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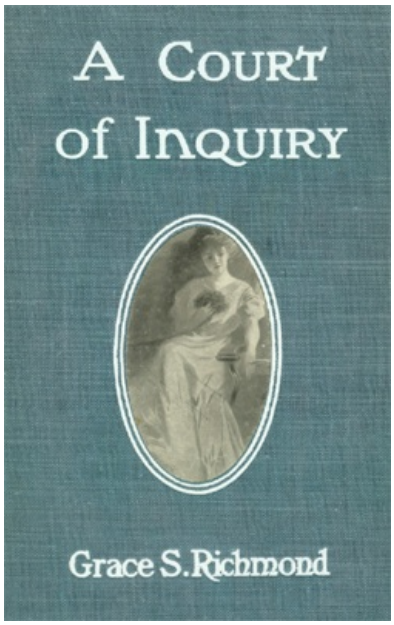

"'We four,' declared the Skeptic, 'constitute a private Court of Inquiry into the Condition of Our Friends'"

A COURT OF INQUIRY

By GRACE S. RICHMOND

Author of "Red Pepper Burns," "Mrs. Red Pepper,"
"Second Violin," Etc.

WITH FOUR ILLUSTRATIONS

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TO

C. R. P. AND M. B. P.

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PART I

A Court of Inquiry

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and Other Tales

I

ALTHEA

Nothing impaired
but all disordered.
—*Midsummer Night's Dream.*

THERE are four guest-rooms in my house. It is not a large house, and how there came to be so many rooms to spare for the entertaining of friends is not a story to be told here. It is only a few years since they were all full—and not with guests. But they are nearly always full now. And when I assign each room it is after taking thought.

There are two men's rooms and two for women. The men's rooms have belonged to men, and therefore they suit other men, who drop into them and use their belongings, and tell me they were never more comfortable. The third room is for one after another of the girls and women who visit me. The fourth room——

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"Is anybody really good enough to sleep in this place?"

It was the Skeptic, looking over my shoulder. He had chanced to be passing, saw me standing in the doorway in an attitude of adoration, and glanced in over my head. He had continued to look from sheer astonishment.

"I should expect to have to take off my shoes, and put on a white cassock over my tennis flannels before I could enter here," he observed.

"You would not be allowed to enter, even in that inappropriate costume," I replied. "I keep this room only for the very nicest of my girl friends. The trouble is——"

"The trouble is—you're full up with our bunch, and have got to put Miss Althea here, whether she turns out to be the sort or not."

I had not expected the Skeptic to be so shrewd—shrewd though he often is. Being also skeptical, his skepticism sometimes overcolours his imagination.

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"Suppose she should leave her slippers kicking around over those white rugs, drop her kimono in the middle of that pond-lily bed, and—er—attach a mound of chewing-gum to the corner of the mirror," he propounded.

"I should send her home."

"No—you could do better than that. Make her change rooms with the Philosopher. He wouldn't leave a speck the size of a molecule on all that whiteness."

"I don't believe he would," I agreed. As the Skeptic went laughing away downstairs I turned again into the room, in order that I might tie back the little inner muslin curtains, to let the green branches outside show between.

Althea arrived at five. The Skeptic, in tennis flannels, was lounging on the porch as she came up the steps, and scanned her critically over the racquet he still held, after a brisk set-to with the Gay Lady, who is one of my other guests. (We call her the Gay Lady because of her flower-bright face, her trick of smiling when other people frown, and because of a certain soft sparkle and glow about her whole personality, as indescribable as it is captivating). The Gay Lady had gone indoors to dress for the evening, and the Philosopher had not returned from the long daily tramp by which he keeps himself in trim. The Lad was on the porch mending some fishing-tackle—my Lad, with the clear young eyes which see things.

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Althea gave the Skeptic a glance, the Lad a smile, and me a hearty embrace. I had never seen her before, and her visit had been brought about by a request from her mother, an old friend, who was anxious to have her daughter spend a pleasant vacation in the absence of most of the girl's family.

It was impossible not to like my new guest at once. She was a healthy, hearty, blooming sort of girl, good to look at, pleasant company to have about, and, as I soon learned, sweet-tempered to a degree which it seemed nothing could upset. She followed me upstairs, talking brightly all the way, and made her entrance into the white room as a pink hollyhock might drop unconcernedly into a pan of milk.

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"What a lovely, cool-looking room!" she cried, and dropped her coat and umbrella upon the bed.

The Lad, following with her handbag, stopped to look at his tennis shoes before he set foot upon the white rug, and dusted off the bag with a somewhat grimy handkerchief before he stood it on the white-tiled hearth. The Lad knows how I feel about the room, and though he races into his own with muddy feet, stands in awe of the place where only girls are made at home.

I have but two maid-servants, both of whom must be busy in kitchen and dining-room when the house is full of guests. So I always make the rounds of the bedrooms in the evening, to see to lights and water, and to turn down the coverings on the beds. The Skeptic's room needed only a touch here and there to put it in order for the night. The Philosopher's needed none. The Gay Lady had left her pretty, rose-hung quarters looking as if a lady lived in them, and had but dropped a dainty reminder of herself here and there to give them character—an embroidered [Page 8] dressing-case on the bureau, an attractive travelling work-box on the table by her bed, a photograph, a lace-bordered handkerchief, a gossamer scarf on a chair-back ready for use if she should need it for a stroll in the moonlight with the Skeptic. The closet door, ajar, gave a glimpse of summer frocks, hanging in order on padded hangers brought in a trunk; beneath, a row of incredibly small, smart shoes stood awaiting their turn. Even the Gay Lady's trunk was clad in a trim, beflowered cover of linen, and looked a part of the place. I smiled to myself as I turned down the white sheets over my best down-filled quilt of pale pink, and thought of the Gay Lady's delightful custom of keeping her room swept and dusted without letting anybody know when she did it.

I felt my way across Althea's room to light the lamp—there are no electrics in my old country home. As I went in I stumbled over a rug whose corner had been drawn into a bunch by the edge of a trunk which had been pulled too far toward the middle of the room. I encountered a chair hung full with clothing; I pushed what felt like a shoe out of my path. [Page 9]

It took some time for me to find the match-box, which ordinarily stands on a corner of the dressing-table. My groping hand encountered all sorts of unfamiliar objects in its quest, and it was not without a premonition of what I was about to see that I finally lit the lamp and looked around me.

Well—of course she had unpacked hurriedly, as hurriedly dressed for dinner, and she had been detained downstairs ever since. I should not judge in haste. Doubtless in the morning she would put things to rights. I removed a trunk-tray from the bed, hung up several frocks in the closet, cleared away the rest of the belongings from the counterpane, and arranged Althea's bed for the night. I did the rest of my work quickly, and returned to lower the light.

It couldn't be—really, no—it couldn't be! There must be some other way of accounting for those scratches on the hitherto spotless white wall, now marred by five long, brown marks, where a match had been drawn again and again before it struck into light! [Page 10]

It *couldn't* have been Althea. Yet—those marks were never there before. It was full daylight when my guest had arrived; she could have had no need for artificial light. Wait—there lay a long, black object on the white cover of the dressing-table—a curling iron!

In the hall I ran into the Skeptic.

"I beg your pardon," he cried under his breath. "I came up for her scarf. She said it was just inside her door, on her trunk. May I go in?"

"I'll get it for you," said I, and turned inside. The Skeptic stood outside the door, looking into the dimness. I could not find the scarf. I would not turn up the light. I searched and searched vainly.

"Let me give you something to see by," said the Skeptic, and before I could prevent him he had bolted into the room and turned up the lamp. "Here it is," said he, and caught up some article of apparel from the dressing-table. "Oh, no—this must be—a sash," said he, and dropped it. He stood looking about him.

"Go away," said I sternly. "I'll find it." [Page 11]

"I don't think you will," said he, "in this—er—this—pandemonium."

I walked over to the dressing-table and put out the lamp. "Now will you go away?" said I.

"You were expeditious," said he, making for the hall, and stumbling over something as he went, "but not quite expeditious enough. Never mind about the scarf. I think I'll let the Philosopher take the Girl Guest to walk—the Gay Lady's good enough for me. I say"—as he moved toward the staircase and I followed—"don't you think we'd better move the Philosopher in to-morrow?"

"To-morrow," said I with assumed conviction, "it will be different. Please reserve your judgment."

I tried to reserve my own. I did not go into Althea's room again until the next evening at the same hour. I found ten articles strewn where five had lain before. A bottle of something green had been tipped over upon the white embroidered cover of my dressing-table. A spot of ink adorned the edge of the sheet, and the condition of the bed showed plainly that an afternoon nap upon it [Page 12]

had ended with some letter writing. I think Althea's shoes had been dusted with one of my best towels. I did not stay to see what else had been done, but I could not help noting three more brown scratches on my white wall.

At the end of the week Althea went away. When she had gone I went up to her room. I had been at work there for some time when a tap at the door interrupted me. The Skeptic stood outside with a hoe and a bushel-basket.

"Want some help?" offered he.

"It's not gentlemanly of you to notice," said I weakly.

"I know it," said he. He came in and inverted the bushel-basket on the hearth and sat down upon it. "But the door was always open, and I couldn't help seeing. If it wasn't shoes and a kimono in the middle of the floor it was a raincoat and rubber boots. Sometimes I stopped to count the things on that dressing——"

"It was *very* ungentlemanly of you!" [Page 13]

"Guilty," he admitted again—but not meekly. There was a sparkle in his eye. "But it isn't often, you see, that a man gets a chance to take notes like this. An open door—it's an invitation to look in. Now, the Gay Lady doesn't leave her door open, except by chance, but I know how it looks inside—by the Gay Lady herself."

"How?" I questioned, my curiosity getting the better of me. "I mean—how can you tell by the look of the Gay Lady that she keeps her room in order?—for she certainly does."

"I knew it," said he triumphantly.

"But how?"

"And I know that you keep yours in order."

"But *how*?"

"Oh, you think we are creatures of no discernment," said he. "But we can see a few things. When a woman, no matter how pretty, pins the back of her collar with a common brass pin——"

I felt of the back of my white stock. Of course I never use them, but his eyes are so keen and—— [Page 14]

He laughed. "The Philosopher liked Miss Althea."

"She has many lovely qualities——" I began.

"Of course. That sort always have. It's their beautiful good-nature that makes them so easy on themselves. Er—by-the-way——Well, well——"

The Skeptic's gaze had fallen upon the brown marks on the white wall, above the lamp. There were now twenty-seven in all. He got up from his bushel-basket and walked over to them. He stood and studied them for a minute in silence. Finally he turned around, looked at me, made a dive for the bushel-basket and the hoe, and hurried out of the door.

"I'll bring up a pail of whitewash," he called.

I shall ask Althea again some time. She really has a great many lovely qualities, as I said to the Skeptic. But there is a little room I have, which I do not call a guest-room, into which I shall put Althea. It has a sort of chocolate paper on the walls, on which I do not think the marks of matches [Page 15] would much show, and it has a general suitableness to this particular guest. I have sometimes harboured small boys there, for the toilet appointments are done in red on brown linen, and curling irons could be laid on them without serious damage. And I've no doubt that she would like that room quite as well.

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II [Page 16]

CAMELLIA

You thought to break a country heart
For pastime, ere you went to town.
—*Tennyson.*

"Did you say Camellia is going to stop here on her way home?" asked the Gay Lady.

"For a few days," I assented.

The Gay Lady was standing in front of the closet in her room, in which hung a row of frocks, on little hangers covered with pale blue ribbon. She sighed pensively as she gazed at the garments. Then she looked at me with a smile. "Would you mind if I keep to my room while Camellia is here?" she asked.

"I should mind very much," said I. "Besides, I've only two good dresses myself."

I went down to the porch. "Camellia is going to stop and make us a short visit on her way home from the South," I announced. [Page 17]

The Skeptic sat up. "Great guns!" he ejaculated. "I must send all my trousers to be pressed."

"Who's Camellia?" queried the Philosopher, looking up calmly from his book.

"Wait and see," replied the Skeptic.

"Probably I shall," agreed the Philosopher. "Meanwhile a little information might not come amiss. Sending all one's trousers to be pressed at once sounds to me serious. Is the lady a connoisseur in men's attire?"

"She may or may not be," said the Skeptic. "The effect is the same. At sight of her my cravat gets under my ear, my coat becomes shapeless, my shoes turn pigeon-toed. We have to dress for dinner every night when Miss Camellia is here."

"I won't," said the Philosopher shortly.

"Wait and see," chuckled the Skeptic. He looked at me. "Ask her," he added.

The Philosopher's fine blue eyes were lifted once more from his book. It was a scientific book, and the habit of inquiry is always strong upon your scientist. "Do *you* dress for dinner when Miss Camellia is here?" he asked of me. "That is—I mean in a way which requires a dinner-coat of us?" [Page 18]

"I think I won't—before she comes," I said. "Afterward—I get out the best I have."

"Which proves none too good," supplemented the Skeptic.

"It's July," said the Philosopher thoughtfully. He looked down at his white ducks. "Couldn't you wire her not to come?" he suggested after a moment.

The Skeptic grinned at me. I shook my head. He shook his head.

"We don't want her not to come," he said, more cheerfully. "She's worth it. To see her is a liberal education. To clothe her would be ruin and desolation. Brace up, Philo—she's certainly worth all the agony of mind she may cause you. I only refrain from falling head over ears in love with her by keeping my hand in my pocket, feeling over my loose change and reminding myself that it's all I have—and it wouldn't buy her a handkerchief."

The Gay Lady spent the morning freshening her frocks—which were somehow never anything but fresh, no matter how much she wore them. It was true that there were not very many of them, and that none of them had cost very much money, but they were fascinating frocks nevertheless, and she had so many clever ways of varying them with knots of ribbon and frills of lace, that one never grew tired of seeing her wear them. [Page 19]

The Skeptic sent several pairs of trousers to be pressed and a bundle of other things to be laundered. I got out a gown I had expected to wear only on state occasions, and did something to the sleeves. The Philosopher was the only person who remained unaffected by the news that Camellia was coming. We envied him his calm.

Camellia arrived. Three trunks arrived at the same time. Camellia's appearance, as she came up the porch steps, while trim and attractive, gave no hint to the Philosopher's eyes, observant though they were, of what was to be expected. He had failed to note the trunks. This was not strange, for Camellia had a beautiful face, and her manner was, as always, charming. [Page 20]

"I don't see," said the Philosopher in my ear, at a moment when Camellia was occupied with the Skeptic and the Gay Lady, "what there is about that to upset you all."

"Don't you?" said I pityingly. Evidently, from what he had heard us say, he had expected her to arrive in an elaborate reception gown—or possibly in spangles and lace!

Camellia went to her room—the white room. This time I had no fears for the embroidered linen on my dressing-table or for the purity of my white wall. I repaired to my own room—*to dress for dinner*. As I passed the porch door on my way I looked out. The Gay Lady had vanished—so had the Skeptic. The Philosopher was walking up and down—in white ducks. He hailed me as I passed.

"See here," he said under his breath. "I thought you people were all guying in that talk about dressing for dinner while—while Miss Camellia is here. But the Skeptic has gone to do it—if he's

not bluffing. Is it true? Do you mean it? We—that is—we haven't been dressing for dinner—except, of course, you ladies seem always to—but that's different. And it's awfully hot to-night," he added plaintively. [Page 21]

"Don't do it," said I hurriedly. "I don't know any reason why we should—in the country—in July."

He looked at me doubtfully. "But is the Skeptic going to—really?"

"I presume he really is. You see—he has met Camellia before. He knows how she will be looking when she comes down. He admires Camellia very much, and he might possibly feel a little odd—in tennis flannels——"

"It's queer," murmured the Philosopher. "But perhaps I'd better not be behind in the procession, even if I wilt my collar." He fingered lovingly the soft, rolled-over collar of his white shirt, with its loose-knotted tie, and sighed again. Then he moved toward the stairs.

We were all on the porch when Camellia came down. The Gay Lady had put on a white muslin—the finest, simplest thing. The Philosopher, pushing a finger between his collar and his neck, to see if the wilting process had begun, eyed the Gay Lady approvingly. "Whatever she wears," he whispered to her, "she can't win over you." [Page 22]

The Gay Lady laughed. "Yes, she can," she declared.

She did. Camellia was a vision when she came floating out upon the porch. The Philosopher was glad he had on his dinner-coat—I saw it in his eye. The Skeptic's tanned cheek turned a reddish shade—he looked as if he felt pigeon-toed. The Gay Lady held her pretty head high as she smiled approval on the guest. Camellia's effect on the Gay Lady was to make her feel like a school-girl—she had repeatedly avowed it to me in private.

Camellia never seemed conscious of her fine attire—that could always truthfully be said. Although on the present occasion she was dressed as duchesses dress for a lawn-party, she seemed supremely unconscious of the fact. The only trouble was that the rest of us could not be unconscious of it. [Page 23]

The dinner moved slowly. We all did our best, including the Philosopher, whose collar was slowly melting, so that he had to keep his chin well up, lest it crush the linen hopelessly beneath. The Skeptic joked ceaselessly, but one could see that all the time he feared his cravat might be awry. The dinner itself was a much more formal affair than usual—somehow that always seemed necessary when Camellia was one's guest. We were glad when it was over and we could go back to the cool recesses of the porch.

The next morning Camellia wore an unpretentious dress of white—one which made the thing the Gay Lady had worn at dinner the evening before seem to her memory poor indeed. Later in the morning the Skeptic took Camellia boating on the river, and she went up and dressed for it in a yachting suit of white flannel. It was some slight consolation that she came back from the river much bedraggled about the skirts, for the boat had sprung a leak and all the Skeptic's gallantry could not keep her dry. But this necessitated a change before luncheon, and some of us were nearly unable to eat with Camellia sitting there in the frock she had put on at the last minute. She was a dream in the pale pink of it, and the Skeptic appeared to be losing his head. On the contrary, the Philosopher was seen to examine her thoughtfully through the eyeglasses he sometimes wears for reading, and which he had forgotten to remove. [Page 24]

On the morning of the third day I discovered the Gay Lady mending a little hole in the skirt of a tiny-flowered dimity, her bright eyes suspiciously misty.

"I'm a g-goose, I know," she explained, smiling at me through the mist, "but it does make me absurdly envious. My things look so—so—*duddy*—beside hers."

"They're not duddy!" I cried warmly. "But I know what you mean. My very best gown, that I had made in town by Lautier herself, seems countrified. Don't mind. Our things will look quite right again—next week."

"What do you suppose she will wear to-night?" sighed she.

"Heaven only knows," I answered feebly.

What she wore was a French frock which finished us all. I had fears for the sanity of the Skeptic. I was sure he did not know what he was eating. He could not, of course, sit with his hands in his trousers' pockets, from time to time giving his loose change a warning jingle, to remind himself that he could not buy her handkerchiefs. But the Philosopher appeared to retain his self-control. I caught his scientific eye fixed upon the pearl necklace Camellia wore. It struck me that the Philosopher and the Skeptic had temporarily exchanged characters. [Page 25]

In the late afternoon, at the end of the sixth day, Camellia left us. The Skeptic and the Philosopher came to dinner in flannels—it had grown slightly cooler. The Gay Lady and I wore things we had not worn for a week—and I was sure the Gay Lady had never looked prettier. After dinner, in the early dusk, we sat upon the porch. For some time we were more or less silent. Then the Skeptic, from the depths of a bamboo lounging chair, his legs stretching half-way across the

porch in a relaxed attitude they had not worn for a week, heaved a sigh which seemed to struggle up from the depths of his interior. [Page 26]

The Philosopher rolled over in the hammock, where he had been reposing on his back, his hands clasped under his head, and looked scrutinizingly at his friend.

"Don't take it too hard," he counselled gently. "It's not worth it."

"I know it," replied the Skeptic with another sigh. "But I wish I were worth—millions."

"Oh, no, you don't," argued the Philosopher.

The Gay Lady and I exchanged glances—through the twilight. We would have arisen and fled, but the Skeptic caught at my skirts.

"Don't go," he begged. "I'm not really insane—only delirious. It'll wear off."

"It will," agreed the Philosopher.

"I suppose," began the Skeptic, after some further moments of silence, "that it's really mostly clothes."

"She's a very charming girl," said the Gay Lady quickly. "I don't blame you."

"Honestly," said the Skeptic, sitting up and looking at her, "don't you think her clothes are about all there is of her?" [Page 27]

"No," said the Gay Lady stoutly.

"Yes," said the Philosopher comfortably.

"Yes—and no," said I, as the Skeptic looked at me.

"A girl," argued the Philosopher, suddenly pulling himself out of the hammock and beginning to pace the floor, "who could come here to this unpretentious country place with three trunks, and then wear their contents——Look here"—he paused in front of me and looked at me as piercingly as somewhat short-sighted blue eyes can look in the twilight—"did she ever wear the same thing twice?"

"I believe not," I admitted.

"A girl who could come to a place like this and make a show figure of herself in clothes that any fool could see cost—Cæsar, what must they cost!—and change four times a day—and keep us dancing around in starched collars——"

"You didn't have to——"

"Yes, we did—pardon me! We did, not to be innocently—not insolently—mistaken for farm hands. I tell you, a girl like that would keep a man humping to furnish the wherewithal. For what," [Page 28] continued the Philosopher, growing very earnest—"what, if she'd wear that sort of clothes here, would she consider necessary for—for—visiting her rich friends? Tell me that!"

We could not tell him that. We did not try.

The Gay Lady was pinching one of her little flowered dimity ruffles into plaits with an agitated thumb and finger. I was sure the Skeptic's present state of mind was of more moment to her than she would ever let appear to anybody.

The Skeptic rose slowly from his chair.

"Will you walk down the garden path with me?" he asked the Gay Lady.

They sauntered slowly away into the twilight.

The Philosopher came and sat down by me.

"He's not really hit," said he presently; "he's only temporarily upset. I was a trifle bowled over myself. She's certainly a stunning girl. But when I try to recall what she and I talked about when we sat out here together, at such times as he was willing to leave her in my company, I have really no recollection. When it was too dark to see her clothes—or her smile—I remember being [Page 29] once or twice distinctly bored. Now—the Gay Lady—don't you think she always looks well?"

"Lovely," I agreed heartily.

"I may not know much about it, being a man," said he modestly, "but I should naturally think the Gay Lady's clothes cost considerably less than Miss Camellia's."

"Considerably."

"Though I never really thought about them before," he owned. "I don't suppose a man usually does think much about a woman's clothes—unless he's forced to. During this last week it occurs to me we've been forced to—eh?"

"Somewhat." I was smiling to myself. I had never imagined that the Philosopher troubled himself with such matters at all.

"And I don't think," he went on, "I like being forced to spend my time speculating on the cost of anybody's clothing.—How comfortable it is on this porch! And how jolly not to have to sit up in a black coat—on a July evening!" [Page 30]

The Skeptic and the Gay Lady returned—after an hour. The Skeptic, as he came into the light which streamed out across the porch from the hall, looked decidedly more cheerful than when he had left us. Although it had been too dark in the garden to see either the Gay Lady's clothes or her smile, I doubted if he had been bored.

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III [Page 31]

DAHLIA

O, weary fa' the women fo'k,
For they winna let a body be!
—*James Hogg.*

My neighbour Dahlia has returned. There is a considerable stretch of lawn, also a garden and a small orchard, intervening between her father's property and mine, not to mention a thick hedge; but in spite of these obstructions it did not take Dahlia long to discover that there were guests upon my porch. I think she recognized the Skeptic's long legs from her window, which looks down my way through a vista of tree-tops. At all events, on the morning after her arrival she appeared, coming through the hedge, down the garden path and across the lawn, a fresh and attractive figure in a pink muslin with ruffles, and one of those coquettish, white-frilled sunbonnets summer-girls wear in the country. [Page 32]

Dahlia is very pretty, very good company, and likable from many points of view. If only——

"Who's this coming to invade our completeness?" queried the Philosopher, looking up from his book of trout flies. Fishing, in its scientific aspect, presents many attractions to our Philosopher, although he spends so much time in getting ready to do it scientifically that he seldom finds much left in which to fish.

The Skeptic glanced at the figure coming over the lawn. Then he made a gesture as if he were about to turn up his coat collar. He hitched himself slightly behind one of the white pillars of the porch.

"Keep cool; you'll soon know," he replied to the Philosopher. "And once knowing, you'll always know."

The Philosopher looked slightly mystified at this oracular information, and gazed rather curiously at Dahlia as she came near, before he dropped his eyes to his trout flies.

The Skeptic appeared to be absorbed in a letter which he had hastily extracted from his pocket. It was merely a brief business communication in type, as I could not help seeing over his shoulder, but he withdrew his attention from it with difficulty as Dahlia paused before him. Her first greeting was for him, although I had risen just behind him. [Page 33]

"Oh—how do you do, Miss Dahlia?" cried the Skeptic, getting to his feet and receiving her outstretched hand in his own. Then he made as if to pass her on to me, but she wouldn't be passed until she had said something under her breath to him, smiling up into his face, her fingers clinging to his.

"Been—er—horribly busy," I heard him murmur in reply. I thought his hand showed symptoms of letting go before hers did.

I greeted Dahlia, introducing her to the Gay Lady, who smiled at her from over a handkerchief she was embroidering with my initials. I presented the Philosopher, who immediately presented his trout flies. She scanned him closely—the Philosopher is very good-looking (almost—but not quite—better-looking than the Skeptic)—then she dropped down upon one of the porch cushions by his side. He politely offered her a chair, but she insisted that she liked the cushion better, and we found it impossible to doubt that she did. At all events she remained upon it, close beside the Philosopher, as long as he retained his position; and she appeared to become absorbed in the trout flies, asking many questions, and exclaiming over some of them in a way which showed her to be of a most sympathetic disposition. [Page 34]

Finally the Philosopher seized upon an opportunity and rose. "Well," he observed, "I believe I'll go and try my luck."

Dahlia looked up at him. Her pretty face took on a beseeching expression.

The Philosopher regarded her uncomprehendingly.

"You will excuse——" he began.

But Dahlia did not let him finish. "I simply love to go fishing," she said softly.

"Do you?" said the Philosopher, blinking stupidly. "It is great sport, I think, myself."

Even then I believe he would have turned away. He is not used to it—at least, in Dahlia's style. But she detained him. [Page 35]

"Are you really not going to ask me?" she said, looking like a disappointed child.

I saw the Gay Lady look at her. The Skeptic glanced at the Gay Lady. I observed the Skeptic. But the Philosopher rose to the occasion. He is invariably courteous.

"Why, certainly," he responded, "if you would really care to go. It's rather a long walk to the stream and—I'm afraid the boat leaks considerably, but——"

"Oh, I don't mind that," she exulted, jumping up, her cheeks pink with delight. "In fact, I know that boat of old——" She gave the Skeptic a look from under her eyelashes, but he was looking at the Gay Lady and it failed to hit him. "Are you ready? All right. And I've my sunbonnet—just the thing. You shall see what we'll catch," she called back to us, as the two walked away.

The Skeptic got the pillar between himself and the departing pair. His face was convulsed with mirth. He slapped his knee. "I said he'd soon know," he chuckled, holding himself in with an effort, "but I didn't think he'd find out quite so soon. Smoke and ashes—but that was quick work!" [Page 36]

He turned about and looked up at the Gay Lady. "Will you go fishing?" he inquired, still chuckling.

"No, thank you," responded the Gay Lady, smiling at her embroidery without looking up.

"Will you go fishing?"

The inquiry was directed at me.

I shook my head.

The Skeptic fell into an attitude of mock despair. Then he sat up. "I'm going to go down and hide behind the big tree at the bend," he declared. "I want to see Philo when she——"

The Gay Lady spoke to me. "Do you think I'm getting that K too heavy?" she asked.

The Skeptic laughed, and strolled away—not in the direction of the trout stream.

Dahlia and the Philosopher came back just as luncheon was served. Dahlia was looking pinker than ever, and I thought the Philosopher's tan had rather a pinkish hue, also. I felt obliged to ask Dahlia to stay to luncheon and she promptly accepted. Throughout the meal she was very gay, sitting at my round table between the Philosopher and the Skeptic, and plying both with [Page 37] attentions. It is a singular phrase to use, in speaking of a girl, but I know no other that applies so well—in Dahlia's case.

After luncheon the Philosopher bolted. His movements are usually deliberate, but I never saw a quicker exit made from a dining-room which has only two doors. One door leads into the hall, the other to the pantry. The rest of us went out the hall door. When we reached the porch the Philosopher was missing. There is no explanation except that he went out by the pantry door.

On the porch the Skeptic said, "I must run down to the barn and look after Skylark's foot. He cut himself when I was out on him yesterday."

He hastened away down the driveway.

Dahlia looked after him.

"Is Skylark here?" she asked. "Oh, how I want to see the dear thing! And he's cut his foot!—I'm going to run down to the barn, too, and see him."

And she hurried away after the Skeptic.

"I think I'll go in and sleep a while," said the Gay Lady to me. Her expressive lips had a curious little twist of scorn. [Page 38]

"I should, too, if I hadn't a new guest," said I.

We tried not to smile at each other, but we couldn't quite help it.

The Gay Lady went away to her room. I heard her close the blinds on the side that looked off toward the barn, and, glancing up, saw that she had turned down the slats tightly.

I think it must have been well on toward four in the afternoon when the white sunbonnet at last disappeared through the gap in the hedge. The Skeptic came back up the garden path at the pace of an escaping convict, and went tearing up the stairs to his room. I heard him splashing like a seal in his bath. Presently he came out, freshly attired and went away down the road, in the opposite direction from that in which lay the house beyond the hedge.

Dahlia came over at twilight that evening—to bring me a great bunch of golden-glow. She was captivatingly arrayed in blue. She remained for an hour or so. When she went away the Skeptic [Page 39] walked home with her. He was forced to do it. The Philosopher had disappeared again, quite without warning, some twenty minutes earlier.

She came over the next afternoon. On the day following she practically took up her residence with us. I thought of inviting her to bring a trunk and occupy the white room. On the fourth night I accidentally overheard a brief but pregnant colloquy which took place just inside the library door, toward the last of the evening.

"You've got to take her home to-night, old man."

"I won't." It was the Philosopher.

"You've got to. It's your turn. No shirking."

"I'll be hanged if I will."

"I'll be hanged if *I* will. There's a limit."

"I'd always supposed there was. There doesn't seem to be."

"Come along—stand up to it like a man. It's up to you to-night. She can't carry you off bodily."

"I'm not so sure of that." The Philosopher's tone was grim. [Page 40]

So far I had been transfixed. But now I hurried away. I was consumed with anxiety during the next ten minutes, lest they come to blows in settling it. But when they appeared I could tell that they had settled it somehow.

When Dahlia arose and said that she positively must go they both accompanied her. The transit occupied less time than it had done on any previous occasion.

From this time on there was concerted action on the part of our two men. Where one was, the other was. The Gay Lady and I received less attention than we were accustomed to expect—the two men were too busy standing by each other to have much time for us.

"I'm so sorry," said Dahlia, coming over after dinner on the tenth evening, "but I'm going away to-morrow. I've an invitation that I'm simply not allowed to refuse."

The Philosopher's face lit up. He attempted to conceal it by burying his head in his handkerchief for a moment, in mock distress, but his satisfaction showed even behind his ears. The Skeptic bent down and elaborately tied his shoe-ribbon. The Gay Lady regarded Dahlia sweetly, and said, [Page 41] "That's surely very nice for you."

"I think," observed Dahlia, looking coyly from the Skeptic to the Philosopher, "that I shall have to let each of you take me for a farewell walk to-night. You first"—she indicated the Philosopher. "Or shall it be a row for one and a walk for the other?"

She and the Philosopher strolled away toward the river. There had been no way out for him.

"The Englishman, the Scotsman and the Irishman," began the Skeptic, in a conversational tone, "being about to be hanged, were given their choice of a tree. 'The oak for me,' says the Englishman. 'The Scotch elm for mine,' says the Scotsman. 'Faith,' says the Irishman, 'I'll be afther takin' a gooseberry bush.' 'That's too small,' says the hangman. 'I'll wait for it to grow,' says the Irishman contentedly."

Whereat he disappeared. When Dahlia and the Philosopher returned he had not come back. I was amazed at him, but my amazement did not produce him, and the Philosopher accompanied Dahlia [Page 42] home. When they were well away the Skeptic swung himself up over the side of the porch, from among some bushes.

"'All's fair in love and war,'" he grinned. "Besides, the campaign's over. Philo's gained experience. He's a veteran now. He'll never be such easy game again. Haven't we behaved well, on the whole?" he asked the Gay Lady, dropping upon a cushion at her feet.

"I don't think you have," said the Gay Lady gently.

"We haven't! Why not?"

She shook her head. "I refuse to discuss it," she said, as gently as before, but quite firmly.

The Skeptic sighed. "I'm sorry," he declared. "You really don't know——"

"I don't want to know," said the Gay Lady. "Isn't it a lovely, lovely evening?"

"Yes, it's a lovely evening," said the Skeptic, looking up at her. "It would be delightful on the river."

She shook her head again.

"Not nicer than here," she answered. [Page 43]

The Philosopher came back. When he was half-way across the lawn the Skeptic jumped up and rushed forward and offered his shoulder for the Philosopher to lean upon.

"Clear out," said the Philosopher shortly.

"I'm glad to hear it," rejoined the Skeptic. "I feared you might be clear in."

"It's not your fault that I'm not," grunted the Philosopher.

He dropped down upon the porch step in an exhausted way.

The Gay Lady rose.

"The air is making me sleepy," said she in her musically sweet voice. "Good-night."

The Skeptic and the Philosopher looked after her retreating figure even after it ceased to be visible, drifting down the wide, central hall.

"The worst of it is," grumbled the Skeptic, "that an exhibition of that sort of thing always makes the other kind draw off, for fear we may possibly think they're in the same class."

I, too, now said good-night, and went away to let them have it out between them.

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IV

[Page 44]

RHODORA

Youth on the prow, and Pleasure at the helm.
—*Gray.*

THIS morning we had a surprise. Grandmother and Rhodora drove over from Langdale, ten miles away, to spend two days. Grandmother does not belong to us exclusively—she is Grandmother to a large circle of people, all of whom are glad to see her whenever they have the opportunity. Rhodora is a new granddaughter of the old lady—by which I mean to say that Rhodora never saw Grandmother till a fortnight ago, when the girl arrived to pay her a visit.

"I wanted to see you people so much," explained Rhodora, coming breezily upon the porch a step or two in advance of the old lady, "that I thought I'd drive over. Grandmother wanted to come too, so I brought her." [Page 45]

Grandmother's dark eyebrows below her white curls went up a trifle. It was quite evident that she thought she had brought Rhodora, inasmuch as the carriage, the horses, and the old family coachman were all her own. But she did not correct the girl. She is a tiny little lady, with a gentle, somewhat hesitating manner, but her black eyes are very bright, and she sees things with almost as keen a vision as Lad himself.

The Gay Lady was charmed with Grandmother. She put the frail visitor into the easiest chair on the porch, untied her bonnet-strings, smoothed her soft, white curls, and brought a footstool for her little feet. Then she sat by her, listening and talking—doing much more listening than talking—leaving Rhodora to me.

"I'm sorry our men are away to-day," I said to Rhodora, "and Lad is with them. They went early this morning to climb Bluebeard Mountain, and won't be back till night. It is rather quiet here without them."

"Are they young and jolly?" inquired Rhodora. [Page 46]

"They are extremely jolly. As for being young, that depends upon one's point of view," said I. "They are between twenty-five and thirty-five, I believe."

"Pretty wide margin," laughed Rhodora. "And how old is Lad?"

"Fifteen."

"I've had the bad luck to be stuck off with old people all the while lately," remarked Rhodora. She looked at me as she spoke. I wondered if she considered me "old people." Then she glanced at the Gay Lady.

"How old is she?" she inquired.

"I have never asked her."

"Looks like a girl, but I guess she isn't. A real girl would never settle down like that to talk to an old lady like Grandmother," she observed sagely.

I opened my lips—and closed them. I had known Miss Rhodora only about ten minutes, and one does not make caustic speeches to one's guests—if one can help it. But one does take observations upon them. I was taking observations upon Rhodora.

She was decidedly a handsome girl—handsome seems the word. She was rather large, well- [Page 47]
proportioned, blooming in colour, with somewhat strikingly modeled features. She wore sleeves to her elbows, and her arms were round and firm. She sat in a nonchalant attitude in which her arms were considerably in evidence.

"Rhodora," said Grandmother, turning to look our way, "did I bring my little black silk bag from the carriage?"

"Didn't see it," replied Rhodora. "Which way is Bluebeard Mountain?" she inquired of me.

The Gay Lady and I arose at the same instant. I went into the house to search for the bag, and when I could not find it the Gay Lady went away down to the red barn to find if the black silk bag had been left in the carriage. She came back bringing it.

"Thank you, my dear," said Grandmother, with a smile which might have repaid anybody for a much longer trip than that to the carriage.

After a time I managed to exchange places with the Gay Lady, feeling that Rhodora very plainly did consider me an elderly person, and that, in spite of her confidence that the Gay Lady was not [Page 48]
"a real girl," as girls of Rhodora's age use the term, she might take her as a substitute for one.

The Gay Lady took Rhodora down to the river, and out in the boat. I understood from what I heard later that the Gay Lady, although a fine oarswoman, did not row Rhodora about the river. Rhodora began by dropping into the stern seat among the cushions, but the Gay Lady fitted two sets of oars into the rowlocks, and offered Rhodora the position of stroke. The Gay Lady is very sweet and courteous in manner, but I could quite understand that when she offered the oars to Rhodora, Rhodora accepted them and did her best.

When they came back it was time for luncheon, and I took my guests to the white room.

"What a cool, reposeful room, my dear," said Grandmother. She patted her white curls in front of the mirror, which is an old-fashioned, oblong one, in which two people cannot well see themselves at the same time. Rhodora came up behind her, stooped to peer over her shoulder, [Page 49]
and seized upon the ivory comb which lay on the dressing-table. Her elbow, as she ran the comb through her fluffy hair, struck Grandmother's delicate shoulder. The old lady turned and regarded her granddaughter in astonishment.

"Want the comb?" inquired Rhodora, having finished with it herself.

Rhodora went over to the washstand, and washed and splashed, and used one of the towels and threw it back upon the rack so that it overhung all the other fresh towels. Grandmother used one end of Rhodora's towel, and carefully folded and put it in place, looking regretfully at its rumpled condition. She took a clean pocket-handkerchief out of her bag. Rhodora caught sight of it.

"Oh, Grandmother, have you got a spare handkerchief?" she cried. "I've lost mine, I'm afraid."

Grandmother handed her the little square of fine linen, exquisitely embroidered with her own monogram, and took another and plainer one from her bag.

"Try not to lose that one, Granddaughter," she said, in her gentle way. [Page 50]

Rhodora pushed it inside her sleeve. "Oh, I seldom lose two in one day," she assured the handkerchief's owner.

I fear it was rather a dull afternoon for Rhodora. The Gay Lady took Grandmother away after luncheon into the quiet, green-hung library, and tucked her up on the couch, and covered her with a little silk quilt from her own room, and went away and played softly upon the piano in the distance until the old lady fell asleep. Late in the afternoon Grandmother awoke much refreshed, and found the Gay Lady sitting by the window, keeping guard.

"It does one's eyes good to look at you, my dear," were Grandmother's first words, after she had lain for some time quietly observing the figure by the window, freshly dressed in white. The Gay Lady got up and came over to the couch and bent down, smiling.

Just in time for a late dinner our men came home, sunburned and hungry. Seeing guests upon the porch they made for their rooms, and reappeared presently in that irreproachable trim which the dustiest and most disreputable-looking of them seems able to achieve, being given plenty of [Page 51]

water, in the twinkling of an eye.

They were presented to Grandmother. At almost the same moment we were summoned to dinner. The Skeptic gave the old lady his arm. The Philosopher picked up her black silk bag from the porch floor, and followed with it dangling from his hand. Just as she reached the table she dropped her handkerchief, and the Lad sprang for it as a retriever springs for a stick, and handed it to her with his best boyish bow. The old lady beamed. Quite evidently this was the sort of thing to which she was accustomed.

At luncheon Rhodora had rather monopolized the conversation. At dinner she found herself unable to do so. The Philosopher and the Skeptic were too much occupied with Grandmother to be able to attend to Rhodora, beyond lending a polite ear to her remarks now and then and immediately afterward returning to the elderly guest. Grandmother was really a most interesting talker when occasion required it of her, as it certainly did now. We were all charmed with her [Page 52] clever way of putting things, her shrewd observation, her knowledge of and interest in affairs in general.

After dinner the Philosopher escorted her out to her chair on the porch. The Skeptic sat down beside the Gay Lady on a wide, wooden settle close by, and both listened, smiling, to the discussion which had arisen between Grandmother and the Philosopher. It was well worth listening to. The Philosopher, while wholly deferential, held his ground staunchly, but Grandmother worsted him in the end. Her cheeks grew pink, her black eyes shone. It was a captivating spectacle.

I called Rhodora's attention to it. Finding nobody else to do her honour she had entered into conversation with the Lad. Both looked up as I spoke to them.

"Yes, isn't she great!" agreed the Lad softly. "Nicest old lady I ever saw."

"It's too exciting for her, I should say," commented her granddaughter. "I didn't think she ought to come. I could have come alone just as well—I'd a good deal rather. She's getting pretty old." [Page 53]

The Skeptic and the Philosopher each did his duty by Rhodora before the evening was over. The Skeptic played four sets of tennis with her—she is an admirable player—but he beat her until he discovered that she was growing very much annoyed—then he allowed her to win the last set by a game. The Lad, who was watching the bout, announced it to me under his breath with a laugh. Then the Philosopher took Rhodora through the garden and over the place generally.

"I think you should have a shawl about your shoulders, Rhodora," said Grandmother, when the girl and the Philosopher had returned and taken their seats upon the steps of the porch. The twilight had fallen, and the Gay Lady had just wrapped Grandmother in a light garment of her own.

Rhodora shrugged her shoulders. "Heavens, no!" she ejaculated. "Old people are always fussing," she remarked, in a slightly lower tone to the Philosopher. "Because she's frozen is no reason why I should be."

"One could almost pretend to be frozen to please her," returned the Philosopher, in a much lower [Page 54] tone than Rhodora's. "She is the most beautiful old lady I ever saw."

"Goodness, I don't see how you can see anything beautiful about old persons," said the girl. "They give me the creeps."

The Philosopher opened his mouth—and closed it again, quite as I had done in the morning. He looked curiously at Rhodora. By his expression I should judge he was thinking: "After all—what's the use?"

The next afternoon Grandmother and Rhodora went home. When Grandmother was in the carriage the Skeptic tucked her in and put cushions behind her back and a footstool under her feet. Then the Philosopher laid a great nosegay of garden flowers in her lap. She was so pleased she coloured like a girl, and put out her delicate little old hand in its black silk mitt, and he took it in both his and held it close for a minute, looking at her with his blue eyes full of such a boyish expression of affection as his own mother might have seen now and then, years before. I think she would have liked to kiss him, and I am sure he wanted to kiss her, but we were all looking on, [Page 55] and they had known each other but a few hours. Nevertheless, there was something about the little scene which touched us all—except Rhodora, who exclaimed:

"Gracious, Grandmother—I suppose that brings back the days when you had lots of beaux! What a gorgeous jumble of old-fashioned flowers that is, anyhow. I didn't know there were so many kinds in the world!"

The Skeptic hustled her into the carriage, rather as if she were a bag of meal, handed her belongings in after her, shook hands with Grandmother in his most courtly fashion, and stood aside. We waved our hands and handkerchiefs, and Grandmother's fat old horses walked away with her down the driveway.

"It's a pity," said the Skeptic to me impatiently, when they were out of sight around the corner, and we had turned to go back to the house, "that a girl like that can't see herself."

"Rhodora is very young yet," said I. "Perhaps by the time she is even as old as the Gay Lady——"

"You don't think it," declared the Skeptic, looking ahead at the Gay Lady as she walked by the Philosopher over the lawn toward the house. "The two are no more the same sort—than——" he looked toward the garden for inspiration and found it, as many a man before him has found it, when searching after similes for the women he knows—"than those yellow tiger-lilies of yours are like—a clump of hepaticas that you find in the woods in spring." [Page 56]

That evening the Gay Lady had left us, as she sometimes does, and gone in to play soft, old-time melodies on my piano, while the rest of us sat silently listening. The men know well enough that it is useless to follow her in when she goes to play in the twilight—if they did she would send them back again, or stop playing. And as it is worth much to hear her play when she has a certain mood upon her, nobody does anything to break the spell. Sometimes the listening grows almost painful, but before we are quite overwrought she comes back and makes us gay again.

"When I was a boy," said the Skeptic, very softly to me, after the music stopped, "I used to pick out men to admire and follow about, and consume myself with wishing that some day I could be like them. How could a girl like that one we've had here to-day look at our Gay Lady and not want to copy her to the last hair on her head?" [Page 57]

"There are some things which can't be copied," I returned. "She is one of them."

The Skeptic gave me a grateful glance. "You never said a truer thing than that," said he.

Perceiving that he was in a sentimental mood, and that the Gay Lady had stopped playing and was coming out again upon the porch, I turned my attention to the Philosopher. In spite of the music he seemed not in a sentimental mood.

"You have a lot of girl company, first and last, don't you?" he queried, when he and I had agreed upon the beauty of the night.

"It happens so, for some reason," I admitted.

He shook his head regretfully. "If I thought you were going to have anything more like that to-day soon, I should take to the woods," said he.

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V

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AZALEA

It all depends upon a consciousness of values, a sense of proportion.
—Arthur Christopher Benson.

"THE heavens have fallen!" I announced in the doorway of the Gay Lady's room. "Cook is ill—I had the doctor for her in the night. And my little waitress went home just yesterday to her sister's wedding."

"And breakfast to get," responded the Gay Lady, arriving instantly at the point, as she always does. She had been dressing leisurely. Now she made all speed and instead of white linen she slipped into a blue-and-white-checked gingham. "Don't worry—I'll be down in three minutes," she assured me cheerily.

I found Lad building the kitchen fire—in the country we do not have gas ranges. "I'll have her roaring in a jiff," he cried. "I learned a dandy way camping last year." [Page 59]

Breakfast came off nearly on schedule time. The Gay Lady's omelet was a feathery success, her coffee perfect, my muffins above reproach. Lad had helped set the table, he had looked over the fruit, he had skimmed the cream.

Azalea came in a little late. She had been my guest for a week, and a delightful guest, too. She has a glorious voice for singing, and she is very clever and entertaining—everybody likes her.

Of course, when I arose to take away the fruit-plates and bring on the breakfast, the fact that I was servantless came out. To the Philosopher and the Skeptic, who were immediately solicitous, I explained that we should get on very well.

"We'll see that you do," promised the Skeptic. "There are a few things I flatter myself I can do as well as the next man—or woman. Consider me at your service."

"The same here," declared the Philosopher. "And—I say—don't fuss too much. Have a cold lunch—bread and milk, you know, or something like that." [Page 60]

I smiled, and said that would not be necessary. Nor was it. For five years after my marriage I had been my own maid-servant—and those were happy days. My right hand had by no means forgotten her cunning. As for both the Gay Lady's pretty hands—they were very accomplished in household arts. And she had put on the blue-and-white gingham.

"I can wipe dishes," offered the Philosopher, as we rose from the table.

"It's a useful art," said the Gay Lady. "In ten minutes we'll be ready for you."

The Skeptic looked about him. Then he hurried away without saying anything. Two minutes later I found him making his bed.

"Go away," he commanded me. "It'll be ship-shape, never fear. You remember I was sent to a military school when I was a youngster."

From below, as I made Azalea's bed, the strains of one of the Liszt Hungarian Rhapsodies floated up to me. Azalea was playing. We had fallen into the habit of drifting into the living-room, where the piano stood, every morning immediately after breakfast, to hear Azalea play. In the evenings [Page 61] she sang to us; but one does not sing directly after breakfast, and only second in delight to hearing Azalea's superb voice was listening to her matchless touch upon the keyboard. I said to myself, as I went about the "upstairs work"—work that the Skeptic, with all his good will, could not do, not being allowed to cross certain thresholds—that we should sorely miss Azalea's music when she should go away next week.

The Gay Lady and I managed luncheon with very little exertion, we had so much assistance. Dinner cost us rather more trouble, for Cook's dinners are always delicious, and we could not have a falling off under our régime. But it was a great success, and our men praised us until we felt our labours fully repaid. Still, we were a trifle fatigued at the end of the day. Cook had needed a good deal of waiting upon, and though the Gay Lady had insisted on sharing this service with me it had required many steps and the exercise of some tact—Cook having been fully persuaded all day that her end was near.

"I have told her six times that people don't die of lumbago," said the Gay Lady, "but her tears flow [Page 62] just as copiously as ever. I've written three letters to her friends for her. To-morrow I suppose I shall have to write her last will and testament."

But on the morrow Cook was enough better to be able to indite her own documents, though as yet unable to come downstairs. It was well that she did not require much of our time, however, for just before noon a party of touring motorists drove up to our door and precipitated themselves upon us with warm greetings—and hungry looks toward our dining-room.

"Smoke and ashes!" cried the Skeptic, under his breath, appearing in the kitchen, whither the Gay Lady and I had betaken ourselves as soon as we had furnished our guests with soap and water and clothes-brushes, and left them to remove as much of the dust of the road from their persons as could be done without a full bath—"why didn't you send them on to the village inn? Of all the nerve!—and you don't know any of them intimately, do you?" [Page 63]

I shook my head. "One of them was my dearest enemy in school-days," I admitted, "and I never saw but one of the others. Never mind. Do you suppose you could saddle Skylark and post over to town for some beefsteak? I've sent Lad to the neighbours for other things. Beefsteak is what they must have—porterhouse—since I've not enough broilers in the ice-box to go around that hungry company."

"Sure thing," and the Skeptic was off. But he came back to say in my ear: "See here, why doesn't Miss Azalea come out and help? She's just sitting on the porch, looking pretty."

"Somebody ought to play hostess, since I must be here," I responded, without meeting his inquiring eye. I did urgently need some one to beat the oil into the salad dressing I was making, for there were other things I must do. The Gay Lady was already accomplishing separate things with each hand, and directing Lad at the same time. The Skeptic looked at her appreciatively.

"She mourns because she can't sing!" said he, and laughed quietly to himself as he swung away. [Page 64] Yet he had seemed much impressed with Azalea's singing all the week, and had turned her music for her devotedly.

We got through it somehow. "I thought they'd eat their heads off," commented the Philosopher, who had carved the beefsteak and the broilers, and had tried to give everybody the tenderloin and the white breast meat, and had eaten drumsticks and end pieces himself, after the manner of the unselfish host.

There were piles and mountains of dishes after that luncheon. They looked the bigger to us because we had been obliged to leave them for two hours while we sat upon the porch with our

motorists, who said they always took a good rest in the middle of the day, and made up by running many extra miles at night. When they had gone, loudly grateful for our hospitality—two of the men had had to have some more things to eat and drink before they could get up steam with which to start—the Gay Lady and I stood in the door of the kitchen and drew our first sighs over the state of things existing. [Page 65]

"If Cook doesn't get down pretty soon——" said I dejectedly, and did not try to finish the sentence. Somehow that hasty cookery for five extra people had been depressing. I couldn't think of a thing that had been left in the house that would do for dinner—due now in three short hours.

But the Gay Lady rallied nobly.

"There's plenty of hot water," said she, "and those dishes will melt away in no time. Then—you're going to have a long sleep, whether we get any dinner to-night or not."

The Skeptic spoke from behind us. "Here's a fresh recruit," said he in a jovial tone, which I understood at once was manufactured for the occasion. We looked around and saw Azalea at his elbow. She was smiling rather dubiously. I wondered how he had managed it. Afterward I learned that he had boldly asked her if she didn't want to help.

"I hope I shan't break anything," murmured Azalea, accepting a dish-towel. The Skeptic took another. "Oh, no," he assured her. "That delicate touch of yours—why, I never heard anybody who could play *pianissimo—legato—cantabile*—like you. You wouldn't break a spun-glass [Page 66] rainbow."

Azalea did not break anything. I think it was because she did not dry more than one article to the Skeptic's three and the Gay Lady's six. Once she dropped a china cup, but the Skeptic caught it and presented it to her with a bow. "Don't mention it," said he. "I'm an old first-baseman."

The Philosopher came through the kitchen with a broom and dustpan. He had been attempting to sweep the dining-room floor—which is of hardwood, with a centre rug—and had had a bad time of it. The Skeptic jeered at him and mentioned the implements he should have used. Azalea looked at them both wonderingly.

"How in the world do you men come to know so much about housework?" she inquired, wiping a single teaspoon diligently. The Gay Lady had just lifted a dozen out of the steaming pan for her, but Azalea had laid them all down on the table, and was polishing them one by one.

"I find it comes in handy," said the Skeptic. "You never stay anywhere, you know, that sooner or [Page 67] later something doesn't happen unexpectedly to the domestic machinery. Besides, I like to show off—don't you? See here"—he turned to me. There was a twinkle in his wicked eye. "See here, why not let Miss Azalea and me be responsible for the dinner to-night—with Philo as second assistant? You and the Gay Lady are tired out. Miss Azalea can tell me what to do, and I'll promise to do it faithfully."

He had not the face to look at the guest as he made this daring suggestion. His audacity took my breath away so completely that I could make no rejoinder, but the Gay Lady came to the rescue. I don't know whether she had seen Azalea's face, but I had.

"I have a surprise for to-night," said she, picking up a trayful of china, "and I don't intend anybody shall interfere with it. Nobody is even to mention dinner in my presence."

The Skeptic took the tray away from her. "There are some other things I should like to mention in your presence," said he, so softly that I think nobody heard him but myself, who was nearest. "And one of them is that somebody I know never looked sweeter than she does this——" [Page 68]

I rattled the saucers in the pan that nobody might catch it. The Gay Lady was colouring so brilliantly that I feared the Skeptic might drop the tray, for he was not looking at all where he was going. But she disappeared into the pantry, and there was nothing left for him to do but to place the tray on the shelf outside, ready for her to take the contents in through the window.

The Gay Lady put me upon my own bed, tucked me up, drew the curtains, and left me to my nap. She left a kiss on my cheek also, and as she dropped it there I thought of the Skeptic again—I don't know why. I wondered casually what he would give for one like it.

When I awoke my room was so nearly dark that I was startled into thinking it next morning. The Lad's voice, speaking eagerly through my door, was what had roused me. He was summoning me to dinner. "It's all ready," he was calling.

I dressed dazedly, refreshed and wondering. I went down to preside at the most delicious meal I [Page 69] had eaten in a month. The Gay Lady—in white muslin, with cheeks like roses—seemed not in the least fatigued. The Skeptic looked like a young commanding general who had seen his forces win triumphantly against great odds. The Philosopher was hilarious. Azalea seemed somewhat quiet and thoughtful.

When the dishes were done and the kitchen in order—matters which were dispatched like wildfire—we gathered upon the porch as usual.

"There is nothing in the world I should like so much," said the Gay Lady presently, from the low chair where she sat, with the Skeptic on a cushion so near to her feet that in the shadow his big figure seemed to melt into her slight one, "as some music. Is it asking too much, dear, after all those dishes?"

"I don't feel a bit like singing," answered Azalea.

The Philosopher sat beside her on the settle, and he turned to add his request to the Gay Lady's.

The Skeptic spoke heartily from his cushion. [Page 70]

"If you knew how much pleasure you've given us all these mornings and evenings," he said, "never having to be urged, but being so generous with your great art——"

"Somehow it doesn't look so great to me to-night," said Azalea quietly.

I almost thought there were tears in her voice. She has a beautiful speaking voice, as singers are apt to have.

Everybody was silent for an instant, in surprise—and anxiety. Azalea was a very lovely girl—nobody had meant to hurt her.

Had the Skeptic's shot in the kitchen gone home? Nobody would be sorrier than he to deal a blow where only a feather's touch was meant.

"It looks so great to me," said the Gay Lady very gently, "that I would give—years of my life to be able to sing one song as you sing Beethoven's '*Adelaide*.'"

"Of course I can't refuse, after that," said Azalea modestly, though more happily, I thought, and the Philosopher went away with her into the half-lit living room.

"May I say anything?" asked the Skeptic, looking up into the Gay Lady's face, in the way he has when he wants to say things very much but is doubtful how she will take them—a condition he is frequently in. [Page 71]

She shook her head—I think she must have been smiling. It was so evident—that which he wanted to say. He wanted to assure her that her own accomplishments——

But the Gay Lady shook her head. "Let's just listen," she said.

So we listened. It was worth it. But, after all, I doubt if the Skeptic heard.

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VI

[Page 72]

HEPATICA

Here's metal more attractive.
—*Hamlet.*

The Gay Lady had gone away for a week and a day. Although four of us remained, the gap in our number appeared prodigious. The first dinner without her seemed as slow and dull as a dance without music, in spite of the fact that we did our best, each one of us, not to act as if anything were wrong.

When we had escaped from the dining-room to the porch, Lad was the first to voice his sentiments upon the subject of our drooping spirits. "I didn't know her being here made such a lot of difference—till she got away," he said dismally. "There's nobody to laugh, now, when I make a joke."

"Don't the rest of us laugh at your jokes, son?" inquired the Philosopher, laying a friendly hand upon the Lad's arm as the boy stood on the porch step below him. [Page 73]

"You do—if she does," replied Lad. "Lots of times you'd never notice what I say if she didn't look at you and laugh. Then you burst out and laugh too—to please her, I suppose," he added.

The Philosopher glanced at me over the boy's head. "Here's a pretty sharp observer," said he, "with a gift at analysis. I didn't know before that I take my cue from the Gay Lady—or from any one else—when it comes to laughing at jokes. Try me with one now, Lad, and see if I don't laugh—all by myself."

Lad shook his head. "That wouldn't be any good. I'd know you didn't mean it. She always means it. Besides—she thinks things are funny that you don't. She's 'most as good as a boy—and I don't see how she can be, either," he reflected, "because she isn't the least bit like one."

"You're right enough about that," observed the Philosopher. "She's essentially feminine, if ever a girl was."

"Girl!" repeated the Lad. "She isn't a girl. That is—I thought she was, till she told me herself she wasn't. She's twenty-seven." [Page 74]

The Philosopher grinned. The Skeptic, who had lit his pipe and was puffing away at it, sitting on the settle with his back to the sunset—which was unusually fine that evening—gave utterance to a deep note of derision at the Lad's point of view. I smiled, myself. If ever there was an irresistible combination of the girlish and the womanly it was to be found in our Gay Lady. As to her looks—even the blooming youth of Althea, and the more cultivated charms of Camellia, had not made the Gay Lady less lovely in our eyes, although she was by no means what is known as a "beauty."

"She's a whole lot nicer than any of those girls we've had here this summer," the Lad went on. He seemed to have the floor. There could be no doubt that the subject of his musings was of interest to all his hearers. "And they weren't so bad, either—except Dahlia. I can't stand her," he added resentfully.

The Philosopher shook his head slightly as one who would have said "Who could?" if it had been allowable. The Skeptic removed his pipe from his mouth and gazed intently into its bowl. I felt it my duty to stand by Dahlia, for the sake of the Lad, who must not learn to sneer at women behind their backs. [Page 75]

"There are a great many nice things about Dahlia," I said. "And she has surely given you many good times, Lad. Think how often she has gone out on the river with you—and helped you make kites, and rigged little ships for you——"

"Oh, yes," cried the Lad scornfully, "she'll take me—when she can't get a man!"

The Skeptic's shoulders heaved as he turned away to cough violently. Evidently he had swallowed a pipeful of smoke. The Philosopher abruptly removed his hand from the Lad's shoulder and dropped down on the porch step, where his face was hidden from the bright young eyes above him. I shook my head at Lad. Presently he ran off to the red barn to look after some small puppies down there in the hay.

We three left behind settled down for the evening. At least I did, and the others made a show of doing so. But the Skeptic was both restless and moody, the Philosopher unsociable. Finally the Skeptic flung an invitation to the Philosopher to go off for a walk. The Philosopher consented with a nod, and they strolled away, taking leave of me with formal politeness. I understood them, and I did not mind. A wise woman lets a man go—that he may return. [Page 76]

They came back just as twilight darkened into night, and sat down at my feet on the step, shoulder to shoulder, like the good comrades that they were. I wondered if they had been discussing the subject which the Lad had introduced.

"How much," inquired the Philosopher quite suddenly, "do you suppose it would cost to dress a girl like Miss Camellia?"

"I've really no idea," I answered, since the question seemed directed at me. "It depends on a number of things. There are girls so clever with their needles that they can produce very remarkable effects for a comparatively small amount of money."

"Is she one of them?"

"I don't know." [Page 77]

"I fancy you do," was his comment. Presently he went on again. "You see, I don't know much about all this," he declared. "So I've had rather an observant eye on—on these young ladies you've had here from time to time this summer, and I confess I'm filled with curiosity. Would you mind telling me what you think the average girl of good family, and well brought up, has in her mind's eye as a desirable future—I mean for the next few years after school?—I don't know that I make myself clear. What I want to get at is—You see, the great thing a young chap thinks about is what he is going to make of himself—and how to do it. It struck me as rather odd that not one of those girls seemed to have any particular end in view—at least, that ever came out in her conversation."

I couldn't help smiling, his tone was so serious.

The Skeptic chuckled. He had put up his pipe, and was sitting with his hands clasped behind his head, as he leaned against one of the great pillars of the porch. "They have one, just the same," he vouchsafed. "He who runs may read." [Page 78]

The Philosopher regarded him thoughtfully, through the half-light from the hall lamp. "I noticed you did a good deal of running, first and last," he observed. "I suppose you read before you ran—unless you have eyes in the back of your head. Well," he continued, "you can't make me believe that all girls are so anxious to make a good impression, or they wouldn't do some of the things they do."

"For instance?" I suggested, having become curious myself. Never before, in an acquaintance dating far back, had I heard the Philosopher hold forth upon this subject.

"They make themselves conspicuous," said he promptly—to my great surprise. "As nearly as I can get at it, that's the cardinal fault of the girl of to-day. Everywhere I go I notice it—in public—in private. Wherever she is she holds the floor, occupies the centre of the stage. If you'll pardon my saying it, every last girl you had here this summer did that thing, each in her own way."

I thought about them—one after another. It was true. Each had, in her own way, occupied the centre of the stage. And the Gay Lady, than whom nobody has a better right to keep fast hold of [Page 79] her position in the foreground of all our thoughts, had allowed each one to do it. And somehow, in every case, after all, the real focus for all our eyes, quite without her being able to help it, had been wherever the Gay Lady had happened to be.

We all went to bed early that night. The Philosopher's observations, though highly interesting, did not keep us from becoming very sleepy at an untimely hour. It was the same way next evening. And the next. In fact, up to the very night before the Gay Lady's expected return, we continued to cut short our days of waiting by as much as we could venture to do without exciting the suspicion that we were weary of one another.

On that last evening the Skeptic fastened himself to me. He insisted on my walking with him in the garden.

"So she comes back to-morrow," said he, as we paced down the path, quite as if he had just learned of the prospect of her return.

"I can hardly wait," said I.

"Neither can I," he agreed solemnly. "I knew I should miss her, but—smoke and ashes!—I didn't [Page 80] dream the week would be a period of time long enough for a ray of light to travel from Sirius to the earth and back again."

"If she could only hear that!" said I.

"She's going to hear it," he declared with great earnestness. "She's kept me quiet all summer, but—by a man's impatience!—she can't keep me quiet any longer. Do you blame me?" he inquired, wheeling to look intently at me through the September twilight.

"Not a bit," said I. "I've only wished she could stand still until Lad grows up."

"You must think well of her, to say that," said he delightedly. "And, on my word, I don't know but she will continue to stand still, as far as looks go. But in mind—and heart—well, the only thing is, I'm so far below her I don't dare to hope. All I know is that, for sheer womanly sweetness and strength, there's nobody her equal. And yet, when I try to put my finger on what makes her what she is—I can't tell."

"One can't analyze her charm," said I, "except as you've just done it—womanly sweetness and [Page 81] strength. Hepatica is—Hepatica. And being that, we love her."

"We do," said he, half under his breath, and caught my hand and gave it a grip which stung.

The next morning the Gay Lady came home. We had not expected her until evening, and when we heard a light footstep approaching through the hall as we sat at breakfast, we looked at one another in dumb astonishment and disbelief. But the next instant she stood smiling at us from the doorway.

She was glad to see us, too. From Lad's ecstatic embrace she came into mine, and I heard her eager whisper—"I'm so glad to get back to *you!*" The Skeptic and the Philosopher wrung her hand until I know her little fingers ached, and they stared at her, the one like a brother, the other like—well, she must have seen for herself. No, they were not rivals. The Philosopher had seen the Skeptic's case, I think, from the first, and being not only a philosopher but a man, and the Skeptic's best friend, had never allowed himself to enter the race at all. I had detected a wistful [Page 82] light in his eyes now and then, and had my own notion of what might have happened if he had let it, but—there was only a very warm brotherliness in the greeting he gave the Gay Lady, and she looked back into his eyes too frankly for me to think he had ever let her see anything else.

She sat down at the table with us for a little, while we finished, and you should have seen the difference in the look of the room. It was another place. She ran upstairs to her own room, and I followed her, and from being a deserted bedroom with a lonely aspect it became a human habitation with an atmosphere of home. She took off her travelling dress, talking gayly to me all the while, and brushed her bright locks, and put on one of the charming white frocks which her own hands had made, and then came and held me tight, and laughed, and was very near crying, and said there was never such another place as this.

"There certainly never is when you are in it, dear," I agreed, and received such a reward for that as only the Gay Lady knows how to give. [Page 83]

All day she stayed by me, wherever I might be. The Skeptic watched and waited—he got not the ghost of an opportunity. When I was upon the porch with the others she was there—and not a minute after.

When evening fell it found the Gay Lady on a cushion close by my knee. Presently the Philosopher went off with the Lad down to the river. The Skeptic accompanied them part of the distance, then returned quite unexpectedly by way of the shrubbery, and swung up over the porch rail at the end at a moment when the Gay Lady, feeling safe in his absence, had gone to that end to see the moonlight upon the river.

"'All's fair in love and war,'" exulted the Skeptic, somewhat breathlessly. It seemed to be a favourite maxim with him. I recalled his having excused himself for eluding Dahlia by that same well-worn proverb. "No—don't run! Have I become suddenly so terrifying?"

"Why should you be terrifying?" asked Hepatica. "Come and sit down and tell us what you've all been doing while I was away." [Page 84]

Her back was toward me. There was a long window open close beside me. My sympathy was with the Skeptic. I slipped through it.

An hour later I went out upon the porch again. Nobody was there. I sat down alone, feeling half excited and half depressed, and wholly anxious to know the outcome of the Skeptic's tactics. I waited a long time, as it seemed to me. Then, without warning, a voice spoke. I could hardly recognize it for the Skeptic's voice, it was strung so tense—with joy.

"Don't shoot," it said. "We'll come down."

I looked toward the end of the porch, where the vines cast a deep shadow. I could not see them, but they must have been there all the time. And the shadow cast by the vines was not a wide shadow at all. [Page 85]

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PART II [Page86]

I [Page 87]

DAHLIA AND THE PROFESSOR

Amen
Stuck in my throat.
—*Macbeth.*

The Skeptic and his wife, Hepatica, being happily established in a beautifully spacious flat in town, measuring thirty feet by forty over all, invited me to visit them. As both had spent considerable time at my country home in summer, they insisted that it was only just for me to allow them, that second winter after their marriage, to return my hospitality. This argument alone would hardly have sufficed, for winter in the country—connected by trolley with the town—is hardly less delightful to me than summer itself. But there were other and convincing arguments, and they ended by bringing me to the city for a month's visit in the heart of the season.

On the first morning at breakfast—I had arrived late the night before—there was much to talk about. [Page 88]

"It's a curious fact," said the Skeptic, stirring a cup of yellow-brown coffee with which his wife had just presented him, "as Hepatica and I discovered only the other day, that three of those girls who visited you that summer four years ago, when she and I were avoiding each other——"

"You—avoiding!" I interpolated.

"Well—I was trying to avoid being avoided by her," he explained. "Three of those girls are married and living in town."

"Yes, I know," said I. "At least I know Camellia and Althea are. Who else? Azalea lives across the river, doesn't she?"

"Yes. You haven't heard of the latest matrimonial alliance, then?" The Skeptic chuckled. Hepatica looked at him, and he looked at her, and then they both looked at me. "Dahlia was married yesterday," the Skeptic announced with relish, "in a manse study, with two witnesses."

I was astounded. I had just come from home, and Dahlia was my next neighbour. She had been away more or less all winter, but there had been no announcement of any engagement—nor sign of one. [Page 89]

The Skeptic, enjoying my stupefaction, proceeded to give what he considered an explanation. "I don't see why you should be so surprised," he said. "You knew Dahlia's methods. Her net was always spread, and though a certain wise man declares it in vain to spread it in the sight of any bird, humans are not always so wary. A man who chanced to be walking along with his head in the clouds might get his feet entangled in a cunningly laid net. And so it happened to the Professor."

"The Professor!" I ejaculated. "Not—our Professor?"

The Skeptic nodded solemnly.

"He was our Professor," he amended. "He's hers now. And day before yesterday he was free!"

He glanced at his watch, folded his napkin in haste, seized his coat and hat, kissed his wife, patted her shoulder, nodded at me, and was gone. A minute later we heard the whirr and slide of his car, and Hepatica, at the window, was returning his wave.

"He's looking extremely well," I observed. "He must be twenty pounds heavier than he was that summer. Avoiding being avoided was probably rather thinning." [Page 90]

"He does seem to enjoy his food," admitted Hepatica, regarding the Skeptic's empty plate with satisfaction.

"Not much doubt of that," I agreed, remembering the delicately hearty breakfast we had just consumed.

"It's really quite dreadful about Dahlia and the poor Professor, isn't it?" said Hepatica presently. "And it's just as Don says: he was literally caught in her net. I presume he couldn't tell to-day precisely how it happened."

"I've no doubt she could," said I ungenerously. "I shall be anxious to see them."

"Oh, you'll see them. It's in the middle of term—he couldn't take her away. And his old quarters are just two blocks below us. She knew you were coming. You'll probably see them within forty-eight hours."

We did, though not where we could do more than take observations upon them. The Philosopher came in that evening—he had known of my coming from the moment that Hepatica had planned to ask me. He was looking rather less well-fed than the Skeptic, but quite as philosophical, and altogether as friendly as ever. He looked hard at me, and wrung my hand, and immediately began to lay out a programme for my visit. As a beginning he had procured tickets for the Philharmonic Society concert to be given on the following evening. [Page 91]

We told him about Dahlia. He had not heard. He looked quickly and dumbfoundedly at the Skeptic, and the Skeptic grinned back at him. "You feel for him, don't you, Philo?" he queried.

The Philosopher shook his head, and seemed, for a time, much depressed; upon which the Skeptic rallied him. "You ought to be jubilant to think it's not yourself," he urged his friend. "You know, there was one time when you feared even to go home with her, though you were to be within call from the porch all the way."

But the Philosopher cheered up presently in the pleasure of talking over old times at the Farm. He had spent the past summer tramping through Germany, and he and I had not met for many months. [Page 92]

We went to the concert next evening, we four, in a jovial mood. There was considerable sly joking, on the Skeptic's part, concerning the change of conditions which now made Hepatica my chaperon, instead of, as in former days, my being alert to protect her from visiting philosophers and skeptics. The Philosopher and I took it quite in good part, for nothing could be more settled than the unimpassioned character of our old friendship—as there could be nothing more satisfactory.

We had not more than taken our seats when the Skeptic leaned past Hepatica to call my attention to two people who had come down the aisle and were finding their places just across it and in the row ahead of us. I turned to the Philosopher.

"There they are," I whispered. So our four pairs of eyes gazed interestedly that way.

As she settled into place, Dahlia, whose pretty, flushed face had been turned in every direction over the house as she got out of her evening coat, caught sight of us. She bowed and smiled with great cordiality, and immediately called her companion's attention to us. The Professor—eighteen years Dahlia's senior, but one of the best men who ever walked the earth, as we had long since discovered—turned and scanned us over his spectacles. Then he also responded to our smiling recognitions with a somewhat subdued but pleased acknowledgment. Dahlia continued to whisper to him, still glancing back at us from time to time with looks of good-fellowship, and he appeared to lend an attentive ear, though he did not again turn toward us. [Page 93]

As for us, in the interest of our observation of the bridal pair, we fell rather silent. I was conscious that the Philosopher, regarding them somewhat steadily, drew a deep breath which sounded like a sigh of dissatisfaction. Noting how thin the Professor's ash-coloured hair seemed to be, over the crown of his head, in comparison with Dahlia's luxuriant and elaborately dressed chestnut locks, I felt depressedly that the disparity in age was more marked than is often seen.

This, in itself, of course, was nothing; but taken in connection with——

The Skeptic leaned forward again.

"What'll you wager I couldn't get up a flirtation with her to-night, if I happened to sit next her?" [Page 94]
he challenged in a whisper.

"Don!" murmured Hepatica; but she smiled.

"I'm not anywhere near his age," continued the Skeptic. "My auburn tresses are thick upon my head, my evening clothes were made a decade later than his. If I were only sitting next her!"

At this moment some more people came down the aisle and were shown to the seats immediately beyond our friends. As the Professor and Dahlia stood up to let them through, we saw that though the newcomers passed the Professor without recognition, the young man exchanged greetings with Dahlia. As they took their seats the man, a floridly handsome person, was at Dahlia's elbow.

For the third time the Skeptic leaned forward. "It's just as well, perhaps," he whispered, "that my observations are to be made upon a proxy. What do you think the new chap's chances are for fun on both sides of him?"

I did not condescend to answer. And without further delay the famous conductor of a famous [Page 95]
orchestra came commandingly to the front of the stage, welcomed by an outburst of applause, and with the rest of the audience we became silent.

But amidst all the delights of the ear which were ours that evening, the eyes of all of us would wander, from time to time, across the aisle. The Professor sat, with arms folded and head bent, drinking in the beauties of sound which beat against his welcoming ears. Next him, Dahlia, the bride of three days, was vindicating the Skeptic's opinion of her undiminished accomplishments. The young man upon her right proved an able second. The girl on his other side, by the time the concert was half over, was holding her head high, or bending it to study a programme which I am sure she did not see, while her companion played Dahlia's old game with a trained hand.

"Can the Ethiopian change his skin?" breathed the Philosopher in my ear, during an intermission.

"I'm afraid not," I assented dubiously. "But, of course, she may make a devoted wife, nevertheless. That sort of thing doesn't mean anything to her, you know. She merely does it as a [Page 96]
matter of habit."

"It can't be precisely an endearing habit to a husband," protested the Philosopher. "If she would address a remark now and then to the poor man at her left one might excuse her. And if she could carry on a conversation with the other one in an ordinarily well-bred, friendly way—and confine it to the intervals between numbers—one might be able to forget her, which would be a relief. But all those silly tricks of hers—those smiles, those archings of the neck—those lengthy looks up into the eyes of that fool——"

"Don't look at them," I advised.

"I can't help looking at them. Everybody else is looking at them—including yourself."

It was quite true—everybody was, even people considerably out of range. If Dahlia herself was conscious of this—and I'm sure she must have been—she probably ascribed it to the charm of her appearance. She is even prettier than she used to be. But, as we were wont to say of her when we had owned to all her attractiveness—"if only!"

"After all," urged Hepatica, on the homeward way, "we've no right to judge by seeing them under [Page 97]
those conditions. Wait till we've had them alone with us. Dahlia told me on the way out that they were planning to come and see us very soon.—I suggested to-morrow night, so they will come then."

"I'll be there," accepted the Philosopher—quite before he was asked.

So on the following evening we saw them, alone with ourselves. The dear Professor seemed to us, more than before, the pitiable victim of a woman in every way unsuited to him. Yet he looked at Dahlia as if he cared for her very much, and was only a trifle bewildered by her manner with other men.

"What dear times we used to have on the river!" said Dahlia to the Philosopher, at a moment when nobody else happened to be speaking. She accompanied this observation by a glance. It was Dahlia's glances which gave life to her remarks.

"I haven't fished in that river for three summers," replied the Philosopher, in his most unsentimental tone.

"You used to have better luck when you went alone," said Dahlia. "Do you remember how we [Page 98]
could never stop talking long enough to lure any fish our way?"

"Nevertheless, there has been considerable fishing done on that river, first and last," asserted the Skeptic, with a twinkle at the Philosopher, who looked uncomfortable. The Professor's gentle gaze was fixed upon each speaker in turn, and as he now waited upon the Philosopher's reply I saw the latter person frown slightly.

"I never considered the fishing on that river very good," said he.

"Oh, it didn't need to be," cried Dahlia. "I can shut my eyes now and see the water rippling in the moonlight! Can't you?" She appealed to the Skeptic.

"I can't," said the Skeptic. "I never noticed how it rippled in the moonlight. The big porch is my favourite haunt at the Farm. The smoking is good there—keeps away the midges."

"Midges!" Dahlia gave a little shriek. "There aren't any midges in that part of the country."

"There are some kinds of little, annoying insects that come around in the evening, then," [Page 99] persisted the Skeptic, "just when people want to settle down and have themselves to themselves. The Philosopher was always more annoyed by them than I. He has a sensitive skin."

Once started on this sort of allusive nonsense it was difficult for us to head off the Skeptic. But presently, noting the Professor's kindly face assuming a puzzled expression as he watched his wife's kittenish demeanour, the Skeptic desisted. It did not seem necessary for him to demonstrate to us that, quite as of old, he could attract Dahlia to his side and keep her there. Before the evening was over he found himself occupied—also quite as of old—with keeping out of her way. Altogether, it was certainly not Dahlia's fault if the Professor did not gain the impression that both the Skeptic and the Philosopher were rejected suitors of her own.

When they had gone, and the door had closed upon the last of the bride's backward looks at our two men, the Skeptic dropped into a chair.

"Hepatica, will you kindly mix a few drops of soothing syrup for me?" he requested. [Page 100]

But the Philosopher fell to marching up and down, his hands in his pockets, and a deeper gloom on his brow than we had ever seen there. Although a decade the Philosopher's elder, the Professor had long shared bachelor quarters with him in past days; it had been only within a year or two that the necessities of their occupations had caused them to separate.

"Why did I ever let him go off by himself?" the Philosopher muttered remorsefully. "Why didn't I keep an eye on him?"

"It would have made no difference," the Skeptic offered dismally as consolation. "'Whom the gods would destroy they first make mad!' You couldn't have prevented his madness."

"I could have seen to it that such deadly instruments as marriage licences and irresponsible clergymen were kept out of his way," groaned the Philosopher.

"Come, cheer up!" cried Hepatica, making haste to light the spirit-lamp under her tea-kettle. "I'm going to brew you all a cup of comfort with lemons and sugar and things." [Page 101]

"Look at her!" commanded the Skeptic, rallying, "and tell me if marriage is a failure."

The Philosopher paused. "You know well enough what I think of your marriage," he owned.

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II

[Page 102]

CAMELLIA AND THE JUDGE

I am ashamed that women are so simple
To offer war when they should kneel for peace.
—*Taming of the Shrew.*

"We are invited to spend the week-end with Camellia," announced my hostess at the breakfast-table one morning, glancing up from a note which the hall-boy had just brought to the door.

The Skeptic jumped in his chair. "Those same old sensations come over me," he announced, digging away vengefully at his grapefruit. "What have I to wear? My only consolation now is that Camellia married a man who cares about as much what he wears as I do."

"It's not Camellia's clothes that bother me now," said Hepatica thoughtfully, "so much as the formality of her style of entertaining. My dear, she has a butler." [Page 103]

"How horrible!" I agreed. "Can I hope to please the eye of the butler?"

"Camellia's husband is a downright good fellow," said the Skeptic warmly. "The fuss and feathers of his wife's hospitality can't prevent his giving you the real thing. Even Philo likes to go there—particularly when Camellia is away. I presume Philo's invited now?"

"So she says," assented Hepatica, studying her note again, with a care not to look at me which made me quite as self-conscious as if she had. Why the dear people will all persist in thinking things which do not exist! Of course I was glad the Philosopher was to be there. What enjoyment is not the keener for his friendly sharing of it? But what of that? Has it not been so for many years?—and will be so, I trust, for all to come.

Hepatica and I packed with care, selecting the most expensive things we owned. Hepatica scrutinized the Skeptic's linen critically before she put it in. When we departed we were as correctly attired as time and thought could make us. When we arrived we were doubly glad that this was so, for the sight of the butler, admitting us, gave us much the same feeling of being badly dressed that Camellia's own presence had been wont to do. [Page 104]

Camellia herself was as exquisitely arrayed as ever, but she looked considerably older than I had expected. I wondered if constant engagements with her tailor and dressmaker, to say nothing of incessant interviews with those who see to the mechanism of formal entertaining, had not begun to wear upon her. But she was very cordial with us, and her husband, the Judge, was equally so. He was considerably her senior—quite as much so, I decided, as the Professor was Dahlia's—but on account of Camellia's woman-of-the-world air the contrast was not so pronounced.

We sat through an elaborate dinner, during which I suffered more or less strain of anxiety concerning my forks. But the Judge, at whose right hand I sat, diverted me so successfully by means of his own most interesting personality and delightful powers of conversation, that in time I forgot both forks and butler, and was only conscious of the length of the dinner by the sense, toward its close, of having had more to eat than I wanted.

"Camellia herself was as exquisitely arrayed as ever"

"They have this sort of thing every night of their unfortunate lives, to a greater or less degree," murmured the Skeptic in my ear, as the men came into the impressively decorated room where Camellia and Hepatica and I were talking over common memories. "The gladdest man to get into his summer camp in Maine is the Judge, and the life of absolute abandon to freedom he lives there ought to teach his wife a thing or two—if she were wise enough to heed it. Why two people—but I've just eaten their salt," he acknowledged in reply to what I suppose must have been my accusing look, and forbore to say more. [Page 105]

"I think I'll give a little dinner for you to-morrow night," said Camellia reflectively, as we sat about. "A very informal one, of course—just some of our neighbours."

I felt my spirits drop. I saw those of Hepatica and the Skeptic and the Philosopher drop, although they made haste to prop their countenances up again.

But the Judge protested. "Why give anything, my dear?" he questioned. "I doubt if our friends would prefer meeting our neighbours, whom they don't know, to visiting with ourselves, whom they do—however egotistic that may sound." [Page 106]

"I want to make things gay for you," explained Camellia; "and the Latimers and the Elliots are very gay."—The Judge only lifted his handsome eyebrows.—"And the Liscombes are lovely," went on Camellia. "Mrs. Liscombe sings."

The Judge ran his hand through the thick, slightly graying locks above his broad forehead. He did not need to tell us that he did not enjoy hearing Mrs. Liscombe sing, and doubted if we should.

"Harry Hodgson recites—we always have him when we want to make things go. Oh, he's not a professional, of course. He only gives readings among his special friends. I believe I'll run and telephone him now. He's so likely to have engagements." Camellia hastened away.

We could hardly tell the Judge we fully agreed with his feeling about to-morrow's proposed

festivities, neither could we discuss his wife's tastes with him. He and we talked of other things until Camellia came back, having made her engagement with Mr. Harry Hodgson, and so having sealed our fate for the succeeding evening. [Page 107]

The Skeptic and the Philosopher spent much of the following day—it was a legal holiday—with the Judge in his private den up on the third floor. This, as Camellia showed us once when the men were away, was a big, bare room—this was her characterization—principally fireplace, easy-chairs, books and windows. I liked it better than any other place in the house, for it was unencumbered with useless furniture of any sort, and the view from its windows was much finer than that from below stairs.

"But we're not invited up here, you observe," was Camellia's comment. "I don't come into it once a month. The Judge spends his evenings here—when I don't actually force him to go out with me—and I spend mine down in the pleasanter quarters. I have the Liscombes and the Latimers in very often, but he never comes down if he can avoid it. They understand he's eccentric, and we let it go at that." [Page 108]

She spoke with the air of being a most kindly and forbearing wife. I followed her downstairs, pondering over points of view. Eccentric—because he preferred wide fires and elbow-room and outlook to Camellia's crowded and over-decorated rooms below, and his books to Mrs. Liscombe's music and Mr. Harry Hodgson's "readings." I felt that I knew Mrs. Liscombe and Mr. Hodgson and the rest quite without having seen them.

I found, the next evening, that my imagination had not gone far astray. Camellia's friends were certainly quite as "gay" as she had pictured them, and gorgeously dressed. I felt, as I attempted to maintain my part among them, like a country mouse suddenly precipitated into the society of a company of town-bred squirrels.

Mrs. Liscombe sang for us. I could not make out what it was she sang, being unfamiliar with the music and unable to understand the words. She possessed a voice of some beauty, but was evidently determined to be classed among the sopranos who are able to soar highest, and when she took certain notes I experienced a peculiar and most disagreeable sensation in the back of my neck. [Page 109]

"I wonder if we couldn't bring in a stepladder for her," murmured the Skeptic in my ear. "It gives me a pang to see a woman, alone and unassisted, attempt to reach something several feet above her head!"

Mr. Hodgson recited for us with great fervour. He fought a battle on the drawing-room floor, fought and bled and died, all in a harrowing tenor voice. He was slender and pale, and it seemed a pity that he should have to suffer so much with so many stalwart men at hand. From the first moment, when he drew his sword and leaped into the fray, our sympathies were with him, although he personified a doughty man of battles, and led ten thousand lusty followers. There were moments when one could not quite forget the swinging coat-tails of his evening attire, but on the whole he was an interesting study, and I was much diverted.

"Dear little fellow!"—it was the Skeptic again. "How came they to let him go to war—and he so young and tender?"

I exchanged observations with Mr. Hodgson after his final reading; I can hardly say that I conversed with him, for our patchwork interview could not deserve that name. At the same time I noted with interest the Philosopher's expression as he and Mrs. Liscombe turned over a pile of music. If I had not known him so well I should have been deceived by that grave and interested air of his—a slight frown of concentrated attention between his well-marked eyebrows—into thinking him deeply impressed by the lady's dicta and by her somewhat dashing manner as she delivered them. But, familiar of old with the quizzical expression which at times could be discovered to underlie the exterior of charmed absorption, I understood that the Philosopher was quietly and skilfully classifying a new, if not a rare, specimen. [Page 110]

When the guests had lingeringly departed I saw, as I went to my room, three male forms leaping up the second flight of stairs toward the Judge's den.

"Don't you envy them the chance to soothe their nerves with a pipe beside the fire up there?" I asked Hepatica as, with hair down and trailing, loose garments, she came into my room through the door which we had discovered could be opened between our quarters. [Page 111]

"Indeed I do. They went up those stairs like three dogs loosed from the leash, didn't they? Can one blame them?"

"One cannot."

Hepatica gazed at me. I stared back. But we were under our host's roof.

"Mrs. Liscombe really has quite a voice," said Hepatica, examining the details of the tiny travelling workbag I always carry with me.

"So she has."

"It was a wonderful dinner, wasn't it?"

"It was, indeed. Would you mind having quite specially simple things to eat for a day or two after we go back?"

"I've been planning them," admitted Hepatica.

"Mr. Hodgson's readings were—entirely new to me; were they to you? I had never heard of the authors."

"Few people can have heard of them, I think. Several were original."

"Indeed!" [Page 112]

"Would you mind taking off your society manner?" requested Hepatica, a trifle fractiously. "I'm a little tired of seeing you wear it so incessantly."

"I shall be delighted," I agreed.

I sprang up and she met me half-way, and seizing me about the neck buried her face in my shoulder. I felt her shaking with smothered laughter, and had great difficulty in keeping my own emotions under control.

We went home on Sunday afternoon, the Skeptic pleading the necessity of his being up at an early hour next morning. By unanimous consent we went to the evening service of a church where one goes to hear that which is worth hearing, and invariably hears it. The music there is also worth a long journey, though it is not at all of an elaborate sort.

"There, I feel better after that," declared the Skeptic heartily, as we came out. "It seems to take the taste of last evening out of my mouth."

Nobody said anything directly about our late visit until we had reached home. Then the Skeptic fired up his diminutive gas grate—which is much better than none at all—and turned off the [Page 113] electrics. We sat before the cheery little glow, luxuriating in a sense of relaxation.

"It seems ungracious, somehow to discuss people, when one has just left their hospitality," suggested Hepatica, as the Skeptic showed signs of letting loose the dogs of war.

"Not between ourselves, dear," affirmed the Skeptic. "We four constitute a private Court of Inquiry into the Condition of Our Friends. When I think of the Judge——"

"He has his own way, after all, when it comes to refusing to join in the sort of thing that pleases Camellia," said I.

"Of course he does. He's too much of a man not to have it. But living upstairs while my wife lives downstairs isn't precisely my ideal of married happiness."

The Philosopher shoved his hands far down into his pockets and laid his head back, gazing up at the ceiling. "What puzzles me," he mused, "is the attraction such a woman has, at the start, for such a man."

"Camellia was a most attractive girl," said I.

"You mean her clothes were most attractive," amended the Skeptic. "They even befuddled me for [Page 114] a few brief hours, as I remember—till I discovered that not all is gold that——"

"You didn't discover that yourself," the Philosopher reminded him. "We had to do it for you. You don't mind our recalling his temporary paralysis of intellect?" he questioned Hepatica suddenly. "It was all your fault, anyhow, for retiring to the background and allowing the fireworks to have full play."

Hepatica smiled. The Skeptic put out his hand and got hold of hers and drew it over to his knee, where he retained it. "She knows I never swerved a point off my allegiance to her," he declared with confidence.

"Do you suppose," suggested Hepatica, "if the Judge and Camellia were to lose all their money and had to come down to living in a little home like this, it would help things any?"

The Skeptic shook his head. The Philosopher shook his, thoughtfully. "It's too late," said the latter. "Her ideals are a fixed quantity now, to be reckoned with. So are his. Under any conditions there would be absolute diversity of tastes." [Page 115]

"I don't think there's any ideal more hopelessly fixed than the fine clothes ideal." The Skeptic looked at his wife.

"I like nice clothes," said she, smiling at him.

"So you do," he rejoined; "thank heaven! A woman who doesn't is abnormal. But when we walk down certain streets together you can see something besides the shop-windows."

"I look away so I won't want the things," confessed Hepatica.

The Skeptic laughed, and the Philosopher and I joined him.

"I passed Mrs. Hepatica the other day when she didn't see me," said the Philosopher to me. "She

was staring fixedly in at a shop-window. I stole up behind her to see what held such an attraction for her.—It often lets a great light in on a friend's character, if you can see the particular object in a shop-window which fixes his longing attention. When I had discovered what she was looking at I stole away again, chuckling to myself."

"What was it?" I asked.

"I'll wager half I own that the wife of our friend the Judge wouldn't have given that window a second glance," pursued the Philosopher. [Page 116]

"It was probably a bargain sale of paper patterns," guessed the Skeptic. But we knew he didn't think it.

"A bargain sale of groceries, more likely," said Hepatica herself.

"It was no bargain sale of anything," denied the Philosopher. "It was a most expensive edition of the works of Charles Dickens."

"Good for you, Patty!" cried the Skeptic.

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III

AZALEA AND THE CASHIER

A mother is a mother still,
The holiest thing alive.
—*S. T. Coleridge.*

"I AM to spend the day with Azalea to-morrow," I announced, as I said good night, one evening, "and I shall not come back until so late that you mustn't sit up for me. Azalea couldn't ask me to stay all night, on account of using the guest-room for a nursery during the winter, but she's very anxious to have me there in the evening, for it's the only chance I shall have to see her husband."

"Remain late enough to see her husband, by all means," urged the Skeptic. "I want to hear what sort of man had the courage to marry a musical genius who could wipe only one teaspoon at a time."

"Azalea was a lovely girl," said Hepatica warmly. "It couldn't take much courage to marry her." [Page 118]

"All right—we'll hear about it when our guest comes back. And I'll be over to bring you home, if you'll telephone about an hour before you'll be ready to start."

"Thank you—it really won't be necessary for you to come," I replied.

The Skeptic eyed me narrowly. Then he glanced at Hepatica and grinned. "Good night," said I, again, and walked away to my room.

"Good night," the Skeptic called after me. "But don't hesitate to call me if anything should detain Philo."

I arrived at Azalea's home early next morning, having been earnestly asked to come in time to see the babies take their bath. There is nothing I like better than to see a baby take a bath, and to see two at once was a bribe indeed.

Azalea met me at the door of her suburban home, the larger of her two children—the two-year-old—on her arm. He was evidently just ready for his bath, for he was wrapped in a blanket, and one pink foot stuck temptingly out from its folds. Azalea greeted me with enthusiasm, pushing back the loose, curling locks from her forehead as she did so, explaining that Bud had just pulled them down. She did not look in the least like the girl who had sung for us, but it occurred to me that, enveloped in the big flannel bath-apron, she was even more engaging than she had been upon the porch at the Farm. [Page 119]

I don't know when I have enjoyed anything so much as I enjoyed seeing Azalea give that bath. The little baby was asleep in her crib when we went into the nursery—which had been the guest-room before the second baby came—so Azalea gave Bud his splash all by himself. He was plump and dimpled and jolly, and he cried only once—when his mother inadvertently rubbed soap in his eyes while talking with me. When he smiled again he was a cherub of cherubs, but he had waked his small sister, and Azalea gave me permission to take her up while she finished with Bud. She was six months old, and she was afraid of me only for a minute or two, and I held her and cuddled her and wanted to take her away with me so fiercely that I had all I could do to give her over to Azalea for her bath. Boy babies are delightful, but girl babies are heavenly! [Page 120]

We had a busy day—made up of babies, with more or less talk between, which didn't matter in the least. Late in the afternoon Azalea put everything straight in the rooms, more or less upset by Bud during the day; and dressed herself for the evening. She dressed both children, also, making them fresh as rosebuds. I saw her putting flowers on the table in the dining-room, lighting a special reading-lamp at a table in the corner of the living-room, and pulling an easy chair to stand close beside it. There was a small grand piano in the room. It had been closed all day, for Bud's fingers could just reach the keyboard. Azalea opened it.

"You haven't had time to-day," said I, "but I'm looking forward to hearing you sing this evening."

"It's my husband you are to hear sing," said Azalea contentedly. "He has a splendid voice."

"I shall be delighted," I agreed; "but surely you will sing too." [Page 121]

"My voice seems to wake up the children," said she, "Arthur's never does. It's odd, for his voice is much heavier, of course. But I can never take really high notes without hearing a wail from either Bud or Dot. And that's not worth while."

"Won't you sing now, then," I begged, "while they are awake? I really can't go away without hearing you. And you know when the Philosopher comes he will be so anxious to have you sing."

"The babies will go to bed before dinner," she insisted, "so I can't very well sing for the Philosopher. But I'll sing for you now, of course."

She laid little Dot in my lap, but Dot was already sleepy and protested. So Azalea went to the piano with Dot on her arm. Bud, seeing her go, followed and stood by her knee—on her trailing skirts. I don't know how she managed to play her own accompaniment, but she did—at least subdued chords enough to carry the harmony of the song. There were no notes before her on the rack, and she looked down into one or the other of the two small faces as she sang. And, of course, it was a lullaby which fell like notes of pearl and silver from her lips. [Page 122]

When she finished, I could only smile at her through an obscuring mist. Never, in all the times I had heard her sing, had she reached my heart like this. But, somehow, the picture of her, sitting in the half light at the grand piano, with the babies in her arms and at her knee, singing lullabies and leaving the fine music for her husband to sing by and by, was quite irresistible. Somehow, as I listened, I was troubled by no doubts lest she had not learned deftly to wipe ten teaspoons at once.

Her husband came home presently; a tall, thin, young bank cashier, with a face I liked at once. He was plainly weary, but his eyes lit up with satisfaction at sight of the three who met him at the door, and the welcome his young son gave him showed that Bud recognized a play-fellow. I heard the pair romping upstairs as the Cashier made dressing for dinner a game in which the little child could join.

"The picture of her, sitting in the half light at the grand piano, with the babies in her arms and at her knee ... was quite irresistible"

But before we sat down to dinner both babies had been put to bed. The Cashier remained with me while Azalea was busy at this task, but he excused himself toward the last, and went tiptoeing upstairs, where I think he must have offered his services in getting the children tucked away. While he was gone the Philosopher arrived. [Page 123]

I let him in myself, motioning the maid away. It was a small house, and I knew she was needed in the kitchen. "Don't make a bit of noise," I cautioned him, as he came smiling into the little hall. "The babies are going to bed."

"Babies!" whispered the Philosopher, in an awestruck way. "I didn't know there were any babies."

"Of course you knew it," I whispered back, leading him into the room. "If you would only store away really important facts in that capacious mind of yours, instead of limiting it to——"

"Tell me how many babies, and of what sex—quick!" commanded the Philosopher, "or I shall say the wrong thing. And how on earth do they come to know enough to put their babies to bed

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before they ask a bachelor to dine, anyhow?"

I hastily set him straight upon these points, adding that Azalea had developed wonderfully.

"You mean she can soar to high Q now, I suppose?" interpreted the Philosopher.

"Not at all. I mean that she's——"

But they were coming downstairs together. The Cashier's arm was about his wife's shoulders; he removed it only just in time to save his dignity as he entered.

"I'm disappointed not to see the boy and girl," declared the Philosopher genially. The Cashier took him by the shoulders and turned him toward the light, laughing. "That was bravely said," he answered. "How did you know but we might go and wake them up for you to see?"

The dinner was quite unpretentious, but very good. Evidently Azalea had a capable servant. We talked gaily, the Cashier proving an adept at keeping the ball in the air, and keenly appreciative of others' attempts to meet him at the sport.

By and by, when we were back in the room where the grand piano stood, and conversation had reached a momentary halt, Azalea went to the piano. "Come, Arthur," she said, sitting down at it and patting a pile of music, "I want our friends to hear 'The Toreador.'" [Page 125]

The Cashier looked up protestingly. "You are the one they want to hear, dear," he declared.

She shook her head. "They've heard me often, but never you, I think. Besides, it wakes the babies, you know, for me to sing."

"You don't need to sing high notes, Azalea," I urged. "I'd like nothing so well as the lullaby you sang to the babies."

But she shook her head again. "That's their song," she said. "You were specially privileged to hear it at all. But I can't do it for company. Come, Arthur—please."

So the Cashier sang. The Philosopher and I found it necessary to avoid each other's eyes as he did it. The Cashier could roar 'The Toreador,' no doubt of that. The voice of the bull of Bashan would have been as the summer wind in the trees beside it. Where so much volume came from we could not tell, as we looked at the thin frame of the performer. Why the babies did not wake up will ever remain a mystery. Why Azalea did not desert her accompaniment to press her hands over bursting ear drums I cannot imagine, for it was with difficulty that I surrendered my own to the shock. But Azalea played on to the end, and looked up into the Cashier's flushed face at the last note with a smile of proprietary triumph. Then she turned about to us. [Page 126]

"That fairly takes me off my feet!" cried the Philosopher. I groped hurriedly for a compliment which would match the equivocal fervour of this, but I could not equal it.

"How much you must enjoy singing together," I said, "when the babies are awake,"—and felt annoyed that I could have said it, for I could really not imagine the two voices together.

Azalea glowed. The Cashier grinned. He is as quick-witted as he is good-humoured. "You're a clever pair," he chuckled.

"I've trained him myself," said Azalea. "When I knew him first he'd never thought of singing. I only discovered his voice by accident. It needs much more work with it, of course, but it's powerful, and it has a quality that will improve with cultivation." [Page 127]

The Cashier patted her shoulders. "Now you sing some soft little thing for them, my girl," he commanded—and looking up at him again, Azalea obeyed. She chose an old ballad, one with no chance in it to show the range of her voice. She sang it exquisitely, and the Cashier stood by and turned her music as if he considered it a high privilege. Yet, half-way through, the little Dot woke up. Azalea broke off in the middle of a bar, and fled up the stairs.

"The truth is, I'm afraid," said the Cashier, looking after her with an expression on his face which indicated that he wanted to flee, too, "nothing really counts in this house but the babies."

"They—and something else," suggested the Philosopher gently.

The Cashier looked at him. He nodded. "Yes—and something else," he agreed with his bright smile.

We came away rather late. The Philosopher looked up at the house as the door closed upon the warm farewells which had sent us out into the night. "It's a little bit of a house, isn't it?" he commented. [Page 128]

I looked up, too—at the nursery windows where the faintest of night-lights showed. "Yes, it's very small," I agreed. "Yet quite big enough, although it holds so much."

"One would hardly have said, four years ago, that anything smaller than the biggest musical auditorium in the city would have been big enough to hold Azalea's voice," he mused.

"If you could have heard her sing her lullaby to those babies," I replied, as we walked slowly on, "you would have said her voice would be wasted on a concert audience."

"It seems a pleasant home."

"It *is* one."

"Somehow, one distrusts the ability of musical prodigies to make pleasant homes."

"I wonder why. Shouldn't the knowledge of any art make one appreciative of other arts?"

"It took some time for a certain exhibition of the domestic art to strike in, at your home, that summer," said the Philosopher. "But I believe Azalea came to envy our Hepatica at the last, didn't she?" [Page 129]

"Indeed she did. And she's never got over envying her her accomplishments. She asked me ever so many questions to-day about Hepatica's housekeeping. I wish I had had a chance before I went to tell her that I was sure her will to succeed would make her home as dear a one as even Hepatica's could be."

"One thing is sure—as long as she lets the Cashier do the singing in the limelight, while she looks after the babies, there'll be no occasion for their friends to demand more music of an evening than is good for her pride of spirit," chuckled the Philosopher. "What—are we at our station already? I say—let's not make a quick trip by train—let's make a slow one, by cab."

"By cab! It would take two hours! No, no—here comes our train."

"This is the first time we've gone anywhere since you've been here without two alert chaperons—younger than myself," grumbled the Philosopher.

"The more reason, then, that we should give them no anxiety on my account."

"I'd like to walk the whole way," said he. [Page 130]

I laughed as I obeyed the signal of an impatient guard and rushed upon the train. "Now, talk to me," said I, as we took our seats.

"My lungs weren't built for the Toreador song," he objected.

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IV [Page 131]

ALTHEA AND THE PROMOTER

> What an interesting fellow our host is! He is almost more interesting because of the qualities he does not possess, than because of the qualities that he does possess.
>
> —*Arthur Christopher Benson.*

"'*Be it ever so humble*,'" quoted the Skeptic under his breath to me, "'*there's no place like*——'"

Hepatica turned and gave him a smiling look which nevertheless conveyed warning. He needed it. The Skeptic was in a mad and merry mood to-night, and no glance shot at him which, being interpreted, meant that we were under our hosts' roof, had thus far been of avail. "We are not under their roof," he argued defiantly, in reply to one of these silent remonstrances. "This isn't their roof. This is the roof of the Hotel Amazon. That's a very different thing. So different that if I lived under it I'd——"

But the Promoter was approaching us again, with the news that dinner had just been announced as served. He immediately led the way with me, Hepatica followed with the Philosopher, and Althea and the Skeptic brought up the rear. It was on the great staircase that the Skeptic, pausing to gaze upward, at a command from the Promoter, who had just bid him observe certain mural decorations done by the distinguished hand of some man of whom I fear none of us had ever heard, murmured the well-known words concerning the humble home. [Page 132]

"I always like to walk down this staircase when I'm not in a hurry," I had heard Althea saying to the Skeptic behind us, "to get the effect from the landing. Isn't it wonderful?"

We all paused upon the landing, which was about thirty feet square. The Skeptic, leaning against the marble balustrade, gazed out over the scene with an air of prostrating himself before a shrine. Awe and wonder dominated his aspect. Only we who were familiar with a certain curving line over his left eyebrow knew that he was longing to break into an apostrophe on the magnificence before him which would have alienated Althea and her husband forevermore. [Page 133]

"These columns are of the purest (something) marble," declared the Promoter, laying his hand upon one of them. He rather mumbled the name, and I think none of us were able to recognize it.

"Indeed!" said the Skeptic, and laid his hand upon the column. "It seems stout."

"It's the same that is used in the Royal Palace at Athens," added the Promoter.

"That must be why it feels so Greece-y to the touch," murmured the Skeptic; but, luckily, nobody

heard him but myself.

In due course of time, proceeding across a gorgeous lobby and traversing an impressive corridor, passing lackeys in livery and guests in evening finery, we arrived at the doorway of the most elaborately ornate dining hall I had ever seen. The Promoter paused in the doorway to let the first impression sink in.

"I could have had our dinner served in a private dining-room, of course," said he to us, "but Althea and I decided that you would enjoy this better. There's nothing like it anywhere. It's [Page 134] absolutely cosmopolitan. People from all over the world are dining here to-night—are every night. Every tenth man is worth his millions. Notice the third table on the right as we go by. That's Joseph L. Chrysler, the iron magnate. With his party is a French actress—worshipped on both sides the water. Keep your eyes peeled."

A bowing potentate motioned us forward. A bending waiter put us in our places. Orchids decorated our table. An extraordinarily expensive orchestra celebrated our arrival with strains from a popular opera then raging. People all around glanced at us and immediately away again. I suppose we showed by our appearance that we were the possessors neither of millions nor of world-renowned accomplishments.

The Promoter leaned back in his chair with the demeanour of a large and puffy young frog on the edge of a pool. He settled his white waistcoat and looked from side to side with the superior glance of a man who owns the whole thing. Althea, in her place, also wore a self-conscious air of being hostess to a party which must appreciate the privilege of dining under such auspices. [Page 135]

Our table was a circular one, and the Skeptic sat upon my right. The Promoter at my left occupied himself with Hepatica much of the time—Hepatica had never looked lovelier than to-night, though her simple, white evening frock was not cut half so low as Althea's pink, embroidered one, nor cost half so much as my plain pale-gray. Althea devoted herself to the Philosopher—she and the Skeptic had never got on very well. Meanwhile the Skeptic was saying things into my ear, under cover of the orchestra and the loud hum of talk.

"This is a crowd," he commented. "This certainly is a crowd! Men of millions, and men who don't know how they're going to meet the next note due, but bluffing it through. Somebodies and nobodies. Kingfish and minnows—and some of the kingfish are going to swallow the minnows at the next gulp——What in the name of time is this we're eating now?"

I expressed my ignorance.

"And what's this we're to have with it?" he pursued. "Look out!" [Page 136]

He had known I would thank him for the warning. I shielded my glass from an imminent bottle. It was the third time already, and the dinner was not far on its way. I saw Hepatica shield hers—also for the third time. A tiny flush was beginning to creep up Althea's cheeks. She had refused only the first offering of the waiter.

The Promoter turned and viewed my empty glasses with ill-disguised contempt. "We'll have to get you to stay in town long enough to overcome those notions of yours," said he. "Look around you. I'll wager there's not another in the room."

If I flushed it was not for either of the reasons which caused the brilliant cheeks I saw all about me. "I think you are quite right," said I, as I looked. I saw a garrulous lady at the table on my right, whose high laughter was beginning to carry far; I observed a sleepy one at my left, who had spilled champagne down the front of her elaborate corsage and was nodding over her ices. I glanced at Hepatica. Her pretty head was held high; her eyes, too, sparkled, but not with wine. [Page 137]

The Promoter began to talk of investments, telling stories of great *coups* made by men who had the daring.

"Not necessary for them to have the money, I suppose?" queried the Philosopher.

"Not at all," agreed the Promoter. "Life's a game of poker. If you're not afraid to sit in, and have the nerve to bluff it through, you can win out with a hand that would make a quitter commit suicide."

Althea listened with pride to her husband's discourse. "He's a man of the world," one could see she was thinking, "who is making the eyes drop out of the heads of these simple people."

"I'm so impressed," said the Skeptic to me, "that I can hardly eat. Think of living in a place like this—having this every day—common, like the dust under your feet. Can I ever eat creamed codfish and johnny-cake again, think you? Hepatica must name the hash by a French name and serve me grape juice with it, or I can't condescend to eat it. I say—the smoke is getting a bit thick here for you ladies, isn't it?"

We had been late in coming down, and at many tables people were nearing the end of the dinner. [Page 138] For some time the odour of expensive cigars had been growing heavier throughout the room; a blue haze hung over the more distant tables.

"I don't think my lungs mind it so much as my feelings," I answered. "I shall never be able to make it seem to me just—just——"

"Try to subdue the expression which dominates your countenance at the present moment,"

counselled the Skeptic gently, "or you will be quietly led away from the scene as dangerous to your fellow-men."

After what seemed like many hours we reached the end of the dinner. I felt that I should be glad to reach the quiet and comparative purity of air to be found in the room in which our hosts had received us—a private drawing-room. But this was not to be. We were taken from place to place about the hotel, to look in on this or that scene of entertainment, of banqueting, of revelry. Gorgeousness upon gorgeousness was revealed to us. Althea, now very gay and sparkling in manner, her carefully dressed hair a little loosened, her mind full of schemes for our diversion, [Page 139] took the lead, showing off everything with that air of personal possession I have often observed in the frequenters of hostelries like the Amazon.

Hepatica, in spite of evident effort to maintain her part, grew a trifle silent. As I regarded her I was reminded of a white dove in the company of a pair of peacocks. The Philosopher adjusted his eyeglasses from time to time as if they did not fit well; he seemed to feel his vision growing distorted. I became intensely fatigued with it all, and found myself longing for a quiet corner and a book. As for the Skeptic—but the Skeptic was incorrigible.

"How much does it cost, do you say," he inquired of the Promoter, "to buy a postage stamp at the desk here? I want to put one on a letter I have in my pocket. May I slip it into the post-box myself, or do I have to call a flunkey, present him with a dollar, and respectfully request him to insert it in the slit for me?"

The Promoter smiled. "Oh, people make a joke of the Amazon," said he. "But I notice they're the same ones who breathe deep when they go by it, hoping to inhale the atmosphere free of charge." [Page 140]

The Skeptic inflated his lungs. "I'm going to do it here, inside," said he, "where it's more highly charged."

At length they took us to their own rooms. I have forgotten how many floors up they were, but it didn't matter, in a luxurious elevator, padded and mirrored. In one of the mirrors I caught the Philosopher's eye regarding me so steadily that I felt a sudden sense of relief at the realization that some time we should be out and away together in the fresh air again. It seemed to me a long while since I had been able to see things from the Philosopher's point of view.

We looked at our hosts' private apartments with interest. As the Skeptic passed me on his way to inspect a system of electrical devices on the wall, to which the Promoter was calling his attention, he was softly humming an air. It was, "*Be it ever so humble*," again.

The rooms were very elaborately furnished; the hangings were heavy and sumptuous. A massive oak mantelpiece harboured a fire of gas-logs. There were a few—not many—apparently personal [Page 141] belongings about the rooms; *bric-à-brac* and photographs—the latter mostly of actors and opera singers. In Althea's bedroom we came upon a dressing-table which reminded me of my own, upon the occasion of Althea's visit to me, a few years before. Althea calmly stirred over everything upon it in the effort to find a small jewel-case whose contents she wished to show me. She found it in the end, although for a time the task seemed hopeless.

We sat down in the outer room and listened again to the Promoter's tales of the great strokes of business he had brought off—"deals," he called them. The stories contained much food for thought in the shape of revelations of character in this or that man of prominence. What we should have talked about if he had not thus held the floor I could not guess. I had noted that there were upon a ponderous table six popular novels, as many magazines, and piles of the great dailies. Nowhere could I descry even a small collection of books of the sort which may furnish material for conversation. I tried to imagine the Philosopher drawing a certain beloved book of [Page 142] essays from his pocket, settling himself comfortably with his back to the drop-light, and beginning to read aloud to us, as he is accustomed to do in the Skeptic's little rooms. Here was not even a drop-light for him to do it by, only electric sconces set high upon the walls, and a fanciful centre electrolier. He must, perforce—for he needs a strong light for reading—have stood close under one of the sconces to read from his book of essays. I tried to fancy Althea and the Promoter politely listening—or appearing to listen. This really drew too heavily upon my imagination, and I gave it up.

At a late hour we escaped. I learned afterward that before we left the Promoter took our men aside and offered them one more thing to drink. This really seemed superfluous, and—judging by the straightforward gait of our escorts, to say nothing of my knowledge of their habits—there is no doubt that it was.

Outside the hotel the Philosopher, looking away from it and from the other great buildings which surrounded us on every side, sent his gaze upward to the starry winter's sky. He drew in deep [Page 143] breaths of the frosty air.

"Getting the Amazon out of your blood?" inquired the Skeptic. "Amazon's a mighty good name for it. It thinks it's sophisticated and refined—but it isn't. It's a great, blowsy, milkmaid of a hotel, with all her best clothes on, perpetually going to a fair."

"I'm not so much re-filling my insulted lungs," said the Philosopher, "as drawing breaths of relief that I got away without buying a block of stock in something, or putting my name down to be one of a company for the development of something else."

"Oh, we were safe enough," the Skeptic declared. "This was a private dinner with ladies present;

the Promoter gave us only a delicate sample of what he could do. Wait till he gets you at luncheon with him in the grill-room, all by yourself—then you can find out what he is when he's after game. Unless you're tied to the mast, so to speak, with your ears stopped with wax, you'll land on the shore of the enchanted country he pictures for you. He's deadly, I assure you. That's why he can afford to live at the Amazon." [Page 144]

"I wonder how Althea likes it?" speculated Hepatica.

"Likes it down to the ground—and up to the roof," asserted the Skeptic. "That's plain enough. It saves housekeeping—and picking up her room," he added softly to Hepatica—but I heard him. Hepatica did not reply.

"Let's not stop at this station," proposed the Skeptic as we walked on, "but keep on up to the next. A fast walk will do us all good after that feast of porpoises."

"I suppose they call that living," said the Philosopher, as we turned aside into quieter streets.

"Of course they do, and so does everybody else at those tables to-night—with four exceptions."

"Oh, come," demurred the Philosopher, "possibly there were a few other wise men in that company besides ourselves. Who would have known from your appearance as you sat there gorging with the rest, that you were inwardly protesting, and greatly preferred the simple life? Don't flatter yourself that you had the aspect of an ascetic. There were moments during that meal when any unprejudiced observer who didn't know you would have sworn that you were deeply [Page 145] gratified that no other engagement had prevented you from dining in your favourite haunt."

"Don't throw stones," retorted the Skeptic. "I saw you when you caught sight of some particularly prosperous looking people at another table and bowed convivially to them as one who says, 'You here, too? Of course. Our set, you know!'"

"Quits!" admitted the Philosopher. "Well then—it's the ladies who did succeed in looking like visitants from another world."

This was rather poetical for the Philosopher, and of course it led us to wonder wherein he thought we differed. Hepatica asked anxiously if she really had looked so very old-fashioned in the white evening frock which had been three times made over.

"Hopelessly old-fashioned," assented the Philosopher. "Hopelessly old-fashioned. But not so much in the matter of the frock as in some other things. Heaven forbid that it should be otherwise!"

"Amen!" responded the Skeptic fervently.

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V

RHODORA AND THE PREACHER

When the fight begins within himself
A man's worth something.
—Robert Browning.

THE Skeptic brought up the letter with him as he came home to dinner; it had arrived in the last mail. The Philosopher happened to be dining with us that night, so we four were together when the news came upon us. As Hepatica read it aloud we stared at one another, astonished.

The letter was from Grandmother, inviting us to Rhodora's wedding, which was to take place under her roof. Rhodora herself had been practically under Grandmother's roof for four years now, except as she had been sent to a school of Grandmother's selection. Rhodora had no mother. Her father, an absorbed man of business, had, at Grandmother's suggestion, been glad to let her have the girl to bring up—or to finish bringing up—according to her own ideas. When we [Page 147] had first seen Rhodora there could be no question that she sadly needed bringing up by somebody. To that date she had, apparently, only come up by herself.

"I, for one, have never seen her since that none-too-short visit she made you, that summer," said the Skeptic reminiscently. "It has never occurred to me to long to see her again. She was a mere lusty infant then. And now she's to be married. How time gets on! What did you say was the name of the unfortunate chap?"

"'The Reverend Christopher Austen,'" re-read Hepatica from the letter.

"He will need all the fortitude the practice of his profession can have developed in him, if my recollections can be depended upon to furnish a basis for the present outlook," said the Skeptic gloomily.

"You don't know that he will, at all," I disputed. "Rhodora was only a girl when you saw her. She has been four years under Grandmother's influence since then. Can you imagine that has

accomplished nothing?" [Page 148]

The Skeptic shook his head. "That would be like a dove attempting the education of a hawk. The girl has probably learned not to break into the conversation of her elders with an axe," he speculated, "nor to walk ahead of Grandmother when she comes into a room. Any girl learns those things—in time—unless she is an idiot. But there are other things to learn. You can't make fine china out of coarse clay."

"But you can make very, very beautiful pottery," cried Hepatica. "And the lump of clay that came into contact with Grandmother's wheel——"

She paused. Metaphors are sometimes difficult things to handle. The Philosopher, musing, did not notice that she had not finished.

"It's rather curious that I should be asked," he said. "I never saw either of them but once."

"You made a great conquest on that one occasion, though," said the Skeptic.

"Nonsense!" The Philosopher coloured like a boy. "That girl——"

"Not that girl," explained the Skeptic. "The Old Lady. She has never ceased to ask after you [Page 149] whenever we have seen her or heard from her. As I remember, you presented her with a bunch of garden flowers as big as your head, and looked at her as if she were eighteen and the beauty she undoubtedly once was.—Well, well—a preacher! What has Rhodora become that she has blinded the eyes of a preacher? Not that their eyes are not easily blinded!"

"Why do you say 'preacher?'" inquired his wife. "Grandmother's letter says a young clergyman."

"He's no clergyman," insisted the Skeptic. "He's not even a minister. He's just a preacher—a raw youth, just out of college—knows as much about women as a puppy about elephant training. Rhodora probably sang a hymn at one of his meetings and finished him. Well, well—I suppose this means another wedding present?" He looked dubiously at Hepatica.

"It does, of course," she admitted.

"Send her a cut-glass punch-bowl," he suggested, preparing savagely to carve a plump, young duck. "Anything less adapted to the use of a preacher's family I can't conceive. And that's the [Page 150] main object in buying wedding gifts, according to my observation."

The day of Rhodora's wedding arrived, and we went down together to Grandmother's lovely old country home—a stately house upon the banks of a wide, frozen river. Our train brought us there two hours before the one set for the ceremony, and we found not only Grandmother but Rhodora and the Preacher in the fine old-time drawing-room to greet us. The wedding was to be a quietly informal one, and such of the other guests as had already arrived were in the room also, having a cup of tea before they should go upstairs to dress.

Rhodora herself was pouring the tea, and the Preacher was helping hand the cups about. It was a beautiful opportunity to observe the pair before their marriage.

Grandmother gave us the welcome only Grandmother knows how to give. In her own home she looks like a fair, little, old queen, receiving everybody's homage, yet giving so much kindness in return that one can never feel one's self out of debt to her hospitality. Her greeting to the [Page 151] Philosopher was an especially cordial one.

"I ventured to ask you," she said to him, "because I have always wanted to see you again—not merely because I have heard of you in the world where you are making a name for yourself. And I wanted, too, in justice to my granddaughter, to have you see her again."

Before the Philosopher could formulate an appropriate reply, Rhodora herself, leaving her tea-table, and crossing the room with a swift and graceful tread, was giving us welcome.

It was amusing to see our two men look at Rhodora. Hepatica and I had been, in a way, prepared to see a transformation, having heard sundry rumours to that effect; but the Skeptic and the Philosopher, having classified Rhodora once and for all, had since received no impression sufficient to efface or modify the original one. I can say for them that to one who did not know them well their surprise would have been undiscoverable, yet to Hepatica and me it was perfectly evident that they considered a miracle had been wrought. [Page 152]

As to personal appearance, Rhodora had developed, as she had promised to do, into a remarkable beauty. If she had kept on as she had begun, she would have become one of those exuberant beauties who look as if they had but lately quitted the stage and must shortly return thither. Even yet, it would have taken but an error in dress, a reversion to a certain type of manner which too often goes with looks like these, to make of the girl that which it had seemed she must become. But, somehow, she had not become that thing.

Rhodora presently turned and beckoned to the Preacher, and putting down his teacups he came to her side. She presented him, and we saw that he was, indeed, no clergyman, no minister even—in the sense that the Skeptic had differentiated these terms—but a preacher—and an embryo one at that—a big, red-cheeked, honest-eyed boy, a straightforward, clean-hearted, large-purposed young fellow, who meant to do all the good in the world, in all the ways that he could bring about. He was but lately graduated from his seminary, had yet to preach his first sermon after the dignities of his ordination, but—one could not tell how—one began to believe in him at [Page 153]

once.

"No, I haven't a bit of experience," he owned to me, as we stood talking together, getting acquainted. "Not a bit—except a little mission work a few of us went in for this last year. I'm as raw a recruit as ever put on a uniform and fell in with the rest of the company for his first drill. But—I mean to count one!"

"I'm sure you will," said I, regarding him with growing pleasure in the sight.

"And Rhodora will count two," said he, his eyes following her. "One and two, side by side, you know, stand for twelve."

"So they do," said I. "And seeing Rhodora as she looks now, I should think she would make an efficient comrade."

His face glowed. Together we observed Rhodora, standing close by Grandmother's side. The two, with Hepatica and our two men, made a group, of which not the bride-elect, but Grandmother, was the precise centre. The moment Rhodora had reached Grandmother's side she had put herself in the background. Although she towered above the little old lady she did not overwhelm [Page 154] her, and Grandmother herself had never seemed a more gently dominating figure than now, in her sweeping black gown with its rare laces, her white hair, in soft puffs, framing her delicate face. And as, at a turn in the conversation, Grandmother looked up at Rhodora, and Rhodora, bending a little, smiled back at her, answering in the most deferential way, it was clear to me that the most efficient element in the education of the girl had been her intercourse with this old-time gentlewoman.

"It was seeing those two together," said the Preacher rather shyly, in my ear, "that attracted me first. I never knew that Youth and Age could set each other off like that till I saw them. And I saw at once that a girl who could be such friends with an old lady must be very much worth while herself. They are great chums, you know—it's quite unusual, I think. And it's a mighty fine thing for any one to know Grandmother. I've learned more from Grandmother than from any one I ever knew."

"She's a very rare and adorable old lady," I agreed heartily. "We all worship her—we all feel that [Page 155] to be near her is a special fortune for any one. She has plainly grown very fond of Rhodora—she will miss her."

"No doubt of that," he agreed—but, quite naturally, more with triumph than with sympathy.

We went upstairs presently to make ready for the wedding. When we were dressed, we met, according to previous agreement, in the big, square, upper hall, with its spindled railing making a gallery about the quaint and stately staircase. It was a little too early to go down, and we drew some high-backed chairs together and sat down to look at one another in our wedding garments.

"I'd like to get married myself again to-night," declared the Skeptic, forcibly pulling on his gloves with a man's brutal disregard for the possible instability of seams. He eyed his wife possessively. "Tell me—will the Preacher's bride put her in the shade?"

"Don!" But Hepatica's falling lashes could not quite conceal her pleasure in his pride. [Page 156]

"Not for a minute." The Philosopher's benevolent gaze approved of his friend's wife from the top of her masses of shining hair to the tip of her white-shod foot. "At the same time, I don't feel quite such a dispirited compassion for the Preacher himself as I did on the way down. Can that possibly be the same girl who treated Grandmother as if she were an inconvenient, antique family relic, and the rest of us as if she endured but was horribly bored by us?"

"I have never supposed grandmothers," said the Skeptic thoughtfully, "to be particularly influential members of society. Evidently ours is different. But there must have been other elements in the metamorphosis of Rhodora."

"Miss Eleanor Lockwood's school," suggested Hepatica.

"You mention that with bated breath," said the Skeptic, "precisely as every one, including its graduates, mentions it. I admit that Miss Lockwood's school is a place where rich young savages are turned out polished members of society. But there's been more than that."

"The Preacher himself?" I suggested. [Page 157]

The Skeptic looked at me. "Do you mean to imply," said he, with raised eyebrows, "that any woman would admit the possibility of acquaintanceship with any particular man's having had a formative influence on her character? After school-days, I mean of course."

"Why not?" I inquired. "What influence could be greater?"

The Skeptic looked at the Philosopher, who returned his gaze calmly.

"Did you ever expect to hear that?" asked the Skeptic.

"I should not think of denying the influence of woman upon man," replied the Philosopher. "Why should not the rule work both ways?"

"I never heard it thus flatly formulated before," declared the Skeptic. "It does me good, that's all. So you think the Preacher has had a hand in the reformation?"

"You have seen the Preacher," said I. "You know the family from which he comes—he's of good stock. You've only to hear him speak to see that he's a man of purpose, of action, of training—boy as he looks. How could he fail to have a strong influence upon a girl who cared for him?" [Page 158]

The Skeptic looked at Hepatica. "Do you agree with her?" he inquired.

"Of course I agree with her," responded Hepatica, looking from him to me—and back again. "You are only pretending to doubt us both. It's very clever of you, but we know perfectly that you understand how far—very far—we are affected by your ideals, your judgments, your whole estimate of life. Therefore—you must be very careful how you use your influence with us!"

The Skeptic gave her back the look he saw in her eyes. "Ah, you two belong to the wise ones!" he said. "The wise ones, who, magnifying our hold on you, thus acquire a far more tremendous hold on us! Eh, Philo?"

The Philosopher smiled—inscrutably. Probably he felt that an inscrutable smile was his safest means of navigating waters like these.

We went down to the wedding. The Preacher stood up very straight while he was being married, and though his boyish cheek paled and reddened again as the ceremony proceeded, his responses were clear-cut. Rhodora made a bonny bride. The absurd vision I had had of her, ever since I had heard she was to be married, of her taking the officiating clergyman's book out of his hand and steering the service for herself, melted away before the vision of her serious young beauty as she made her vows, and turned from the clergyman's felicitations, at the conclusion of the service, to take Grandmother into a tender embrace. [Page 159]

"I owe it all to you," she said to Grandmother by and by, in my hearing, as we three happened to be for a little alone together. She turned to me. "I was a barbarian when she took me," she said. "A barbarian of barbarians. If it hadn't been for Grandmother I should be one yet, and he"—her glance went off for an instant toward her young husband—"would never have dreamed of looking at me."

"You were not very different, my dear," said Grandmother, in her gentle way, "from many girls of this day."

"Forgive me, dear," responded Rhodora, "but I was so much worse that only a grandmother like you could have shown me what I was." [Page 160]

"I never tried to show you what you were," said Grandmother. "Only what you could be. And now—I must lose you."

The Preacher came up, the Skeptic by his side. The Philosopher and Hepatica, seeing the old magic circle forming, promptly added themselves.

It fell out, presently, that the Philosopher and I, a step away from the others, were observing them as we talked together. The Philosopher had adjusted his eyeglasses, having carefully polished them. He seemed to want to see things clearly to-day.

"This is a scene I've witnessed a good many times, first and last," said he. "Each time it impresses me afresh with the daring of the participants. Brave young things, setting sail upon a mighty ocean, in a small boat, which may or may not be seaworthy—some of them, it seems, sometimes, with neither chart nor compass—certainly with little knowledge of the crew. It's a trite comparison, I suppose."

"You talk as if you stood safely on the shore," I ventured. "Is life no ocean to you, then—and do you never feel adrift upon it?" [Page 161]

The Philosopher stared curiously at me. It was, I admit, a strange speech for me to make to him, but I had not been thinking of him. I had been thinking of Lad, my big boy, now away at school, and of the day when he should reach this experience for himself, and I should have to give him up—my one near tie. I should surely feel adrift in that day—far adrift.

"Does it seem to you like that?" he asked, very gently, after a minute.

I looked up, and saw a new and quite strange expression in his kindly eyes. "No, no," I said hastily. "How could it—with so many and such good friends?"

I think he would have questioned me further, but the Skeptic at that moment turned my way, and I laid hold upon him—figuratively speaking—and did not let go again till all danger of a discussion with the Philosopher on the subject of my loneliness was past.

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VI [Page 162]

WISTARIA—AND THE PHILOSOPHER

Friendship needs delicate handling.
—*Hugh Black.*

"AFTER all this dining and wine-ing of you," said Hepatica suddenly one morning, toward the close of my visit, "you are not to escape without our giving a dinner for you."

"Oh, my dear," I began, "after all you have done for me, surely that isn't necessary. I have had ——"

"Yes, I know. You have had dinners and dinners, including the Philosopher's bachelor repast, which might or might not be called by that name, but was certainly great fun. But I want to give you a dinner myself."

"Better let her," advised the Skeptic, who was putting on his overcoat at the time, preparatory to leaving us for the day. "It won't be like anything of that name you have ever tried before. Besides she wants you to meet Wistaria." [Page 163]

"Who is Wistaria?" I asked.

They both looked at me. Then they looked at each other.

"Hasn't Philo told you about Wistaria?" inquired the Skeptic, in evident surprise. "Wasn't she at his——Oh, that's right—she was out of town. Well, she's back, and you must meet her. She's a mighty fine girl—or, if not exactly a girl, woman. Philo admires her rather more than he condescends to admire most women, I should say. Any errands for me, Patty? All right—good-bye, dear."

He kissed her and ran for his car. I stood looking out of the window after him. It struck me rather suddenly that it was a gray day outside, with heavy clouds threatening to make the sky even darker. There was a touch of gloom in the whole outer aspect of things.

Hepatica immediately set about making preparations for her dinner. It would be most informal, she assured me, and as I heard her giving her invitations over the telephone I recognized from their character that it would be so, even though I heard her inviting quite a party, including Camellia and the Judge, Dahlia and the Professor, Althea and the Promoter, and Azalea and the Cashier. A strange man, a Mining Engineer, was included in the list, to make the tale of numbers evenly divided. I judged he was likely to fall to me in the final disposition of the guests at Hepatica's table, and inquired what he was like. [Page 164]

"He's delightful," replied Hepatica enthusiastically. "You'll be sure to like him. He lost his wife about five years ago, but hasn't re-married, and lives mostly at his club, as he has no children. He's devoted to his work, and has a good, big reputation, though he's still in the early forties."

Hepatica would not tell me what she meant to have for her dinner, but on the appointed day shut herself up in her kitchen with a young woman whom she had engaged, and would allow me only to set her table for her. As I laid the required number of forks and spoons I realized that she meant to be true to her word and serve a quite simple dinner. For this I was thankful. For some reason, which I could not just understand myself, I was dreading that dinner more than anything that had happened for a long time. [Page 165]

The evening came. I dressed without enthusiasm, putting on the pale-gray frock which Hepatica had insisted upon, and pinning on a bunch of violets which arrived for me at almost the last moment, without any card in the box. Hepatica had three magnificent red roses at the same time. It was like the Skeptic to be so thoughtful.

The guests arrived—Camellia superbly attired, Althea gorgeously so, Dahlia in youthful pink and white, Azalea in a demurely simple dress whose laces were just a thought rumpled about the neck, and had to be straightened out by my assisting fingers. Little Bud, she explained, had insisted on hugging her violently at the last moment, before he would allow her to come away.

Wistaria came last, so that, as we all stood grouped about the little rooms I had a fine chance to see her arrival. She had to go through the room in which we were to reach Hepatica's bedroom, and I saw a tall and graceful figure, all in black under a white evening cloak, and caught a glimpse of a pair of brilliant dark eyes under the white silken scarf which enveloped her hair. But when she came out, in Hepatica's company, I saw, undisguised, one of the most attractive women I had ever met. [Page 166]

"She's unusual, isn't she?" said the Skeptic in my ear, as, having welcomed the new guest, and watched Hepatica present her to me, he fell back at my side. Wistaria had greeted the Philosopher with the quiet warmth of manner which means assured acquaintance, and the two had remained together while we waited for the serving of the dinner.

"She is very charming," I agreed. "It is her manner, quite as much as her face, isn't it? She must be well worth knowing."

"We think so," said he. He seemed to be regarding me quite steadily. I wondered uneasily if I were not looking well. The rooms seemed rather over-warm. The presence of so many people in such a small space is apt to make the air oppressive. Also I remembered that the effect of pale-gray is not to heighten one's colouring.

Wistaria, all in filmy black, from which her white shoulders rose like a flower, wore one splendid [Page 167]

American Beauty rose. Somehow I felt, quite suddenly, that pale-gray is a meaningless tint, the mere shadow of a colour, of less character than white, of immeasurably less beauty than simple black itself. I caught the Philosopher's eye apparently fixed for a moment upon my violets, and I wondered, with a queer little sensation of disquiet, if even they seemed to be without character also.

Then dinner was announced, and I shook myself mentally, and looked up smiling at my Mining Engineer, who was truly a man worth knowing and a most pleasant gentleman besides, and went to dinner with him determined that if I must look characterless I would not be characterless, nor make my companion long to get away.

Wistaria and the Philosopher sat exactly opposite. The Mining Engineer on my one side, and the Judge on my other, kept me too busy to spend much time in noting Wistaria's captivating presence or the Philosopher's absorption. Yet, at moments when some sally of the Skeptic's, who sat upon Wistaria's other side, brought the attention of the whole company to bear upon that quarter of the table, I found myself unable to help noting two things. One was that I had never seen the Philosopher so roused and ready of speech; the other, that I had never quite appreciated how distinguished he has, of late years, grown in appearance. Possibly this was because I had not had the chance to view him under just these conditions; possibly, also, it was because he literally was growing distinguished in the world of scientific research, and his name becoming one cited as an authority in a certain important field. [Page 168]

The dinner itself I cannot describe, for the sufficient reason that I cannot now recall one solitary thing I ate. But the impression remains with me that it was really an extraordinarily simple dinner, that everything was delicious, and that one rose up from it with a sense of having been daintily fed, not stuffed. I'm sure I could not pay it a higher or a rarer compliment.

After dinner the Promoter told stories of "deals," to which the Professor listened curiously, watching the speaker as he might have gently eyed some strange specimen in the world of insects or of birds. The Judge and the Cashier hobnobbed for a while; then the Judge made his way to the side of Wistaria and remained there for an indefinite period, both looking deeply interested in their conversation. The Engineer attempted to make something of Althea, but presently gave it up, spent a few moments with Camellia, and came back to me. By and by Azalea and the Cashier sang a duet for us, and after some persuasion Azalea then sang alone. Altogether, the evening got on somehow—it is all very hazy in my mind, except for one singular fact—I did not spend a moment with the Philosopher. How this happened I do not know, and it was so unusual that it seemed noteworthy. It was not because he was not several times in my immediate vicinity, but I was always at the moment so engaged with whomever happened to be talking with me that I had not time to turn and include the Philosopher in the interview. [Page 169]

When our guests departed they went together, having one and the same car to catch. All but Wistaria, who had come in her own private carriage, which was late in arriving to take her home. The Philosopher had remained with her, and he took her down to her carriage. I cannot remember seeing anything more attractive than Wistaria's personality as she said good night, her sparkling face all winsome cordiality, her white scarf lying lightly upon the masses of her black hair, the crimson rose nodding from the folds of her long, white cloak. [Page 170]

"Pretty fine looking pair, aren't they?" observed the Skeptic, with an expansive grin, the moment the door had closed upon Wistaria and the Philosopher. He threw himself into a chair and yawned mightily. "Wistaria's almost as tall as Philo, isn't she? A superb woman."

"I never saw her looking so well," agreed Hepatica, straightening chairs and settling couch pillows, trailing here and there in her pretty frock with all the energy of the early morning, as if it were not half-after eleven by the little mantel clock. "Didn't you like her, dear?" She threw an eager glance at me. She was in the restless mood of the hostess who wishes to be assured that everything has gone well. [Page 171]

"I was charmed with her," said I—I had not meant to take a seat again; I was weary and wanted to get away to bed—"I never knew how beautiful an American Beauty rose was till I saw it beneath her face."

The Skeptic turned in his chair and looked at me. "Well done!" he cried. "Couldn't have said it better myself. We must tell Philo that speech. He'll be deeply gratified. He has every confidence in your taste."

"The dinner was perfect," I went on. "I never imagined one so cleverly planned. And everybody seemed in great spirits—there wasn't a dull moment."

"You dear thing!" said Hepatica, and came and dropped a kiss upon my hair. "It's fun to do things for you, you're so appreciative. Didn't you enjoy your Mining Engineer?"

"He was so entertaining," said I, "that if it had been any other dinner than that one I shouldn't have known what I was eating."

"Hear, hear!" applauded the Skeptic. "Bouquets for us all! Didn't I make an ideal host?"

"Your geniality was rivalled only by your tact," I declared. [Page 172]

They laughed together. Then the Skeptic sat up. He got up and strode over to the window and peered down. "Philo is taking a disgracefully long time to see the lady into her carriage," he

observed. "I supposed he'd be back, to talk it over, as usual. The best of entertaining is the talking your guests over after they've gone—eh, Patty, girl? I don't seem to see the carriage. Perhaps he's gone home with her."

I laid my hand upon the door of my room. "I don't know why I am so sleepy," I apologized. "It only came over me since the door closed. But you must both be tired, too—and we have to be up in the morning at the usual hour."

Hepatica looked regretful, but she did not urge me to remain. I felt guilty at leaving a wide-awake host and hostess who wanted to talk things over, but really I—the perfume from my violets had been stealing away my nerves all the evening. I felt that I must take them off or grow faint at their odour, which seemed stronger as they drooped. I opened my door, turned to smile back at the pair, and shut it upon the inside. A moment later I was standing by my window which I had [Page 173] thrown wide, and the winter wind was lifting the violets which I had already forgotten to take off.

I heard the murmur of voices in the room outside, but it soon ceased. With no third person to praise the feast it was probably dull work congratulating each other on its success. By and by—I don't know when it happened—I heard the electric entrance-bell whirr in the tiny hall, and the Skeptic go to answer it. Then I heard voices again—men's voices. There was an interval. Then came a small knock at my door. I opened it to Hepatica.

"The Philosopher has come back," she whispered. I had not lit my light—I had closed my window and had been sitting by it, my elbows on the sill. Hepatica put out her hand and felt of me. "Oh, you haven't undressed," she said. "Then won't you go out and see him? He seemed so disappointed when Don said you had gone. It seems he's called out of town quite suddenly—he's afraid he may not be back before you go—he says he didn't have a chance to tell you about it this evening." [Page 174]

There was no help for it—I had no excuse. I did not dare to snap on my light and look at myself. I put my hands to my hair to feel if it was still snug; then I went.

Hepatica had mercifully turned off all the lights but the rose-shaded drop-light on the reading-table and two of the electric candles in the dining-room. It was a relief to feel the glare gone. The air from the window had freshened me. The Philosopher stood by the reading-table, upon which he had laid his hat. His overcoat was on a chair. Evidently he was not waiting merely to say good-bye and go.

The Skeptic, upon my entrance, immediately crossed the room to the door of the hall, upon which his own room opened. "You people will excuse me," he said. "I don't know *why* I am so sleepy." His tone was peculiar, and I recognized that he was quoting my words of a half-hour before. "It only came over me since the door closed on our guests. And I have to be up in the morning at the usual hour. But don't let that hurry you, Philo, old man." And he vanished.

The Philosopher looked as if he did not mean to let it hurry him. He drew his chair near mine, [Page 175] facing me, after a fashion he has, and looked at me in silence for a minute.

"You are tired," he said.

"A little. The rooms were very warm."

"They were. They made the violets droop, I see."

I put up my hand. "Yes. I meant to take them off."

"Perhaps you don't like violets. If I could have found a bunch of sweet-williams to send you instead, like those in your own garden, I should have preferred it. I know what you like among summer flowers, but with these florist's offerings I'm not so familiar. I'm afraid I'm not much versed in the sending of flowers."

"Did you send these?" I put my hand up to them again. They certainly were drooping sadly. Perhaps if they had known who sent them——

"To be sure I did."

"There was no card. I thought it was Don—and forgot to thank him—luckily. Let me thank you now. They have been so sweet all the evening."

"Too sweet, haven't they? You looked a bit pale to-night, I thought." [Page 176]

"It was my frock. Gray always makes people look pale."

"Does it? I've liked that frock so much—and I had an idea gray and purple went together."

"They do—beautifully. And to-morrow, after the violets have been in water, they'll be quite fresh—and so shall I. To tell the honest truth, so many dinners—well, I'm not used to them. I'm just a little bit glad to remember that spring is coming on soon, and I can get out in my old garden and dig and rake, and watch the things come out."

"Yes—you're one of the outdoor creatures," said the Philosopher, leaning back in his chair in the old way—he had been sitting up quite straight. "I understand it—I like gardens myself. And your garden most of all. Do you realize, between your absences and my long stay in Germany, it's three summers since I've strolled about your garden?"

"So long? Yes, it must be."

"But I mean to be at home this summer. Do you?"

"And so we renewed the old vow"

"I? Yes, I think so. After so long a winter outing—or inning—I couldn't bear to miss the garden this year. And Lad will be home—his first vacation. He is fond of the old garden, too." [Page 177]

"May I come?" asked the Philosopher rather abruptly.

"To stroll about the garden? Haven't you always been welcome?"

"I want a special welcome—from you—from my friend. When a man has only one friend, that one's welcome means a good deal to him."

"Only one! You have so many."

"Have I? Yes, so I have, and pleasant friends they are, too. But friendship—with only one. Come, Rhexia—you understand that as well as I. Why pretend you don't? That's not like you."

He was looking at me very steadily. He leaned forward, stretching out his hand. I laid mine in it. And so we renewed the old vow.

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PART III

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I

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SIXTEEN MILES TO BOSWELL'S

"One passenger off the five-thirty, coming up the hill," announced Sue Boswell, peering eagerly out of the Inn's office window. "That makes nine for supper. I'll run and tell mother."

"Nine—poor child," murmured Tom Boswell, behind the desk. "That's certainly a great showing for a summer hotel, on the fifteenth day of July. If we don't do better in August—the game's up."

He stared out of the window at the approaching guest, who, escorted by Tom's brother Tim, was climbing the road toward Boswell's Inn at a pace which indicated no pressing anxiety to arrive. As the pair drew nearer, Tom could see that the stranger was a rather peculiar-looking person. Of medium height, as thin as a lath, with a nearly colourless face in which was set a pair of black eyes with dark circles round them, the man had somewhat the appearance of an invalid; yet an air of subdued nervous energy about him in a measure offset the suggestion of ill-health. He was surveying Boswell's Inn as he approached it in a comprehensive way which seemed to take in every feature of its appearance. [Page 182]

Across the desk in the small lobby the newcomer spoke curtly. "Good room and a bath? I want an absolutely quiet room where I get no kitchen noises or ballroom dancing. Windows with a breeze—if you've got such a thing."

"I can't give you the bath," Tom answered regretfully, "because we haven't got one that goes with any room in the house. But you can have plenty of hot and cold, in cans. The room will be quiet, all right. And we always have a breeze up here, if there is one anywhere in the world. Shall I show you?"

"Lead on," assented the stranger. He had not offered to register, though Tom had extended to him a freshly dipped pen.

"He's going to make sure first," thought Tom, recognizing a sign of the experienced traveller. He led the way himself, feeling, for some reason, unwilling to hand young Tim the key and allow him to exploit the rooms. As they mounted the stairs, Tom was rapidly considering. He had brought along three keys—rather an unusual act on his part. It was hard to say why he felt it necessary to bestow any special attention upon this guest, who certainly was by no means of an imposing appearance, and whose hot-weather dress was as careless as his manner. [Page 183]

He opened the door of the first room, and the stranger looked in silently. "I'll show you another before you decide," said Tom hurriedly, without waiting for a comment.

This was not his best empty room, and he felt somehow that the man who wanted a room with a bath and a breeze knew it. He led the way on along the hall to a corner room in the front. This was his second best. Tom always preferred to reserve his choicest for a chance millionaire or a possible wealthy society lady—though Heaven knew that, during the six weeks the Inn had been open, no guest distantly resembling one or the other of those desirable types had approached the little mountain hostelry. [Page 184]

"Anything better?" inquired the thin man, his extraordinarily quick glance covering every detail of the room like lightning, as Tom felt.

"Sure—if you want the bridal suit." Tom pronounced it proudly, as it were a claw-hammer and white waistcoat.

"Bring her on."

Tom marched ahead to the two rooms opening on the little balcony above the side porch, a balcony which belonged to the "bridal suite" alone, and which commanded the finest view into the very heart of the mountains that the house afforded. Seeing his guest—after one look around the spotless room with its pink and white furnishings, and into the small dressing-room beyond—stride toward the outer door, Tom threw it wide. The guest stepped out on to the balcony. Here he pulled off his hat, which he had not before removed, and let the breeze—for there was unquestionably a breeze, even on this afternoon of a day which had been one of the hottest the country had known—drift refreshingly against his damp brow. The zephyr was strong enough even to lift slightly the thick locks of black hair which lay above the white forehead. [Page 185]

"Price for this?" asked the stranger, in his abrupt way, turning back into the room.

Tom mentioned it—with a little inward hesitation. The family had differed a good deal on the question of prices for these best rooms. In his opinion that settled upon for the bridal suite was almost prohibitively high. Not a guest yet but had turned away with a sigh. For a moment he had been tempted to reduce it, but he had promised the others to stick by the decision at least through July. So he mentioned the price firmly.

The guest glanced sharply at him as he did so. There was a queer little contraction of the stranger's thin upper lip. Then he said: "I'll take 'em—for the night, and you may hold 'em for me till to-morrow night. Tell you then whether I'll stay longer."

Tom understood, of course, that it was now a question of a satisfactory table. But here he knew he was strong. Mother Boswell's cooking—there was none better obtainable. He was already in a hurry to prove to this laconic stranger who demanded the best he had of everything, including breezes, that in the matter of food Boswell's Inn could satisfy the most exacting. Not in elaborately dressed viands of rare kitchen product, of course—that was not to be expected off here. But in temptingly cooked everyday food, and in certain extras which were Mother Boswell's specialties, and which the few people now in the Inn called for with ever-increasing zest—though they seldom deigned to send any special word of praise to the anxious cook—Boswell's needed to ask forbearance of nobody. [Page 186]

"I'll send your stuff up right away," said Tom, as the other man cast his straw hat upon a chair and went over to a washstand, where hung several snowy towels. "Have some hot water?"

"Yes—and iced."

"All right." Tom was off on the jump. It was certainly something to have rented the bridal suite even for the night, but he felt more than ordinarily curious to know who his guest was.

"Might be a travelling man," he speculated, when he had given Tim his orders, "though he doesn't exactly seem like one. But he looks like a fellow who's used to getting what he wants." [Page 187]

When the new guest came downstairs, at the peal of a gong through the quiet house, Tom saw him cast one keen-eyed glance in turn at each of the other occupants of the lobby, as they clustered about the door of the dining-room. Seven of these were women, and of that number at least five were elderly. Of the two younger ladies, neither presented any special attractiveness beyond that of entire respectability. The eighth guest was a man—a middle-aged man who was reading a book and who carried the book into the dining-room with him, where he continued to read it at his solitary table.

Tom Boswell was at the elbow of the latest arrival as he entered the dining-room, a long, low, but airy apartment, as spotless and shining in its way as the bedroom upstairs had been. There was no head waiter, and Tom himself piloted the new guest to a small table by a window, looking off into the mountains on the opposite side of the house from that of the bridal suite. The women

boarders were all behind him, the solitary man just across the way at a corresponding small table. Certainly the proprietor of Boswell's Inn possessed that great desideratum for such an official—tact. [Page 188]

Sue Boswell, aged fifteen, in a blue-and-white print frock and white apron so crisp that one could not discern a wrinkle in them, waited on the new guest. She did not ask him what he would have, nor present to him a card from which to select his meal. She brought him first a small cup of chicken broth, steaming hot; and though he regarded this at first as if he had no appetite whatever, after the first tentative sip he went on to the bottom of the cup. When this was gone, Sue placed before him a plate of corned-beef hash, an alluring pinkness showing beneath the gratifying upper coat of brown. A small dish of cucumbers—thin, iced cucumbers, with a French dressing—accompanied the hash; and with these he was offered hot rolls so small and delicate and crisp that, after cautiously sampling the butter with what seemed a fastidious palate, the guest took to eating rolls as if he had seldom found anything so well worth consuming.

Something made of red raspberries and cream followed, and then half a large cantaloupe, its golden heart filled with crushed ice, was placed before him. Last appeared a cup of amber coffee. As the guest tasted this beverage, a look of complete satisfaction overspread his pale face, and he drained the cup clear and asked for more. [Page 189]

Presently he strolled out into the lobby. Here Tom awaited him behind the desk. The hotel register was open, and Tom's fingers suggestively held a pen. The guest obeyed the hint. At an inn so small, it certainly would be a pity for any guest not to add his name to the short list.

For it was a very short list. Although a full month had gone by since the first arrival had written her name, the bottom of the page had not been quite reached when this latest one scratched his in characters which looked quite as much like Arabic as English. When Tom came to examine the name later, he made it out to be Perkins, though it might quite as easily have been Tompkins, or Judson, or any other name which had an elevated letter somewhere in the middle. The initials were quite indecipherable. But Perkins it turned out to be, for when Tom tentatively addressed the newcomer by that appellation there was no correction made, and he continued to respond whenever so accosted. [Page 190]

Mr. Perkins spent the evening smoking upon the porch, his head turned toward the mountains. The next morning, when he had eaten a breakfast which included some wonderful browned griddle-cakes and syrup—another of the Inn's specialties—he strolled away into the middle distance and was observed by various of the guests, from time to time, perched about among the rocks, in idle attitudes.

"He's a queer duck," observed Tom in the kitchen that day, describing Mr. Perkins to his mother. Mrs. Boswell seldom appeared beyond her special domain—that of the kitchen—but left the rest of the housekeeping to her daughters Bertha and Sue; the management of the Inn to Tom and Tim. "Silent as an owl. Seems to like his food—nothing strange about that. He doesn't act sick, exactly, but tired, or bored, or used up, somehow. Eyes like coals and sharper than a ferret's. I can't make him out. He won't talk to anybody, except now and then a word or two to Mr. Griffith. Never looks at the ladies, but I tell you they look at him. Every one of 'em has a different notion about him. Anyhow, he's taken the bridal suit for two weeks. Goes down to the post-office for his mail—gave particular orders not to have it sent up here. That's kind of funny, isn't it? Oh, I meant to tell you before: he's paid for his rooms a week in advance." [Page 191]

"It helps a little," said his sister Bertha. She was twenty-five years old, and if any one of this family had the responsibility of the success of Boswell's Inn heavily and anxiously at heart, it was Bertha. "But it can't make up the difference. Here's July half over, and not a dozen people in the house. What can be the matter? Isn't everything all right?"

"Sure it's all right," insisted Tom. "We just haven't got known, that's all."

"But how are we going to get known, if nobody comes? Our advertisement in the city papers costs dreadfully, and it doesn't seem to bring anybody."

"Now see here," said Tom firmly, "don't you go to getting discouraged. This is our first season. We can't expect to do much the first season. We're prepared for that." [Page 192]

But he realized, quite as clearly as his sister, that they had not been prepared for so complete a failure as they were making. Boswell's Inn stood only sixteen miles away from a large city, a great Western railroad centre, into which, early and late, thousands of tourists were pouring. The road out into the mountains was a good one, the trip easy enough for the owners of motor cars, of whom the city held enough to make a continuous procession all the way if only they could be headed in the right direction. But how to head them? That was what Tom couldn't figure out.

On the third evening after Mr. Perkins's arrival, Tom, strolling gloomily out upon the porch to see if any one was lingering there to prevent his closing up, discovered Perkins sitting alone, smoking. There had not been a new arrival that day; worse, one of the elderly ladies had gone away. She had departed reluctantly, but her absence counted just the same, and Tom was missing her as he had never expected to miss any elderly lady with iron-gray curls and a cast in one eye. [Page 193]

"Nice night," observed Tom to Mr. Perkins.

"First-class."

"Getting cooled off a bit up here?"

"Pretty well."

"Are, you—having everything you want?"

Tom asked the question with some diffidence. It was a matter of regret with him that he couldn't afford yet to put young Tim into buttons, but without them he was sure the lad made as alert a bellboy and porter as could be asked.

"Nothing to complain of."

Tom wished Mr. Perkins wouldn't be so taciturn. The proprietor of the Inn That Couldn't Get a Start was feeling so blue to-night that speech with some one besides his depressed family was almost a necessity. He couldn't talk with the women; Mr. Griffith, though kindly enough, had his nose forever buried in a book. Perkins looked as if he could talk if he would, and have something to say, too. Tom tried to think of an observation which would draw this silent man out. But quite suddenly, and greatly to Tom's surprise, Mr. Perkins began to draw Tom out. Even so, his questions were like shots from a gun, so brief and to the point were they. [Page 194]

"Doing any advertising?" broke the silence first, from a corner of the thin mouth. Perkins's cigar had been shifted to the opposite corner. He did not look at Tom, but continued to gaze off toward a certain curious effect of moonlight against the rocky sides of the canyon.

"We have a card in all the city papers."

"Any specials? Write-ups?"

"Well, this is our first season, and we didn't feel as if we could afford to pay for that."

"No pulls, eh?"

"You mean——?"

"No friends among the newspaper men?"

"I don't know one. They don't seem to come up here. I wish they would."

"Ever ask one?"

"I don't know any," repeated Tom.

A short laugh, more like a grunt, was Perkins's reply. Tom didn't see what there was to laugh at in the misfortune of having no acquaintance among the writing fellows. He waited eagerly for the next question. It was worth a good deal to him merely to have this outsider show a spark of [Page 195] interest in the fortunes of Boswell's Inn.

"When did you open up?" It came just as he feared Perkins was going to drop the subject.

"The third of June."

"Own the house?"

"No—lease it, cheap. It's an old place, but we put all we could afford into freshening it up."

"Cook a permanent one?"

The form of the question perplexed Tom for an instant, but it presently resolved itself, and he was grinning as he replied: "Sure she is. It's my mother. Do you like her cooking?"

"A-1."

Ah, Tom would tell his mother that! The young man flushed slightly in the darkness of the porch. It was almost the first compliment that had been paid her, and she worked like a slave, too.

"Little waitress your sister?"

"Yes. Sue's young, but we think she does pretty well."

"Delivers the goods. Housekeeper a member of the family, too?"

"Yes—and Tim's my brother. Oh, it's all in the family. The only trouble is——" he hesitated. [Page 196]

"Lack of patronage?"

"We can't keep open much longer if things don't improve." The moment the words were out Tom regretted them. He didn't know how he had come to speak them. He hadn't meant to give this fact away. Certainly there had been nothing particularly sympathetic in the tone of Perkins's choppy questions. But the other man's next words knocked his regrets out of his mind in a jiffy.

"Could you entertain a dozen men at supper to-morrow night if they came in a bunch without warning?"

"Give us the chance!"

"Chance might happen—better be prepared. I expect to be away over to-morrow night myself, but have the tip that a crowd may be coming out to sample the place. It may be a mistake—don't

know."

"We'll be ready. Would they come by train?"

"Don't ask me—none of my picnic. Merely overheard the thing suggested." And Perkins, rising, cast away the close-smoked stub of his cigar. "Good-night," said he, carelessly enough, and [Page 197] strolled in through the wide hall of the old stone house. Tom looked after him as he mounted the stairs. The young innkeeper's spirits had gone up with a bound. A dozen men to supper! Well—he thought they could entertain them. He would go and tell his mother and Bertha on the instant; the prospect would cheer them immensely. He wondered how or where Perkins had overheard this rumour. At the post-office, most likely. It was a gossipy place, the centre of the tiny burg at the foot of the mountain, an eighth of a mile away, where a dozen small shops and half a hundred houses strung along the one small street, at the end of which the two daily trains made their half-minute stops.

The dozen men had come and gone. There were fourteen of them, to be exact, and they had climbed out of a couple of big touring cars with sounds of hilarity which made the elderly ladies jump in their chairs. They had swarmed over the place as if they owned it, had talked and laughed and joked and shouted, all in a perfectly agreeable way which woke up Boswell's as if it [Page 198] were in the centre of somewhere instead of off in the mountains. They had scrawled fourteen vigorous scrawls upon the register and made it necessary to turn the page, this of itself affording the clerk a satisfaction quite out of proportion to the apparent unimportance of the incident. Then they had gone gayly in to supper, had sat about two stainless tables close by the open windows, and had been waited upon by both Sue and Tim in such alert fashion that their plates arrived almost before they had unfurled their napkins.

Out in the kitchen, crimson-cheeked and solicitous, Mrs. Boswell had sent in relays of broiled chicken, young and tender, browned as only artists of her rank can brown them, flanked by potatoes cooked in a way known only to herself. These were two of her "specialties," which the elderly ladies were accustomed to enjoy without mentioning it. Pickles and jellies such as the fourteen men had tasted only in childhood accompanied these dishes, and the little hot rolls came on in piles which melted away before the delighted attacks of the hungry guests; so that the kitchen itself became alarmed, and cut the elderly ladies a trifle short, at which complaints were [Page 199] promptly filed, though it was the first time such a shortage had occurred.

Other toothsome dishes followed and were partaken of with such zest and so many frank expressions of approval that Sue and Tim carried to the kitchen reports which forced their mother to ask them to stop, lest she lose her head. When the amber coffee with a fine cheese and crisp toasted wafers ended the meal, the guests were in such a state of satisfaction that Tom, though he did not know it, had acquired with them his first "pull."

He did not know it—not then. He only knew that they were very cordial with him, asking him a good many interested questions, and that one requested to be shown rooms, remarking that his wife and children might like to run out for a little while before the summer was over. Most of them looked back at the Inn as the automobiles bore them away, and one waved his cigar genially at Tom standing on the top step.

He was standing on the top step again the next morning when Mr. Perkins returned. Tom was [Page 200] wishing Perkins had been there the night before, to see confirmed the truth of the rumour he had reported.

"Well, we had the crowd here last night," was Tom's greeting, as Perkins's sharp black eyes looked up at him from the bottom step.

"So I see." Perkins held up a morning paper. The inevitable cigar was in his mouth. His face indicated no particular interest. He went along into the house as Tom grasped the paper. So he saw! What did Perkins mean by that? It couldn't be that any of that party of men had, unsolicited, taken the trouble to——

But they had, or one of them had. In a fairly conspicuous position on one of the local pages of the best city daily was an item of at least a dozen lines setting forth the fact that a party of prominent men, including several newspaper men, had taken supper the night before at Boswell's Inn, Mount o' Pines, and had found that place decidedly attractive. The paragraph stated that such a supper was seldom found at summer hotels, added that the air and the view were worth a long trip to obtain when the city was sweltering with heat, and ended by speaking of the prime condition of the roads leading to the Inn. Altogether, it was such an item as Tom had often longed [Page 201] to see, and the reading of it went to his head. When, ten minutes later, Tim, coming up from the post-office with the mail and another of the morning papers, excitedly called Tom's attention to a second paragraph headed, "Have You Had a Supper at Boswell's Inn?" Tom became positively delirious.

"It pays to set it up to a bunch like that," was Perkins's comment when Tom showed him this second free advertisement.

"But I didn't treat them. They paid their bills," cried the young host.

"Charge your usual price?"

"Sure. We didn't have anything extra—except the cheese. Tim drove ten miles for that."

"Usual price was all the treat those fellows needed."

"Do you mean you don't think I charge enough?" Tom's eyes opened wide. He had felt as if he were robbing those men when he counted up the sum total.

"Ever dine at the Arcadia?—or the Princess?" [Page 202]

"No."

"They do."

Tom did not know the prices at these imposing popular hotels in the nearby city, but he supposed they were high. He felt as if he were the greenest innkeeper who ever invited the patronage of city guests.

"Would you advise me to put up the price?" Tom asked presently, with some hesitation.

Perkins glanced at him out of those worn, brilliant, black eyes of his, which looked as if they had seen more of the world than Tom's ever would see in the longest life he could live, though Perkins himself could hardly be over forty, perhaps not quite that.

"Not yet, son," said he. "By and by—yes. But keep up the quality now—and then."

That evening a young man, whom Tom recognized as one of the party of the night before, the one who had waved to him as he had driven away, appeared again. He came in a runabout this time and brought two women, who proved to be his mother and sister. The young man himself—Mr. Haskins—smiled genially at Tom, and said by way of explanation: [Page 203]

"I liked your place so well I brought them up to see if my fairy tales were true."

Upon which Tom naturally did his best to make the fairy tales seem true, and thought, by the signs he noted, that he had succeeded.

During the following week three or four others of the men of the original fourteen came up to Boswell's or sent small parties. Evidently the flattering paragraphs in the two dailies had also made some impression on people eager to get away from the intense heat of a season more than ordinarily trying. They found the air stirring upon the porches and through the rooms at the Inn; and they found—which was, of course, the greater attraction—a table so inviting with appetizing food, and an unpretentious service so satisfactory, that mouth-to-mouth advertising of the little new resort, that most-to-be-desired means of becoming known, began, gradually but surely, to tell.

Strange to say, several more paragraphs now appeared: brief, crisp mention of the simple but perfect cooking to be had for the short drive of sixteen miles over the best of roads. These inevitably had their effect, and at the end of the third week Tom declared to Perkins that he was more than making expenses. [Page 204]

"Much more?" inquired that gentleman, his eyes as usual upon the view.

"Enough so we're satisfied and won't have to close up. Why, there's been from one to three big autos here every day this week."

One of Perkins's short laughs answered this—Tom never could tell just what that throaty chuckle indicated. Presently he found out.

"What you want, Boswell," said Perkins, removing his cigar—an unusual sign of interest with him—"is a boom. I'd like to see you get it. Gradual building up's all right, but quick methods pay better."

"A boom! How on earth are we to get a boom?" Tom felt a bit disconcerted.

He had noticed for several days an increasing restlessness in the silent guest. Instead of sitting quietly upon the porch with his cigar, Perkins had fallen to pacing up and down with a long, nervous stride. At first he had seemed moody and fatigued, now he had the appearance of a man eager to be at something from which he was restrained. [Page 205]

When Tom asked his startled question about the desirable boom, Perkins got out of his chair with one abrupt movement, threw one leg over the porch rail, and began suddenly to talk. He could not be said really to have talked before. Tom listened, his eyes sticking out of his head.

"Bunch of motoring fellows down in town—Mercury Club—want to get up an auto parade, end with supper somewhere. Hotels at Lake Lucas, Pleasant Valley, and half a dozen others all crazy to get 'em. Happen to know a chap or two in town who could swing it out here for you if you cared to make the bid, and could handle the crowd. Chance for you, if you want it. Make a big thing of it—lanterns, bonfires, fireworks, orchestra—regular blow-out."

Tom's breath came in gasps. "Why—why——" he stammered. "How could we—how could we—afford——What——? How——?"

Perkins threw away the stub of his cigar, chewed to a pulp at the mouth end. His eyes had an odd glitter. "I've what you might call a bit of experience in that sort of thing," he said in a quiet tone

which yet had a certain edge of energy. "Going away next week, but might put this thing through for you, if you cared to trust me." [Page 206]

"But—the money?" urged Tom.

"Willing to stand for that—pay me back, if you make enough. Otherwise—my risk. Something of a gambler, I am. Club'll pay for the fireworks—that's their show. Bonfires on the mountains around are easy. Lanterns cheap. Get special terms on the music—friend of mine can. Supper's up to you. Can you get extra help?"

"We can manage the supper," agreed Tom, his round cheeks deeply flushed with excitement. "Say, you're—you're awfully kind. I don't know why——"

Perkins vaulted over the porch rail. From the ground below he looked back at Tom. For the first time since he had come to Boswell's Inn Tom caught sight of the gleam of white teeth, as an oddly brilliant smile broke out for an instant on the face which was no longer deadly white but brown with tan. "Son," said Perkins, preparing to swing away down to the post-office, "I told you I was a gambler. Gambler out of work's the lamest duck on the shore. Game of booming the Inn interests me—that's all." [Page 207]

Tom watched the lithe, slim figure in the distance for a minute before he went in to break the plan to the force of Boswell's. "He's no gambler," said he to himself, "or I couldn't trust him the way I do. He's queer, but I don't believe he has any other motive for this than wanting to help us."

With which innocent faith in the goodness of the man who had already seen more of the world than Tom Boswell would ever see, he rushed in to tell Bertha and the rest of his excited family the astounding talk he had just had with Perkins.

"Mother Boswell, you've got to come out on the porch—just one minute—and look."

"No, no, child, I can't. I——"

"Not where the folks are—just out on Mr. Perkins's balcony. He told me to take you."

"But I can't leave——"

"Yes, you can. Everything's all right. Come—quick. The first autos are coming—you can see 'em miles off."

With one glance about the kitchen, where two extra helpers were busy with the last preparations, over which Mrs. Boswell had kept a supervising eye to the smallest detail, herself working harder than anybody, the mistress of the place suffered herself to be led away. Up the back stairs, through Mr. Perkins's empty rooms, out upon the balcony, Sue hustled her mother, and then with one triumphant "There!" swept an arm about the entire horizon. [Page 208]

"My goodness!" burst from the lady's lips, and she stood gazing, transfixed.

At the foot of the mountainside, where lay the little village street with its row of shops and houses, glowed a line of Chinese lanterns, hung thickly along the entire distance. The winding road up to the Inn was outlined by lanterns; the trees about the Inn held out long arms dancing with the parti-coloured lights; the porch below, as could be told by the rainbow tints thrown upon the ground beneath, was hung with them from end to end.

"My goodness!" came again from Mrs. Boswell, in stupefied amazement. "There must be a thousand of those things. How on earth——?" [Page 209]

But her ear was caught by a distant boom, and her eyes lifted to the surrounding mountain heights. In a dozen different places bonfires flashed and leaped, with an indescribable effect of beauty.

"They're firing dynamite up on West Peak!" explained Sue. "Jack Weatherbee offered to do that. Tim's got boys at all those places to keep up the fires—and put 'em out afterward. Oh, look!—now you can see the parade beginning to show!"

Down upon the distant plain, across which lay the winding road out from the city, one could discern a trail of light—thrown by many searchlights—and make out its rapid advance. The sight moved Mrs. Boswell instantly to action again.

"I must get back to the kitchen!" she cried, and vanished from the balcony.

"If you could only see the Inn from outside!" Sue called after her, but uselessly. Mrs. Boswell felt that the entire success of the "boom" depended upon the kitchen. They might string lanterns from Boswell's to Jericho, but if the supper shouldn't be good—the thought sent her down the back stairs at a speed reckless for one of her years. But she reached the bottom safely, or this story would never have been told. [Page 210]

The first cars in the procession came up the steep road with open cut-outs. The bigger cars made nothing of it; the smaller ones got into their low gears and ground a bit as they pulled. In fifteen

minutes from the first arrival, the wide plateau upon which the Inn stood looked like an immense garage, cars of every description having been packed in together at all angles. Up the Inn steps flowed a steady stream of people: men in driving attire and motor caps; women in long coats and floating veils, under which showed pretty summer frocks; a few children, dressed like their elders in motoring rig, their faces eager with interest in everything. In the hall, behind a screen of flags and evergreen, the orchestra played merrily. It presently had to play its loudest to be heard above the chorus of voices.

In less time than it takes to tell, every table in the airy dining-room, lit by more Chinese lanterns and hung with streamers of bunting, was filled. Reservations had been made by mail and telephone for the past three days, and with a list in his hand Tom hurried about. He could never have kept his head if it had not been for young Haskins at his elbow. Haskins was secretary of the Mercury Club and knew everybody. He was a genial fellow, and if anybody attempted to tell Tom that a mistake had been made, and certain reservations should have been for the first or second table, instead of the third, Haskins would cut in with a joke and have the murmurer appeased and laughing in a trice. [Page 211]

As for Perkins—but where was Perkins? Up to the last minute before the first car arrived, Perkins had been in evidence enough—in fact, he had been everywhere all day, personally supervising every detail, working like a fiend himself and inspiring everybody else to work, proving himself the ablest of generals and a perfect genius at effective decoration. The Inn, inside and out, was a fairyland of light and colour—even the sated eyes of the city people, accustomed to every trick of effect in such affairs, were charmed with the picturesque quality of the scene. But now Tom could see nothing of Perkins anywhere. Tim, hurriedly questioned, shook his head, also puzzled. [Page 212]

Late in the evening there came a moment when Tom could free himself long enough to run up to Perkins's room. He was uneasy about his guest—and friend—for that the stranger seemed to have become. Perkins certainly didn't look quite strong—could he have overdone and be ill, alone in his room? After one hasty knock, to which he got no answer, Tom turned the knob. Through the open balcony door he saw a leg and shoulder—and smelled the familiar fragrance of the special brand.

"Hello, son!" was Perkins's greeting.

"You're not sick?"

"Never. Things going O. K.?"

"Oh, splendid! Such a crowd—such a jolly crowd! But—why don't you come down?"

"To help make things go?"

"No, no—to enjoy it. You've done enough. You must know some of these people, and if you don't—it's worth something just to look at 'em. I didn't know ladies dressed like that—under those things they wear in the autos. Say, Mr. Perkins, the Lieutenant-Governor's here—and his wife!" [Page 213]

"So?"

"Mr. Haskins thinks they want to stay all night. The lady hasn't been sleeping well through the heat. Mr. Haskins says she's taken a fancy to the Inn. But I haven't a really good room for 'em."

"Take mine."

Tom gasped. "Oh, no! Not yours—after all you've done——"

"Going to-morrow, you know. It doesn't matter where I hang up to-night. Matters a good deal where Mrs. Lieutenant-Governor hangs up."

"But where——?"

"Anywhere. May sit up till morning, anyhow. Feel like it. Your show sort of goes to my head."

"My show? Yours! But why on earth don't you come down and——?"

"By and by, son. Say, send me some clean linen and I'll see that this room's in shape for the lady—girls all busy yet. Room swept yesterday. My truck's packed. I'll have things ready in ten minutes." [Page 214]

Tom went downstairs feeling more than ever that his guest was an enigma. But he was too busy to stop just then to think about it.

The hours went by. The guests talked and laughed, ate and promenaded. They crowded the porch to watch the fireworks on the mountain; they swept over the smooth space and the roadway in front of the Inn, looking up at it and remarking upon the quaint charm of it, the desirability of its location, its attractiveness as a resort. Tom heard one pretty girl planning a luncheon here next week; he heard a group of men talking about entertaining a visiting delegation of bankers up here at Boswell's out of the heat.

Everywhere people were asking, "Why haven't we known about this?" and to one and another Arthur Haskins, in Tom's hearing, was saying such things as, "Just opened up. Jolly place, isn't it? Going to be the most popular anywhere around. Deserves it, too."

"But is the table as good every day as it is to-night?" one skeptic inquired.

"Better." Haskins might have been an owner of the place, he was so prompt with his flattering statements. "First time I came up was with a crowd of fellows. We took them unawares, and they served a supper that made us smile all over. Their cook can't be beaten—and the service is first-class." [Page 215]

It was over at last. But it was at a late hour that the first cars began to roll away down the hill, and later still when the last got under way. They carried a gay company, and the final rockets, spurting from West Peak, flashed before the faces of people in the high good humour of those who have been successfully and uniquely entertained.

The Lieutenant-Governor and his wife had gone to the pink and white welcome of the bridal suite when Perkins at last came strolling downstairs. Only Haskins's party remained in the flag-hung lobby, the women sheathing themselves in veils, as their motor chugged at the porch steps.

Haskins turned as Perkins crossed the lobby. He stared an instant, then advanced with outstretched hand, smiling.

"Why, Mr. Parker," he said, "I didn't know you were here. Doctor Austin was asking me to-day if I knew where you were. He seems to have got you on his mind. He'll be delighted to see you. I'll call him—he's just outside. He's with our party." [Page 216]

With an expression half dismayed, half amused, Perkins looked after the Mercury Club's secretary as he darted to the outer door, where a big figure in a motoring coat was pacing up and down.

Tom, leaning over the office desk, looked at Perkins. But Haskins had called the man "Parker." What——?

The big figure in the motoring coat came hurriedly in at the doorway and grasped the hand of Tom's guest. "Parker," he cried, "what are you doing here? Are you responsible for this panjandrum to-night? Didn't I send you off for an absolute rest?"

"Been obeying directions strictly, Doctor. I've lain around up here till the grass sprouted under my feet. You haven't seen me here to-night, have you?"

"No, but the thing looks like one of your managing."

"No interest in this place whatever. Never heard of it till I stumbled on it." But Perkins's eyes were dancing. [Page 217]

"You're looking a lot better, anyhow. Come out here and meet Mrs. Austin. I want to show her the toughest patient I ever had to pull loose from his work."

The two went out upon the porch. Tom gazed at young Haskins, as the latter looked at him with a smile.

"Did he engineer this part of the thing, too, Boswell?" questioned the young man, interestedly.

"Sure, he did. But who is he?"

"Didn't you know who he was? That's so—you've called him Perkins all along, but this is the first time I've seen him here, and I didn't put two and two together. His letters and 'phones about this supper came from in town somewhere. Why, he's Chris Parker, the biggest hotel man in the country. Nobody like him—he'd make the deadest hotel in the loneliest hamlet pay in a month. Head of all the hotel organizations you can count. Most original chap in the world. Doctor Austin was telling me to-night about ordering him off for a rest because he'd put such a lot of nerve tension into his schemes he was on the edge of a bad breakdown. Well, well, you're mighty lucky if you've got him backing you. No other man on earth could have got the Mercury Club up here to-night—a place they'd never heard of." [Page 218]

So Tom was thinking. He was still thinking it when the motor car shot away down the hill with its load, the physician calling back at his ex-patient: "Don't get going too soon again, Parker! So far, so good, but don't——"

The last words were lost in a final boom from West Peak.

Tom went slowly out upon the porch, feeling embarrassed and uncertain. How could he ever express his gratitude to this mighty man of valour?

"Perkins" was sitting, as usual, astride the porch rail, the red light of his cigar glowing against the dark background of the mountains where the bonfires were dying to mere sparks. He looked around as Tom appeared, and grinned in a friendly way under the Chinese lanterns.

"Tough luck, to get caught at the last minute, eh?" he said.

"Mr. Per—Parker——" began Tom, and stopped. [Page 219]

The "biggest hotel man in the country" looked at the greenest young innkeeper, and there was satisfaction in his bright black eyes.

"Not any thanks, son. Should have croaked in one week more if I couldn't have worked off a few pounds of high pressure. This sort of thing to me's like a game to a gambler—as I told you. Had to keep incog., or I'd have had a dozen parties from town after me on one deal or another. Thought I

could put this little stunt through without giving myself away—but came downstairs five minutes too soon. Went off pretty well—eh? You'll have patronage after this, all right. No—no thanks, I said. I'm under obligations to you for trusting me to run the thing. It's saved my life!"

Well, if it were all a game, Tom thought, as he watched Mr. Christopher Parker run lightly up the stairs, a few minutes later, it was certainly a wondrous friendly one.

And Boswell's Inn was now known to be only sixteen short motor miles from town.

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II

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HONOUR AND THE GIRL

He lay back among the crimson pillows in his big chair, close beside the fire, with his eyes on the burning logs. A tablet and pen lay in his lap, and he had written a few paragraphs, but he was listening now to certain sounds which came from below stairs: voices, laughter, scurryings up and down the hall and staircase; then the slam of a heavy door, the tuneful ring of sleighbells in a rapid *decrescendo* down the street, and absolute silence within the house. Three times in the last fifteen minutes before the door closed somebody had looked in upon the occupant of the big chair to say something like this:

"Oh, Jerry—sorry we couldn't spend Nan's last evening with you. Too bad this wretched Van Antwerp dance had to come to-night—Christmas Eve, too. Busy, aren't you, as usual? At work on those sketches of country life in winter? You clever boy—who but you could make so much out of so little? Anything we can do for you before we are off? Nan hates to go, since it's the very last evening of her visit. She thought we all ought to give up and stay with you, but we told her you disliked to be 'babied.' Well—good-night, old fellow. Don't write too late. You know the doctor thinks plenty of sleep is part of your cure."

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That was the sort of thing they had been saying to him for a year now—a year. And he seemed no nearer health than when he had been sent home from his gloriously busy, abounding life in New York, where he was succeeding brilliantly, far beyond anybody's expectations—except those of the few knowing ones who had recognized the genius in him in his school and college days. But he had never given up. Invalided in body, his mind worked unceasingly; and a certain part of the literary work he had been doing he did still. He said it kept him from going off his head.

When the stillness of the usually noisy house had become oppressive he took up his tablet and pen again. He wrote a sentence or two—slowly; then another—more slowly; and drew an impatient line through them all. He tossed the tablet over to a table near at hand and sat staring into the fire. Certain lines about his mouth grew deep.

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A knock on his door roused him, and he realized that it had sounded before. "Come in," he called, and the door opened and closed behind him. An unmistakable sound, as of the soft rustle of delicate skirts, swept across the floor and paused behind his chair. He drew himself up among his pillows, and strained his neck to look over his shoulder. A young face, full of life and colour, laughed down into his.

"You?" he said in an amazed breath. "*You?* Why, Nan!"

He reached up one hand and took hers and drew her with his slight strength around where he could see her. It did not take much strength. She came, laughing still, and sweeping a graceful low bend before him.

"Don't ask me why," she said with a shake of her head. "I didn't want to go. I knew I wouldn't go all the time I was dressing. But I dressed. I knew I could argue with them better when I got this gown on. I think I have rather a regal air in it, don't you?"

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"I could tell better if you were not wearing that shapeless thing over it."

"Oh, but I've taken off my gloves, and I can't stand bare arms and shoulders here at home." She shrugged the shoulders under the thin silken garment with which she had covered them.

"And you're not going to the Van Antwerps' at all?"

"Certainly not. I preferred to stay at home."

"Why?"

"I told you not to ask me why. But I suppose you won't talk about anything else until you know."

She sat down opposite him before the fire, looking up at the great branches of holly on the chimney-piece above, their scarlet berries gleaming saucily among the rich green of their leaves. She reached up and pulled off a spray; then she glanced at him. He was silently surveying her. In her delicate blue gauzy gown she was something to look at in the fire-glow.

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"I wanted to spend my last evening here with you," she said.

He smiled back at her. "Three people looked in here this evening and told me you thought you ought."

She answered indignantly: "I didn't say I ought. I didn't think it. I wanted to. And I didn't want them to stay. That is why I let them all array themselves before I refused to go."

He was still smiling. "Delicate flattery," he said, "adapted to an invalid. You should never let an invalid think you pity him—at least not a man-invalid who got knocked out while playing a vigorous game for all it was worth."

"Jerry," she said, looking full at him out of a pair of eyes which were capable of saying eloquent things quite by themselves, "do you think all the hours I've spent with you in this month I've been visiting Hester were spent from pity?"

"I hope not," he answered lightly. "I'm sure not. We've had some pleasant times, haven't we?"

She turned from him without speaking, and, clasping her hands loosely in front of her, bent forward and studied the fire. Presently she got up and took a fresh log from the basket. [Page 225]

"Be careful," he warned, as she stooped to lay it in place. "Put it on gently. The sparks might fly, and that cobweb dress of yours——"

She laid the log across the other half-burnt sticks, and started back with a little cry as a dozen brilliant points of flame flew toward her.

"Don't do that again," he protested sternly, with nothing of the invalid in his voice. "I don't like to see you do such things when I couldn't stir to save you no matter what happened."

She stood looking down at him. "Jerry," she said, "I'll tell you why I stayed to-night. I wanted to talk with you about something. I want your help."

His eyes told her that he would give it if he could.

"Do you mind if I sit on a pillow here before the fire?" she asked, bringing one from the couch. Jerry had plenty of pillows. Since his breakdown every girl who had ever known him had sent him a fresh one. [Page 226]

"Somehow I can talk better," she explained.

She settled herself on her cushion, her blue skirts lying in light folds about her, her chin on her hand, her elbow on her knee.

"I always go straight to the point," she said. "I never know how to lead artfully up to a thing. Jerry, you know I go to Paris in January, to do some special work in illustrating?"

"Yes."

"I go with Aunt Elizabeth, and we shall live very quietly and properly, and I shall not have any of the—trials—so many young women workers have. My work will keep me very busy, and, I think, happy. I mean it shall. But, Jerry—I want something. You know you have always known me, because I was Hester's friend."

"Is this 'straight to the point'?" he asked, and there was a gleam of fun in his eyes, though his lips were sober. But his interest was unmistakable.

"Very straight. But we have never been special friends, you and I."

"Haven't we? I congratulated myself we had."

"Not what I mean by that word." She sat looking into the fire for some little time, while he remained motionless, watching her, his eyes shaded by his hand. At length she said very earnestly, still staring fireward, while her cheeks took on a slight access of colour: [Page 227]

"I want to feel I have a friend—one friend—a real one, whom I leave behind me here—who will understand me and write to me, and whom I can count on—differently from the way I count on other friends."

He was studying her absorbedly. There came into his eyes a peculiar look as she made her frank statement.

"Then you haven't just that sort of a friend among all the men you know at home?"

"Not a single one. And I miss it. Not because I have ever had it," she added quickly.

He was silent for a little while, then he said very quietly: "You are offering me a good deal, Nan. Do you realize just how much? Friendship—such friendship—means more to me now than it ever did before."

"Does it?" she asked with equal quietness. "I'm glad of that."

"Because," he went on gravely, "I realize that it is the only thing I can ever have, and it must take the place of all I once—hoped for." [Page 228]

"Oh, why do you say that?" she cried impetuously.

"Since you are to be my friend now—my special friend—I can tell you what Doctor McDonough told me just two days ago. May I tell you that? I have told and shall tell no one else. Before you take the vows"—he smiled grimly—"you should know what you are accepting."

"Tell me."

"He said I might be better—much better—but I could never hope to be—my old self again."

"Oh, Jerry! Oh, Jerry!" Her voice was almost a sob. She turned about and reached up both hands to him, clasping his with a warm and tender pressure.

"Is that what your friendship means?" he asked, holding her hands closely and looking down steadily into her eyes while his own grew brilliant. "If it does—it is going to be something a man might give up a good deal for."

"Oh, how can you take such a cruel disappointment so?" she breathed. "And to hear it just at Christmas, too. I've said all along that you were just the bravest person I ever knew. But now!—Jerry, I'm not worthy to be your friend." [Page 229]

"Ah, I'll not let you take back what you offered me. If you knew how I've wanted to ask it——"

"Have you, really?" she asked so eagerly that he turned his head away for a moment and set his lips firmly together as if he feared he might presently be tempted to go beyond those strait boundaries of friendship. Somehow from the lips of such a girl as Nan this sort of thing was the most appealing flattery; at the same time it was unquestionably sincere.

"So you will seal the compact? Think it over carefully. I can never give you the strong arm a well man could."

"If you will teach me to acquire the sort of strength you have learned yourself," she said—and there was a hint of mistiness about those eyes of hers—"you will have given me something worth while."

Presently they were talking of her journey, to be begun on the morrow; of her work, in which she had come in the last year to remarkable success; of his work—the part which he could do and would continue to do, he said, with added vigour. They talked quietly but earnestly, and each time she looked up into his face she saw there a new brightness, something beyond the mere patient acceptance of his hard trial. [Page 230]

"Jerry," she said all at once, breaking off in the midst of a discussion of certain phases of the illustrator's art, "you don't know how suddenly rich I feel. All the while you were doing such wonderful, beautiful things with your pen in New York and being made so much of, I was thinking, 'What an inspiration Jerrold Fullerton would be as a real friend.' But all the girls were ——"

He laughed. "They won't trouble you, now."

"But your friendship is worth more now than then."

He shook his head.

"It is—because *you* are more than you were then."

"I'm a mere wreck of what I was, Nan." He did not say it bitterly, but he could not quite keep the sadness out of the uncompromising phrase. [Page 231]

She looked up at him, studying his face intently. It had always been a remarkably fine face, and on it the suffering of the past year had done a certain work which added to its beauty. He did not look ill, but the refinement which illness sometimes lends to faces of a somewhat too strongly cut type had softened it into an exceeding charm. Out of it the eyes shone with an undaunted spirit which told of hidden fires.

"I am glad a share in the wreckage falls to me," she said softly.

"Nan," he told her, while his lips broke irresistibly into a smile again, "I believe you are deliberately trying to burn a sweet incense before me to-night. Just how fragrant it is to a fellow in my shape I can't tell you. You would never do it if I were on my feet, I appreciate that; but I'm very grateful just the same."

"I'd like," she said with eyes which fell now to the hands folded in her lap—and the droop of her head as he saw it, with the turned-away profile cut like an exquisite silhouette against the fire, was burnt into his memory afterward—"to have you remember this Christmas Eve—as I shall." [Page 232]

"Remember it!"

"Shall you?"

"Shall I!"

"Ah—who is deliberately trying to say nice things now?" But she said it rather faintly.

He lay back among his pillows with a long breath. "So you go to-morrow morning?"

"Early—at six o'clock. You will not see me. And I must go now. See, it is after eleven. Think of

their making me go out this evening when I must be up at five and travel the next forty-eight hours. On Christmas Day, too. Isn't that too bad? But that's the price of my staying over to spend Christmas Eve with Jerry Fullerton—like the foolish girl that I am."

She rose and stood before him.

"Would you mind slipping off that—domino?" he requested. "I'd like to see you just as all the other fellows would have seen you if you had gone to the Van Antwerps'." [Page 233]

Smiling, and flushing a little, she drew off the silken garment, and the firelight bathed her softly rounded shoulders and arms in a rosy glow. He looked at her silently for a minute, until she said again that she must go, and took a step toward him, smiling down at him and holding out both hands.

"I don't know how I can spare my friend, when I've just found her," he said, searching her face with an intentness she found it difficult to bear. "I suppose I ought not to ask it, but—it's Christmas Eve, you know—and—you'll give me one more thing to remember—won't you, Nan?"

She bent, like a warm-hearted child, and laid her lips lightly upon his forehead, but he caught her hands.

"Is that the proper degree for friendship—and you feel that more would be too much?"

She hesitated; then, as his grasp drew her, she stooped lower, blushing beautifully, to give the kiss upon his lips. But it was not the breath of a caress she would have made it. Invalids are sometimes possessed of unsuspected reserves of strength.

She turned away then in a pretty confusion, said, "Good-night," and went slowly toward the door. [Page 234]

"Oh, come back!" he cried. "Tell me—you will write often?"

"Oh, yes; every—month."

"Month? Won't you write every mail?"

"Oh, Jerry!"

"Every week, then?"

"Will you?"

"I will, whether you do or not."

"Your ideas of friendship——"

"Are they too exacting?"

"No-o," she admitted, as if reluctantly. She was behind him now, her hands clasped together tightly, her eyes glowing with the light of a frightened purpose which was over-mastering her. He tried to turn and see her, but she defeated this.

"Please come here," he begged.

She was silent, trying to breathe more naturally.

"Please——"

"What good will it do?" she asked at last. "I shall have to go, and you—won't——"

"Won't—what?"

She crept up close behind his chair. [Page 235]

"—*say it*," she whispered.

He reached out his hand with a commanding gesture. "Nan, come here. Say—what?"

She bent over the back of his chair and laid a soft, trembling hand on each side of his face.

"Please say it," she breathed.

He seized her hands and drew them to his lips. "Nan, you are tempting me almost beyond my power. Do you mean to tempt me? Are you trying to?"

She leaned low, so that her breath swept his cheek, and whispered, "Yes."

"Oh, my God," he groaned. "Nan—are you insane? What if I say it—then how much worse will it be? I can bear it better as it is now—and you—can't mean it."

"*Say it!*" came the breath in his ear again.

He was silent for a while, breathing heavily. Presently he began to speak in a quiet tone whose vibrations showed, nevertheless, the most rigid self-control. He still held her hands, resting there upon his shoulders, but he made no further effort to see her face.

"Nan," he said, "this friendship you give me is the dearest thing I ever knew. It is worth everything to me. Let me keep it while you go away for your year of work. Be the warmest friend [Page 236]

to me you know how, and write me everything about yourself. Meanwhile—keep your heart free for—the man will surely come to claim it some day—a man who will be worthy of you in every way, soul, mind, and—body. I shall be happy in your——"

Her hand pulled itself away from his, and was laid with a gentle insistence upon his mouth.

"Jerry," she said very softly, "that's enough—please. I understand. That had to be said. I knew you would say it. It's what you think you ought to say, of course. But—it's said now. You needn't repeat it. For it's not the thing—I'm waiting for you to say."

"Nan——"

"Would you make a poor girl do it all?" she questioned, with a suggestion of both laughter and tears in her voice.

"But, Nan——"

"I'm not used to it," she urged. "It's very embarrassing. And I ought to be asleep this minute, getting ready for my early start. I'm not quite sure that I shall sleep if you say it"—her voice dropped to a whisper again—"but I'm sure I shall not if—you—don't." [Page 237]

"My dear girl——"

"That's hardly warm enough, is it—under the circumstances—when you won't see me for a year? Jerry—a whole year——"

"Nan—for the love of Heaven come around here!"

"Not so much for the love of Heaven as——"

"No—for the love of you—you—*you!*"

She came at last—and then she saw his eyes. But she could not meet them after the first glance. She lay in his arms, held there by a grasp so strong that it astonished her beyond measure. So, for a time; then he began to speak—in her ear now, where, in its pinkness, with a little brown curl touching his lips, it listened.

"You've made me say it, dear, when for your sake I would have kept it back. But you know—you must know, nothing can come of it."

He heard her murmur, "Why?"

"You know why."

"I don't."

He drew a deep breath.

"Don't you want me?" she asked—into his shoulder. [Page 238]

"Want you!"

"You've everything to offer me."

"Nan——"

"Everything I want. Jerry"—she lifted her head and looked for an instant into his eyes—"I shall die of heartache if you won't offer it."

"A wreck of a life——"

"I won't let you call it that again," she flashed. "You—Jerrold Fullerton—whose merest scrawl is reviewed by every literary editor in the land. Do you think you can't do still better work with—with me?"

"But you wouldn't be marrying Jerrold Fullerton's mind alone."

"No—his soul—all there is of him—his great personality—himself. And that's so much more than I can give in return——"

"Nan, darling——"

"Yes——"

"Go to Paris for a year, but don't bind yourself to me. Then, when you come back, if——"

"If I'm still of the same mind——Jerry, you sound like the counsel of a wise and worldly grandmother," with a gleeful laugh. [Page 239]

"—if I'm no worse—if I'm a little better——This is great medicine, Nan. I feel like a new man now. If then——"

"I shall not go at all unless—unless——"

"Yes——"

"—unless I am bound tight—tight—to you. I—I shouldn't feel sure of you!"

"Oh, there's no use resisting you," he said, half under his breath. "It's the sorriest bargain a woman ever made, but——"

"If she will make it——"

"Look at me, Nan."

"I can't—long," she complained. "Somehow you—you—blind me."

He laughed softly. "I realize that—you are blind—blind. But I can't open your eyes. Somehow I'm losing the strength to try."

"I must go now," she said gently, trying to release herself. "Really I must! Yes, I must! Please, Jerry—let me go, dear——Yes, yes—you must!" It took time, however, and was accomplished with extreme difficulty. "But I *can* go now. I couldn't when I said good-night before——Oh! it's striking twelve! Good-night, Jerry——Merry Christmas, Jerry!" [Page 240]

Before she quite went, however, she came back once more to lean over the back of his chair and whisper in his ear:

"Jerry——"

"Yes?"

"Am I really—engaged—to you?"

"Darling—bless you—I'm afraid you are."

"Afraid?"

"Nan—I'm the happiest cripple on earth."

So she went softly out and closed the door. But it was not to sleep. As for the man she left behind, his eyes looked into the smouldering fire till well toward morning. It was not the doctor's prescription, but it was the beginning of his cure.

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III

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THEIR WORD OF HONOUR

THE president of the Great B—— railway system laid down the letter he had just re-read three times, and turned about in his chair with an expression of annoyance.

"I wish it were possible," he said slowly, "to find one boy or man in a thousand who would receive instructions and carry them out to the letter without a single variation from the course laid down. Cornelius"—he looked up sharply at his son, who sat at a desk close by—"I hope you are carrying out my ideas with regard to your sons. I've not seen much of them lately. The lad Cyrus seems to me a promising fellow, but I'm not so sure of Cornelius. He appears to be acquiring a sense of his own importance as Cornelius Woodbridge, 3d, which is not desirable, sir—not desirable. By the way, Cornelius, have you yet applied the Hezekiah Woodbridge test to your boys?" [Page 242]

Cornelius Woodbridge, Junior, looked up from his work with a smile. "No, I haven't, father," he said.

"It's a family tradition, and if the proper care has been taken that the boys should not learn of it, it will be as much of a test for them as it was for you and for me, and for my father. You have not forgotten the day I gave it to you, Cornelius?"

"That would be impossible," said his son, still smiling.

The elder man's somewhat stern features relaxed, and he sat back in his chair with a chuckle. "Do it at once," he requested, "and make it a stiff one. You know their characteristics; give it to them hard. I feel pretty sure of Cyrus, but Cornelius——" He shook his head doubtfully and returned to his letter. Suddenly he wheeled about again.

"Do it Thursday, Cornelius," he said in his peremptory way, "and whichever one of them stands it shall go with us on the tour of inspection. That will be reward enough, I fancy."

"Very well, sir," replied his son, and the two men went on with their work without further words. They were in the habit of dispatching important business with the smallest possible waste of breath. [Page 243]

On Thursday morning, immediately after breakfast, Cyrus Woodbridge found himself summoned to his father's library. He presented himself at once, a round-cheeked, bright-eyed lad of fifteen, with an air of alertness in every line of him.

"Cyrus," said his father, "I have a commission for you to undertake, of a character which I cannot now explain to you. I want you to take this envelope"—he held out a large and bulky packet—"and

without saying anything to any one follow its instructions to the letter. I ask of you your word of honour that you will do so."

The two pairs of eyes looked into each other for a moment, singularly alike in a certain intent expression, developed into great keenness in the man, but showing as yet only an extreme wide-awakeness in the boy. Cyrus Woodbridge had an engagement with a young friend in half an hour, but he responded firmly:

"I will, sir."

"On your honour?" [Page 244]

"Yes, sir."

"That is all I want. Go to your room and read your instructions. Then start at once."

Mr. Woodbridge turned back to his desk with the nod and smile of dismissal to which Cyrus was accustomed. The boy went to his room, opening the envelope as soon as he had closed the door. It was filled with smaller envelopes, numbered in regular order. Enfolding these was a typewritten paper which read as follows:

> Go to the reading-room of the Westchester Library. There open Env. No. 1. Remember to hold all instructions secret. C. W., Jr.

Cyrus whistled. "That's funny!" he thought. "And it means my date with Harold is off. Well, here goes!"

On his way out he stopped to telephone his friend of his detention, took a Westchester Avenue car at the nearest point, and in twenty minutes was at the library. He found an obscure corner and opened "Env. No. 1." [Page 245]

> Go to office of W. K. Newton, Room 703, seventh floor, Norwalk Building, X Street, reaching there by 9:30 A. M. Ask for letter addressed to Cornelius Woodbridge, Jr. On way down elevator open Env. No. 2. C. W., Jr.

Cyrus began to laugh. At the same time he felt a trifle irritated. "What's father at?" he questioned, in perplexity. "Here I am away uptown, and he orders me back to the Norwalk Building. I passed it on my way up. Must be he made a mistake. Told me to obey instructions, though. He usually knows just about why he does things."

Meanwhile Mr. Woodbridge had sent for his elder son, Cornelius. A tall youth of seventeen, with the strong family features, varied by a droop in the eyelids and a slight drawl in the speech, lounged to the door of the library. Before entering he straightened his shoulders; he did not, however, quicken his pace.

"Cornelius," said his father promptly, "I wish to send you upon an errand of some importance, but of possible inconvenience to you. I have not time to give you instructions, but you will find them in this envelope. I ask you to keep the matter and your movements strictly to yourself. May I have from you your word of honour that I can trust you to follow the orders to the smallest detail?" [Page 246]

Cornelius put on a pair of eyeglasses, and held out his hand for the envelope. His manner was nonchalant to the point of indifference.

Mr. Woodbridge withheld the packet and spoke with decision:

"I cannot allow you to look at the instructions until I have your word of honour that you will fulfil them."

"Isn't that asking a good deal, sir?"

"Perhaps so," said Mr. Woodbridge, "but no more than is asked of trusted messengers every day. I will assure you that the instructions are mine and represent my wishes."

"How long will it take?" inquired Cornelius, stooping to flick an imperceptible spot of dust from his trousers.

"I do not find it necessary to tell you." Something in his father's voice sent the languid Cornelius to an erect position and quickened his speech.

"Of course I will go," he said, but he did not speak with enthusiasm.

"And—your word of honour?" [Page 247]

"Certainly, sir." The hesitation before the promise was momentary.

"Very well. I will trust you. Go to your room before opening your instructions."

And the second somewhat mystified boy went out of the library on that memorable Thursday morning, to find his first order one which sent him to a remote district of the city, with the direction to arrive there within three quarters of an hour.

Out on an electric car Cyrus was speeding to another suburb. After getting the letter from the seventh floor of the Norwalk Building, he had read:

> Take cross-town car on L Street, transfer to Louisville Avenue, and go out to Kingston Heights. Find corner West and Dwight streets and open Env. No. 3. C. W. Jr.

Cyrus was growing more and more puzzled, but he was also getting interested. At the corner specified he hurriedly tore open No. 3, but found, to his amazement, only the singular direction:

> Take Suburban Elevated Road for Duane Street Station. From there go to *Sentinel* Office and secure third edition of yesterday's paper. Open Env. No. 4. C. W. Jr.

[Page 248] "Well, what under the sun, moon, and stars did he send me out to Kingston Heights for?" cried Cyrus aloud. He caught the next train, thinking longingly of his broken engagement with Harold Dunning, and of certain plans for the afternoon which he was beginning to fear might be thwarted if this seemingly endless and aimless excursion continued. He looked at the packet of unopened envelopes.

"It would be mighty easy to break open the whole outfit and see what this game is," he thought. "Never knew father to do a thing like this before. If it's a joke"—his fingers felt the seal of "Env. No. 4"—"I might as well find it out at once. Still, father never would joke with a fellow's promise the way he asked it of me. 'My word of honour'—that's putting it pretty strong. I'll see it through, of course. My, but I'm getting hungry! It must be near luncheon-time."

[Page 249] It was not; but by the time Cyrus had been ordered twice across the city and once up a sixteen-story building in which the elevator was out of order it was past noon, and he was in a condition to find "Env. No. 7" a very satisfactory one:

> Go to Café Reynard on Westchester Square. Take seat at table in left alcove. Ask waiter for card of Cornelius Woodbridge, Jr. Before ordering luncheon read Env. No. 8. C. W. Jr.

The boy lost no time in obeying this command, and sank into his chair in the designated alcove with a sigh of relief. He mopped his brow and drank off a glass of ice water at a gulp. It was a warm October day, and the sixteen flights had been somewhat trying. He asked for his father's card, and then sat studying the attractive menu. The Café Reynard was a place famous the country over for its cookery.

"I think I'll have—" he mused for a moment then said helplessly with a laugh—"well, I'm about hungry enough to eat the whole thing. Bring me the——"

Then he recollected, paused, and reluctantly pulled out "Env. No. 8" and broke the seal. "Just a minute," he murmured to the waiter. Then his face turned scarlet, and he stammered under his breath, "Why—why—this can't be——"

[Page 250] "Env. No. 8" ought to have been bordered with black, judging by the dismay it caused the famished lad. It read remorselessly:

> Leave Café immediately, without stopping for luncheon, remembering to fee waiter for place retained. Proceed to box office, Metropolitan Theatre, buy a parquet ticket for matinée—"The Pied Piper." At end of first act read Env. No. 9. C. W. Jr.

The Woodbridge blood was up now, and it was with an expression resembling that of his Grandfather Cornelius under strong indignation that Cyrus stalked out of that charming place to proceed grimly toward the Metropolitan Theatre.

"Who wants to see a matinée on an empty stomach?" he groaned. "I suppose I'll be ordered out, anyway, the minute I sit down and stretch my legs. Wonder if father can be exactly right in his mind. He doesn't believe in wasting time, but I'm wasting it to-day by the bucketful. Suppose he's doing this to size me up some way; he isn't going to tire me out as quick as he thinks. I'll keep going till I drop."

[Page 251] Nevertheless, when at the end of the first act of a pretty play by a well-trained company of school children he was ordered to go three miles to a football field, and then ordered away again without a sight of the game he had planned for a week to see, his disgust was intense.

All through that long, warm afternoon he raced about the city and suburbs, growing wearier and more empty with every step. The worst of it was the orders were beginning to assume the form of a schedule, and commanded that he be here at 3:15, and there at 4:05, and so on, which forbade loitering had he been inclined to loiter. In it all he could see no purpose, except the possible one of trying his physical endurance. He was a strong boy, or he would have been quite exhausted long before he reached "Env. No. 17," which was the last but three of the packet. This read:

> Reach home at 6:20 P. M. Before entering house read No.18. C. W., Jr.

[Page 252] Leaning against one of the big white stone pillars of the porch of his home, Cyrus wearily tore open No. 18—and the words fairly swam before his eyes. He had to rub them hard to make sure that he was not mistaken.

> Go again to Kingston Heights, corner West and Dwight streets, reaching there by 6:50. Read No. 19. C. W., Jr.

The boy looked up at the windows, desperately angry at last. If his pride and his sense of the meaning of that phrase, "My word of honour," as the men of the Woodbridge family were in the habit of teaching it to their sons, had not been both of the strongest sort, he would have rebelled and gone defiantly and stormily in. As it was, he stood for one long minute with his hands clenched and his teeth set; then he turned and walked down the steps, away from the longed-for dinner, and out toward L Street and the car for Kingston Heights.

As he did so, inside the house, on the other side of the curtain, from behind which he had been anxiously peering, Cornelius Woodbridge, Senior, turned about and struck his hands together, rubbing them in a satisfied way.

"He's come—and gone," he cried softly, "and he's on time to the minute!" [Page 253]

Cornelius, Junior, did not so much as lift his eyes from the evening paper, as he quietly answered, "Is he?" But the corners of his mouth slightly relaxed. One who knew him well might have guessed that he thought it a simple matter to risk any number of chances on a sure thing.

The car seemed to crawl out to Kingston Heights. As it at last neared its terminus, a strong temptation seized the boy Cyrus. He had been on a purposeless errand to this place once that day. The corner of West and Dwight streets lay more than half a mile from the end of the car route, and it was an almost untenanted district. His legs were very tired; his stomach ached with emptiness. Why not wait out the interval which it would take to walk to the corner and back in the little suburban station, read "Env. No. 19," and spare himself? He had certainly done enough to prove that he was a faithful messenger.

Had he? Certain old and well-worn words came into his mind: they had been in his "writing-book" in his early school-days: "*A chain is no stronger than its weakest link*." Cyrus jumped off the car before it fairly stopped and started at a hot pace for the corner of West and Dwight streets. There [Page 254] must be no weak places in his word of honour.

Doggedly he went to the extreme limit of the indicated route, even taking the longest way round to make the turn. As he started back, beneath the arc light at the corner there suddenly appeared a city messenger boy. He approached Cyrus grinning, and held out an envelope.

"Ordered to give you this," he said, "if you made connections. If you'd been later than five minutes past seven, I was to keep dark. You've got seven minutes and a half to spare. Queer orders, but the big railroad boss, Woodbridge, give 'em to me."

Cyrus made his way back to the car with some self-congratulations that served to brace up the muscles behind his knees. This last incident showed him plainly that his father was putting him to a severe test of some sort, and he could have no doubt that it was for a purpose. His father was the kind of man who does things with a very definite purpose indeed. Cyrus looked back over the day with an anxious searching of his memory to be sure that no detail of the singular service [Page 255] required of him had been slighted.

As he once more ascended the steps of his own home, he was so confident that his labours were now ended that he almost forgot about "Env. No. 20" which he had been directed to read in the vestibule before entering the house. With his thumb on the bell-button he recollected, and with a sigh broke open the final seal:

> Turn about and go to Lenox Street Station, B—— Railroad, reaching there by 8.05. Wait for messenger in west end of station, by telegraph office. C. W., Jr.

It was a blow, but Cyrus had his second wind now. He felt like a machine—a hollow one—which could keep on going indefinitely.

"I know how an automobile feels," he said to himself, "rolling about from one place to another—never knowing where it's due next—always waiting outside—never getting fed. Wonder if eating is on this schedule. I'd have laid in something besides a chop and a roll this morning at breakfast if I'd known what was ahead." [Page 256]

The Lenox Station was easily reached on time. The hands of the big clock were only at one minute past eight when Cyrus entered. At the designated spot the messenger met him. Cyrus recognized the man as a porter on one of the trains of the road of which his grandfather and father were officers. Why, yes, he was the porter of the Woodbridge special car! He brought the boy a card which ran thus:

> Give porter the letter from Norwalk Building, the card received at restaurant, the matinée coupon, yesterday evening's *Sentinel*, and the envelope received at Kingston Heights. C. W., Jr.

Cyrus silently delivered up these articles, feeling a sense of thankfulness that not one was missing. The porter went away with them, but was back in three minutes.

"This way, sir," he said, and Cyrus followed, his heart beating fast. Down the track he recognized the "Fleetwing," President Woodbridge's private car. And Grandfather Cornelius he knew to be just starting on a tour of his own and other roads, which included a flying trip to Mexico. Could it be possible—— [Page 257]

In the car his father and grandfather rose to meet him. Cornelius Woodbridge, Senior, was

holding out his hand.

"Cyrus, lad," he said, his face one broad, triumphant smile, "you have stood the test—the Hezekiah Woodbridge test, sir—and you may be proud of it. Your word of honour can be depended upon. You are going with us through nineteen states and Mexico. Is that reward enough for one day's hardship?"

"I think it is, sir," agreed Cyrus, his round face reflecting his grandfather's smile, intensified.

"Was it a hard pull, Cyrus?" questioned the elder Woodbridge with interest.

Cyrus looked at his father. "I don't think so—now, sir," he said. Both gentlemen laughed.

"Are you hungry?"

"Well, just a little, grandfather."

"Dinner will be served the moment we are off. We've only six minutes to wait. I'm afraid—I'm very much afraid"—the old gentleman turned to gaze searchingly out of the car window into the station—"that another boy's word of honour isn't——" [Page 258]

He stood, watch in hand. The conductor came in and remained, awaiting orders. "Two minutes more, Mr. Jefferson," he said. "One and a half——one half a minute." He spoke sternly: "Pull out at 8:14 on the second, sir. Ah——"

The porter entered hurriedly, and delivered a handful of envelopes into Grandfather Cornelius's grasp. The old gentleman scanned them at a glance.

"Yes—yes—all right!" he cried, with the strongest evidences of excitement Cyrus had ever seen in his usually imperturbable manner. As the train made its first gentle motion of departure, a figure appeared in the doorway. Quietly, not at all out of breath, and with precisely his own nonchalant manner, Cornelius Woodbridge 3d walked into the car.

Then Grandfather Woodbridge grew impressive. He advanced and shook hands with his grandson as if he were greeting a distinguished member of the board of directors. Then he turned to his son and shook hands with him also, solemnly. His eyes shone through his gold-rimmed spectacles, but his voice was grave with feeling. [Page 259]

"I congratulate you, Cornelius," he said, "on possessing two sons whose word of honour is of the sort to satisfy the Hezekiah Woodbridge standard. The smallest deviation from the outlined schedule would have resulted disastrously. Ten minutes' tardiness at the different points would have failed to obtain the requisite documents. Your sons did not fail. They can be depended upon. The world is in search of men built on those lines. I congratulate you, sir."

Cyrus was glad presently to escape to his stateroom with Cornelius. "Say, what did you have to do?" he asked eagerly. "Did you trot your legs off all over town?"

"Not much, I didn't!" said Cornelius, grimly, from the depths of a big towel. "I spent the whole day in a little hole of a room at the top of an empty building, with just ten trips down the stairs to the ground floor to get envelopes at certain minutes. Not a crumb to eat nor a thing to do. Couldn't even snatch a nap for fear I'd oversleep one of my dates at the bottom. Had five engagements, too—one with Helena Fowler at the links. All I could do was to cut 'em and stick it out. Casabianca was nothing to me." [Page 260]

"I believe that was worse than mine," commented Cyrus reflectively.

"I should say it was. If you don't think so, try it."

"Dinner, boys," said their father's voice at the door, and they lost no time in responding. When they had taken their seats and the waiter came for Cornelius's order, that youth simply pushed the card of the elaborate menu to one side, and said emphatically, quite without his customary drawl: "Bring me everything, and twice of it."

"Me, too!" said Cyrus, with enthusiasm.

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IV

[Page 261]

HALF A LEAGUE ONWARD

The Rev. Arthur Thorndyke stirred at his desk with a vague impatience on account of a little droning sound which had been bothering him for the last ten minutes without his realizing what it was. He recognized at last that it was the boy David, in the alcove, where he had asked to be allowed to stay, promising not to bother Uncle Arthur with his work. For Uncle Arthur was very busy with his Memorial Day address. At least he was struggling desperately to be very busy with it, although so far he had succeeded only in spoiling half a dozen sheets of paper with as many inadequate introductions.

"For you see, Major," Arthur Thorndyke had explained to the boy, when he had come tap-tapping on his crutches into his uncle's study that morning, "this is such very new business to me. I'm having a pretty hard time trying to think of anything good and fine enough to say to the men in [Page 262] blue—and gray—and brown, for we have all sorts here, you know."

It was true that Uncle Arthur was a very boyish-looking uncle; but he was tall and big, and he had been preaching for a year now, and David thought that he preached very good sermons indeed. Besides, he had been in the Spanish War, one of the youngest privates in Uncle Stephen's company, and he ought to know all about it, even though he had really been in very few engagements.

"I guess you can do it, Uncle Arthur," said David comfortingly. "And I'll keep very still in the alcove. I would play somewhere else, only, you see, it's the only window that looks out over the square, and my playing is out there."

Uncle Arthur had not taken time to ask him what he meant, but afterward, when the little droning sound had begun to annoy him, he found out. He peeped in between the curtains of the alcove, and saw at once what was out in the square. It was the major's "regiment." To other people the square might have seemed to be a very quiet place, full of trees and May sunshine, [Page 263] with a few babies and nurses and placid pedestrians as its only occupants. But Uncle Arthur perceived at once, from the aspect of the major, that it was a place of wild carnage, of desperate assault, of the clash and shock of arms.

The major stood erect, supported by one crutch. The other crutch was being waved in the air, as by one who orders on a mass of fighting men. From the major's lips issued the subdued but passionate words:

"Flash'd all their sabres bare,
Flash'd as they turned in air
Sabring th' gunners there,
Charging an army, while
    All th' world wonder'd:
Plunged in th' batt'ry-smoke
Right through th' line they broke;
Cossack an' Russian
Reeled from th' sabre-stroke
    Scatter'd an' shunder'd.
Then they rode back, but not——"

The boy's voice wavered. Uncle Arthur saw him put up a thin hand and wipe his white little brow. [Page 264] Major David's plays were always intensely real to him.

"*Not—the six hundred,*" he murmured, and sank down on the window-seat, gazing mournfully out over the square. But in a moment he was up again.

"Cannon to right of 'em," he began again, sternly. "Cannon to left of 'em——"

Uncle Arthur crept away without bidding him remember his promise. What is a Memorial Day address beside the charge of a Light Brigade?

It was only two days after this that David's mother summoned David's four uncles to a conference. David had no father. There was a granite boulder up in the cemetery which ever since David was four years old—he was ten now—had been draped once a year with a beautiful silken flag. All the Thorndyke men had been soldiers, and David's father had died at the front, where the Thorndyke men usually died. It was a matter of great pride to David every year—that silken flag.

David's four uncles were all soldiers—in a way. There was Uncle Chester; he had been breveted colonel at the close of the Civil War, and Colonel Thorndyke he was—against his will—always [Page 265] called still. Next came Uncle Stephen; he was a captain of artillery in the regular army, and had lately come home on a furlough, after three years' service in the Philippines. Then there was Uncle Stuart, just getting strong after an attack of typhoid fever. In a week he would be back at West Point, where he was a first classman and a cadet lieutenant. As for Uncle Arthur, David always regretted deeply that he was no longer in either volunteer or regular army, although he took some comfort from the fact that Uncle Arthur sometimes told him that he had never felt more like a soldier than he did now.

It was a hasty and a serious conference, this to which Mrs. Roger Thorndyke had summoned her dead husband's three brothers and his uncle. She felt the need of all their counsel, for she had a grave question to settle. She was a young woman with a sweet decisiveness of character all her own, yet when a woman has four men upon whom she can call for wisdom to support her own judgment, she would be an unwise person to ignore that fact. [Page 266]

"It's just this," she told them, when she had closed the door of Arthur's study, where they had assembled. "You know how long we've been hoping something could be done for David, and how you've all insisted that when Doctor Wendell should decide he was strong enough for the operation on the hip-joint we must have it. Well, he says a great English surgeon, Sir Edmund Barrister, will be here for just two days. He comes to see the little Woodbridge girl, and to operate on her if he thinks it best. And Doctor Wendell urges upon me that—it's my chance."

She had spoken quietly, but her face paled a little as she ended. Her youngest brother-in-law, Stuart, the cadet, himself but lately out of hospital, was first to speak.

"When does he come?"

"To-morrow."

"Great guns! The little chap's close up to it! Does he know?"

"Oh, no! I wouldn't tell him till it was all arranged. Indeed, I wasn't sure whether——"

"You'd better tell him at all? Oh, yes, you will, Helen; the major mustn't stand up to be fired at blindfold." This was from Captain Stephen, the only one of the four now in active service. [Page 267]

"You all think it's best to have it done?"

"Why, it's as Wendell says: now's the chance to have the best man in that line. You can rest assured the Woodbridges would never stop at anything short of the finest. Besides, the Englishman's reputation is international. Of course it must be done." This was Stuart again. The cadet lieutenant had already acquired the tone of command—he was an excellent cadet lieutenant.

But Mrs. Thorndyke looked past Stuart at her Uncle Chester, Colonel Thorndyke, Civil War veteran. It was upon his opinion that she most relied. He nodded at her.

"He's right, Nell," he said. "It's our chance. The boy seems to me in as good condition for it as he'll ever be." He spoke very gently, for to his mind, as to them all, rose the vision of a delicate little face and figure, frail with the frailty of the child who has been for six years a cripple.

So it was decided, with few words, that the great surgeon should see David upon the morrow, to operate upon him at once if he thought wise, as the local surgeon, Doctor Wendell, was confident he would. Then arose another question: Who should tell David? [Page 268]

"Somehow I think," said Mrs. Thorndyke, looking from one to another of the four who surrounded her, "it would be easier for him from one of you. He thinks so much of your being soldiers. You know he's always playing he's a soldier, and if—if one of you could put it to him—in a sort of military way——"

She stopped, for this time her lips were really trembling. They looked at one another, the four men, and there was not a volunteer for the task. After a minute, however, Arthur, lifting his eyes from the rug which he had been intently studying, found the others were all facing him.

"You're the one," said Captain Stephen Thorndyke.

"I think you are," agreed Colonel Chester Thorndyke.

"It's up to you, Art," declared Cadet Lieutenant Thorndyke, with his usual decision of manner. [Page 269]

So, although Arthur protested that he was not as fit for the mission as any of the others, they would not let him off.

"You're the one he swears by," Stephen said, and Stuart added:

"Put on your old khaki clothes, Art; that'll tickle the major so he won't mind what you tell him."

It was a suggestion which appealed to the young clergyman as he lay awake that night, thinking how he should tell the boy in the morning. It seemed to him somehow that it would take the edge off the thing if he could meet David in the old uniform which the child was always begging to see.

Just before he fell asleep he thought of his Memorial Day address. Since the morning, day before yesterday, when David's play had interrupted his first futile efforts at it, he had found no time to work on it. He had had a wedding and two funerals to attend, besides having to look after the preparation for his Sunday services. The following Saturday would be Memorial Day. Meanwhile —there was David. [Page 270]

The next morning Mrs. Thorndyke, on her way to Arthur's study to tell him that the doctor had telephoned that he would bring the English surgeon to the house at eleven o'clock for the preliminary examination, ran into a tall figure in a khaki uniform, a battered slouch hat in his hand.

"Why, Arthur!" she cried, then added quickly: "Oh, my dear, that's just what will please him! I'm so glad it's you who are to tell him—you'll know how."

"I don't know how," said her brother, and she saw that his eyes were heavy. "But I expect the Commander-in-Chief will show me how." And with these words he went into his study and closed the door for a moment before David should come, in order that he might get his instructions from headquarters.

When the boy came in on his crutches, he found a soldierly figure awaiting him. He saluted, and the tall corporal returned the salute. The deep eyes of the man met the clear, bright ones of the child, and the corporal said to the major:

"I am ordered to report to you, sir, that the enemy is encamped on the opposite shore, and is preparing to attack." [Page 271]

Half an hour afterward Mrs. Thorndyke came anxiously to the door of the study. Hearing cheerful voices within, she knocked, and was bidden to enter.

Her first glance was at little David's face. To her surprise, she saw there neither fear nor nervousness, only an excited shining of the eyes and an unusual flushing of the cheeks. The boy rose to meet her.

"I'm ready, mammy," he announced in his childish treble. "Uncle Arthur says I've got a chance to prove I'm a soldier's son and a Thorndyke, and I'm going to do it. The enemy's encamped over in the hospital, and I'm going to move on his works to-day. I'm going over with my staff. This is Corporal Thorndyke, and Colonel Chester Thorndyke and Captain Stephen Thorndyke and Lieutenant Stuart Thorndyke are my staff. And the corporal has promised that they'll go with me in uniform. I'm going to wear my uniform, too—may I?"

[Page 272] The oddness of the question, made in a tone which dropped suddenly and significantly from the proud address of the officer to the humble request of the subaltern, brought a very tender smile to Mrs. Thorndyke's lips, as she gave her brother a grateful glance. "Yes," she said, "I think you certainly ought to wear your uniform. I'll get it ready."

"I may be taken prisoner over there," the little soldier pursued, "but if I do, Uncle Ar—the corporal says that's the fortunes of war, and I must take it as it comes."

Downstairs, presently, David, under a flag of truce, met the opposing general and his staff. The bluff-looking Englishman with the kind manner made an excellent general, David thought.

They detained him only a half-hour, but when he left them it was with the understanding that his army should move forward at once and attack upon the morrow. It seemed a bit unusual, not to say unmilitary, to David, to arrange such matters so thoroughly with the enemy, but his corporal assured him that under certain conditions the thing was done.

[Page 273] There being no other part of the "Charge" that would fit, David said over to himself a great many times on the way to the hospital the opening lines:

"Half a league, half a league,
  Half a league onward.
All in th' valley of Death
  Rode th' six hundred...."

As he went up the hospital steps, tap-tapping on his crutches because he would not let anybody carry him, the situation seemed to him much better. He stopped upon the top step, balanced himself upon one crutch, and waved the other at his staff—and at the "Six Hundred," pressing on behind.

"Forward, th' Light Brigade!
'Charge for th' guns!' he said...."

"What's the little chap saying?" Uncle Chester murmured into the ear of Uncle Arthur, as the small figure hurried on.

"He's living out 'The Charge of the Light Brigade,'" Arthur answered, and there was no smile on his lips. Uncle Chester swallowed something in his throat.

[Page 274] It may have been a common thing for the hospital nurses and doctors to see a patient in military clothes arrive accompanied by four other military figures—the uniforms a little mixed; but if they were surprised they gave no sign. The nurse who put David to bed wore a Red Cross badge on her sleeve—hastily constructed by Doctor Wendell. This badge David regarded with delight.

"Why, you're a real army nurse, aren't you?" he asked happily.

"Of course. They are the kind to take care of soldiers," she returned. And after that there was a special bond between them.

When they had finished with David that night he was rather glad to have Corporal Thorndyke say to him that there was a brief cessation of hostilities, and that the men were to have the chance for a few hours' sleep.

"But you'll stay by, won't you, Corporal?" requested the major sleepily.

"Certainly, sir," responded the corporal, saluting. "I'll be right here all night."

[Page 275] The corporal at this point was so unmilitary as to bend over and kiss him; but as this was immediately followed by a series of caresses from his mother, the major thought it best not to mind. Indeed, it was very comforting, and he might have missed it if it had not happened, even though he was supposed to be in the field and sleeping upon his arms.

The next morning things happened rather rapidly.

"No rations, Major," said the Red Cross nurse, when he inquired for his breakfast.

"Commissary department left far to the rear," explained the corporal, with his salute; and of course there was nothing more to be said, although it did seem a little hard to face "the jaws of death" with no food to hearten one.

A number of things were done to David. Then Doctor Wendell came in and sat down by the high white bed, and, with a reassuring smile at his patient, gave him a few brief directions. The corporal took David's hand in his, and held it with the tight grip of the comrade who means to stand by to the last ditch.

"Forward, th' Light Brigade!
Was 'ere a man dismay'd?
Not though the soldier knew
Some 'un had blunder'd...."

[Page 276] "God forbid!" murmured the corporal, as the words trailed slowly out into the air from under Doctor Wendell's hand.

"Theirs not to make reply—
Theirs—not to—reason—why—
Theirs—but—to—do—an'—die——"

The corporal set his teeth. Presently he looked across the bed and met the eyes of the major's mother. "So far, so good," he said, nodding to her, as the small hand in his relaxed its hold.

"Talk about sheer pluck!" growled Captain Stephen Thorndyke, in the waiting-room, where he and Colonel Chester and Cadet Stuart were marching up and down during the period of suspense.

"It's that 'Charge of the Light Brigade' that floors me," said Stuart. "If the youngster'd just whimper a little; but to go under whispering, 'Theirs not to make reply——'" He choked, and frankly drew his gray sleeve across his eyes.

[Page 277] "It's the Thorndyke spirit," said Colonel Chester proudly. "He's Roger's boy, all right."

There were two or three doubtful bulletins. Then Arthur brought them the good news that the major had been brought back from the firing-line and was rallying bravely.

"But will he pull through? These successful operations don't always end successfully," said Stuart, as he and Arthur paced down the corridor together.

"That's what we've got to wait and hope and pray for," answered Arthur. "It's the 'stormed at with shot and shell' the major'd be reciting now, if he could do anything but shut his lips together and try to bear the pain. It'll be five or six days, they say, before we can call him out of danger. Hip-joint disease of Davy's form isn't cured by anything short of this grave operation, and it's taking a good many chances, of course, in the little chap's delicate condition. But—we've all his own staunch courage on our side—and somehow, well—Stuart, I've got to preach to-morrow. And next week—that Memorial address! How do you suppose I'm going to do it? The major wants me on hospital duty every hour between now and then."

[Page 278] That Memorial Day address! How was a distraught young clergyman to think of material for such an address when he was held captive at the bedside of a little soldier fighting for his life?

It was the fourth day before anxiety began to lessen its grip; the fifth, the sixth, before Doctor Wendell would begin to speak confidently. Through it all the words of the "Charge" beat in Arthur Thorndyke's brain till it seemed to him that if David died he should never hear anything else. For they were constantly on the boy's lips.

Finally, on the morning of Saturday, Arthur said to David: "Major, this is the day for you to say the last lines. You know this afternoon the 'Six Hundred' are going by. You'll hear the band play, and Uncle Chester and Uncle Stephen will be marching in the ranks. Stuart and I will be there, too, somewhere, and I think if we can just prop you up a little bit you'll be able to see at least the heads of the men. And you can salute, you know, even if they can't see you."

"After the procession are you going to speak to them?" asked David.

[Page 279] Arthur smiled. "After some sort of fashion I'm going to open my mouth," he said. "I hardly know myself what will come out. All I do know is, I never had quite so much respect for the courage that faces the cannon's mouth as now. And it's you, Major, who are the pluckiest soldier I know."

He smiled down at the white little face, its great gray eyes staring up at him.

"Uncle Arthur—but—but—I wasn't plucky—all the time. Sometimes—it hurt so I—had to cry."

The words were a whisper, but Uncle Arthur still smiled. "That doesn't count, Major," he said. "Now I must go. Watch for the band."

Away in the distance, by and by, came the music. As it approached, mingled with it David could hear the sound of marching feet. His mother and the Red Cross nurse propped his head up a very little, so that he could see into the street. Louder and louder grew the strains, then stopped; the drums beat.

"Oh, they're not going to play as they go by!" cried David, disappointed.

[Page 280] The tramp of the marching feet came nearer. Suddenly the band burst with a crash into the "Star-Spangled Banner." David's eyes shone with delight.

"They're halting in front of us, David," said the nurse. So they were; David could see them.

The music reached the end of the tune and stopped. A shout broke upon the air; it was a cheer. It took words, and swelled into David's room; but it was a gentle cheer, not a vociferous one. It was given by Lieutenant Roger Thorndyke's old company. And the words of it were wonderful:

"'Rah, 'rah, 'rah—comrade!"

David lay back on his pillow, his face shining with happiness. He would never forget that those soldiers of his father's regiment, the ——th New York, had called him comrade. He thought of them tenderly; he murmured the closing words of the "Charge," and by them he meant the men who had stood outside his window and cheered:

"When can their glory fade?
O th' wild charge they made!
All th' world wonder'd.
Honour th' charge they made!
Honour th' Light Brigade,
Noble six hundred!"

An hour afterward they came in together, his four Thorndyke soldiers, in their uniforms—all but Uncle Arthur, who, because he was a clergyman, and had had to make a speech, had felt obliged to put on a frock coat. [Page 281]

"Here's the fellow who's been worrying over his Memorial Day address!" cried Uncle Stephen proudly.

"It was a rousing good one," declared Stuart.

"Never heard a better," agreed Uncle Chester. "He's gone 'half a league onward,' if the rest of us have stood still."

Uncle Arthur came round, his face rather red, and sat down beside David.

"Don't you believe them, Major," he said softly. "I could have done it much better if I could have worn my corporal's uniform."

THE END

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Transcriber's notes:

"Where-ever" on page 78 has been changed to "Wherever" to be consistent with the spelling in the rest of the text.

"everbody" on page 96 has been change to "everybody".

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