

Chambers Robert William

The Laughing Girl



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Robert W. Chambers

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FOREWORD

I

Here's a pretty tale to tell
All about the beastly boche —
How the Bolsheviki fell
Out of grace and in the wash!
– How all valiant lovers love,
How all villains go to hell,
Started thither by a shove
From the youth who loved so well,
Virtue mirrored in the glass
Held by his beloved lass.

II

He who grins in clown's disguise
Often hides an aching heart —
Sadness, sometimes worldly-wise,
Dresses for a motley part —
Cap, and bells to cheat the ears,
Chalk and paint to hide the tears
Lest the world, divining pain,
Turn to gape and stare again.

III

You who read but may not run
Where the bugles summon youth,
You who when the day is done
Ponder God's eternal Truth
Ere you fold your hands to rest,
Sheltered from the fierce huns' ruth,
Here within the guarded West
Safe from swinish tusk and tooth
Laugh in God's name, if you can! —

Serving so the Son of Man.

IV

*Gorse is growing, poppies bloom
Where our bravest greeted Christ.
Is His dwelling, then, the tomb?
Has the sacrifice sufficed?
What is all we have then worth
In Thy sight, Lord, in Thy sight?
Take our offered heart-sick mirth —
Let our laughter fight Thy fight.*

R. W. C.

I

AN INHERITANCE

There was a red-headed slattern sweeping the veranda – nobody else visible about the house. All the shutters of the stone and timber chalet were closed; cow-barn, stable, springhouse and bottling house appeared to be deserted. Weeds smothered the garden where a fountain played above a brimming basin of gray stone; cat-grass grew rank on the oval lawn around the white-washed flag-pole from which no banner flapped. An intense and heated silence possessed the place. Tall mountains circled it, cloud-high, enormous, gathered around the little valley as though met in solemn council there under the vast pavilion of sky.

From the zenith of the azure-tinted tent hung that Olympian lantern called the sun, flooding every crested snow-peak with a nimbus of pallid fire.

In these terms of belles-lettres I called Smith's attention to the majesty of the scene.

"Very impressive," remarked Smith, lighting a cigarette and getting out of the Flivver; – "I trust that our luncheon may impress us as favorably." And he looked across the weedy drive at the red-headed slattern who was now grooming the veranda with a slopping mop.

"Her ankles might be far less ornamental," he observed. I did not look. Ankles had long ceased to mean anything to me.

After another moment's hesitation I handed Smith his suit-case, picked up my own, and descended from the Flivver. The Swiss officer at the wheel, Captain Schey, and the Swiss officer of Gendarmerie beside him, Major Schoot, remained heavily uninterested in the proceedings. To think of nothing is bovine; to think of nothing at all, and do that thinking in German, is porcine. I inspected their stolid features: no glimmer of human intelligence illuminated them. Their complexions reminded me of that moist pink hue which characterizes a freshly cut boiled ham.

Smith leisurely examined the buildings and their surroundings, including the red-headed girl, and I saw him shrug his shoulders. He was right; it was a silly situation and a ridiculous property for a New Yorker to inherit. And the longer I surveyed my new property the more worried I became.

I said in English to Major Schoot, one of the ample, pig-pink gentlemen in eye-glasses and the uniform of the Swiss Gendarmerie: "So this is Schwindlewald, is it?"

He blinked his pale little eyes without interest at the low chalet and out-buildings; then his vague, weak gaze flickered up at the terrific mountains around us.

"Yes," he replied, "this is now your property, Mr. O'Ryan."

"Well, I don't want it," I said irritably. "I've told you that several times."

"Quite right," remarked Smith; "what is Mr. O'Ryan going to do with a Swiss hotel, a cow-barn, a bottling factory, one red-headed girl, and several large mountains? I ask you that, Major?"

I was growing madder and madder; and Smith's flippancy offended me.

"I'm an interior decorator," I said to Major Schoot. "I've told you that a dozen times, too. I don't wish to conduct a hotel in Switzerland or Greenland or Coney Island or any other land! I do not desire either to possess kine or to deprive them of their milk. Moreover, I do not wish to bottle spring water. Why then am I not permitted to sell this bunch of Swiss scenery and go home? What about my perfectly harmless business?"

Major Schoot rolled his solemn fish-blue eyes: "The laws of the canton and of the Federal Government," he began in his weak tenor voice, "require that any alien inheriting property in the Swiss Republic, shall reside upon that property and administer it for the period of not less than one year before offering the said property for sale or rent – "

He already had told me that a dozen times; and a dozen times I had resisted, insisting that there must be some way to circumvent such a ridiculous Swiss law. Of what use are laws unless one can circumvent them, as we do?

I now gazed at him with increasing animosity. In his uniform of Major of Swiss Gendarmes he appeared the personification of everything officially and Teutonically obtuse.

"Do you realize," I said, "that my treatment by the Swiss Confederation and by the Federal police has been most extraordinary? A year ago when my uncle's will was probated, and that German attorney in Berne notified me in New York that I had inherited this meaningless mess of house and landscape, he also wrote that upon coming here and complying with the Swiss law, I could immediately dispose of the property if I so desired? Why the devil did he write that?"

"That was a year ago," nodded Major Schoot. Captain Schey regarded me owlishly. "A new law," he remarked, "has been since enacted."

"I have suspected," said I fiercely, "that this brand new law enacted in such a hellofa hurry was enacted expressly to cover this case of mine. Why? Why does your government occupy itself with me and my absurd property up here in these picture-book Alps? What difference does it make to Switzerland whether I sell it or try to run it? And another thing! – " I continued, madder than ever at the memory of recent wrongs – "Why do your police keep visiting me, inspecting me and my papers, trailing me around? Why do large, moon-faced gentlemen seat themselves beside me in restaurants and cafés and turn furtive eyes upon me? Why do they open newspapers and punch holes in them to scrutinize me? Why do they try to listen to my conversation addressed to other people? Why do strange ladies lurk at my elbow when hotel clerks hand me my mail? Dammit, why?"

Major Schoot and Captain Schey regarded me in tweedle-dum-and-tweedle-dee-like silence: then the Major said: "Under extraordinary conditions extraordinary precautions are necessary." And the Captain added: "These are war times and Switzerland must observe an impartial neutrality."

"You mean a German neutrality," I thought to myself, already unpleasantly aware that all the banks and all the business of Switzerland are owned by Teutons and that ninety per cent of the Swiss are German-Swiss, and speak German habitually.

And still at the same time I realized that, unless brutally menaced and secretly coerced by the boche the Swiss were first of all passionately and patriotically Swiss, even if they might be German after that fact. They wished to be let alone and to remain a free people. And the Hun was blackmailing them.

Smith had now roamed away through the uncut grass, smoking a cigarette and probably cursing me out – a hungry, disconsolate figure against the background of deserted buildings.

I turned to Major Schoot and Captain Schey:

"Very well, gentlemen; if there's no immediate way of selling this property I'll live here until your law permits me to sell it. But in the meanwhile it's mine. I own it. I insist on my right of privacy. I shall live here in indignant solitude. And if any stranger ever sets a profane foot upon this property I shall call in the Swiss police and institute legal proceedings which – "

"Pardon," interrupted Major Schoot mildly, "but the law of Switzerland provides for Government regulation of all inns, rest-houses, chalets, and hotels. All such public resorts must remain open and receive guests."

"I won't open my chalet!" I said. "I'd rather fortify it and die fighting! I hereby formally refuse to open it to the public!"

"It is open," remarked Captain Schey, "theoretically."

"Theoretically," added Major Schoot, "it never has been closed. The law says it must not be closed. Therefore it has not been closed. Therefore it is open. Therefore you are expected to entertain guests at a reasonable rate – "

"What if I don't?" I demanded.

"Unhappily, in such a case, the Federal Government regretfully confiscates the property involved and administers it according to law."

"But I wish to reside here privately until such time as I am permitted to sell the place! Can't I do that? Am I not even permitted privacy in this third-rate musical comedy country?"

"Monsieur, the Chalet of Schwindlewald has always been a public 'Cure,' not a private estate. The tourist public is always at liberty to come here to drink the waters and enjoy the climate and the view. Monsieur, your late Uncle, purchased the property on that understanding."

"My late Uncle," said I, "was slightly eccentric. Why in God's name he should have purchased a Swiss hotel and bottling works in the Alps he can perhaps explain to his Maker. None of his family know. And all I have ever heard is that somebody interested him in a plan to drench Europe with bottled spring-water at a franc a quart; and that a further fortune was to be extracted from this property by trapping a number of Swiss chamois and introducing the species into the Andes. Did anybody ever hear of such nonsense?"

The Swiss officers gaped at me. "Very remarkable," said Major Schoot without any inflection in his voice or any expression upon his face.

Smith, weary of prowling about the place, came over and said in a low voice: "Cut it out, old chap, and start that red-headed girl to cooking. Aren't you hungry?"

I was hungry, but I was also irritated and worried.

I stood still considering the situation for a few moments, one eye on my restless comrade, the other reverting now and then to the totally emotionless military countenances in front of me.

"Very well," I said. "My inheritance appears to be valuable, according to the Swiss appraisal. I shall, therefore, pay my taxes, observe the laws of Switzerland, and reside here until I am at liberty to dispose of the property. And I'll entertain guests if I must. But I don't think I'm likely to be annoyed by tourists while this war lasts. Do you?"

"Tourists tour," observed Major Schoot solemnly.

"It's a fixed habit," added Captain Schey, – "war or no war. Tourists invariably tour or," he added earnestly, "they would not be tourists."

"Also," remarked Schoot, "the wealthy amateur chamois hunter is always with us. Like the goitre, he is to be expected in the Alps."

"Am I obliged to let strangers hunt on my property?" I asked, aghast.

"The revenue to an estate is always considerable," explained Schoot. "With your inn, your 'Cure,' your bottling works, and your hunting fees your income should be enviable, Mr. O'Ryan."

I gazed angrily up at the mountains. Probably every hunter would break his neck. Then a softer mood invaded my wrath, and I thought of my late uncle and of his crazy scheme to stock the Andes with chamois – a project which, while personally pursuing it, and an infant chamois, presently put an end to his dashing career upon earth. He was some uncle, General Juan O'Ryan, but too credulous, and too much of a sport.

"Which mountain did he fall off?" I inquired in a subdued voice, gazing up at the ring of terrific peaks above us.

"That one – the *Bec de l'Empereur*," said Captain Schey, in the funereal voice which decency requires when chronicling necrology.

I looked seriously at the peak known as "The Emperor's Nose." No wonder my uncle broke his neck.

"Which Emperor?" I inquired absently.

"The Kaiser."

"You don't mean William of Hohenzollern!"

"The All-Highest of Germany," he replied in a respectful voice. "But the name is in French. That is good politics. We offend nobody."

"Oh. Well, *why* all the same?"

"Why what?"

"Why celebrate the All-Highest's Imperial nose?"

"Why not?" retorted the Swiss mildly; "he suggested it."

"The Kaiser suggested that the mountain be named after his own nose?"

"He did. Moreover it was from that peak that the All-Highest declared he could smell the Rhine. Tears were in his eyes when he said it. Such sentiment ought to be respected."

"May I be permitted to advise the All-Highest to return there and continue his sentimental sniffing?"

"For what purpose, Monsieur?"

"Because," I suggested pleasantly, "if he sniffs very earnestly he may scent something still farther away than the Rhine."

"The Seine?" nodded Captain Schey with a pasty, neutral smile.

"I meant the United States," said I carelessly. "If William sniffs hard enough he may smell the highly seasoned stew that they say is brewing over there. It reeks of pep, I hear."

The two neutral officers exchanged very grave glances. Except for my papers, which were most perfectly in order and revealed me as a Chilean of Irish descent, nothing could have convinced them or, indeed, anybody else that I was not a Yankee. Because, although my great grandfather was that celebrated Chilean Admiral O'Ryan and I had been born in Santiago and had lived there during early boyhood, I looked like a typical American and had resided in New York for twenty years. And there also I practiced my innocent profession. There were worse interior decorators than I in New York and I was, perhaps, no worse than any of them – if you get what I am trying not to say.

"Gentlemen," I continued politely, "I haven't as yet any lavish hospitality to offer you unless that red-headed girl yonder has something to cook and knows how to cook it. But such as I have I offer to you in honor of the Swiss army and out of respect to the Swiss Confederation. Gentlemen, pray descend and banquet with me. Join our revels. I ask it."

They said they were much impressed by my impulsive courtesy but were obliged to go back to barracks in their flivver.

"Before you go, then," said I, "you are invited to witness the ceremony of my taking over this impossible domain." And I took a small Chilean flag from the breast pocket of my coat, attached it to the halyards of the white-washed flag pole, and ran it up, whistling the Chilean national anthem.

Then I saluted the flag with my hat off. My bit of bunting looked very gay up there aloft against the intense vault of blue.

Smith, although now made mean by hunger, was decent enough to notice and salute my flag. The flag of Chili is a pretty one; it carries a single white star on a blue field, and a white and a red stripe.

One has only to add a galaxy of stars and a lot more stripes to have the flag I had lived under so many years.

And now that this flag was flying over millions of embattled Americans – well, it looked very beautiful to me. And was looking more beautiful every time I inspected it. But the Chilean O'Ryan had no business with the Star Spangled Banner as long as Chili remained neutral. I said this, at times to Smith, to which he invariably remarked: "Flap-doodle! No Irishman can keep out of this shindy long. Watch your step, O'Ryan."

Now, as I walked toward Smith, carrying my suitcase, he observed my advent with hopeful hunger-stricken eyes.

"If yonder maid with yonder mop can cook, and has the makings of a civilized meal in this joint of yours, for heaven's sake tell her to get on the job," he said. "What do you usually call her – if not Katie?"

"How do I know? I've never before laid eyes on her."

"You don't know the name of your own cook?"

"How should I? Did you think she was part of the estate? That boche attorney, Schmitz, at Berne, promised to send up somebody to look after the place until I made up my mind what I was going to do. That's the lady, I suppose. And Smith – did you ever see such very red hair on any human woman?"

I may have spoken louder than I meant to; evidently my voice carried, for the girl looked over her shabby shoulder and greeted us with a clear, fresh, unfeigned, untroubled peal of laughter. I felt myself growing red. However, I approached her. She wore a very dirty dress – but her face and hands were dirtier.

"Did Schmitz engage you and are you to look out for us?" I inquired in German.

"If you please," she replied in French, leaning on her mop and surveying us out of two large gray eyes set symmetrically under the burnished tangle of her very remarkable hair.

"My child," I said in French, "why are you so dirty? Have you by chance been exploring the chimney?"

"I have been cleaning fireplaces and pots and pans, Monsieur. But I will make my toilet and put on a fresh apron for luncheon."

"That's a good girl," I said kindly. "And hasten, please; my friend, Mr. Smith, is hungry; and he is not very amiable at such times."

We went into the empty house; she showed us our rooms.

"Luncheon will be served in half an hour, Messieurs," she said in her cheerful and surprisingly agreeable voice, through which a hidden vein of laughter seemed to run.

After she had gone Smith came through the connecting door into my room, drying his sunburned countenance on a towel.

"I didn't suppose she was so young," he said. "She's very young, isn't she?"

"Do you mean she's too young to cook decently?"

"No. I mean – I mean that she just seems rather young. I merely noticed it."

"Oh," said I without interest. But he lingered about, buttoning his collar.

"You know," he remarked, "she wouldn't be so bad looking if you'd take her and scrub her."

"I've no intention of doing it," I retorted.

"Of course," he explained, peevishly, "I didn't mean that you, personally, should perform ablutions upon her. I merely meant –"

"Sure," said I frivolously; "take this cake of soap and chase her into the fountain out there."

"All the same," he added, "if she'd wash her face and fix her hair and stand up straight she'd have – er – elements."

"Elements of what?" I asked, continuing to unpack my suitcase and arrange the contents upon my dresser. Comb and brushes I laid on the left; other toilet articles upon the right; in the drawers I placed my underwear and linen and private papers.

Then I took the photograph which I had purchased in Berne and stood it up against the mirror over my dresser. Smith came over and looked at it with more interest than he had usually displayed.

It was the first photograph of any woman I had ever purchased. Copies were sold all over Europe. It seemed to be very popular and cost two francs fifty unframed. I had resisted it in every shop window between London and Paris. I nearly fell for it in Geneva. I did fall in Berne. It was called "The Laughing Girl," and I saw it in a shop window the day of my arrival in Berne. And I could no more get it out of my mind than I could forget an unknown charming face in a crowded street that met my gaze with a shy, faint smile of provocation. I went back to that shop and bought the photograph labeled "The Laughing Girl." It traveled with me. It had become as necessary to me as my razor or toothbrush.

As I placed it on the center of my dresser tilted back against the looking-glass, for the first time since it had been in my possession an odd and totally new sense of having seen the original of the picture somewhere – or having seen somebody who resembled it – came into my mind.

"As a matter of fact," remarked Smith, tying his tie before my mirror, "that red-haired girl of yours downstairs bears a curious resemblance to your lady-love's photograph."

"Good Lord!" I exclaimed, intensely annoyed. Because the same distasteful idea had also occurred to me.

II AL FRESCO

Our luncheon was a delicious surprise. It was served to us on a rustic table and upon a fresh white cloth, out by the fountain. We had a fragrant omelette, a cool light wine, some seductive bread and butter, a big wooden bowlful of mountain strawberries, a pitcher of cream, and a bit of dreamy cheese with our coffee. The old gods feasted no more luxuriously.

Smith, fed to repletion, gazed sleepily but sentimentally at the vanishing skirts of my red-headed Hebe who had perpetrated this miracle in our behalf.

"Didn't I tell you she'd prove to be pretty under all that soot?" he said. "I like that girl. She's a peach."

In point of fact her transfiguration had mildly amazed me. She had scrubbed herself and twisted up her hair, revealing an unsuspected whiteness of neck. She wore a spotless cotton dress and a white apron over it; the slouch of the slattern had disappeared and in its place was the rather indolent, unhurried, and supple grace of a lazy young thing who has never been obliged to hustle for a living.

"I wonder what her name is?" mused Smith. "She deserves a pretty name like Amaryllis –"

"Don't try to get gay and call her that," said I, setting fire to a cigarette. "Mind your business, anyway."

"But we ought to know what she calls herself. Suppose we wanted her in a hurry? Suppose the house caught fire! Suppose she fell into the fountain! Shall I go to the pantry and ask her what her name is? It will save you the trouble," he added, rising.

"I'll attend to all the business details of this establishment," said I, coldly. Which discouraged him; and he re-seated himself in silence.

To mitigate the snub, I offered him a cigar which he took without apparent gratitude. But Shandon Smith never nursed his wrath; and presently he affably reverted to the subject:

"O'Ryan," he remarked, leaning back in his chair and expelling successive smoke rings at the Bec de l'Empereur across the valley, "that red-haired girl of yours is a mystery to me. I find no explanation for her. I can not reconcile her extreme youth with her miraculous virtuosity as a cook. I cannot coordinate the elements of perfect symmetry which characterize her person with the bench show points of a useful peasant. She's not formed like a 'grade'; she reveals pedigree. Now I dare say you look upon her as an ordinary every-day, wage-earning pot-wrestler. Don't you?"

"I do."

"You don't consider her symmetrical?"

"I am," said I, "scarcely likely to notice pulchritude below stairs."

Smith laughed:

"For that matter she dwells upstairs in the garret, I believe. I saw her going up. I'm astonished that you don't think her pretty because she looks like that photograph on your dresser."

What he said again annoyed me, – the more so because, since her ablutions, the girl did somehow or other remind me even more than before of that lovely, beguiling creature in my photograph. And why on earth there should be any resemblance at all between that laughing young aristocrat in her jewels and silken negligée and my slatternly maid-of-all-work – why the one should even remotely suggest to us the other – was to me inexplicable and unpleasant.

"Smith," I said, "you are a sentimental and romantic young man. You shyly fall in love several times a day when material is plenty. You have the valuable gift of creative imagination. Why not employ it commercially to augment your income?"

"You mean by writing best sellers?"

"I do. You are fitted for the job."

"O'Ryan," he said, "it would be wasted time. Newspapers are to-day the best sellers. Reality has knocked romance clean over the ropes. Look at this war? Look at the plain, unvarnished facts which history has been recording during the last four years. Has Romance ever dared appropriate such astounding material for any volume of fiction ever written?"

I admitted that fiction had become a back number in the glare of daily facts.

"It certainly has," he said. "Every day that we live – every hour – yes, every minute that your watch ticks off – events are happening such as the wildest imagination of a genius could not create. You can prove it for yourself, O'Ryan. Try to read the most exciting work of fiction, or the cleverest, the most realistic, the most subtle romance ever written. And when you've yawned your bally head off over the mockery of things actual, just pick up the daily paper."

He was quite right.

"I tell you," he went on, "there's more romance, more excitement, more mystery, more tragedy, more comedy, more humanity, more truth in any single edition of any French, English, Italian, or American daily paper published in these times than there is in all the fiction ever produced."

"Very true," I said. "Romance is dead to-day. Reality reigns alone."

"Then why snub me when I say that your red-headed maid is a real enigma and an actual mystery? She might be anything in such times as these. She might be a great lady; she might be a scullion. Have you noticed how white and fine and slim her hands are?"

"I notice they're clean," said I cautiously.

He laughed at me in frank derision, obstinately interested and intent upon building up a real romance around my maid-of-all-work. His gayety and his youth amused me. I was a year his senior and I felt my age. The world was hollow; I had learned that much.

"Her whole make-up seems to me suspiciously like camouflage," he said, "her flat-heeled slippers, for example! She has a distractingly pretty ankle, and have you happened to notice her eyes, O'Ryan?"

In point of fact I had noticed them. They were gray and had black lashes. But I was not going to give Smith the satisfaction of admitting that I had noticed my housemaid's eyes.

"Her eyes," continued Smith, "are like those wide young eyes in that pretty photograph of yours. So is her mouth with its charmingly full width and the hint of laughter in its upcurled childish corners – "

"Nonsense! – "

"Not at all. Not at all! And all you've got to do is to put a bunch of jewels on her fingers and a thin, shimmery silk thing showing her slender throat and shoulders, and then some; and then you can fix her hair like the girl's hair in your photograph, and hand her a guitar, and drop one of her knees over the other, and hang a slipper to the little naked foot that swings above its shadow on the floor – "

"I shall do none of those things," said I. "And I'll tell you some more, Smith: I believe it's your devilish and irresponsible chatter which has put the unpleasant idea into my head that my red-headed domestic resembles that photograph upstairs. I don't like the idea. And I'd be much obliged if you wouldn't mention it again."

"All right," he said cheerfully.

But what he had said about this resemblance left me not only vaguely uncomfortable, but also troubled by a sort of indefinite curiosity concerning my cook. I desired to take another look at her immediately.

After a while I threw aside my cigarette: "I'm going into the pantry," said I, "to discuss business with my housekeeper. Here's the key to the wine-cellar. There's more of that Moselle there, I understand."

And I started toward the house, leaving him to twiddle his thumbs and stare at the Bec de l'Empereur. Or he could vary this program by smoking his head off if he chose. Or investigate the wine-cellar. But my cook he could not flirt with as long as I was on the job.

He seemed to be a very nice fellow in his way, but he had put a lot of nonsense into my head by his random talk.

Yet he was certainly an agreeable young man. I had first met him in Berne – that hot-bed of international intrigue, where every other person is a conspirator and every other a boche.

Now Smith's papers and passport revealed him as a Norwegian; his reason for being in Switzerland a purely commercial one. He had arrived in Berne, he told me, with a proposition to lay before the Federal Government. This was a colossal scheme to reforest parts of Switzerland with millions and millions of Norway pines and hardwoods – a stupendous enterprise, but apparently feasible and financially attractive.

So far, however, he had made little headway. But somewhere in the back of my head I had a lively suspicion that Shandon Smith was no more a Norwegian than was I; and that he could tell a very interesting story about those papers and passports of his if he cared to. I had lived too long in New York not to recognize a New Yorker no matter what his papers showed.

Anyway we seemed to attract each other and during my enforced and bothersome sojourn in Berne we became companionable to the edge of friendship.

And when I told him about my ridiculous inheritance and the trouble I was having in trying to get rid of it, he offered to come up here with me and keep me company while the Swiss Government was making up its composite mind about his offer to reforest such cantons as required it.

That is how we came to be here in Schwindlewald together. I was to stay until the prescribed time elapsed when I should be allowed by law to sell the place: he was willing to remain with me until his offer to the Swiss Government had been either accepted or rejected.

I had begun to like Smith very much. We were on those terms of easy and insulting badinage which marks the frontier between acquaintances and friends.

Now as I entered the house I turned on the threshold and glanced back to see what Smith was doing. His hat was off; the Alpine breeze was ruffling his crisp, blond hair. He sat at ease beside the fountain, a fresh cigar balanced between his fingers, a cork-screw in the other hand. Beside him on the grass stood a row of bottles of light Moselle. He had investigated the cellar. And as I watched what appeared to me a perfectly characteristic type of American from Manhattan Island, his voice came across the grass to me, lifted in careless song: —

– "My girl's a corker,
She's a New Yorker,
She plays the races,
Knows the sporty places
Uptown, downtown,
Always wears a nifty gown." —

"Yes," said I to myself, "you're a Norwegian – aye don' t'ank!" which is good Norwegian for "I don't think."

And I smiled subtly upon Smith as he drew the first cork from the first bottle of that liquid sunshine called Château Varenne, and with which one may spend a long and intimate afternoon without fear of consequences.

As I entered the house his careless song came to me on the summer wind:

"My girl's a corker,
She's a New Yorker – "

"Such a saga," said I to myself, "could be sung only by that sort of Viking. Now why the deuce is that young man in Switzerland?"

But it didn't matter to me, so I continued along the wide hallway toward the kitchen in the rear.

III

IN THE CELLAR

She was peeling potatoes in the kitchen when I entered; – she did it as daintily, as leisurely as though she were a young princess preparing pomegranates – But this sort of simile wouldn't do and I promptly pulled myself together, frowning.

Hearing me she looked up with a rather sweet confused little smile as though aroused from thoughts intimate but remote. Doubtless she was thinking of some peasant suitor somewhere – some strapping, yodling, ham-fisted, bull-necked mountaineer —

"I have come to confer with you on business," said I, forestalling with a courteous gesture any intention she might have had to arise out of deference to my presence. I admit I observed no such intention. On the contrary she remained undisturbed, continuing leisurely her culinary occupation, and regarding me with that engaging little half-smile which seemed to be a permanent part of her expression – I pulled myself together.

"My child," said I pleasantly, "what is your name?"

"Thusis," she replied.

"Thusis? Quite unusual, – hum-hum – quite exotic. And then – hum-hum! – what is the remainder of your name, Thusis?"

"There isn't any more, Monsieur."

"Only Thusis?"

"Only Thusis."

"You're – hum-hum! – very young, aren't you, Thusis?"

"Yes, I am."

"You cook very well."

"Thank you."

"Well, Thusis," I said, "I suppose when Mr. Schmitz engaged you to come up here, he told you what are the conditions and what vexatious problems confront me."

"Yes, he did tell me."

"Very well; that saves explanations. It is evident, of course, that if I am expected to board and feed any riff-raff tourist who comes to Schwindlewald I must engage more servants."

"Oh, yes, you'll have to."

"Well, where the deuce am I to find them? Haven't you any friends who would perhaps like to work here?"

"I have a sister," she said.

"Can you get her to come?"

"Yes."

"That's fine. She can do the rooms. Could you get another girl to wait on table?"

"I have a friend who is a very good cook – "

"You're good enough! – "

"Oh, no!" she demurred, with her enchanting smile, "but my friend, Josephine Vannis, is an excellent cook. Besides I had rather wait on table – with Monsieur's permission."

I said regretfully, remembering the omelette, "Very well, Thusis. Now I also need a farmer."

"I know a young man. His name is Raoul Despres."

"Fine! And I want to buy some cows and goats and chickens – "

"Raoul will cheerfully purchase what stock Monsieur requires."

"Thusis, you are quite wonderful."

"Thank you," she said, lifting her dark-fringed gray eyes, the odd little half-smile in the curling corners of her lips. It was extraordinary how the girl made me think of my photograph upstairs.

"What is your sister's name?" I inquired – hoping I was not consciously making conversation as an excuse to linger in my cook's kitchen.

"Her name is Clelia."

"Clelia? Thisis? Very unusual names – hum-hum! – and nothing else – no family name. Well – well!"

"Oh, there was a family name of sorts. It doesn't matter; we never use it." And she laughed.

It was not what she said – not the sudden charm of her fresh young laughter that surprised me; it was her effortless slipping from French into English – and English more perfect than one expects from even the philologically versatile Swiss.

"Are you?" I asked curiously.

"What, Mr. O'Ryan?"

"Swiss?"

Thisis laughed and considered me out of her dark-fringed eyes.

"We are Venetians – very far back. In those remote days, I believe, my family had many servants. That, perhaps, is why my sister and I make such good ones – if I may venture to say so. You see we know by inheritance what a good servant ought to be."

The subtle charm of this young girl began to trouble me; her soft, white symmetry, the indolent and youthful grace of her, and the disturbing resemblance between her and my photograph all were making me vaguely uneasy.

"Thisis," I said, "you understand of course that if I am short of servants you'll have to pitch in and help the others."

"Of course," she replied simply.

"What do you know how to do?"

"I understand horses and cattle."

"Can you milk?"

"Yes. I can also make butter and cheese, pitch hay, cultivate the garden, preserve vegetables, wash, iron, do plain and fancy sewing – "

I suppose the expression of my face checked her. We both laughed.

"Doubtless," I said, "you also play the piano and sing."

"Yes, I – believe so."

"You speak French, German, English – and what else?"

"Italian," she admitted.

"In other words you have not only an education but several accomplishments."

"Yes. But in adversity one must work at whatever offers. *Necessitas non habet legem*," she added demurely. That was too much for my curiosity.

"Who are you, Thisis?" I exclaimed.

"Your maid-of-all-work," she said gravely – a reproof that made me redden in the realization of my own inquisitiveness. And I resolved never again to pry into her affairs which were none of my bally business as long as she made a good servant.

"I'm sorry," said I. "I'll respect your privacy hereafter. So get your sister and the other girl and the man you say is a good farmer – "

"I told them in Berne that you'd need them. They ought to arrive this evening."

"Thisis," I said warmly, "you're a wonder. Go ahead and run my establishment if you are willing. You know how things are done in this country. You also know that I don't care a rap about this place and that I'm only here marking time until the Swiss Government permits me to sell out and get out."

"Do you wish to leave the entire responsibility of this place to me, Mr. O'Ryan?"

"You bet I do! How about it, Thuis? Will you run this joint and look out for any stray tourists and keep the accounts and wait on table? And play the piano between times, and sing, and converse in four languages – "

We both were laughing now. I asked her to name her monthly compensation and she mentioned such a modest salary that I was ashamed to offer it. But she refused more, explaining that the Swiss law regulated such things.

So that subject being settled and her potatoes pared and set to soak, she picked up a youthful onion with the careless grace of a queen selecting a favorite pearl.

"I hope you will like my soup to-night," said this paragon of servants.

I was for a moment conscious of a naïve desire to sit there in the kitchen and converse with her – perhaps even read aloud to her to relieve the tedium of her routine. Then waking up to the fact that I had no further business in that kitchen, I arose and got myself out.

Smith, lolling in his chair by the fountain with half a dozen empty Moselle bottles in a row on the grass beside his chair, was finishing another Norse Saga as I approached:

– The farmer then to that young man did say:
"O treat my daughter kindly,
Don't you do her any harm,
And I will leave you in my will
My house and barn and farm; —
My hay in mows,
My pigs and cows,
My wood-lot on the hill,
And all the little chick-uns in the ga-arden!"

The city guy he luffed to scorn
What that old man did say:
"Before I bump you on the bean
Go chase yourself away.
Beat it! you bum blackmailing yap!
I never kissed your daughter's map
Nor thought of getting gay!
I'm here on my vacation
And I ain't done any harm,
I do not want your daughter, Bill,
Nor house and barn and farm,
Nor hay in mows
Nor pigs and cows
Nor wood-lot on the hill.
Nor all them little chick-uns in the ga-arden!"

Them crool words no sooner said
Than Jessie fetched a sob:
"I'll shoot you up unless we're wed!"
Sez she – "You prune-fed slob!
Get busy with the parson – "

Here Smith caught sight of me and ceased his saga.

"Yes," I said, "you're a Norwegian all right. Three cheers for King Haakon!"

"You speak in parables, O'Ryan."

"You behave in parabolics. I don't care. I like you. I shall call you Shan."

"Your companionship also is very agreeable to me, Michael. Sit down and have one on yourself."

We exchanged bows and I seated myself.

"By the way," I remarked carelessly, "her name is Thusis." And I filled my glass and took a squint at its color. Not that I knew anything about Moselle.

"What else is her name?" he inquired.

"She declines to answer further. Thusis seems to be her limit."

"I told you she was a mystery!" he exclaimed with lively interest. "What else did she say to you, Michael?"

"Her sister is coming to-night. Also a lady-friend named Josephine Vannis; and a farmer of sorts called Raoul Despres."

"Take it from me," said Smith, "that if truth is stranger than fiction in these days, this red-haired girl called Thusis is no more Swiss than you are!"

"No more of a peasant than you are a Norwegian," I nodded.

"And whoinhell," he inquired, keeping his countenance, "ever heard of a South American named O'Ryan?"

"It's a matter of Chilean history, old top."

"Oh, yes, I know. But the essence of the affair is that an Irish family named O'Ryan have, for several generations, merely been visiting in Chili. Now one of 'em's in Switzerland as close to the big shindy as he can get without getting into it. And, the question is this: how long before he pulls a brick and starts in?"

"Chili is neutral – "

"Ireland isn't. Sinn Fein or Fusiliers – which, Michael?"

"Don't talk nonsense," said I, virtuously. "I'm no fighter. There's no violence in me. If I saw a fight I'd walk the other way. There's none of that kind of Irish blood in me."

"No. And all your family in the army or navy. And you practically a Yankee – "

I stared at him and whistled the Chilean anthem.

"That's my reply," said I. "Yours is:

"My girl's a corker,
She's a New Yorker – "

"What piffle you talk, you poor prune," said this typical Norwegian.

So we filled our glasses to our respective countries, and another round to that jolly flag which bears more stars and stripes than the Chilean ensign.

It being my turn to investigate the cellar I went. Down there in one of the alleys between bins and casks I saw Thusis moving with a lighted candle – a startling and charming apparition.

What she might be doing down there I could not guess, and she was so disturbingly pretty that I didn't think it best to go over and inquire. Maybe she was counting the bottles of Moselle to keep reproachful tabs on us; maybe she was after vinegar. No; I realized then for the first time that the girl was far too pretty for any man to encounter her by candle-light with impunity.

She did not see me – wouldn't have noticed me at all in the dim light had not my bunch of bottles clinked – both hands being loaded, and a couple of extra ones under each arm.

The sound startled her apparently; she turned quite white in the candle-light and stood rigid, listening, one hand pressing her breast.

"It is I, Thusis," I said. "Did I frighten you?"

She denied it rather faintly. She was distractingly pretty in her breathless attitude of a scared child.

I ought to have said something cheerful and matter of fact, and gone out of the cellar with my cargo of bottles. Instead I went over to her and looked at her – a silly, dangerous proceeding. "Thusis," I said, "I would not frighten you for one million dollars!"

Realizing suddenly the magnitude of the sum I mentioned I pulled myself together, conscious that I could easily make an ass of myself.

So, resolutely expelling from voice and manner any trace of sex consciousness, I said in the spirit of our best American novelists: "Permit me, Thusis, to recommend a small glass of this very excellent Moselle. Sipped judiciously and in moderation the tonic qualities are considered valuable as a nourishment to the tissues and nerves."

"Thank you," she said, slightly bewildered.

So I knocked off the neck of the bottle in medieval fashion – which wasted its contents because she was afraid of swallowing glass, and said so decidedly. I then noticed a row of corkscrews hanging on a beam, and she, at the same moment, discovered a tasting porringer of antique silver under one of the casks.

She picked it up naïvely and polished it with a corner of her apron. Then she looked inquiringly at me.

So I drew the cork and filled her porringer.

"It is delicious Moselle," she said. "Is it Château Varenn?"

"It is. How did you guess?"

"I once tasted some."

"Another of your accomplishments," said I, laughing. She laughed too, but blushed a little at her expert knowledge of Moselle.

"I have rather a keen sense of taste and a good memory," she explained lightly; and she sipped her Moselle looking at me over the rim of the silver porringer – a perilous proceeding for me.

"Thusis," said I.

"Yes, Monsieur O'Ryan."

"Did you ever, by chance, see that photograph they sell all over Europe called 'The Laughing Girl'?"

Her dark-fringed eyes regarded me steadily over the cup's silver edge:

"Yes," she said, "I've seen it."

"Do you think that b-b-beautiful c-creature resembles you?"

"Do you?" she inquired coolly, and lowered the cup. There ensued a little silence during which I became vaguely aware of my danger. I kept repeating to myself: "Try to recollect that your grandfather was an Admiral."

After a moment she smiled: "Thank you for the tonic, Monsieur. I feel better; but I am afraid it was a presumption for me to drink in your presence... And no cup to offer you."

"I'll use yours," said I, taking it. She was still smiling. I began to feel that I ought to pull myself together and invoke the Admiral more earnestly. But when I remembered him he bored me. And yet, could it be possible that an O'Ryan was drinking Moselle in his own cellar with his cook? In no extravagance of nightmare had I ever evoked such a cataclysmic scene. I have dreamed awful dreams in the course of my life: – such grotesqueries as, for example, finding myself on Fifth Avenue clothed only in a too brief undershirt. I have dreamed that I was wedded to a large Ethiopian who persisted in embracing me passionately in public. Other horrors I have dreamed after dining incautiously, but never, never, had I dreamed of reveling in cellars with my own cook!

A slight perspiration bedewed my brow; – I said in a strained and tenor voice not my own, but over-modulated and quite sexless: "Thusis, I am gratified that the slight medicinal tonic of which you have partaken in moderation has restored you to your normal condition of mental and

bodily vigor. I trust that the natural alarm you experienced at encountering me in the dark, has now sufficiently subsided to enable you to return to your culinary duties. Allow me to suggest an omelette for luncheon... I thank you."

The girl's bewildered eyes rested on me so sweetly, so inquiringly, that I knew I must pull myself together at once or never. But when I evoked the image of that damned Admiral he was grinning.

"Thusis," I said hoarsely, "you do look like that girl in my photograph. I – I can't help it – b-but you do!"

At that her perplexed expression altered swiftly and that bewitching smile flashed in her gray eyes.

"Good heavens," I exclaimed, "you look more like her than ever when you smile! Don't you know you do?"

Instantly the hidden laughter lurking in the curled corners of her mouth rippled prettily into music.

"Oh, Lord," I said, "you *are* 'The Laughing Girl' or her twin sister!"

"And you," she laughed, "are so much funnier than you realize, – so delightfully young to be so in earnest! You consider the world a very, very serious place of residence, – don't you, Mr. O'Ryan? And life a most sober affair. And I am afraid that you also consider yourself quite the most ponderous proposition upon this tottering old planet. Don't you?"

Horrified at her levity I tried to grasp the amazing fact that my cook was poking fun at me. I could not compass the idea. All I seemed to realize was that I stood in my cellar confronting a slender laughing stranger by candle-light – an amazingly pretty girl who threatened most utterly to bewitch me.

"I'm sorry! – are you offended?" she asked, still laughing, and her dark-fringed eyes very brilliant with mischief. – "Are you very angry at me, Mr. O'Ryan?"

"Why do you think so?" I asked, wincing at her mirth.

"Because I suppose I know what you are thinking."

"What am I thinking?"

"You're very, very angry with me and with yourself. You are saying to yourself in pained amazement that you have no business in a cellar exchanging persiflage with a presumptuous servant! You are chagrined, mortified! You are astonished at yourself – astounded that the solemn, dignified, distinguished Cabalero Don Michael O'Ryan y Santiago de Chile y Manhattanos – "

I turned red with surprise and wrath – and then slightly dizzy with the delicious effrontery of her beauty which daring had suddenly made dazzling in the candle-light.

For a minute my brain resembled a pin-wheel; then I pulled myself together, but not with the aid of the Admiral. No! The Admiral made me sick. In my sudden rush of exhilaration I derided him.

"Thusis," said I, when I recovered power of speech, "there's just one thing to do with you, and that is to kiss you for your impudence."

"Your own *cook*! Oh, shocking! Oh, Señor! Oh Don Michael – "

– "And I'm going to do it! – " said I solemnly.

"Remember the seriousness of life!" she warned me, retreating a step or two as I set all my bottles upon the ground. "Remember the life-long degradation entailed by such an undignified proceeding, Don Michael."

That was too much. She saw trouble coming, turned to escape what she had unloosed: and I caught her near the cellar stairs.

Then, under the lifted candle, I saw her face pale a little, change, then a flush stain the white skin to her throat.

"Don't do that," she said, still smiling, but in a quiet and very different voice. "I invited it by my silly attitude; – I know it perfectly well. But you won't do it – will you, Mr. O'Ryan?"

"You deserve it, Thusis."

"I know I do. But don't."

My arms slipped from her. I released her. She was still smiling faintly.

"Thank you," she said. "I'm sorry I offered you provocation. I don't know why you seem to tempt me to – to laugh at you a little – not unkindly. But you *are* so very young to be so solemn – "

"I tell you I *will* kiss you if you repeat that remark again!"

It was on the tip of her tongue to retort that I dared not: I saw defiance in her brilliant eyes. Something in mine, perhaps, made her prudent; for she suddenly slipped past me and fled up the stairs.

Half way up she turned and looked back. There was an odd silence for a full minute. Then she lifted the candle in mocking salute:

"I defy you," she said, "to tell Mr. Smith what you've been about down here in the cellar with your cook!" I said nothing. She mounted the stairs, her head turned toward me, watching me. And, on the top step:

"Try always to remember," she called back softly, "that the world is a very, very solemn and serious planet for a ponderous young man to live in!"

I don't remember how long after that it was before I picked up my bottles and went out to the fountain where Smith sat awaiting me. I don't know what he saw in my face to arouse his suspicion.

"You've been in the kitchen again!" he exclaimed.

I placed the bottles on the grass without noticing the accusation.

"What was it this time – business as usual?" he inquired sarcastically.

"I have not been in the kitchen," said I, "although I did transact a little business with my cook." I did not add: – "business of making an outrageous ass of myself."

As I drew the first cork I was conscious of Smith's silent and offensive scrutiny. And very gradually my ears revealed my burning guilt under his delighted gaze.

Calm, but exasperated, I lifted my brimming glass and bowed politely to Smith.

"Go to the devil," said I.

"A rendezvous," said he.

And we drank that friendly toast together.

IV MODUS VIVENDI

Smith's luggage and mine, and my other effects – trunks, boxes, and crates – arrived very early the next morning: and several large, sweating Swiss staggered up the stairs with the impedimenta until both they and their job were finished.

When I left New York, not knowing how long this business of my ridiculous inheritance might detain me in Switzerland, I packed several trunks with clothing and several crates with those familiar and useful – or useless – objets-d'art which for many years had formed a harmless and agreeable background for my more or less blameless domestic career in New York.

Rugs, curtains, furniture, sofa-pillows, books, a clock mantel set, framed and unframed pictures and photographs including the O'Ryan coat-of-arms – all this was the sort of bachelor stuff that Smith and I disinterred from the depths of trunks, crates, and boxes, and lugged about from corner to corner trying effects and combinations.

Before we had concluded our task I think he had no opinion at all of me as an interior decorator. Which revealed considerable insight on his part. And although I explained to him that interior decorators became so fed up on gorgeous and sumptuous effects that they themselves preferred to live amid simpler surroundings reminiscent of the Five and Ten Cent Store, he remained unconvinced.

"It's like a lady-clerk in a candy shop," I insisted. "She never eats the stuff she sells. It's the same with me. I am surfeited with magnificence. I crave the humble what-not. I long for the Victorian. I need it."

He gazed in horror at a framed picture of my grandfather the Admiral.

"Oh God," he said, "what are we to do with this old bird?"

Intensely annoyed I took it from him and hung it over my mantel. It wasn't a Van Dyck, I admit, but it demanded no mental effort on my part. One can live in peace with such pictures.

"Some day, Smith," said I, "you'll understand that the constant contemplation of true Art is exhausting. A man can't sleep in a room full of Rubens. When I put on my dressing gown and slippers and light a cigarette what I want is relaxation, not Raphael. And these things that I own permit me to relax. Why," I added earnestly, "they might as well not be there at all so little do they distract my attention. That's the part of art suitable for domestic purposes, – something that you never look at, or, if you do, you don't want to look at it again."

He said: "I couldn't sleep here. I couldn't get away from that old bird over the mantel. However, it's your room."

"It is."

"Doubtless you like it."

"Doubtless."

"On me," he remarked, "it has the effect of a Jazz band." And he went into his own apartment. For half an hour or so I fussed and pottered about, nailing up bunches of photographs fanwise on the walls, arranging knickknacks, placing brackets for curtain-poles and shoving the poles through the brass rings supporting the curtains. They had once belonged to the Admiral. They were green and blue with yellow birds on them.

After I finished draping them, I discovered that I had hung one pair upside down. But the effect was not so bad. In domestic art one doesn't want everything exactly balanced. Reiteration is exasperating; repetition aggravating to the nerves. A chef-d'oeuvre is a priceless anæsthetic: duplicated it loses one hundred per cent of its soporific value. I was glad I had hung one pair of curtains upside down. I went into Smith's room. He was shaving and I had him at my mercy.

"The principal element of art," said I to Smith, "is beauty – or rather, perhaps, the principal element of beauty is art – I am not very clear at this moment which it is. But I do know that beauty is never noisy. Calm and serenity reign where there is no chattering repetition of effects. Therefore, as an interior decorator, I always take liberties with the stereotyped rules of decoration. I jumble periods. I introduce bold innovations. For example: Old blue plates, tea-pots and sugar-bowls I do not relegate to the pantry or the china-closet where they belong. No. I place them upon a Louis XV commode or a Victorian cabinet, or on a mantel. A clock calms the irritating monotony of a side-board. A book-case in the bath-room produces a surprisingly calm effect amid towels and tooth-mugs. A piano in the dining room gives tone ... if played. And so, in my profession, Smith, I am always searching for the calm harmony of the inharmonious, the unity of the unconventional, and the silence of the inexplicable. And, if I may venture to say so, I usually attain it. This is not a business card."

And having sufficiently punished Smith, I returned to my own room.

Lovingly, and with that unerring knowledge born of instinct, I worked away quite happily all the morning decorating my room, and keeping one eye on Smith to see that he didn't drift toward the kitchen. He betrayed a tendency that way once or twice but desisted. I think he was afraid I might decorate his room in his absence. He need not have worried: I wanted all my things in my own room.

While I was busy hanging some red and pink curtains in my dressing-room and tacking a yellowish carpet to the floor – a definitely advanced scheme of color originating with me – I heard voices in the rear court and, going to the window, beheld my consignment of brand new servants arriving from Berne by diligence.

Smith, who had come up beside me to peer out through the blinds, uttered an exclamation.

"That girl in Swiss peasant dress! – she looks like the twin sister to your cook!"

"She is her sister. But she isn't nearly as pretty."

"She's infinitely prettier!" he asserted excitedly. "She's a real beauty! – for a peasant."

I corrected him in my most forbearing manner: "What you are trying to convey to me," said I, kindly, "is that the girl is flamboyantly picturesque, but scarcely to be compared to Thusis for unusual or genuine beauty. That's what you really mean, Smith; but you lack vocabulary."

"Whatever I lack," he retorted warmly, "I mean exactly what I said! For a peasant, that girl is beautiful to an emphatic degree, – far more so than her sister Thusis. Be kind enough to get that."

I smiled patiently and pointed out to him that the hair of the newcomer was merely light golden, not that magnificent Venetian gold-red of Thusis' hair; and that her eyes were that rather commonplace violet hue so much admired by cheap novelists. I don't know why he should have become so animated about what I was striving to explain to him: he said with unnecessary heat: "That's what I'm trying to drive into your Irish head! That girl is beautiful, and her red-headed sister is merely good-looking. Is my vocabulary plain?"

I began to lose my temper: "Smith," said I, "you fell for Thusis before I noticed her at all – "

"I merely called your attention to the resemblance between her and your photograph of 'The Laughing Girl.' And I did *not* 'fall for her' – as you put it with truly American elegance – "

"Confound it!" I exclaimed, "what do you mean by 'American elegance'? Don't hand me that, Smith – you and your 'My girl's a corker!' Of the two of us you'd be picked for a Yankee before I'd be. And I have my own ideas on that subject, too – you and your Sagas about —

"'She plays the races' – "

"In my travels," he said, looking me straight in the eye, "it has happened that I have picked up a few foreign folk-songs. You understand me, of course."

"Yes," I replied amiably. "I think I get you, Smith. Whatever you say goes; and you're a Viking as far as I'm concerned."

The slightest shadow of a grin lurked on his lips. "Good old Michael," he said, patting me on the shoulder. And, reconciled, we looked out of the window again in brotherly accord. Just in time to see the golden-haired sister of Thusis rise and jump lightly from the wagon to the grass.

"Did you see that!" he demanded excitedly. "Did you ever see such grace in a human being? Did you, Michael?"

What was the use? I saw nothing supernaturally extraordinary in that girl or in her flying leap. Of course she was attractive in her trim, supple, dainty, soubrette-like way. But as for comparing her to Thusis! —

"Her name's Clelia," I remarked, avoiding further discussion. "She's to do the rooms; Thusis waits on table and runs our establishment; and that other girl down there – her name is Josephine Vannis, I believe – she is to cook for us. You know," I added, "she also is very handsome in her own way..."

He nodded without interest. She seemed to be of the Juno type, tall, dark-haired, with velvet eyes and intensely white skin, – too overwhelmingly classical to awaken my artistic enthusiasm. In fact she rather scared me.

"And to think that six-foot goddess is my new cook," said I, rather awed. I took another intent survey of the big, healthy, vigorous, handsome girl; and I determined to keep out of her kitchen and avoid all culinary criticism.

"She'd not hesitate to hand us a few with a rolling-pin," I remarked. "Juno was celebrated for her quick temper, Shan, so don't find fault with your victuals."

"No," he said very earnestly, "I won't."

My new gardener was now carrying in the assorted luggage, – bundles and boxes of sorts done up in true peasant fashion with cords.

He seemed to be a sturdy, bright, good-looking young fellow with keen black eyes and a lively cock-sure manner.

"He'll raise jealousies below stairs," remarked Smith. "That young fellow is the beau ideal of all peasant girls. He'll be likely to raise the deuce below stairs with Thusis and Juno."

Somehow or other the idea of such rustic gallantry did not entirely please me. Nor did Smith's reference to Thusis and his cool exclusion of Clelia.

"I don't believe Thusis would care for his type," said I carelessly. "And if he gets too – too –" I hesitated, not exactly knowing what I had meant to say.

"Sure," nodded Smith; "fire him if he bothers Clelia."

I dimly realized then that I didn't care whether he cut up with Clelia or not. In fact, I almost hoped he would.

A little later when I was in my room, alone, and agreeably busy, there sounded a low and very discreet knocking at my door. Instantly my pulse, for some unexplained reason, became loud and irregular.

"Come in," said I, laying aside my work – some verses I had been composing – trifles – trifles. Thusis came in.

As the hostile Trojans rose unanimously to their feet when Helen entered – rose in spite of their disapproval – so I got up instinctively and placed a chair for her. She merely dropped me a curtsy and remained standing.

"Please be seated," said I, looking at her with uneasy suspicion.

"Monsieur O'Ryan forgets himself," she protested in the softest and most winningly demure of voices. But I saw the very devil laughing at me out of her gray eyes.

"I don't know why a man should receive his servants standing," said I. "Sit down," I added coldly, seating myself.

"Pardon, but I could not venture to seat myself in Monsieur's presence –"

Perfectly conscious of the subtle mockery in her voice and manner, I told her sharply to be seated and explain her errand. She curtsied again – a most devilishly impudent little curtsy – and seated herself with the air of a saint on the loose.

"My thisther Clelia, and my friend Jothephine Vannith, and Raoul Dethpreth requeth the honor of rethpectfully prethenting themthelves to Monsieur's graciouth conthideration," she said with an intentional lisp that enraged me.

"Very well," I replied briefly. "You may go back and get rid of your lisp, and then explain to them that you are to be waitress and general housekeeper here, and that they are to take their orders from me through you."

"Yes, Monsieur."

I don't think she relished my dry bluntness for I saw a slight color gather in her cheeks.

I thought to myself that I'd come very close to spoiling the girl by my silliness in the cellar. I'd made a fool of myself, but I'd do it no more in spite of her heavenly resemblance to my photograph.

"That will be all at present, Thusis," I said coldly. "Come back in half an hour for orders. And see that you wear a clean apron."

Her lovely face was quite red as she passed out, forgetting to curtsy. As for my own emotions they were mixed.

One thing was certain; there was going to be a show-down between Thusis and me before very long.

If she were indeed the peasant girl she pretended to be, she'd recover her balance when I did, and learn her proper place. If she were, perhaps, a child of the bourgeoisie – some educated and superior young girl compelled to take service through family misfortune – and I now entertained no further doubt that this was really the case – she had nobody but herself to blame for my present attitude.

But! – but if, by any inexplicable chance, her social circumstances were, or had once been, even better than bourgeoisie, then the girl was a political agent in masquerade. But, whoever she was, she had no business to presume on her wit and insolent beauty to amuse herself at my expense. And if she had really been sent by the Swiss police into my household to keep an eye on me she was going about it in a silly and stupid manner.

For such surveillance I didn't care a pewter penny. Spies had lagged after me ever since I entered Switzerland. It was rather amusing than otherwise.

But, as far as Thusis was concerned, I now decided that, no matter what she was or had been, she had voluntarily become my servant; and I intended that she should not again forget that fact.

As I sat there at my desk, grimly planning discipline for Thusis, I chanced to look up at the photograph of "The Laughing Girl"; and stern thoughts melted like frost at sunrise.

How amazingly, how disturbingly the lovely pictured features reminded me of Thusis!

The resemblance, of course, must be pure accident, but what an astonishing coincidence!

Musing there at my desk, possessed by dreamy and pleasing thoughts, I gradually succumbed to the spell which my treasured photograph invariably wove for me.

And I unlocked my desk and took out my verses.

They had been entitled "To Thusis." This I had scratched out and under the canceled dedication I had written: "To a Photograph."

I had quite forgotten that I had told Thusis to report for orders in half an hour: I was deeply, sentimentally absorbed in my poem. Then there came a low knocking; and at the mere prospect of again encountering my exceedingly impudent housekeeper I experienced a little shock of emotion which started my heart thumping about in a most silly and exasperating manner.

"Come in!" I said angrily.

She entered. I kept my seat with an effort.

"Well," said I in an impatient voice, "what is it now?"

Thusis looked at me intently for a moment, then the little devils that hid in her gray eyes suddenly laughed at me, totally discrediting the girl's respectful and almost serious face with its red mouth slightly drooping.

"Monsieur has orders for the household?" she inquired in her sweet, grave voice of a child.

That floored me. I had spoken about giving my orders through her. I didn't know what orders to give.

"Certainly," said I, – "hum-hum! Let me see. – Let – me – see," I repeated. "Yes – certainly – the orders must be given – hum-hum! – "

But what the devil I was to order I hadn't the vaguest idea.

"We'll have luncheon at one," I said, desperately. She made no observation. I grew redder.

"We'll dine, too," I added. Her gray eyes mocked me but her mouth drooped respectfully.

"For further orders," said I, "c-come b-back in half an hour. No, don't do that! Wait a moment. I – I really don't know what sort of an establishment I have here. Hadn't I better make a tour of inspection?"

"Monsieur will please himself."

"I think I'd better inspect things."

"What things, Monsieur?"

"The – the linen press – er – the *batterie-de-cuisine*– all that sort of thing. Do you think I'd better do it, Thusis?"

"Would Monsieur know any more about them if he inspects these things?" she inquired so guilelessly, so smilingly, that I surrendered then and there.

"Thusis," I said, "I don't know anything about such matters. They bore me. Be a nice child and give what orders are necessary. Will you?"

"If Monsieur wishes."

"I do wish it. Please – take full charge and run this ranch for me and bring me the bills. You see I trust you, Thusis, although you have not been very respectful to me."

"I am sorry, Monsieur," she said with a tragic droop of her lovely mouth. But her eyes belied her.

"Thusis?"

"Monsieur?"

"I won't ask you who you are – "

"Merci, M'sieu."

"Don't interrupt me. What I am going to ask you, is, why do you continually and secretly make fun of me – "

"M'sieu!"

"You do!"

"I, M'sieu?"

"Yes, you, Thusis. Always there is a hint of mockery in your smile, – always the hidden amusement as though, in me, you find something ridiculous – "

"Please! – "

" – Something secretly and delightfully absurd – "

"But you know you *are* funny," she said, looking a trifle scared at her own temerity.

"What!" I demanded angrily.

"Please be just, Mr. O'Ryan. I minded my own business until you tempted me."

That was perfectly true but I denied it.

"You know," she said, "when a man finds a girl attractive the girl always knows it, even when she's a servant... And certain circumstances made it much more amusing than you realize... I mean to be respectful. I am your servant... But you know very well that it is funny."

"What is funny?"

"The circumstances. You found me attractive. It mortified you. And the way you took it was intensely amusing to me."

"Why?"

"Because you are you; and I am I. Because the fact that you found your cook attractive horrified you. That was intensely funny to me. And when, waiving the degradation, you actually attempted to kiss your own cook – "

Laughter burst from her lips in a silvery shower of rippling notes which enchanted and infuriated me at the same time.

I waited, very red, to control my voice; then I got up and set a chair for her. And she dropped onto it without protest.

"What are you doing in my household?" I asked drily.

At that her laughter ceased and she gave me a straight sweet look.

"Don't you really know?"

"Of course not. You're an agent of some sort. That's evident. Are you here to watch me?"

"Dear Mr. O'Ryan," she said lightly, "have I been at any pains to deceive you? I'm not really a servant; you learned that very easily. And I let you learn it – " She laughed: – "and it was a very pretty compliment I paid you when I let you learn it."

"I don't understand you," I said.

"It's very simple. My name really is Thusis; I wish to remain in your employment. So do my friends. We will prove good servants. You shall be most comfortable, – you and your amusing friend, Mr. Smith —*the Norwegian*."

I smiled in spite of my suspicion and perplexity, and Thusis smiled too, such a gay little confidential smile that I could not resist the occult offer of confidence that it very plainly implied.

"You are *not* here to keep tabs on me?" I demanded.

"You very nice young man, of course not!"

"Do you really think I'm nice, Thusis?"

"I think you're adorable!"

The rush of emotion to the head made me red and dizzy. I had never been talked to that way by a young girl. I didn't know it was done.

And another curious thing about this perfectly gay and unembarrassed eulogy of hers, she said it as frankly and spontaneously as she might have spoken to another girl or to an attractive child: there was absolutely no sex consciousness about her.

"Are you going to let us remain and be your very faithful and diligent servants?" she asked, mischievously amused at the shock she had administered.

"Thusis," I said, "it's going to be rather difficult for me to treat you as a servant. And if your friends are of the same quality – "

"It's perfectly easy," she insisted. "If we presume, correct us. If we are slack, punish us. Be masculine and exacting; be bad tempered about your food – " She laughed delightfully – "Raise the devil with us if we misbehave."

I didn't believe I could do that and said so; and she turned on me that bewildering smile and sat looking at me very intently, with her white hands clasped in her lap.

"You don't think we're a band of robbers conspiring to chloroform you and Mr. Smith some night and make off with your effects?" she inquired.

We both laughed.

"You're very much puzzled, aren't you, Mr. O'Ryan," she continued.

"I am, indeed."

"But you're so nice – so straight and clean yourself – that you'd give me the benefit of any doubt, wouldn't you?"

"Yes."

"That's because you're a sportsman. That's because you play all games squarely." Her face became serious; her gray eyes met mine and seemed to look far into them.

"Your country is neutral, isn't it?" she said.

"Yes."

"You are not."

"I have my ideas."

"And ideals," she added.

"Yes, I have them still, Thusis."

"So have I," she said. "I am trying to live up to them. If you will let me."

"I'll even help you – "

"No! Just let me alone. That is all I ask of you." Her youthful face grew graver. "But that is quite enough to ask of you. Because by letting me alone you are incurring danger to yourself.

"Why do you tell me?"

"Because I wish to be honest with you. If you retain me as your servant and accept me and my friends as such, – even if you live here quietly and blamelessly, obeying the local and Federal laws and making no inquiries concerning me or my three friends, – yet, nevertheless, you may find yourself in very serious trouble before many days."

"Political trouble?"

"All kinds of trouble, Mr. O'Ryan."

There was a silence; she sat there with slender fingers tightly interlocked as though under some sort of nervous tension, but the faint hint of a smile in the corners of her mouth – which seemed to be part of her natural expression – remained.

She said: "And more than that: if you let us remain as your servants, we shall trust to you and to Mr. Smith that neither one of you by look or word or gesture would ever convey to anybody the slightest hint that I and my friends are not exactly what we appear to be – your household servants."

"Thusis," said I, "what the deuce are you up to?"

"What am I up to?" She laughed outright: – "Let me see! First – " counting on her fingers, "I am trying to find a way to live up to my ideals; second, I am going to try to bring happiness to many, many people; third, I am prepared to sacrifice myself, my friends, my nearest and dearest." ... She lifted her clear eyes: "I am quite ready to sacrifice you, too," she said.

I smiled: "That would cost you very little," I said.

There was another short silence. The girl looked at me with a curious intentness as though mentally appraising me – trying to establish in her mind any value I might represent to her – if any.

"It's like an innocent bystander being hit by a bullet in a revolution," she murmured: "it's a pity: but it is unavoidable, sometimes."

"I represent this theoretical and innocent bystander?"

"I'm afraid you do, Mr. O'Ryan; the chances are that you'll get hurt."

A perfectly inexplicable but agreeable tingling sensation began to invade me, amounting almost to exhilaration. Was it the Irish in me, subtly stirred, by the chance of a riot? Was it a possible opportunity to heave a brick, impartially and with Milesian enthusiasm?

"Thusis," said I, "there is only one question I must ask you to answer."

"I know what it is."

"What?"

"You are going to remind me that, to-day, the whole world is divided into two parts; that the greatest war of all times is being waged between the forces of light and of darkness. And you are going to ask me where I stand."

"I am."

The girl rose; so did I. Then she stepped forward, took my right hand and rested her other upon it.

"I stand for light, for the world's freedom, for the liberties of the weaker, for the self-determination of all peoples. I stand for their right to the pursuit of happiness. I stand for the downfall of all tyranny – the tyranny of the mob as well as the tyranny of all autocrats. That is where I stand, Mr. O'Ryan... Where do you stand?"

"Beside you."

She dropped my hand with an excited little laugh:

"I was certain of that. In Berne I learned all about you. I took no chances in coming here. I took none in being frank with you." She began to laugh again, mischievously: "Perhaps I took chances in being impertinent to you. There is a dreadful and common vein of frivolity in me. I'm a little reckless, too. I adore absurd situations, and the circumstances – when you unwillingly discovered that I was attractive – appealed to me irresistibly. And I am afraid I was silly enough – common enough – malicious enough to thoroughly enjoy it... But," she added naïvely, "you gave me rather a good scare when you threatened to kiss me."

"I'm glad of that," said I with satisfaction.

"Of course," she remarked, "that would have been the climax of absurdity."

"Would it?"

"Certainly."

"Why?"

"Fancy such a nice young man kissing his cook in the cellar."

"That isn't what you meant."

"Isn't it?" she asked airily.

"No."

"What did I mean then, Mr. O'Ryan?"

"I don't know," said I thoughtfully.

She gave me one of her smiling but searching looks, in which there seemed a hint of apprehension. Then, apparently satisfied by her scrutiny, she favored me with a bewitching smile in which I thought to detect a slight trace of relief.

"You will keep me, then?" she asked.

"Yes."

"Thank you!"

She stretched out her beautiful hand impulsively: I took it.

"Thanks – and good-by," she said a trifle gravely, Then, with a shadow of the smile still lingering: "Good-by: because, from now on, it is to be master and servant. We must both remember that."

I was silent.

"You will remember, won't you?" she said – the laughter flashed in her eyes: – "especially if we ever happen to be in the cellar together?"

I said, forcing a smile and my voice not quite steady: "Suppose we finish that scene, now, Thuis?"

"Good heavens!" she said: – "and the Admiral watching us!" She drew her hand from mine and pointed at the picture over my mantel.

"I'm afraid of that man," she said. "The cellar is less terrifying –"

"Thuis!"

But she laughed and slipped through the door. "Good-by, Don Michael!" she called back softly from the stairs.

I walked back slowly to the center of my room and for a long time I stood there quite motionless, staring fixedly at the Admiral.

V AN ODD SONG

"There's one thing certain," thought I; "my household personnel is altogether too pulchritudinous for a man like Smith, and it begins to worry me."

Considerably disturbed in my mind I reconnoitered Smith's rooms, and found him, as I suspected, loitering there on pretense of re-arranging the contents of his bureau-drawers.

Now Smith had no legitimate business there; it was Clelia's hour to do his rooms. But, as I say, I already had noticed his artless way of hanging about at that hour, and several times during the last two weeks I had encountered him conversing with the girl while she, her blonde hair bound up in a beguiling dust-cap, and otherwise undeniably fetching, leaned at ease on her broom and appeared quite willing to be cornered and conversed with.

My advent always galvanized this situation; Clelia instantly became busy with her broom and duster, and Smith usually pretended he had been inquiring of Clelia where I might be found.

He attempted the same dishonesty now, and, with every symptom of delight, cordially hailed me and inquired where I'd been keeping myself since breakfast.

"I've been out doors," said I coldly, "where I hoped – if I did not really expect – to find you."

This sarcasm put a slight crimp in his assurance, and he accompanied me out with docile alacrity, which touched me.

"It's too good a household to spoil," said I. "A little innocent gaiety – a bit of persiflage en passant – that doesn't interfere with discipline. But this loitering about the vicinity of little Clelia's too brief skirts is almost becoming a habit with you."

"She's a nice girl," returned Smith, vaguely.

"Surely. And you're a very nice young man; but you know as well as I do that we can't arrange our social life to include the circle below stairs."

"You mean, in the event of travelers arriving, they might misconstrue such a democracy?"

"Certainly, they'd misjudge it. We couldn't explain why our cook was playing the piano in the living-room or why Clelia laid aside her dust-pan for a cup of tea with us at five, could we?"

"Or why Thusis and you went trout fishing together," he added pleasantly.

A violent blush possessed my countenance. So he was aware of that incident! He had gone to Zurich that day. I hadn't mentioned it.

"Smith," said I, "these are war times. To catch fish is to conserve food. Under no other circumstances –"

"I understand, of course! Two can catch more fish than one. Which caught it?"

"Thusis," I admitted. "Thusis happened to know where these Swiss trout hide and how to catch them. Naturally I was glad to avail myself of her knowledge."

"Very interesting. You need no further instruction, I fancy."

"To become proficient," said I, "another lesson or two – possibly –" I paused out near the fountain to stoop over and break off a daisy. From which innocent blossom, absent-mindedly, I plucked the snowy petals one by one as I sauntered along beside Smith.

Presently he began to mutter to himself. At first I remained sublimely unconscious of what he was murmuring, then I caught the outrageous words: "Elle m'aime – un peu – beaucoup – passablement – pas-du-tout –"

"What's that?" I demanded, glaring at him. "What are you gabbling about?"

He seemed surprised at my warmth. I hurled the daisy from me; we turned and strode back in hostile silence toward the bottling house.

My farmer, Raoul Despres, was inside and the door stood open. We could hear the humming of the dynamo. Evidently, obeying my orders of yesterday, he had gone in to look over and report upon the condition of the plant with a view to resuming business where my recent uncle had left off.

We could see his curly black head, and athletic figure inside the low building. As he prowled hither and thither investigating the machinery he was singing blithely to himself:

"Crack-brain-cripple-arm
You have done a heap of harm —
You and yours and all your friends!
Now you'll have to make amends."

Smith and I looked at each other in blank perplexity.

"That's a remarkable song," I said at last.

"Very," said Smith. We halted. The dynamo droned on like a giant bee.

Raoul continued to sing as he moved around in the bottling house, and the words he sang came to us quite plainly:

"Crack-brain-cripple-arm
Sacking city, town and farm!
You, your children and your friends,
All will come to rotten ends!"

"Smith," said I, "who on earth do you suppose he means by 'Crack-brain-cripple-arm'?"

"Surely," mused Smith, "he could not be referring to the All-highest of Hunland... Could he?"

"Impossible," said I. We went into the bottling house. And the song of Raoul ceased.

It struck me, as he turned and came toward us with his frank, quick smile and his gay and slightly jaunty bearing, that he had about him something of that nameless allure of a soldier of France.

"But of course you are Swiss," I said to him with a trace of a grin twitching at my lips.

"Of course, Monsieur," he replied innocently.

"Certainly... And, how about that machinery, Raoul?"

"It functions, Monsieur. A little rust – nothing serious. The torrent from the Bec de l'Empereur runs the dynamo; the spring flows full. Listen!"

We listened. Through the purring of the dynamo the bubbling melody of the famous mineral spring was perfectly audible.

"How many bottles have we?" I asked.

"In the unopened cases a hundred thousand. In odd lots, quart size, twenty thousand more."

"Corks? Boxes?"

"Plenty."

"Labels? Straw?"

"Bales, Monsieur."

"And all the machinery works?"

For answer he picked up a quart bottle and placed it in a porcelain cylinder. Then he threw a switch; the bottle was filled automatically, corked, labeled, sheathed in straw and deposited in a straw-lined box.

"Fine!" I said. "When you have a few moments to spare from the farm you can fill a few dozen cases. And you, too, Smith, when time hangs heavy on your hands, it might amuse you to drop in and start bottling spring water for me – instead of rearranging your bureau drawers."

The suggestion did not seem to attract him. He said he'd enjoy doing it but that he did not comprehend machinery.

I smiled at him and made up my mind that he'd not spend his spare time in Clelia's neighborhood.

"Raoul," said I, "that was an interesting song you were singing when we came in."

"What song, Monsieur?"

"The one about 'Crack-brain-cripple-arm.'"

He gazed at me so stupidly that I hesitated.

"I thought I heard you humming a song," said I.

"Maybe it was the dynamo, Monsieur."

"Maybe," I said gravely.

Smith and I walked out and across toward the cow-stables.

There was nothing to see there except chickens; the little brown Swiss cattle being in pasture on the Bec de l'Empereur.

"If time hangs heavy with you, Smith," I ventured, "why not drive the cows home and milk them in the evenings?"

He told me, profanely, that he had plenty to do to amuse himself.

"What, for example, did he tell you?"

"Write letters," he said, – "for example."

"To friends in dear old Norway, I suppose," said I flippantly.

"To whomever I darn well please," he rejoined drily.

That, of course, precluded further playful inquiry. Baffled, I walked on beside him. But I sullenly decided to stick to him until Clelia had done the chamber-work and had safely retired to regions below stairs.

Several times he remarked he'd forgotten something and ought to go to his rooms to look for the missing objects. I pretended not to hear him and he hadn't the effrontery to attempt it.

The words of Raoul's song kept running in my mind.

"Crack-brain-cripple-arm
You have done a heap of harm – "

And I found myself humming the catchy air as I strolled over my domain with my unwilling companion.

"I like that song," I remarked.

"Of course *you* would," he said.

"Why?"

"Because you're so bally neutral," he replied ironically.

"I *am* neutral. All Chileans are. I'm neutral because my country is."

"You're neutral as hell," he retorted with a shrug – "you camouflaged Yankee."

"If I weren't neutral," said I, "I'd not be afraid of admitting it to a New York Viking."

That put him out on first. I enjoyed his silence for a while, then I said: "Come on, old top, sing us some more Norse sagas about 'My girl's a corker.'"

"Can it!" retorted that typical product of Christiania.

So with quip and retort and persiflage veiled and more or less merry, we strolled about in the beautiful early summer weather.

"Why the devil don't you find Thusis and take another lesson in angling?" he suggested.

"Because, dear friend, Thusis hitched up our horse and went to Zurich this morning."

"What? When?"

"Ere the earliest dicky-bird had caroled – ere Aurora had wiped night's messy cobwebs from the skies with rosy fingers."

"What did she go for? – that is, what did she say she was going for?"

"To purchase various household necessities. Why?"

"She's a funny girl," he remarked evasively.

"Yes?"

"Rather."

"In what humorous particular do you hand it so generously to Thusis?" I inquired.

"Oh, you know well enough she's odd. You can't explain her. She's no peasant, and you know it. She's not Swiss, either. I don't know what she is. I don't know quite what she's doing here. Sometimes she reminds me of a runaway school girl: sometimes of the humorless, pep-less prude who usually figures as heroine in a best seller. And sometimes she acts like a vixen! ... I didn't tell you," he added, "but I was amiable enough to try to kiss her that first evening. I don't know where you were – but you can take it from me, O'Ryan, I thought I'd caught hold of the original vestal virgin and that my hour had come for the lions!"

"You beast," said I, not recollecting my own behavior in the cellar. "What did she say?"

"She didn't say anything. She merely looked it. I've been horribly afraid she'd tell her sister," he added naïvely.

"Smith," I said, laying an earnest hand on his arm, "you mustn't frivol with my household. I won't stand for it. I admit that my household is an unusual one. Frankly, I have no more idea than you have that Thusis and Clelia are real servants, or why they choose to take service here with me. Probably they're political agents. I don't care. But you and I mustn't interfere with them, first, because it disorganizes my ménage; second, because I believe they're really nice girls."

"I think so, too," he said.

"Well, then, if they are, we don't want to forget it. And also we must remember that probably they are political agents of some country now engaged in this war, and it won't do for us to become involved."

"How involved?"

"Well, suppose I took Thusis more or less seriously?"

"Do you?"

"I didn't say I did. I said suppose I do? Who is she? With all her dainty personality and undoubted marks of birth and breeding – with the irrefutable evidence of manner and speech and presence – with all these ear-marks by which both she and Clelia seem plainly labeled —*who* is Thusis?"

"I don't know," he said soberly.

"Nor I. And yet it is apparent that she has taken no pains to play the part of a peasant or of a servant for our benefit. Evidently she doesn't care – for I venture to believe she's a good actress in addition to the rest of her ungodly cleverness.

"But she seems to think it immaterial as to whether or not you and I wonder who she may be. Mentally, Thusis snaps her fingers at us, Smith. So does Clelia."

"Clelia is gentler – more girlish and immature," he said, "but she makes no bones about having been in better circumstances. She's sweet but she's no weakling. My curiosity amuses her and she pokes a lot of fun at me."

"Doesn't she tell you anything? Doesn't she give you any hint?"

"No, she doesn't. She's friendly – willing to stop dusting and exchange a little innocent banter with me... Do you know, O'Ryan, I never before saw such a pretty girl. She's only eighteen. Did you know it?"

"No, I didn't."

"And Thusis is twenty."

I thought deeply for a while, then:

"We'd better keep away from them except when business requires an interview," I concluded.

"Why," he pointed out in annoyance, "that leaves *me* out entirely."

"Of course. I shall not think of Thusis at all except on terms of business. That's the safe idea, Smith, business, – strictly business. It neutralizes everything; it's a wet blanket on folly; it paralyzes friskiness; it slays sentiment in its tracks. Become a business man. Engage in some useful occupation. Suppose, for example, I pay you a franc a week to feed my chickens."

"I've plenty to do, I tell you."

"Then do it, old top, and steer shy of that little blue-eyed parlor maid of mine."

He made no answer. We prowled about until nearly lunch-time. But the odd thing was that I had lost my appetite. It may have happened because I'd begun to worry a little about Thusis.

What the deuce had that girl been doing in Zurich all this while? She was too attractive to go about that seething city alone with market-cart and horse. Some fresh young officer —

"Smith?"

He looked up, mildly surprised at my vehemence.

"Where the devil do you suppose Thusis is?" I asked.

"In Zurich, isn't she?"

"Yes, but she's been gone a long time and she ought to be back."

"Probably," he said, "she's gallivanting with some handsome young fellow along the Lake promenade. Possibly she's lurching at the Baur-au-Lac with some fascinating lieutenant. Or maybe they've strolled over to the Café de la Terrasse or to Rupps; or," he went on as though interested in his irritating speculations, "it may be that Thusis has gone out in a motor launch with some sprightly cavalier; or she may be at the Tonhalle, or at Belvoir Park."

"No doubt," said I, exasperated. "You needn't speculate further."

"Business over, why shouldn't Thusis kick up her pretty heels a bit?" he inquired.

"Because Thusis isn't that sort."

"How do *you* know that she isn't that sort?"

I didn't, and his question made me the madder.

"Luncheon ought to be ready," he reminded me presently. I could actually hear the grin in his voice.

"All right," said I. "I'm hungry." Which was a lie. Then, as we turned toward the house, Thusis drove into the yard.

Blue ribbons fluttered from her whip, from the fat horse's head-stall, from his braided tail. There were bows of blue ribbon on her peasant's apron, too, which danced saucily in the wind. I went over to aid her descend from the cart, but she laughed and jumped out with a flash of white stockings and blue garters.

"I've been wondering," said I, "why you were so long."

"Were you worried?"

The demurely malicious glance she flung at me became a laugh. She turned to Smith:

"Did he think somebody might kidnap his young and silly housekeeper?" she inquired. "Pas de chance! I am horridly wise!" – she touched her forehead with the tip of one finger – "and a thousand years old!" – she laid one hand lightly over her heart. And turned to me. "I am a thousand years of age," she repeated, smiling. "Such as I are not kidnapped, Monsieur O'Ryan. Au contraire. I myself am far more likely to kidnap – "

She looked Smith gaily in the eye " – some agreeable young man – some day." And very slowly her gray eyes included me.

Then she tossed the reins to Raoul who had come up beside the cart:

"A protean moment," she said to me, "and I shall reappear as a very presentable waitress to wait upon you at luncheon."

And off went this amazing housekeeper of mine dancing lightly away across the grass with the buckles on her little peasant slippers twinkling and every blue ribbon a-flutter.

I turned and looked at Raoul. He returned my gaze with an odd smile.

"Of what," said I, "are you thinking?"

"I was thinking," he replied seriously, "that the world is a very droll place, – agreeable for the gay, but hell for those born without a sense of humor."

VI MASTER AND MAID

I had become tired of following Smith about and of trying to keep an eye on Clelia. The little minx was so demure that it seemed difficult to believe she deliberately offered Smith opportunities for philandering. Otherwise my household caused me no anxiety; everything went smoothly. Thusis waited on table and ran the place, Josephine Vannis cooked to perfection, Raoul had started a garden and the bottling works; and no tourists had bothered us by interrupting the régime and demanding food and shelter.

Outwardly ours was a serene and emotionless life, undisturbed by that bloody frenzy which agitated the greater surface of the globe.

Here in the sunny silence of our little valley ringed by snow peaks, the soft thunder of some far avalanche or the distant tinkle of cow-bells were the loudest interruptions that startled us from the peaceful inertia consequent upon good food and idle hours.

Outwardly as I say, calm brooded all about us. True the Zurich and Berne newspapers stirred me up, and the weekly packages of New York papers which Smith and I received caused a tense silence in our rooms whither we always retired to read them.

Smith once remarked that it was odd I never received any Chilean papers. To which I replied that it seemed queer no Norwegian newspapers came to him.

We let it rest there. As for my household I never saw Josephine Vannis at all except by accident in the early evening when I sometimes noticed her in the distance strolling with Raoul.

On Clelia, I kept an unquiet eye as I have said. Thusis I saw only on strictly business interviews. And Smith thought it strange that there was so much business to be discussed between us. But every day I felt it my duty to go over my household accounts with Thusis, checking up every item. In these daily conferences there were, of course, all sorts of matters to consider, such as the farm and dairy reports from Raoul, the bottling reports, daily sales of eggs, butter, and bottled spring-water – a cart arriving from Zurich every morning to take away these surplus items to the Grand Hotel, Baur-au-Lac, with which Thusis had made a thrifty contract.

This was a very delightful part of the day to me, – the hour devoted to business with Thusis, while Smith fumed in his room. Possibly Clelia fumed with him – I was afraid of that – and it was the only rift in the lute.

Every morning I tried to prolong that business interview with Thusis, – she looked so distractingly pretty in her peasant garb. But though her gray eyes were ever on duty and her winning smile flashed now and then across the frontier of laughter, always and almost with malice, she held me to the matter of business under discussion, discouraging all diversions I made toward other topics, refusing to accompany me on gay excursions into personalities, resisting any approach toward that little spot of unconventional ground upon which we had once stood face to face.

For since that time when, for hours afterward, my hand remained conscious of her soft, cool hand's light contact – since that curious compact between us which had settled her status, and my own, here under this common roof above us, she had permitted no lighter conversation to interrupt our business conferences, no other subject to intrude. Only now and then I caught a glimpse of tiny devils dancing in her gray eyes; only at long intervals was the promise of the upcurled corners of her mouth made good by the swift, sweet laughter always hidden there.

There was no use attempting any less impersonal footing any more; Thusis simply evaded it, remaining either purposely dull and irresponsive or, gathering up her accounts, she would rise, curtsy, and back out with a gravity of features and demeanor that her mocking eyes denied.

Once, as I have said, I discovered a fishing rod in the attic, dug some worms, and started out upon conservation bent. And encountering Thusis digging dandelions for salad behind the garden, explained to her my attire and implements. As it was strictly a matter of business she consented to go with me as far as the brook. There, by the bridge in the first pool, she caught the first trout. And, having showed me how, retreated, resolutely repelling all suggestions that she take a morning off, and defying me with a gaiety that made her eyes brilliant with delighted malice.

"It was my duty to show you how Swiss trout are caught," she called back to me, always retreating down the leafy path – "but when you propose a pleasure party to your housekeeper – oh, Don Michael, you betray low tastes and I am amazed at you and I beg you most earnestly to remember the Admiral."

Whereupon I was stung into action and foolish enough to suppose I could overtake her. Where she vanished I don't know. There was not a sound in the wood. I was ass enough to call – even to appeal in a voice so sentimental that I blush to remember it now.

And at last, discomfited and sulky, I went back to my fishing. But hers remained the only trout in my basket. Smith and I ate it, baked with parsley, for luncheon, between intermittent inquiries from Smith regarding the fewness of the catch.

And now, it appeared, somebody had already told him that Thusis and I had gone fishing together that day. Who the devil had revealed that fact? Clelia, no doubt, – having been informed by Thusis. And no doubt Thusis had held me up to ridicule.

So now, at the hour when our daily business conference approached, instead of seating myself as usual at the table in my sitting-room, I took my fishing-rod, creel, a musty and water-warped leather fly-book, and went into Smith's room.

"Suppose we go fishing," I suggested, knowing he'd refuse on the chance of a tête-à-tête with Clelia the minute I was out of sight.

He began to explain that he had letters to write, and I laughed in derision and sent my regards to all the folks in dear old Norway.

"Go to the deuce," said I. "Flirt with my chamber-maid if you want to, but Thusis will take your head off – "

"Isn't she going with *you*?"

" – When she returns," I continued, vexed and red at his impudent conclusion. It was perfectly true that I meant to take Thusis fishing, but it was not Smith's business to guess my intentions.

"You annoy me," I added, passing him with a scowl. At which he merely grinned.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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