

Chambers Robert William

The Restless Sex



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Robert W. Chambers

The Restless Sex

PREFACE

Created complete, equipped for sporadic multiplication and later for auto-fertilization, the restless sex, intensely bored by the process of procreation, presently invented an auxiliary and labeled him [male symbol].

A fool proceeding, for the inherited mania for invention obsessed him and he began to invent gods. The only kind of gods that his imagination could conceive were various varieties of supermen, stronger, more cruel, craftier than he. And with these he continued to derive satisfaction by scaring himself.

But the restless sex remained restless; the invention of the sign of Mars ([Mars symbol]), far from bringing content, merely increased the capacity of the sex for fidgeting. And its insatiate curiosity concerning its own handiwork increased.

This handiwork, however, fulfilled rather casually the purpose of its inventor, and devoted the most of its time to the invention of gods, endowing the most powerful of them with all its own cowardice, vanity, intolerance and ferocity.

"He made us," they explained with a modesty attributable only to forgetfulness.

"Believe in him or he'll damn you. And if he doesn't, we will!" they shouted to one another. And appointed representatives of various denominations to deal exclusively in damnation.

Cede Deo! And so, in conformity with the edict of this man-created creator, about a decade before the Great Administration began, a little girl was born.

She should not have been born, because she was not wanted, being merely the by-product of an itinerant actor – Harry Quest, juveniles – stimulated to casual procreation by idleness, whiskey, and phthisis.

The other partner in this shiftless affair was an uneducated and very young girl named Conway, who tinted photographs for a Utica photographer while daylight lasted, and doubled her small salary by doing fancy skating at a local "Ice Palace" in the evenings. So it is very plain that the by-product of this partnership hadn't much chance in the world which awaited her; for, being neither expected nor desired, and, moreover, being already a prenatal heiress to obscure, unknown traits scarcely as yet even developed in the pair responsible for her advent on earth, what she might turn into must remain a problem to be solved by time alone.

Harry Quest, the father of this unborn baby, was an actor. Without marked talent and totally without morals, but well educated and of agreeable manners, he was a natural born swindler, not only of others but of himself. In other words, an optimist.

His father, the Reverend Anthony Quest, retired, was celebrated for his wealth, his library, and his amazing and heartless parsimony. And his morals. No wonder he had grimly kicked out his only son who had none.

The parents of the mother of this little child not yet born, lived in Utica, over a stationery and toy shop which they kept. Patrick Conway was the man's name. He had a pension for being injured on the railway, and sat in a peculiarly constructed wheeled chair, moving himself about by pushing the rubber-tired wheels with both hands and steering with his remaining foot.

He had married a woman rather older than himself, named Jessie Grismer, a school teacher living in Herkimer.

To Utica drifted young Quest, equipped only with the remains of one lung, and out of a job as usual. At the local rink he picked up Laura Conway, after a mindless flirtation, and ultimately went to board with her family over the stationery shop.

So the affair in question was a case of propinquity as much as anything, and was consummated with all the detached irresponsibility of two sparrows.

However, Quest, willing now to be supported, married the girl without protest. She continued to tint photographs and skate as long as she was able to be about; he loafed in front of theatres and hotels, with a quarter in change in his pockets, but always came back to meals. On sunny afternoons, when he felt well, he strolled about the residence section or reposed in his room waiting, probably, for Opportunity to knock and enter.

But nothing came except the baby.

About that time, too, both lungs being in bad condition, young Quest began those various and exhaustive experiments in narcotics, which sooner or later interest such men. And he finally discovered heroin. Finding it an agreeable road to hell, the symptomatic characteristics of an addict presently began to develop in him, and he induced his young wife to share the pleasures of his pharmaceutical discovery.

They and their baby continued to encumber the apartment for a year or two before the old people died – of weariness perhaps, perhaps of old age – or grief – or some similar disease so fatal to the aged.

Anyway, they died, and there remained nothing in the estate not subject to creditors. And, as tinted photographs had gone out of fashion even in Utica, and as the advent of moving pictures was beginning to kill vaudeville everywhere except in New York, the ever-provincial, thither the Quest family drifted. And there, through the next few years, they sifted downward through stratum after stratum of the metropolitan purlieu, always toward some darker substratum – always a little lower.

The childishly attractive mother, in blue velvet and white cat's fur, still did fancy skating at rink and Hippodrome. The father sometimes sat dazed and coughing in the chilly waiting rooms of theatrical agencies. Fortified by drugs and by a shabby fur overcoat, he sometimes managed to make the rounds in pleasant weather; and continued to die rather slowly, considering his physical condition.

But his father, who had so long ago disowned him – the Reverend Anthony Quest – being in perfect moral condition, caught a slight cold in his large, warm library, and died of pneumonia in forty-eight hours – a frightful example of earthly injustice, doubtless made all right in Heaven.

Young Quest, forbidden the presence for years, came skulking around after a while with a Jew lawyer, only to find that his one living relative, a predatory aunt, had assimilated everything and was perfectly qualified to keep it under the terms of his father's will.

Her attorneys made short work of the shyster. She herself, many times a victim to her nephew's deceit in former years, and once having stood between him and prison concerning the matter of a signature for thousands of dollars – the said signature not being hers but by her recognised for the miserable young man's sake – this formidable and acidulous old lady wrote to her nephew in reply to a letter of his:

You always were a liar. I do not believe you are married. I do not believe you have a baby. I send you – not a cheque, because you'd probably raise it – but enough money to start you properly.

Keep away from me. You are what you are partly through your father's failure to do his duty by you. An optimist taken at birth and patiently trained can be saved. Nobody saved you; you were merely punished. And you, naturally, became a swindler.

But I can't help that now. It's too late. I can only send you money. And if it's true you have a child, for God's sake take her in time or she'll turn into what you are.

And *that* is why I send you any money at all – on the remote chance that you are not lying. Keep away from me, Harry.

ROSALINDA QUEST.

So he did not trouble her, he knew her of old; and besides he was too ill, too dazed with drugs to bother with such things.

He lost every penny of the money in Quint's gambling house within a month.

So the Quest family, father, mother and little daughter sifted through the wide, coarse meshes of the very last social stratum that same winter, and landed on the ultimate mundane dump heap.

Quest now lay all day across a broken iron bed, sometimes stupefied, sometimes violent; his wife, dismissed from the Hippodrome for flagrant cause, now picked up an intermittent living and other things in an east-side rink. The child still remained about, somewhere, anywhere – a dirty, ragged, bruised, furtive little thing, long accustomed to extremes of maudlin demonstration and drug-crazed cruelty, frightened witness of dreadful altercations and of more dreadful reconciliations, yet still more stunned than awakened, more undeveloped than precocious, as though the steady accumulation of domestic horrors had checked mental growth rather than sharpened her wits with cynicism and undesirable knowledge.

Not yet had her environment distorted and tainted her speech, for her father had been an educated man, and what was left of him still employed grammatical English, often correcting the nasal, up-state vocabulary of the mother – the beginning of many a terrible quarrel.

So the child skulked about, alternately ignored or whined over, cursed or caressed, petted or beaten, sometimes into insensibility.

Otherwise she followed them about instinctively, like a crippled kitten.

Then there came one stifling night in that earthly hell called a New York tenement, when little Stephanie Quest, tortured by prickly heat, gasping for the relief which the western lightning promised, crept out to the fire escape and lay there gasping like a minnow.

Fate, lurking in the reeking room behind her, where her drugged parents lay in merciful stupor, unloosed a sudden breeze from the thunderous west, which blew the door shut with a crash. It did not awaken the man. But, among other things, it did jar loose a worn-out gas jet... That was the verdict, anyway.

Pluris est oculatus testis unus quam auriti decem.

But, as always, the Most High remained silent, offering no testimony to the contrary.

This episode in the career of Stephanie Quest happened in the days of the Great Administration, an administration not great in the sense of material national prosperity, great only in spirit and in things of the mind and soul.

Even the carpenter, Albrecht Schmidt, across the hallway in the tenement, rose to the level of some unexplored spiritual stratum, for he had a wife and five children and only his wages, and he did not work every week.

"Nein," he said, when approached for contributions toward the funeral, "I haff no money for dead people. I don't giff, I don't lend. Vat it iss dot Shakespeare says? Don't neffer borrow und don't neffer lend noddings... But I tell you what I do! I take dot leedle child!"

The slim, emaciated child, frightened white, had flattened herself against the dirty wall of the hallway to let the policemen and ambulance surgeon pass.

The trampling, staring inmates of the tenement crowded the stairs, a stench of cabbage and of gas possessed the place.

The carpenter's wife, a string around her shapeless middle, and looking as though she might add to her progeny at any minute, came to the door of her two-room kennel.

"Poor little Stephanie," she said, "you come right in and make you'self at home along of us!"

And, as the child did not stir, seemingly frozen there against the stained and battered wall, the carpenter said:

"*Du!* Stephanie! Hey you, Steve! Come home und get you some breakfast right away quick!"

"Is that their kid?" inquired a policeman coming out of the place of death and wiping the sweat from his face.

"Sure. I take her in."

"Well, you'll have to fix that matter later – "

"I fix it now. I take dot little Steve for mine – "

The policeman yawned over the note book in which he was writing.

"It ain't done that way, I'm tellin' you! Well, all *right*! You can keep her until the thing is fixed up – " He went on writing.

The carpenter strode over to the child; his blond hair bristled, his beard was fearsome and like an ogre's. But his voice trembled with Teuton sentiment.

"You got a new mamma, Steve!" he rumbled. "Now, you run in und cry mit her so much as you like." He pulled the little girl gently toward his rooms; the morbid crowd murmured on the stairs at the sight of the child of suicides.

"Mamma, here iss our little Steve alretty!" growled Schmidt. "Now, py Gott! I got to go to my job! A hellofa business iss it! Schade – immer – schade! Another mouth to feed, py Gott!"

FOREWORD

On the Christmas-tide train which carried homeward those Saint James schoolboys who resided in or near New York, Cleland Junior sat chattering with his comrades in a drawing-room car entirely devoted to the Saint James boys, and resounding with the racket of their interminable gossip and laughter.

The last number of their school paper had come out on the morning of their departure for Christmas holidays at home; every boy had a copy and was trying to read it aloud to his neighbour; shrieks of mirth resounded, high, shrill arguments, hot disputes, shouts of approval or of protest.

"Read this! Say, did you get this!" cried a tall boy named Grismer. "Jim Cleland wrote it! What do you know about our own pet novelist –"

"*Shut up!*" retorted Cleland Junior, blushing and abashed by accusation of authorship.

"He wrote it all right!" repeated Grismer exultantly. "Oh, girls! Just listen to this mush about the birds and the bees and the bright blue sky –"

"Jim, you're all right! That's the stuff!" shouted another. "The girl in the story's a peach, and the battle scene is great!"

"Say, Jim, where do you get your battle stuff?" inquired another lad respectfully.

"Out of the papers, of course," replied Cleland Junior. "All you have to do is to read 'em, and you can think out the way it really looks."

The only master in the car, a young Harvard graduate, got up from his revolving chair and came over to Cleland Junior.

The boy rose immediately, standing slender and handsome in the dark suit of mourning which he still wore after two years.

"Sit down, Jim," said Grayson, the master, seating himself on the arm of the boy's chair. And, as the boy diffidently resumed his seat: "Nice little story of yours, this. Just finished it. Co you still think of making writing your profession?"

"I'd like to, sir."

"Many are called, you know," remarked the master with a smile.

"I know, sir. I shall have to take my chance."

Phil Grayson, baseball idol of the Saint James boys, and himself guilty of several delicate verses in the Century and Scribner's, sat on the padded arm of the revolving chair and touched his slight moustache thoughtfully.

"One's profession, Jim, ought to be one's ruling passion. To choose a profession, choose what you most care to do in your leisure moments. That should be your business in life."

The boy said:

"I like about everything, Mr. Grayson, but I think I had rather write than anything else."

John Belter, a rotund youth, listening and drawing caricatures on the back of the school paper, suggested that perhaps Cleland Junior was destined to write the Great American Novel.

Grayson said pleasantly:

"It was the great American ass who first made inquiries concerning the Great American Novel."

"Oh, what a knock!" shouted Oswald Grismer, delighted.

But young Belter joined in the roars of laughter, undisturbed, saying very coolly:

"Do you mean, sir, that the Great American Novel will never be written, or that it has already been written several times, or that there isn't any such thing?"

"I mean all three, Jack," explained Grayson, smiling. "Let me see that caricature you have been so busy over."

"It's – it's *you*, sir."

"What of it?" retorted the young master. "Do you think I can't laugh at myself?"

He took the paper so reluctantly tendered:

"Jack, you *are* a terror! You young rascal, you've made me look like a wax-faced clothing dummy!"

"Tribute to your faultless apparel, sir, and equally faultless features – "

A shriek of laughter from the boys who had crowded around to see; Grayson himself laughing unfeignedly and long; then the babel of eager, boyish voices again, loud, emphatic, merciless in discussion of the theme of the moment.

Into the swaying car and down the aisle came a negro in spotless white, repeating invitingly:

"First call for luncheon, gentlemen! Luncheon served in the dining car forward!"

His agreeable voice was drowned in the cheering of three dozen famished boys, stampeding. Cleland Junior came last with the master.

"I hope you'll have a happy holiday, Jim," said Grayson, with quiet cordiality.

"I'm crazy to see father," said the boy. "I'm sure I'll have a good time."

At the vestibule he stepped aside, but the master bade him precede him.

And as the fair, slender boy passed out into the forward car, the breeze ruffling his blond hair, and his brown eyes still smiling with the anticipation of home coming, he passed Fate, Chance, and Destiny, whispering together in the corner of the platform. But the boy could not see them; could not know that they were discussing him.

CHAPTER I

An average New York house on a side street in winter is a dark affair; daylight comes reluctantly and late into the city; the south side of a street catches the first winter sun rays when there are any; the north side remains shadowy and chilly.

Cleland Senior's old-fashioned house stood on the north side of 80th Street; and on the last morning of Cleland Junior's Christmas vacation, while the first bars of sunshine fell across the brown stone façades on the opposite side of the street, the Clelands' breakfast room still remained dim, bathed in the silvery gray dusk of morning.

Father and son had finished breakfast, but Cleland Senior, whose other names were John and William, had not yet lighted the cigar which he held between thumb and forefinger and contemplated in portentous silence. Nor had he opened the morning paper to read paragraphs of interest to Cleland Junior, comment upon them, and encourage discussion, as was his wont when his son happened to be home from school.

The house was one of those twenty-foot brown stone houses – architecturally featureless – which was all there was to New York architecture fifty years ago.

But John William Cleland's dead wife had managed to make a gem of the interior, and the breakfast room on the second floor front, once his wife's bedroom, was charming with its lovely early American furniture and silver, and its mellow, old-time prints in colour.

Cleland Junior continued to look rather soberly at the familiar pictures, now, as he sat in silence opposite his father, his heart of a boy oppressed by the approaching parting.

"So you think you'll make writing a profession, Jim?" repeated John Cleland, not removing his eyes from the cigar he was turning over and over.

"Yes, father."

"All right. Then a general education is the thing, and Harvard the place – unless you prefer another university."

"The fellows are going to Harvard – most of them," said the boy.

"A boy usually desires to go where his school friends go... It's all right, Jim."

Cleland Junior's fresh, smooth face of a school boy had been slowly growing more and more solemn. Sometimes he looked at the prints on the wall; sometimes he glanced across the table at his father, who still sat absently turning over and over the unlighted cigar between his fingers. The approaching separation was weighing on them both. That, and the empty third chair by the bay window, inclined them to caution in speech, lest memory strike them suddenly, deep and unawares, and their voices betray their men's hearts to each other – which is not an inclination between men.

Cleland Senior glanced involuntarily from the empty chair to the table, where, as always, a third place had been laid by Meachem, and, as always, a fresh flower lay beside the service plate.

No matter what the occasion, under all circumstances and invariably Meachem laid a fresh blossom of some sort beside the place which nobody used.

Cleland Senior gazed at the frail cluster of frisia in silence.

Through the second floor hallway landing, in the library beyond, the boy could see his suitcase, and, lying against it, his hockey stick. Cleland Senior's preoccupied glance also, at intervals, reverted to these two significant objects. Presently he got up and walked out into the little library, followed in silence by Cleland Junior.

There was a very tall clock in that room, which had been made by one of the Willards many years before the elder Cleland's birth; but it ticked now as aggressively and bumptiously as though it were brand new.

The father wandered about for a while, perhaps with the vague idea of finding a match for his cigar; the son's clear gaze followed his father's restless movements until the clock struck the half hour.

"Father?"

"Yes, dear – yes, old chap?" – with forced carelessness which deceived neither.

"It's half past nine."

"All right, Jim – any time you're ready."

"I hate to go back and leave you all alone here!" broke out the boy impulsively.

It was a moment of painful tension.

Cleland Senior did not reply; and the boy, conscious of the emotion which his voice had betrayed, and suddenly shy about it, turned his head and gazed out into the back yard.

Father and son still wore mourning; the black garments made the boy's hair and skin seem fairer than they really were – as fair as his dead mother's.

When Cleland Senior concluded that he was able to speak in a perfectly casual and steady voice, he said:

"Have you had a pretty good holiday, Jim?"

"Fine, father!"

"That's good. That's as it should be. We've enjoyed a pretty good time together, my son; haven't we?"

"Great! It was a dandy vacation!"

There came another silence. On the boy's face lingered a slight retrospective smile, as he mentally reviewed the two weeks now ending with the impending departure for school. Certainly he had had a splendid time. His father had engineered all sorts of parties and amusements for him – schoolboy gatherings at the Ice Rink; luncheons and little dances in their own home, to which school comrades and children of old friends were bidden; trips to the Bronx, to the Aquarium, to the Natural History Museum; wonderful evenings at home together.

The boy had gone with his father to see the "Wizard of Oz," to see Nazimova in "The Comet" – a doubtful experiment, but in line with theories of Cleland Senior – to see "The Fall of Port Arthur" at the Hippodrome; to hear Calvé at the Opera.

Together they had strolled on Fifth Avenue, viewed the progress of the new marble tower then being built on Madison Square, had lunched together at Delmonico's, dined at Sherry's, motored through all the parks, visited Governor's Island and the Navy Yard – the latter rendezvous somewhat empty of interest since the great battle fleet had started on its pacific voyage around the globe.

Always they had been together since the boy returned from Saint James school for the Christmas holidays; and Cleland Senior had striven to fill every waking hour of his son's day with something pleasant to be remembered.

Always at breakfast he had read aloud the items of interest – news concerning President Roosevelt – the boy's hero – and his administration; Governor Hughes and *his* administration; the cumbersome coming of Mr. Taft from distant climes; local squabbles concerning projected subways. All that an intelligent and growing boy ought to know and begin to think about, Cleland Senior read aloud at the breakfast table – for this reason, and also to fill in every minute with pleasant interest lest the dear grief, now two years old, and yet forever fresh, creep in between words and threaten the silences between them with sudden tears.

But two years is a long, long time in the life of the young – in the life of a fourteen-year-old boy; and yet, the delicate shadow of his mother still often dimmed for him the sunny sparkle of the winter's holiday. It fell across his clear young eyes now, where he sat thinking, and made them sombre and a deeper brown.

For he was going back to boarding school; and old memories were uneasily astir again; and Cleland Senior saw the shadow on the boy's face; understood; but now chose to remain silent, not intervening.

So memory gently enveloped them both, leaving them very still together, there in the library.

For the boy's mother had been so intimately associated with preparations for returning to school in those blessed days which already had begun to seem distant and a little unreal to Cleland Junior – so tenderly and vitally a part of them – that now, when the old pain, the loneliness, the eternal desire for her was again possessing father and son in the imminence of familiar departure, Cleland Senior let it come to the boy, not caring to avert it.

Thinking of the same thing, both sat gazing into the back yard. There was a cat on the whitewashed fence. Lizzie, the laundress – probably the last of the race of old-time family laundresses – stood bare-armed in the cold, pinning damp clothing to the lines, her Irish mouth full of wooden clothes-pins, her parboiled arms steaming.

At length Cleland Senior's glance fell again upon the tall clock. He swallowed nothing, stared grimly at the painted dial where a ship circumnavigated the sun, then squaring his big shoulders he rose with decision.

The boy got up too.

In the front hall they assisted each other with overcoats; the little, withered butler took the boy's luggage down the brown-stone steps to the car. A moment later father and son were spinning along Fifth Avenue toward Forty-second Street.

As usual, this ordeal of departure forced John Cleland to an unnatural, off-hand gaiety at the crisis, as though the parting amounted to nothing.

"Going to be a good kid in school, Jim?" he asked, casually humorous.

The boy nodded and smiled.

"That's right. And, Jim, stick to your Algebra, no matter how you hate it. I hated it too... Going to get on your class hockey team?"

"I'll do my best."

"Right. Try for the ball team, too. And, Jim?"

"Yes, father?"

"You're all right so far. You know what's good and what's bad."

"Yes, sir."

"No matter what happens, you can always come to me. You thoroughly understand that."

"Yes, father."

"You've never known what it is to be afraid of me, have you?"

The boy smiled broadly; said no.

"Never be afraid of me, Jim. That's one thing I couldn't stand. I'm always here. All I'm here on earth for is you! Do you really understand me?"

"Yes, father."

Red-capped porter, father and son halted near the crowded train gate inside the vast railroad station.

Cleland Senior said briskly:

"Good-bye, old chap. See you at Easter. Good luck! Send me anything you write in the way of verses and stories."

Their clasped hands fell apart; the boy went through the gate, followed by his porter and by numerous respectable and negligible travelling citizens, male and female, bound for destinations doubtless interesting to them. To John Cleland they were merely mechanically moving impedimenta which obscured the retreating figure of his only son and irritated him to that extent. And when the schoolboy cap of that only son disappeared, engulfed in the crowd, John Cleland went back to his car, back to his empty, old-fashioned brownstone house, seated himself in the library that his wife had made lovely, and picked up the *Times*, which he had not read aloud at breakfast.

He had been sitting there more than an hour before he thought of reading the paper so rigidly spread across his knees. But he was not interested in what he read. The battle fleet, it seemed, was preparing to sail from Port-of-Spain; Mr. Taft was preparing to launch his ponderous candidacy at the

fat head of the Republican party; a woman had been murdered in the Newark marshes; the subway muddle threatened to become more muddled; somebody desired to motor from New York to Paris; President Roosevelt and Mr. Cortelyou had been in consultation about something or other; German newspapers accused the United States of wasting its natural resources; Scotti was singing *Scarpia* in "Tosca"; a new music hall had been built in the Bronx —

Cleland Senior laid the paper aside, stared at the pale winter sunshine on the back fence till things suddenly blurred, then he resumed his paper, sharply, and gazed hard at the print until his dead wife's smiling eyes faded from the page.

But in the paper there seemed nothing to hold his attention. He turned to the editorials, then to the last page. This, he noticed, was still entirely devoted to the "Hundred Neediest Cases" — the yearly Christmastide appeal in behalf of specific examples of extreme distress. The United Charities Organization of the Metropolitan district always made this appeal every year.

Now, Cleland Senior had already sent various sums to that particular charity; and his eyes followed rather listlessly the paragraphs describing certain cases which still were totally unrelieved or only partially aided by charitable subscriptions. He read on as a man reads whose heart is still sore within him — not without a certain half irritable sense of sympathy, perhaps, but with an interest still dulled by the oppression which separation from his son always brought.

And still his preoccupied mind plodded on as he glanced over the several paragraphs of appeal, and after a while he yawned, wondering listlessly that such pitiable cases of need had not been relieved by somebody among the five million who so easily could give the trifles desired. For example:

"Case No. 47. A young man, 25, hopelessly crippled and bedridden, could learn to do useful work, sufficient to support him, if \$25 for equipment were sent to the United Charities office."

Contributors were asked to mention Case No. 47 when sending cheques for relief. He read on mechanically:

"Case No. 108. This case has been partly relieved through contributions, but thirty dollars are still required. Otherwise, these two aged and helpless gentlewomen must lose their humble little home and an institution will have to take care of them. Neither one has many more years to live. A trifling aid, now, means that the few remaining days left to these old people will be tranquil days, free from the dread of separation and destitution."

"Case 113. The father, consumptive and unable to work; the mother still weak from childbirth; the only other wage-earner a daughter aged sixteen, under arrest; four little children dependent. Seventy dollars will tide them over until the mother can recover and resume her wage-earning, which, with the daughter's assistance, will be sufficient to keep the family together. Three of the children are defectives; the oldest sister, a cash-girl, has been arrested and held as a witness for attending, at her mother's request, a clinic conducted by people advocating birth-control; and the three dollars a week which she brought to the family has been stopped indefinitely."

"Case 119. For this case no money at all has been received so far. It is the case of a little child, Stephanie Quest, left an orphan by the death or suicide of both drug-addicted parents, and taken into the family of a kindly German carpenter two years ago. It is the first permanent shelter the child has ever known, the first kindness ever offered her, the first time she has ever had sufficient nourishment in all her eleven years of life. Now she is in danger of losing the only home she has ever had. Stephanie is a pretty, delicate, winsome and engaging little creature of eleven, whose only experience with life had been savage cruelty, gross neglect, filth

and immemorial starvation until the carpenter took her into his own too numerous family, and his wife cared for her as though she were their own child.

"But they have five children of their own, and the wife is soon to have another baby. Low wages, irregular employment, the constantly increasing cost of living, now make it impossible for them to feed and clothe an extra child.

"They are fond of the little girl; they are willing to keep and care for her if fifty dollars could be contributed toward her support. But if this sum be not forthcoming, little Stephanie will have to go to an institution.

"The child is now physically healthy. She is of a winning personality, but somewhat impulsive, unruly, and wilful at times; and it would be far better for her future welfare to continue to live with these sober, kindly, honest people who love her, than to be sent to an orphanage."

"Case No. 123. A very old man, desperately poor and ill and entirely – "

John Cleland dropped the paper suddenly across his knees. A fierce distaste for suffering, an abrupt disinclination for such details checked further perusal.

"Damnation!" he muttered, fumbling for another cigar.

His charities already had been attended to for the year. That portion of his income devoted to such things was now entirely used up. But he remained uneasily aware that the portion reserved for further acquisition of Americana – books, prints, pictures, early American silver, porcelains, furniture, was still intact for the new year now beginning.

That was his only refuge from loneliness and the ever-living grief – the plodding hunt for such things and the study connected with this pursuit. Except for his son – his ruling passion – he had no other interest, now that his wife was dead – nothing that particularly mattered to him in life except this collecting of Americana.

And now his son had gone away again. The day had to be filled – filled rather quickly, too; for the parting still hurt cruelly, and with a dull persistence that he had not yet shaken off. He must busy himself with something. He'd go out again presently, and mouse about among musty stacks of furniture "in the rough." Then he'd prowl through auction rooms and screw a jeweller's glass into his right eye and pore over mezzotints.

He allowed himself just so much to spend on Americana; just so much to spend on his establishment, so much to invest, so much to give to charity —

"Damnation!" he repeated aloud.

It was the last morning of the exhibition at the Christensen Galleries of early American furniture. That afternoon the sale was to begin. He had not had time for preliminary investigation. He realized the importance of the collection; knew that his friends would be there in force; and hated the thought of losing such a chance.

Turning the leaves of his newspaper for the advertisement, he found himself again confronted by the columns containing the dreary "Hundred Neediest Cases." And against every inclination he re-read the details of Case 119.

Odd, he thought to himself angrily, that there was nobody in the city to contribute the few dollars necessary to this little girl. The case in question required only fifty dollars. Fifty dollars meant a home, possibly moral salvation, to this child with her winning disposition and unruly ways.

He read the details again, more irritated than ever, yet grimly interested to note that, as usual, it is the very poor with many burdens who help the poor. This carpenter, living probably in a tenement, with a wife, an unborn baby, and a herd of squalling children to support, had still found room for another little waif, whose drug-sodden parents had been kind to her only by dying.

John Cleland turned the page, searched for the advertisement of the Christensen Galleries, discovered it, read it carefully. There were some fine old prints advertised to be sold. His hated rivals would be there – beloved friends yet hated rivals in the endless battle for bargains in antiquities.

When he got into his car a few minutes later, he told the chauffeur to drive to Christensen's and drive fast. Halfway there, he signalled and spoke through the tube:

"Where is the United Charities Building? *Where?* Well, drive there first."

"Damn!" he muttered, readjusting himself in the corner under the lynx robe.

CHAPTER II

"Would you care to go there and see the child for yourself, Mr. Cleland? A few moments might give you a much clearer idea of her than all that I have told you," suggested the capable young woman to whom he had been turned over in that vast labyrinth of offices tenemented by the "United Charities Organizations of Manhattan and the Four Boroughs, Inc."

John Cleland signed the cheque which he had filled in, laid it on the desk, closed his cheque-book, and shook his head.

"I'm a busy man," he said briefly.

"Oh, I'm sorry! I *wish* you had time to see her for a moment. You may obtain permission through the Manhattan Charities Concern, a separate organization, which turns over certain cases to the excellent child-placing agency connected with our corporation."

"Thank you; I haven't time."

"Mr. Chiltern Grismer would be the best man to see – if you had time."

"Thank you."

There was a chilly silence; Cleland stood frowning at space, wrapped in gloomy preoccupation.

"But," added the capable young woman, wistfully, "if you are so busy that you have no time to bother with this case personally –"

"I *have* time," snapped Cleland, turning red. For the man was burdened with the inconvenient honesty of his race – a sort of tactless truthfulness which characterized all Clelands. He said:

"When I informed you that I'm a busy man, I evidently but unintentionally misled you. I'm not in business. I *have* time. I simply don't wish to go into the slums to see somebody's perfectly strange offspring."

The amazed young woman listened, hesitated, then threw back her pretty head and laughed:

"Mr. Cleland, your frankness is most refreshing! Certainly there is no necessity for you to go if you don't wish to. The little girl will be *most* grateful to you for this generous cheque, and happy to be relieved of the haunting terror that has made her almost ill at the prospect of an orphanage. The child will be beside herself with joy when she gets word from us that she need not lose the only home and the only friends she has ever known. Thank you – for little Stephanie Quest."

"What did the *other* people do to her?" inquired John Cleland, buttoning his gloves and still scowling absently at nothing.

"What people?"

"The ones who – her parents, I mean. What was it they did to her?"

"They were dreadfully inhuman –"

"*What* did they do to the child? Do you know?"

"Yes, I know, Mr. Cleland. They beat her mercilessly when they happened to be crazed by drugs; they neglected her when sober. The little thing was a mass of cuts and sores and bruises when we investigated her case; two of her ribs had been broken, somehow or other, and were not yet healed –"

"Oh, Lord!" he interrupted sharply. "That's enough of such devilish detail! – I beg your pardon, but such things – annoy me. Also I've some business that's waiting – or pleasure, whichever you choose to call it –" He glanced at his watch, thinking of the exhibition at Christensen's, and the several rival and hawk-like amateurs who certainly would be prowling around there, deriding him for his absence and looking for loot.

"Where does that child live?" he added carelessly, buttoning his overcoat.

The capable young woman, who had been regarding him with suppressed amusement, wrote out the address on a pad, tore off the leaf, and handed it to him.

" – In case you ever become curious to see little Stephanie Quest, whom you have aided so generously –" she explained.

Cleland, recollecting with increasing annoyance that he had three hundred dollars less to waste on Christensen than he had that morning, muttered the polite formality of leave-taking required of him, and bowed himself out, carrying the slip of paper in his gloved fingers, extended as though he were looking for a place to drop it.

Down in the street, where his car stood, the sidewalks were slowly whitening under leisurely falling snowflakes. The asphalt already was a slippery mess.

"Where's *that*!" he demanded peevishly, shoving the slip of paper at his chauffeur. "Do you know?"

"I can find it, sir."

"All right," snapped John Cleland.

He stepped into the little limousine and settled back with a grunt. Then he hunched himself up in the corner and perked the fur robe over his knees, muttering. Thoughts of his wife, of his son, had been heavily persistent that morning. Never before had he felt actually old – he was only fifty-odd. Never before had he felt himself so alone, so utterly solitary. Never had he so needed the comradeship of his only son.

He had relapsed into a sort of grim, unhappy lethargy, haunted by memories of his son's baby days, when the car stopped in the tenement-lined street, swarming with push-carts and children.

The damp, rank stench of the unwashed smote him as he stepped out and entered the dirty hallway, set with bells and letter boxes and littered with *débris* and filthy melting snow.

The place was certainly vile enough. A deformed woman with sore eyes directed him to the floor where the Schmidt family lived. On the landing he stumbled over several infants who were playing affectionately with a dead cat – probably the first substitute for a doll they had ever possessed. A fight in some room on the second floor arrested his attention, and he halted, alert and undecided, when the dim hallway resounded with screams of murder.

But a slatternly young woman who was passing explained very coolly that it was only "thim Cassidys mixing it"; and she went her way down stairs with her cracked pitcher, and he continued upward.

"Schmidt? In there," replied a small boy to his inquiry; and resumed his game of ball against the cracked plaster wall of the passage.

Answering his knock, a shapeless woman opened the door.

"Mrs. Schmidt?"

"Yes, sir," – retying the string which alone kept up her skirt.

He explained briefly who he was, where he had been, what he had done through the United Charities for the child, Stephanie.

"I'd like to take a look at her," he added, "if it's perfectly convenient."

Mrs. Schmidt began to cry:

"*Ex-cuse* me, sir; I'm so glad we can keep her. Albert has all he can do for our own kids – but the poor little thing! – it seemed hard to send her away to a Home – " She gouged out the tears abruptly with the back of a red, water-soaked hand.

"Steve! Here's a kind gentleman come to see you. Dry your hands, dearie, and come and thank him."

A grey-eyed child appeared – one of those slender little shapes, graceful in every unconscious movement of head and limbs. She was drying her thin red fingers on a bit of rag as she came forward, the steam of the wash-boiler still rising from her bare arms.

A loud, continuous noise arose in the further room, as though it were full of birds and animals fighting.

For a moment the tension of inquiry and embarrassment between the three endured in silence; then an odd, hot flush seemed to envelop the heart of Cleland Senior – and something tense within

his brain loosened, flooding his entire being with infinite relief. The man had been starving for a child; that was all. He had suddenly found her. But he didn't realize it even now.

There was a shaky chair in the exceedingly clean but wretchedly furnished room. Cleland Senior went over and seated himself gingerly.

"Well, Steve?" he said with a pleasant, humourous smile. But his voice was not quite steady.

"Thank the good, kind gentleman!" burst out Mrs. Schmidt, beginning to sob again, and to swab the welling tears with the mottled backs of both fists. "You're going to stay with us, dearie. They ain't no policeman coming to take you to no institoot for orphan little girls! The good, kind gentleman has give the money for it. Go down onto your knees and thank him, Steve – !"

"Are you really going to *keep* me?" faltered the child. "Is it *true*?"

"Yes, it's true, dearie. Don't go a-kissing me! Go and thank the good, kind –"

"Let me talk to the child alone," interrupted Cleland drily. "And shut the door, please!" – glancing into the farther room where a clothes-boiler steamed, onions were frying, five yelling children swarmed over every inch of furniture, a baby made apocryphal remarks from a home-made cradle, and a canary bird sang shrilly and incessantly.

Mrs. Schmidt retired, sobbing, extolling the goodness and kindness of John Cleland, who endured it with patience until the closed door shut out eulogies, yells, canary and onions.

Then he said:

"Steve, you need not thank me. Just shake hands with me. Will you? I – I like children."

The little girl, whose head was still turned toward the closed door behind which had disappeared the only woman who had ever been consistently kind to her, now looked around at this large, strange man in his fur-lined coat, who sat there smiling at her in such friendly fashion.

And slowly, timidly, over the child's face the faintest of smiles crept in delicate response to his advances. Yet still in the wonderful grey eyes there remained that heart-rending expression of fearful inquiry which haunts the gaze of children who have been cruelly used.

"Is your name Stephanie?"

"Yes, sir."

"Stephanie Quest?"

"Yes, sir."

"What shall I call you? Steve?"

"Yes, sir," winningly grave.

"All right, then. Steve, will you shake hands?"

The child laid her thin, red, water-marred fingers in his gloved hand. He retained them, and drew her nearer.

"You've had a rather tough deal, Steve, haven't you?"

The child was silent, standing with head lowered, her bronzed brown hair hanging and shadowing shoulders and face.

"Do you go to school, Steve?"

"Yes, sir."

"Not to-day?"

"No, sir. It's Saturday."

"Oh, yes. I forgot. What do you learn in school?"

"Things – writing – reading."

"Do you like school?"

"Yes, sir."

"What do you like best?"

"Dancing."

"Do they teach *that*? What kind of dancing do you learn to do?"

"Fancy dancing – folk-dances. And I like the little plays that teacher gets up for us."

"Do you like any other of your studies?" he asked drily.

"Droring."

"Drawing?"

"Yes, sir," she replied, flushing painfully.

"Oh. So they teach you to draw? Who instructs you?"

"Miss Crowe. She comes every week. We copy picture cards and things."

"So you like to draw, Steve," nodded Cleland absently, thinking of his only son, who liked to write, and who, God willing, would have every chance to develop his bent in life. Then, still thinking of his only son, he looked up into the grey eyes of this little stranger.

As fate would have it, she smiled at him. And, looking at her in silence he felt the child-hunger gnawing in his heart – felt it, and for the first time, vaguely surmised what it really was that had so long ailed him.

But the idea, of course, seemed hopeless, impossible! It was not fair to his only son. Everything that he had was his son's – everything he had to give – care, sympathy, love, worldly possessions. These belonged to his son alone.

"Are you happy here with these kind people, Steve?" he asked hastily.

"Yes, sir."

But though his conscience should have instantly acquitted him, deep in his lonely heart the child-hunger gnawed, unsatisfied. If only there had been other children of his own – younger ones to play with, to have near him in his solitude, to cuddle, to caress, to fuss over as he and his dead wife had fussed over their only baby! —

"Steve?"

"Sir?"

"You are sure you will be quite happy here?"

"Yes, sir."

"Would you – " A pause; and again he looked up into the child's face, and again she smiled.

"Steve, I never had a little girl. It's funny, isn't it?"

"Yes, sir."

A silence.

"Would you like to – to go to a private school?"

The child did not understand. So he told her about such schools and the little girls who went to them. She seemed deeply interested; her grey eyes were clear and seriously intelligent, and very, very intently fixed on him in the effort to follow and understand what he was saying.

He told her about other children who lived amid happy surroundings; what they did, how they were cared for, schooled, brought up; what was expected of them by the world – what was required by the world from those who had had advantages of a home, of training, of friends, and of an education. He was committing himself with every word, and refused to believe it.

At times he paused to question her, and she always nodded seriously that she understood.

"But this," he added smilingly, "you may not entirely comprehend, Steve; that such children, brought up as I have explained to you, owe the human race a debt which is never cancelled." He was talking to himself now, more than to her; voicing his thoughts; feeling his way toward the expression of a philosophy which he had heretofore only vaguely entertained.

"The hope of the world lies in such children, Steve," he said. "The world has a right to expect service from them. You don't understand, do you?"

Her wonderfully clear eyes were almost beautiful with intelligence as they looked straight into his. Perhaps the child understood more than she herself realized, more than he believed she understood.

"Shall I come to see you again, Steve?"

"Yes, sir, please."

There was a pause. Very gently the slight pressure of his arm, which had crept around her, conveyed to her its wistful meaning; and when she understood she leaned slowly toward him in winning response, and offered her lips with a gravity that captivated him.

"Good-bye, Steve, dear," he said unsteadily. "I'll come to see you again very soon. I surely, surely will come back again to see you, Steve."

Then he put on his hat and went out abruptly – not down town to Christensen's, but back to the United Charities, and, after an hour, from there he went down town to his attorney's, where he spent the entire day under suppressed excitement.

For there were many steps to take and much detail to be attended to before this new and momentous deal could be put through – a transaction concerning a human soul and the measures to be taken to insure its salvage.

CHAPTER III

During the next few weeks John William Cleland's instinct fought a continuous series of combats with his reason.

Instinct, with her powerful allies, loneliness and love, urged the solitary man to rash experiment; reason ridiculed impulse and made it very clear to Cleland that he was a fool.

But instinct had this advantage; she was always awake, whispering to his mind and heart; and reason often fell asleep on guard over his brain.

But when awake, reason laughed at the conspirators, always in ambush to slay him; and carried matters with a high hand, rebuking instinct and frowning upon her allies.

And John Cleland hesitated. He wrote to his only son every day. He strove to find occupation for every minute between the morning awakening in his silent chamber and the melancholy lying down at night.

But always the battle between reason and instinct continued.

Reason had always appealed to Cleland Senior. His parents and later his wife and son had known the only sentimental phenomena which had ever characterized him in his career. Outside of these exceptions, reason had always ruled him. This is usually the case among those who inherit money from forebears who, in turn, have been accustomed to inherit and hand down a moderate but unimpaired fortune through sober generations.

Such people are born logical when not born fools. And now Cleland Senior, mortified and irritated by the increasing longing which obsessed him, asked himself frequently which of these he really was.

Every atom of logic in him counselled him to abstain from what every instinct in him was desiring and demanding – a little child to fill the loneliness of his heart and house – something to mitigate the absence of his son, whose absences must, in the natural course of events, become more frequent and of longer duration with the years of college imminent, and the demands of new interests, new friends increasing year by year.

He told himself that to take another child into his home would be unfair to Jim; to take her into his heart was disloyal; that the dear past belonged to his wife alone, the present and the future to his only son.

And all the while the man was starving for what he wanted.

Well, the arrangements took some time to complete; but they were fairly complete when finished. She kept her own name; she was to have six thousand dollars a year for life after she became twenty-one. He charged himself with her mental, moral, spiritual, physical, and general education.

It came about in the following manner:

First of all, he went to see a gentleman whom he had known for many years, but whose status with himself had always remained a trifle indefinite in his mind – somewhere betwixt indifferent friendship and informal acquaintanceship.

The gentleman's name was Chiltern Grismer; his business, charity and religion. He did not dispense either of these, however; he made a living for himself out of both. Cleland had learned at the United Charities that Grismer was an important personage in the *Manhattan Charities Concern*, a separate sectarian affair with a big office building, and a book bindery in Brooklyn for the immense tonnage of sectarian books and pamphlets published and sold by the "Concern," as it called itself. The profits were said to be enormous.

Grismer, tall, bony, sandy and with a pair of unusually light yellowish eyes behind eye-glasses, appeared the classical philanthropist of the stage. With his white, bushy side-whiskers, his frock coat, and his little ready-made black bow-tie, slightly askew under a high choker, he certainly dressed the part. In fact, any dramatic producer would have welcomed him in the rôle, for he had no "business" to

learn; it was perfectly natural for him to join his finger tips together while conversing; and his voice and manner left nothing whatever to criticize.

"Ah! My friend of many years!" he exclaimed as Cleland was ushered into his office in the building of the Manhattan Charities Concern. "And how, I pray, can I be of service to my old friend, John Cleland? M-m-m'yes – my friend of many years!"

Cleland told his story very simply, adding:

"I understand that your Concern is handling Case 119, Grismer – acting, I believe, for a child-placing agency."

"Which case?" demanded Grismer, almost sharply.

"Case 119. The case of Stephanie Quest," repeated Cleland.

Grismer looked at him with odd intentness for a moment, then his eyes shifted, as though something were disturbing his suave mental tranquillity:

"M-m-m'yes. Oh, yes. I believe we have this case to handle among many others. M-m-m! Quite so; quite so. Case 119? Quite so."

"May I have the child?" asked Cleland bluntly.

"Bless me! Do you really wish to take such chances, Cleland?"

"Why not? Others take them, don't they?"

"M-m-m'yes. Oh, yes. Certainly. But it is usually people of the – ah – middle and lower classes who adopt children. M-m-m'yes; the middle and lower classes. And, naturally, *they* would not be very much disappointed in a foundling or waif who failed to – ah – develop the finer, subtler, more delicate Christian qualities that a gentleman in your position might reasonably expect – m-m-m'yes! – might, as it were, demand in an adopted child."

"I'll take those chances in the case in question," said Cleland, quietly.

"M-m-m'yes, the case in question. Case 119. Quite so... I am wondering – " he passed a large, dry hand over his chin and mouth, reflectively, while his light-coloured eyes remained alertly on duty. "I have been wondering whether you have looked about before deciding on this particular child. There are a great many other deserving cases, m-m-m'yes – a great many deserving cases – "

"I want this particular child, Grismer."

"Quite so. M-m-m'yes." He looked up almost furtively. "You – ah – have some previous knowledge, perhaps, of this little girl's antecedents?"

Mr. Grismer's voice grew soft and persuasive; his finger tips were gently joined. Cleland, looking up at him, caught a glimmer resembling suspicion in those curiously light-coloured eyes.

"Yes, I have learned certain things about her," he said shortly. "I know enough! I want that child for mine and I'm going to have her."

"May I ask – ah – just what facts you have learned about this unfortunate infant?"

Cleland, bored to the verge of irritation, told him what he had learned.

There was a silence during which Grismer came to the conclusion that he had better tell Cleland another fact which necessary legal investigation of the child's antecedents might more bluntly reveal. Yes, certainly Grismer felt that he ought to place himself on record at once and explain this embarrassing fact in his own way before others cruelly misinterpreted it to Cleland. For John Cleland's position in New York among men of wealth, of affairs, of influence, and of culture made this sudden and unfortunate whim of his for Stephanie Quest a matter of awkward importance to Chiltern Grismer, who had not cared to figure in the case at all.

Grismer's large, dry hand continued to massage his jaw. Now and then the bony fingers wandered caressingly toward the white side-whiskers, but always returned to screen the thin lips with a gentle, incessant massage.

"Cleland," he began in a solemn voice, "have you ever heard that this child is – ah – is a very distant connection of my family? – m-m-m'yes – my immediate family. Have you ever heard any ill-natured gossip of this nature?"

Cleland, too astonished to reply, merely gazed at him. And Grismer wrongly concluded that he had heard about it, somewhere or other.

"M-m-m'yes – a connection – very distant, of course. In the event that you have heard of this unfortunate affair from sources perhaps unfriendly to myself and family – m-m-m'yes, unfriendly – possibly it were judicious to explain the matter to you – in justice to myself."

"I never heard of it," said Cleland, " – never dreamed of such a connection."

But to Grismer all men were liars.

"Oh, I did not know. I thought you might have heard malicious rumours. But it is just as well that you should be correctly informed... Do you recollect ever reading anything concerning my – ah – late sister?"

"Do you mean something that happened many, many years ago?"

"That is what I refer to. Did you read of it in the newspapers?"

"Yes," said Cleland. "I read that she ran away with a married man."

"Doubtless," continued Grismer with a sigh, "you recollect the dreadful disgrace she brought upon my family? The cruel scandal exploited by a pitiless and malicious press?"

Cleland said nothing.

"Let me tell you the actual facts," continued Grismer gently. "The unfortunate woman became infatuated with a common Pullman conductor – an Irishman named Conway – a very ordinary man who already was married.

"His religion forbade divorce; my wretched sister ran away with him. We have always striven to bear the disgrace with resignation – m-m-m'yes, with patience and resignation. That is the story."

Cleland, visibly embarrassed, sat twisting the handle of his walking-stick, looking persistently away from Grismer. The latter sighed heavily.

"And so," he murmured, "our door was forever closed to her and hers. She became as one ignobly dead to us – as a soul damned for all eternity."

"Oh, come, Grismer – "

"Damned – hopelessly, and for all eternity," repeated Grismer with a slight snap of his jaw; " – she and her children, and her children's children – "

"What!"

" – The sins of the parents that are borne through generations!"

"Nonsense! That is Old Testament bosh – "

"Pardon!" said Grismer, with a pained forbearance. "It is the creed of those who worship and believe the truth as taught in the church of which I am a member."

"Oh, I beg your pardon."

"Granted," said Grismer sadly.

He sat caressing his jaw in silence for a while, then:

"Her name was Jessie Grismer. She – ah – assumed the name of Conway... God did not bless the unholy union. There was a daughter, Laura. A certain Harry Quest, the profligate, wasted son of that good man, the Reverend Anthony Quest, married this girl, Laura Conway... God, mindful of His wrath, still punished the seed of my sinful sister, even until the second generation... Stephanie Quest is their daughter."

"Good heavens, Grismer! I can't understand that you, knowing this, have not done something – "

"Why? Am I to presume to interfere with God's purpose? Am I to question the righteousness of His wrath?"

"But – she is the little grandchild of your own sister! – "

"A sister utterly cut off from among us! A sister dead to us – a soul eternally lost and to be eternally forgotten."

"Is that your —*creed*– Grismer?"

"It is."

"Oh. I thought that sort of – I mean, I thought such creeds were out of date – old-fashioned – "

"God," said Chiltern Grismer patiently, "is old-fashioned, I believe – m-m-m'yes – very old fashioned, Cleland. But His purposes are terrible, and His wrath is a living thing to those who have the fear of God within their hearts."

"Oh. Well, I'm sorry, but I really can't be afraid of God. If I were, I'd doubt Him, Grismer... Come; may I have the little girl?"

"Do you desire her to abide under your roof after what you have learned?"

"Why, Grismer, I'd travel all the way to hell to get her now, if any of your creed had managed to send her there. Come; I've seen the child. It may be a risk, as you say. In fact, it can't help being a risk, Grismer. But – I want her. May I have her?"

"M-m-m – " he touched a bell and a clerk appeared. Then he turned to Cleland. "Would you be good enough to see our Mr. Bunce? I thank you. Good afternoon! I am happy to have conversed again with my old friend, John Cleland, – m-m-m'yes, my friend of many years."

An hour later John Cleland left "our" Mr. Bunce, armed with proper authority to begin necessary legal proceedings.

Talking it over with Brinton, his attorney, that evening, he related the amazing conversation between himself and Chiltern Grismer.

Brinton laughed:

"It isn't religious bigotry; it's just stinginess. Grismer is the meanest man on Manhattan Island. Didn't you know it?"

"No. I don't know him well – though I've been acquainted with him for a long while. But I don't see how he can be stingy."

"Why?"

"Well, he's interested in charity – "

"He's paid a thumping big salary! He makes money out of charity. Why shouldn't he be interested?"

"But he publishes religious books – "

"Of course. They sell. It's a great graft, Cleland. Don't publish novels if you want to make money; print Bibles!"

"Is that a fact?"

"You bet! There are more parasites in pulpit, publishing house and charity concerns, who live exclusively by exploiting God, than there were unpleasant afflictions upon the epidermis of our late friend, Job. And Chiltern Grismer is one of them – the old skinflint! – hogging his only sister's share of the Grismer money and scared stiff for fear some descendant might reopen the claim and fight the verdict which beggared his own sister!"

"By Gad!" exclaimed Cleland, very red; "I've a mind to look into it and start proceedings again if there is any ground – "

"You can't."

"Why?"

"Not if you adopt this child."

"Not in her behalf?"

"Your motives would be uncharitably suspected, Cleland. You can give her enough. Besides, you don't want to stir up anything – rattle any skeletons – for this little girl's sake."

"No, of course not. You're quite right, Brinton. No money could compensate her. And, as you say, I am able to provide for her amply."

"Besides," said Brinton, "there's the paternal aunt, Miss Rosalinda Quest. She's as rich as mud. It may be that she'll do something for the child."

"I don't want her to," exclaimed Cleland angrily. "If she'll make no objection to my taking the girl, she can keep her money and leave it to the niggers of Senegambia when she dies, for all I care! Fix it for me, Brinton."

"You'd better go down to Bayport and interview her yourself," said the lawyer. "And, by the way, I hear she's a queer one – something of a bird, in fact."

"Bird?"

"Well, a vixen. They say so. All the same, she's doing a lot of real good with her money."

"How do you mean?"

"She's established a sort of home for the offspring of vicious and degenerate parents. It's really quite a wonderful combination of clinic and training school where suspected or plainly defective children are brought to be taught and to remain under observation – really a finely conceived charity, I understand. Why not call on her?"

"Very well," said Cleland, reluctantly, not caring very much about encountering "vixens" and "birds" of the female persuasion.

Except for this paternal aunt and the Grismers, there turned out to be no living human being related to the child Stephanie.

Once assured of this, John Cleland undertook the journey to Bayport, running down in his car one morning, and determined that a combination of mild dignity and gallant urbanity should conquer any untoward symptoms which this "bird" might develop.

When he arrived at the entrance to the place, a nurse on duty gave him proper directions how to find Miss Quest, who was out about the grounds somewhere.

He found her at last, in nurse's garb, marching up and down the gravel paths of the "Common Sense Home for Defectives," as the institution was called.

She was pruning privet hedges. She had a grim face, a belligerent eye, and she stood clicking her pruning shears aggressively as he approached, hat in hand.

"Miss Quest, I presume?" he inquired.

"I'm called Sister Rose," she answered shortly.

"By any other name – " began Cleland, gallantly, but checked himself, silenced by the hostility in her snapping black eyes.

"What do you wish?" she demanded impatiently.

Cleland, very red, swallowed his irritation:

"I came here in regard to your niece – "

"Niece? I haven't any!"

"I beg your pardon; I mean your great-niece – "

"What do you mean? I haven't any that I know of."

"Her name is Stephanie Quest."

"Harry Quest's child? Has he really got a baby? I thought he was lying! He's such a liar – how was I to know that he has a baby?"

"You didn't know it, then?"

"No. He wrote about a child. Of course, I supposed he was lying. That was before I went abroad."

"You've been abroad?"

"I have."

"Long?"

"Several years."

"How long since you've heard from Harry Quest?"

"Several years – a dozen, maybe. I suppose he's living on what I settled on him. If he needed money I'd hear from him soon enough."

"He doesn't need money, now. He doesn't need anything more from anybody. But his little daughter does."

"Is Harry dead?" she asked sharply.

"Very."

"And – that hussy he married – "

"Equally defunct. I believe it was suicide."

"How very nasty!"

"Or," continued Cleland, "it may have been suicide and murder."

"Nastier still!" She turned sharply aside and stood clicking her shears furiously. After a silence: "I'll take the baby," she said in an altered voice.

"She's eleven years old."

"I forgot. I'll take her anyway. She's probably a defective – "

"She is *not*!" retorted Cleland so sharply that Sister Rose turned on him in astonishment.

"Madame," he said, "I want a little child to bring up. I have chosen this one. I possess a comfortable fortune. I offer to bring her up with every advantage, educate her, consider her as my own child, and settle upon her for life a sum adequate for her maintenance. I have the leisure, the inclination, the means to do these things. But you, Madame, are too busy to give this child the intimate personal attention that all children require – "

"How do you know I am?"

"Because your time is already dedicated, in a larger sense, to those unhappy children who need you more than she does."

"Because your life is already consecrated to this noble charity of which you are founder and director. A world of unfortunates is dependent on you. If, therefore, I offer to lighten your burden by relieving you of one responsibility, you could not logically decline or disregard my appeal to your reason – " His voice altered and became lower: "And, Madame, I already love the child, as though she were my own."

After a long silence Sister Rose said:

"It isn't anything you've advanced that influences me. It's my – failure – with Harry. Do you think it hasn't cut me to the – the soul?" she demanded fiercely, flinging the handful of clipped twigs onto the gravel. "Do you think I am heartless because I said his end was a nasty one! It was! Let God judge me. I did my best."

Cleland remained silent.

"As a matter of fact, I don't care what you think," she added. "What concerns me is that, possibly – probably, this child would be better off with you... You're *the* John Cleland, I presume."

He seemed embarrassed.

"You collect prints and things?"

"Yes, Madame."

"Then you are *the* John Cleland. Why not say so?"

He bowed.

"Very well, then! What you've said has in it a certain amount of common sense. I have, in a way, dedicated my life to all unfortunate children; I might not be able to do justice to Harry's child – give her the intimate personal care necessary – without impairing this work which I have undertaken, and to which I am devoting my fortune."

There was another silence, during which Sister Rose snapped her shears viciously and incessantly. Finally, she looked up at Cleland:

"Does the child care for you?"

"I – think so."

"Very well. But I sha'n't permit you to adopt her."

"Why not?"

"I may want her myself when I'm too old and worn out to work here. I wish her to keep her name."

"Madame – "

"I insist. What did you say her name is? Stephanie? Then her name is to remain Stephanie Quest."

"If you insist – "

"I do! And that's flat! And you need not settle an income on her – "

"I shall do so," he interrupted firmly. "I have ample means to provide for the future of anybody dependent on me, Madame."

"Do you presume to dictate to me what I shall do concerning my own will?" she demanded; and her belligerent eyes fairly snapped at him.

"Do what you like, Madame, but it isn't necessary to – "

"Don't instruct *me*, Mr. Cleland!"

"Very well, Madame – "

"I shall do as I always have done, and that is exactly as I please," she said, glancing at him. "And if I choose to provide for the child in my will, I shall do so without requesting your opinion. Pray understand me, Mr. Cleland. If I let you have her it is only because I am self-distrustful. I failed with Harry Quest. I have not sufficient confidence in myself to risk failure with his daughter."

"Let the matter stand this way until I can consult my attorney and investigate the entire affair. Take her into your home. But remember that she is to bear her own name; that the legal guardianship shall be shared by you and me; that I am to see her when I choose, take her when I choose... Probably I shall not choose to do so. All the same, I retain my liberty of action."

Cleland said in a low voice:

"It would be – heartless – if – "

"I'm not heartless," she rejoined tartly. "Therefore, you need not worry, Mr. Cleland. If you love her and she loves you – I tell you you need not worry. All I desire is to retain my liberty of action. And I intend to do it. And that settles it!"

Cleland Senior went home in his automobile.

In a few days the last legal objection was removed. There were no other relatives, no further impediments; merely passionate tears from the child at parting with Schmidt; copious, fat tears from the carpenter's wife; no emotion from the children; none from the canary bird.

CHAPTER IV

In February the child departed from the Schmidts' in charge of an elderly, indigent gentlewoman, recommended to Mr. Cleland at an exorbitant salary. Mrs. Westlake was her name; she inhabited, with a mild and useless husband, the ancient family mansion in Pelham. And here the preliminary grooming of Stephanie Quest began amid a riot of plain living, lofty thinking, excision of double negatives acquired at hazard, and a hospital régime of physical scrubbing.

During February and March the pitiless process continued, punctuated by blessed daily visits from Cleland Senior, laden with offerings, edible and otherwise. And before April, he had won the heart of Stephanie Quest.

The first night that she slept under Cleland's roof, he was so excited that he sat up in the library all night, listening for fear she should awake, become frightened, and cry out.

She slept perfectly. Old Janet had volunteered as nurse and wardrobe mistress, and a new parlour-maid took her place. Janet, aged sixty, had been his dead wife's childhood nurse, his son's nurse in babyhood: then she had been permitted to do in the household whatever she chose; and she chose to dust the drawing-room, potter about the house, and offer herself tea between times.

Janet, entering the library at six in the morning, found Mr. Cleland about ready to retire to bed after an all-night vigil.

"What do you think of what I've done – bringing this child here?" he demanded bluntly, having lacked the courage to ask Janet's opinion before.

Janet could neither read nor write. Her thoughts were slow in crystallizing. For a few moments master and ancient servant stood confronted there in the dusk of early morning.

"Maybe it was God's will, sor," she said at last, in her voice which age had made a little rickety.

"You don't approve?"

"Ah, then Mr. Cleland, sor, was there annything you was wishful for but the dear Missis approved?"

That answer took him entirely by surprise. He had never even thought of looking at the matter from such an angle.

And after Janet went away into the dim depths of the house, he remained standing there, pondering the old Irishwoman's answer.

Suddenly his heart grew full and the tears were salt in his throat – hot and wet in his closed eyes.

"Not that memory and love are lessened, dear," he explained with tremulous, voiceless lips, " – but you have been away so long, and here on earth time moves slowly without you – dearest – dearest – "

"Th' divil's in that young wan," panted Janet outside his chamber door. "She won't be dressed! She's turning summersalts on her bed, God help her!"

"Did you bathe her?" demanded Cleland, hurriedly buttoning his collar and taking one of the scarfs offered by old Meacham.

"I did, sor – and it was like scrubbing an eel. Not that she was naughty, sor – the darlint! – only playful-like and contrayry – all over th' tub, under wather and atop, and pretindin' the soap and brush was fishes and she another chasin' them – "

"Janet!"

"Sorr?"

"Has she had her breakfast?"

"Two, sorr."

"What?"

"Cereal and cream, omelet and toast, three oranges and a pear, and a pint of milk – "

"Good heavens! Do you want to kill the child?"

"Arrah, sorr, she'll never be kilt with feedin'! It's natural to the young, sorr – and she leppin' and skippin' and turnin' over and over like a young kid! – and how I'm to dress her in her clothes God only knows – "

"Janet! Stop your incessant chatter! Go upstairs and tell Miss Stephanie that I want her to dress immediately."

"I will, sorr."

Cleland looked at Meacham and the little faded old man looked back out of wise, tragic eyes which had seen hell – would see it again more than once before he finished with the world.

"What do you think of my little ward, Meacham?"

"It is better not to think, sir; it is better to just believe."

"What do you mean?"

"Just that, sir. If we really think we can't believe. It's pleasanter to hope. The young lady is very pretty, sir."

Cleland Senior always wore a fresh white waistcoat, winter and summer, and a white carnation in his button-hole. He put on and buttoned the one while Meacham adjusted the other.

They had been together many years, these two men. Every two or three months Meacham locked himself in his room and drank himself stupid. Sometimes he remained invisible for a week, sometimes for two weeks. Years ago Cleland had given up hope of helping him. Once, assisted by hirelings, he had taken Meacham by a combination of strategy and force to a famous institute where the periodical dipsomaniac is cured if he chooses to be.

And Meacham emerged, cured to that extent; and immediately proceeded to lock himself in his room and lie there drunk for eighteen days.

Always when he emerged, ashy grey, blinking, neat, and his little, burnt-out eyes tragic with the hell they had looked upon, John Cleland spoke to him as though nothing had happened to interrupt the routine of service. The threads were picked up and knotted where they had been broken; life continued in its accustomed order under the Cleland roof. The master would not abandon the man; the man continued to fight a losing fight until beaten, then locked himself away until the enemy gave his broken body and broken mind a few weeks' respite. Otherwise, the master's faith and trust in this old-time servant was infinite.

"Meacham?"

"Sir."

"I think – Mrs. Cleland – would have approved. Janet thinks so."

"Yes, sir."

"You think so, too?"

"Certainly, sir. Whatever you wished was madame's wish also."

"Master James is so much away these days... I suppose I am getting old, and – "

He suffered Meacham to invest him with his coat, lifted the lapel and sniffed at the blossom there, squared his broad shoulders, twisted his white moustache.

There was no more attractive figure on Fifth Avenue than Cleland Senior with the bright colour in his cheeks, his vigorous stride and his attire, so suitable to his fresh skin, sturdy years and bearing.

Meacham's eyes were lifted to his master, now. They were of the same age.

"Will you wear a black overcoat or a grey, sir?"

"I don't care. I'm going up to the nursery first. The nursery," he repeated, with a secret thrill at the word, which made him tingle all over in sheerest happiness.

"The car, sir?"

"First," said Cleland, "I must find out what Miss Stephanie wishes – or rather, I must decide what I wish her to do. Telephone the garage, anyway."

There was a silence; Cleland had walked a step or two toward the door. Now, he came back.

"Meacham, I hope I have done what was best. On her father's side there was good blood; on her mother's, physical health... I know what the risk is. But character is born in the cradle and lowered into the grave. The world merely develops, modifies, or cripples it. But it is the same character... I've taken the chance – the tremendous responsibility... It isn't a sudden fancy – an idle caprice; – it isn't for the amusement of making a fine lady out of a Cinderella. I want – a – baby, Meacham. I've been in love with an imaginary child for a long, long time. Now, she's become real. That's all."

"I understand, sir."

"Yes, you do understand. So I ask you to tell me; have I been fair to Mr. James?"

"I think so, sir."

"Will *he* think so? I have not told him of this affair."

"Yes, sir. He will think what madame would have thought of anything that you do." He added under his breath: "As we all think, sir."

There was a pause, broken abruptly by the sudden quavering appeal of Janet at the door once more:

"Mr. Cleland! Th' young lady is all over the house, sor! In her pajaymis and naked feet, running wild-like and ondacent – "

Cleland stepped to the door:

"Where's that child?"

"In the butler's pantry, sor – "

"I'm up here!" came a clear voice from the landing above. Cleland, Janet and Meacham raised their heads.

The child, in her pyjamas, elbows on the landing rail, smiled down upon them through her thick shock of burnished hair. Her lips were applied to an orifice in an orange; her slim fingers slowly squeezed the fruit; her eyes were intently fixed on the three people below.

When Cleland arrived at the third floor landing, he found Stephanie Quest in the nursery, cross-legged on her bed. As he entered, she wriggled off, and, in rose-leaf pyjamas and bare feet, dropped him the curtsy which she had been taught by Mrs. Westlake.

But long since she had taken Cleland's real measure; in her lovely grey eyes a thousand tiny devils danced. He held out his arms and she flung herself into them.

When he seated himself in a big chintz arm-chair, she curled up on his knees, one arm around his neck, the other still clutching her orange.

"Steve, isn't it rather nice to wake up in bed in your own room under your own roof? Or, of course if you prefer Mrs. Westlake's – "

"I don't. I don't – " She kissed him impulsively on his freshly-shaven cheek, tightened her arm around his neck.

"You know I love you," she remarked, applying her lips to the orange and squeezing it vigorously.

"I don't believe you really care much about me, Steve."

Her grey eyes regarded him sideways while she sucked the orange; contented laughter interrupted the process; then, suddenly both arms were around his neck, and her bewitching eyes looked into his, deep, very deeply.

"You know I love you, Dad."

"No, I don't."

"Don't you *really* know it?"

"Do you, really, Steve?"

There was a passionate second of assurance, a slight sigh; the little head warm on his shoulder, vague-eyed, serious, gazing out at the early April sunshine.

"Tell me about your little boy, Dad," she murmured presently.

"You know he isn't very little, Steve. He's fourteen, nearly fifteen."

"I forgot. Goodness!" she said softly and respectfully.

"He seems little to me," continued Cleland, "but he wouldn't like to be thought so. Little girls don't mind being considered youthful, do they?"

"Yes, they *do*! You are teasing me, Dad."

"Am I to understand that I have a ready-made, grown-up family, and no little child to comfort me?"

With a charming little sound in her throat like a young bird, she snuggled closer, pressing her cheek against his.

"*Tell* me," she murmured.

"About what, darling?"

"About your lit – about your boy."

She never tired hearing about this wonderful son, and Cleland never tired of telling about Jim, so they were always in accord on that subject.

Often Cleland tried to read in the gravely youthful eyes uplifted to his the dreamy emotions which his narrative evoked – curiosity, awe, shy delight, frank hunger for a playmate, doubt that this wonder-boy would condescend to notice her, wistfulness, loneliness – the delicate tragedy of solitary souls.

Always her gaze troubled him a little, because he had not yet told his son of what he had done – had not written to him concerning the advent of this little stranger. He had thought that the best and easiest way was to tell Jim when he met him at the railroad station, and, without giving the boy time to think, brood perhaps, perhaps worry, let him see little Stephanie face to face.

It seemed the best way to John Cleland. But, at moments, lying alone, sleepless in the night, he became horribly afraid.

It was about that time that he received a letter from Miss Rosalinda Quest:

DEAR MR. CLELAND:

Will you bring the child out to Bayford, or shall I call to see her when business takes me into town?

I want to see her, so take your choice.

Yours truly,

ROSALINDA QUEST.

This brusque reminder that Stephanie was not entirely his upset Cleland. But there was nothing to do about it except to write the lady a civil invitation to call.

Which she did one morning a week later. She wore battle-grey tweeds and toque, and a Krupp steel equipment of reticule and umbrella; and she looked the fighter from top to toe.

When Cleland came down to the drawing-room with Stephanie. Miss Quest greeted him with perfunctory civility and looked upon Stephanie with unfeigned amazement.

"Is that my niece?" she demanded. And Stephanie, who had been warned of the lady and of the relationship, dropped her curtsy and offered her slender hand with the shy but affable smile instinctive in all children.

But the grey, friendly eyes and the smile did instantly a business for the child which she never could have foreseen; for Miss Quest lost her colour and stood quite dumb and rigid, with the little girl's hand grasped tightly in her grey-gloved fingers.

Finally she found her voice – not the incisive, combative, precise voice which Cleland knew – but a feminine and uncertain parody on it:

"Do you know who I am, Stephanie?"

"Yes, ma'am. You are my Aunt Rosalinda."

Miss Quest took the seat which Cleland offered and sat down, drawing the child to her knee. She looked at her for a long while without speaking.

Later, when Stephanie had been given her cong , in view of lessons awaiting her in the nursery, Miss Quest said to Cleland, as she was going:

"I'm not blind. I can see what you are doing for her – what you have done. The child adores you."

"I love her exactly as though she were my own," he said, flushing.

"That's plain enough, too... Well, I shall be just. She is yours. I don't suppose there ever will be a corner in her heart for me... I could love her, too, if I had the time."

"Is not what you renounce in her only another sacrifice to the noble work in which you are engaged?"

"Rubbish! I like my work. But it does do a lot of good. And it's quite true that I can not do it and give my life to Stephanie Quest. And so – " she shrugged her trim shoulders – "I can scarcely expect the child to care a straw for me, even if I come to see her now and then."

Cleland said nothing. Miss Quest marched to the door, held open by Meacham, turned to Cleland:

"Thank God you got her," she said. "I failed with Harry; I don't deserve her and I dare not claim responsibility. But I'll see that she inherits what I possess – "

"Madame! I beg you will not occupy yourself with such matters. I am perfectly able to provide sufficiently – "

"Good Lord! Are you trying to tell me again how to draw my will?" she demanded.

"I am not. I am simply requesting you not to encumber this child with any unnecessary fortune. There is no advantage to her in any unwieldy inheritance; there is, on the contrary, a very real and alarming disadvantage."

"I shall retain my liberty to think as I please, do as I please, and differ from you as often as I please," she retorted hotly.

They glared upon each other for a moment; Meacham's burnt-out gaze travelled dumbly from one to the other.

Suddenly Miss Quest smiled and stretched out her hand to Cleland.

"Thank God," she said again, "that it is you who have the child. Teach her to think kindly of me, if you can. I'll come sometimes to see her – and to disagree with you."

Cleland, bare-headed, took her out to her taxicab. She smiled at him when it departed.

CHAPTER V

There came the time when Easter vacation was to be reckoned with. Cleland wrote to Jim that he had a surprise for him and that, as usual, he would be at the station to meet the school train.

During the intervening days, at moments fear became an anguish. He began to realize what might happen, what might threaten his hitherto perfect understanding with his only son.

He need not have worried.

Driving uptown in the limousine beside his son, their hands still tightly interlocked, he told him very quietly what he had done, and why. The boy, astonished, listened in silence to the end. Then all he said was:

"For heaven's sake, Father!"

There was not the faintest hint of resentment, no emotion at all except a perfectly neutral amazement.

"How old is she?"

"Eleven, Jim."

"Oh. A kid. Does she cry much?"

"They don't cry at eleven," explained his father, laughing in his relief. "You didn't squall when you were eleven."

"No. But this is a girl."

"Don't worry, old chap."

"No. Do you suppose I'll like her?"

"Of course, I hope you will."

"Well, I probably sha'n't notice her very much, being rather busy... But it's funny... A kid in the house! ... I hope she won't get fresh."

"Be nice to her, Jim."

"Sure... It's funny, though."

"It really isn't very funny, Jim. The little thing has been dreadfully unhappy all her life until I – until we stepped in."

"We?"

"You and I, Jim. It's our job."

After a silence the boy said:

"What was the matter with her?"

"Starvation, cruelty."

The boy's incredulous eyes were fastened on his father's.

"Cold, hunger, loneliness, neglect. And drunken parents who beat her so mercilessly that once they broke two of her ribs... Don't talk about it to her, Jim. Let the child forget if she can."

"Yes, sir."

The boy's eyes were still dilated with horror, but his features were set and very still.

"We've got to look out for her, old chap."

"Yes," said the boy, flushing.

Cleland Senior, of course, expected to assist at the first interview, but Stephanie was not to be found.

High and low Janet searched; John Cleland, troubled, began a tour of the house, calling:

"Steve! Where are you?"

Jim, in his room, unstrapping his suitcase, felt rather than heard somebody behind him; and, looking up over his shoulder saw a girl.

She was a trifle pale; dropped him a curtsey:

"I'm Steve," she said breathlessly.

Boy and girl regarded each other in silence for a moment; then Jim offered his hand:

"How do you do?" he said, calmly.

"I – I'm very well. I hope you are, too."

Another pause, during a most intent mutual inspection.

"My tennis bat," explained Jim, with polite condescension, "needs to be re-strung. That's why I brought it down from school... Do you play tennis?"

"No."

Cleland Senior, on the floor below, heard the young voices mingling above him, listened, then quietly withdrew to the library to await events.

Janet looked in later.

"Do they like each other?" he asked in a low, anxious voice.

"Mr. Cleland, sor, Miss Steve is on the floor listenin' to that blessed boy read thim pieces he has wrote in the school paper! Like two lambs they do be together, sor, and the fine little gentleman and little lady they are, God be blessed this April day!"

After a while he went upstairs, cautiously, the soft carpet muffling his tread.

Jim, seated on the side of his bed, was being worshipped, permitting it, accepting it. Stephanie, cross-legged on the floor, adored him with awed, uplifted gaze, her clasped hands lying in her lap.

"To be a writer," Jim condescended to explain, "a man has got to work like the dickens, study everything you ever heard of, go out and have adventures, notice everything that people say and do, how they act and walk and talk. It's a very interesting profession, Steve... What are *you* going to be?"

"I don't know," she whispered, " – nothing, I suppose."

"Don't you want to be something? Don't you want to be celebrated?"

She thought, hesitatingly, that it would be pleasant to be celebrated.

"Then you'd better think up something to do to make the world notice you."

"I shouldn't know what to do."

"Father says that the thing you'd rather do to amuse yourself is the proper profession to take up. What do you like to do?"

"Ought I to try to write, as you do?"

"You mustn't ask me. Just think what you'd rather do than anything else."

The girl thought hard, her eyes fixed on him, her brows slightly knitted with the effort at concentration.

"I – I'd honestly really rather just be with dad – and *you* – "

The boy laughed:

"I don't mean that!"

"No, I know. But I can't think of anything... Perhaps I could learn to act in a play – or do beautiful dances, or draw pictures – ?" her voice continuing in the rising inflection of inquiry.

"Do you like to draw and dance and act in private theatricals?"

"Oh, I never acted in a play or danced folk-dances, except in school. And I never had things of my own to make pictures with – except once I had a piece of blue chalk and I made pictures on the wall in the hall."

"What hall?"

"It was a very dirty hall. I was punished for making pictures on the wall."

"Oh," said the boy, soberly.

After a moment the boy jumped up:

"I'm hungry. I believe luncheon is nearly ready. Come on, Steve!"

The child could scarcely speak from pride and happiness when the boy condescended to take her hand and lead her out of that enchanted place into the magic deeps below.

At nine-thirty that evening Stephanie made the curtsy which had been taught her, to Cleland Senior, and was about to repeat the process to Cleland Junior, when the latter laughed and held out his hand.

"Good night, Steve," he said reassuringly. "You've got to be a regular girl with me."

She took his hand, held it, drew closer. To his consternation, he realized that she was expecting to kiss him, and he hastily wrung her hand and sat down.

The child's face flushed: she turned to Cleland Senior for the kiss to which he had accustomed her. Her lips were quivering, and the older man understood.

"Good night, darling," he said, drawing her close into his arms, and whispered in her ear gaily: "You've scared him, Steve. He's only a boy, you know."

Her head, buried against his shoulder, concealed the starting tears.

"You've scared him," repeated Cleland Senior. "All boys are shy about girls."

Suddenly it struck her as funny; she smiled; the tears dried in her eyes. She twisted around, and, placing her lips against the elder man's ear, she whispered:

"I'm afraid of him, but I do like him!"

"He likes *you*, but he's a little afraid of you yet."

That appealed to her once more as exquisitely funny. She giggled, snuggled closer, observed by Jim with embarrassment and boredom. But he was too polite to betray it.

Stephanie, with one arm around Cleland's neck, squeezed herself tightly against him and recounted in a breathless whisper her impressions of his only son:

"I do like him so much, Dad! He talked to me upstairs about his school and all the boys there. He was very kind to me. Do you think I'm too little for him to like me? I'm growing rather fast, you know. I'd do anything for him, anything. I wish you'd tell him that. Will you?"

"Yes, I will, dear. Now, run upstairs to Janet."

"Shall I say good night to Jim again?"

"If you like. But don't kiss him, or you'll scare him."

They both had a confidential and silent fit of laughter over this; then the child slid from his knees, dropped a hasty, confused curtsy in Jim's direction, turned and scampered upstairs. And a gale of laughter came floating out of the nursery, silenced as Janet shut the door.

The subdued glow of a lamp fell over father and son; undulating strata of smoke drifted between them from the elder man's cigar.

"Well, Jim?"

"Yes, Father."

"Do you like her?"

"She's a – funny girl... Yes, she's a rather nice little kid."

"We'll stand by her, won't we, Jim?"

"Yes, sir."

"Make up to her the lost days – the cruellest injustice that can be inflicted – the loss of a happy childhood."

"Yes, sir."

"All right, old chap. Now, tell me all about yourself and what has happened since you wrote."

"I had a fight."

"With whom, Jim?"

"With Oswald Grismer, of the first form."

"What did he do to you?" inquired his father.

"He said something – about a girl."

"What girl?"

"I don't know her."

"Go on."

"Nothing... Except I told him what I thought of him."

"For what? For speaking disrespectfully about a girl you never met?"

"Yes, sir."

"Oh. Go on."

"Nothing more, sir... Except that we mixed it."

"I see. Did you – hold your own?"

"They said – I think I did, sir."

"Grismer is – your age? Younger? Older?"

"Yes, sir, older."

"How do you and he weigh in?"

"He's – I believe – somewhat heavier."

"First form boy. Naturally. Well, did you shake hands?"

"No, sir."

"That's bad, Jim."

"I know it. I – somehow – couldn't."

"Do it next term. No use to fight unless to settle things."

The boy remained silent, and his father did not press the matter.

"What shall we do to-morrow, Jim?" inquired Cleland Senior, after a long pause.

"Do you mean just you and me, Father?"

"Oh, yes. Steve will be busy with her lessons. And, in the evening, nine-thirty is her bedtime."

The boy said, with a sigh of unconscious relief:

"I need a lot of things. We'll go to the shops first. Then we'll lunch together, then we can take in a movie, then we'll dine all by ourselves, and then go to the theatre. What do you say, Father?"

"Fine!" said his father, with the happy thrill which comes to fathers whose growing sons still prefer their company to the company of anybody else.

CHAPTER VI

To Cleland Senior it seemed as though Jim's Easter vacation ended before it had fairly begun; so swiftly sped the blessed days together.

Already the morning of his son's departure for school had dawned, and he realized it with the same mental sinking, the same secret dismay and painful incredulity which he always experienced when the dreaded moment for parting actually arrived.

As usual, he prepared to accompany his son to the railway station. It happened not to occur to him that Stephanie might desire to go.

At breakfast, his son sat opposite as usual, Stephanie on his right, very quiet, and keeping her grey eyes on her plate so persistently that the father finally noticed her subdued demeanour, and kept an eye on her until in her momentarily lifted face he detected the sensitive, forced smile of a child close to tears.

All the resolute composure she could summon did not conceal from him the tragedy of a child who is about to lose its hero and who feels itself left out – excluded, as it were, from the last sad rites.

He was touched, conscience stricken, and yet almost inclined to smile. He said casually, as they rose from the table:

"Steve, dear, tell Janet to make you ready at once, if you are going to see Jim off."

"Am —I— going!" faltered the child, flushing and tremulous with surprise and happiness.

"Why, of course. Run quickly to Janet, now." And, to his son, when the eager little flying feet had sped out of sight and hearing: "Steve felt left out, Jim. Do you understand, dear?"

"Y-yes, Father."

"Also, she is inclined to take your departure very seriously. You do understand, don't you, my dear son?"

The boy said that he did, vaguely disappointed that he was not to have the last moments alone with his father.

So they all went down town together in the car, and there were other boys there with parents; and some recognitions among the other people; desultory, perfunctory conversations, cohesion among the school boys welcoming one another with ardour and strenuous cordiality after only ten days' separation.

Chiltern Grismer, father of Oswald, came over and spoke to Cleland Senior:

"Our respective sons, it appears, so far forgot their Christian principles as to indulge in a personal encounter in school," he said in a pained voice. "Hadn't they better shake hands, Cleland?"

"Certainly," replied John Cleland. "If a fight doesn't clean off the slate, there's something very wrong somewhere ... Jim?"

Cleland Junior left the group of gossiping boys; young Grismer, also, at his father's summons, came sauntering nonchalantly over from another group.

"Make it up with young Cleland!" said Chiltern Grismer, tersely. "Mr. Cleland and I are friends of many years. Let there be no dissension between our sons."

"Offer your hand, Jim," added Cleland Senior. "A punch in the nose settles a multitude of sins; doesn't it, Grismer?"

The ceremony was effected reluctantly, and in anything but a cordial manner. Stephanie, looking on, perplexed, caught young Grismer's amber-coloured eyes fixed on her; saw the tall, sandy-haired boy turn to look at her as he moved away to rejoin his particular group; saw the colour rising in his mischievous face when she surprised him peeping at her again over another boy's shoulder.

Several times, before the train left, the little girl became conscious that this overgrown, sandy-haired boy was watching her, sometimes with frankly flattering admiration, sometimes furtively, as though in sly curiosity.

"Who is that kid?" she distinctly heard him say to another boy. She calmly turned her back. And was presently aware of the elder Grismer's expressionless gaze concentrated upon herself. "Is this the little girl?" he said to Cleland Senior in his hard, dry voice.

"That is my little daughter, Stephanie," replied Cleland coldly, discouraging any possible advances on Grismer's part. For there would never be any reason for bringing Stephanie in contact with the Grismers; and there might be reasons for keeping her ignorant of their existence. Which ought to be a simple matter, because he never saw Grismer, except when he chanced to encounter him quite casually here and there in town.

"She's older than I supposed," remarked Grismer, staring steadily at her, where she stood beside Jim, shyly conversing with a group of his particular cronies. Boy-like, they all were bragging noisily for her exclusive benefit, talking school-talk, and swaggering and showing off quite harmlessly as is the nature of the animal at that age.

"I don't observe any family resemblance," mused Grismer, pursing his slit-like lips.

"No?" inquired Cleland drily.

"No, none whatever. Of course, the connection is remote – m-m-m'yes, quite remote. I trust," he added magnanimously, "that you will be able to render her life comfortable and pleasant; and that the stipend you purpose to bestow upon her may, if wisely administered, keep her from want."

Cleland, who was getting madder every moment, turned very red now.

"I think," he said, managing to control his temper, "that it will scarcely be a question of want with Stephanie Quest. What troubles me a little is that she's more than likely to be an heiress."

"What!"

"It looks that way."

"Do you – do you mean, Cleland, that – that any legal steps to re-open – "

"Good Lord, no!" exclaimed Grismer, contemptuously. "She wouldn't touch a penny of Grismer money – not a penny! I wouldn't lift a finger to stir up that mess again, even if it meant a million for her!"

Grismer breathed more easily, though Cleland's frank and unconcealed scorn left a slight red on his parchment-like skin.

"Our conception of moral and spiritual responsibility differs, I fear," he said, " – as widely as our creeds differ. I regret that my friend of many years should appear to be a trifle biassed – m-m-m'yes, a trifle biassed in his opinion – "

"It's none of my affair, Grismer. We're different, that's all. You had, perhaps, a legal right to your unhappy sister's share of the Grismer inheritance. You exercised it; I should not have done so. It's a matter of conscience – to put it pleasantly."

"It is a matter of creed," said Grismer grimly. "It was God's will."

Cleland shrugged.

"Let it go at that. Anyway, you needn't worry over any possible action that might be brought against you or your heirs. There won't be any. What I meant was that the child's aunt, Miss Rosalinda Quest, seems determined to leave little Stephanie a great deal more money than is good for anybody. It isn't necessary. I don't believe in fortunes. I'm wary of them, afraid of them. They change people – often change their very natures. I've seen it too many times – observed the undesirable change in people who were quite all right before they came into fortunes. No; I am able to provide for her amply; I have done so. That ought to be enough."

Grismer's dry, thin lips remained parted; he scarcely breathed; and his remarkable eyes continued to bore into Cleland with an intensity almost savage.

Finally he said, in a voice so dry that it seemed to crackle:

"This is – amazing. I understood that the family had cast out and utterly disowned the family of Harry Quest – m-m-m'yes, turned him out completely – him and his. So you will pardon my surprise, Cleland... Is – ah – the Quest fortune – as it were – considerable?"

"Several millions, I believe," replied Cleland carelessly, moving away to rejoin his son and Stephanie, where they stood amid the noisy, laughing knot of school-boys.

Grismer looked after him, and his face, which had become drawn, grew almost ghastly. So this was it! Cleland had fooled him. Cleland, with previous knowledge of what this aunt was going to do for the child, had cunningly selected her for adoption – doubtless designed her, ultimately, for his son. Cleland had known this; had kept the knowledge from him. And that was the reason for all this philanthropy. Presently he summoned his son, Oswald, with a fierce gesture of his hooked forefinger.

The boy detached himself leisurely from his group of school-fellows and strolled up to his father.

"Don't quarrel with young Cleland again. Do you hear?" he said harshly.

"Well, I – "

"Do you *hear*? – you little fool!"

"Yes, sir, but – "

"Be silent and obey! Do as I order you. Seek his friendship. And, if opportunity offers, become friends with that little girl. If you don't do as I say, I'll cut your allowance. Understand me, I want you to be good friends with that little girl!"

Oswald cast a mischievous but receptive glance toward Stephanie.

"I'll sure be friends with her, if I have a show," he said. "She's easily the prettiest kid I ever saw. But Jim doesn't seem very anxious to introduce me. Maybe next term – " He shrugged, but regarded Stephanie with wistful golden eyes.

After the gates were opened, and when at last the school boys had departed and the train was gone, Stephanie remained tragically preoccupied with her personal loss in the departure of Cleland Junior. For he was the first boy she had ever known; and she worshipped him with all the long-pent ardour of a lonely heart.

Memory of the sandy youth with golden eyes continued in abeyance, although he had impressed her. It had, in fact, been a new experience for her to be noticed by an older boy; and, although she considered young Grismer homely and a trifle insolent, there remained in her embryonic feminine consciousness the grateful aroma of incense swung before her – incense not acceptable, but still unmistakably incense – the subtle flattery of man.

As for young Grismer, reconciliation between him and Jim having been as pleasantly effected as the forcible feeding of a jailed lady on a hunger strike, he sauntered up to Cleland Junior in the car reserved for Saint James School, and said amiably:

"Who was the little peach you kissed good-bye, Jim?"

The boy's clear brown eyes narrowed just a trifle.

"She's – my – sister," he drawled. "What about it?"

"She's so pretty – for a kid – that's all."

Jim, eyeing him menacingly, replied in the horrid vernacular:

"That's no sty on *your* eye, is it?"

"F'r heaven's sake!" protested Grismer. "Are you still carrying that old chip on your shoulder? I thought it was all squared."

Jim considered him for a few moments.

"All right," he said; "it's squared, Oswald... Only, somehow I can't get over feeling that there are some more fights ahead of us... Have a caramel?"

Chiltern Grismer joined Cleland Senior on the way to the street, and they strolled together toward the station entrance. Stephanie walked in silence beside Cleland, holding rather tightly to his arm, not even noticing Grismer, and quite overwhelmed by her own bereavement.

Grismer murmured in his dry, guarded voice:

"She's pretty enough and nicely enough behaved to be your own daughter."

Cleland nodded; a deeper flush of annoyance spread over his handsome, sanguine face. He resented it when people did not take Stephanie for his own flesh and blood; and it even annoyed him that Grismer should mention a matter upon which he had become oddly sensitive.

"I hope you won't ever be sorry, Cleland," remarked the other in his dry, metallic voice. "Yes, indeed, I hope you won't regret your philanthropic venture."

"I am very happy in my little daughter," replied Cleland quietly.

"She's turning out quite satisfactory?"

"Of course!" snapped the other.

"M-m-m!" mused Grismer between thin, dry lips. "It's rather too early to be sure, Cleland. You never can tell what traits are going to reveal themselves in the young. There's no knowing what may crop out in them. No – no telling; no telling. Of course, sometimes they turn out well. M-m-m'yes, quite well. That's our experience in the Charities Association. But, more often, they – don't! – to be perfectly frank with you – they *don't* turn out very well."

Cleland's features had grown alarmingly red.

"I'm not apprehensive," he managed to say.

"Oh, no, of course, it's no use worrying. Time will show. M-m-m! Yes. It will all be made manifest in time. M-m-m'yes! Time'll show, Cleland – time'll show. But – I knew my sister," he added sadly, "and I am afraid – very much afraid."

At the entrance for motors they parted. Grismer got into a shabby limousine driven by an unkempt chauffeur.

"Going my way, Cleland?"

"Thanks, I have my car."

"In that case," returned Grismer, "I shall take my leave of you. Good-bye, and God be with you," he said piously. "And good-bye to *you*, my pretty little miss," he added graciously, distorting his parchment features into something resembling a smile. "Tell your papa to bring you to see me sometime when my boy is home from school; and," he added rather vaguely, "we'll have a nice time and play games. *Good-bye!*"

"Who was that man, Daddy?" asked Stephanie, as their own smart little car drew up.

"Oh, nobody – just a man with whom I have a – a sort of acquaintance," replied Cleland.

"Was that his boy who kept looking at me all the while in the station, Daddy?"

"I didn't notice. Come, dear, jump in."

So he took Stephanie back to the house where instruction in the three R's awaited her, with various extras and embellishments suitable for the education of the daughter of John William Cleland.

The child crept up close to him in the car, holding tightly to his arm with both of hers.

"I'm lonely for Jim," she whispered. "I – " but speech left her suddenly in the lurch.

"You're going to make me proud of you, darling; aren't you?" he murmured, looking down at her.

The child merely nodded. Grief for the going of her first boy had now left her utterly dumb.

CHAPTER VII

There is a serio-comic, yet charming, sort of tragedy – fortunately only temporary – in the attachment of a little girl for an older boy. It often bores him so; and she is so daintily in earnest.

The one adores, tags after, and often annoys; the other, if chivalrous, submits.

It began this way between Stephanie Quest and Jim Cleland. It continued. She realized with awe the discrepancy in their ages; he was amiable enough to pretend to waive the discrepancy. And his condescension almost killed her.

The poor child grew older as fast as she possibly could; resolute, determined to overtake him somewhere, if that could be done. For in spite of arithmetic she seemed to know that it was possible. Moreover, it was wholly characteristic of her to attack with pathetic confidence the impossible – to lead herself as a forlorn hope and with cheerful and reckless resolution into the most hopeless impasse.

Cleland Senior began to notice this trait in her – began to wonder whether it was an admirable trait or a light-headed one.

Once, an imbecile canary, purchased by him for her, and passionately cherished, got out of its open cage, out of the open nursery window, and perched on a cornice over one of the windows. And out of the window climbed Stephanie, never hesitating, disregarding consequences, clinging like a desperate kitten to sill and blind, negotiating precarious ledges with steady feet; and the flag-stones of the area four stories below her, and spikes on the iron railing.

A neighbour opposite fainted; another shouted incoherently. It became a hair-raising situation; she could neither advance nor retreat. The desperate, Irish keening of Janet brought Meacham; Meacham, at the telephone, notified the nearest police station, and a section of the Fire Department. The latter arrived with extension ladders.

It was only when pushed violently bed-ward, as punishment, that the child realized there had been anything to be frightened about. Then she became scared; and was tearfully glad to see Cleland when he came in that evening from a print-hunting expedition.

And once, promenading on Fifth Avenue with Janet, for the sake of her health – such being the régime established – she separated two violently fighting school-boys, slapped the large one, who had done the bullying, soundly, cuffed another, who had been enjoying the unequal combat, fell upon a fourth, and was finally hustled home with her expensive clothing ruined. But in her eyes and cheeks still lingered the brilliant fires of battle, when Janet stripped her for a bath.

And once in the park she sprang like a young tigress upon a group of ragamuffins who had found a wild black mallard duck, nesting in a thicket near the lake, and who were stoning the frightened thing.

All Janet could see was a most dreadful *melée* agitating the bushes, from which presently burst boy after boy, in an agony of flight, rushing headlong and terror-stricken from that dreadful place where a wild-girl raged, determined on their extermination.

Stephanie's development was watched with tender, half-fearful curiosity by Cleland.

As usual, two separate columns were necessary to record the varied traits so far apparent in her. These traits Cleland noted in the book devoted to memoranda concerning the child, writing them as follows:

| | |
|--|---|
| Inclined to self-indulgence. impulsive | Easily moved to |
| Consequently, a trifle selfish at times. affections; | self-sacrifice. Ardent in her |
| Over-sensitive and likely friendship; and to exaggerate. truthful. | loyal to essentially |
| Very great talent latent: quickly excited possibly histrionic. cruelty or | Indignation by any form of |
| Anger, when finally likely to aroused, likely to lead to without regard extremes. considerations. | treachery. Action be immediate for personal |
| Generous with her possessions. | |

So far he could discover nothing vicious in her, no unworthy inherited instincts beyond those common to young humans, instincts supposed to be extirpated by education.

She was no greedier than any other healthy child, no more self-centred; all her appetites were normal, all her inclinations natural. She had a good mind, but a very human one, fairly balanced but sensitive to emotion, inclination, and impulse, and sometimes rather tardy in readjusting itself when logic and reason were required to regain equilibrium.

But the child was more easily swayed by gratitude than by any other of the several human instincts known as virtues.

So she grew toward adolescence, closely watched by Cleland, good-naturedly tolerated by Jim, worshipped by Janet, served by Meacham with instinctive devotion – the only quality in him not burnt out in his little journeys through hell.

There were others, too, in the world, who remembered the child. There was her aunt, who came once a month and brought always an expensive present, over the suitability of which she and Cleland differed to the verge of rudeness. But they always parted on excellent terms. And there was Chiltern Grismer, who sat sometimes for hours in his office, thinking about the child and the fortune which threatened her.

Weeks, adhering to one another, became months; months totalled years – several of them, recorded so suddenly that John Cleland could not believe it.

He had arrived at that epoch in the life of man when the years stood still with him: when he neither felt himself changing nor appeared to grow older, though all around him he was constantly aware of others aging. Yet, being always with Stephanie, he could not notice her rapid development, as he noted the astonishing growth of his son when the boy came home after brief absences at school.

Stephanie, still a child, was becoming something else very rapidly. But still she remained childlike enough to idolize Jim Cleland and to show it, without reserve. And though he really found her excellent company, amusing and diverting, her somewhat persistent and dog-like devotion embarrassed and bored him sometimes. He was at that age.

Young Grismer, in Jim's hearing, commenting upon a similar devotion inflicted on himself by a girl, characterized her as "too damn pleasant" – a brutal yet graphic summary.

And for a while the offensive phrase stuck in Jim's memory, though always chivalrously repudiated as applying to Stephanie. Yet, the poor girl certainly bored him at times, so blind her devotion, so pitiful her desire to please, so eager her heart of a child for the comradeship denied her in the dreadful years of solitude and fear.

For a year or two the affair lay that way between these two; the school-boy's interest in the little girl was the interest of polite responsibility; consideration for misfortune, toleration for her sex, with added allowance for her extreme youth. This was the boy's attitude.

Had not boarding-school and college limited his sojourn at home, it is possible that indifference might have germinated.

But he saw her so infrequently and for such short periods; and even during the summer vacation, growing outside interests, increasing complexity in social relations with fellow students – invitations to house parties, motor trips, camping trips – so interrupted the placid continuity of his vacation in their pleasant summer home in the northern Berkshires, that he never quite realized that Stephanie Quest was really anything more than a sort of permanent guest, billeted indefinitely under his father's roof.

When he was home in New York at Christmas and Easter, his gravely detached attitude of amiable consideration never varied toward her.

The few weeks at a time that he spent at "Runner's Rest," his father's quaint and ancient place on Cold River, permitted him no time to realize the importance and permanency of the place she already occupied as an integral part of the house of Cleland.

A thousand new interests, new thoughts, possessed the boy in the full tide of adolescence. All the world was beginning to unclothe before him like the brilliant, fragrant petals of a magic flower. And in this rainbow transformation of things terrestrial, a boy's mind is always unbalanced by the bewildering and charming confusion of it all – for it is he who is changing, not the world; he is merely learning to see instead of to look, to comprehend instead of to perceive, to realize instead of to take for granted all the wonders and marvels and mysteries to which a young man is heir.

It is drama, comedy, farce, tragedy, this inevitable awakening; it is the alternate elucidation and deepening of mysteries; it is a day of clear, keen reasoning succeeding a day of illogical caprice; an hour aquiver with undreamed-of mental torture followed by an hour of spiritual exaltation; it is the era of magnificent aspiration, of inexplicable fear, of lofty abnegations, of fierce egotisms, of dreams and of convictions, of faiths for which youth dies; and, alas, it is a day of pitiless development which leaves the shadowy memory of faith lingering in the brain, and, on the lips, a smile.

And, amid such emotions, such impulses, such desires, fears, aspirations, hopes, regrets, the average boy puts on that Nessus coat called manhood. And he has, in his temporarily dislocated and unadjusted brain, neither the time nor the patience, nor the interest, nor the logic at his command necessary to see and understand what is happening under his aspiring and heavenward-tilted nose. Only the clouds enrapture him; where every star beckons him he responds in a passion of endeavour.

And so he begins the inevitable climb toward the moon – the path which every man born upon the earth has trodden far or only a little way, but the path all men at least have tried.

In his freshman year at Harvard, he got drunk. The episode was quite inadvertent on his part – one of those accidents incident to the vile, claret-coloured "punches" offered by some young idiot in "honour" of his own birthday.

The Cambridge police sheltered him over night; his fine was over-subscribed; he explored the depths of hell in consequence of the affair, endured the agony of shame, remorse, and self-loathing to the physical and mental limit, and eventually recovered, regarding himself as a reformed criminal with a shattered past.

However, the youthful gloom and melancholy dignity with which this clothed him had a faint and not entirely unpleasant flavour – as one who might say, "I have lived and learned. There is the sad wisdom of worldly things within me." But he cut out alcohol. It being the fashion at that time to shrug away an offered cup, he found little difficulty in avoiding it.

In his Sophomore year, he met the inevitable young person. And, after all that had been told him, all that he had disdainfully pictured to himself, did not recognize her when he met her.

It was one of those episodes which may end any way. And it ended, of course, in one way or another. But it did end.

Thus the limited world he moved in began to wear away the soft-rounded contours of boyhood; he learned a little about men, nothing whatever about women, but was inclined to consider that he understood them sadly and perfectly. He wrote several plays, novels and poems to amuse himself;

wrote articles for the college periodicals, when he was not too busy training with the baseball squad or playing tennis, or lounging through those golden and enchanted hours when the smoke of undergraduate pipes spins a magic haze over life, enveloping books and comrades in that exquisite and softly brilliant web which never tears, never fades in memory while life endures.

He made many friends; he visited many homes; he failed sometimes, but more often he made good in whatever he endeavoured.

His father came on to Cambridge several times – always when his son requested it – and he knew the sympathy of his father in days of triumph, and he understood his father's unshaken belief in his only son when that son, for the moment, faltered.

For he had confided in his father the episodes of the punch and the young person. Never had his father and he been closer together in mind and spirit than after that confession.

In spite of several advances made by Chiltern Grismer, whose son, Oswald, was also at Harvard and a popular man in his class, John Cleland remained politely unreceptive; and there were no social amenities exchanged. Jim Cleland and Oswald Grismer did not visit each other, although friendly enough at Cambridge. Cleland Senior made no particular effort to discourage any such friendly footing, and he was not inclined to judge young Grismer by his father. He merely remained unresponsive.

In such cases, he who makes the advances interprets their non-success according to his own nature. And Grismer concluded that he had been a victim of insidious guile and sharp practice, and that John Cleland had taken Stephanie to his heart only after he had learned that, some day, she would inherit the Quest fortune from her eccentric relative.

Chagrin and sullen irritation against Cleland had possessed him since he first learned of this inheritance; and he nourished both until they grew into a dull, watchful anger. And he waited for something or other that might in some way offer him a chance to repair the vital mistake he had made in his attitude toward the child.

But Cleland gave him no opening whatever; Grismer's social advances were amiably ignored. And it became plainer and plainer to Grismer, as he interpreted the situation, that John Cleland was planning to unite, through his son Jim, the comfortable Cleland income with the Quest millions, and to elbow everybody else out of the way.

"The philanthropic hypocrite," mused Grismer, still smarting from a note expressing civil regrets in reply to an invitation to Stephanie and Jim to join them after church for a motor trip to Lakewood.

"Can't they come?" inquired Oswald.

"Previous engagement," snapped Grismer, tearing up the note. His wife, an invalid, with stringy hair and spots on her face, remarked with resignation that the Clelands were too stylish to care about plain, Christian people.

"Stylish," repeated Grismer, "I've got ten dollars to Cleland's one. I can put on style enough to swamp him if I've a mind to! – m-m-m'yes, if I've a mind to."

"Why don't you?" inquired Oswald, with a malicious side glance at his father's frock coat and ready-made cravat. "Chuck the religious game and wear spats and a topper! It's a better graft, governor."

Chiltern Grismer, only partly attentive to his son's impudence, turned a fierce, preoccupied glance upon him. But his mind was still intrigued with that word "stylish." It began to enrage him.

He repeated it aloud once or twice, sneeringly:

"So you think we may not be sufficiently stylish to suit the Clelands – or that brat they picked out of the sewer? M-m-m'yes, out of an east-side sewer!"

Oswald pricked up his intelligent and rather pointed ears.

"What brat?" he inquired.

Chiltern Grismer had never told his son the story of Stephanie Quest. In the beginning, the boy had been too young, and there seemed to be no particular reason for telling him. Later, when Grismer suddenly developed ambitions in behalf of his son for the Quest fortune, he did not say anything about Stephanie's origin, fearing that it might prejudice his son.

Now, he suddenly concluded to tell him, not from spite entirely, nor to satisfy his increasing resentment against Cleland; but because Oswald would, some day, inherit the Grismer money. And it might be just as well to prime him now, in the event that any of the Clelands should ever start to reopen the case which had deprived Jessie Grismer of her own inheritance so many years ago.

The young fellow listened with languid astonishment as the links of the story, very carefully and morally polished, were displayed by his father for his instruction and edification.

"That is the sort of stylish people they are," concluded Grismer, making an abrupt end. "Let it be a warning to you to keep your eye on the Clelands; for a man that calls himself a philanthropist, and is sharp enough to pick out an heiress from the gutter, will bear watching! – m-m-m'yes, indeed, he certainly will bear watching."

Mrs. Grismer, who was knitting with chilly fingers, sighed.

"You always said it was God's judgment on Jessie and her descendants, Chiltern. But I kind of wish you'd been a little mite more forgiving."

"Who am I?" demanded Grismer, sullenly, "to thwart God's wrath ... m-m-m'yes, the anger of the Lord Almighty! And I never thought of that imbecile aunt... It was divine will that punished my erring sister and her children, and her children's chil – "

"Rot!" remarked Oswald. "Cleland caught you napping and put one over. That's all that worries you. And now you are properly and piously sore!"

"That is an impious and wickedly outrageous way to talk to your father!" said Grismer, glaring at him. "You have come back from college lacking reverence and respect for everything you have been taught to consider sacred! – m-m-m'yes – everything! You have returned to us utterly demoralized, defiant, rebellious, changed! Every worldly abomination seems to attract you: you smoke openly in your mother's presence; your careless and loose conversation betrays your contempt for the simple, homely, and frugal atmosphere in which you have been reared by Christian parents. Doubtless we are not sufficiently stylish for you any longer!" he added sarcastically.

"I'm sorry I was disrespectful, governor – "

"No! You are *not* sorry!" retorted Grismer tartly. "You rejoice secretly in your defiance of your parents! You have been demoralized by the license permitted you by absence from home. You live irresponsibly; you fling away your money on theatres! You yourself admit that you have learned to dance. Nothing that your pastor has taught you, nothing that our church holds sacred seems capable of restraining you from wickedness. That is the truth, Oswald. And your mother and I despair of your future, here and – " he lifted his eyes solemnly – "above."

There was an awkward silence. Finally Oswald said with sullen frankness:

"You see I'm a man, now, and I've got to do my own thinking. Things I used to believe seem tommyrot to me now – "

"Oswald!" sighed his mother.

"I'm sorry to pain you, Mother, but they do! And about everything you object to I find agreeable. I'm not very bad, Mother. But this sort of talk inclines me to raise the devil. What's the harm in going to a show? In dancing? In smoking a cigar? For heaven's sake, let a fellow alone. The line of talk the governor hands me makes a cynic of a man who's got any brains."

There was another silence; then Oswald continued:

"And, while we are trying to be frank with each other this pleasant Sunday morning, what about my career? Let's settle it now!"

"I'm opposed to any such frivolous profession!" snapped Grismer angrily. "That's your answer. And that settles it."

"You mean that you still oppose my studying sculpture?"

"Emphatically."

"Why?" demanded the youth, rather white, but smiling.

"Because it is no business career for a Christian!" retorted his father, furious. "It is a loose, irregular, eccentric profession, beset with pitfalls and temptations. It leads to immorality and unbelief – m-m-m'yes, to hell itself! And that is why I oppose it!"

Oswald shrugged:

"I'm sorry you feel that way but I can't help it, of course."

"Do you mean," inquired his mother, "that you intend to disregard our solemn wishes?"

"I don't know," said the young fellow, "I really don't know, Mother. I can't seem to breathe and expand at home. You've never made things very cheerful for me."

"Oswald! You are utterly heartless!"

"I've been fed up on the governor's kind of religion, on narrow views and gloom; and that's no good for a modern boy. It's a wonder I have any heart at all, and sometimes I think it's dried up – "

"That will do!" shouted Grismer, losing all self-control. "If your home, your parents, and your Creator can not make a Christian of you, there is nothing to hope from you! ... I'll hear no more from you. Go and get ready for church!"

"I sha'n't go," said the young fellow calmly.

When he went back to Cambridge at the end of the week, it was with the desire never to see his home again, and with a vague and burning intention to get even, somehow, by breaking every law of the imbecile religion on which he had been "fed up."

CHAPTER VIII

When Stephanie was fifteen years old, John Cleland took her to Cambridge.

The girl had been attending a celebrated New York school during the last two years. She had developed the bearing and manners which characterized the carefully trained products of that institution, but the régime seemed to have subdued her, and made her retiring and diffident.

She could have formed friendships there had she desired to do so; she formed none; yet any girl there would have been happy and flattered to call Stephanie Quest her friend. But Stephanie cared little for those confidential and intimate relations so popular among school girls of her age.

She made no enemies, however. An engaging reticence and reserve characterized her – the shy and wistful charm of that indeterminate age when a girl is midway in the delicate process of transformation.

If she cared nothing about girls, she lacked self-confidence with boys, though vastly preferring their society; but she got little of it except when Jim's school friends came to the house during holidays. Then she had a heavenly time just watching and listening.

So when John Cleland took her to Cambridge, she had, in the vernacular of the moment, a "wonderful" experience – everything during that period of her career being "wonderful" or "topping."

Jim, as always, was "wonderful;" and the attitude of his friends alternately delighted and awed her, so gaily devoted they instantly became to Jim's "little sister."

But what now secretly thrilled the girl was that Jim, for the first time, seemed to be proud of her, not tolerating her as an immature member of the family, but welcoming her as an equal, on an equal footing. And, with inexpressible delight, she remembered her determination, long ago, to overtake him; and realized that she was doing it very rapidly.

So she went to a football game at the stadium; she took tea in the quarters of these god-like young men; she motored about Cambridge and Boston; she saw all that a girl of fifteen ought to see, heard all that she ought to hear, and went back to New York with John Cleland in the seventh paradise of happiness fulfilled, madly enamoured of Jim and every youthful superman he had introduced to her.

Every year while Jim was at college there was a repetition of this programme, and she and John Cleland departed regularly for Cambridge amid excitement indescribable.

And when, in due time, Jim prepared to emerge from that great university, swaddled in sheepskin, and reeking with Cambridge culture, Stephanie went again to Cambridge with her adopted father – a girl, then, of seventeen, still growing, still in the wondering maze of her own adolescence, exquisitely involved in its magic, conscious already of its spell, of its witchcraft, which lore she was shyly venturing to investigate.

She had a "wonderful" week in Cambridge – more and more excited by the discovery that young men found her as agreeable as she found them, and that they sought her now on perfectly even terms of years and experience; regarded her as of them, not merely with them. And this enchanted her.

Two of her school friends, the Hildreth girls, were there with their mother, and the latter very gladly extended her wing to cover Stephanie for the dance, John Cleland not feeling very well and remaining in Boston.

And it chanced that Stephanie met there Oswald Grismer; and knew him instantly when he was presented to her. Even after all those years, the girl clearly recollected seeing him in the railroad station, and remembered the odd emotions of curiosity and disapproval she experienced when he stared at her so persistently – disapproval slightly mitigated by consciousness of the boyish flattery his manner toward her implied.

He said, in his easy, half-mischievous way:

"You don't remember me, of course, Miss Quest, but when you were a very little girl I once saw you at the Grand Central Station in New York."

Stephanie, as yet too inexperienced a diplomat to forget such things, replied frankly that she remembered him perfectly. When it was too late, she blushed at her admission.

"That's unusually nice of you," he said. "Maybe it was my bad manners that impressed you, Miss Quest. I remember that I had never seen such a pretty little girl in my life, and I'm very sure I stared at you, and that you were properly annoyed."

He was laughing easily, as he spoke, and she laughed, too, still a trifle confused.

"I did think you rather rude," she admitted. "But what a long time ago that was! Isn't it *strange* that I should remember it? I can even recollect that you and my brother had had a fight in school and that dad made you both shake hands there in the station, before you went aboard the train... Naturally, I didn't feel kindly toward you," she added, laughingly.

"Jim and I are now on most amiable terms," he assured her, "so please feel kindly toward me now – kindly enough to give me one unimportant dance. Will you, Miss Quest?"

Later when he presented himself to claim the dance, her reception of him was unmistakably friendly.

He had grown up into a spare, loosely coupled, yet rather graceful young fellow, with hair and eyes that matched, both of a deep amber shade.

But there was in his bearing, in his carelessly attractive manner, in his gaze, a lurking hint of irresponsibility, perhaps of mischief, which did not, however, impress her disagreeably.

On the contrary, she felt oddly at ease with him, as though she had known him for some time.

"Have you forgiven me for staring at you so many years ago?" he inquired, smilingly.

She thought that she had.

But his next words startled her a little; he said, still smiling in his careless and attractive way:

"I have a queer idea that we're beginning in the middle of everything – that we've already known each other long enough to waive preliminaries and begin our acquaintance as old friends."

He was saying almost exactly what she had not put into words. He was still looking at her intently, curiously, with the same slightly importunate, slightly deferential smile which she now vividly remembered in the boy.

"Do you, by any chance, feel the same about our encounter?" he asked.

"What way?"

"That we seem to have known each other for a long time?"

Stephanie had not yet learned very much in the art of self-defense. A question to her still meant either a truthful answer or a silence. She remained silent.

"Do you, Miss Quest?" he persisted.

"Yes, I do."

"As though," he insisted, "you and I are beginning in the middle of the book of friendship instead of bothering to cut the pages of the preface?" he suggested gaily.

She laughed.

"You know," she warned him, "that I have not yet made up my mind about you."

"Oh. Concerning what are you in doubt?"

"Concerning exactly how I ought to consider you."

"As a friend, please."

"Perhaps. Are we going to dance or talk?"

After they had been dancing for a few moments:

"So you are a crew man?"

"Who told you?"

"I've inquired about you," she admitted, glancing sideways at the tall, spare, graceful young fellow with his almost golden colouring. "I have questioned various people. They told me things."

"Did they give me a black eye?" he asked, laughingly.

"No. But somebody gave you a pair of golden ones... Like two sun-spots on a brown brook. You've a golden look; do you know it?"

"Red-headed men turn that way when they're in the sun and wind," he explained, still laughing, yet plainly fascinated by the piquant, breezy informality of this young girl. "Tell me, do you still go to school, Miss Quest?"

"How insulting! ... Yes! But it was mean of you to ask."

"Good Lord! You didn't expect me to think you the mother of a family, did you?"

That mollified her.

"Where do you go to school?" he continued.

"Miss Montfort's. I finish this week."

"And then?"

"To college, I'm afraid."

"Don't you want to?"

"I'd rather go to a dramatic school."

"Is that your inclination, Miss Quest?"

"I'd adore it! But dad doesn't."

"Too bad."

"I don't know. I'm quite happy, anyway. I'm having a wonderful time, whatever I'm doing."

"Then it isn't an imperious call from Heaven to leave all and elevate the drama?" he asked, with a pretense of anxiety that made her laugh.

"You are disrespectful. I'm sure I could elevate the drama if I had the chance. But I sha'n't get it. However, next to the stage I adore to paint," she explained. "There is a class. I have attended it for two years. I paint rather nicely."

"No wonder we feel so friendly," exclaimed Grismer.

"Why? Do *you* paint?"

"No, but I'm to be a sculptor."

"How *wonderful*! I'm simply mad to do something, too! Don't you love the atmosphere of Bohemia, Mr. Grismer?"

He said that he did with a mischievous smile straight into her grey eyes.

"It is my dream," she went on, slightly confused, "to have a studio – not a bit fixed up, you know, and not frilly – but with just one or two wonderful old objects of art here and there and the rest a fascinating confusion of artistic things."

"Great!" he assented. "Please ask me to tea!"

"Wouldn't it be *wonderful*? And of course I'd work like fury until five o'clock every day, and then just have tea ready for the brilliant and interesting people who are likely to drop in to discuss the most wonderful things! Just think of it, Mr. Grismer! Think what a heavenly privilege it must be to live such a life, surrounded by inspiration and – and atmosphere and – and such things – and listening to the conversation of celebrated people telling each other all about art and how they became famous! What a lofty, exalted life! What a magnificent incentive to self-cultivation, attainment, and creative accomplishment! And yet, how charmingly informal and free from artificiality!"

Grismer also had looked forward to a professional career in Bohemia, with a lively appreciation of its agreeable informalities. And the irresponsibility and liberty – perhaps license – of such a life had appealed to him only in a lesser degree than the desire to satisfy his artistic proclivities with a block of marble or a fistful of clay.

"Yes," he repeated, "that is undoubtedly *the* life, Miss Quest. And it certainly seems as though you and I were cut out for it."

Stephanie sighed, lost in iridescent dreams of higher things – vague visions of spiritual and artistic levels from which, if attained, genius might stoop to regenerate the world.

But Grismer's amber eyes were brilliant with slumbering mischief.

"What do you think of Grismer, Steve?" inquired Jim Cleland, as they drove back to Boston that night, where his father, at the hotel, awaited them both.

"I really don't exactly know, Jim. Do you like him?"

"Sometimes. He's crew, Dicky, Hasty Pudding. He's a curious chap. You've got to hand him that, anyway."

"Cleverness?"

"Oh, more than that, I think. He's an artist through and through."

"Really!"

"Oh, yes. He's a bird on the box, too."

"*What!*"

"On the piano, Steve. He's the real thing. He sings charmingly. He draws better than Harry Beltran. He's done things in clay and wax – really wonderful things. You saw him in theatricals."

"Did I? Which was he?"

"Why, the *Duke of Brooklyn*, of course. He was practically the whole show!"

"I didn't know it," she murmured. "I did not recognize him. How clever he really is!"

"You hadn't met him then," remarked Jim.

"But I had seen him, once," she answered in a low, dreamy voice.

Jim Cleland glanced around at her. Again it struck him that Stephanie was growing up very rapidly into an amazingly ornamental girl – a sister to be proud of.

"Did you have a good time, Steve?" he asked.

"Wonderful," she sighed; smiling back at him out of sleepy eyes.

The car sped on toward Boston.

CHAPTER IX

Stephanie Quest was introduced to society when she was eighteen, and was not a success. She had every chance at her debut to prove popular, but she remained passive, charmingly indifferent to social success, not inclined to step upon the treadmill, unwilling to endure the exactions, formalities, sacrifices, and stupid routine which alone make social position possible. There was too much chaff for the few grains of wheat to interest her.

She wanted a career, and she wanted to waste no time about it, and she was delightfully certain that the path to it lay through some dramatic or art school to the stage or studio.

Jim laughed at her and teased her; but his father worried a great deal, and when Stephanie realized that he was worrying she became reasonable about the matter and said that the next best thing would be college.

"Dad," she said, "I adore dancing and gay dinner parties, but there is nothing else to them but mere dancing and eating. The trouble seems to be with the people – nice people, of course – but –"

"Brainless," remarked Jim, looking over his evening paper.

"No; but they all think and do the same things. They all have the same opinions, the same outlook. They all read the same books when they read at all, go to see the same plays, visit the same people. It's jolly to do it two or three times; but after a little while you realize that all these people are restless and don't know what to do with themselves; and it makes me restless – not for that reason – but because I *do* know what to do with myself – only you, darling –" slipping one arm around John Cleland's neck, " – don't approve."

"Yours is a restless sex, Steve," remarked Jim, still studying the evening paper. "You've all got the fidgets."

"A libel, my patronizing friend. Or rather a tribute," she added gaily, "because only a restless mind matures and accomplishes."

"Accomplishes what? Suffrage? Sex equality? You'll all perish with boredom when you get it, because there'll be nothing more to fidget about."

"He's just a bumptious boy yet, isn't he, Dad?"

Jim laughed and laid aside his paper:

"You're a sweet, pretty girl, Steve –"

"I'll slay you if you call me that!"

"Why not be what you look? Why not have a good time with all your might, marry when you wish, and become a perfectly –"

"Oh, Jim, you *are* annoying! Dad, is there anything more irritating than a freshly hatched college graduate? Or more maddeningly complacent? Look at your self-satisfied son! There he sits, after having spent the entire day in enjoyment of his profession, and argues that I ought to be satisfied with an idle day in which I have accomplished absolutely nothing! I'm afraid your son is a pig."

Jim laughed lazily:

"The restless sex is setting the world by the ears," he said tormentingly. "All this feminist business, this intrusion into man's affairs, this fidgety dissatisfaction with a perfectly good civilization, is spoiling you all."

"Is that the sort of thing you're putting into your wonderful novel?" she inquired.

"No, it's too unimportant –"

"Dad! Let's ignore him! Now, dear, if you feel as you do about a career for me at present, I really think I had better go to college. I do love pleasure, but somehow the sort of pleasure I'm supposed to enjoy doesn't last; and it's the people, I think, that tire one very quickly. It *does* make a difference in dancing, doesn't it? – not to hear an idea uttered during an entire evening – not to find anybody thinking for themselves –"

"Oh, Steve!" laughed Jim, "you're not expected to think at your age! All that society expects of you is that you chatter incessantly during dinner and the opera and do your thinking in a ballroom with your feet!"

She was laughing, but an unwonted colour brightened her cheeks as she turned on him from the padded arm of John Cleland's chair, where she had been sitting:

"If I really thought you meant that, Jim, I'd spend the remainder of my life in proving to you that I have a mind."

"Never mind him, Steve," said John Cleland. "If you wish to go to college, you shall."

"How about looking after us?" inquired Jim, alarmed.

"Dad, if my being here is going to make *you* more comfortable," she said, "I'll remain. Really, I am serious. Don't you want me to go?"

"Are you really so restless, Steve?"

"Mentally," she replied, with a defiant glance at Jim.

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