood. They were snubbing her as a social inferior!

[pg 128]

Mrs. De Peyster was beginning to flame when the clergyman they had glimpsed the night before entered and pronounced a sonorous good-morning, all-inclusive, as though intended for a congregation. He seated himself at a small table just beyond Mrs. De Peyster's and was unfolding his napkin when his eyes fell upon Mrs. De Peyster. And then Mrs. De Peyster saw one of the oddest changes in a man's face imaginable. Mr. Pyecroft's eyes, which had been large with benedictory roundness, flashed with a smile. And then, at an instant's end, his face was once more grave and clerically benign.

But that instant-long look made her shiver. What was in this clergyman's mind? She watched him, in spite of herself—strangely fascinated; stole looks at him during this meal, and the next, and when they passed upon the stairway. He had a confusingly contradictory face, had the Reverend Herbert E. Pyecroft—for such she learned was his full name; a face customarily sedate and elderish, and then, almost without perceptible change, for swift moments oddly youthful; with a wide mouth, which would suddenly twist up at its right corner as though from some unholy quip of humor, and whose as sudden straightening into a solemn line would show that the unseemly humor had been exorcised. In manner he was bland, ornate, gestureish, ample; giving the sense that in nothing less commodious than a church could he loose his person and his powers to their full expression. He was genially familiar; the church-man who is a good fellow. Yet never did he let one forget the respect that was due his cloth.

He was at present without a charge, as she learned later. It was understood that he was waiting an almost certain call from a church in Kansas City.

As Mrs. De Peyster came out of her room that first Sunday at supper-time, there emerged from the room in front of hers the Reverend Mr. Pyecroft. He held out his hand, and smiled parochially.

[pg 129]

"Ah, Miss Thompson,"—that was the name she had given the landlady,—"since we are neighbors we should also be friends." And on he went, voluminously, in his full, upholstered voice.

Somehow Mrs. De Peyster got away from him. But thereafter he spoke to her whenever he could waylay her in the hallway or upon the stairs. And his attentions did not stop with words. Flowers, even edibles, were continuously found against her door, his card among them. The situation somehow recalled to her the queer gentleman in shorts who threw vegetables over Mrs. Nickleby's garden wall. Mrs. De Peyster felt outraged; she fumed; yet she dared not be outspokenly resentful.

She had at first no inkling of the meaning of these attentions. It was Matilda who suggested the dismaying possibility.

"Don't you think, ma'am, he's trying to make love to you?"

"Make love to me!" rising in horror from one of Mrs. Gilbert's veteran "easy"-chairs.

"I'm sure it's that, ma'am," said the troubled Matilda.

"Matilda! Of all the effrontery!"

"Indeed, it is an insult to you, ma'am. But that may not be the worst of it. For if he really falls in love with you, he may try to follow you when you get ready to leave."

"Matilda!" gasped Mrs. De Peyster.

[pg 130]

Thereafter, whenever he tried to speak to her in the hallways she shrank from him in both fear and indignation. But her rebuffs did not lessen by one ray the smiling amicability of his bland countenance. He tried to become confidential, tried to press toward intimacy; one evening he even had the unbelievable audacity to ask if he might call upon her! She flamed with the desire to destroy him with a look, a word; Mrs. De Peyster knew well how thus to snuff out presuming upstarts. But caution warned her that she dared not unloose her powers. So she merely turned and fled, choking.

But the reverend gentleman's unperturbed overtures continued.

Mrs. De Peyster and Matilda did not speak of money at first; but it was constantly in both their minds as a problem of foremost importance. Their failure to buy fresh outfits, as they had told Mrs. Gilbert they intended doing, thus supplying "baggage" that would be security for their board, caused Mrs. Gilbert to regard them with hostile suspicion. Matilda saw eviction in their landlady's penciled eyes, and without a word as to her intention to Mrs. De Peyster, she slipped out on the third day, returned minus her two rings, and handed Mrs. Gilbert ten dollars.

They were secure to the week's end. After that—?

[pg 131]

Fitfully Mrs. De Peyster pondered this matter of finances. She had money so near, yet utterly unreachable. Her house was filled with negotiable wealth, but she dared not go near it. Judge Harvey would secure her money gladly; but if the previous Friday she could not accept his aid, then a thousand times less could she accept it now. To ask his aid would be to reveal, not alone her presence in America, but the series of undignified experiences which had involved her deeper and deeper. That humiliation was unthinkable.

But on Thursday, locked in their room, they spoke of the matter openly.

"Please, ma'am," said Matilda, who had been maturing a plan, "you might make out a check to me, dated last week, before you sailed, and I could get it cashed. They'd think it was for back wages."

"I told you last Friday, when everything happened, that I had drawn out my balance."

"But your bank won't mind your overdrawing for a hundred or two," urged Matilda.

"That," said Mrs. De Peyster with an air of noble principle, "is a thing I will not do."

Matilda knew nothing of the secret of Mrs. De Peyster's exhausted credit at her bank.

"My own money," Matilda remarked plaintively, "is all in a savings bank. I have to give thirty days' notice before I can draw a penny."

There was a brief silence. Matilda's gaze, which had several times wandered to a point a few inches below Mrs. De Peyster's throat, now fixed themselves upon this spot. She spoke hesitantly.

[pg 132]

"There's your pearl pendant you forgot and kept on when you put on my dress to go out riding with William." It was not one of the world's famous jewels; yet was of sufficient importance to be known, in a limited circle, as "The De Peyster Pearl." "I know the chain wouldn't bring much; but you could raise a lot on the pearl from a pawnbroker."

Mrs. De Peyster tried to look shocked. "What! I take my pearl to a pawnbroker!"

"Of course, I wouldn't expect you to go to a pawnshop, ma'am," Matilda apologized. "I'd take it."

Mrs. De Peyster had a moment's picture of Matilda's laying the pearl before a pawnbroker and asking for a fraction of its worth, a mere thousand or two; and of the hard-eyed usurer glancing at it, announcing that the pearl was spooft, and offering fifty cents upon it.

"Matilda, you should know that I would not part with such an heirloom," she said rebukingly.

"But, ma'am, in a crisis like this—"

"That will do, Matilda!"

Matilda said no more about the pearl then. She went to her bank and gave due notice of her desire to withdraw her funds. That, however, was provision merely for the next month and thereafter. It did not help to-day.

But all the rest of that day, and all of the following, Mrs. De Peyster felt Matilda's eyes, aggrieved, bitterly resentful, upon the spot where beneath her black housekeeper's dress hung the pearl she was unwilling to pawn to save them.

It was most uncomfortable.

[pg 133]

CHAPTER XI

THE REVEREND MR. PYECROFT

The next evening, Friday, as they left the dining-room, draped with the heavy odor of a dark, mysterious viand which Matilda in a whisper had informed Mrs. De Peyster to be pot-roast, Mrs. Gilbert stopped them on the stairs. In her most casual, superior tone, she notified Mrs. De Peyster that she would thank them for another week's pay in advance the following day, or their room.

Here was a crisis that had to be faced at once. Up in their room they discussed finance, going over and over their predicament, for two hours. There seemed no practical solution.

A heavy rain had begun to fall. The night was hot, close. The unaccustomed high collar of Matilda's dress had seemed suffocating to Mrs. De Peyster, and she had loosened it, and also she had taken off the pearl pendant which had chafed her beneath the warm, heavy cloth. The pearl and its delicate chain of platinum were now lying on their center-table.

Several times Matilda's eye had gone furtively toward the pendant. "I don't see why," she at length said doggedly, "you shouldn't let me pawn that pearl."

[pg 134]

"I believe I have requested you not to refer to this again." Mrs. De Peyster's tone was stiff.

Matilda's face showed stubborn bitterness. But the habit of obedience was too old and strong for her to speak further.

There was another silence. Both sat in desperate thought. Suddenly Mrs. De Peyster looked up. "Matilda, I think I have it."

"What is it, ma'am?"—with faintly reviving hope.

"You have the keys to my house. You slip back there to-night, find my purse, or bring something that you might sell."

Matilda slumped down, aghast.

"It's perfectly simple," Mrs. De Peyster reassured her. "We should have thought of it at first."

"But, ma'am!" quaveringly protested Matilda. "Suppose a policeman should see me! They watch those closed houses. And suppose—suppose he should shoot!"

"Nonsense, Matilda! No one will see you if you are careful."

"But if—if—Mr. Jack should hear me and come down and see me—"

"We shall prepare for such an emergency some kind of plausible explanation that will satisfy Jack."

"But, ma'am, please! I don't think I could ever do it!"

[pg 135]

"Matilda, it is the only way"—in the voice of authority. And then more emphatically, and in some desperation: "Remember, we have got to do something! We have simply got to have money!"

Matilda was beginning to whimper yieldingly, when a knock sounded at their door. They clutched each other, but did not answer.

The knuckles rapped again.

They continued silent.

The knock sounded more loudly.

"It's the landlady, come to throw us out," quaked Matilda.

"Open the door," ordered Mrs. De Peyster, decorously rearranging the throat of her dress, "and tell her she shall have her money in the morning."

Matilda unlocked the door, partially opened it, then fell back with a little cry. There entered the Reverend Mr. Pyecroft. He smiled at them, put a finger to his lips. Then he locked the door behind him.

"Please leave this instant!" commanded Mrs. De Peyster.

"It is not in my nature," he returned in his bland voice, "to go and leave behind me fellow

creatures in distress."

"Fellow creatures in distress?" repeated Mrs. De Peyster.

"I was passing," said he, "and chanced to overhear you say a moment since that you simply had to have money."

Mrs. De Peyster's face filled with suspicion. "You have been listening all the while?"

[pg 136] "Possibly," said Mr. Pycroft, with the same bland smile.

"Eavesdropper!"

His smile did not alter. "I did not hear very much, really. Miss Thompson, may I beg the favor of a few minutes with you alone?"

"Most certainly not!"

"I am sure when you learn what it is, Miss Thompson, you would prefer that it be between yourself and myself."

"Matilda, don't go!"

He shrugged his shoulders pleasantly. "I had really hoped that the matter might be between just you and me, Miss Thompson. However, if you prefer Miss Perkins"—Matilda's name at Mrs. Gilbert's—"to be present, yours is the right to command. Shall we be seated?"

Matilda had already subsided upon her couch. Mrs. De Peyster sank into one of the chairs. The Reverend Mr. Pycroft drew the other up to face her and sat down.

"Miss Thompson," he began, "I have a very serious proposition to lay before you."

Mrs. De Peyster shrank away. An awful premonition burst upon her. It was coming! This impudent, pompous, philandering clergyman was about to propose to her! To *her*! She gave a swift horrified glance at Matilda, who gave back a look of sympathetic understanding.

[pg 137] Then Mrs. De Peyster's horror at the indignity changed to horror of quite another sort; for the Reverend Mr. Pycroft was leaning confidentially close to her, eyes into hers, and was saying in a low voice:—

"I suppose, Miss Thompson, you are not aware how much you look like a certain great lady, a famous social leader? To be explicit, like Mrs. De Peyster?"

She sank back, mere jelly with a human contour. So she was discovered! She rolled her eyes wildly toward Matilda; Matilda rolled wild eyes toward her.

"It is really a remarkable likeness," went on the low voice of the Reverend Mr. Pycroft. "I've seen Mrs. De Peyster, you know; not more than six yards away; and the likeness struck me the very moment I saw you. You haven't the grand-duchess dignity she had on when I saw her—say, but you should have seen the figure she made!—but it's a wonderful coincidence. Dressed right, and with some lofty spirit pumped into you, you could pass anywhere as Mrs. De Peyster, provided they did not know Mrs. De Peyster too intimately. That likeness is the foundation of my proposition."



"IT IS REALLY A REMARKABLE LIKENESS"

[pg 138] Mrs. De Peyster stared at him, and began to clutch at consciousness. After all, was it possible that he hadn't recognized her as Mrs. De Peyster? Perhaps he hadn't—for every one knew Mrs. De Peyster was abroad, and, furthermore, all the social world yawned inimitably between Mrs. De Peyster and this apparent nobody that she was, in an obscure boarding-house, and in a housekeeper's gown. But if he hadn't recognized her, then what was he driving at?

While she gazed she became aware of an amazing change in his face, of the possibility of which she had previously had only hints. The bland, elderish, clerical look faded; the face grew strangely young, the right corner of his mouth twisted upward, and his right eyelid drooped in a prodigious, unreverend wink.

"Friend," he remarked, "what's you two ladies' game?"

"Our game?" Mrs. De Peyster repeated blankly.

"Now don't try to come Miss Innocence over me," he said easily. "I sized you two up from the first minute, and I've been watching you ever since. The other one could get away with the housekeeper's part O.K., but any one could see through your makeup. What are the bulls after you for?"

"The—the what?"

"Oh, come,—you're dodging the police, or why the disguise?" he queried pleasantly. He picked up Mrs. De Peyster's pearl pendant. "Housekeepers don't sport this kind of jewelry. What are you? Housebreakers—sneak thieves—confidence game?"

Mrs. De Peyster gaped at him. "I—I don't understand."

[pg 139] "It's really a pretty fair front you're putting up," he commented with a dry indulgent smile. "But might as well drop it, for you see I'm on. But I think I understand." He nodded. "You don't want to admit anything until you feel you can trust me. That's about the size of it, isn't it, friends?"

Mrs. De Peyster stared, without speaking.

"Now I know I can trust you," he went on easily, "for I've got something on you and I give you away if you give me away. Well, sisters, of course you know you're not the only people the police are after. That's why I am temporarily in the ministry."

He grinned widely—a grin of huge enjoyment.

"Who are you?" demanded Mrs. De Peyster.

"Well, you don't hesitate to ask, do you?" He laughed, lightly. "Say, it's too good to keep! I always was too confiding a lad; but I've got you where you won't squeal, and I suppose we've got to know each other if we're going to do business together. You must know, my dear ladies, that every proposition I've handled I've gone into it as much for the fun as for the coin." He cocked his head; plainly there was an element of conceit in his character. "Well, fair ones—ready?"

Mrs. De Peyster nodded.

"Ever heard of the American Historical Society's collection of recently discovered letters of a gentleman named Thomas Jefferson?"

Mrs. De Peyster started.

"Yes."

[pg 140]

"And perhaps you have heard that authorities now agree that said Thomas Jefferson was dead almost a hundred years when said letters were penned; and that he must have been favored with the assistance of an amanuensis of, so to say, the present generation?"

"Yes."

"That being the case you may have heard of one Thomas Preston, alleged to be said amanuensis?"

"Yes."

He put his hand across his clerical vest, and bowed first to Mrs. De Peyster, then to Matilda.

"It gives Mr. Preston very great pleasure to meet you, ladies. Only for the present he humbly petitions to be known as Mr. Pyecroft."

Mrs. De Peyster was quite unable to speak. So this was the man Judge Harvey was trying to hunt down! Her meeting him like this, it seemed an impossible coincidence—utterly impossible! She little dreamed that the laws of chance were not at all concerned in this adventure; that this meeting was but the natural outcome of Matilda's trifling act in picking up from the library rug a boarding-house card and slipping it into her slit-pocket.

The young man, for he now obviously was a young man, plainly delighted in the surprise he had created.

[pg 141]

"I like to hand it to these pompous old stiffs," he went on gleefully—"these old boys who will come across with sky-high prices for old first editions and original manuscripts, and who don't care one little wheeze of a damn for what the author actually wrote. I'm sorry, though,"—in a tone of genuine contrition,— "that Judge Harvey was the man finally to be stung; they say he's the real thing." Suddenly his mood changed; his eye dropped in its unreverend wink. "There's a Raphael that the Metropolitan is solemnly proud of. It cost Morgan a hundred and fifty thousand dollars. It cost me an even five hundred to have it made."

He laughed again: that gay, whimsical, irresponsible laugh. Mrs. De Peyster was recovering somewhat from her first surprise.

Mr. Pyecroft leaned forward. "But this isn't getting down to our business. I've got a plan that's more fun than the Jefferson letters, and that will make us a lot of money, Miss Thompson. And it's easy and it's sure fire. It depends, as I said, upon the remarkable coincidence of your likeness to Mrs. De Peyster."

"Yes?" Mrs. De Peyster managed to say.

"You've read of her, of course; stiffest swell of the lot," went on the young gentleman rapidly, in clipped phrases oddly unlike the sonorous sentences of the Reverend Mr. Pyecroft. "Looks down on most of the Four Hundred as *hoi polloi*. She's in Europe now, and the papers say she won't be back until the very end of summer. We can't do a thing till then; have to lie low and wait. You need money, I heard you say; I suppose you're afraid to hock this twinkler"—touching the pearl pendant. "Police probably watching the pawnshops and would nab you. Well, I'll stake you till Mrs. De Peyster comes back."

[pg 142]

"Stake me?" breathed Mrs. De Peyster.

"Yes. Give you, both of you, what money you need."

"And—and when—Mrs. De Peyster comes back?"

Young Mr. Pyecroft chortled with delight.

"Say, this scheme's the best ever! The day we learn Mrs. De Peyster has landed, we dress you up as a top-notch—gad, but we can make you look the part!—we put you in a swell carriage, with her coat of arms painted on it—and you go around to Tiffany's and all the other swell shops where in the mean time I'll have learned Mrs. De Peyster has charge accounts. You select the most valuable articles in the shop, and then in the most casual, dignified manner,—I can coach

you on how to put on the dignity,—you remark, 'Charge to my account, and I'll just take it along with me.' And off you go, with a diamond necklace under your arm. And same thing at all the shops. Then we duck before the thing breaks, and divide the fruits of our industry and superior intelligence, as the economists say. Isn't that one great little game!"

Mrs. De Peyster stared at his face, grinning like an elated gargoyle; herself utterly limp, her every nerve a filament of icy horror.

"Well, what do you say, girls?" prompted Mr. Pyecroft.

Mrs. De Peyster at first could say nothing at all. Whereupon the young man, gleeful over his invention, prompted her again.

[pg 143] "I—can't—can't do it," she gulped out.

"Can't do it!" He stared at her, amazed. "Say, do you realize what you're passing up?"

"I can't do it," repeated Mrs. De Peyster.

"Why?" he demanded.

She did not reply.

He stood up, smiling again. "I won't argue with you; it's bigger than anything you ever pulled off—so big, I guess it stuns you; I'll just let the matter soak in, and put up its own argument. You'll come in, all right," he continued confidently, "for you need money, and I'm the party that can supply you. And to make certain that you don't get the money elsewhere, I'll just take along this vault of the First National Bank as security"—with which he slipped Mrs. De Peyster's pearl pendant into his pocket. "Now, think the matter over, girls. I'll be back in half an hour. So-long for the present."

The door closed behind him.

Mrs. De Peyster gazed wildly after him. The plan "soaked in," as he had said it would; and as it soaked in, her horror grew. She saw herself becoming involved, helpless to prevent it, in the plan Mr. Pyecroft considered so delectable; she saw herself later publicly exposed as engaged in this scheme to defraud herself; she could hear all New York laughing. Her whole being shivered and gasped. Of all the plans ever proposed to a woman—!

And all the weeks and months this Mr. Pyecroft would be hovering about her!...

[pg 144] Despairingly she sat upright.

"Matilda, we can't stay in the same house with that man."

"Oh, ma'am," breathed the appalled Matilda, "of course not!"

"We've got to leave! And leave before he comes back!"

"Of course, ma'am," cried Matilda. And then: "But—but where?"

"Anywhere to get away from him!"

"But, ma'am, the money?" said Matilda who had handled Mrs. De Peyster's petty cash account for twenty years, and whose business it had been to think of petty practicalities. "We've only got twenty-three cents left, and we can't possibly get any more soon, and no one will take us in without money or baggage. Don't you see? We can't stay here, and we can't go any place else."

This certainly was a dilemma. The two gazed at each other, their faces momentarily growing more ghastly with helplessness. Then suddenly Mrs. De Peyster leaned forward, with desperate decision.

"Matilda, we shall go back home!"

"Go home, ma'am?" cried Matilda.

"There's nothing else we can do. I'll slip into my sitting-room, lock the door, and live there quietly—and Jack will never know I'm in the house."

"But, ma'am, won't that be dangerous?"

"Danger is comparative. Anything is better than this!"

[pg 145] "Just as you say; I suppose you're right, ma'am." And then with an hysterical snuffle: "But oh, ma'am, I wish I knew how this thing was ever going to turn out!"

Five minutes later the two twin figures of somberness, their veils down, stole stealthily down the stairs and out into the night.

CHAPTER XII

HOME AGAIN

The two dark figures, giving a glance through the rain in either direction, stole down beneath the stately marble steps of No. 13 Washington Square, and Matilda unlocked the servants' door. They slipped inside; the door was cautiously relocked. Breathless, they stood listening. A vast, noble silence pervaded the great house. They flung their arms about each other, and thus embraced tottered against the wall; and Mrs. De Peyster relaxed in an unspeakable relief.



MATILDA UNLOCKED THE SERVANTS' DOOR

Home again! Her own home! Odorless of pot-roasts and frying batter-cakes. The phrase was rather common and sentimental—but, in truth, this was "home, sweet home."

And free of that unthinkable Mr. Pycroft!

While Mrs. De Peyster leaned there in the blackness, gathering strength, her mind mounted in sweet expectancy to her suite. Only a few minutes of soft treading of stairways—certainly they could avoid arousing Jack—and she would be locked in her comfortable rooms. A cautious bath! Clean clothes! Her own bed! All of the luxuries she had been so long denied!

Cautiously they crept through the basement hallway; cautiously crept up the butler's stairs and turned off through the door into the great hall of the first floor; cautiously they crept up to the drawing-room floor and trod ever so softly over woven treasures of the Orient, through the spacious ducal gloom. One more flight, then peace, security. With unbreathing care, Mrs. De Peyster set foot upon the first step of her journey's end.

And then, suddenly, the servants' bell burst into ringing. And there was a terrific hammering against the servants' door and also against the door in the boarding.

"Matilda—what's that?" breathed Mrs. De Peyster.

"M—maybe the police saw us come in," breathed Matilda.

They did not pause for discussion. Discarding caution, they plunged frantically and noisily up the stairs; until from out of the overhead blackness descended a voice:—

"Stop! Or I'll shoot!"

It was Jack's voice.

They stopped.

"Who are you?" the voice demanded.

They clung to each other, wordless.

"Who are you?" repeated Jack.

Their voices were still palsied. They heard his feet begin determinedly to descend. Mrs. De Peyster loosed her grip on Matilda's arm and vanished noiselessly downward.

[pg 148] "Speak up there," commanded Jack, "or I'll fire on the chance of getting you in the dark."

"It's only me, Mr. Jack," trembled Matilda.

"What, Matilda!" cried Jack; and from above, like an echo transposed an octave higher, sounded another, "What, Matilda!"

"Yes, Mr. Jack. Yes, ma'a—yes, Mary."

"But where the devil have you been?" exclaimed Jack, coming to her side.

Mary had also hurried down to her. "Matilda, the way you ran away from us!"

"I got a—er—sudden message. There was no time—"

"Never mind about explaining now," interrupted Jack. "Go down and stop that racket before they break in the doors. And thank God you're here just in time, Matilda! You're just the person to do it: housekeeper, caretaker. But be careful if they're reporters. Now, hurry."

Jack and Mary scuttled back to the haven of upstairs, and Matilda shivered down through the blackness. As she passed through the lower hall, a hand reached out of the dark and touched her. She managed not to cry out.

"Don't let them know about me!" implored Mrs. De Peyster.

"I'll—I'll do my best, ma'am," quavered Matilda, and glided weakly on.

[pg 149] When she opened the servants' door, a dripping policeman caught her arm. "Down here, Bill," he called to the man battering at the door above; and a minute later two officers were inside, and the door was closed, and a light was flashing in Matilda's face.

"Now, old girl," said the first officer, tightly gripping her arm and giving it that twist which if a policeman does not give an arm he is no policeman, "what's your little game, eh?"

"I—I live here, sir. I'm the housekeeper."

"Now don't try to put that over on us. You know you ain't."

"You must be new policemen, in this neighborhood," trembled Matilda, "or you'd know I am."

"We may be new cops, but we don't fall for old stuff like that. I was talkin' to Mrs. De Peyster's coachman only yesterday. He told me the housekeeper wasn't here no more. So better change your line o' dope. Where's the other one?"

"Wha—what other one?"

"The one what come in here with you."

"I'm the only person in the house," Matilda tried to declare valiantly.

"Drop it!" said the officer. "Didn't the boss tell us to keep our eyes on these here millionaires' closed houses; all kinds o' slick crooks likely to clean 'em out. An' didn't we see two women come in this house,—hey, Bill?"

"Sure—I was a block off, but I seen 'em plain as day," said Bill.

"So I guess," again the twist that proved him a policeman, "you'd better lead us to your pal."

[pg 150] He pushed her before him, lighting the way with his flash-lantern, up stairways and back into the dining-room, where she turned on the one shaded electric bulb that had been left connected. In Matilda all hope was gone; resistance was useless; fate had conquered. And when the officer again demanded that she bring forth her accomplice, she dumbly and obediently made search; and finally brought Mrs. De Peyster forth from the china closet.

The officer pulled up Mrs. De Peyster's veil, and closely scanned her features; which, to be just to the officer, were so distorted that they bore little semblance to the Mrs. De Peyster of her portraits.

"Recognize her, Bill?" he queried.

"Looks a bit like the pictures of Chicago Sal," said Bill. "But I ain't ever handled her. I guess she ain't worked none around New York."

"Well, now," said the officer, with policial jocularly, "since you two ladies already got your hats on, I guess we'll just offer you our arms to the station."

Mrs. De Peyster gave Matilda a look of frenzied appeal. But Matilda needed not the spur of another's desperation. For herself she saw a prison cell agape.

"But I tell you I'm Matilda Simpson, Mrs. De Peyster's housekeeper!"

"If so, who's the other mourner?" inquired the humorous policeman. "And what's she doin' here?"

[pg 151]

"She's—she's"—and then Matilda plunged blindly at a lie—"she's my sister." And having started, she went on: "My sister Angelica, who lives in Syracuse. She's come to visit me awhile."

The officer grinned. "Well, Matilda and Angelica, we'll give you a chance to tell that to the lieutenant. Come on."

"But I tell you I'm Matilda Simpson!" cried Matilda. She was now thinking solely of her own imminent disgrace. Inspiration came to her. "You say you talked to William, the coachman. He'll tell you who I am. There's the bell—ring for him!"

The officer scratched his chin. Then he eyed his co-laborer meditatively.

"Not a bad idea, Bill. There's a chance she may be on the level, and there'd be hell to pay at headquarters if we got in bad with any of these swells. No harm tryin'."

He pressed a big thumb against the bell Matilda had indicated.

They all sat down, the two officers' oilskins guttering water all over Mrs. De Peyster's Kirmanshah rug and parquet floor. But Mrs. De Peyster was unconscious of this deluge. She gave Matilda a glance of reproachful dismay; then she edged into the dimmest corner of the dusky room and turned her chair away from the door through which this new disaster was about to stalk in upon her, and unnoticed drew down her veil.

There was a long, sickening wait. Plainly William had gone to bed, and had to dress before he could answer the bell.

[pg 152]

At length, however, William appeared. He started at sight of the four figures; then his gaze fastened on Matilda and grew hard. Mrs. De Peyster tried to collapse within herself.

"Friend," said the officer, "here's a lady as says she's Matilda Simpson, Mrs. De Peyster's housekeeper. How about it?"

"She is," William affirmed coldly.

"The devil!" said the officer; and then in a low voice apart to the other: "Lucky we didn't go no further—hey, Bill?" And again to William: "Miss Simpson says this other lady is her sister, visitin' her from Syracuse. Can you identify her?"

William did not alter a line in his face.

"Miss Simpson has a sister living near Syracuse. I have never seen her. I cannot identify her."

"H'm," said the officer.

"Is that all?" asked William.

"Yes, that'll do. Thanks."

With a cold blighting glare at Matilda, William withdrew.

"Well, ladies," said the officer with ingratiating pleasantness, "I'm mighty glad it's all right. If you have occasion, Miss Simpson, to speak o' this here little incident to Mrs. De Peyster when she gets back from Europe, just explain it as due to over-zealousness, if you don't mind—desire to safeguard her interests. D'you get me? Headquarters is awful sensitive to kicks from you rich people; and the boss comes down on you like a ton o' bricks. It'll be mighty kind o' you. Good-night. Don't bother to come down with us. I noticed it was a spring lock. We can let ourselves out."

[pg 153]

When the two policemen were out of the room, Mrs. De Peyster and Matilda collapsed into each others' arms and their bodies sank limply forward from their chairs upon the dining-table. "Matilda, what an escape!" shivered Mrs. De Peyster; and she lay there, gathering breath, regathering strength, regathering poise, while the officers' steps grew dimmer and more dim. She was palpitant, yet able to think. Certainly it had been a narrow escape. But that danger was now over. There now remained only the feat of getting into her room, unnoticed by Jack. This

they could manage when they were certain that Jack and Mary were asleep.

Relief, hope, courage once more began to rise within her.

Then suddenly she sat upright. Footsteps were sounding below—growing nearer—heavy footsteps—what sounded like more than two pairs of footsteps. She sat as one palsied; and before she could recover strength or faculties, there in the doorway were the two policemen. And with them was a gentleman in a cap and tan summer overcoat buttoned to the chin.

The gentleman was the Reverend Mr. Pyecroft; and the Mr. Pyecroft they had first seen: bland, oh, so bland, with that odd, elderish look of his.

[pg 154] "Met him goin' down the servants' steps as we were goin' out, and he asked us—" the officer was beginning.

But Mr. Pyecroft was already crossing toward Matilda, smiling affectionately.

"My dear Matilda!" He kissed her upon the cheek. "I arrived in New York very unexpectedly less than half an hour ago, and could not delay coming to see you. How are you, sister?"

"Wha—what?" stammered Matilda.

Mr. Pyecroft with his bland affectionate smile crossed to Mrs. De Peyster, slipped an arm across her shoulders and kissed her veil somewhere about the forehead. "And how are you, dear sister?" he inquired with deep concern.

Mrs. De Peyster gasped and stiffened.

"You ladies don't seem very glad to see him," put in the officer. "When we told him about you two bein' sisters, he said he was your brother. Is he?"

"Of course I am," Mr. Pyecroft answered pleasantly. "They weren't expecting me; therefore this very natural surprise which you observe. Of course, I am your brother, am I not?"—patting Mrs. De Peyster's arm with the appearance of affection, and then closing on it warningly.

Mrs. De Peyster nodded her head.

"Matilda," turning to her, in frank fraternal fashion, "you might tell these officers that I am not only your brother, but in fact the only brother you have. That is true, isn't it, sister?"

"Yes," gulped Matilda.

[pg 155] "Well," said the officer, "since everything is all right, we'll be leavin' you. But, believe me, this is certainly some sudden family reunion."

When they had gone Mr. Pyecroft calmly removed cap and overcoat and stood forth in his clericals. Again he wore the youngish face of their interview of an hour before. Mrs. De Peyster watched him in sickening fear. What was he going to do? Surely he must now know her identity!

He smiled at them amiably.

"Well, my dears, so you tried to give me the slip. I rather thought you'd bear watching, so I followed you. And when I saw the officers come out without you I knew you had successfully entertained them with some sort of plausible explanation."

His gaze fixed on Matilda. "So, my dear sister, you're really the housekeeper here." He shook his head chidingly. "And the usual crook of a housekeeper, eh—trying to make a safe clean-up while her mistress is away. You're deeper than I thought, Matilda. I understand the whole affair now. You and our sister Angelica had already been planning some kind of a game similar to the one I suggested. I just happened to think of the same thing. I don't blame you a lot for not wanting to take me into the game; it was quite natural for you to want all there is in it for yourselves. Not the least hard feeling in the world, my dears. But, of course,"—apologetically,—"you could hardly expect me to give up a rich thing like this, could you?"

[pg 156] His easy, familiar, ironic talk had brought Mrs. De Peyster one large item of relief. Evidently he didn't suspect who she was—yet.

"What are you going to do?" she managed to ask.

"Stay right here with you, my sisters, and in due time we'll go ahead with our game as per previous specifications." He surveyed the high, paneled dining-room, sumptuous, distinguished even in the semi-dusk. "Cozy little flat, eh, my dears?"

Suddenly that wide mouth of his slipped up to one side, and he laughed in exultant, impish glee.

"Say, isn't this the funniest ever! Beats my plan a mile. We'll make ourselves at home—hang out together for the summer in Mrs. De Peyster's own house,—*her own house*,—and when we hear she's coming back we vacate and then do our little act of buying out the stores in Lady De

Peyster's name. Was there ever such a lark!" For a moment his low laugh of wild glee cut off his speech. "What's more, it's the safest place in the world for us. Nobody'd ever think of our being here!"

Mrs. De Peyster stared at Matilda, Matilda stared at Mrs. De Peyster.

"And it's just what I needed," continued Mr. Pyecroft in amicable confidence. "I just had a tip that the police were closing in on me, and I had to disappear quick. An hour ago, I'd never have dreamed of falling into such a safe little retreat as this. Luck favors the deserving."

Mrs. De Peyster gazed at him, faint.

[pg 157]

"And of course, Matilda," he went on, "if, say, any of the neighbors happen to drop in for a cup of tea and see me, or if the police should manage to trail me here,—and they may, you know,—of course, Matilda, you'll speak right up and say I'm your dear brother."

At that moment it was beyond either of them to speak right up.

"Remember, my dears, that we're all crooks together," he prompted in a soft voice, that had a steely suggestion beneath it. "And in case you fail to stand by me it would give me very great pain—very great pain, I assure you—to have to blow on you."

Matilda gulped, blinked her eyes, and looked helplessly at Mrs. De Peyster. Mr. Pyecroft turned to the latter.

"Of course, Angelica, dear, you're going to stand by me?"

Mrs. De Peyster hesitated, then breathed a barely audible "Yes."

"And you, Matilda, who were always my favorite sister, you, too, will stand by me?"

"Yes," breathed Matilda.

"Ah," said Mr. Pyecroft, in a moved tone, "such family loyalty is truly touching. I foresee a most pleasant summer."

[pg 158]

CHAPTER XIII

THE HAPPY FAMILY

He nodded at the two with an air of deep fraternal affection. And again he gazed with satisfaction about the spacious apartment, indicative of numberless other rooms of corresponding comfort.

His eyes came back to them.

"And now, Matilda, my dear," he resumed, with his pleasant smile, "in the event we spoke of,—neighbors or police dropping in, you know,—in such a case I suppose I ought to be prepared with a correct history of myself. To begin with, might I inquire what our name is?—our family name, I mean."

"Simpson."

"Simpson. Ah, yes; very good. Matilda Simpson—Angelica Simpson—and, let us say, Archibald Simpson. And where was I born, Matilda?"

"You weren't ever born," protested Matilda with frightened indignation.

"Now don't be facetious or superfluous, sister dear," he said soothingly. "Granted for the sake of argument I wasn't ever born. But where might I have been born?"

"I was born near Albany."

[pg 159]

"Near Albany is perfectly agreeable to me," said Mr. Pyecroft. "And how many are there in our family?"

"Just Angelica and me."

"Then there really is an authentic Angelica?"

"Yes."

"Excellent. And our parents?"

"They died when I was a child."

"I'm grieved, indeed, to learn of it," said Mr. Pyecroft. "But I'll admit it simplifies matters; there's

less to remember. Angelica, our sister here, who is also visiting you, lives near Syracuse I understood some one to say. Married or single?"

"Married," Matilda choked out.

"Her married name?"

"Jones."

"Angelica Simpson Jones. Good. Very euphonious. And how many little nieces and nephews am I the happy uncle of?"

"She—she has no children."

"That's too bad, for I have a particular fondness for children," sorrowed Mr. Pyecroft. "Still, that also simplifies matters, lessening considerably the percentage of chances for regrettable lapses of memory."

He pursued his genealogical inquiries into all possibly useful details. And then he sat meditative for a while, gazing amiably about his family circle. And it was while they were all thus sitting silent, in what in the dim light of the one shaded electric bulb might have seemed to an observer the silence of intimacy, that Jack, who had slipped cautiously downstairs, walked in, behind him Mary.

[pg 160]

"Matilda, what's this mean?" he demanded, with a bewildered look. "We've been wondering why you didn't come upstairs."

Mrs. De Peyster turned in her chair, and held her breath, like one beneath the guillotine. Matilda arose, shaking.

"Who's this man, Matilda?" Jack continued.

"He—ah—er—he's—"

"And, pray, Matilda, who is this?" politely inquired the arisen Mr. Pyecroft, blandly assuming command of the situation.

"Who am I? Well, you certainly have nerve—" the astounded Jack was beginning.

"He's Mr. Jack," Matilda put in. "Jack De Peyster."

"Ah, young Mr. De Peyster!" Mr. Pyecroft's eyebrows went up slightly and a shrewd light flashed into his rounded eyes and was at once gone, and again his face was blandly clerical. "It is, indeed, a pleasure to meet you, Mr. De Peyster. And, pray, who is this?" with a suave gesture toward Mary.

"That, sir, is my wife!" Jack announced, stiff with anger.

Again Mr. Pyecroft's eyes flashed shrewdly, and again were clerically rounded.

"My dear sir, that is, indeed, surprising. I have seen no public notice of your marriage. And I watch the marriage announcements quite closely—which is rather natural, for, if I may be permitted to mention it, I myself am frequently called upon to perform the holy rites." His face clouded with what seemed a painful suspicion. "I trust, sir, that you are really married?"

[pg 161]

"Why, damn you—"

"Sir, you must not thus address the cloth!" sternly interposed Mr. Pyecroft. "It is our duty to speak frankly, and to make due inquiry into the propriety of such relations. However, since you say so, I am sure the affair is strictly correct." His voice softened, became nobly apologetic. "No harm has been meant, and if any offense has been felt, I assure you of my deepest regrets."

"See here, who the devil are you?" demanded Jack.

Mr. Pyecroft turned to Matilda.

"Matilda, my dear, will you kindly tell young Mr. De Peyster who I am."

Matilda seemed about to choke. "He's—he's my—my brother."

"Your brother!" exclaimed Jack, "I didn't know you had a brother. You never spoke of one."

"Which was entirely natural," said Mr. Pyecroft, with an air of pious remorse. "Matilda has been ashamed to speak of me. To be utterly frank—and it is meet that one who has been what I have been should be humble and ready to confess—for many years I was the black sheep of the family, my name unmentioned. But sometime since I was snatched a brand from the burning; I have remained silent about myself until I could give to my family, which had properly disowned me, a long record to prove my reformation. I am now striving by my devotion to make some amends for my previous shortcomings."

[pg 162]

Jack stared incomprehensibly at this unexpected clerical brother of Matilda's, with his unquenchable volubility. Mr. Pyecroft gazed back with appropriate humility, yet with a lofty self-respect.

Jack turned away with a shrug, and pointed at the dark figure of Mrs. De Peyster.

"And who is that, Matilda?"

"That, sir," put in Mr. Pyecroft quickly, easily, to forestall any blunder by the hapless Matilda—and deftly interposing himself between Jack and Mrs. De Peyster, "that is our sister."

"The one who lives in Syracuse?"

"Yes; and she is indisposed," said Mr. Pyecroft. "Our sister Angelica Simpson Jones," he elaborated. "Matilda is the eldest, I am the youngest; there are just us three children."

"And might I ask, Matilda, without intending discourtesy," said Jack, eyeing Mr. Pyecroft with disfavor, "how long your brother and sister intend to remain?"

"Matilda invited us for the summer," said Mr. Pyecroft apologetically.

[pg 163]

"For the summer!" repeated Jack in dismay. Then he spoke to Matilda, caustically: "I suppose it's all right, Matilda, but has it been your fixed custom, when we've been away for the summer, to fill the house with your family?"

"Please, Mr. Jack, please," imploringly began Matilda, and could utter nothing further.

"Great God!" Jack burst out in exasperation. "Not that I'd object ordinarily to your relatives being here, Matilda. But running this place just now as a hotel, who knows but it may let out the fact that we're here!"

Mr. Pyecroft's eyebrows went up—ever so little.

"Ah, I understand. You wish your presence in the house to be a secret."

"Of course! Hasn't Matilda told you?"

"I only just arrived. She hasn't had time. But of course she would have done so. You are—ah"—his tone was delicate—"evading the police?"

"The police! We don't care a hang about the police, though, of course, we don't want them to know. It's the infernal reporters we care about."

"The reporters?" softly pursued Mr. Pyecroft.

"Yes, but one reporter in particular—a beast by the name of Mayfair, I've had a tip that he suspects something; already he's tried to get into the house as a gas-meter inspector."

At the mention of that indomitable, remorseless, undeceivable newsgatherer, Mayfair, and the possibility of his gaining entrance into the house, Mrs. De Peyster experienced a new shudder.

[pg 164]

"What would be the harm if Mr. Mayfair did get in?" Imperceptibly prodded Mr. Pyecroft. "He would merely write a piece about you for his paper."

"And his confounded piece, or the main facts in it, would be cabled to Europe!"

"Ah, I think I see," said Mr. Pyecroft. "Mrs. De Peyster would read about your marriage in the Paris 'Herald' or some other European paper. You do not wish your mother to know of your marriage—yet."

"I supposed Matilda had already told you that," said Jack.

"Ah, so that is why you are here in hiding," said Mr. Pyecroft, very softly, chiefly to himself; and his eyes had another momentary flash, only brighter than any heretofore, and his mouth twitched upward, and he pleasantly rubbed his hands.

At that moment, from the stairway, came the sound of descending steps. Jack and Mary appeared undisturbed. Mr. Pyecroft became taut, though no one could have observed a change. Mrs. De Peyster quivered with yet deeper apprehension. Would the trials and tribulations and Pharaonic plagues never cease descending on her!

Matilda gazed wildly at Jack. "Who's that?" she quavered.

"Only Uncle Bob," Jack answered carelessly.

Only Uncle Bob! Mrs. De Peyster, in her dim corner, tried to shrivel up into yet darker obscurity. Breathlessly she felt herself upon the precipitous edge of ultimate horror. For Judge Harvey—Judge Harvey of all persons—to be the one to discover her amid her humiliating circumstances!

[pg 165]

Dimly she heard Jack talk on, explaining in casual tone: "You know, Matilda, Uncle Bob has always had the general oversight of the house when it's been closed during summers; and he's always made it his business to drop in occasionally to see that everything's all right. I got him word we were here, and he dropped in this evening to call on us—and along came this awful rain and we coaxed him to stay the night. Uncle Bob and you are lucky, Matilda, you can both come and go without arousing any suspicion."

Only the Judge!... Yet, for all her horror, a new phase of the general predicament filtered into such consciousness as she now possessed. Judge Harvey, irate purchaser of autograph letters, and Mr. Pyecroft, *alias* Thomas Preston, profuse producer of the same, were under the same roof and were about to meet. What would happen when they came face to face?—for she remembered now that a bad likeness of Thomas Preston had several times appeared in the papers. She turned her head toward the doorway and peered through her veil, waiting.

When Judge Harvey entered, Mr. Pyecroft started. Upon the instant he had recognized Judge Harvey. But the next moment Mr. Pyecroft was himself. Jack gave the necessary introductions, the one to Angelica Simpson Jones at long distance, and gave a brief explanation of the presence of the two guests. During this while Judge Harvey repeatedly glanced at Mr. Pyecroft, a puzzled look on his countenance.

"Excuse me, Mr. Simpson," he remarked presently, "but your face seems elusively familiar to me. I seem to know it, yet I cannot place it. Haven't I met you somewhere?"

"Perhaps you were a lay delegate to the recent Episcopal Convention in New York?" politely suggested Mr. Pyecroft.

"No. I did not even attend any of the sessions."

"Then, of course, it could not have been there that you saw me," said Mr. Pyecroft.

"Perhaps it will come to me," said Judge Harvey.

"Perhaps," said Mr. Pyecroft.

Mrs. De Peyster, for all her personal apprehension, could but marvel at this young man of the sea who had fastened himself upon her back. Most amazing of all, he seemed to like the taste of his danger.

"Judge Harvey, Mr. De Peyster was remarking when you came in," Mr. Pyecroft continued without permitting a lull, "that he wished his presence in this house to remain unknown. Also I had just told him and his young wife that my earlier years were given over to a life for which I have been trying to atone by good works. Now I have a very humiliating further confession to make to you all. Recently there has been—may I call it a recrudescence?—an uncontrollable recrudescence of my former regrettable self. For a disastrous moment the Mr. Hyde element in me, which I thought I had stifled and cast out, arose and possessed me. In brief, I have been guilty of an error which the police consider serious; in fact, the police are this moment searching for me. So you see, I am in the same situation as Mr. De Peyster: I prefer my whereabouts to remain unknown. Since we are in each other's hands, and it is in our power each to betray the other, shall we not all, as a *quid pro quo*, agree to preserve Mr. De Peyster's and my presence in this house a secret? For my part, I promise."

"I'm willing," said Jack.

"And I," said Mary. "Anyhow, I never get a chance to tell, for I haven't been out of this house once."

"And you, Judge Harvey? You will—ah—protect me?"

Judge Harvey bit the end of his mustache. "I don't like this bargaining over a matter of justice. But—for Jack's sake, yes."

"Thank you, Judge Harvey," Mr. Pyecroft said in a soft, grateful voice, and with a slight, dignified bow.

Mrs. De Peyster drew a deep breath. He certainly was a cool one.

"There's something that's just been occurring to me," spoke up Jack. "It's along of that infernal reporter Mayfair who's snooping around here. He's likely to get in here any time. If he were to find me here alone, there'd be nothing for him to write about. It's finding me here, married, that will give him one of his yellow stories, and that will put mother next. Matilda, since you already have so large a family visiting you, I suppose you wouldn't mind taking on one more and saying that Mary here was something or other of yours—say a niece?"

"Oh, that would be delicious" laughed Mary.

"Why, Mr. Jack,—I! I—" The flustered Matilda could get out no more.

"Mr. Simpson, couldn't you say she was your daughter?" queried Jack.

"I would be only too delighted to own her as such," said Mr. Pyecroft. "But I am not married and I am obviously too young. However,"—moving closer to Mrs. De Peyster,— "our sister Angelica is married, and I am sure it will be a great pleasure to her to claim Mrs. De Peyster as her daughter. Angelica, my dear, of course you'll do it?"

Mrs. De Peyster sat rigid, voiceless.

"What's the matter?" asked Mary, in deep concern.

"Our sister probably did not hear, she is slightly deaf," Mr. Pyecroft explained. He bent over Mrs. De Peyster, made a trumpet of one hand, and raised his voice. "Angelica, if any other person comes into the house, you are to say that young Mrs. De Peyster is your daughter. You understand?"

Mrs. De Peyster nodded.

"And of course you'll say it?"

[pg 169]

For a moment Mrs. De Peyster was again rigid. Then slowly she nodded.

The spirit of the masquerade seized upon Mary. "Oh, mother dear,—what a comfort to have you!" she cried with mischievous glee; and arms wide as if for a daughterly embrace she swept toward Mrs. De Peyster.

Mrs. De Peyster shriveled back. She stopped living. In another moment—

But the Reverend Mr. Pyecroft, *alias* Archibald Simpson, *alias* Thomas Preston, *alias* God knows what else, stepped quickly between her and the on-coming Mary, and with an air of brotherly concern held out an intercepting hand.

"No excitement, please. The doctor's orders."

"Is it anything serious?" Mary asked anxiously.

"We hope not," in a grave voice. "It is chiefly nervous exhaustion due to a period of worry over a trying domestic situation."

"That's too bad!" Very genuine sympathy was in Mary's soft contralto. "But if she's unwell, she ought to have more air. Why don't you draw up that heavy veil?"

"S-s-h! Not so loud, I beg you. If she heard you speak of her veil, it would pain her greatly. You see," Mr. Pyecroft unhesitatingly went on in a low, compassionate tone, "our sister, while trying to light a gasoline stove—It was a gasoline stove, was it not, Matilda?"

"Ah—er—ye-yes," corroborated Matilda.

[pg 170]

"A gasoline stove, yes," continued the grave voice of Mr. Pyecroft. "It was during the very first year after her marriage. The explosion that followed disfigured her face frightfully. She is extremely sensitive; so much so that she invariably wears a heavy veil when she goes out of her own house."

"Why, how terrible!" cried Mary.

"Yes, isn't it! All of our family have felt for poor Angelica most deeply. And furthermore, she is sensitive about her deafness—which, I may add, was caused by the same accident. And her various misfortunes have made her extremely shy, so the less attention that is paid to her, the happier the poor creature is."

Mary withdrew among the others. Slowly Mrs. De Peyster returned once more to life. She hardly knew how she had escaped, save that it had been through some miracle of that awful Mr. Pyecroft's amazing tongue.

"By the way, Matilda," she heard Mary remark, "did you read in to-night's papers about Mrs. De Peyster's voyage? You know she landed to-day."

"No, ma'—Mary," said Matilda.

"The paper said she was so ill all the way across that she wasn't able to leave her stateroom once." Mary's voice was very sympathetic. "Why, she was so ill she couldn't leave the boat until after dark, hours after all the other passengers had gone."

"I never knew mother to be seasick before," said Jack, in deep concern.

[pg 171]

Judge Harvey said nothing, but his fine, handsome face was disturbed. Jack noted the look, and, suddenly catching the Judge's hand, said with a burst of boyish frankness:—

"Uncle Bob, you're worried more than any of us! You know I've always liked you like a father—and—and here's hoping some day mother'll change her mind—and you'll be my father in reality!"

"Thank you, Jack!" the Judge said huskily, gripping Jack's hand.

Over in her corner, beneath her veil, Mrs. De Peyster flushed hotly.

They talked on about the distant Mrs. De Peyster, and she listened with keenest ears. They were all so sympathetic about her—sick—alone—in far-off Europe. So sympathetic—so very, very sympathetic!

[pg 172]

As for Mr. Pyecroft, standing on guard beside her, he looked appropriately grave. But inside his gravity he was smiling. These people had no guess that in a way he was connected with the great Mrs. De Peyster of whom they talked—that "Miss Gardner" who was the companion to the ailing social leader in France was something more than just Miss Gardner. And he felt no reason for revealing his little secret.... Clara, the dear little Puritan, would be scandalized by this his wildest escapade—by his having used, after all and despite her prohibition, Mrs. De Peyster's closed house as a retreat; but when she came back from Europe, and he made her see in its proper light this gorgeous and profitable lark, she would relent and forgive him. Why, of course, she would forgive him.

He was very optimistic, was Mr. Pyecroft; and the founder of his family must have been a certain pagan gentleman by the name of Pan.

[pg 173]

CHAPTER XIV

THE ATTIC ROOM

Mrs. De Peyster gave thanks when at last, toward one o'clock Jack and Mary and Judge Harvey went back to bed, leaving Matilda, Mr. Pyecroft, and herself. It had previously been settled that Mr. Pyecroft was to have Jack's old room, Matilda was, of course, to have her usual quarters, and Mrs. De Peyster was to have the room adjoining Matilda's, that formerly was occupied by Mrs. De Peyster's second maid.

"Say, that was certainly one close shave," Mr. Pyecroft whispered at the door of her room. "Perhaps we'd better beat it from here. If that Judge ever places me! And you, if those people ever get a fair look at your face, they'll see your likeness to Mrs. De Peyster and they'll guess what our game is—sure! You'll promise to be careful?"

Mrs. De Peyster promised.

Fifteen minutes later, having been undressed by Matilda, she was lying in the dark on a narrow bed, hard, very hard, as hard as Mrs. Gilbert's folding contrivance—and once more, after this her second move, she was studying the items of her situation.

[pg 174]

She had daily to mix with, strive to avoid, Jack and Mary. And Jack had casually remarked that Judge Harvey would be frequently dropping in.

And there was that bland, incorrigible Pyecroft, whom she seemed to have become hopelessly tied to; Pyecroft, irresistibly insisting that she should swindle herself, and whom she saw no way of denying.

Suppose Pyecroft should find out? He might.

Suppose Jack and Mary should find out? They might.

Suppose Judge Harvey should find out? He might.

And suppose all this business of her not going to Europe, but staying in her shuttered house—her flight from home—her humiliating experiences in an ordinary boarding-house where she passed as a housekeeper—her being forced into a plan to rob herself—suppose Mrs. Allistair should find out? And Mrs. Allistair, she well knew, might somehow stumble upon all this; for she remembered how Mrs. Allistair had tried, and perhaps was still trying, to get some piquant bit of evidence against her in that Duke de Crécy affair. And if Mrs. Allistair did find out—

What a scandal!

And since her fate had become so inextricably tied up with the fates of others, and since the exposure of others might involve the exposure of her, there were yet further sources of danger. For—

There was that awful reporter watching the house, after Jack!

There were the police, after Pyecroft!

[pg 175]

She shuddered. This was only the seventh day since her inspired idea had been born within her. And it was only that very day that she had landed at Cherbourg. Three months must pass before Olivetta, in the role of Mrs. De Peyster, would return, and she could be herself again—if they

could ever, ever manage their expected re-exchange of personalities in this awful mess.

Only seven days thus far. Three more months of this!

Three ... more ... months!...

But at length she slept; slept deeply, for she had the gift of sleep in its perfection; slept a complete and flawless oblivion. So that when she awoke Saturday, refreshed, and glanced blinking about from her thin pillow she did not at first remember where she was. This low room, four by seven feet, with a narrow bed penitentially hard, a stationary wash-basin, a row of iron clothes-hooks, a foot-high oblong window above her head—what was it? How had she come here? And had any one ever before lived in such a cell?

Then memory came flooding back. This was her second maid's room. She was Angelica Simpson Jones, sister of Matilda, a poor, diffident creature with defective hearing and pitifully disfigured face. And in the house were Mr. Pyecroft, and Jack and Mary, and Judge Harvey was a frequent visitor. And besides these, there were all the other sources of danger!

She was now poignantly awake.

[pg 176]

While she was still in this process of realization, there was a soft knock at her door and a whispered, "It's Matilda, ma'am," at her keyhole. She unlocked the door, admitted Matilda, and crept back into her second maid's bed. They gazed at each other a moment without speaking. Matilda's face was gray with awe and helpless woe.

They whispered about their predicament. What should they do? Should they flee again?—and how?—and where?—and what good would flight do them, especially since Mr. Pyecroft might once more follow? Twice they had leaped from the frying-pan, and each time had landed in a fire hotter than the one preceding. A third flight might drop them into a fire worse even than this in which they now sizzled.

And as for the specific plan which had brought them back—for Mrs. De Peyster to steal unnoticed into her suite and hide there—that seemed impossible of achievement with all these people circulating about the house, especially that all-observing Mr. Pyecroft. If Mr. Pyecroft should catch her in one suspicious move, then his quick mind would deduce the rest, and everything would be up—everything!

[pg 177]

There was, of course, yet another way—to give up and disclose her identity herself. But she was now far, far too deeply involved: to confess and thus by her own act bring limitless and appalling humiliation on herself, this was unthinkable! She must go on, on, blindly on—with the desperate hope that in some manner now unseen she might in the end disentangle herself and come out of the affair undiscovered and with dignity untarnished. The two were still whispering over their predicament, when at the door sounded another knock, loud and confident. They caught at each other. The knocking was repeated.

"Who's that?" Matilda asked, at Mrs. De Peyster's prompting.

"It's Archibald," answered a bland voice.

"Ma'am, shall I let him in?" breathed Matilda.

"We don't dare keep him out," breathed Mrs. De Peyster.

Matilda admitted him. Even in the semi-darkness of the room, due to the green shutters being closed, Mrs. De Peyster could see that he was admirably transformed from the raven Mr. Pyecroft of the night before. He had on a gray modish suit, with lavender tie and socks to match; and looked natty and young and spirited and quite prepared for anything.

"Good morning, sisters," he greeted them pleasantly. "I see you are admiring my new spring outfit. Not at all bad, is it?" He turned slowly about, for their better observation; then grinned and lowered his voice: "It's young De Peyster's; found it in his room, and helped myself. Burned my clergyman's outfit in the kitchen range before any one was up; best to leave no clues lying around."

[pg 178]

He, too, had come to talk plans, and quickly Mr. Pyecroft settled them. This was a dangerous place for him, with Judge Harvey coming and going; but to stay here was a safer risk than to venture forth until the hue and cry of the police had quieted. It was a dangerous place also for his dear sister Angelica, but if on the plea of indisposition she would stay in this dusky room and would keep her disfigured face hidden when any member of the household chanced to come in (they would all understand, and sympathize with, her painful diffidence), why, there was an excellent chance of her pulling through without discovery. It was obvious that they dared not keep out Jack and Mary, and perhaps Judge Harvey, should these be inspired to make friendly calls. To forbid their visits would arouse suspicion. And if it were said Angelica was too ill to see any one, then they would demand that a doctor be called in—and a doctor would mean exposure. Their visits must be permitted; no doubt of that; but if dear Angelica were only careful, extremely careful, and kept her head, all would go well.

Yes, summarized Mr. Pyecroft, the best plan for them was to remain here for the present. Then when the safe and appropriate moment arrived, they could make their get-away.

From quite other reasons, Mrs. De Peyster accepted this plan. After the strain of the past week, particularly after the wild emotional oscillations of the preceding night, she wished just to lie there in the dusk, and breathe—and breathe—and breathe some more—and recover life.

[pg 179]

Matilda suggested that she bring up breakfast for Mrs. De Peyster, and Mr. Pyecroft begged her to discover and set out something below for him, for his stomach was a torturing vacuum. Matilda went down, leaving Mr. Pyecroft behind in the room, discussing further details of their immediate campaign; and presently she returned, trembling, with a tray, Jack and Mary just behind her. Mrs. De Peyster did not need to be prompted to turn her face toward the wall, and into the deeper shadow that there prevailed. Mr. Pyecroft casually sat down upon the bed near its head, making an excellent further screen.

Mr. Pyecroft noted that Jack was observing his raiment. "I trust, Mr. De Peyster, you will pardon the liberty I have taken with your clothes. My own were still wet from last night."

"That's all right," said Jack. "But, say, Matilda, have your sister eat her breakfast. What we've come to talk about can wait."

But Matilda's sister, after all, wished no breakfast. And sollicitation could not rouse in her an appetite.

"Very well," said Jack. "Then to the point. I thought we'd better all get together on the matter at once. It's about food."

"Food?" queried Mr. Pyecroft, a bit blankly.

"Yes, and it's some problem, you bet. Here's a house that is supposed to be empty. And within this empty house are five adults. Do you get me?"

"Isn't it terrible!" cried Mary.

[pg 180]

"Five adults," repeated Jack. "How are we going to get food in here for them without exciting suspicion?"

"As you say," mused Mr. Pyecroft with a wry face, "that is certainly some problem. My own appetite is already one magnitudinous toothache."

Jack enlarged upon their situation.

"Since Judge Harvey tipped me off to the fact that the newspapers smelled a story, and since that reporter Mayfair and other reporters began to watch this house, I've had to give up going out. We two would have starved but for what Judge Harvey and William managed to slip in to us. Even with that, we've almost starved. In fact, we've been driven by hunger about to the point of giving in, going out, acknowledging our marriage and taking the consequences."

Mrs. De Peyster, face buried in the shadow, thrilled with a sudden rush of hope. If Jack and Mary should leave the house, then half her danger would be ended!

"But, you see, since that news yesterday about mother being so sick in Europe," Jack continued solicitously, "I feel that, in her weakened condition, the news of our marriage might be a very severe shock for her. So for her sake we're going to keep the thing secret for a while yet, and stick it out here."

Mrs. De Peyster could hardly keep back a groan.

"So, now," Jack again propounded, "what the dickens are the five of us going to do?"

[pg 181]

Mr. Pyecroft rubbed his wide mouth for a meditative moment. Then he smiled upon Matilda.

"It seems to me, sister dear, that we'll have to put it up to you."

"Up to me?" cried Matilda.

"Yes, Matilda. You belong here; you can come and go as a matter of course. You have a sister visiting you; also a brother, but as I have requested, the less said about his being here the better. But you can go out and openly order provisions for yourself and our sister. And you can give a good large order for nourishing canned goods, casually mentioning that you are laying in a supply so that you will not have to bother again soon with staples. That, with what Judge Harvey and William can smuggle in, should keep us provided for."

Mr. Pyecroft's suggestion was approved by the majority. As an addendum to his proposal Matilda was ordered to answer the bell whenever rung; if she did not, with the knowledge abroad that she was in the house, a dangerous suspicion might be aroused. But she should be careful when she went to the door, very careful.

Matilda was driven forth to make the purchases; Mr. Pyecroft, under Jack's guidance, went below to forage for the anesthetic of immediate crumbs; and Mary, tender-heartedly, remained behind to relieve the tedium of and give comfort to the invalid. She straightened up the room a bit; urged the patient to eat, to no avail; then went out of the room for a minute, and reappeared with a book.

"I'm going to read to you, Angelica," she announced, in a loud yet nursely voice. "I suppose your taste in books is about the same as your sister's. Here's a story I found in Matilda's room. It's called 'Wormwood.' I'm sure you'll like it."

So placed that she could get all of the dim light that slanted through the tiny shuttered window, Mary began, her voice raised to meet the need of Mrs. De Peyster's aural handicap. Now Marie Corelli may have been the favorite novelist of a certain amiable queen, who somehow managed to continue to the age of eighty-two despite her preference. But Mrs. De Peyster liked no fiction; and the noble platitudes, the resounding moralizings, the prodigious melodrama, the vast caverns of words of the queen's favorite made Mrs. De Peyster writhe upon her second maid's undentable bed. If only she actually did possess the divine gift of defective hearing with which Mr. Pyecroft had afflicted her! But in the same loud voice, trying to conceal her own boredom, Mary read on, on, on—patiently on.

At length Matilda returned. Mary closed the book with a sigh of relief, which on the instant she repressed.

"I'll read to you for a while two or three times a day," she promised. "I know what a comfort it is to a sick person to hear a story she likes."

Mrs. De Peyster did not even thank her.

CHAPTER XV

DOMESTIC SCENES

The provisions arrived; Mr. Pyecroft proved himself agreeably competent and willing in the matter of their preparation; and such as had appetites gorged themselves. Also Mr. Pyecroft proved himself agreeably competent and willing to do his full share, and more, in the matter of cleaning up.

Later in the forenoon, Mary again called on Mrs. De Peyster. "I hope you don't mind a little praise directed at your family, Angelica," she said, in the loud voice she had adopted for that unfortunate. "At first Jack and I thought your brother Archibald was—well—too pompous. You know, clergymen are often that way. But the more we see of him, the better we like him. He's so pleasant, so helpful. I hope the little trouble he spoke of being in with the police isn't serious, for Jack and I think he's simply splendid!"

Archibald's sister seemed indifferent to this praise of her brother. At least she said nothing. So Mary took up "Wormwood" and half-shouted another installment.

The spirits of Jack and Mary, which during the previous evening and the earlier part of this morning had been subdued by concern over the illness of the distant Mrs. De Peyster, had, an hour before Mary's second visit, become suddenly hilarious. While Mary read, Mrs. De Peyster wondered over this change. When the book was closed upon the installment, she hesitatingly asked concerning this mystery.

"It's news about Mrs. De Peyster," answered Mary. "But of course it could hardly interest you much, for you've never met her—at least I supposed not, Angelica."

"I've—seen her," corrected Angelica. "What—what news?"

"Why," cried Mary in her soft, happy contralto, "Judge Harvey just telephoned that the latest papers contain cables saying that Mrs. De Peyster has just left Paris on that long motor trip of hers to the Balkans. That means that Jack's mother must be quite well again. We all feel so relieved—so very, very relieved!"

Mrs. De Peyster also felt relief—and some badly needed courage flowed into her. Olivetta's part of the plan, at least, was working out as per schedule.

Finally Mary went, Matilda brought in her lunch, and the afternoon began to wear itself away, Mrs. De Peyster keeping most of the time to the hard, narrow bed of the second maid. Twice, however, she got up while Matilda guarded her door, stood at her high, cell-like window, and peered through the slats of the closed shutter, past the purple-and-lavender plumes of the wistaria that climbed on up to the roof, and out upon the soft, green, sunny spaces of Washington Square. The Square, which she had been proud to live upon but rarely walked in,—only children and nursemaids and the commoner people actually walked in it,—the Square looked so expansive, so free, so inviting. And this tiny cell—these days of early May were unseasonably, hot—seemed

to grow more narrow and more stifling every moment. How had any one ever, ever voluntarily endured it!

Mrs. De Peyster learned that Jack was studying at home, and studying hard. With the return of Matilda to the house, Jack repeated his instruction concerning the piano: Matilda was to tell any inquisitive folk that Mrs. De Peyster had bought a player-piano shortly before she sailed, and that she, Matilda, was operating it to while away the tedious hours. This device made it possible for Mary to begin her neglected practice.

With the certainty of being bored, yet with an irrepressible curiosity, Mrs. De Peyster, piano-lover, awaited during the morning and early forenoon Mary's first assault upon the instrument. She would be crude, no doubt of it; no technique, no poetic suavity of touch, no sense of interpretation.

[pg 186]

When from the rear drawing-room the grand piano sent upwards to Mrs. De Peyster its first strains, they were rapid, careless scales and runs. Quite as she'd expected. Then the player began Chopin's Ballade in G Minor. Mrs. De Peyster listened contemptuously; then with rebellious interest; then with complete absorption. That person below could certainly play the piano—brilliantly, feelingly, with the touch and insight of an artist. Mrs. De Peyster's soul rose and fell with the soul of the song, and when the piano, after its uprushing, almost human closing cry, fell sharply into silence, she was for the moment that piano's vassal.

Then she remembered who was the player. Instinctively her emotions chilled; and she lay stiffly in bed, hostile, on guard, defying the charm of the further music.

Suddenly the piano broke off in the very middle of Liszt's Rhapsodic Number Twelve. The way the music snapped off startled her. There was something inexplicably ominous about it. Intuitively she felt that something was happening below. She wondered what it could be.

An hour passed; she continued wondering; then Matilda entered the attic room, behind her Mr. Pyecroft and Mary.

"Sister"—such familiarity was difficult to Matilda, even though she knew this familiarity was necessary to maintain the roles circumstances and Mr. Pyecroft had forced upon them—"sister," she quavered, "I thought you might be interested to know that the bell rang awhile ago, and I went down, and there was a man—with a note to me from—from Mrs. De Peyster."

[pg 187]

"What!" exclaimed Mrs. De Peyster, in an almost natural tone.

"It—it's disturbed us all so much that I thought you might like to look at it. Here it is."

Shakingly, Matilda held out a sheet of paper. Shakingly, but without turning to face her visitors, Mrs. De Peyster took it. There was enough light to see that the letter was written on heavy paper embossed at the top with a flag and "S.S. Plutonia," and was dated the evening she had supposedly gone on board. The note read:—

DEAR MATILDA:—

Just at this late moment I recall something which, in the hurry of getting off, I forgot to tell you about. This is that I left instructions with Mr. Howard, an expert cabinet-maker, who has previously done things for me under the supervision of the Tiffany Studios, to go over all my furniture while I am abroad and touch up and repair such pieces as may be out of order. I am sending this letter to Mr. Howard for him or his representative to present for identification to you when he is ready to undertake the work. See that he has every facility.

Mrs. De Peyster lay dizzily still. Such an order she had never given. But the writing was amazingly similar to her own.

"Well, Matilda?" she managed to inquire, in a voice she tried to make like the sickly Angelica's.

[pg 188]

"When the man showed me the note, I tried to put him off; but he simply wouldn't go and he followed me in. His orders, he said. I showed the letter to Mary and Mr. Pyecroft. The man saw them. They said call up Judge Harvey and ask him what to do. I did and Judge Harvey came down and he examined the letter and said it was undoubtedly written by Mrs. De Peyster. And he called up the Tiffany Studios, and they said they'd had such a telephone order from Mrs. De Peyster."

"Jack and I never dreamed that his mother might have left orders to have people in here to renovate the house!" cried Mary in dismay.

"Then—then Judge Harvey asked the man to put off the work," Matilda went on. "The man was very polite, but he said his orders from Mrs. De Peyster had been strict, and if he wasn't allowed to go on with the work, he said, in order to protect himself, he'd have to cable Mrs. De Peyster that the people occupying her house wouldn't let him. Judge Harvey didn't want Mrs. De Peyster to find out about Mr. and Mrs. Jack, so he told the man to go ahead."

"And the man?" breathed Mrs. De Peyster. "Where is he?"

"He's down in the drawing-room, beginning on the tables."

"It seems to me," suggested Mr. Pyecroft, "that since this summer hotel is filling so rapidly, we might as well withdraw our advertisements from the papers."

[pg 189]

"I wonder, ma'—" Matilda checked herself just in time. "I wonder, Angelica," she exclaimed desperately, "who it'll be next?"

"Isn't it simply awful!" cried Mary. "But Jack's gone into hiding and isn't going to stir—and the man didn't see him—and I'm your niece, you know. So Jack and I are in no danger. Anyhow, Judge Harvey gave the man a—a large fee not to mention any one being in the house besides Matilda, and the man promised. So I guess all of us are safe."

But no such sentiment of security comforted Mrs. De Peyster.

Who was the man?

What was he here for?

One thing was certain: he and those behind him had made clever and adequate preparations for his admission. And she dared not expose him, and order him out—for only that very morning she had left Paris on her motor trip! She could only lie on the second maid's narrow bed and await developments.

[pg 190]

Matilda went out to attend to her domestic duties below; Mr. Pyecroft withdrew; and Mary, the sympathetic Mary,—Mary who had no worry, for the cabinet-maker below would in due time complete his routine work and take himself away,—Mary remained behind to apply to the invalid the soothing mental poultice of "Wormwood." But "Wormwood" did not torment Mrs. De Peyster as it had done in the forenoon. She did not hear it. She was thinking of the cabinet-maker below. But Mary faithfully continued; she did not cease when Mr. Pyecroft reentered. There was a slightly amused look in that gentleman's face, but he said nothing, and seated himself on the foot of the bed and gazed thoughtfully at the wall of scaling kalsomine—and Mary's loudly pitched voice went on, and on, and on.

They were thus engaged when Matilda returned. She was all a-tremble. Behind her, holding her arm, was a smallish, sharp-faced young man.

"He—he came in with the roast," Matilda stammered wildly.

Mr. Pyecroft had sprung up from the bed.

"And who is *he*?"

"Mr. Mayfair, of the 'Record,'" answered the young man, loosing Matilda and stepping forward.

Mrs. De Peyster shivered frantically down beneath the bedclothes, her see-sawing hopes once more at the bottom. Mary leaned limply back in the shadow and hid her face.

"He tried to question me—and he made me bring him—" Matilda was chattering.

"May I inquire what it is you wish, Mr. Mayfair?" requested Mr. Pyecroft—and Matilda fled.

[pg 191]

"You may," rapidly said the undecivable Mr. Mayfair. Mr. Mayfair had learned and made his own one of the main tricks of that method of police inquisition known as the "third degree": to hurl a fact, or a suspicion with all the air of its being the truth, with bomb-like suddenness into the face of the unprepared suspect. "I know Jack De Peyster has made a runaway marriage! I know he and his wife are living secretly in this house!"

"Why, this news is simply astounding!" exclaimed Mr. Pyecroft.

"Come, now. Bluffing won't work with me. You see, I'm on to it all!"

"I presume it's a newspaper story you're after?" Mr. Pyecroft inquired politely.

"Of course!"

"Then"—in the same polite tone—"if you know it all, why don't you print it?"

"I want the heart-story of the runaway lovers," declared Mr. Mayfair.

"I'm afraid, Mr. Mayfair," Mr. Pyecroft suggested gently, "that you are the one who is only bluffing. You have a suspicion, and are trying to find evidence to support it."

"I know, I tell you!"

"Then may I inquire to whom young Mr. De Peyster is married?"

"I know all right!"

"Ah, then, you don't really know," said Mr. Pyecroft mildly.

"I know, I tell you!" Mr. Mayfair repeated in his sharp, third-degree manner.

"Then why trouble us? Why not, as I have already suggested, print it?"

[pg 192]

"I'm here to see them!" Mr. Mayfair said peremptorily. Then his tone became soft, diplomatic. "The housekeeper spoke about referring me to her brother. You are her brother, I suppose?"

"I am."

Mr. Mayfair smiled persuasively. "If you would tell me what you know about them, and lead me to where they are, my paper would be quite willing to be liberal. Say twenty dollars."

"I'd accept it gladly," said Mr. Pyecroft, "but I know nothing of the matter."

"One hundred," bid Mr. Mayfair.

"I would have done it for twenty, if I could. But I couldn't do it for a thousand. They are not here."

"I know better!" snapped Mr. Mayfair, his manner sharp again. "Who's that?" he demanded suspiciously, pointing at Mary's shadow-veiled figure.

"That? That is my niece. The daughter of my sister Angelica here."

"Is she your mother?" demanded Mr. Mayfair of Mary.

"Yes, sir," breathed Mary from her corner.

"Madam, is she your daughter?"

Mrs. De Peyster did not reply.

"Pardon me, my sister is ill, and somewhat deaf," put in Mr. Pyecroft. "Angelica, dear," he half shouted, "the gentleman wishes to know if this is your daughter."

"Yes," from Mrs. De Peyster in smothered voice.

"Well, I know they're here," doggedly insisted Mr. Mayfair, "and I'm going to see them! I have witnesses who saw them enter."

[pg 193]

"Indeed!" Mr. Pyecroft looked surprised and puzzled. "The witnesses can swear to seeing young Mr. De Peyster come in?"

"They can swear to seeing a young man and woman come in. And I know they were Mr. De Peyster and his wife."

"That's strange." Suddenly Mr. Pyecroft's face cleared. "I think I begin to understand! It was at night, wasn't it, when the witnesses saw them come in?"

"At night, yes."

"I'm sorry you have been caused all this trouble, Mr. Mayfair,"—in a tone of very genuine regret. "But there has been a blunder—a perfectly natural one, I now see. Undoubtedly the young couple your witnesses saw were my niece and myself."

"What!" cried Mr. Mayfair. For a moment the undeflectable star reporter was all chagrin. Then he was all suspicion. "But why," he snapped out, "should you and your niece slip in at night? And why should you live here in hiding?"

"You force me into a disagreeable and humiliating admission. The fact is, our family is in severe financial straits. We simply had no money to live on, and no prospects in sight. To help us out temporarily, my sister Matilda invited us to stay here while Mrs. De Peyster is in Europe. But for Mrs. De Peyster to know of our being here might cost my sister Matilda her position, which accounts for our attempt to get in unseen and to live here secretly. We had to protect Matilda against the facts leaking out."

[pg 194]

Mr. Mayfair stared searchingly at Mr. Pyecroft's face. It was confused, as was quite natural after the confession of a not very honorable, and certainly not very dignified, procedure. But it was candor itself.

"Hell!" he burst out irefully. "Some one has certainly given me a bum steer. But I'll get that young couple yet, you see!"

"I'm sorry about the story," said Mr. Pyecroft. And then with a slight smile, apologetic, as of one who knows he is taking liberties: "Perhaps, as compensation for the story you missed, you could write a society story about Mrs. De Peyster's housekeeper entertaining for the summer her brother, sister, and niece."

Mr. Mayfair grinned, ever so little. "You've got some sense of humor, old top," he approved dryly.

"Thank you," said Mr. Pyecroft, with a gratified air.

He led Mr. Mayfair past the room within which Jack was hidden, down to the servants' door and courteously let him out. Two minutes later Mr. Pyecroft was again in the second maid's room. Mary eagerly sprang forward and caught his hand.

[pg 195]

"I waited to thank you—you were simply superb!" she cried enthusiastically. "I've been telling your sister how wonderful you are. She's got to forgive you—I'll make her! And Jack will die laughing when I tell him." She herself burst into excited merriment that half-choked her. "Just think of it—all the while he was looking—looking a big story straight in the face!"

She was off to tell Jack.

"One might add, looking two big stories straight in the face, eh, Angelica, my dear?" chuckled Mr. Pyecroft, *alias* Mr. Preston.

One might add, three big stories, shivered Mrs. De Peyster.

But she did not add this aloud.

[pg 196]

CHAPTER XVI

THE MAN IN THE CELLULOID COLLAR

The amused smile which Mr. Pyecroft had worn when he had entered, and which he had subdued to thoughtful sobriety while "Wormwood" was assuaging the invalid's tribulations, began now to reappear. It grew. Mrs. De Peyster could but notice it, for he was smiling straight at her—that queer, whimsical, twisted smile of his.

"What is it?" she felt forced to ask.

"We three are not the only ones, my dear Angelica," he replied, "who are trying to slip one across on Mrs. De Peyster. Our friend the cabinet-maker is on the same job. I might remark, that he's about as much a cabinet-maker as yourself."

"What is he?"

"A detective, my dear."

"A detective!"

"The variety known as 'private,'" enlarged Mr. Pyecroft.

"What—what makes you think so?"

[pg 197]

"Well, I felt it my duty to keep an eye on our new guest—unobtrusively, of course. When I slipped out a little while ago it was to watch him. He was working in the library; entirely by accident, my dear Angelica, my eye chanced to be at the keyhole. He was examining the drawers of the big writing-table; and not paying so much attention to the drawers as to the letters in them. And from the rapidity with which he was examining the letters it was plain the cabinet-maker knew exactly what he was after."

"What—do you think—it means?" breathed Mrs. De Peyster.

"Some person is trying to get something on Mrs. De Peyster," returned Mr. Pyecroft. "What, I don't know. But the detective party, I've got sized up. He's one of those gracious and indispensable noblest-works-of-God who dig up evidence for divorce trials—lay traps for the so-called 'guilty-parties,' ransack waste-paper baskets for incriminating scraps of letters, bribe servants—and if they find anything, willing to blackmail either side; remarkably impartial and above prejudice in this respect, one must admit. Altogether a most delectable breed of gentlemen. What would our best society do without them? And then again, what would they do without our best society?"

Mrs. De Peyster did not attempt an answer to this conjectural dilemma.

"Twin and interdependent pillars of America's shining morality," continued Mr. Pyecroft. "Now, like you, Angelica," he mused, "I wonder what the detective party is after; what the lofty Lady De Peyster can have been doing that is spicy? However," smiling at her, "Angelica, my dear, in the words of the great and good poet, 'We should worry.'"

[pg 198]

It was only a moment later that Matilda burst into the room and closed the door behind her. She was almost breathless.

"He asked me for the key to—"your" almost escaped Matilda—"to Mrs. De Peyster's suite. He'd

been particularly ordered to touch up Mrs. De Peyster's private desk, he said."

"And you gave him the key?" inquired Mr. Pyecroft, asking the very question that was struggling at Mrs. De Peyster's lips.

"I told him I didn't have a key," said Matilda.

"Oh!" breathed Mrs. De Peyster.

"But," continued Matilda, "he said it didn't matter, for he said he'd been brought up a locksmith. And he picked the lock right before my eyes."

"That's one accomplishment of gentlemanliness I was never properly instructed in," said Mr. Pyecroft regretfully, almost plaintively. "I never could pick a lock."

"And where—is he now?" inquired Mrs. De Peyster.

"In Mrs. De Peyster's sitting-room, retouching her desk."

"He's certainly after something, and after it hot—and probably something big," mused Mr. Pyecroft. "Any idea what it can be, Matilda?"

Matilda had none.

"Any idea, Angelica?"

Mrs. De Peyster was beginning to have an idea, and a terrified idea; but she likewise said she had none.

[pg 199] Mrs. De Peyster wished Mr. Pyecroft would go, so she could give way to her feelings, talk with Matilda. But Mr. Pyecroft stretched out his legs, settled back, clasped his hands behind his head, and looked thoughtfully at the ceiling. He had an intellectual interest in some imaginary escapade of the far-distant Mrs. De Peyster; but no more; and he was obviously comfortable where he was.

Matilda started out, but was recalled by a glance of imperative appeal from Mrs. De Peyster. And so the three sat on in silence for a time, Mrs. De Peyster and Matilda taut with expectant fear, Mr. Pyecroft loungingly unconcerned.

And thus they were still sitting when there was a knock, which Mr. Pyecroft answered. The cabinet-maker entered. He wore a slouching, ready-made suit and a celluloid collar with ready-made bow tie snapped by an elastic over his collar-button—the conventional garb of the artisan who aspires for the air of gentlemanliness while at work. His face, though fresh-shaven, was dark with the sub-cutaneous stubble of a heavy beard; his eyes were furtive, with that masked gleam of Olympian all-confidence which a detective can never entirely mask.

"How are you, Miss Simpson?" he said to Matilda. "Your niece told me I'd find you here, so I came right up. Could I have a word with you outside?"

[pg 200] "Couldn't you have it here just as well," suggested Mr. Pyecroft—who somehow had imperceptibly taken on an air of mediocrity. "We're all in the family, you know."

"Mebbe it'd be better to have it here," agreed the cabinet-maker. "You other two are living in the house, so I understand, because you're hard up; so your needing money may help what I'm after." He suddenly and visibly expanded with importance. "When the time comes to put my cards on the table, I don't waste a minute in showing my hand. That cabinet-maker business was all con. I'm an officer of the law."

"You don't say!" cried Mr. Pyecroft with a startled air.

"A detective. Brown's my name. I'm here hunting for something. I got part of what I wanted, but not all. What I want isn't here, or I'd have found it; there's only three or four places it'd have been locked up. I know," he ended, with driving confidence, "that a letter was written to Mrs. De Peyster by the Duke de Crécy saying he couldn't marry her. That letter is what I'm after."

"Oh!" breathed Mr. Pyecroft. And then with his wide-eyed mediocrity, "I wonder whom you represent."

"Mrs. Allistair!" exclaimed Matilda.

Mrs. De Peyster long since had been silently exclaiming the same.

"Why, what could Mrs. Allistair want it for?" queried the futile-looking brother.

[pg 201] "Never mind who I represent, or the reasons of the party," said Mr. Brown. "That letter is what I'm after, and I'm willing to pay for it. That's what ought to concern you folks."

"But if there ever was such a letter," commented Mr. Pyecroft with his simple-minded manner, "perhaps Mrs. de Peyster destroyed it."

"Perhaps she did. But I found two others he wrote her. And if she didn't tear it up or burn it, I'm going to have it!"

He directed himself at Matilda, and spoke slowly, suggestively, impressively. "Confidential servants, who think a bit of number one, should be on the lookout for documents and letters that may be of future value to themselves. I guess you get me. For the original of the letter I'm willing to come across with five hundred dollars."

"But I have no such letter!" cried Matilda.

"I might make it a thousand," conceded the detective. "And," he added, "the money might come in very handy for your sick sister there."

"But I tell you I have no such letter!"

"Say fifteen hundred, then."

"But I haven't got it!" cried Matilda.

"Perhaps you may have it without knowing what it is. Some of his letters he signed only with an initial. Here is a sample of the Duke's handwriting—one of his letters I found."

"I tell you I have—"

[pg 202]

"Pardon me, Mr. Brown," interrupted the ineffectual-looking Mr. Pyecroft. "May I see the handwriting, please?"

Firmly holding it in his own hands, the detective displayed the letter to Mr. Pyecroft—an odd, foreign hand, the paper of superfine quality, but without crest or any other embossing. Mr. Pyecroft studied it closely; his look grew puzzled; then he turned to Matilda.

"I don't exactly remember, Matilda, but it seems to me that there was handwriting like this among the letters you sent to me to keep for you."

Matilda gaped at Mr. Pyecroft. Mrs. De Peyster, half-rising on an elbow, peered in amazed stupefaction at her incalculable young man of the sea.

"Why, of course, she'd have turned it over to some one else for safe-keeping!" the detective cried triumphantly. "Where is it?" he demanded of Mr. Pyecroft.

"I'm not so sure I have it," said the shallow Mr. Pyecroft apologetically. "It just seems to me that I saw writing like this. If I have, it's over in a little room I keep. But if I really do have it"—with the shrewd look of a small mind—"we couldn't sell it for fifteen hundred."

"How much d'you want?"

"Well"—Mr. Pyecroft hesitated—"say—say three thousand."

"Good God, that's plain blackmail!"

"It may be, but poor people like us don't often get a chance like this."

[pg 203]

"I won't pay it!"

"Perhaps, then,"—apologetically,—"*we'd better deal with Mrs. Allistair direct.*"

"Oh, well,—if you've got the letter, we won't scrap about the price. I'll come across."

"Cash?" shrewdly queried the doltish brother.

"Sure. I don't run no risks with checks."

"I—we—wouldn't let the letter go out of our hands until it's paid for. And we won't go to any office. You yourself can say whether it's what you want or not? And you can pay right here?"

"Sure. I'm the judge of what I want. And when I go for a big thing, I go prepared." Mr. Brown opened his coat, and significantly patted a bulge on the right side of his vest.

"Well, then, I'll go to my room and see if I have it. But you'll have to wait here, for"—again with the shrewd look of the ineffectual man—"you might follow me, and with some more detectives you might take the letter from me."

"Soon wait here as anywhere else. Anyhow, I'll want your sister's word," nodding at Matilda, "that the letter is the same. But don't worry—nobody's going to take anything from you."

Mr. Pyecroft started out, then paused.

"I just happened to remember; you said the letter might not be signed. Hadn't you better let me

have one of the Duke de Crécy's letters, so I can verify the handwriting?"

[pg 204] "I don't mind; these don't tell much." And the detective handed over one letter.

"It may be an hour or two before I can get back; the letters are packed away and I've got to go through them and compare them."

He slipped out. Mr. Brown, as he watched him, could hardly conceal his contempt.

The detective sat heavily down. Mrs. De Peyster was sick with apprehension as to what that incomprehensible Mr. Pyecroft was about to do. She wanted to talk to Matilda. But the two dared not speak with this confident, omniscient, detectorial presence between them. Mr. Brown condescendingly tried to make conversation by complimenting Matilda on her shrewdness; he'd helped a lot of clever servants like her to snug little fortunes.

But Matilda proved a poor conversationalist.

Close upon two hours passed before Mr. Pyecroft returned. He drew a letter from his pocket, firmly gripped its edges with both hands, and held it out to Mr. Brown.

"Is this the one?"

"Didn't I tell you not to be afraid; no one's going to steal it from you."

He took the letter from Mr. Pyecroft's unwilling and untrustful hands and glanced it through. The next moment it was as though an arc light of excitement had been switched on within his ample person. With swift, expert fingers he compared the texture of the paper of the new letter and the earlier ones.

[pg 205] "Great God!" he exulted. "Same paper—same handwriting—and it says just what I expected—and signed 'De Crécy!'"

He held out the letter to Matilda.

"Of course, you identify this as the letter you found?"

But Matilda shrank away as though the letter was deadly poison.

"I never saw the thing before!"

"What's that?" cried the detective.

"She's trying to hold out for more money," explained Mr. Pyecroft. From behind the detective's broad back he gave Matilda a warning look; then said softly: "Of course, it's the letter, isn't it, sister?"

Matilda thought only of saving the hour. The day would have to save itself.

"Yes," she said.

"Might—might I see it?" huskily inquired Mrs. De Peyster.

"Sure. The more that corroborates it the better."

Her face to the wall, the faint light slanting across her shoulder, she glanced at the letter. The Duke's own handwriting! And a jilting letter!—politely worded—but a jilting letter!... Mrs. De Peyster jilted!... If that were ever to come out—

For a moment she lay enfeebled and overwhelmed with horror. Then convulsively she crushed the letter in her hands.

[pg 206] "See here—wha' d' you mean?" cried the startled detective, springing forward; in a moment his powerful hands rescued the document.

"Both of my sisters think we ought to stand out for more money," apologized Mr. Pyecroft. "And I'm not so sure they're not right."

"We've made our bargain already," quickly returned Mr. Brown. "And that's just how we'll settle."

He started to slip the letter into a pocket. But Mr. Pyecroft caught hold of it.

"How about the money?"

"You mean you don't trust me?"

"I'm not saying that," apologized Mr. Pyecroft. "But this means a lot to us. We can't afford to run any risks."

"All right, then."

Mr. Brown released the letter, drew a leather wallet from inside his vest, counted off six five-hundred-dollar bills, returned the wallet and held out the bills. The exchange was made. The detective carefully put the letter into a thick manila envelope, which he licked and sealed and put inside his vest to keep company with the wallet.

Mr. Pycroft counted the bills, slowly, three or four times; then looked up.

"I bet my sisters were right; you would have paid more," he said regretfully, greedily.

"Never you mind what I would have paid!" retorted the detective, buttoning his coat over the letter.



"SAME PAPER—SAME HANDWRITING!"

[pg 207]

"You'd have paid twice that!" Mr. Pycroft exclaimed disappointedly.

The detective, triumphant, could not resist grinning confirmingly.

"We've been outwitted!" cried Mr. Pycroft. He turned to the two woman contritely. "If I'd only heeded you—let you have managed the affair!"

"You people got a mighty good price," commented Detective Brown.

"Well—perhaps so," sighed Mr. Pycroft. Chagrin gave way to curiosity in his face. "I wonder, now, how Mrs. Allistair is going to use the letter?"

"That's none of my business."

"She must think she can do a lot with it," mused Mr. Pycroft. "If the letter, or its substance, were printed, say in 'Town Gossip,' I suppose it would mean the end of Mrs. De Peyster's social leadership, and Mrs. Allistair would then have things her own way."

"Can't say," said the detective. But he winked knowingly.

When he had gone Mr. Pycroft stood listening until the descending tread had thinned into silence. Then he turned about to Mrs. De Peyster and Matilda, and his wide mouth twisted up and rightward into that pagan, delighted smile of his. He laughed without noise; but every cell of him was laughing.

[pg 208]

"Well, sisters dear, we're cleaning up—eh! I had the devil's own time matching that letter-paper at Brentanos', and I ran a pretty big risk leaving the house—but, say, it was worth it!" For a moment he could only laugh. "First, let's split the pile. I told you I was always square with my pals. Here's a thousand for you, Angelica,"—slipping two bills under Mrs. De Peyster's pillow,— "and a thousand for you, Matilda,"—thrusting the amount into her hands,— "and a thousand for your dear brother Archibald,"—slipping his share into a vest pocket.

Neither of the two women dared refuse the money.

"But—but," Mrs. De Peyster gasped thickly, "it's an outrageous forgery!"

"A forgery, I grant you, my dear Angelica," Mr. Pyecroft said good-humoredly. "But if by outrageous you mean crude or obvious, I beg to correct you. Even if I must say it myself, that forgery was strictly first-class."

"But it's a forgery!" repeated Mrs. De Peyster.

"My dears, don't you worry about that," he reassured them soothingly. "There'll be no comeback. That detective and his agency, and Mrs. Allistair behind them, first tried robbery, then tried bribery. They're all in bad themselves. So stop worrying; you're in no danger at all from arrest for forgery or fraud. There'll never be a peep from any of them."

This seemed sound reasoning, but Mrs. De Peyster did not acknowledge herself comforted.

[pg 209]

"Besides," Mr. Pyecroft went on, with a sudden flash of wrathful contempt, "if there's anybody under God's sun I like to slip something over on it's those damned vermin of private detectives! And the swells that employ them! I hope that Mrs. Allistair gets stung good and plenty!"

"But Mrs. De Peyster!" wailed that lady—she couldn't help it, though she tried to keep inarticulate her sense of complete annihilation. "When they publish that letter the damage will have been done. It's a forgery, but nobody will believe her when she says so, and she can't prove it! She'll be ruined!"

"Well," Mr. Pyecroft commented casually, "I don't see where that bothers us. She's pretty much of a stiff, too, and I wouldn't mind handing her one while we're at it. But, Lord, this won't hurt her a bit."

Mrs. De Peyster sat suddenly upright.

"Not hurt her?"

"Didn't I tell you?" chortled Mr. Pyecroft. "Why, when our excellent friend, Mr. Brown, presents the Duke's letter to-morrow morning to his chief, or to Mrs. Allistair's agent,—if he ever gets that far,—he will turn triumphantly over one sheet of Brentanos' very best notepaper—blank."

"Blank?" cried Mrs. De Peyster.

Mr. Pyecroft's right eyelid drooped in its remarkable wink; his mouth again tilted high to starboard in its impish smile.

[pg 210]

"You see," he remarked, "the Duke's letter was written in an ink of my own invention. One trifling idiosyncrasy of that ink is that it fades completely and permanently in exactly twelve hours."

[pg 211]

CHAPTER XVII

A QUESTION OF IDENTITY

Mr. Pyecroft's grin grew by degrees more delighted: became the smile of a whimsical genius of devil-may-care, of an exultantly mischievous Pan. But he offered not a word of comment upon his work. He was an artist who was, in the main, content to achieve his masterpieces and leave comment and blame and praise to his public and his critics.

He stood up.

"I believe I promised to peel the potatoes and put on the roast," he remarked, and went out.

"Matilda," breathed Mrs. De Peyster, numbed and awed, still aghast, "did you ever dream there could be such a man?"

"Oh, ma'am,—never!"—tragically, wildly.

"Whatever *is* he going to do next?"

"I'm sure I don't know, ma'am. Almost anything."

"And whatever is going to happen to us next?"

"Oh, ma'am, it's terrible to think about! I'm sure I can't even guess! Mr. Pyecroft, and all the others, and all these things happening—I'm sure they'll be the death of me, ma'am!"

[pg 212]

Mrs. De Peyster sprang from her bed. Despite Matilda's cheap dressing-gown which she wore as appropriate to her station, she made a splendid figure of raging majesty, hands clenched, eyes blazing, furiously erect.

"That man is outrageous!" she stormed. "I cannot, and shall not, stand him any longer! We must,

and shall, get rid of him!" Her voice rang with its accustomed tone of all-conquering determination. "Matilda, we are going to do it! I say we are going to do it!"

Matilda gazed admiringly at her magnificently aroused mistress. "Of course, you'll do it, ma'am," she said with conviction.

"I cannot endure him another minute!" Mrs. De Peyster raged on. "At once, he goes out of this house! Or we do!"

"Of course, ma'am," repeated Matilda in her adoring voice. And then after a moment, she added quaveringly: "But please, ma'am,—how are we going to do it?"

The outraged and annihilatory Mrs. De Peyster gazed at Matilda, utterer of practical common-places. As she gazed the splendid flames within her seemed slowly to flicker out, and she sank back upon her bed. Yes, how were they going to do it?

[pg 213]

In cooler mood they discussed that question, without discovering a solution; discussed it until it was time for Matilda to go downstairs to perform her share of the preparation of the communal dinner. Left alone, her fury now sunk to sober ashes, Mrs. De Peyster continued the exploration of possibilities, with the same negative result.

Matilda brought up her dinner on a tray, then returned to the kitchen; for though the others were all doing fair tasks, to Matilda of twenty years' experience fell the oversight of the thousand details of the house. Presently Mary appeared, on one of her visits of mercy—full of relief that the cabinet-maker had ended his work so soon, thus setting Jack free.

But before beginning the anodynous "Wormwood," she launched into another high-voltage eulogy of Angelica's brother. Even more than they had at first thought was he willing and competent and agreeable in the matter of their common household labor; he was not intrusive; he was rich with clever and well-informed talk when they all laid aside work to be sociable. In fact, as she had said before, he was simply splendid!

"Now, I do hope, Angelica, that you are going to forgive your brother," Mary insisted. "He really means well. I think he's what he is because he has never had a fair chance." And then more boldly: "I think the fault is largely yours and Matilda's. Matilda says your parents died when you were all young; and he admitted that he does not even remember them. And he also admitted, when I pressed him, that you and Matilda had not given him very much attention during his boyhood. You and Matilda are older; you should have brought him up more carefully; you are both seriously to blame for what he is. So I hope," she concluded, "that both of you will forgive him and help him."

[pg 214]

Once more Mrs. De Peyster did not feel called upon to make response.

"I have noted particularly that Matilda does not seem cordial and forgiving," Mary was continuing, when the prodigal brother himself dropped in. With her pretty, determined manner, Mary renewed her efforts at reconciliation in the estranged family. Mr. Pyecroft was penitent without being humble, and whenever a question was put directly to Mrs. De Peyster his was the tongue that answered; he was quite certain his sister Angelica would relent and receive him back into her respect and love once he had fully proved his worthiness.

"I must say, Mr. Simpson, that I think you have an admirably forgiving nature," declared Mary. It was clear, though she was silent on the matter, that she considered his sisters to have cold, hard, New England hearts.

Mr. Pyecroft withdrew; and Mary, in the high-pitched voice required by the invalid's misfortune, read "Wormwood" for an hour—until Jack came to the door and announced that Judge Harvey had again called on them. Alone, Mrs. De Peyster pondered her poignant problem, What should she do?—wishing that Matilda were present to talk the affair over with her. But Matilda was still busy in the kitchen with the odd jobs of night-end.

[pg 215]

Toward ten o'clock Mr. Pyecroft came in again. He stood and gazed silently down upon her. The one electric light showed her an odd, dry smile on Mr. Pyecroft's face.

"What is it?" Mrs. De Peyster asked in fear.

"Really, Angelica, you're not half so clever as I believed you."

"What is it?" she repeated huskily.

"This pearl." And from a pocket he drew out the pendant he had appropriated the night before in Mrs. Gilbert's boarding-house. "I thought we ought to be prepared with more cash in hand for our get-away when we decide to make it. So an hour ago I slipped out the back way, and made for a safe pawnbroker I know of. Angelica, you're easy. This pearl is nothing but imitation. And you fell for it!" He shook his head sorrowingly, chidingly. "Here's one case where remorse might be highly proper—and safest; better just mail it back to the party you lifted it from."

With good-humored contempt he tossed the pendant upon the bed. Mrs. De Peyster clutched it

and thrust it beneath her pillow.

"I believe, Angelica, my dear," he commented, "that in view of the capacity this pearl incident has revealed, it is strictly up to me to assume charge of every detail of our plan."

[pg 216]

He sat down and in his fluent manner discussed the day's developments and their preparations for the future; and he was still talking when, fifteen minutes later, the door opened and Matilda entered. Her face, of late so often ashen, was ashen as though almost from habit.

"Oh, oh," she quavered, "the servants' bell rang—and I answered it, like I'd been told to do—and in stepped four men—two of them the policemen we let in last night, and two men I never saw before—and they asked if they might speak to my brother who was visiting me. And I—I promised to call him down. Oh, ma'—Angelica—"

"Mr. Pyecroft, what does this mean?" cried Mrs. De Peyster.

Mr. Pyecroft's usual perfect composure was gone. His face was gleamingly alert; sharp as a razor's edge.

"God knows how they've done it," he snapped out. "But it means they've tracked me here!"

"As—as Thomas Preston?"

"As Thomas Preston."

"And if they take you—they—they may find me, and—"

"Nothing more likely," grimly responded Mr. Pyecroft.

"Then escape!" Mrs. De Peyster cried with frantic energy. "Run! For heaven's sake, run! You still have time!"

[pg 217]

"Running from the police is the surest way to get caught when they've got you trapped," he answered in quick, staccato tones. "They've got every door watched—sure. Anyhow—Listen! Hear those steps? They haven't trusted you, Matilda; they've followed. Angelica, down with your face to the wall, and be sick! And while you're at it, be damned sick!"

Mrs. De Peyster obeyed. Mr. Pyecroft drew the room's one chair up beside the bed, sat down, picked up "Wormwood," and again, with the most natural manner in the world, he began to read in a loud voice. The next moment the two policemen of the previous night came in.

Mr. Pyecroft arose.

"I must beg your pardon, officers," he said pleasantly and with a slight tincture of his clerical manner. "My sister Matilda just told me you wished to see me, but I was almost at the end of a very interesting chapter which I was reading aloud to my other sister, who is ill, and so I thought I would conclude the scene before I came down. In what way can I serve you?"

Neither of the officers replied. One closed the doorway with his bulk, and the other thumped heavily down a flight or two of stairs, from whence his shout ascended:—

"We've got him up here, Lieutenant! Come on up!"

Within the tiny room of the second maid no one spoke. Presently heavy footfalls mounted; the second policeman entered, and presently two solid men in civilian dress pushed through the door. The foremost, a dark-visaged man with heavy jaw, and a black derby which he did not remove, fixed on Mr. Pyecroft a triumphant, domineering gaze.

[pg 218]

"Well, Preston," he said, "so we've landed you at last."

Mr. Pyecroft, his left forefinger still keeping the place in "Wormwood," stared at the speaker in bewilderment.

"Pardon me, sir, but I completely fail to understand what you are talking about."

"Don't try that con stuff on us; we won't fall for it," advised the lieutenant. He smiled with satiric satisfaction; he was something of a wit in the department. "But if you ain't sure who you are, I'll put you wise: Mr. Thomas Preston, forger of the Jefferson letters, it gives me great pleasure to introduce you to yourself. Shake hands, gents."

Mr. Pyecroft continued his puzzled stare. Then a smile began to break through his bewilderment. Then he laughed.

"So that's it, is it! You take me for that Thomas Preston. I've read about him. He must be a clever fellow, in his own way."

He sobered. "But, gentlemen, if I had the clever qualities attributed to Mr. Preston, I am sure I could apply those qualities to some more useful, and even more profitable, occupation."

"You don't do it bad at all, Preston," observed the lieutenant. "Only, you see, it don't go down."

"I trust," Mr. Pyecroft said good-humoredly, "that it isn't going to be necessary to explain to you that I am not Thomas Preston."

[pg 219]

"No, that won't be necessary at all," replied the waggish lieutenant. "Not necessary at all. For you can't."

Mr. Pyecroft raised his eyebrows.

"Gentlemen, you really seem to be taking this matter seriously! Why, you two officers in uniform saw me only last night here with my two sisters, and any one in the neighborhood can tell you my sister Matilda has been housekeeper in this house for twenty years."

That tone was most plausible. The two uniformed policemen looked at their superior dubiously.

"Never you mind what they seen last night," the lieutenant commented dryly. "And never you mind about Matilda."

"But you are forgetting that I am Matilda's brother," said Mr. Pyecroft. "Matilda, I am your brother, am I not?"

"Y—yes," testified Matilda, who by the corpulent pressure of four crowded officers was almost being bisected against the edge of the stationary wash-bowl.

"And you, Angelica; I'm your brother, am I not?"

"Yes," breathed Mrs. De Peyster from beneath the bedclothes.

Mr. Pyecroft turned in polite triumph to the lieutenant.

"There, now, you see."

[pg 220]

"But, I don't see," returned that officer. "I know you're Thomas Preston. Jim, just slip the nippers on him. And there's something queer about these women. Just slip the bracelets on Matilda, too, and carry downstairs the party in bed. We'll call the police ambulance for her, and take the whole bunch over to the station."

The party in bed suddenly stiffened as if from a stroke of some kind, and Matilda fairly wilted away. Mr. Pyecroft alone did not change by so much as a hair.

"One moment, gentlemen," he interposed in his even voice, "before you go to regrettable extremes. I believe that an even better witness to my identity can easily be secured."

"And who's that, Tommie?"

"I refer to Judge Harvey."

"Judge Harvey!" The lieutenant was startled out of his ironic exultation. "You mean the guy that was stung by them forged letters—the complainant who's making it so damned hot for Preston?"

"The same," said Mr. Pyecroft. "Judge Harvey is at this moment in this house."

"In this house!"

"I believe he is downstairs some place going over some bills Mrs. De Peyster asked him to examine. Matilda, you doubtless know in what room the Judge is working. Will you kindly knock at his door and ask him to step up here for a moment?"

[pg 221]

The lieutenant frowned doubtfully at Mr. Pyecroft, hesitated, then nodded to Matilda. The latter, relieved of the pressure of much policial avoirdupois, slipped from the room. The lieutenant turned and silently held a penetrating gaze upon the empty clothes-hooks. Mr. Pyecroft continued to look imperturbably and pleasantly upon the four officers. And under the bedclothes Mrs. De Peyster saw wild visions of Mr. Pyecroft being the next moment exposed, and herself dragged forth to shame.

Thus for a minute or two. Then Judge Harvey appeared in the doorway.

"Lieutenant Sullivan! See here, what's the meaning of this?" he demanded sternly.

"Evening, Judge Harvey," began the lieutenant, for the first time since his entrance removing his derby. "It's like this—"

"Pardon me," interrupted Mr. Pyecroft. "Judge Harvey, these gentlemen here have been upon the point of making a blunder that would be ludicrous did it not have its serious side. That's why I had you called. The fact is, they desire to arrest me."

"Arrest you!" exclaimed the Judge.

"Yes, arrest me," Mr. Pycroft went on, easily, yet under his easy words trying to suggest certain definite contingencies. "That would be bad enough in itself. But, as you know, Judge Harvey, my arrest would unfortunately but necessarily involve the arrest of several other quite innocent persons—bring about a great public scandal—and create a situation that would be deplorable in every particular. You see that, Judge?"

[pg 222]

Judge Harvey got the covered meaning.

"I see. But what do they want to arrest you for?"

"On a most absurd charge," answered Mr. Pycroft, smiling,—but eyes straight into Judge Harvey's eyes. "They seem to think I am Thomas Preston."

"Thomas Preston!" cried the Judge.

"Yes, the man that forged those Jefferson letters you bought."

Mr. Pycroft saw the puzzled semi-recognition that he had observed in the Judge's face the night before flash into amazed, full recognition. Quickly but without appearance of haste, he stepped forward diverting attention from the Judge's face, and made himself the center of the party's eyes.

"You see, lieutenant and officers," he said easily, filling in time to give Judge Harvey opportunity to recover and think—and still aiming his meaning at the Judge, "you see, I have here summoned before you the best possible witness to my identity. You threaten to arrest and expose me and two other persons in this house. Judge Harvey knows, as well as I know, how unfortunate it would be for these parties, and how displeasing to Mrs. De Peyster, if you should make the very great blunder of arresting me as Thomas Preston. Now, Judge Harvey,"—with a joking smile,—"you know who I am. Will you please inform the lieutenant whether I am the man you wish to have arrested?"

Judge Harvey stared, silent, his face twitching.

[pg 223]

"Is what he says O.K., Judge?" queried Lieutenant Sullivan. "He ain't the man you want arrested?"

"He is not," the Judge managed to get out.

"From the way you hesitated—"

"The Judge's hesitation, Lieutenant," Mr. Pycroft interrupted in his pleasant tone, "was due to his amazement at the utter grotesqueness of the situation. He was for a moment utterly taken aback. That's it, isn't it, Judge?"

"Yes," said Judge Harvey.

The lieutenant twisted his derby in chagrined, ireful hands.

"Some of my men have been damned fools again!" he exploded. He got himself back under control. "Judge Harvey, I hope you'll excuse our buttin' in like this—and—and won't find it necessary to mention it to the heads of the department."

"It's—it's all right," said the Judge.

"And you, Mr.—Mr.—"

"Simpson—Archibald Simpson," supplied Mr. Pycroft.

"Mr. Simpson, I hope you don't mind this too much?"

"No ill feeling at all, Lieutenant," Mr. Pycroft said graciously. "Such little mistakes must occasionally occur in the most careful police work."

[pg 224]

"And—and—there's another thing," said Lieutenant Sullivan with a note of gruff pleading. "You know how the papers are roasting the department just now. For every little slip, we get the harpoon or the laugh. I'll be obliged to you if you don't say anything that'll let this thing get into the papers."

"Believe me, Lieutenant, I shall do everything in my power to protect you," Mr. Pycroft assured him. "And now, since the matter is settled," he added pleasantly, "perhaps you'd like to have Matilda show you the way out. These upper hallways are really very confusing. Matilda, my dear,—if you don't mind."

Wordlessly, Matilda obeyed, and four sets of policemen's feet went heavily down the stairs. Beneath her bedclothes Mrs. De Peyster began faintly, ever so faintly, to return to life. Judge Harvey glared at Mr. Pycroft, hands spasmodically clutching and unclutching; his look grew darker and darker. Respectful, regretful, Mr. Pycroft stood waiting.

His left forefinger had not lost the place in "Wormwood."

[pg 225]

CHAPTER XVIII

THE THIRD FLIGHT

The storm broke.

"You are a scoundrel, sir!" thundered the Judge.

"I fear, sir, you are right," respectfully assented Mr. Pyecroft.

"And what's more, you've made me lie to the police!"

"Not exactly, sir," Mr. Pyecroft corrected mildly. "I was careful about that. I did not ask you to deny that I was Thomas Preston. I merely asked you if I was the man you wished arrested. You answered that you did not want me arrested; under the circumstances I am certain you spoke the truth. And in explaining your hesitation to the lieutenant, when you said it was due to your utter amazement at the grotesqueness of the situation, I am certain you there also spoke the truth."

"You are a quibbler!" fumed the outraged Judge. "You made me lie to the police!"

"Well, even if I did," returned Mr. Pyecroft in his same mild tone, "is there any one else you would rather lie to?"

The Judge glared, almost choking. "Have you no respect, man, for common decency—for order—for the law?"

[pg 226]

"For order and decency, yes,—but as for ordinary law, I fear I have no more respect than your honor has," Mr. Pyecroft admitted gravely. "And I acquired my irreverence toward law just as your honor did—from studying it."

Judge Harvey stared.

"What! You're a lawyer?"

"I have been admitted to the bar, and have been a law clerk, but have never practiced for myself."

"But last night you said you were a clergyman!"

"I have gone no deeper into theology, sir, than the price of a clerical suit. And that was for its moral effect on the police."

"Sir," exploded the Judge, "you are utterly incorrigible!"

"I trust that I am not, sir," submitted Mr. Pyecroft gravely, hopefully.

At that moment Jack and Mary appeared on tiptoe in the doorway, alive with curiosity; and directly behind them came Matilda. Upon the latter Judge Harvey turned.

"Well, Matilda, I certainly want to compliment you on your brother!" he exclaimed with irate sarcasm.

"My bro—bro—yes, sir, thank you," weakly returned poor Matilda.

"No wonder, Mr. Simpson," the outraged Judge continued, "that your family disowned you!"

"They were justified, certainly, as I told you at the very first," soberly conceded Mr. Pyecroft.

[pg 227]

Jack and Mary demanded enlightenment. To them Judge Harvey told of the visit of the four police officers, scathingly expounded the character of Matilda's brother, and explained how he, Judge Harvey, had been forced to protect the outrageous scape-grace. Through this recital, Mr. Pyecroft, though unbowed by shame, continued to wear his respectful, regretful look.

"Perhaps you will not believe me, Judge Harvey," he returned courteously, and with the ring of sincerity, when the indictment was ended, "and even if you do believe me, perhaps my statement will mean nothing to you; but I desire none the less to state that I am sorry that you were the person to be deceived by those Jefferson letters. Of course, I had no idea to whom they were to be sold. I did them for the autograph dealer, so much for the job—and did them partly as a lark, though, of course, I do not expect you to appreciate the humor of the affair. It may be some consolation to you, however, to know that I profited very little from the transaction; the dealer got over ninety per cent of the price you paid."

The Judge snorted, and stalked incredulously and wrathfully out, Jack and Mary behind him; and Mrs. De Peyster was left alone in the bosom of her family. Mr. Pyecroft sat silent on the foot of

the bed for a space, grave but composed, gazing at a particular scale of the flaking kalsomine. Then he remarked something about its having been a somewhat trying day and that he believed that he'd be off to bed.

When he was gone Mrs. De Peyster lay wordless, limp, all a-shiver. Beside her sat the limp and voiceless Matilda, gasping and staring wildly. How long Mrs. De Peyster lay in that condition she never knew. All her faculties were reeling. These crowding events seemed the wildest series of unrealities; seemed the frenzied, feverish phantasms of a nightmare. They never, never could possibly-have happened!

But then ... they had happened! And this hard, narrow bed was real. And this low, narrow room was real. And Mr. Pyecroft was real. And so were Jack, and Mary, and Judge Harvey.

These things could never have happened. But, then, they had. And would they ever, ever stop happening?

This was only the eighth day since her promulgated sailing. Three more months, ninety days of twenty-four hours each, before Olivetta—

"Matilda," she burst out in a despairing whisper, "I can't stand this another minute!"

"Oh, ma'am!" wailed Matilda.

"That Mr. Pyecroft—" Words failed her. "I've simply got to get out of this somehow!"

"Of course, ma'am. But—but our changes haven't helped us much yet. If we tried to leave the house, that Mr. Pyecroft might follow and we might find ourselves even in a worse way than we are, ma'am."

"Nothing can be worse than this!"

"I'm not so sure, ma'am," tremulously doubted Matilda. "We never dreamed anything could be so bad as this, but here this is."

There was a vague logic in what Matilda said; but logic none the less. Unbelievable, and yet so horribly actual as this was,—was what had thus far happened only the *legato* and *pianissimo* passages of their adventure, with *crescendo* and *fortissimo* still ahead? Mrs. De Peyster closed her eyes, and did not speak. She strove to regain some command over her routed faculties.

Matilda waited.

Presently Mrs. De Peyster's eyes opened. "It would be some relief"—weak hope was in her voice—"if only I could manage to get down into my own suite."

"But, ma'am, with that Mr. Pyecroft—"

"He's a risk we've got to run," Mrs. De Peyster cried desperately. "We've somehow got to manage to get me there without his knowing it."

Suddenly she sat up. The hope that a moment before had shone faintly in her face began to become a more confident glow. Matilda saw that her mistress was thinking; therefore she remained silent, expectant.

"Matilda, I think there's a chance!" Mrs. De Peyster exclaimed after a moment. "I'll get into my suite—I'll live there quiet as death. Since they believe the suite empty, since they know it is locked, they may never suspect any one is in it. Matilda, it's the only way!"

"Yes—but, ma'am, how am I to explain your sudden disappearance?"

"Say that your sister became homesick," said Mrs. De Peyster with mounting hope, "and decided suddenly, in the middle of the night, to return at once to her home in Syracuse."

"That may satisfy all but Mr. Pyecroft, ma'am. But Mr. Pyecroft won't believe it."

"Mr. Pyecroft will have to believe whatever he likes. It's the only way, and we're going to do it. And do it at once! Matilda, go down and see if they're all asleep yet, particularly Mr. Pyecroft."

Matilda took off her shoes and in her stocking-feet went scouting forth; and stocking-footed presently returned, with the news that all seemed asleep, particularly Mr. Pyecroft.

Five minutes later, in Matilda's dress, and likewise in stocking-feet, Mrs. De Peyster stepped out of her second maid's room. Breathless, she listened. Not a sound. Then, Matilda at her heels, she began to creep down the stairway—slowly—slowly—putting each foot down with the softness of a closing lip—pausing with straining ears on every tread. With up-pressing feet she glided by the door within which Mr. Pyecroft lay in untroubled sleep, then started by the room that homed Jack and Mary, creeping with the footsteps of a disembodied spirit, fearful every second lest some door might spring open and wild alarms ring out.

But she got safely by. Then, more rapidly, yet still as noiseless as a shadow's shadow, she crept on down—down—until she came to her own door. Here the attending Matilda silently vanished. With velvet touch Mrs. De Peyster slipped her key into the lock, stepped inside, noiselessly closed and locked the door behind her.

Then she sank into a chair, and breathed. Just breathed ... back once more in the spacious suite wherein nine days ago—or was it nine thousand years?—inspiration had flowered within her and her great idea had been born.

[pg 232]

CHAPTER XIX

A PLEASANT HERMITAGE

When she awoke, it was with a sweet, languorous sense of perfect comfort. Heavy-lidded, she glanced about her. Ah! Once more she was in her own wide, gracious bed—of a different caste, of an entirely different race, from the second maid's paving-stone pallet, from that folding, punitive contrivance from whose output of anguish Mrs. Gilbert managed to extract a profit. Also she was in sweet, ingratiating linen—the first fresh personal linen that had touched her in nine days.

It was all as though she were enfolded deep in the embrace of a not too fervent benediction.

About her were the large, dignified spaces of her bedroom, and beyond were the yet greater spaces of her sitting-room; and from where she lay she could see the gleaming white of her large tiled bathroom. And there were drawers and drawers of fresh *lingerie*; and there were her closets filled with comfortable gowns that would be a thousand times more grateful after a week of Matilda's unchanged and oppressive black. And there on her dressing-table were the multitudinous implements of silver that had to do with her toilet.

[pg 233]

After what she had been through, this, indeed, was comfort.

But as consciousness grew clearer, her forgotten troubles and her dangers returned to her. For a brief period alarm possessed her. Then reason began to assert itself; and the hope which the night before had been hardly more than desperation began to take on the character of confidence. She saw possibilities. And the longer she considered, the more and greater the possibilities were. Her original plan began to re-present itself to her; modified, of course, to meet the altered conditions. If she could only remain here, undiscovered, then months hence, when it was announced that Mrs. De Peyster (she sent up a warm prayer for Olivetta!) was homeward bound, Jack and Mary and that unthinkable Mr. Pyecroft would decamp, if they had not gone before, and leave the way clear for the easy interchange by Olivetta and herself of their several personalities.

As she lay there in the gentle Sabbath calm, in the extra-curved hair of her ultra-superior mattress, this revised version of her plan, in the first glow of its conception, seemed alluringly plausible. She had to be more careful, to be sure, but aside from this the new plan seemed quite as good as the original. In fact, in her reaction from the alarms of yesterday, it somehow seemed even better.

[pg 234]

Twelve hours before there had seemed no possible solution to her predicament. And here it was—come unexpectedly to her aid, as was the way with things in life; and a very simple solution, too. Lazily, hazily, a poet's line teased and evaded her memory. What was it?—something about "a pleasant hermitage." That was just what this was: a pleasant hermitage.

But presently, as she lay comforting herself, and the morning wore on, she became increasingly conscious of an indefinable uncomfortable sensation. And presently the sensation became more definite; became localized; and she was aware that she was growing hungry. And in the same moment came the dismaying realization that, in their haste of the night before, she had not thought to plan with Matilda for the somewhat essential item of food!

She sat up. What was she ever to do? Three months of solitary confinement, with no arrangements for food! Would Matilda have the sense to think of this, and if so would she have the adroitness to smuggle edibles in to her unnoticed? Or was she to be starved out?

The revised plan had lost its first rose-tint.

She got up, and noiselessly foraged throughout her quarters. The total of her gleaning was a box of forgotten chocolate bon-bons and a box of half-length tallow candles. She had read that Esquimaux ate tallow, or its equivalent, and prospered famously upon it; but she deferred the candles in favor of the bon-bons, and breakfasted on half the box.

Then she went back to bed and read. In the afternoon she ate the second half of the bon-bons.

[pg 235]

Also in the afternoon she discovered that the bliss of lying abed, which she had thought would be exhaustless, had inexplicably become transmitted into boredom. And yet she dared not move about, save with a caution that amounted almost to pain; for she had heard Jack and Mary and

Mr. Pyecroft pass and re-pass her door, and she knew that any slight noise on her part might result in disastrous betrayal.

Evening drew on. Bed, and sitting noiseless in one spot, grew more wearisome. And her stomach began to complain bitterly, for as has been remarked it was a pampered creature and had been long accustomed to being served sumptuously and with deferential promptitude. But she realized that Matilda would not dare come, if she remembered to come at all, until the household was fast asleep.

Eight o'clock came. She lit one of the candles and placed it, cautiously shaded, in a corner of her sitting-room....

Ten o'clock came.

She looked meditatively at the box of candles. Perhaps the Esquimaux ate them with a kind of sauce. They might not be so bad that way....

Midnight came. Shortly thereafter a faint, ever so faint, knocking sent her tiptoeing—for months she would dare move only on breathless tiptoe!—to the door of her sitting-room, where she stood and listened.

Again the faint knocking sounded.

[pg 236] "Mrs. De Peyster, it's Matilda," whispered an agitated voice.

Mrs. De Peyster quickly unlocked and opened the door. Matilda slipped in and the door was softly closed upon her back.

"Here's some food—just what I could grab in a second—I didn't dare take time to choose." Matilda held out a bundle wrapped in a newspaper. "Take it, ma'am. I don't dare stay here a second."

But Mrs. De Peyster caught her arm.

"How did they take my going?"

"Mr. Jack thought home was really the best place for my sister, if she was sick, ma'am. And Mary was awfully kind and asked me all sorts of questions—which—which I found it awfully hard to answer, ma'am,—and she is going to send you the book you didn't finish. And Mr. Pyecroft got me off into a corner and said, so we'd tried to give him the slip again."

"What is he going to do?"

"He said he was safe here, under Judge Harvey's protection. Outside some detective might insist on arresting him, and perhaps things might take such a turn that even Judge Harvey might not be able to help him. So he said he was going to stay on here till things blew over. Oh, please, ma'am, let me go, for if they were to hear me—"

[pg 237] A minute later the chattering Matilda was out of the room, the door was locked, and Mrs. De Peyster was sitting in a chair with the bundle of provisions on her exquisitely lacquered tea-table. In the newspaper was a small loaf of bread, a tin of salmon, and a kitchen knife. That was all. Not even butter! And, of course, no coffee—she who liked coffee, strong, three times a day. But when was she ever again to know the taste of coffee!

Never before had she sat face to face with such an uninteresting menu. But she devoured it—opening the tin of salmon after great effort with the knife—devoured it every bit. Then she noticed the newspaper in which the provisions had been wrapped. It was part of that day's, Sunday's, "Record," and it was the illustrated supplement. This she unfolded, and before her eyes stood a big-lettered title, "Annual Exodus of Society Leaders," and in the queenly place in the center of the page was her own portrait by M. Dubois.

Her eyes wandered up to the original, which was dimly illumined by the rays of her one candle. What poise, what breeding, what calm, imperturbable dignity! Then her gaze came back to her be-crumbed tea-table, with the kitchen knife and the raggedly gaping can. She slipped rather limply down in her chair and covered her eyes.

[pg 238] A day passed—and another—and another. Outside Mrs. De Peyster's suite these days flew by with honeymoon rapidity; within, they lingered, and clung on, and seemed determined never to go, as is time's malevolent practice with those imprisoned. Mrs. De Peyster could hear Mary practicing, and practicing hard—and, yes, brilliantly. As for Jack, Matilda told her on her later visits—and her later bundles contained a larger and more palatable supply of food than had the first package—Matilda said that Jack, too, was working hard. Furthermore, Matilda admitted, the pair were having the jolliest of honeymoons.

And a further thing Matilda told on her third furtive, after-midnight visit. This concerned Mr. Pyecroft. Mr. Pyecroft, it seemed, was becoming an even greater favorite with Jack and Mary—particularly with Mary. He had confided to them that he was weary of his escapades, and wanted to settle down; in fact, there was a girl—the nicest girl in the world, begging Mary's pardon—who

had promised to marry him as soon as he had become launched in honorable work. The trouble was, he knew that no business man would employ him in a responsible capacity, and so his last departures from strict rectitude had been for the purpose of securing the capital to set himself up in some small but independent way.

His story, Matilda admitted, had captured Mary's heart.

[pg 239]

Judge Harvey, however, still smarting under his indignity, would on his evening calls scarcely speak to Mr. Pycroft. Nonetheless, Mr. Pycroft had continued regretful and polite. Once or twice, Judge Harvey, forgetting his resentment, had been drawn into discussions of points of law with Mr. Pycroft. To Matilda, who, of course, knew nothing about law, it had seemed that Mr. Pycroft talked almost as well as the Judge himself. But the Judge, the instant he remembered himself, resumed his ire toward Mr. Pycroft.

Thus three days, in which it seemed to Mrs. De Peyster that Time stood still and taunted her,—each day exactly like the day before, a day of half starvation, of tiptoed, breathless routine,—days in which she spoke not a word save a whisper or two at midnight at the food-bearing visit of the sad-visaged Matilda,—three dull, diabolic days dragged by their interminable length of hours. Such days!—such awful, awful days!

On Matilda's fourth visit with her usual bundle of pilferings from the pantry, Mrs. De Peyster observed in the manner of that disconsolate pirate a great deal of suppressed agitation—of a sort hardly ascribable to the danger of their situation: an agitation quite different from mere nervous fear. There were traces of recent crying in Matilda's face, and now and then she had difficulty in holding down a sob. Mrs. De Peyster pressed her as to the trouble; Matilda chokingly replied that there was nothing. Mrs. De Peyster persisted, and soon Matilda was weeping openly.

"Oh, my heart's broke, ma'am!" she sobbed. "My heart's broke!"

"Your heart broken! How?"

[pg 240]

"Before I can tell you, ma'am," cried the miserable Matilda, "I've got to make a confession. I've done—something awful! I've disobeyed you, ma'am! I've disobeyed and deceived you!"

"What, Matilda," said Mrs. De Peyster severely, "after the way I've trusted you for twenty years!"

"Yes, ma'am. But, I couldn't help it, ma'am! There's feelings one can't—"

"But what have you done?"

"I've—I've fallen in love, ma'am. For over a year I've been the same as engaged to William."

"William!" cried Mrs. De Peyster, sinking back from her erect, reproving posture, and recalling an unforgettable episode.

"Yes, ma'am,—to William. I'm sorry I disobeyed you, ma'am,—very sorry,—but I can't think about that now. For now," sobbed Matilda, "for now it's all off—and my heart is broke!"

"All off? Why?" breathed Mrs. De Peyster.

[pg 241]

"That's what I can't understand, ma'am," wailed Matilda. "It's all a mystery to me. I've hardly seen William, and haven't spoken to him, since we came back, and he's acted awfully queer to me. I—I couldn't stand it any longer, and this evening I went out to the stable to see him. He was as stiff, and as polite, and as mad as—oh, William was never like that to me before, ma'am! I asked him what was the matter. 'All right, if you want to break off, I'm willing!' he said in, oh, such a hard voice. 'But, William,' I said, beginning to cry, 'but, William, what have I ever done to you?' 'You know what you've done!' he said."

"Oh!" breathed Mrs. De Peyster.

"I begged him to explain, but he just turned his back on me and walked away! And now, ma'am," wept Matilda, "I know he'll never explain, he's such a proud, obstinate, stiff-necked man! And I love him so, Mrs. De Peyster,—I love him so! Oh, my heart is broke!"

Mrs. De Peyster gazed at her sobbing serving-woman in chilled dismay. She was for a moment impelled to explain to Matilda; but she quickly realized it would never, never do for her housekeeper to know that her coachman had made love to her, and had—had even kissed her. Every drop of De Peyster blood revolted against such a degradation.

"I hope it will come out all right, Matilda," she said in a shaking voice.

"Oh, it never can!" Matilda had already started for the door. She paused, hesitant, with the knob in her hand. "But you, ma'am," she faltered, "can you ever forgive me for the way I deceived you?"

Mrs. De Peyster tried to look severe, yet relenting.

"I'll try to overlook it, Matilda."

"Thank you, ma'am," snuffled Matilda; and very humbly she went out.

[pg 242]

CHAPTER XX

MATILDA BREAKS IT GENTLY

At two o'clock of the fifth night Matilda stole into Mrs. De Peyster with a face that would have been an apt cover for the Book of Lamentations. She opened her pages. That day she had had a telegram that her sister Angelica—the really and truly Angelica, who really and truly lived near Syracuse—that Angelica was seriously ill. She was sorry, but she felt that she must go.

"Of course, you must go, Matilda!" exclaimed Mrs. De Peyster. Then the significance to her of Matilda's absence flashed upon her. "But what will I do without any company at all?" she cried. "And without any food?"

"I've seen to the food, ma'am." And Matilda explained that during the evening, in preparation for her going, she had been smuggling into the house from Sixth Avenue delicatessen stores boxes of crackers, cold meats, all varieties of canned goods—"enough to last you for a month, ma'am, and by that time I'll be back."

[pg 243]

Her explanation made, Matilda proceeded, with extremest caution, to carry the provisions up and stack them in one corner of Mrs. De Peyster's large, white-tiled bathroom. When the freightage was over, the bathroom, with its supply of crackers and zweibach, its bottles of olives and pickles, its cold tongue, cold roast beef, cold chicken, its cans of salmon, sardines, deviled ham, California peaches, and condensed milk—the bathroom was itself a delicatessen shop that many an ambitious young German would have regarded as a proud start in life.

"But what about food for the others while you're gone?" inquired Mrs. De Peyster—with a sudden hope that the others would be starved into leaving.

"I've attended to them, ma'am. I've bought a lot of things that will keep. And then I told the tradespeople that my niece was going to be here in my place, and they are to deliver milk and other fresh things for her every day in care of William."

Matilda broke down at the last moment.

"If it wasn't for you, ma'am, I wouldn't care if it was me that was sick, instead of my sister, and if I never got well. For with William—"

She could say no more, and departed adrip with tears.

[pg 244]

Matilda's nightly visits were a loss; but Mrs. De Peyster had come to take her situation more and more philosophically. The life was unspeakably tedious, to be sure, and rather dangerous, too; but she had accepted the predicament—it had to be endured and could not be helped; and such a state of mind made her circumstances much easier to support. All in all, there was no reason, though, of course, it was most uncomfortable—there was no good reason, she kept assuring herself, why she might not safely withstand the siege and come out of the affair with none but her two confidants being the wiser.

In this philosophic mood three more days passed—passed slowly and tediously, to be sure, but yet they did get by. There were relaxations, of course,—things to occupy her mind. She read a little each day; she listened to Mary's concert in the drawing-room below her—for Mary dared to continue playing despite Matilda's absence, since it was known that Matilda's niece was in the house, though Mary never showed her face; she listened for snatches of the conversation of Jack and Mary and Mr. Pyecroft when they passed her door; at times she stood upon a chair at one of her windows and cautiously peered through the little panes in her shutters, like the lens of a camera, down into the sunny green of Washington Square.

Also, of evenings, she found herself straining to hear the voice of Judge Harvey. When she surprised herself at this, she would flush slightly, and again raise her book close to her shaded candle.

Then, of course, her meals were a diversion. She became quite expert with the can-opener and the corkscrew. The empty cans, since there was no way to get them out of her suite, she stacked on the side of the bathroom opposite her provisions; and daily the stack grew higher.

[pg 245]

The nearest approach to an incident during this solitary period came to pass on the third night after Matilda's departure. On that evening Mrs. De Peyster became aware of a new voice in the house—a voice with a French accent. It seemed familiar, yet for a time she was puzzled as to the identity of the voice's owner. Then suddenly she knew: the man below was M. Dubois, whom Olivetta, at her desire, had with unwilling but obedient frostiness sent about his business. She had known that Jack had taken up with M. Dubois at the time the artist was doing her portrait; but she had not known that Jack was so intimate as the artist's being admitted to Jack's secret seemed to indicate.

Within herself, some formless, incomprehensible thing seemed about to happen. During these days of solitude—and this, too, even before Matilda had gone—a queer new something had begun to stir within her, almost as though threatening an eruption. It seemed a force, or spirit, rising darkly from hitherto unknown spaces of her being. It frightened her, with its amorphous, menacing strangeness. She tried to keep it down. She tried to keep her mental eyes away from it. And so, during all these days, she had no idea what the fearsome thing might be....

[pg 246]

And then something did happen. On the fifth day after Matilda's departure, and the eighteenth after the sailing of the *Plutonia*, Mrs. De Peyster observed a sudden change in the atmosphere of the house. Within an hour, from being filled with honeymoon hilarity, the house became filled with gloom. There was no more laughter—no more running up and down the stairs and through the hallways—the piano's song was silent. Mrs. De Peyster sought to gain some clue to this mysterious change by listening for the talk of Mary and Jack and Mr. Pyecroft as they passed her door. But whereas the trio had heretofore spoken freely and often in liveliest tones, they now were either wordless or their voices were solemnly hushed.

What did it mean? Days passed—the solemn gloom continued unabated—and this question grew an ever more puzzling mystery to Mrs. De Peyster. What could it possibly, *possibly*, mean?

But there was no way in which she could find out. Her only source of information was Matilda, and Matilda was gone for a month; and even if Matilda, by any chance, should know what was the matter, she would not dare write; and even if she wrote, the letter, of course, would never be delivered, but would doubtless be forwarded to the pretended Mrs. De Peyster in Europe. Mrs. De Peyster could only wonder—and read—and gaze furtively out of the little peep-holes of her prison—and eat—and stack the empty cans yet higher in her bathroom—and wait, impatiently wait, while the mystery grew daily and hourly in magnitude.

[pg 247]

Among the details that added to the mystery's bulk was the sound of another new but familiar voice—the voice of the competent Miss Gardner, her discharged secretary. And Miss Gardner's voice was not heard for an hour and then heard no more—but was heard day after day, and her tone was the tone of a person who is acquainted with the management of an establishment and who is giving necessary orders. And another detail was that William no longer kept to the stable, but seemed now constantly busy within the house. And another detail was that she became aware that Jack and Mary no longer tried to keep their presence in the house a secret, but went openly forth into the streets together. And Judge Harvey every day came openly to see them.

But the most bewildering, and yet most clarifying, detail of all was one she observed on the twelfth day since Matilda's going, the twenty-fifth of her own official absence.

On that afternoon she was standing on a chair entertaining herself by gazing through one of her shutters, when she saw Jack crossing Washington Square. He was walking very soberly, and about the left sleeve of a quiet gray summer suit was a band of crape.

Mrs. De Peyster stepped down from her chair. The mystery was lifting. Somebody was dead! But who? Who?

[pg 248]

Early the next morning, while the inmates of the house were occupied in the serving or the eating of breakfast, Mrs. De Peyster was startled by a soft knocking at her door. But instantly she was reassured by the tremulous accents without.

"It's me, ma'am,—Matilda. Let me in—quick!"

The next instant the door opened and Matilda half staggered, half fell, into the room. But such a Matilda! Shivering all over, eyes wildly staring.

"What is it?" cried Mrs. De Peyster, seizing her housekeeper's arm.

"Oh, ma—ma—ma'am," chattered Matilda. "It's—it's awful!"

"But what is it?" demanded Mrs. De Peyster, beginning to tremble with an unknown terror.

"Oh, it's—it's awful! I couldn't get you word before—for I didn't dare write, and my sister wasn't well enough for me to leave her till last night."

Mrs. De Peyster shook the shaking Matilda.

"Will you please tell me what's happened!"

"Yes, ma—ma'am. Here's a copy of the first paper that had anything about it. The paper's over a week old. I brought it along to—to break the thing to you gently."

Mrs. De Peyster seized the newspaper. In the center of its first page was a reproduction of M. Dubois's painting of herself, and across the paper's top ran the giant headline:—



"SO—SO IT'S I—THAT'S—THAT'S DEAD!"

[pg 249]

MRS. DE PEYSTER FOUND
DEAD IN THE SEINE

*Face Disfigured by Water, but
Friends in Paris Identify Social
Leader by Clothes upon
the Body*

Mrs. De Peyster sank without a word into a chair, and her face duplicated the ashen hue of Matilda's.

Matilda likewise collapsed into a chair. "Oh, isn't it awful, ma'am," she moaned.

"So—so it's I—that's—that's dead!" mumbled Mrs. De Peyster.

"Yes, ma'am. But that isn't all. I—I thought I'd break it to you gently. That was over a week ago. Since then—"

"You mean," breathed the marble lips of Mrs. De Peyster, "that there's something more?"

"Yes, ma'am. Oh, the papers have been full of it. It's been a tremendous sensation!"

"Oh!" gasped Mrs. De Peyster.

"And Mr. Jack, since you died without a will, is your heir. And, since he is now the head of the De Peyster family, the first thing he did on hearing the news was to arrange by cable to have your body sent here."

Mrs. De Peyster, as though galvanized, half rose from her chair.

"You mean—my body—is coming here?"

[pg 250]

"I said I was trying to break it to you gently," moaned Matilda. "It's—it's already here. The ship that brought it is now docking. Your funeral—"

"My funeral!"

"It takes place in the drawing-room, this morning. Oh, isn't it awful! But, perhaps, ma'am, if you could see what beautiful flowers your friends have sent—"

But Mrs. De Peyster had very softly sunk back into her chair.

[pg 251]

CHAPTER XXI

THE VEILED LADY

As soon as that huddled mass of womanhood that was Mrs. De Peyster had become sufficiently reanimated to be able to think, its first thought came in the form of an unuttered wail.

She was dead! She was to be buried! She could never come home again!

Or if she did come home, what a scandal! A scandal out-scandalizing anything of which she had ever dreamed! A scandal worse ten times than the very grave itself!

With loose face and glazed eyes she stared at Matilda while the latter stammered out disjointed details of the past week's happenings. As for Mr. Jack's lark in dwelling surreptitiously with his wife in his mother's house, not a breath of that had reached the public. With Mr. Pyecroft's aid, and Judge Harvey's, he had managed this well. He had told the reporters that he had been quietly married over three weeks before, that he and his wife had been living in seclusion, and that on learning of his mother's demise they had come to the house to direct the obsequies.... Those Paris police were trying to solve the mystery of what had become of Mrs. De Peyster's trunks.... If Mrs. De Peyster could only see the beautiful floral tributes that were arriving, particularly the large wreath sent by Mrs. Allistair—

[pg 252]

But Mrs. De Peyster heard none of this. She was dead! She was to be buried! She could never come home again!

At length her lips moved—slowly, stiffly, as might the lips of a dead person.

"What are we going to do?"

"I've been saying that same question to myself for days, ma'am," quavered Matilda. "And I—I don't see any answer."

No, there was nothing she could do. Mrs. De Peyster continued her glazed stare at her faithful serving-woman. In the first few minutes her mind had been able to take in the significance only to herself of this culminating disaster. But now its significance to another person shivered through that her being.

Poor—poor Olivetta!

For Olivetta, of course, it was. Mrs. De Peyster knew what was due the De Peyster corpuscles that moved in stately procession along the avenues of her blood, and was not neglectful to see that that due was properly observed; but the heart from which those corpuscles derived their impulse was, as Judge Harvey had once said, in its way the kindest sort of heart. And now, for a few minutes, all that her heart could feel was felt for Olivetta.

[pg 253]

But for a few minutes only. Then Olivetta, and all concerns beyond the immediate moment, were suddenly forgotten. For in the hall without soft footsteps were heard, and the instant after, upon her door, there sounded an ominous scratching—a sound like a key in an agitated hand searching for its appointed hole.

Mrs. De Peyster rose up and clutched Matilda's arm, and stood in rigid terror.

"Tha—that key?" chattered Matilda. "Can—can it fit?"

"There were only two keys," breathed Mrs. De Peyster. "Mine here, and the one I gave to Olivetta."

"Then it can't fit, since Miss Olivetta's—"

But the key gave Matilda the lie direct by slipping into the lock. The two women clung to one another, knowing that the end had come, wondering who was to be their exposé. The bolt clicked back, the door swung open, and—

And into the dusky room there tottered a rather tall, heavily veiled, feminine figure. It did not gaze at the shrinking couple in astoundment. It did not launch into exclamation at its discovery. Instead, it sank weakly down into the nearest chair.

"Oh!" it moaned. "Oh! Oh! Oh!"

"Who—who are you?" huskily demanded Mrs. De Peyster.

"Oh! Oh!" moaned the figure. "Isn't it terrible! Isn't it terrible! But I didn't mean to do it—I didn't mean to do it, Caroline!"

"It's not—not Olivetta?" gasped Mrs. De Peyster.

"It was an accident!" the figure wailed on. "I couldn't help myself. And if you knew what I've gone through to get here, I know you'd forgive me."

Mrs. De Peyster had lifted the veil up over the hat.

"Olivetta! Then—after all—you're not dead!"

"No—if I only were!" sobbed Olivetta.

"Then who is that—that person who's coming here this morning?"

"I don't know!" Then Olivetta's quavering voice grew hard with indignation. "It's somebody who's trying to get a good funeral under false pretenses!"

"But the papers said the body had on my clothes."

"Yes—I suppose it must have had."

"But how—" Mrs. De Peyster recalled their precarious position. "Matilda, lock the door. But, Olivetta, how could it ever, ever have happened?"

"I followed your directions—and got to Paris all right—and everything was going splendid—and I was beginning to enjoy myself—when—when—Oh, Caroline, I—I—"

"You what?" demanded Mrs. De Peyster.

"I lost my purse!" sobbed Olivetta.

"Lost your purse?"

"I left it in a cab when I went to the Louvre. And in it was all my money—my letter of credit—everything!"

"Olivetta!"

"And I didn't dare cable you for more. For if I had sent a cable to you here, it might have betrayed you."

"And what did you do?"

"There was nothing for me to do but to—to—sell some of your gowns."

"Oh!" Mrs. De Peyster was beginning dimly to see the drift of things.

Olivetta's mind wandered to another phase of her tribulations.

"And the price I got for them was a swindle, Caroline. It was—it was a tragedy! For your black chiffon, and your silver satin, and your spangled net—"

"But this person they took for me?" interrupted Mrs. De Peyster.

"Oh, whoever she is, she must have bought one of them. She could have bought it for nothing—and that Frenchman who cheated me—would have doubled his money. And after she bought it—she—she"—Olivetta's voice rang out with hysterical resentment—"she got us all into this trouble by walking into the Seine. It's the most popular pastime in Paris, to walk into the Seine. But why," ended Olivetta with a spiteful burst,— "why couldn't she have amused herself in her own clothes? That's what I want to know!"

"And then? What did you do?" breathed Mrs. De Peyster.

"When it came out three days later that it was you, I was so—so frightened that I didn't know what to do. I didn't dare deny the report, for that would have been to expose you. And I didn't dare cable to you that it was all a mistake and that I was all right, for that would have been just as bad. Perhaps I might have acted differently, but I—well, I ran away. I crossed to London with your trunks. There I learned that—that they were sending your remains home. I realized I had to get you word somehow, and I realized the only way was for me to come and tell you. So I sold some more of your gowns, and just caught the Mauretania, and here I am."

So ending, Olivetta, as though her bones had melted, subsided into a gelatinous heap of dejection, dabbing her crimson eyes with a handkerchief already saturated with liquid woe.

"It's a relief to know it wasn't you," said Mrs. De Peyster.

"I'm sure—it's kind of you—to say so," snuffled Olivetta gratefully.

"But, aside from your being safe, our situation is unchanged," said Mrs. De Peyster in tremulous, awe-stricken tone. "For that—that person is coming here just the same!"

"I know. The horrid interloper!"

"She may be here any minute," said Mrs. De Peyster. "What are we going to do?"

[pg 257]

"We must think of something quick," spoke up Matilda nervously. "For it's almost time for your funeral, ma'am, and after that—"

"I've been thinking all the voyage over," broke in Olivetta. "And I could think of only one plan."

"And that?" Mrs. De Peyster eagerly inquired.

There was an excited, desperate light in Olivetta's flooding eyes.

"Couldn't you manage, in some way, while nobody is looking, to slip into that Frenchwoman's place; and then, before the ceremony was over, you could sit up and say you'd been in a cataleptic fit. Such things have happened. I've read about them."

"Absurd, Olivetta! Quite absurd!" quavered Mrs. De Peyster.

"I dare say it is," agreed Olivetta, subsiding again into her limp misery. "Oh, why did I ever go to Paris! I hate the place!"

"Don't give way; think!" commanded Mrs. De Peyster, who was in a condition not far removed from Olivetta's. "Think, Matilda!"

"Yes, ma'am," said Matilda obediently.

"You think, Caroline," whimpered Olivetta. "You always had such a superior intellect, and were always so equal to every emergency."

[pg 258]

Mrs. De Peyster thus reminded of what was expected of her life-long leadership, tried to collect her scattered forces, and sat with pale, drawn, twitching face, staring at her predicament—and her two faithful subjects sat staring at her, waiting the inspired idea for escape that would fall from her never-failing lips. Moment after moment of deepest silence followed.

At length Mrs. De Peyster spoke.

"There are only two ways. First, for me to go down and disclose myself—"

"But the scandal! The humiliation!" cried Olivetta.

"Yes, that first way will never do," said Mrs. De Peyster. "The second way is not a solution; it is only a means to a possible solution. But before I state the way, I must ask you, Olivetta, if any one saw you come in?"

"There were a number of people coming and going, people preparing for the funeral—but I watched my chance, and used my latch-key, and I'm sure no one connected with the house saw me."

"That is good. If any outsiders saw you, they will merely believe that you also were some person concerned in the funeral. As for my plan, it is simple. You must both slip out of here unseen; you, Olivetta, will, of course, say that you have returned to the city to attend my funeral. From the outside you both must help me."

"Yes. But you, Caroline?" said Olivetta.

[pg 259]

"As for me, I must stay here, quietly, just as I have done for the last three weeks. I still have some supplies left. After everything has quieted down, I shall watch my chance, and steal out of the house late some night. That's as far as I have planned, but once away I can work out some explanation for the terrible mistake and then come home. That seems the only way; that seems the only chance."

"You always were a wonder!" cried Olivetta admiringly.

"Then you agree to the plan?"

"Of course!"

"And you, Matilda?"

"Of course, ma'am."

Thus praised and seconded, Mrs. De Peyster resumed some faint shadow of her accustomed dignity.

"Very well, then. You must both leave here this instant."

Olivetta threw her arms about her cousin's neck.

"Good-bye, Caroline," she quavered. "You really have no hard feelings against me?"

"No, none. You must go!" said Mrs. De Peyster.

"I'm sure, with you in charge, it's all going to come out right!" said the clinging Olivetta hopefully.

"You must really go!" And Mrs. De Peyster pressed her and Matilda toward the door.

But midway to the door the trio halted suddenly. Coming up the stairway was the sound of hurried feet—of many pairs of feet. The footsteps came through the hall. The trio did not breathe. The footsteps paused before the sitting-room door. The confederates gripped each others' arms.

"Are you sure you saw that person come in here?" they heard a voice ask—Jack's voice.

[pg 260]

"I'm certain." The voice that answered was Mary's.

"I'll bet it was a sneak thief," said a third voice—Mr. Pyecroft's. "To slip into a house at a funeral, or a wedding, when a lot of people are coming and going—that's one of their oldest tricks." He turned the knob, and finding the door locked, shook it violently. "Open up, in there!" he called.

The three clung to one another for support.

"Better open up!" called a fourth voice—Judge Harvey's. "For we know you're in there!"

Breathless, the trembling conspirators clung yet more desperately.

"But how could she get in?" queried the excited voice of Mary. "I understood that Mrs. De Peyster locked the door before she went away."

"Skeleton key," was Mr. Pyecroft's brief explanation. "Mrs. De Peyster, we three will watch the door to see she doesn't get out—there may have been more than one of her. You go and telephone for a locksmith and the police."

"All right," said Mary.

"It's—it's all over!" breathed Mrs. De Peyster.

"Oh, oh! What shall we ever do?" wailed Olivetta, collapsing into a chair.

"The police!—she mustn't go!" gasped Mrs. De Peyster. "Open the door, Matilda, quick!" Then in a weak, quavering voice she called to her besiegers:—

"Wait!"

[pg 261]

After which she wilted away into the nearest chair—which chanced to be directly beneath the awesome, unbending, blue-blue-blooded Mrs. De Peyster of the golden frame, whose proud composure it was beyond things mortal to disturb.

[pg 262]

CHAPTER XXII

A FAMILY REUNION

Matilda's shaking hand unlocked the door. Jack lunged in, behind him Mr. Pyecroft and Judge Harvey, and behind them Mary. On Jack's face was a look of menacing justice. But at sight of the trembling turnkey the invading party suddenly halted, and Jack's stern jaw relaxed and almost dropped from its sockets.

"Matilda!" he exclaimed. And from behind him, like a triplicate echo, sounded the others' "Matilda!"

"Good—good-morning, Mr. Jack," quavered Matilda, locking the door again.

Then the four sighted Olivetta.

"What, you, Olivetta!" Jack and Judge Harvey cried in unison.

"Yes, it's I, Jack," she said with an hysterical laugh. "I just thought I'd call in to express—it's no more than is proper, my being her cousin, you know,—to express my sympathy to your mother."

"Your sympathy to my mother?"

"Yes. To—to tell her how—how sorry I am that she's dead," elucidated Olivetta.

A little hand gripped Jack's arm.

"Jack!"

He turned his head and his eyes followed Mary's pointing finger.

"Mother!" He walked amazedly up before Mrs. De Peyster's palsied figure. "Mother!"

In the same instant Judge Harvey was beside her.

"Caroline!" he breathed, like one seeing a ghost.

"Ye-yes," she mumbled.

"Then you're not dead?"

"N-no," she mumbled.

The Judge and Jack and Mary gazed down at her in uttermost astoundment. To them was added Mr. Pyecroft. His bewilderment, for the moment, was the greatest of the group; for the likeness between the black-garbed, fled Angelica, and this real Mrs. De Peyster in lavender dressing-gown, was more remarkable than he had ever dreamed.

"Thank God!" quavered Judge Harvey. And then, voicing the general amazement: "But—but—I don't understand! What has happened? How do you come here?"

Mrs. De Peyster, with a shivering glance at them all, and one of particular terror at her recent confederate, Mr. Pyecroft, made a last rally to save herself.

"My explanation—that is, all I know about this affair—is really very simple. I—you see—I very unexpectedly returned home—and—and discovered this—this situation. That is all." She gathered a little more courage. "I do not need to inform you that I have been away."

"Of course, we know you've been away!" said Jack. "But that Mrs. De Peyster at the pier—who is she?"

"She's nothing—but a base—impostor!" cried Olivetta indignantly, lifting her face for a moment from her woe-soaked handkerchief. "Don't you believe a word she says!"

"But we're all ready for the ceremony!" exclaimed Jack. "There are a dozen reporters downstairs, and no end of friends are coming from out of town to be present. And that person, whoever she is, will be here—"

"I tell you she's an impostor!" cried Olivetta frantically. "Don't you let her in!"

"Caroline, I can't tell you how—" Judge Harvey's voice, tremulous with relief at this unbelievably averted tragedy, broke off. "But what are we going to do?" he cried.

"Yes, what are we going to do?" echoed Mary.

Concern over this new, swiftly approaching crisis for a moment took precedence of all other emotions. Judge Harvey and Mary and Jack gazed at each other, bewildered, helpless. Something had to be done, quick—but what?

"I tell you, don't let that impostor in!" repeated the frantic Olivetta.

The three continued their interchange of helpless gaze.

"Pardon me if I seem to intrude," spoke up the even voice of Mr. Pyecroft.

Swiftly, but without appearing to hurry, he stepped to Mrs. De Peyster's writing-desk, and began running through the pages of the telephone book. With terrified apprehension, Mrs. De Peyster watched him: what—what was that terrible man going to do?

The telephone was now in his hand, the receiver at his ear.

"Central, give me Broad 4900.... Is this the French Line? Then connect me with the manager.... This the manager of the French Line?... I am speaking for Mr. Jack De Peyster, son of Mrs. De Peyster,—you know. Please give orders to the proper authorities to have Mrs. De Peyster held at the dock. Or if she has left, stop her at all cost. There must be no mistake! Further orders will follow. Understand?... Thank you very much. Good-bye."

He turned about.

"It will be all right," he said quietly.

With a wild stare at him, Mrs. De Peyster sank back in her chair and closed her eyes.

"She's fainted!" cried Mary. "Her smelling-salts!"

"A glass of water!" exclaimed Jack.

"No, no," breathed Mrs. De Peyster.

But the pair had darted away, Mary into the bedroom, Jack into the bathroom. From the bathroom came a sudden, jangling din like the sheet-iron thunder of the stage.

[pg 266] Mary reappeared, fresh amazement on her face.

"Somebody's been using the bedroom! The bed's not made, and your clothes are all about!"

The next moment Jack rushed in behind her.

"What a stack of empty tin cans I kicked into in the bathroom! What the deuce has been going on here?"

Mrs. De Peyster looked weakly, hopelessly, at Olivetta.

"There's no use trying to keep it up any longer. We—we might as well confess. You tell them, Olivetta."

But Olivetta protested into her dripping handkerchief that she never, never could. So it fell to Mrs. De Peyster herself to be the historian of her plans and misadventures—and she was so far reduced that even the presence of Mr. Pyecroft made no difference to her; and as for Mr. Pyecroft, when the truth of the affair flashed upon him, that wide, flexible mouth twisted upward into its whimsical smile—but the next instant his face was gravity itself. With every word she grew less and less like the Mrs. De Peyster of M. Dubois's masterpiece. At the close of the long narrative, made longer by frequent outbursts of misery, she could have posed for a masterpiece of humiliation.

"It's all been bad enough," she moaned at the end; "what's happened is all bad enough, but think what's yet to come! It's all coming out! Everybody will be laughing at me—oh!—oh!—oh!—"

[pg 267] Mrs. De Peyster was drifting away into inarticulate lamentations, when there came a tramping sound upon the stairway. She drew herself up.

"What's that?"

There was a loud rap upon the door.

"I say, Judge Harvey, Mr. De Peyster," called out a voice. "What's all this delay about?"

"Who is it?" breathed Mrs. De Peyster.

"That infernal Mayfair, and the whole gang of reporters!" exclaimed Jack.

"Oh, Jack,—Judge Harvey! Save me! Save me!"

"The hour set for the funeral is passed," Mayfair continued to call, "the drawing-room is packed with people, and the body hasn't arrived yet. We don't want to make ourselves obnoxious, but it's almost press-time for the next edition, and we've got to know what's doing. You know what a big story this is. Understand—we've simply got to know!"

"Judge—what the devil *are* we going to do?" breathed Jack.

"My God, Caroline, Jack,—this is awful!" Judge Harvey whispered desperately. "We simply can't keep this out of the papers, and when it does get out—"

"Oh! Oh!" moaned Mrs. De Peyster.

"Judge Harvey," called the impatient Mr. Mayfair, "you really must tell us what's up!"

[pg 268] Judge Harvey and Jack and Mary regarded each other in blank desperation; Mrs. De Peyster and Olivetta and Matilda were merely different varieties of jellied helplessness.

"Judge Harvey," Mr. Mayfair called again, "we simply must insist!"

"Caroline," falteringly whispered Judge Harvey, "I don't see what we—"

"Pardon me," whispered Mr. Pyecroft, gently stepping forward among them. Then he raised his voice: "Wait just one minute, gentlemen! You shall know everything!"

"Oh, Mr. Pyecroft, don't, don't!" moaned Mrs. De Peyster. "Judge Harvey—Jack—don't let him! Send them away! Put it off! I can't stand it!"

But Mr. Pyecroft, without heeding her protest, and unhampered by the others, stepped to Olivetta's side.

"Miss Harmon," he whispered rapidly, "did you obey Mrs. De Peyster's instructions on your voyage home? About keeping to your stateroom—about keeping yourself veiled, and all the rest?"

"Yes," said Olivetta.

"And Mrs. De Peyster's trunks, where are they?"

"At the Cunard pier,"

"What name did you sail under?"

"Miss Harriman."

[pg 269]

In the same instant Mr. Pyecroft had lifted Olivetta to her feet, had drawn from her boneless figure the long traveling-coat of pongee silk, and had drawn the pins from her traveling-hat. Released from his support, Olivetta re-collapsed. In the next instant Mr. Pyecroft had Mrs. De Peyster upon her feet, with firm, deft, resistless hands had slipped the long coat upon her, had put the hat upon her head and pushed in the pins, had drawn the thick veil down over her face—and had thrust her again down into her chair.

"Matilda, not a word!" he ordered, in a quick, authoritative whisper. "Miss Harmon, not a word! Mrs. De Peyster, call up your nerve; you'll need it, for you know that Mayfair is the cleverest reporter in Park Row. And now, Mrs. Jack De Peyster,"—for Mary stood nearest the door,—“let them in."

Mrs. De Peyster half-rose in ultimate consternation.

"Oh, please—please—you're not going to let them in!"

"We don't dare keep them out!" Mr. Pyecroft pressed Mrs. De Peyster firmly back into her chair. "Keep your nerve!" he repeated sharply. "Open the door, please,—quick!"

Mary cast a questioning glance at Jack, who, bewildered, nodded his consent. She unlocked the door.

[pg 270]

CHAPTER XXIII

MR. PYECROFT TAKES CHARGE

The next moment a dozen reporters crowded into the room, the redoubtable Mr. Mayfair at their head; and behind them could be seen the pale, curious faces of William, Miss Gardner, and M. Dubois. Mrs. De Peyster, Olivetta, and Matilda sat in limp despair. Judge Harvey, Jack, and Mary gazed in breathless suspense and wonderment at Mr. Pyecroft. As for Mr. Pyecroft, he stood before Mrs. De Peyster, obscuring her, looking like one who has suffered a severe shock, yet withal grave and composed.

"What's up?" demanded the keen-faced Mayfair.

[pg 271]

"Before I answer that," said Mr. Pyecroft, "permit me to preface what I have to say by touching upon two necessary personal details. First, I believe, at least, you, Mr. Mayfair, have known me as Mr. Simpson, brother of Mrs. De Peyster's housekeeper. I am not her brother. This harmless deception was undertaken, for reasons not necessary to give, at the request of Judge Harvey; he wished me to remain in the house to arrange, and make abstracts of, certain private papers. The second detail is, that I am speaking at the request of Judge Harvey, as his associate and as the representative of the De Peyster family."

Judge Harvey felt his collar; Jack stared. But fortunately the room was dim, and the reporters' eyes were all on the grave, candid face of Mr. Pyecroft.

"Yes—yes," said the impatient Mayfair. "But out with the story! What's doing?"

"Something that I think will surprise you," said Mr. Pyecroft. "Something that has completely astounded all of us—particularly this lady who is Mrs. De Peyster's housekeeper, and Miss Harmon, here, who has just returned from a quiet summer in Maine to attend her cousin's funeral. The fact is, gentlemen, to come right to the point, there is to be no funeral."

"No funeral!" cried Mr. Mayfair.

"No funeral!" ran through the crowd.

"No funeral," repeated Mr. Pyecroft. "The reason, gentlemen, is that a great mistake has been made. Mrs. De Peyster is not dead."

"Not dead!" exclaimed the reporters.

"If you desire proof, here it is." Mr. Pyecroft, stepping aside, revealed the figure of Mrs. De Peyster. He put his right hand upon her shoulder, gripping it tightly and holding her in her chair, and with his left he lifted the thick veil above her face. "I believe that most of you know Mrs. De Peyster, at least from her pictures."

[pg 272]

"Mrs. De Peyster!" cried the staggered crowd. "Mrs. De Peyster herself!"

"Mrs. De Peyster herself," repeated Mr. Pycroft in his grave voice. "You are surprised, but not more so than the rest of us."

"But that other Mrs. De Peyster—the one the funeral is for?" asked Mr. Mayfair. "Who is she?"

"That, gentlemen, is as great a mystery to us as to any of you," said Mr. Pycroft.

"But how the—but how did it all happen?" ejaculated Mr. Mayfair.

"That is what I am going to tell you," Mr. Pycroft answered.

Mrs. De Peyster struggled up.

"Don't—don't!" she besought him wildly.

Mr. Pycroft pressed her back into her chair, and held her there with an arm that was like a brace of steel.

"You see, gentlemen," he remarked sympathetically, "how this business has upset her."

"Yes! But the explanation?"

"Immediately—word for word, as Mrs. De Peyster has just now told us," said he.

"Oh!" moaned Mrs. De Peyster.

Olivetta and Matilda gazed at Mr. Pycroft with ghastly, loose-lipped faces; Judge Harvey and Jack and Mary stared at him with an amazed suspense which they could hardly mask; and Miss Gardner, with whom he had not yet made his peace, breathlessly awaited the next move of this incomprehensible husband of hers. Mr. Pycroft kept his eyes, for the most part, upon the shrewd, fraud-penetrating features of the unfoilable Mr. Mayfair—his own countenance the most truthful that son of Adam ever wore.

[pg 273]

"What Mrs. De Peyster has said is really very simple. As you know, she left Paris two or three weeks ago on a long motor trip. During her brief stay in Paris, one of her trunks was either lost or stolen, she is not certain which. As she pays no personal attention to her baggage, she was not aware of her loss for several days. So much is fact. Now we come to mere conjecture. A plausible conjecture seems to be that the gowns in the trunk were sold to a second-hand dealer, and these gowns, being attractive, the dealer must have immediately resold to various purchasers, and one of these purchasers must have—"

"Yes, yes! Plain as day!" exclaimed Mr. Mayfair.

"The face was unrecognizable," continued Mr. Pycroft, "but since the gown had sewn into it Mrs. De Peyster's name, of course—"

"Of course! The most natural mistake in the world!" cried Mr. Mayfair excitedly. "Go on! Go on!"

Mrs. De Peyster had slowly turned a dazed countenance upward and was gazing at the sober, plausible face of her young man of the sea.

[pg 274]

"Mrs. De Peyster did not learn of what had happened till the day the supposed Mrs. De Peyster was started homeward. The most sensible thing for her to have done would have been to declare the mistake, and saved her family and friends a great deal of grief. But the shock completely unbalanced her. I will not attempt to describe her psychological processes or explain her actions. You may call her course illogical, hysterical, what you like; I do not seek to defend it; I am only trying to give you the facts. She was so completely unnerved—But a mere look at Mrs. De Peyster will show you how the shock unnerved her."

The group gazed at Mrs. De Peyster's face. A murmur of sympathy and understanding ran among them.

"In her hysterical condition," continued Mr. Pycroft, "she had but one thought, and that was to get home as quickly as she could. She crossed to England, sailed on the Mauretania, kept to her stateroom, and arrived here at the house heavily veiled about an hour ago. I may add the details that she sailed under the name of Miss Harriman and that her trunks are now at the Cunard pier. There you have the entire story, gentlemen."

He looked down at Mrs. De Peyster. "I believe I have stated the matter just as you outlined it to us?"

"Ye—yes," breathed Mrs. De Peyster.

"There is no detail you would like to add?"

"N—none," breathed Mrs. De Peyster.

"Then, gentlemen," said Mr. Pyecroft, turning to the reporters, "since you have all the facts, and since Mrs. De Peyster is in a state bordering on collapse, we would take it as a favor if—"

"No need to dismiss us," put in Mr. Mayfair. "We're in a bigger hurry to leave than you are to have us go. God, boys," he ejaculated to his fellows, "what a peach of a story!"

In a twinkling Mr. Mayfair and his fellows of the press had vanished, each in the direction of a telephone over which he could hurry this super-sensation into his office.

Within the room, all were staring at Mr. Pyecroft, as though in each a whirling chaos were striving to shape itself into speech. But before they could become articulate, that sober young gentleman had stepped from out of their midst and, his back to them, was discreetly engrossing himself in the examination of the first object that came to his hands: which chanced to be something lying on top of the exquisite safe—a slender platinum chain with a pendant pearl.

With him gone, all eyes fixed themselves upon Mrs. De Peyster, and there was a profound and motionless silence in the room, save at first for some very sincere and vigorous snuffling into the handkerchiefs of Olivetta and Matilda. As for Mrs. De Peyster, she sat below the awesome, imperturbable Mrs. De Peyster of the portrait, and oh, what a change was there in the one beneath!—huddled, shaking, not a duchess-like line to her person, her face dropped forward in her hands.

"Mother—" Jack breathed at length.

"Caroline!" breathed Judge Harvey. Then added: "I'm sure it—it'll never become known."

"Oh, to think it's all over—and we're out of it!" Olivetta cried hysterically. "Oh! Oh!" And she limply pitched sidewise in her chair.

"Mees Harmon—Olivetta!" exclaimed M. Dubois. He sprang forward, knelt at her side and supported her wilted figure against his bosom. Upon this poultice to her troubles Olivetta relaxed and sobbed unrestrainedly. And no one, particularly Mrs. De Peyster, paid the least heed to this little episode.

William, the coachman, the irreproachable, irreplaceable, unbendable William, his clean-shaven mask of a face now somewhat pale—William took a few respectful paces toward his resurrected mistress.

"If you will not regard it as a liberty," said he, with his cadence of a prime minister, "I should like to express my relief and happiness at your restoration among us."

"Thank you—William," whispered Mrs. De Peyster.

William, having delivered his felicitations, bowed slightly, and started to turn away. But Matilda had stepped forward behind him, an imploring look upon her face.

"Please, ma'am,—please, ma'am!" said she, in a tone that left no doubt as to her meaning.

"Wait, William," weakly commanded Mrs. De Peyster.

William paused.

Mrs. De Peyster did not yet know what she was doing; her words spoke themselves.

"William, Matilda has—has just confessed your engagement. She has also confessed how, during my—my absence—one night, after driving with you, she—she lost control of herself and seriously offended you. She asks me to apologize to you and tell you how very, very sorry she is."

"Indeed, I am, William!" put in Matilda fervently.

"It is my wish, William," continued Mrs. De Peyster, "that you should forgive her—and make up things between you—and never speak of that incident again—and be happy and stay with me forever."

Matilda timidly slipped an arm through William's.

"Forgive me, William!" said she appealingly.

William's graven face exhibited a strange phenomenon—it twitched slightly.

"Thank you, Mrs. De Peyster," said he. And bowing respectfully, with Matilda upon his arm, he went out.

"Well, Mary, I guess we'd better be going, too," said Jack, taking his wife's hand. "Mother,"—respectfully, yet a little defiantly,—"I'm sorry that Mary and I have by our trespassing caused you so much inconvenience. But Mary and I and our things will be out of the house within an hour. Good-bye."

"Wait, Jack!" Mrs. De Peyster reached up a trembling hand and caught his sleeve. "Olivetta," said

she, "perhaps you and your—your fiancé could find—another place for your confidences."

"Oh!" exclaimed Olivetta, starting up with a flush.

"Cousin Caroline, do you mean—"

Mrs. De Peyster lifted an interrupting hand.

"Do as you like, but tell me about it later."

As the pair went out, Mrs. De Peyster slowly raised herself up and stood gazing for a moment at her son. And that strange new force which had menaced her with eruption during all the days of her hiding, and which these last few minutes had been pulsing upward toward orgasm, was now become resistless. It was as though a crust, a shell, were being burst and being violently shed. She thrilled with an amazing, undreamed-of, expanding warmth.

"Do you really—want to—leave me, Jack?" she whispered.

"I have been invited to leave," said he, "but I have never been invited to come back."

With a timidity, shot through with tingling daring, she slipped an arm about his shoulders.

"Then I invite you," she said tremulously. "Won't you stay, Jack?"

[pg 279]

"And Mary?" said he.

She looked about at her dark-eyed daughter-in-law.

"If Mary will stay, too, I'll—I'll try not to act like my petrified family tree."

"What! Was that you that day?" gasped the horrified Mary.

Mrs. De Peyster slipped her other arm about Mary, and daringly she kissed Mary's fresh young cheek, and she drew the two tightly, almost convulsively, to her. "Mother!" cried Jack; and the next instant the two pairs of arms were about her. And thus they stood for several moments; until —

"Caroline," broke in the unsteady but determined voice of Judge Harvey, "I told you I was going to propose to you again. And I'm going to do it right now. Please consider yourself proposed to."

She looked up—shamefaced, flushing.

"What, after the foolish woman I've—"

"If you were ever foolish, you were never less a fool than now!"

"I don't know about that," she quavered, "but anyhow I want you to straighten out my affairs—and—and Allistair, for all I care, can have—can have—for I'm all through—"

"Caroline!"

The next moment Judge Harvey's arms had usurped complete possession of her. And she wilted away upon his shoulder, and sobbed there. And thus for several moments....

[pg 280]

They were aroused by a polite cough. Both looked up. Halfway to the door stood Mr. Pyecroft; and beside him was Miss Gardner, gazing at him, tremulously bewildered.

"Pardon me," said he, in his grave manner; nothing was ever seen less suggestive of having ever smiled than his face—"pardon me, Judge Harvey, but I believe you failed to mention at what time your office opens."

"What time my office opens?" Judge Harvey repeated blankly. "Why?"

"Naturally," said Mr. Pyecroft, "I wish to know at what hour I am supposed to report for work."

"Well—Well—"

But for a moment Judge Harvey could get out no more. He just stared.

Then in a voice of dryest sarcasm: "Would you consider it impudent on my part—I wouldn't be impudent for the world, you know—to inquire what might be your real name? I have heard you variously called Mr. Simpson, Mr. Preston, Mr. Pyecroft. Perhaps you have a few other *aliases*."

"I have had—yes. My real name is Eliot Endicott Bradford. That name has the advantage of never having appeared in any complaint or police report. For that matter, I may add that under none of my names have I ever been arrested. Eliot Bradford is a man against whom no legal fault can be found."

"A testimonial from you," exclaimed the Judge—"what could possibly be better!"

"But the hour?" gently insisted the other.

Judge Harvey stared; his eyes narrowed. Then, suddenly—

"Nine-thirty," said he.

"Thank you, sir," said Mr. Bradford; and slipped a hand through Miss Gardner's arm.

But before he could turn to go, Mrs. De Peyster, from over the shoulder against which she leaned—Mrs. De Peyster, she couldn't help it ... smiled at him.

And, suddenly, Judge Harvey—he couldn't help it, either ... was smiling, too.

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK NO. 13 WASHINGTON SQUARE ***

Updated editions will replace the previous one—the old editions will be renamed.

Creating the works from print editions not protected by U.S. copyright law means that no one owns a United States copyright in these works, so the Foundation (and you!) can copy and distribute it in the United States without permission and without paying copyright royalties. Special rules, set forth in the General Terms of Use part of this license, apply to copying and distributing Project Gutenberg™ electronic works to protect the PROJECT GUTENBERG™ concept and trademark. Project Gutenberg is a registered trademark, and may not be used if you charge for an eBook, except by following the terms of the trademark license, including paying royalties for use of the Project Gutenberg trademark. If you do not charge anything for copies of this eBook, complying with the trademark license is very easy. You may use this eBook for nearly any purpose such as creation of derivative works, reports, performances and research. Project Gutenberg eBooks may be modified and printed and given away—you may do practically ANYTHING in the United States with eBooks not protected by U.S. copyright law. Redistribution is subject to the trademark license, especially commercial redistribution.

START: FULL LICENSE
THE FULL PROJECT GUTENBERG LICENSE
PLEASE READ THIS BEFORE YOU DISTRIBUTE OR USE THIS WORK

To protect the Project Gutenberg™ mission of promoting the free distribution of electronic works, by using or distributing this work (or any other work associated in any way with the phrase "Project Gutenberg"), you agree to comply with all the terms of the Full Project Gutenberg™ License available with this file or online at www.gutenberg.org/license.

Section 1. General Terms of Use and Redistributing Project Gutenberg™ electronic works

1.A. By reading or using any part of this Project Gutenberg™ electronic work, you indicate that you have read, understand, agree to and accept all the terms of this license and intellectual property (trademark/copyright) agreement. If you do not agree to abide by all the terms of this agreement, you must cease using and return or destroy all copies of Project Gutenberg™ electronic works in your possession. If you paid a fee for obtaining a copy of or access to a Project Gutenberg™ electronic work and you do not agree to be bound by the terms of this agreement, you may obtain a refund from the person or entity to whom you paid the fee as set forth in paragraph 1.E.8.

1.B. "Project Gutenberg" is a registered trademark. It may only be used on or associated in any way with an electronic work by people who agree to be bound by the terms of this agreement. There are a few things that you can do with most Project Gutenberg™ electronic works even without complying with the full terms of this agreement. See paragraph 1.C below. There are a lot of things you can do with Project Gutenberg™ electronic works if you follow the terms of this agreement and help preserve free future access to Project Gutenberg™ electronic works. See paragraph 1.E below.

1.C. The Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation ("the Foundation" or PGLAF), owns a compilation copyright in the collection of Project Gutenberg™ electronic works. Nearly all the individual works in the collection are in the public domain in the United States. If an individual work is unprotected by copyright law in the United States and you are located in the United States, we do not claim a right to prevent you from copying, distributing, performing, displaying or creating derivative works based on the work as long as all references to Project Gutenberg are removed. Of course, we hope that you will support the Project Gutenberg™ mission of promoting free access to electronic works by freely sharing Project Gutenberg™ works in compliance with the terms of this agreement for keeping the

Project Gutenberg™ name associated with the work. You can easily comply with the terms of this agreement by keeping this work in the same format with its attached full Project Gutenberg™ License when you share it without charge with others.

1.D. The copyright laws of the place where you are located also govern what you can do with this work. Copyright laws in most countries are in a constant state of change. If you are outside the United States, check the laws of your country in addition to the terms of this agreement before downloading, copying, displaying, performing, distributing or creating derivative works based on this work or any other Project Gutenberg™ work. The Foundation makes no representations concerning the copyright status of any work in any country other than the United States.

1.E. Unless you have removed all references to Project Gutenberg:

1.E.1. The following sentence, with active links to, or other immediate access to, the full Project Gutenberg™ License must appear prominently whenever any copy of a Project Gutenberg™ work (any work on which the phrase “Project Gutenberg” appears, or with which the phrase “Project Gutenberg” is associated) is accessed, displayed, performed, viewed, copied or distributed:

This eBook is for the use of anyone anywhere in the United States and most other parts of the world at no cost and with almost no restrictions whatsoever. You may copy it, give it away or re-use it under the terms of the Project Gutenberg License included with this eBook or online at www.gutenberg.org. If you are not located in the United States, you will have to check the laws of the country where you are located before using this eBook.

1.E.2. If an individual Project Gutenberg™ electronic work is derived from texts not protected by U.S. copyright law (does not contain a notice indicating that it is posted with permission of the copyright holder), the work can be copied and distributed to anyone in the United States without paying any fees or charges. If you are redistributing or providing access to a work with the phrase “Project Gutenberg” associated with or appearing on the work, you must comply either with the requirements of paragraphs 1.E.1 through 1.E.7 or obtain permission for the use of the work and the Project Gutenberg™ trademark as set forth in paragraphs 1.E.8 or 1.E.9.

1.E.3. If an individual Project Gutenberg™ electronic work is posted with the permission of the copyright holder, your use and distribution must comply with both paragraphs 1.E.1 through 1.E.7 and any additional terms imposed by the copyright holder. Additional terms will be linked to the Project Gutenberg™ License for all works posted with the permission of the copyright holder found at the beginning of this work.

1.E.4. Do not unlink or detach or remove the full Project Gutenberg™ License terms from this work, or any files containing a part of this work or any other work associated with Project Gutenberg™.

1.E.5. Do not copy, display, perform, distribute or redistribute this electronic work, or any part of this electronic work, without prominently displaying the sentence set forth in paragraph 1.E.1 with active links or immediate access to the full terms of the Project Gutenberg™ License.

1.E.6. You may convert to and distribute this work in any binary, compressed, marked up, nonproprietary or proprietary form, including any word processing or hypertext form. However, if you provide access to or distribute copies of a Project Gutenberg™ work in a format other than “Plain Vanilla ASCII” or other format used in the official version posted on the official Project Gutenberg™ website (www.gutenberg.org), you must, at no additional cost, fee or expense to the user, provide a copy, a means of exporting a copy, or a means of obtaining a copy upon request, of the work in its original “Plain Vanilla ASCII” or other form. Any alternate format must include the full Project Gutenberg™ License as specified in paragraph 1.E.1.

1.E.7. Do not charge a fee for access to, viewing, displaying, performing, copying or distributing any Project Gutenberg™ works unless you comply with paragraph 1.E.8 or 1.E.9.

1.E.8. You may charge a reasonable fee for copies of or providing access to or distributing Project Gutenberg™ electronic works provided that:

- You pay a royalty fee of 20% of the gross profits you derive from the use of Project Gutenberg™ works calculated using the method you already use to calculate your applicable taxes. The fee is owed to the owner of the Project Gutenberg™ trademark, but he has agreed to donate royalties under this paragraph to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation. Royalty payments must be paid within 60 days following each date on which you prepare (or are legally required to prepare) your periodic tax returns. Royalty payments should be clearly marked as such and sent to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation at the address specified in Section 4, “Information about donations to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation.”

- You provide a full refund of any money paid by a user who notifies you in writing (or by e-mail) within 30 days of receipt that s/he does not agree to the terms of the full Project Gutenberg™ License. You must require such a user to return or destroy all copies of the works possessed in a physical medium and discontinue all use of and all access to other copies of Project Gutenberg™ works.
- You provide, in accordance with paragraph 1.F.3, a full refund of any money paid for a work or a replacement copy, if a defect in the electronic work is discovered and reported to you within 90 days of receipt of the work.
- You comply with all other terms of this agreement for free distribution of Project Gutenberg™ works.

1.E.9. If you wish to charge a fee or distribute a Project Gutenberg™ electronic work or group of works on different terms than are set forth in this agreement, you must obtain permission in writing from the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation, the manager of the Project Gutenberg™ trademark. Contact the Foundation as set forth in Section 3 below.

1.F.

1.F.1. Project Gutenberg volunteers and employees expend considerable effort to identify, do copyright research on, transcribe and proofread works not protected by U.S. copyright law in creating the Project Gutenberg™ collection. Despite these efforts, Project Gutenberg™ electronic works, and the medium on which they may be stored, may contain “Defects,” such as, but not limited to, incomplete, inaccurate or corrupt data, transcription errors, a copyright or other intellectual property infringement, a defective or damaged disk or other medium, a computer virus, or computer codes that damage or cannot be read by your equipment.

1.F.2. LIMITED WARRANTY, DISCLAIMER OF DAMAGES - Except for the “Right of Replacement or Refund” described in paragraph 1.F.3, the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation, the owner of the Project Gutenberg™ trademark, and any other party distributing a Project Gutenberg™ electronic work under this agreement, disclaim all liability to you for damages, costs and expenses, including legal fees. YOU AGREE THAT YOU HAVE NO REMEDIES FOR NEGLIGENCE, STRICT LIABILITY, BREACH OF WARRANTY OR BREACH OF CONTRACT EXCEPT THOSE PROVIDED IN PARAGRAPH 1.F.3. YOU AGREE THAT THE FOUNDATION, THE TRADEMARK OWNER, AND ANY DISTRIBUTOR UNDER THIS AGREEMENT WILL NOT BE LIABLE TO YOU FOR ACTUAL, DIRECT, INDIRECT, CONSEQUENTIAL, PUNITIVE OR INCIDENTAL DAMAGES EVEN IF YOU GIVE NOTICE OF THE POSSIBILITY OF SUCH DAMAGE.

1.F.3. LIMITED RIGHT OF REPLACEMENT OR REFUND - If you discover a defect in this electronic work within 90 days of receiving it, you can receive a refund of the money (if any) you paid for it by sending a written explanation to the person you received the work from. If you received the work on a physical medium, you must return the medium with your written explanation. The person or entity that provided you with the defective work may elect to provide a replacement copy in lieu of a refund. If you received the work electronically, the person or entity providing it to you may choose to give you a second opportunity to receive the work electronically in lieu of a refund. If the second copy is also defective, you may demand a refund in writing without further opportunities to fix the problem.

1.F.4. Except for the limited right of replacement or refund set forth in paragraph 1.F.3, this work is provided to you ‘AS-IS’, WITH NO OTHER WARRANTIES OF ANY KIND, EXPRESS OR IMPLIED, INCLUDING BUT NOT LIMITED TO WARRANTIES OF MERCHANTABILITY OR FITNESS FOR ANY PURPOSE.

1.F.5. Some states do not allow disclaimers of certain implied warranties or the exclusion or limitation of certain types of damages. If any disclaimer or limitation set forth in this agreement violates the law of the state applicable to this agreement, the agreement shall be interpreted to make the maximum disclaimer or limitation permitted by the applicable state law. The invalidity or unenforceability of any provision of this agreement shall not void the remaining provisions.

1.F.6. INDEMNITY - You agree to indemnify and hold the Foundation, the trademark owner, any agent or employee of the Foundation, anyone providing copies of Project Gutenberg™ electronic works in accordance with this agreement, and any volunteers associated with the production, promotion and distribution of Project Gutenberg™ electronic works, harmless from all liability, costs and expenses, including legal fees, that arise directly or indirectly from any of the following which you do or cause to occur: (a) distribution of this or any Project Gutenberg™ work, (b) alteration, modification, or additions or deletions to any Project Gutenberg™ work, and (c) any Defect you cause.

Section 2. Information about the Mission of Project Gutenberg™

Project Gutenberg™ is synonymous with the free distribution of electronic works in formats

readable by the widest variety of computers including obsolete, old, middle-aged and new computers. It exists because of the efforts of hundreds of volunteers and donations from people in all walks of life.

Volunteers and financial support to provide volunteers with the assistance they need are critical to reaching Project Gutenberg™'s goals and ensuring that the Project Gutenberg™ collection will remain freely available for generations to come. In 2001, the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation was created to provide a secure and permanent future for Project Gutenberg™ and future generations. To learn more about the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation and how your efforts and donations can help, see Sections 3 and 4 and the Foundation information page at www.gutenberg.org.

Section 3. Information about the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation

The Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation is a non-profit 501(c)(3) educational corporation organized under the laws of the state of Mississippi and granted tax exempt status by the Internal Revenue Service. The Foundation's EIN or federal tax identification number is 64-6221541. Contributions to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation are tax deductible to the full extent permitted by U.S. federal laws and your state's laws.

The Foundation's business office is located at 809 North 1500 West, Salt Lake City, UT 84116, (801) 596-1887. Email contact links and up to date contact information can be found at the Foundation's website and official page at www.gutenberg.org/contact

Section 4. Information about Donations to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation

Project Gutenberg™ depends upon and cannot survive without widespread public support and donations to carry out its mission of increasing the number of public domain and licensed works that can be freely distributed in machine-readable form accessible by the widest array of equipment including outdated equipment. Many small donations (\$1 to \$5,000) are particularly important to maintaining tax exempt status with the IRS.

The Foundation is committed to complying with the laws regulating charities and charitable donations in all 50 states of the United States. Compliance requirements are not uniform and it takes a considerable effort, much paperwork and many fees to meet and keep up with these requirements. We do not solicit donations in locations where we have not received written confirmation of compliance. To SEND DONATIONS or determine the status of compliance for any particular state visit www.gutenberg.org/donate.

While we cannot and do not solicit contributions from states where we have not met the solicitation requirements, we know of no prohibition against accepting unsolicited donations from donors in such states who approach us with offers to donate.

International donations are gratefully accepted, but we cannot make any statements concerning tax treatment of donations received from outside the United States. U.S. laws alone swamp our small staff.

Please check the Project Gutenberg web pages for current donation methods and addresses. Donations are accepted in a number of other ways including checks, online payments and credit card donations. To donate, please visit: www.gutenberg.org/donate

Section 5. General Information About Project Gutenberg™ electronic works

Professor Michael S. Hart was the originator of the Project Gutenberg™ concept of a library of electronic works that could be freely shared with anyone. For forty years, he produced and distributed Project Gutenberg™ eBooks with only a loose network of volunteer support.

Project Gutenberg™ eBooks are often created from several printed editions, all of which are confirmed as not protected by copyright in the U.S. unless a copyright notice is included. Thus, we do not necessarily keep eBooks in compliance with any particular paper edition.

Most people start at our website which has the main PG search facility: www.gutenberg.org.

This website includes information about Project Gutenberg™, including how to make donations to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation, how to help produce our new eBooks, and how to subscribe to our email newsletter to hear about new eBooks.