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A PHILANTHROPIST

By Josephine Daskam

"I suspected him from the first," said Miss Gould, with some irritation, to her lodger. She spoke with irritation because of the amused smile of the lodger. He bowed with the grace that characterized all his lazy movements.

"He looked very much like that Tom Waters that I had at the Reformed Drunkards' League last year. I even thought he was Tom—"

"I do not know Tom?" hazarded the lodger.

"No. I don't know whether I ever mentioned him to you. He came twice to the League, and we were really quite hopeful about him, and the third time he asked to have the meeting at his house. We thought it a great sign—the best of signs, in fact. So as a great favor we went there instead of meeting at the Rooms. I was a little late—I lost the way—and when I got there I heard a great noise as if they were singing different songs at the same time. I hurried in to lead them—they get so mixed in the singing—and—it makes me blush now to think of it!—the wretch had invited them all early, and—and they were all intoxicated!

"I am sorry I told you," she added with dignity; for the lodger, in an endeavor to smile sympathetically, had lost his way and was convulsed with a mirth entirely unregretful.

"Not at all, not at all," he murmured politely. "It is a delightful story. I would not have missed it—a choir of reformed drunkards! But do you not, my dear Miss Gould, perceive in these little setbacks a warning against further attempts? Do you still attend the League? It is not possible!"

"Possible?" echoed his visitor; for owing to certain recent and untoward circumstances, Miss Gould was half reclining in her lodger's great Indian chair, sipping a glass of his '49 port. "Indeed I do! They had every one of them to be reformed all over again! It was most disgraceful!"

Her lodger checked a rising smile, and leaned solicitously toward her, regarding her firm, fine-featured face with flattering attention.

"Are you growing stronger? Can I bring you anything?" he inquired.

Miss Gould's color rose, half with anger at her weakness of body, half with a vexed consciousness of his amusement.

"Thank you, no," she returned coldly, "I am ashamed to have been so weak-minded. I must go now and tell Henry to pile the wood again in the east corner. There will probably come another tramp very soon—they are very prevalent this month, I hear."

Her lodger left his low wicker seat—a proof of enormous excitement—and frowned at her.

“Do you seriously mean, Miss Gould, that you are going to run the risk of another such—such catastrophe? It is absurd. I cannot believe it of you! Is there no other way—”

But he had been standing a long while, it occurred to him, and he retired to the chair again. A splinter of wood on his immaculate white flannel coat caught his eye, and a slow smile spread over his handsome, lazy face. It grew and grew until at last a distinct chuckle penetrated to the dusky corner where the Indian chair leaned back against dull Oriental draperies. Its occupant attempted to rise, her face stern, her mouth unrelenting. He was at her side instantly.

“Take my arm—and pardon me!” he said with an irresistible grace. “It is only my fear for your comfort, you know, Miss Gould. I cannot bear that you should be at the mercy of every drunken fellow that wishes to impose on you!”

As she crossed the hall that separated her territory from his, her fine, full figure erect, her dark head high in the air, a whimsical regret came over him that they were not younger and more foolish.

“I should certainly marry her to reform her,” he said to the birch log that spluttered on his inimitable colonial fire-dogs. And then, as the remembrance of the events of the morning came to him, he laughed again.

He had been disturbed at his leisurely coffee and roll by a rapid and ceaseless pounding, followed by a violent rattling, and varied by stifled cries apparently from the woodshed. The din seemed to come from the lower part of the house, and after one or two futile appeals to the man who served as valet, cook, and butler in his bachelor establishment, he decided that he was alone in his half of the house, and that the noise came from Miss Gould's side. He strolled down the beautiful winding staircase, and dragged his crimson dressing-gown to the top of the cellar stairs, the uproar growing momentarily more terrific. Half-way down the whitewashed steps he paused, viewing the remarkable scene below him with interest and amazement. The cemented floor was literally covered with neatly chopped kindling-wood, which rose as in a tide under the efforts of a large red-faced man who, with the regularity of a machine, stooped, grasped a billet in either hand, shook them in the face of Miss Gould, who cowered upon a soap-box at his side, and flung them on the floor. From the woodhouse near the cellar muffled shouts were heard through a storm of blows on the door. From the rattling of this door, and the fact that the red-faced man aimed every third stick at it, the observer might readily conclude that some one desirous of leaving the woodhouse was locked within it.

For a moment the spectator on the stairs stood stunned. The noise was deafening; the appearance of the man, whose expression was one of settled rage but whose actions were of the coldest regularity, was most bewildering, partially obscured as it was by the flying billets of wood; the mechanical attempts of Miss Gould to rise from the soap-box, invariably checked by a fierce brandishing of the stick just taken from the lessening pile, were at once startling and fascinating, inasmuch as she was methodically waved back just as her knees had unbent for the trial, and as methodically essayed her escape again, alternately rising with dignity and sinking back in terror.

The red dressing-gown advanced a step, and met her gaze. Dignity and terror shifted to relief.

“Oh, Mr. Welles!” she gasped. Her lodger girded up his *robe de chambre* with its red silk cord and advanced with decision through the chaos of birch and hickory. A struggle, sharp but brief, and he turned to find Miss Gould offering a coil of clothes-rope with which to bind the conquered, whom conflict had sobered, for he made no resistance.

“What do you mean by such idiotic actions?” the squire of dames demanded, as he freed the maddened Henry from his durance vile in the woodhouse and confronted the red-faced man, who had not uttered a word.

He cast a baffled glance at Miss Gould and a triumphant smile at Henry before replying. Then, disdaining the lady's righteous indignation and the hired man's threatening gestures, he faced the gentleman in the scarlet robe and spoke as man to man.

“Gov'nor,” he said with somewhat thickened speech, “I come here an' I asked for a meal. An' she tol' me would I work fer it? An' I said yes. An' she come into this ol' vault of a suller, an' she pointed to that ol' heap o' wood, an' she tol' me ter move it over ter that corner. An' I done so fer half an hour. An' I says to that blitherin' fool over there, who was workin' in that ol' wood-house, what the devil did she care w'ich corner the darned stuff was in? An' he says that she didn't care a hang, but that she'd tell the next man that come along to move it back to where I got it from; he said 'twas a matter er principle with her not to give a man a bite fer nothin'! So I shut him in his ol' house, an' w'en she come down I gave her a piece of my mind. I don't mind a little work, mister, but when it come to shufflin' kind-lin's round in this ol' tomb fer half an hour an' makin' a fool o' myself fer nothin', I got my back up. My time ain't so vallyble to me as 'tis to some, gov'nor, but it's worth a damn sight more'n that!”

Miss Gould's lodger shuddered as he remembered the quarter he had surreptitiously bestowed upon the man, and the withering scorn that would be his portion were the weakness known. He smiled as he recalled the scene in the cellar when he had helped Miss Gould up the stairs and returned to soothe Henry, who regretted that he had left one timber of the woodhouse upon another.

“Though I'm bound to say, Mr. Welles, that I see how he felt. I've often felt like a fool explainin' how they was to move that wood back an' forth. It does seem strange that Miss Gould has to do it that way. Give 'em some-thin' an' let 'em go, I say!”

It was precisely his own view—but how fundamentally immoral the position was he knew so well! He recalled Miss Gould's lectures on the subject, miracles of eloquence and irrefutably correct in deductions that interested him not nearly so much as the lecturer.

“So firm, so positive, so wholesome!” he would murmur to himself in tacit apology for the instructive hours spent before their common ground, the great fireplace in the central hall. He never sat there without remembering their first interview: her resentment at an absolutely inexcusable intrusion slowly melting before his exquisite appreciation of every line and corner of the old colonial homestead; her reserve waning at every touch of his irresistible courtesy, till, to her own open amazement, she rose to conduct this

connoisseur in antiquities through the rooms whose delights he had perfectly foreseen, he assured her, from the modelling of the front porch; her utter and instantaneous refusal to consider for a second his proposal to lodge a stranger in half of her father's house; and the naïve and conscientious struggle with her principles when, with a logic none the less forcible because it was so gracefully developed, he convinced her that her plain duty lay along the lines of his choice.

For as a philanthropist what could she do? Here were placed in her hands means she could not in conscience overlook. Rapidly translating his dollars into converts, he juggled them before her dazzled eyes; he even hinted delicately at Duty, with that exact conception of the requirements of the stern daughter felt by none so keenly as those who systematically avoid her.

His good genius prompted him to refer casually to soup-kitchens. Now soup-kitchens were the delight of Miss Gould's heart; toward the establishment of a soup-kitchen she had looked since the day when her father's death had left her the double legacy of his worldly goods and his unworldly philanthropy.

Visions of dozens of Bacchic revellers, riotous no more, but seated temperately each before his steaming bowl, rose to her delighted eyes; she saw in fancy the daughters and nieces of the reformed in smiles and white aprons ladling the nutritious and attractive compound, earning thus an honest wage; she saw a neatly balanced account-book and a triumphant report; she saw herself the respected and deprecatory idol of a millennial village. She wavered, hesitated, and was lost.

That very evening saw the establishment of a second ménage in the north side of the house, and though a swift regret chilled her manner for weeks, she found herself little by little growing interested in her lodger, and conscious of an increasing desire to benefit him, an irritated longing to influence him for good, to turn him from the butterfly whims of a pretended invalid to an appreciation of the responsibilities of life.

For in all her well-ordered forty years Miss Gould had never seen so indolent, so capricious, so irresponsible a person. That a man of easy means, fine education, sufficient health, and gray hair should have nothing better to do than collect willow-ware and fire-irons, read the magazines, play the piano, and stroll about in the sun seemed to her nothing less than horrible.

Each day that added some new treasure to his perfectly arranged rooms, and in consequence some new song to his seductive repertoire, left a new sting in her soul. She had been influencing somebody or something all her life. She had been educating and directing and benefiting till she was forced to be grateful to that providential generosity that caused new wickedness and ignorance to spring constantly from this very soil she had cleared; for if one reform had been sufficient she would long since have been obliged to leave the little village for larger fields. She had ministered to the starved mind as to the stunted body; the idle and dissolute quaked before her. And yet here in her own household, across her hall, lived the epitome of uselessness, indolence, selfishness, and—she was forced to admit it—charm. What corresponded to a sense of humor in her caught at the discrepancy and worried over it.

What! was she not competent, then, to influence her equals? For in everything but moral stamina she was forced to admit that her lodger was her equal, if no more. Widely travelled, well read, well born, talented, handsome, deferential—but persistently amused at her, irrevocably indolent, hopelessly selfish.

With the firm intention of turning the occasions to his benefit, she had finally accepted his regular and courteous invitation to take tea with him, and had watched his graceful management of samovar and tea-cup with open disfavor. “A habit picked up in England,” he had assured her, when, with the frankness characteristic of her, she had criticised him for the effeminacy. And his smiling explanation had sent a sudden flush across her smooth, firm cheeks. Was she provincial? Did she seem to him a New England villager and nothing more? She bit her lip, and the appeal she had planned went unspoken that day.

But her desire could not rest, and as to her strict notions the continual visits from her side to his seemed unsuitable, she gave in self-defence her own invitation, and Wednesday and Saturday afternoons saw her lodger across the hall drinking her own tea with wine and plum-cake by the shining kettle.

If she could command his admiration in no other way, she felt, she might safely rely on his deferential respect for the owner of that pewter tea-service—velvety, shimmering, glistening dully, with shapes that vaguely recalled Greek lamps and Etruscan urns. And she piled wedges of ambrosial plum-cake with yellow frosting on sprigged china, and set out wine in her great-grandfather's long-necked decanter, and, with what she considered a gracious tact, overlooked the flippancy of her guest's desultory conversation, and sincerely tried to discover the humorous quality in her conversation that forced a subdued chuckle now and then from her listener.

She confided most of her schemes to him, sometimes unconsciously, and grew to depend more than she knew upon his common sense and experience; for, though openly cynical of her works, he would give her what she often realized to be the best of practical advice, and his amusing generalities, though to her mind insults to humanity, had been so bitterly proved true that she looked fearfully to see his lightest adverse prophecy fulfilled.

After a cautious introduction of the subject by asking his advice as to the minimum of hours in the week one could conscientiously allow a doubtful member of the Weekly Culture Club to spend upon Browning, she endeavored to get his idea of that poet. Her famous theory as to her ability to place any one satisfactorily in the scale of culture according to his degree of appreciation of “Rabbi ben Ezra” was unfortunately known to her lodger before she could with any verisimilitude produce the book, and he was wary of committing himself. The exquisite effrontery with which she finally brought out her gray-green volume was only equalled by the forbearing courtesy with which he welcomed both it and her. Nor did he offer any other comment on her opening the book at a well-worn page than an apologetic removal to the only chair in the room more comfortable than the one he was at the time occupying. He listened in silence to her intelligent if somewhat sonorous rendering of selected portions of “Saul,” thanking her politely at the close, and only stipulating that he should be allowed to return the favor by a reading from one of his own favorite poets. With a shocked remembrance of certain yellow-covered volumes she had often cleared away from the piazza, Miss Gould inquired if the poet in question were English. On his hearty affirmative she resigned herself with no little interest to the opportunity of seeing her way more clearly into this baffling mind, horrified at his criticism of

the second reading—for she had brought the “Rabbi” forward at last,

> *“Then welcome each rebuff*
> *That turns earth's smoothness rough,*
> *Each sting that bids nor sit nor stand, but go!”*

she had intoned; and, fixing her eye sternly on the butterfly in white flannels, she had asked him with a telling emphasis what that meant to him? With the sweetest smile in the world, he had leaned forward, sipped his tea, gazed thoughtfully in the fire, and answered, with a polite apology for the homeliness of the illustration, that it reminded him most strongly of a tack fixed in the seat of a chair, with the attendant circumstances! After a convulsive effort to include in one terrible sentence all the scorn and regret and pity that she felt, Miss Gould had decided that silence was best, and sat back wondering why she suffered him one instant in her parlor. He took from the floor beside him at this point a neat red volume, and, murmuring something about his inability to do the poet justice, he began to read. For one, two, four minutes Miss Gould sat staring; then she interrupted him coldly:

“And who is the author of that doggerel, Mr. Welles?”

“Edward Lear, dear Miss Gould—and a great man, too.”

“I think I might have been spared—” she began with such genuine anger that any but her lodger would have quailed. He, however, merely smiled.

“But the subtlety of it—the immensity of the conception—the power of characterization!” he cried. “Just see how quietly this is treated.”

And to her amazement she let him go on; so that a chance visitor, entering unannounced, might have been treated to the delicious spectacle of a charming middle-aged gentleman in white flannels reading, near a birch fire and a priceless pewter tea-service, to a handsome middle-aged woman in black silk, the following pregnant lines:

> *“There was an old person of Bow,*
> *Whom nobody happened to know,*
> *So they gave him some soap,*
> *And said coldly, 'We hope*
> *You will go back directly to Bow!'*

And the illustration is worthy of the text,” he added enthusiastically, as he passed the volume to her.

She had no sense of humor, but she had a sense of justice, and it occurred to her that after all an agreement was an agreement. If to listen to insinuating inanities was the price of his attention, she would pay it. She had borne more than this in order to do good.

So the readings continued, a source of unmixed delight to her lodger and a great spiritual discipline to herself.

As the days grew milder their intimacy, profiting by the winter seclusion, led him to accompany her on her various errands. She was at first unwilling to accept his escort—it too clearly resembled a tacit consent to his idleness. But his quiet persistence, together with his evident cynicism as to the results of these professional tours, accomplished, as usual, his end; and the wondering village might observe on hot June mornings its benefactress, languidly accompanied by a slender man in white flannels, balancing a large white green-lined umbrella, picking his way daintily along the dusty paths, with a covered basket dangling from one hand and a gray-green volume distending one white pocket.

There was material, too, for the interested observer in the picture of Miss Gould distributing reading matter, fruit, and lectures on household economy in the cottages of the mill-hands, while her lodger pitched pennies with the delighted children outside. It was on one of these occasions that Miss Gould took the opportunity to address Mr. Thomas Waters, late of the paper and cardboard manufacturing force, on the wickedness and folly of his present course of action. Mr. Waters had left his position on the strength of his wife's financial success. Mrs. Waters was a laundress, and the summer boarders, together with Mr. Welles, who alone went far toward establishing the fortunes of the family, had combined to place the head of the house in his present condition of elegant leisure. “I wonder at you, Tom Waters, after all the interest we've taken in you \ Are you not horribly ashamed to depend on your wife in this lazy way?” Miss Gould demanded of the once member of the Reformed Drunkards' League. “How many times have I explained to you that nothing—absolutely nothing—is so disgraceful as a man who will not work? What were you placed in the world for? How do you justify your existence?”

“How,” replied her unabashed audience, with a wave of his pipe toward the front yard, where Mr. Welles was amiably superintending a wrestling match, “does he justify hisn?”

Had Miss Gould been less consistent and less in earnest, there were many replies open to her. As it was, she colored violently, bit her lip, made an inaudible remark, and with a bitter glance at the author of her confusion, now cheering on to the conflict the scrambling Waters children, she called their mother to account for their presence in the yard at this time on a school-day, and for the first time in her life left the house without exacting a solemn promise of amendment from the head of the family.

“I guess I fixed her that time!” Mr. Waters remarked triumphantly, as he summoned his second pair of twins from the yard and demanded of them if the gentleman had given them nickels or dimes.

The gentleman in question became uncomfortably conscious, in the course of their walk home, of an atmosphere not wholly novel, that lost no strength in this case from its studied repression. That afternoon, as they sat in the shade of the big elm, he in his flexible wicker chair, she in a straight-backed, high-seated legacy from her grandfather, the whirlwind that Mr. Waters had so lightly sown fell to the reaping of a victim too amiable and unsuspecting not to escape the sentence of any but so stern a judge as the handsome and inflexible representative of the moral order now before him.

Miss Gould was looking her best in a crisp lavender dimity, upon whose frills Mrs. Waters had bestowed the grateful exercise of her highest art. Her sleek, dark coils of hair, from which no one stray lock escaped,

framed her fresh cheeks most admirably; her strong white hands appeared and disappeared with an absolute regularity through the dark-green wool out of which she was evolving a hideous and useful shawl. To her lodger, who alternately waved a palm-leaf fan and drank lemonade, reading at intervals from a two-days-old newspaper, and carrying on the desultory and amusing soliloquy that they were pleased to consider conversation, she presented the most attractive of pictures. “So firm, so positive, so wholesome,” he murmured to himself, calling her attention to the exquisite effect of the slanting rays that struck the lawn in a dappled pattern of flickering leaf-shadows, and remarking the violet tinge thrown by the setting sun on the old spire below in the middle of the village. She did not answer immediately, and when she did it was in tones that he had learned from various slight experiments to regard as final.

“Mr. Welles,” she said, bending upon him that direct and placid regard that rendered evasion difficult and paltering impossible, “things have come to a point;” and she narrated the scene of the morning.

“It is indeed a problem,” observed her lodger gravely, “but what is one to do? It is just such questions as this that illustrate the futility—”

“There is no question about it, Mr. Welles,” she interrupted gravely. “Tom was right and I was wrong. There is no use in my talking to him or anybody while I—while you—while things are as they are. You must make up your mind, Mr. Welles.”

“But, great heavens, dear Miss Gould, what do you mean? What am I to make up my mind about? Am I to provide myself with an occupation, perhaps, for the sake of Tom Waters's principles? Or am I—”

“Yes. That is just it. You know what I have always felt, Mr. Welles, about it. But I never seemed to be able to make you see. Now, as I say, things have come to a point. You must do something.”

“But this is absurd, Miss Gould! I am not a child, and surely nobody can dream of holding you in any way responsible—”

“*I* hold myself responsible,” she replied simply, “and I have never approved of it—never!”

He shrugged his shoulders desperately. She was imperturbable; she was impossible; she was beyond argument or persuasion or ridicule.

“Suppose I say that I think the situation is absurd, and that I refuse to be placed at Mr. Waters's disposal?” he suggested with a furtive glance. She drew the ivory hook through the green meshes a little faster.

“I should be obliged to refuse to renew your lease in the fall,” she answered. He started from his wicker chair.

“You cannot mean it, Miss Gould! You would not be so—so unkind, so unjust!”

“I should feel obliged to, Mr. Welles, and I should not feel unjust.”

He sank back into the yielding chair with a sigh. After all, her fascination had always lain in her great decision. Was it not illogical to expect her to fail to display it at such a crisis? There was a long silence. The sun sank lower and lower, the birds twittered happily around them. Miss Gould's long white hook slipped in and out of the wool, and her lodger's eyes followed it absently. After a while he rose, settled his white jacket elaborately, and half turned as if to go back to the house.

“I need not tell you how I regret this unfortunate decision of yours,” he said politely, with a slight touch of the hauteur that sat so well on his graceful person. “I can only say that I am sorry you yourself should regret it so little, and that I hope it will not disturb our pleasant acquaintance during the weeks that remain to me.”

She bowed slightly with a dignified gesture that often served her as a reply, and he took a step toward her.

“Would we not better come in?” he suggested. “The sun is gone, and your dress is thin. Let me send Henry after the chairs,” and his eyes dropped to her hands again. They were nearly hidden by the green wool, but the long needle quivered like a leaf in the wind; she could not pass it between the thread and her white forefinger. He hesitated a moment, glanced at her face, smiled inscrutably, and deliberately reseated himself.

“What in the world could I do, you see?” he inquired meditatively, as if that had been the subject under discussion for some time. “I can't make cardboard boxes, you know. It's perfectly useless, my going into a factory. Wheels and belts and things always give me the maddest longing to jump into them—I couldn't resist it! And that would be so unpleasant—”

She dropped her wool and clasped her hands under it.

“Oh, Mr. Welles,” she cried eagerly, “how absurd! As if I meant that! As if I meant anything like it!”

“Had you thought of anything, then?” he asked interestedly.

She nodded gravely. “Why, yes,” she said. “It wouldn't be right for me to say you must do something, and then offer no suggestions whatever, knowing as I do how you feel about it. I thought of such a good plan, and one that would be the best possible answer to Tom—”

“Oh, good heavens!” murmured her lodger, but she went on quickly: “You know I was going to open the soup-kitchen in October. Well, I've just thought, Why not get the Rooms all ready, and the reading-room moved over there, and have lemonade and sandwiches and sarsaparilla, and Kitty Waters to begin to serve right away, as she's beginning to run the streets again, and Annabel Riley with her? Then the Civic Club can have its headquarters there, and people will begin to be used to it before cold weather.”

“And I am to serve sarsaparilla and sandwiches with Kitty and Annabel? Really, dear Miss Gould, if you knew how horribly ill sarsaparilla is certain to make me—I have loathed it from childhood—”

“Oh, no, no, no!” she interrupted, with her sweet, tolerant smile. She smiled at him as if he had been a child.

“You know I never meant that you should work all day, Mr. Welles. It isn't at all necessary. I have always felt that an hour or two a day of intelligent, cultivated work was fully equal to a much longer space of manual labor that is more mechanical, more tiresome.”

“Better fifty years of poker than a cycle of croquet!” her lodger murmured. “Yes, I have always felt that myself.”

“And somebody must be there from ten to twelve, say, in the mornings, in what we call the office; just to

keep an eye on things, and answer questions about the kitchen, and watch the reading-room, and recommend the periodicals, and take the children's Civic League reports, and oversee the Rooms generally. Now I'd be there Wednesdays to meet the mothers, and Mrs. Underwood Saturdays for the Band of Hope and the kitchen-garden. It would be just Mondays, Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Fridays from ten to twelve, say!"

"From ten to twelve, say," he repeated absently, with his eyes on her handsome, eager face. He had never seen her so animated, so girlishly insistent. She urged with the vivid earnestness of twenty years.

"My dear lady," he brought out finally, "you are like Greek architecture or Eastlake furniture or—or 'God Save the Queen'—perfectly absolute! And I am so hideously relative—But, after all, why should a sense of humor be an essential? One is really more complete—I suppose Mahomet had none—When shall I begin?"

The interested villagers were informed early and regularly of the progress of the latest scheme of their benefactress. Henry and Mr. Waters furnished most satisfactory and detailed bulletins to gatherings of leisurely and congenial spirits, who listened with incredulous amazement to the accounts of Mr. Welles's proceedings.

"Him an' that hired man o' his, they have took more stuff over to them Rooms than you c'd shake a stick at! I never see nothing like it—never! Waxed that floor, they have, and put more mats onto it—fur and colored. An' the stuff—oh, Lord! China—all that blue china he got fr'm ol' Mis' Simms, an' them ol' stoneware platters that Mis' Rivers was goin' to fire away, an' he give her two dollars for the lot—all that's scattered round on tables and shelves. An' that ol' black secr'tary he got fr'm Lord knows where, an' brakes growin' in colored pots standin' right up there, an' statyers o' men an' women—no heads onto 'em, some ain't got; it's all one to him—he'd buy any ol' thing so's 'twas broke, you might say. An' them ol' straight chairs—no upholsterin' on 'em, an' some o' them wicker kind that bends any way, with piliers in 'em. An' cups and sassers, with a tea-pot 'n' kittle; an' he makes tea himself an' drinks it—I swear it's so. An' a guitar, an', Lord, the pictures! You can't see no wall for 'em!

"'It's a mighty lucky thing, havin' this room, Thompson,' says he to that hired man, 'the things was spillin' over. We'll make it a bower o' beauty, Thompson,' says he. 'Yes, sir,' says the man. That's all he ever says, you might say. I never see nothin' like it, never, the way that hired man talks to him; you'd think he was the Queen o' Sheba.

"An' he goes squintin' about here an' there, changin' this an' that, an' singin' away an' laughin'—you'd think he'd have a fit. Seems's if he loved to putter about 'n' fool with things in a room, like women. I heard him say so myself. I was helpin' Miss Gould with the other rooms—she ain't seen his; she don't know no more'n the dead what he's got in there—an' I was by the door when he said it.

"'Thompson,' says he, 'if I don't keep my present situation,' says he, 'I c'n go out as a decorator an' furnisher. Don't you think I'd succeed, Thompson?' says he. 'Yes, sir,' says Thompson.

"'You see, we've got to do something Thompson,' says he. 'We've got ter justify our existence, Thompson,' an' he commenced to laugh. 'Yes, sir,' says Thompson. Beats all I ever see, the way that man answers back!"

An almost unprecedented headache, brought on by her unremitting labor in effecting the change in the Rooms, kept Miss Gould in the house for two days after the new headquarters had been satisfactorily arranged; and as Mr. Welles had refused to open his office for inspection till it was completely furnished, she did not enter that characteristic apartment till the third day of its official existence.

As she went through the narrow hallway connecting the four rooms on which the social regeneration of her village depended, she caught the sweet low thrum of a guitar and a too familiarly seductive voice burst forth into a chant, whose literal significance she was unable to grasp, owing to lack of familiarity with the language in which it was couched, but whose general tenor no one could mistake, so tender and arch was the rendering.

With a vague thrill of apprehension she threw open the door.

Sunk in cushions, a tea-cup on the arm of his chair, a guitar resting on his white flannel sleeve, reclined the director of the Rooms. Over his head hung a large and exquisite copy of the Botticelli Venus. Miss Gould's horrified gaze fled from this work of art to rest on a representation in bronze of the same reprehensible goddess, clothed, to be sure, a little more in accordance with the views of a retired New England community, yet leaving much to be desired in this direction. Kitty Waters attentively filled his empty cup, beaming the while, and the once errant Annabel, sitting on a low stool at his feet, with a red bow in her pretty hair, and her great brown eyes fixed adoringly on his face as he directed the fascinating incomprehensible little song straight at her charming self, was obviously in no present danger of running the streets.

"Good morning, Miss Gould!" he said cheerfully, rising and handing the guitar to the abashed Annabel. "And you are really quite recovered? *C'est bien!* Business is dull, and we are amusing each other, you see. How do you like the rooms? I flatter myself—"

"If you flattered none but yourself, Mr. Welles, much harm would be avoided," she interrupted with uncompromising directness. "Kitty and Annabel, I cannot see how you can possibly tell how many people may or may not be wanting lunch!"

"Billy Rider tells us when any one comes," the director assured her. "They don't come till twelve, anyway, and then they want to see the room, mostly—which we show them, don't we, Annabel?"

Annabel blushed, cast down her eyes, lifted them, showed her dimples, and replied in the words, if not in the accents, of Thompson: "Yes, sir!"

"It's really going to be an education in itself, don't you think so?" he continued. "It's amazing how the people like it—it's really quite gratifying. Perhaps it may be my mission to abolish the chromo and the tidy from off the face of New England! We have had crowds here—just to look at the pictures."

"I don't doubt it!" replied Miss Gould briefly.

"And I got the most attractive sugar-bowl from the little boy who brought in the reports about picking up papers and such things from the streets. He said he ought to have five cents, so I gave him a dime—I hadn't five—and I bought the bowl. Annabel, my child, bring me—"

But Annabel and her fellow-waitress had disappeared. Miss Gould sat in silence. At intervals her perplexed gaze rested unconsciously on the Botticelli Venus, from which she instantly with a slight frown lowered it and regarded the floor. When she at last met his eyes the expression of her own was so troubled, the droop of her firm mouth so pathetic and unusual, that he left his chair and dragged the little stool to her feet, assuming an attitude so boyish and graceful that in spite of herself she smiled at him.

“What is the matter?” he asked confidentially. “Is anything wrong? Don't you like the room? I enjoy it tremendously, myself. I've been here almost all the time since it was done. I think Tom Waters must be tremendously impressed—”

“That's the trouble; he is,” said Miss Gould simply.

“Trouble? trouble? Is his impression unfavorable? Heavens, how unfortunate!” exclaimed the director airily. “Surely, my application—Does the room fail to meet his approval, or—”

“Yes, it does,” she interrupted. “He says it's no place for a man to be in; and he says the pictures are—are—well, he says they are improper!” glancing at the Venus.

“Ah!” responded the director with a suspicious sweetness. “He does not care for the nude, then?”

She sighed deeply. “Oh, Mr. Welles!”

“It is indeed to be regretted that Mr. Waters's ideals are so high—and—shall we say—so elusive?” proceeded the director smoothly. “It is so difficult—so well-nigh impossible—to satisfy him. One devotes one's energies—I may say one slaves night and day—to win some slight mark of approval; and just as one is about to reap the well-earned reward—a smile, a word of appreciation—all is forfeited! It is hard indeed! Would you suggest the rearrangement of the Rooms under Mr. Waters's direction? Thompson is at his service—”

“Oh, Mr. Welles!” she sighed hopelessly. “It isn't only that! It's not alone the room, though Mrs. Underwood wonders that I should think she would be able to conduct the Band of Hope in here, and Mrs. Rider says that after what her husband told her she should no more think of sitting here for a mothers' meeting than anything in the world. It's the whole thing. Why did you treat them all to lemonade the first day? Surely you knew that our one aim is to prevent miscellaneous charity. And Tom says you smoked in here—he smelt it.”

“I smelt him, too,” remarked the director calmly. “That was one reason why I smoked.”

“And—and having Kitty and Annabel here all the time! The Girls' Club are so j—— Well, the Girls' Club like the old rooms better, they say, and it's so difficult to get them to work together at best. And now we shall have to work so hard—

“And the men think it's just a joke, the lemonade and everything, and the room gave them such a wrong impression, and they don't seem to want it, anyway. Tom Waters says he can't abide sarsaparilla—”

“Great heavens!” the director broke in, “is it possible? A point on which Mr. Waters's opinion coincides with mine? I have not lived in vain! But this is too much; I have not deserved—”

“Oh, don't!” she begged. “There is more. When I corrected Annabel for what I had heard about her—her impertinent behavior, she said that Mrs. Underwood had never approved of the whole thing, and that if I had consulted her she would never have given her consent to your being here, and that I was dictatorial—I!”

Her lodger coughed and ejaculated, “You, indeed!”

“And when I said that their ingratitude actually made me wonder why I worked so hard for them, she said—oh, dear! It is all dreadful! I don't know what to do!”

“I do!” returned her lodger promptly. “Go away and leave 'em! They aren't fit to trouble you any more. Besides, they're really not so bad, after all, you know. There has to be just about so much laziness and—and that sort of thing, don't you see. Look at me, for instance! Think of how much misdirected energy I balance! And it gives other people something to do.... Go away and leave it all for a while!” he repeated smilingly.

“Go away! But where? Why should I? What do you mean?” she stammered, confused at something in his eyes, which never left her face.

“To England—you said you'd like to see it. With me—for I certainly couldn't stay here alone. Why do you suppose I stay, dear lady? I used to wonder myself. No, sit still, don't get up! I am about to make you an offer of marriage; indeed, I am serious, Miss Gould!

“I don't see that it's ridiculous at all. I see every practical reason in favor of it. In the first place, if they are gossiping—oh, yes, Thompson told me, and I wonder that they hadn't before: these villages are dreadful places—I couldn't very well stay, you see; and then where should I put all my things? In the second place, I have so much stuff, and there's no house fit for it but—but ours; and if we were married I could have just twice as much room for it—and I'm getting far too much for my side. In the third place, I find that I can't look forward with any pleasure to travelling about alone, because, in the fourth place, I've grown so tremendously fond of you, dear Miss Gould! I think you don't dislike me?”

She plucked the guitar strings nervously with her white, strong fingers. The rich, vibrating tones of it filled the room and confused her still more.

“People will say that I—that we—” He caught her hand: it had never been kissed before. “Would you rather I went away and then there would be nothing left for them to say?” he asked softly.

She caught her breath.

“I'm too—”

“You are too charming not to have some one who appreciates the fact as thoroughly as I do,” he interrupted gallantly. “I think you do me so much good, you know,” he added, still holding her hand. She looked at him directly for the first time.

“Do I really? Is that true?” she demanded, with a return of her old manner so complete and sudden as to startle him. “If I thought that—”

“You would?” he asked with a smile. “I thought so! Here is a village that scorns your efforts and a respectful suitor who implores them. Can you hesitate?”

His smile was irresistible, and she returned it half reprovingly. “Will you never be serious?” she said. “I

wonder that I can—” She stopped.

“That you can—” he repeated, watching her blush, but she would not finish.

“You must not think that I can give up my work—my real work—so easily,” she said, rising and looking down on him with a return of her simple impressive seriousness. “I shall have to consider. I have been very much disturbed by their conduct. I will see you after supper,” and with a gesture that told him to remain, she left the room, her head high as she caught Annabel's voice from outside. She turned in the door, however, and the stern curves of her mouth melted with a smile so sweet, a promise so gracious and so tender, that when her eyes, frank and direct as a boy's, left his, he looked long at the closed door, wondering at the quickening of his pulses.

A moment later he heard her voice, imperious and clear, and the mumble of Mr. Waters's unavailing if never-ending excuses. He laughed softly to himself, and touched the strings of the guitar that she had struck. “I shall save the worthy Thomas much,” he murmured to himself, “and of course I do it to reform her—I cannot pull down the village and die with the Philistines!”

She went up the long main street, Mr. Waters at her side and Annabel Riley behind her. Her lodger watched her out of sight, and prepared to lock up the Rooms.

“So firm, so positive, so wholesome!” he said, as he started after her.

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