

ARLO BATES

LOVE IN A CLOUD: A
COMEDY IN FILIGREE

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I

THE MISCHIEF OF A MAID

"No, my dear May, I positively will not hear another word about 'Love in a Cloud.' I am tired to death of the very sound of its stupid name."

"Oh, Mrs. Harbinger," May Calthorpe responded, eagerly defensive, "it isn't a stupid name."

Mrs. Harbinger settled herself back into the pile of gay cushions in the corner of the sofa, and went on without heeding the interruption: —

"I have heard nothing but 'Love in a Cloud,' 'Love in a Cloud,' until it gives me a feeling of nausea. Nobody talks of anything else."

May nodded her head triumphantly, a bright sparkle in her brown eyes.

"That only shows what a perfectly lovely book it is," she declared.

Mrs. Harbinger laughed, and bent forward to arrange a ribbon at May's throat.

"I don't care if it is the loveliest book ever written," she responded; "I won't have it stuffed down my throat morning, noon, and night. Why, if you'll believe it, my husband, who never reads novels, not only read it, but actually kept awake over it, and after that feat he'll talk of it for months."

Pretty May Calthorpe leaned forward with more animation than the mere discussion of an anonymous novel seemed to call for, and caught one of her hostess's hands in both her own.

"Oh, did Mr. Harbinger like it?" she asked. "I am so interested to know what he thinks of it."

"You never will know from me, my dear," was the cool response. "I've forbidden him to speak of it. I tell you that I am bored to death with the old thing."

May started up suddenly from the sofa where she had been sitting beside Mrs. Harbinger. With rather an offended air she crossed to the fireplace, and began to arrange her hat before the mirror over the mantel. Mrs. Harbinger, smiling to herself, gave her attention to setting in order the cups on the tea-table before her. The sun of the April afternoon came in through the window, and from the polished floor of the drawing-room was reflected in bright patches on the ceiling; the brightness seemed to gather about the young, girlish face which looked out from the glass, with red lips and willful brown hair in tendrils over the white forehead. Yet as she faced her reflection, May pouted and put on the look of one aggrieved.

"I am sorry I mentioned the book if you are so dreadfully against it," she observed stiffly. "I was only going to tell you a secret about the author."

Mrs. Harbinger laughed lightly, flashing a comical grimace at her visitor's back.

"There you go again, like everybody else! Do you suppose, May, that there is anybody I know who hasn't told me a secret about the author? Why, I'm in the confidence of at least six persons who cannot deny that they wrote it."

May whirled around swiftly, leaving her reflection so suddenly that it, offended, as quickly turned its back on her.

"Who are they?" she demanded.

"Well," the other answered quizzically, "Mrs. Croydon, for one."

"Mrs. Croydon! Why, nobody could dream that she wrote it!"

"But they do. It must have been written by some one that is inside the social ring; and there is a good deal in the style that is like her other books. I do wish," she went on, with a note of vexation

in her voice, "that Graham would ever forget to mix up my two tea-services. He is a perfect genius for forgetting anything he ought to remember."

She walked, as she spoke, to the bell, and as she passed May the girl sprang impulsively toward her, catching both her hands.

"Oh, Mrs. Harbinger!" she cried breathlessly. "I must tell you something before anybody comes."

"Good gracious, May, what is it now? You are as impulsive as a pair of bellows that could blow themselves."

The butler came ponderously in, in reply to her ring as she spoke, and the two women for the moment suspended all sign of emotion.

"Graham," Mrs. Harbinger said, with the air of one long suffering and well-nigh at the end of her patience, "you have mixed the teacups again. Take out the tray, and bring in the cups with the broad gold band."

Graham took up the tray and departed, his back radiating protest until the portière dropped behind him. When he was gone Mrs. Harbinger drew May down to a seat on the sofa, and looked at her steadily.

"You evidently have really something to tell," she said; "and I have an idea that it's mischief. Out with it."

May drew back with heightened color.

"Oh, I don't dare to tell you!" she exclaimed.

"Is it so bad as that?"

"Oh, it isn't bad, only – Oh, I don't know what in the world you will think!"

"No matter what I think. I shan't tell you, my dear. No woman ever does that."

May regarded her with a mixture of curiosity and wistfulness in her look.

"You are talking that way just to give me courage," she said.

"Well, then," the other returned, laughing, "take courage, and tell me. What have you been doing?"

"Only writing letters."

"Only! Good gracious, May! writing letters may be worse than firing dynamite bombs. Women's letters are apt to be double-back-action infernal-machines; and girls' letters are a hundred times worse. Whom did you write to?"

"To the author of 'Love in a Cloud.'"

"To the author of 'Love in a Cloud'? How did you know him?"

Miss Calthorpe cast down her eyes, swallowed as if she were choking, and then murmured faintly: "I don't know him."

"What? Don't know him?" her friend demanded explosively.

"Only the name he puts on his book: Christopher Calumus."

"Which of course isn't his name at all. How in the world came you to write to him?"

The air of Mrs. Harbinger became each moment more judicially moral, while that of May was correspondingly humble and deprecatory. In the interval during which the forgetful Graham returned with the teacups they sat silent. The culprit was twisting nervously a fold of her frock, creasing it in a manner which would have broken the heart of the tailor who made it. The judge regarded her with a look which was half impatient, but full, too, of disapproving sternness.

"How could you write to a man you don't know," insisted Mrs. Harbinger, – "a man of whom you don't even know the name? How could you do such a thing?"

"Why, you see," stammered May, "I thought – that is – Well, I read the book, and – Oh, you know, Mrs. Harbinger, the book is so perfectly lovely, and I was just wild over it, and I – I –"

"You thought that being wild over it wasn't enough," interpolated the hostess in a pause; "but you must make a fool of yourself over it."

"Why, the book was so evidently written by a gentleman, and a man that had fine feelings," the other responded, apparently plucking up courage, "that I – You see, I wanted to know some things that the book didn't tell, and I –"

"You wrote to ask!" her friend concluded, jumping up, and standing before her companion. "Oh, for sheer infernal mischief commend me to one of you demure girls that look as if butter wouldn't melt in your mouths! If your father had known enough to have you educated at home instead of abroad, you'd have more sense."

"Oh, a girl abroad never would dare to do such a thing," May put in naïvely.

"But you thought that in America a girl might do what she pleases. Why, do you mean to tell me that you didn't understand perfectly well that you had no business to write to a man that you don't know? I don't believe any such nonsense."

May blushed very much, and hung her head.

"But I wanted so much to know him," she murmured almost inaudibly.

Mrs. Harbinger regarded her a moment with the expression of a mother who has reached that stage of exasperation which is next halting-place before castigation. Then she turned and walked vehemently up the drawing-room and back, a quick sprint which seemed to have very little effect in cooling her indignation.

"How long has this nonsense been going on?" she demanded, with a new sternness in her voice.

"For – for six weeks," answered May tearfully. Then she lifted her swimming eyes in pitiful appeal, and proffered a plea for mercy. "Of course I didn't use my own name."

"Five or six weeks!" cried Mrs. Harbinger, throwing up her hands.

"But at first we didn't write more than once or twice a week."

The other stared as if May were exploding a succession of torpedoes under her very nose.

"But – but," she stammered, apparently fairly out of breath with amazement, "how often do you write now?"

May sprang up in her turn. She faced her mentor with the truly virtuous indignation of a girl who has been proved to be in the wrong.

"I shan't tell you another word!" she declared.

Mrs. Harbinger seized her by the shoulders, and fairly pounced upon her in the swoop of her words.

"How often do you write now?" she repeated. "Tell me before I shake you!"

The brief defiance of May vanished like the flare of a match in a wind-storm.

"Every day," she answered in a voice hardly audible.

"Every day!" echoed the other in a tone of horror.

Her look expressed that utter consternation which is beyond any recognition of sin, but is aroused only by the most flagrant breach of social propriety. Again the culprit put in what was evidently a prayer for pity, couched in a form suggested by instinctive feminine cunning.

"Oh, Mrs. Harbinger, if you only knew what beautiful letters he writes!"

"What do I care for his beautiful letters? What did you want to drag me into this mess for? Now I shall have to do something."

"Oh, no, no, Mrs. Harbinger!" cried May, clasping her hands. "Don't do anything. You won't have to do anything. I had to tell you when he is coming here."

Mrs. Harbinger stared at the girl with the mien of one who is convinced that somebody's wits are hopelessly gone, and is uncertain whether they are those of herself or of her friend.

"Coming here?" she repeated helplessly. "When?"

"This afternoon. I am really going to meet him!" May ran on, flashing instantly from depression into smiles and animation. "Oh, I am so excited!"

Mrs. Harbinger seized the girl again by the shoulder, and this time with an indignation evidently personal as well as moral.

"Have you dared to ask a strange man to meet you at my house, May Calthorpe?"

The other cringed, and writhed her shoulder out of the clutch of her hostess.

"Of course not," she responded, taking in her turn with instant readiness the tone of just resentment. "He wrote me that he would be here."

The other regarded May in silence a moment, apparently studying her in the light of these new revelations of character. Then she turned and walked thoughtfully to a chair, leaving May to sit down again on the sofa by which they had been standing. Mrs. Harbinger was evidently going over in her mind the list of possible authors who might be at her afternoon tea that day.

"Then 'Love in a Cloud' was written by some one we know," she observed reflectively. "When did you write to him last?"

"When I was here yesterday, waiting for you to go to the matinée."

"Do you expect to recognize this unknown paragon?" asked Mrs. Harbinger with an air perhaps a thought too dispassionate.

A charming blush came over May's face, but she answered with perfect readiness: —

"He asked me to give him a sign."

"What kind of a sign?"

"He said he would wear any flower I named if I would —"

"Would wear one, too, you minx! That's why you have a red carnation at your throat, is it? Oh, you ought to be shut up on bread and water for a month!"

May showed signs of relapsing again into tears.

"I declare, I think you are just as horrid as you can be," she protested. "I wish I hadn't told you a word. I'm sure there was no need that I should. I —"

The lordly form of Graham the butler appeared at the drawing-room door.

"Mrs. Croydon," he announced.

II

THE MADNESS OF A MAN

While Mrs. Harbinger was receiving from May Calthorpe the disjointed confession of that young woman's rashness, her husband, Tom Harbinger, was having a rather confused interview with a client in his down-town office. The client was a middle-aged man, with bushy, sandy hair, and an expression of invincible simplicity not unmixed with obstinacy. Tom was evidently puzzled how to take his client or what to do with him. He had, as they talked, the air of being uncertain whether Mr. Barnstable was in earnest, and of not knowing how far to treat him seriously.

"But why do you come to me?" he asked at length, looking at his client as one regards a prize rebus. "Of course 'Love in a Cloud,' like any other book, has a publisher. Why don't you go there to find out who wrote it?"

The other shook his head wearily. He was a chunky man, seeming to be made largely of oleaginous material, and appearing to be always over-worn with the effort of doing anything with muscles and determination hopelessly flabby despite his continual persistence.

"I've been to them," he returned; "but they won't tell."

"Then why not let the matter pass? It seems to me – "

The other set his square jaw the more firmly amid its abundant folds of flabby flesh.

"Let it pass?" he interrupted with heavy excitement. "If something isn't done to stop the infernal impudence of these literary scribblers there will be no peace in life. There is nothing sacred! They ought to be punished, and I'll follow this rascal if it costs me every dollar I'm worth. I came to you because I thought you'd sympathize with me."

Mr. Harbinger moved uneasily in his chair like a worm on a hook.

"Why, really, Barnstable," he said, "I feel as you do about the impudence of writers nowadays, and I'd like to help you if I could; but – "

The other broke in with a solemn doggedness which might well discourage any hope of his being turned from his purpose by argument.

"I mean to bring suit for libel, and that's the whole of it."

"Perhaps then," the lawyer responded with ill concealed irritation, "you will be good enough to tell me whom the suit is to be against."

"Who should it be against? The author of 'Love in a Cloud,' of course."

"But we don't know who the author of that cursed book is."

"I know we don't know; but, damme, we must find out. Get detectives; use decoy advertisements; do anything you like. I'll pay for it."

Mr. Harbinger shrugged his shoulders, and regarded his client with an expression of entire hopelessness.

"But I'm not in the detective business."

The other gave no evidence of being in the least affected by the statement.

"Of course a lawyer expects to find out whatever is necessary in conducting his clients' business," he remarked, with the air of having disposed of that point. "There must be a hundred ways of finding out who wrote the book. An author ought not to be harder to catch than a horse-thief, and they get those every day. When you've caught him, you just have him punished to the extent of the law."

Harbinger rose from his chair and began to walk up and down with his hands in his pockets. The other watched him in silence, and for some moments nothing was said. At length the lawyer stopped before his client, and evidently collected himself for a final effort.

"But consider," he said, "what your case is."

"My case is a good case if there is any justice in the country. The man that wrote that book has insulted my wife. He has told her story in his confounded novel, and everybody is laughing over her divorce. It is infamous, Harbinger, infamous!"

He so glowed and smouldered with inner wrath that the folds of his fat neck seemed to soften and to be in danger of melting together. His little eyes glowed, and his bushy hair bristled with indignation. He doubled his fist, and shook it at Harbinger as if he saw before him the novelist who had intruded upon his private affairs, and he meant to settle scores with him on the spot.

"But nobody knew that you had a wife," Harbinger said. "You came here from Chicago without one, and we all thought that you were a bachelor."

"I haven't a wife; that's just the trouble. She left me four years ago; but I don't see that that makes any difference. I'm fond of her just the same; and I won't have her put into an anonymous book."

Harbinger sat down again, and drew his chair closer to that in which the other seethed, molten with impotent wrath.

"Just because there's a divorced woman in 'Love in a Cloud,'" he said, "you propose to bring a suit for libel against the author. If you will pardon me, it strikes me as uncommon nonsense."

Barnstable boiled up as a caldron of mush breaks into thick, spluttering bubbles.

"Oh, it strikes you as uncommon nonsense, does it? Damme, if it was your wife you'd look at it differently. Isn't it your business to do what your clients want done?"

"Oh, yes; but it's also my business to tell them when what they want is folly."

"Then it's folly for a man to resent an insult to his wife, is it? The divorce court didn't make a Pawnee Indian of me. My temper may be incompatible, but, damme, Harbinger, I'm human."

Harbinger began a laugh, but choked the bright little bantling as soon as it saw the light. He leaned forward, and laid his hand on the other's knee.

"I understand your feelings, Barnstable," he said, "and I honor you for them; but do consider a little. In the first place, there is no probability that you could make a jury believe that the novelist meant you and your wife at all. Think how many divorce suits there are, and how well that story would fit half of them. What you would do would be to drag to light all the old story, and give your wife the unpleasantness of having everything talked over again. You would injure yourself, and you could hardly fail to give very serious pain to her."

Barnstable stared at him with eyes which were full of confusion and of helplessness.

"I don't want to hurt her," he stammered.

"What do you want to do?"

The client cast down his eyes, and into his sallow cheeks came a dull flush.

"I wanted to protect her," he answered slowly; "and I wanted – I wanted to prove to her that – that I'd do what I could for her, if we were divorced."

The face of the other man softened; he took the limp hand of his companion and shook it warmly.

"There are better ways of doing it than dragging her name before the court," he said. "I tell you fairly that the suit you propose would be ridiculous. It would make you both a laughing-stock, and in the end come to nothing."

The square jaw was still firmly set, but the small eyes were more wistful than ever.

"But I must do something," Barnstable said. "I can't stand it not to do anything."

Harbinger rose with the air of a man who considers the interview ended.

"There is nothing that you can do now," he replied. "Just be quiet, and wait. Things will come round all right if you have patience; but don't be foolish. A lawyer learns pretty early in his professional life that there are a good many things that must be left to right themselves."

Barnstable rose in turn. He seemed to be trying hard to adjust his mind to a new view of the situation, but it was evident enough that his brain was not of the sort to yield readily to fresh ideas

of any kind. He examined his hat carefully, passing his thumb and forefinger round the rim as if to assure himself that it was all there; then he cleared his throat, and regarded the lawyer wistfully.

"But I must do something," he repeated, with an air half apologetic. "I can't just let the thing go, can I?"

"You can't do anything but let it go," was the answer. "Some time you will be glad that you did let it be. Take my word for it."

Barnstable shook his head mournfully.

"Then you take away my chance," he began, "of doing something –"

He paused in evident confusion.

"Of doing something?" repeated Harbinger.

"Why, something, you know, to please –"

"Oh, to please your wife? Well, just wait. Something will turn up sooner or later. Speaking of wives, I promised Mrs. Harbinger to come home to a tea or some sort of a powwow. What time is it?"

"Yes, a small tea," Barnstable repeated with a queer look. "Pardon me, but is it too intrusive in me to ask if I may go home with you?"

Harbinger regarded him in undisguised amazement; and quivers of embarrassment spread over Barnstable's wavelike folds of throat and chin.

"Of course it seems to you very strange," the client went on huskily; "and I suppose it is etiquettsionally all wrong. Do you think your wife would mind much?"

"Mrs. Harbinger," the lawyer responded, his voice much cooler than before, "will not object to anybody I bring home."

The acquaintance of the two men was no more than that which comes from casual meetings at the same club. The club was, however, a good one, and membership was at least a guarantee of a man's respectability.

"I happen to know," Barnstable proceeded, getting so embarrassed that there was reason to fear that in another moment his tongue would cleave to the roof of his mouth and his husky voice become extinct altogether, "that a person that I want very much to see will be there; and I will take it as very kind – if you think it don't matter, – that is, if your wife –"

"Oh, Mrs. Harbinger won't mind. Come along. Wait till I get my hat and my bag. A lawyer's green bag is in Boston as much a part of his dress as his coat is."

The lawyer stuffed some papers into his green bag, rolled down the top of his desk, and took up his hat. The visitor had in the meantime been picking from his coat imaginary specks of lint and smoothing his unsmoothable hair.

"I hope I look all right," Barnstable said nervously. "I – I dressed before I came here. I thought perhaps you would be willing –"

"Oh, ho," interrupted Harbinger. "Then this whole thing is a ruse, is it? You never really meant to bring a suit for libel?"

The face of the other hardened again.

"Yes, I did," was his answer; "and I'm by no means sure that I've given it up yet."

III

THE BABBLE OF A TEA

The entrance of Mrs. Croydon into Mrs. Harbinger's drawing-room was accompanied by a rustling of stuffs, a fluttering of ribbons, and a nodding of plumes most wonderful to ear and eye. The lady was of a complexion so striking that the redness of her cheeks first impressed the beholder, even amid all the surrounding luxuriance of her toilet. Her eyes were large and round, and of a very light blue, offering to friend or foe the opportunity of comparing them to turquoise or blue china, and so prominent as to exercise on the sensitive stranger the fascination of a deformity from which it seems impossible to keep the glance. Mrs. Croydon was rather short, rather broad, extremely consequential, and evidently making always a supreme effort not to be overpowered by her overwhelming clothes. She came in now like a yacht decorated for a naval parade, and moving before a slow breeze.

Mrs. Harbinger advanced a step to meet her guest, greeting the new-comer in words somewhat warmer than the tone in which they were spoken.

"How do you do, Mrs. Croydon. Delighted to see you."

"How d' y' do?" responded the flutterer, an arch air of youthfulness struggling vainly with the unwilling confession of her face that she was no longer on the sunny side of forty. "How d' y' do, Miss Calthorpe? Delighted to find you here. You can tell me all about your cousin Alice's engagement."

Miss Calthorpe regarded the new-comer with a look certainly devoid of enthusiasm, and replied in a tone not without a suggestion of frostiness: —

"On the contrary I did not know that she was engaged."

"Oh, she is; to Count Shimbowski."

"Count Shimbowski and Alice Endicott?" put in Mrs. Harbinger. "Is that the latest? Sit down, Mrs. Croydon. Really, it doesn't seem to me that it is likely that such a thing could be true, and the relatives not be notified."

She reseated herself as she spoke, and busied herself with the tea-equipage. May rather threw herself down than resumed her seat.

"Certainly it can't be true," the latter protested. "The idea of Alice's being engaged and we not know it!"

"But it's true; I have it direct," insisted Mrs. Croydon; "Miss Wentstile told Mr. Bradish, and he told me."

May sniffed rather inelegantly.

"Oh, Miss Wentstile! She thinks because Alice is her niece she can do what she likes with her. It's all nonsense. Alice has always been fond of Jack Neligage. Everybody knows that."

Mrs. Croydon managed somehow to communicate to her innumerable streamers and pennants a flutter which seemed to be meant to indicate violent inward laughter.

"Oh, what a child you are, Miss Calthorpe! I declare, I really must put you into my next novel. I really must!"

"May is still so young as to be romantic, of course," Mrs. Harbinger remarked, flashing at her young friend a quick sidewise glance. "Besides which she has been educated in a convent; and in a convent a girl must be either imaginative or a fool, or she'll die of ennui."

"I suppose you never were romantic yourself," put in May defensively.

"Oh, yes, my dear; I had my time of being a fool. Why, once I even fell violently in love with a man I had never seen."

The swift rush of color into the face of Miss Calthorpe might have arrested the attention of Mrs. Croydon, but at that moment the voice of Graham interrupted, announcing: —

"Mr. Bradish; Mr. Neligage."

The two men who entered were widely different in appearance.

That Mr. Bradish was considerably the elder was evident from his appearance, yet he came forward with an eager air which secured for him the first attention. He was lantern-jawed, and sanguine in color. Near-sight glasses unhappily gave to his eyes an appearance of having been boiled, and distorted his glance into an absurd likeness to a leer. A shadow of melancholy, vague yet palpable, softened his face, and was increased by the droop of his Don Quixote like yellow mustaches. The bald spot on his head and the stoop in his shoulders betrayed cruelly the fact that Harry Bradish was no longer young; and no less plainly upon everything about him was stamped the mark of a gentleman.

Jack Neligage, on the other hand, came in with a face of irresistible good nature. There was a twinkle in his brown eyes, a spark of humor and kindness which could evidently not be quenched even should there descend upon him serious misfortune. His face was still young enough hardly to show the marks of dissipation which yet were not entirely invisible to the searching eye; his hair was crisp and abundant; his features regular and well formed. He was a young fellow so evidently intended by nature for pleasure that to expect him to take life seriously would have seemed a sort of impropriety. An air of youth, and of jocund life, of zest and of mirthfulness came in with Jack, inevitably calling up smiles to meet him. Even disapproval smiled on Jack; and it was therefore not surprising if he evaded most of the reproofs which are apt to be the portion of an idle pleasure-seeker. He moved with a certain languid alertness that was never hurried and yet never too late. This served him well on the polo-field, where he was deliberately swift and swiftly deliberate in most effective fashion. He came into the drawing-room now with the easy mien of a favorite, yet with an indifference which seemed so natural as to save him from all appearance of conceit. He had the demeanor of the conscious but not quite spoiled darling of fortune.

"You are just in time for the first brewing of tea," Mrs. Harbinger said, when greetings had been exchanged. "This tea was sent me by a Russian countess who charged me to let nobody drink it who takes cream. It is really very good if you get it fresh."

"To have the tea and the hostess both fresh," Mr. Bradish responded, "will, I fear, be too intoxicating."

"Never mind the tea," broke in Mrs. Croydon. "I am much more interested in what we were talking about. Mr. Bradish, you can tell us about Count Shimbowski and Alice Endicott."

Jack Neligage turned about with a quickness unusual in him.

"The Count and Miss Endicott?" he demanded. "What about them? Who's had the impertinence to couple their names?"

Mrs. Croydon put up her hands in pretended terror, a hundred tags of ribbon fluttering as she did so.

"Oh, don't blame me," she said. "I didn't do it. They're engaged."

Neligage regarded her with a glance of vexed and startled disfavor. Then he gave a short, scornful laugh.

"What nonsense!" he said. "Nobody could believe that."

"But it's true," put in Bradish. "Miss Wentstile herself told me that she had arranged the match, and that I might mention it."

Neligage looked at the speaker an instant with a disbelieving smile on his lip; and tossing his head went to lean his elbow on the mantel.

"Arranged!" he echoed. "Good heavens! Is this a transaction in real estate?"

"Marriage so often is, Mr. Neligage," observed Mrs. Harbinger, with a smile.

Bradish began to explain with the solemn air which he had. He was often as obtuse and matter-of-fact as an Englishman, and now took up the establishment of the truth of his news with as much gravity as if he were setting forth a point of moral doctrine. He seemed eager to prove that he had at least been entirely innocent of any deception, and that whatever he had said must be blamelessly credible.

"Of course it's extraordinary, and I said so to Miss Wentstile. She said that as the Count is a foreigner, it was very natural for him to follow foreign fashions in arranging the marriage with her instead of with Alice."

"And she added, I've no doubt," interpolated Mrs. Harbinger, "that she entirely approved of the foreign fashion."

"She did say something of that sort," admitted Bradish, with entire gravity.

Mrs. Harbinger burst into a laugh, and trimmed the wick of her tea-lamp. Neligage grinned, but his pleasant face darkened instantly.

"Miss Wentstile is an old idiot!" said he emphatically.

"Oh, come, Mr. Neligage," remonstrated his hostess, "that is too strong language. We must observe the proprieties of abuse."

"And say simply that she is Miss Wentstile," suggested Mrs. Croydon sweetly.

The company smiled, with the exception of May, whose face had been growing longer and longer.

"I don't care what she says," the girl burst out indignantly; "I don't believe Alice will listen to such a thing for one minute."

"Perhaps she won't," Bradish rejoined doubtfully, "but Miss Wentstile is famous for having her own way. I'm sure I shouldn't feel safe if she undertook to marry me off."

"She might take you for herself if she knew her power, Mr. Bradish," responded Mrs. Croydon. "No more tea, my dear, thank you."

"For Heaven's sake don't mention it then," he answered. "It's enough to have Jack here upset. The news is evidently too much for him."

"What news has upset my son, Mr. Bradish?" demanded a crisp voice from the doorway. "I shall disown him if he can't hide his feelings."

Past Graham, who was prepared to announce her, came a little woman, bright, vivacious, sparkling; with clear complexion and mischievous dimples. A woman trimly dressed, and in appearance hardly older than the son she lightly talked of disowning. The youthfulness of Mrs. Neligage was a constant source of irritation to her enemies, and with her tripping tongue and defiant independence she made enemies in plenty. Her gypsyish beauty and clear skin were offenses serious enough; but for a woman with a son of five and twenty to look no more than that age herself was a vexation which was not to be forgiven. Some had been spiteful enough to declare that she preserved her youth by being entirely free from feeling; but since in the same breath they were ready to charge the charming widow with having been by her emotions carried into all sorts of improprieties, the accusation was certainly to be received with some reservations. Certainly she was the fortunate possessor of unfailing spirits, of constant cleverness, and delightful originality. She had the courage, moreover, of daring to do what she wished with the smallest possible regard for conventions; and it has never been clearly shown how much independence of conventionality and freedom of life may effect toward the preservation of a woman's youth.

She evidently understood the art of entering a room well. She came forward swiftly, yet without ungraceful hurry. She nodded brightly to the ladies, gave Bradish the momentary pleasure of brushing her finger-tips with his own as she passed him, then went forward to shake hands with Mrs. Harbinger. Without having done anything in particular she was evidently entire mistress of the situation, and the rest of the company became instantly her subordinates. Mrs. Croydon, almost twice her size and so elaborately overdressed, appeared suddenly to have become dowdy and ill at ease; yet nothing could have been more unconscious or friendly than the air with which the new-comer turned from the hostess to greet the other lady. There are women to whom superiority so evidently belongs by nature that they are not even at the trouble of asserting it.

"Oh, Mrs. Neligage," Mrs. Croydon said, as she grasped at the little glove which glanced over hers as a bird dips above the water, "you have lived so much abroad that you should be an authority on foreign marriages."

"Just as you, having lived in Chicago, should be an authority on un-marriages, I suppose. Well, I've had the fun of disturbing a lot of foreign marriages in my day. What marriage is this?"

"We were speaking of Miss Wentstile's proposing to marry Alice to Count Shimbowski," explained Mrs. Harbinger.

"Then," returned Mrs. Neligage lightly, "you had better speak of something else as quickly as possible, for Alice and her aunt are just behind me. Let us talk of Mrs. Croydon's anonymous novel that's made such a stir while I've been in Washington. What is it? 'Cloudy Love'! That sounds tremendously improper. My dear, if you don't wish to see me fall in a dead faint at your feet, do give me some tea. I'm positively worn out."

She seated herself near Mrs. Croydon, over whose face during her remarks had flitted several expressions, none of them over-amiable, and watched the hostess fill her cup.

"Come, Mrs. Neligage," protested Bradish with an air of mild solicitation. "You are really too bad, you know. It isn't 'Cloudy Love,' but 'Love in a Cloud.' I didn't know that you confessed to writing it, Mrs. Croydon."

"Oh, I don't. I only refuse to deny it."

"Oh, well, now; not to deny is equivalent to a confession," he returned.

"Not in the least," Mrs. Neligage struck in. "When you are dealing with a woman, Mr. Bradish, it isn't safe even to take things by contraries."

IV

THE TICKLING OF AN AUTHOR

The entrance of Miss Wentstile and her niece Alice Endicott made the company so numerous that it naturally broke up into groups, and the general conversation was suspended.

Miss Wentstile was a lady of commanding presence, whose youth was with the snows of yester year. She had the eye of a hawk and the jaw of a bulldog; nor was the effect of these rather formidable features softened by the strong aquiline nose. Her hair was touched with gray, but her color was still fresh and too clear not to be natural. She was richly dressed in dark green and fur, her complexion making the color possible in spite of her years. She was a woman to arouse attention, and one, too, who was evidently accustomed to dominate. She cast a keen glance about her as she crossed the room to her hostess, sweeping her niece along with her not without a suggestion that she dragged the girl as a captive at her chariot-wheel.

Jack Neligage stepped forward as she passed him, evidently with the intention of intercepting the pair, or perhaps of gaining a word with Alice Endicott.

"How do you do, Miss Wentstile," he said. "I am happy to see you looking so well."

"There is no reason why I should not look well, Mr. Neligage," she responded severely. "I never sit up all night to smoke and drink and play cards."

Neligage smiled his brightest, and made her a bow of mock deference.

"Indeed, Miss Wentstile," he responded, "I am delighted to know that your habits have become so correct."

She retorted with a contemptuous sniff, and by so effectually interposing between him and her niece that Miss Endicott could only nod to him over her aunt's shoulder. Jack made a grimace more impertinent than courtly, and for the time turned away, while the two ladies went on to Mrs. Harbinger.

"Well, Alice," Mrs. Harbinger said, "I am glad you have come at last. I began to think that I must appoint a substitute to pour in your place."

"I am sorry to be so late," Miss Endicott responded, as she and her hostess exchanged places. "I was detained unexpectedly."

"I kept her," Miss Wentstile announced with grim suddenness. "I have been talking to her about –"

"Aunt Sarah," interposed Alice hurriedly, "may I give you some tea?"

"Don't interrupt me, Alice. I was talking to her about –"

Mrs. Harbinger looked at the crimsoning cheeks of Alice, and meeting the girl's imploring glance, gave her a slight but reassuring nod.

"My dear Miss Wentstile," she said, "I know you will excuse me; but here are more people coming."

Miss Wentstile could hardly finish her remarks to the air, and as Mrs. Harbinger left her to greet a new arrival the spinster turned sharply to May Calthorpe, who had snuggled up to Alice in true school-girl fashion.

"Ah, May," Miss Wentstile observed, "what do you settle down there for? Don't you know that now you have been brought out in society you are expected to make your market?"

"No, Miss Wentstile," May responded; "if my market can't make itself, then it may go unmade."

The elder turned away with another characteristic sniff, and Alice and May were left to themselves. People were never tired of condemning Miss Wentstile for her brusque and naked remarks; but after all society is always secretly grateful for any mortal who has the courage to be individual. The lady was often frank to the verge of rudeness; she was so accustomed to having

her own way that one felt sure she would insist upon it at the very Judgment Seat; she said what she pleased, and exacted a deference to her opinions and to her wishes such as could hardly under existing human conditions be accorded to any mortal. Miss Wentstile must have been too shrewd not to estimate reasonably well the effect of her peculiarities, and no human being can be persistently eccentric without being theatrical. It was evident enough that she played in some degree to the gallery; and undoubtedly from this it is to be argued that she was not without some petty enjoyment in the notoriety which her manners produced. Should mankind be destroyed, the last thing to disappear would probably be human vanity, which, like the grin of the Cheshire cat in "Alice," would linger after the race was gone. Vanity in the individual is nourished by the notice of others; and if Miss Wentstile became more and more confirmed in her impertinences, it is hardly to be doubted that increase of vanity was the cause most active. She outwardly resented the implication that she was eccentric; but as she contrived continually and even complacently to become steadily more so, society might be excused for not thinking her resentment particularly deep. Dislike for notoriety perhaps never cured any woman of a fault; and certainly in the case of Miss Wentstile it was not in the least corrective.

The relations between Miss Wentstile and Alice Endicott were well known. Alice was the doubly orphaned daughter of a gallant young officer killed in a plucky skirmish against superior force in the Indian troubles, and of the wife whose heart broke at his loss. At six Alice was left, except for a small pension, practically penniless, and with no nearer relative than Miss Wentstile. That lady had undertaken the support of the child, but had kept her much at school until the girl was sixteen. Then the niece became an inmate of her aunt's house, and outwardly, at least, the mere slave of the older lady's caprices. Miss Wentstile was kind in her fashion. In all that money bought she was generous. Alice was richly dressed, she might have what masters she wished, be surrounded by whatever luxuries she chose. As if the return for these benefits was to be implicit obedience, Miss Wentstile was impatient of any show toward herself of independence. If Alice could be imagined as bearing herself coldly and haughtily toward the world in general, – a possibility hardly to be conceived of, – Miss Wentstile might be pictured glorying in such a display of proper spirit; but toward her aunt the girl was expected to be all humility and concession. As neither was without the pride which belonged to the Wentstile blood, it is easy to see that perfect harmony was not to be looked for between the pair. Alice had all the folly of girlhood, which is so quick to refuse to be bullied into affection; which is so blind as not to perceive that an elder who insists upon its having no will of its own is providing excellent lessons in the high graces of humility and meekness. Clever observers – and society remains vital chiefly in virtue of its clever observers – detected that Miss Wentstile chafed with an inward consciousness that the deference of her niece was accorded as a courtesy and not as a right. The spinster had not the tact to avoid betraying her perception that the submission of Alice was rather outward than inward, and the public sense of justice was somewhat appeased in its resentment at her domineering treatment by its enjoyment of her powerlessness either to break the girl's spirit or force her into rebellion.

The fondness of Alice for Jack Neligage was the one tangible thing with which Miss Wentstile could find fault; and this was so intangible after all that it was difficult to seize upon it. Nobody doubted that the two were warmly attached. Jack had never made any effort to hide his admiration; and while Alice had been more circumspect, the instinct of society is seldom much at fault in a matter of this sort. For Miss Wentstile to be sure that her niece favored the man of all others most completely obnoxious, and to bring the offense home to the culprit were, however, matters quite different. Now that Miss Wentstile had outdone herself in eccentricity by boldly adopting the foreign fashion of a *mariage de convenance*, there was every reason to believe that the real power of the spinster would be brought to the test. Nobody doubted that behind this absurd attempt to make a match between Alice and Count Shimbowski lay the determination to separate the girl from Jack Neligage; and it was inevitable that the struggle should be watched for with eager interest.

The first instant that there was opportunity for a confidential word, May Calthorpe rushed precipitately upon the subject of the reported engagement.

"Oh, Alice," she said, in a hurried half-whisper, "do you know that Miss Wentstile says she has arranged an engagement between you and that horrid Hungarian Count."

Alice turned her long gray eyes quickly to meet those of her companion.

"Has she really told of it?" she demanded almost fiercely.

"They were all talking of it before you came in," May responded.

Her voice was deepened, apparently by a tragic sense of the gravity of the subject under discussion; yet she was a bud in her first season, so that it was impossible that there should not also be in her tone some faint consciousness of the delightfully romantic nature of the situation.

An angry flush came into the cheek of Miss Endicott. She was not a girl of striking face, although she had beautiful eyes; but there was a dignity in her carriage, an air of birth and breeding, which gave her distinction anywhere. She possessed, moreover, a sweet sincerity of character which made itself subtly felt in her every tone and movement. Now she knit her forehead in evident perplexity and resentment.

"But did they believe it?" she asked.

"Oh, they would believe anything of Miss Wentstile, of course," May replied. "We all know Aunt Sarah too well not to know that she is capable of the craziest thing that could be thought of."

She picked out a fat bonbon as she spoke, and nibbled it comfortably, as if thoroughly enjoying herself.

"But what can I do?" demanded Alice pathetically. "I can't stand up here and say: 'Ladies and gentlemen, I really have no idea of marrying that foreign thing Aunt Sarah wants to buy for me.'"

Whatever reply May might have made was interrupted by the arrival of a gentleman with an empty teacup. The new-comer was Richard Fairfield, a young man of not much money but of many friends, and of literary aspirations. As he crossed the drawing-room Mrs. Neligage carelessly held out to him her cup and saucer.

"As you are going that way, Richard," she said without preface of salutation, "do you mind taking my cup to the table?"

"Delighted, of course," he answered, extending his hand for it.

"If Mrs. Neligage will permit me," broke in Mr. Bradish, darting forward. "I beg ten thousand pardons for not perceiving –"

"But Mrs. Neligage will not permit you, Mr. Bradish," she responded brightly. "I have already commissioned Richard."

Fairfield received the cup, and bore it away, while Bradish cast upon the widow a glance of reproach and remonstrance.

"You women all pet a rising author," he said. "I suppose it's because you all hope to be put in his books."

"Oh, no. On the contrary it is because we hope to be left out."

"I don't see," he went on with little apparent relevancy, "why you need begrudge me the pleasure of doing you a small favor."

"I don't wish you to get too much into the habit of doing small favors," she responded over her shoulder, as she turned back to the group with which she had been chatting. "I am afraid that if you do, you'll fail when I ask a great one."

Fairfield made his way to the table where Alice was dispensing tea. He was by her welcomed cordially, by May with a reserve which was evidently absent-minded regret that he should break in upon her confidences with her cousin. He exchanged with Alice the ordinary greetings, and then made way for a fresh arrival who wished for tea. May responded rather indifferently to his remarks as he took a chair at the end of the sofa upon which she was seated, seeming so absorbed that in a moment he laughed at some irrelevant reply which she gave.

"You did not understand what I said," he remarked. "I didn't mean –"

"I beg your pardon," she interrupted, turning toward him. "I was thinking of something I was talking about with Alice, and I didn't mind what you did say."

"I am sorry that I interrupted."

"Oh, everybody interrupts at an afternoon tea," she responded, smiling. "That is what we are here for, I suppose. I was simply in a cloud –"

Fairfield returned her smile with interest.

"Is that an allusion?"

May flushed a little, and put her hand consciously to the carnation at her throat.

"Oh, no," she answered, with a little too much eagerness. "I can talk of something beside that book. Though of course," she added, "I do think it is a perfectly wonderful story. There is so much heart in it. Why, I have read it so much that I know parts of it almost word for word."

"Then you don't think it is cynical?"

"Oh, not the least in the world! How can anybody say that? I am ashamed of you, Mr. Fairfield."

"I didn't mean that I thought it cynical; but lots of folk do, you know."

May tossed her hands in a girlish gesture of disdain.

"I hate people that call everything cynical. It is a thing that they just say to sound wise. 'Love in a Cloud' is to me one of the truest books I ever read. Why, you take that scene where she tells him she cares for him just the same in spite of his disgrace. It brings the tears into my eyes every time I read it."

A new light came into the young man's face as she spoke in her impulsive, girlish fashion. He was a handsome fellow, with well-bred face. He stroked his silky mustache with an air not unsuggestive of complacency.

"It is delightful," said he, "to find somebody who really appreciates the book for what is best in it. Of course there are a great many people who say nice things about it, but they don't seem to go to the real heart of it as you do."

"Oh, the story has so much heart," she returned. Then she regarded him quizzically. "You speak almost as if you had written it yourself."

"Oh, I – That is – Why, you see," he answered, in evident confusion, "I suppose that my being an embryo literary man myself makes it natural for me to take the point of view of the author. Most readers of a novel, you know, care for nothing but the plot, and see nothing else."

"Oh, it is not the plot," May cried enthusiastically. "I like that, of course, but what I really care for is the feeling in the book."

Jack Neligage, with his eyes on Alice Endicott, had made his way over to the tea-table, and came up in time to hear this.

"The book, Miss Calthorpe?" he repeated. "Oh, you must be talking of that everlasting novel. I wish I had had the good luck to write it."

"Oh, I should adore you if you had, Mr. Neligage."

"By Jove, then I'll swear I did write it."

Fairfield regarded the girl with heightened color.

"You had better be careful, Miss Calthorpe," he commented. "The real author might hear you."

She started in pretty dismay, and covered with her hand the flower nestling under her chin.

"Oh, he is not here!" she cried.

"How do you know that?" demanded Jack laughingly.

She sank back into the corner of the sofa with a blush far deeper than could be called for by the situation.

"Oh, I just thought so," she said. "Who is there here that could have written it?"

"Why, Dick here is always scribbling," Neligage returned, with a chuckle. "Perhaps you have been telling him what you thought of his book."

The face of Fairfield grew suddenly sober.

"Come, Jack," he said, rising, "that's too stupid a joke to be worthy of you."

He was seized at that moment by Mrs. Harbinger, who presented him to Miss Wentstile. Fairfield had been presented to Miss Wentstile a dozen times in the course of the two winters since he had graduated at Harvard and settled in Boston; but since she never seemed to recognize him, he gave no sign of remembering her.

"Miss Wentstile," the hostess said, "don't you know Mr. Fairfield? He is one of our literary lights now, you know."

"A very tiny rushlight, I am afraid," the young man commented.

Miss Wentstile examined him with critical impertinence through her lorgnette.

"Are you one of the Baltimore Fairfields?" she asked.

"No; my family came from Connecticut."

"Indeed!" she remarked coolly. "I do not remember that I ever met a person from Connecticut before."

The lips of the young man set themselves a little more firmly at this impertinence, and there came into his eyes a keen look.

"I am pleased to be the humble means of increasing your experience," he said, with a bow.

Miss Wentstile had the appearance of being anxious to quarrel with somebody, a fact which was perhaps due to the conversation which she had had with her niece as they came to the house. Alice had been ordered to be especially gracious to Count Shimbowski, and had respectfully but succinctly declared her intention to be as cold as possible. Miss Wentstile had all her life indulged in saying whatever she felt like saying, little influenced by the ordinary restraints of conventionality and not at all by consideration for the feelings of others. She had gone about the room that afternoon being as disagreeable as possible, and her rudeness to Fairfield was milder than certain things which were at that very moment being resented and quoted in the groups which she had passed. She glared at the young man now as if amazed that he had dared to reply, and unfortunately she ventured once more.

"Thank you," she said. "Even the animals in the Zoo increase one's experience. It is always interesting to meet those that one has heard chattered about."

He made her a deeper bow.

"I know," he responded with a manner coolly polite. "I felt it myself the first half dozen times I had the honor to be presented to you; but even the choicest pleasures grow stale on too frequent repetition."

Miss Wentstile glared at him for half a minute, while he seemed to grow pale at his own temerity. Then a humorous smile lightened her face, and she tapped him approvingly on the shoulder with her gold lorgnette.

"Come, come," she said briskly but without any sharpness, "you must not be impertinent to an old woman. You will hold your own, I perceive. Come and see me. I am always at home on Wednesdays."

Miss Wentstile moved on looking less grim, but her previous sins were still to be atoned for, and Mrs. Neligage, who knew nothing of the encounter between the spinster and Fairfield, was watching her opportunity. Miss Wentstile came upon the widow just as a burst of laughter greeted the conclusion of a story.

"And his wife is entirely in the dark to this day," Mrs. Neligage ended.

"That is – ha, ha! – the funniest thing I've heard this winter," declared Mr. Bradish, who was always in the train of Mrs. Neligage.

"I think it's horrid!" protested Mrs. Croydon, with an entirely unsuccessful attempt to look shocked. "I declare, Miss Wentstile, they are gossiping in a way that positively makes me blush."

"So you see that the age of miracles is not past after all," put in Mrs. Neligage.

"Mrs. Neligage has lived abroad so much," Miss Wentstile said severely, "that I fear she has actually forgotten the language of civility."

"Not to you, my dear Miss Wentstile," was the incorrigible retort. "My mother taught me to be civil to you in my earliest youth."

And all that the unfortunate lady, thus cruelly attacked, could say was, —

"I wish you remembered all your mother taught you half as well!"

V THE BLAZING OF RANK

The usual mass of people came and went that afternoon at Mrs. Harbinger's. It was not an especially large tea, but in a country where the five o'clock tea is the approved method of paying social grudges there will always be a goodly number of people to be asked and many who will respond. The hum of talk rose like the clatter of a factory, the usual number of conversations were begun only to end as soon as they were well started; the hostess fulfilled her duty of interrupting any two of her guests who seemed to be in danger of getting into real talk; presentations were made with the inevitable result of a perfunctory exchange of inanities; and in general the occasion was very like the dozen other similar festivities which were proceeding at the same time in all the more fashionable parts of the city.

As time wore on the crowd lessened. Many had gone to do their wearisome duty of saying nothing at some other five o'clock; and the rooms were becoming comfortable again. The persons who had come early were lingering, and one expert in social craft might have detected signs that their remaining so long was not without some especial reason.

"If he is coming," Mrs. Neligage observed to Mr. Bradish, "I wish he would come. It is certainly not very polite of him not to arrive earlier if he is really trying to pass as the slave of Alice."

"Oh, he is always late," Bradish answered. "If you had not been in Washington you would have heard how he kept Miss Wentstile's dinner waiting an hour the other day because he couldn't make up his mind to leave the billiard table."

Mrs. Neligage laughed rather mockingly.

"How did dear Miss Wentstile like that?" asked she. "It is death for any mortal to dare to be late at her house, and she does not approve of billiards."

"She was so taken up with berating the rest of us for his tardiness that when he appeared she had apparently forgotten all about his being to blame in anything."

"She loves a title as she loves her life," Mrs. Neligage commented. "She would marry him herself and give him every penny she owns just to be called a countess for the rest of her life."

A stir near the door, and the voice of Graham announcing "Count Shimbowski" made them both turn. A brief look of intelligence flashed across the face of the widow.

"It is he," she murmured as if to herself.

"Do you know him?" demanded Bradish.

"Oh, I used to see him abroad years ago," was her answer. "Very likely he will have forgotten me."

"That," Bradish declared, with a profound bow, "is impossible."

The Count made his way across the drawing-room with a jaunty air not entirely in keeping with the crow's-feet at the corners of his eyes. He was tall and wiry, with sandy hair and big mustaches. He showed no consciousness that he was being stared at, but with admirable self-possession saluted his hostess.

"How do you do, Count?" Mrs. Harbinger greeted him. "We began to think you were not coming."

"Ah, how do, Mees Harbeenger. Not to come eet would be to me too desolate. *Bon jour*, my dear Mees Wentsteele. I am so above-joyed to encountair you'self here. My dear Mees Endeecott, I kees your feengair."

"Beast!" muttered Jack Neligage to Fairfield. "I should like to cram a fistful of his twisted-up sentences down his snaky throat!"

"He must open his throat with a corkscrew in the morning," was the reply.

Miss Wentstile was smiling her most gracious.

"How do you feel to-day, Count?" she asked. "Does our spring weather affect you unpleasantly?"

The Count made a splendid gesture with both his hands, waving in the right the monocle which he more often carried than wore.

"Oh, what ees eet de weder een one land w'ere de peoples so heavenly keent ees?" he demanded oratorically. "Only eet ees Mees Endeecott do keel me wid her so great cheelleeness."

Miss Endicott looked up from her seat at the tea-table beside which the group stood. Her air was certainly sufficiently cold to excuse the Count for feeling her chilliness; and she answered without a glimmer of a smile.

"I'm not cruel," she said. "I wouldn't hurt a worm."

"But," the Count responded, shaking his head archly, "eet ees dat I be not a worm."

"I thought that all men were worms of the dust," Mrs. Harbinger observed.

The Count bowed his tall figure with finished grace.

"And all de weemens," he declared, "aire angles!"

"It is our sharpness, then, that is to be admired," Alice commented.

"Of course, Alice," Miss Wentstile corrected vixenishly, "the Count means angels."

"So many men," Alice went on without showing other sign of feeling than a slight flush, "have turned a woman from an angel into an angle."

"I do comprehend not," the Count said.

"It is no matter, Count," put in the hostess. "She is only teasing you, and being rude into the bargain. You will take tea? Alice, pour the Count some tea."

Alice took up a cup.

"How many lumps?" she asked.

"Loomps? Loomps? Oh, eet weel be sugaire een de tea. Tree, eef you weel be so goot weedeen eet."

Just as the Count, with profuse expressions of overwhelming gratitude to have been permitted so great an honor, had received his tea from the hand of Miss Endicott, and Miss Wentstile was clearing her throat with the evident intention of directing toward him some profound observation, Mrs. Neligaze came briskly forward with outstretched hand.

"It would be generous of you, Count," she said, "to recognize an old friend."

He stared at her with evident astonishment.

"*Ciel!*" he exclaimed. "Ah, but eet weel be de *belle* Madame Neleegaze!"

She laughed as she shook hands, her dark eyes sparkling with fun.

"As gallant as ever, Count. It is good of you to remember me after so many years."

The Count regarded her with a look so earnest that he might easily be supposed to remember from the past, whatever and whenever it had been, many things of interest. Miss Wentstile surveyed the pair with an expression of keen suspicion.

"Louisa," she demanded, "where did you know the Count?"

The Count tried to speak, but Mrs. Neligaze was too quick for him.

"It was at – Where was it, Count? My memory for places is so bad," she returned mischievously.

"Yees," he said eagerly. "Eet weel have been Paris *certainement*, ees eet not?"

She laughed more teasingly yet, and glanced swiftly from him to Miss Wentstile. She was evidently amusing herself, though the simple question of the place of a former meeting might not seem to give much opportunity.

"That doesn't seem to me to have been the place," she remarked. "Paris? Let me see. I should have said that it was –"

The remark was not concluded, for down went the Count's teacup with a splash and a crash, with startings and cries from the ladies, and a hasty drawing away of gowns. Miss Endicott, who

had listened carefully to the talk, took the catastrophe coolly enough, but with a darkening of the face which seemed to show that she regarded the accident as intentional. The Count whipped out his handkerchief, and went down on his knee instantly to wipe the hem of Miss Wentstile's spattered frock; while Mrs. Neligage seemed more amused than ever.

"Oh, I am deesconsolate forever!" the Count exclaimed, in tones which were pathetic enough to have made the reputation of an actor. "I am broken een de heart, Mees Wentsteele."

"It is no matter," Miss Wentstile said stiffly.

A ring of the bell brought Graham to repair the damage as far as might be, and in the confusion the Count moved aside with the widow.

"That was not done with your usual skill, Count," she said mockingly. "It was much too violent for the occasion."

"But for what you speak of Monaco here?" he demanded fiercely. "De old Mees Wentsteele say dat to play de card for money ees villain. She say eet is murderous. She say she weel not to endure de man dat have gamboled."

"And you have gamboled in a lively manner in your time, Count. It's an old pun, but it would be new to you if you could understand it."

"I don't understand," he said savagely in French.

"No matter. It wasn't worth understanding," she answered, in the same tongue. "But you needn't have been afraid. I'm no spoil-sport. I shouldn't have told."

"She is an old prude," he went on, smiling, and showing his white teeth. "If she knew I had been in a duel, she would know me no more."

"She will not know from me."

"As lovely and as kind as ever," he responded. "Ah, when I remember those days, when I was young, and you were just as you are now –"

"Old, that is."

"Oh, no; young, always young as when I knew you first. When I was at your feet with love, and your countryman was my rival –"

Mrs. Neligage began to look as if she found the tables being turned, and that she had no more wish to have the past brought up than had the Count. She turned away from her companion. Then she looked back over her shoulder to observe, still in French, as she left him: —

"I make it a point never to remember those days, my friend."

VI

THE MISCHIEF OF A WIDOW

There were now but ten guests left, the persons who have been named, and who seemed for the most part to be lingering to observe the Count or Alice Endicott. May Calthorpe had all the afternoon kept near Alice, and only left her place when the sopping up of the Count's tea made it necessary for her to move. Mrs. Harbinger took her by the arm, and looked into her face scrutinizingly.

"Well," she asked, "did your unknown author come?"

"Nobody has come with a carnation. Oh, I am so disappointed!"

"I am glad of it, my dear."

"But he said he would come if I'd give him a sign, and I wrote to him while I was waiting for you yesterday."

"So you told me."

"Well," May echoed dolefully; "I think you might be more sympathetic."

"What did you do with the letter?" asked Mrs. Harbinger.

"I gave it to Graham to post."

"Then very likely no harm is done. Graham never in his life posted a letter under two days."

"Oh, do you think so?" May asked, brightening visibly at the suggestion. "You don't think he despised me, and wouldn't come?"

Mrs. Harbinger gave her a little shake.

"You hussy!" she exclaimed, with too evident an enjoyment of the situation to be properly severe. "How was it addressed?"

"Just to Christopher Calumus, in care of the publishers."

"Well, my dear," the hostess declared, "your precious epistle is probably in the butler's pantry now; or one of the maids has picked it up from the kitchen floor. I warn you that if I can find it I shall read it."

"Oh, you wouldn't!" exclaimed May in evident distress.

"Um! Wouldn't I, though? The way you take the suggestion shows that it's time somebody looked into your correspondence with this stranger."

May opened her lips to protest again, but the voice of Graham was heard announcing Mr. Barnstable, and Mrs. Harbinger turned to greet the late-coming stranger. The gentleman's hair had apparently been scrubbed into sleekness, but had here and there broken through the smooth outer surface as the stuffing of an old cushion breaks through slits in the covering. His face was red, and his air full of self-consciousness. When he entered the drawing-room Mr. Harbinger was close behind him, but the latter stopped to speak with Bradish and Mrs. Neligage, and Barnstable advanced alone to where Mrs. Harbinger stood with May just behind her.

"Heavens, May," the hostess said over her shoulder. "Here is your carnation. I hope you are pleased with the bearer."

Barnstable stood hesitating, looking around as if to discover the hostess. On the face of Mrs. Croydon only was there sign of recognition. She bowed at him rather than to him, with an air so distant that no man could have spoken to her after such a frigid salutation. The stranger turned redder and redder, made a half step toward Mrs. Croydon, and then stopped. Fortunately Mr. Harbinger hastened up, and presented him to the hostess. That lady greeted him politely, but she had hardly exchanged the necessary commonplaces, before she put out her hand to where May stood watching in dazed surprise.

"Let me present you to Miss Calthorpe," she said. "Mr. Barnstable, May."

She glided away with a twinkle in her eye which must have implied that she had no fear in leaving the romantic girl with a lover that looked like that. May and Barnstable stood confronting each other a moment in awkward silence, and then the girl tossed her head with the air of a young colt that catches the bit between his teeth.

"I had quite given you up," she said in a voice low, but distinct.

"Eh?" he responded, with a startled look. "Given me up?"

"I have been watching for the carnation all the afternoon."

"Carnation?" he echoed, trying over his abundant chins to get a glimpse of the flower in his buttonhole. "Oh, yes; I generally wear a carnation. They keep, don't you know; and it was always the favorite flower of my wife."

"Your wife?" demanded Miss Calthorpe.

Her cheeks grew crimson, and she drew herself up haughtily.

"Yes," Barnstable replied, looking confused. "That is, of course, she that was my wife."

"I should never have believed," May observed distantly, "that 'Love in a Cloud' could have been written by a widower."

Barnstable began to regard her as if he were in doubt whether she or he himself had lost all trace of reason.

"'Love in a Cloud,'" he repeated, "'Love in a Cloud'? Do you know who wrote that beastly book?"

Her color shot up, and the angry young goddess declared itself in every line of her face. Her pose became instantly a protest.

"How dare you speak of that lovely book in that way?" she demanded. "It is perfectly exquisite!"

"But who wrote it?" he demanded in his turn, growing so red as to suggest awful possibilities of apoplexy.

"Didn't you?" she stammered. "Are you running it down just for modesty?"

"I! I! I write 'Love in a Cloud'?" cried Barnstable, speaking so loud that he could be heard all over the room. "You insult me, Miss – Miss Calthump! You –"

His feelings were evidently too much for him. He turned with rude abruptness, and looking about him, seemed to become aware that the eyes of almost everybody in the room were fixed on him. He cast a despairing glance to where Mrs. Harbinger and Mrs. Croydon were for the moment standing together, and then started in miserable flight toward the door. At the threshold he encountered Graham the butler, who presented him with a handful of letters.

"Will you please give the letters to Mrs. Harbinger?" Graham said, and vanished.

Barnstable looked after the butler, looked at the letters, looked around as if his head were swimming, and then turned back into the drawing-room. He walked up to the hostess, and held out the letters in silence, his fluffy face a pathetic spectacle of embarrassed woe.

"What are these?" Mrs. Harbinger asked.

He shook his head, as if he had given up all hope of understanding anything.

"The butler put them in my hands," he murmured.

"Upon my word, Mrs. Harbinger," spoke up Mrs. Croydon, seeming more offended than there was any apparent reason for her to be, "you have the most extraordinary butler that ever existed."

Mrs. Harbinger threw out her hands in a gesture by which she evidently disclaimed all responsibility for Graham and his doings.

"Extraordinary! Why, he makes my life a burden. There is no mistake he cannot make, and he invents fresh ones every day. Really, I know of no reason why the creature is tolerated in the house except that he makes a cocktail to suit Tom."

"Dat ees ver' greet veertue," Count Shimbowski commented genially.

"I do not agree with you, Count," Miss Wentstile responded stiffly.

The spinster had been hovering about the Count ever since his accident with the teacup, apparently seeking an opportunity of snubbing him.

"Oh, but I die but eef Mees Wentsteele agree of me!" the Count declared with his hand on his heart.

Mrs. Croydon in the meanwhile had taken the letters from the hand of Barnstable, and was looking at them with a scrutiny perhaps closer than was exactly compatible with strict good-breeding.

"Why, here is a letter that has never been posted," she said.

Mr. Harbinger took the whole bundle from her hand.

"I dare say," was his remark, "that any letter that's been given to Graham to mail in the last week is there. Why, this letter is addressed to Christopher Calumus."

May Calthorpe moved forward so quickly that Mrs. Harbinger, who had extended her hand to take the letters from her husband, turned to restrain the girl. Mrs. Croydon swayed forward a little.

"That is the author of 'Love in a Cloud,'" she said with a simper of self-consciousness.

Mrs. Neligage, who was standing with Bradish and Alice at the moment, made a grimace.

"She'll really have the impudence to take it," she said to them aside. "Now see me give that woman a lesson."

She swept forward in a flash, and deftly took the letter out of Tom Harbinger's hand before he knew her intention. Flourishing it over her head, she looked them all over with eyes full of fun and mischief.

"Honor to whom honor is due," she cried. "Ladies and gentlemen, be it my high privilege to deliver this to its real and only owner. Count," she went on, sweeping him a profound courtesy, "let your light shine. Behold in Count Shimbowski the too, too modest author of 'Love in a Cloud.'"

There was a general outburst of amazement. The Count looked at the letter which had been thrust into his hand, and stammered something unintelligible.

"*Vraiment*, Madame Neleegaze," he began, "eet ees too mooch of you –"

"Oh, don't say anything," she interrupted him. "I have no other pleasure in life than doing mischief."

Mrs. Croydon looked from the Count to Mrs. Neligage with an expression of mingled doubt and bewilderment. Her attitude of expecting to be received as the anonymous author vanished in an instant, and vexation began to predominate over the other emotions visible in her face.

"Well," she said spitefully, "it is certainly a day of wonders; but if the letter belongs to the Count, it would be interesting to know who writes to him as Christopher Calumus."

Mrs. Harbinger answered her in a tone so cold that Mrs. Croydon colored under it.

"Really, Mrs. Croydon," she said, "the question is a little pointed."

"Why, it is only a question about a person who doesn't exist. There isn't any such person as Christopher Calumus. I'm sure I'd like to know who writes to literary men under their assumed names."

May was so pale that only the fact that everybody was looking at Mrs. Harbinger could shield her from discovery. The hostess drew herself up with a haughty lifting of the head.

"If it is of so great importance to you," she said, "it is I who wrote the letter. Who else should write letters in this house?"

She extended her hand to the Count as she spoke, as if to recover the harmless-looking little white missive which was causing so much commotion, but the Count did not offer to return it. Tom Harbinger stood a second as if amazement had struck him dumb. Then with the air of a puppet pronouncing words by machinery he ejaculated: —

"You wrote to the Count?"

His wife turned to him with a start, and opened her lips, but before she could speak a fresh interruption prevented. Barnstable in the few moments during which he had been in the room had met with so many strange experiences that he might well be bewildered. He had been greeted by

May as one for whom she was waiting, and then had been hailed as the author of the book which he hated; the eccentric Graham had made of him a sort of involuntary penny-post; he had been in the midst of a group whisking a letter about like folk in the last act of a comedy; and now here was the announcement that the Count was the anonymous libeler for whom he had been seeking. He dashed forward, every fold of his chins quivering, his hair bristling, his little eyes red with excitement. He shook his fist in the face of the Count in a manner not often seen in a polite drawing-room.

"You are a villain," he cried. "You have insulted my wife!"

Bradish and Mr. Harbinger at once seized him, and between them he was drawn back gesticulating and struggling. The ladies looked frightened, but with the exception of Mrs. Croydon they behaved with admirable propriety. Mrs. Croydon gave a little yapping screech, and fell back in her chair in hysterics. More complete confusion could hardly have been imagined, and Mrs. Neligage, who looked on with eyes full of laughter, had certainly reason to congratulate herself that if she loved making mischief she had for once at least been most instantly and triumphantly successful.

VII

THE COUNSEL OF A MOTHER

If an earthquake shook down the house in which was being held a Boston function, the persons there assembled would crawl from the ruins in a manner decorous and dignified, or if too badly injured for this would compose with decency their mangled limbs and furnish the addresses of their respective family physicians. The violent and ill-considered farce which had been played in Mrs. Harbinger's drawing-room might elsewhere have produced a long-continued disturbance; but here it left no trace after five minutes. Mr. Barnstable, babbling and protesting like a lunatic, was promptly hurried into confinement in the library, where Mr. Harbinger and Bradish stood guard over him as if he were a dangerous beast; while the other guests made haste to retire. They went, however, with entire decorum. Mrs. Croydon was, it is true, a disturbing element in the quickly restored serenity of the party, and was with difficulty made to assume some semblance of self-control. Graham, being sent to call a carriage, first caught a forlorn herdic, which was prowling about like a deserted tomcat, and when the lady would none of this managed to produce a hack which must have been the most shabby in the entire town. The Count was taken away by Miss Wentstile, who in the hour of his peril dropped the stiffness she had assumed at his recognition of Mrs. Neligage. She dragged Alice along with them, but Alice in turn held on to May, so that the Count was given no opportunity to press his suit. They all retired in good order, and however they talked, they at least behaved beautifully.

As Neligage took his hat in the hall Fairfield caught him by the arm.

"Jack," he said under his breath, "do you believe Mrs. Harbinger wrote me those letters?"

"Of course not," Jack responded instantly. "Not if they are the sort of letters you said. Letty Harbinger is as square as a brick."

"Then why did she say she did?"

Jack rubbed his chin thoughtfully.

"The letter was evidently written here," he said. "She must know who did write it."

"Ah, I see!" exclaimed the other. "She was shielding somebody."

Jack regarded him with sudden sternness.

"There was nobody that it could be except –"

He broke off abruptly, a black look in his face, and before another word could be exchanged Mrs. Neligage called him. He went off with his mother, hastily telling his friend he would see him before bedtime.

Mrs. Neligage was hardly up to her son's shoulder, but so well preserved was she that she might easily have been mistaken for a sister not so much his senior. She was admirably dressed, exquisitely gloved and booted, to the last fold of her tailor-made frock entirely correct, and in her manner provokingly and piquantly animated.

"Who in the world was that horror that made the exhibition of himself?" she asked. "I never saw anything like that at the Harbingers' before."

"I know nothing about him except that his name is Barnstable, and that he came from the West somewhere. He's joined the Calif Club lately. How he got in I don't understand; but he seems to have loads of money."

"He is a beast," Mrs. Neligage pronounced by way of dismissing the subject. "What did Mrs. Harbinger mean by thanking you for arranging something with the Count? What have you to do with him?"

"Oh, that is a secret."

"Then if it is a secret tell it at once."

"I'll tell you just to disappoint you," Jack returned with a grin. "It is only about some etchings that the Count brought over. Mrs. Harbinger has bought a couple as a present for Tom."

"She had better be careful," Mrs. Neligage observed. "Tom thinks more of the collection now than he does of anything else in the world. But what are you mixed up in the Count's transactions for?"

"She asked me to fix it, and besides the poor devil needed to sell them to raise the wind. I'm too used to being hard up myself not to feel for him."

"But you wrote me that you detested the Count."

"So I do, but you can't help doing a fellow a good turn, can you, just because you don't happen to like him?"

She laughed lightly.

"You are a model of good nature. I wish you'd show it to May Calthorpe."

Her son looked down at her with a questioning glance.

"She is always at liberty to admire my virtues, of course; but she can't expect me to put myself out to make special exhibitions for her benefit."

The faces of both mother and son hardened a little, as if the subject touched upon was one concerning which they had disagreed before. The change of expression brought out a subtle likeness which had not before been visible. Jack Neligage was usually said to resemble his father, who had died just as the boy was entering his teens, but when he was in a passion – a thing which happened but seldom – his face oddly took on the look of his mother. The change, moreover, was not entirely to his disadvantage, for as a rule Jack showed too plainly the easy-going, self-indulgent character which had been the misfortune of the late John Neligage, and which made friends of the family declare with a sigh that Jack would never amount to anything worth while.

Mother and son walked on in silence a moment, and then the lady observed, in a voice as dispassionate as ever: —

"She is a silly little thing. I believe even you could wind her round your finger."

"I haven't any intention of trying."

"So you have given me to understand before; but now that I am going away you might at least let me go with the consolation of knowing you'd provided for yourself. You must marry somebody with money, and she has no end of it."

He braced back his shoulders as if he found it not altogether easy not to reply impatiently.

"Where are you going?" he asked.

"Oh, to Europe. Anywhere out of the arctic zone of the New England conscience. I've had as long a spell of respectability as I can stand, my boy."

Something in her manner evidently irritated him more and more. She spoke with a little indefinable defiant swagger, as if she intended to anger him. He looked at her no longer, but fixed his gaze on the distance.

"When you talk of giving up respectability," he remarked in an aggrieved tone, "I should think you might consider me."

Her eyes danced, as if she were delighted to see him becoming angry.

"Oh, I do, Jack, I assure you; but I really cannot afford to be respectable any longer. Respectability is the most expensive luxury of civilization; and how can I keep it up when I'm in debt to everybody that'll trust me."

"Then you might economize."

"Economize! Ye gods! This from you, Jack! Where did you hear the word? I'm sure you know nothing of the thing."

He laughed in evident self-despite.

"We are a nice pair of ruffianly adventurers," he responded; "a regular pair of genteel paupers. But we've both got to pull up, I tell you."

"Oh, heavens!" was his mother's reply. "Don't talk to me of pulling up. What fun do I have as it is but quarreling with Miss Wentstile and snubbing Harry Bradish? I've got to keep up my authority in our set, or I should lose even these amusements."

Jack flashed her a swift, questioning look, and with a new note in his voice, a note of doubt at once and desperation, blurted out a fresh question.

"How about flirting with Sibley Langdon?"

Mrs. Neligage flushed slightly and for a brief second contracted her well-arched eyebrows, but in an instant she was herself again.

"Oh, well," she returned, with a pretty little shrug, "that of course is a trifle better, but not much. Sibley really cares for himself so entirely that there's very little to be got out of him."

"But you know how you make folks talk."

"Oh, folks always talk. There is always as much gossip about nothing as about something."

"But he puts on such a damnable air of proprietorship," Jack burst out, with much more feeling than he had thus far shown. "I know I shall kick him some time."

"That is the sort of thing you had better leave to the Barnstable man," she responded dryly. "Sibley only has the air of owning everything. That's just his nature. He's really less fun than good old Harry Bradish. But such as he is, he is the best I can do. If that stuffy old invalid wife of his would only die, I think I'd marry him out of hand for his money."

Jack threw out his arm with an angry gesture.

"For Heaven's sake, mother," he said, "what are you after that you are going on so? You know you drive me wild when you get into this sort of a talk."

"Or I might elope with him as it is, you know," she continued in her most teasing manner; but watching him intently.

"What in the deuce do you talk to me like that for!" he cried, shaking himself savagely. "You're my mother!"

Mrs. Neligage grew suddenly grave. She drew closer to her son, and slipped her hand through his arm.

"So much the worse for us both, isn't it, Jack? Come, we may as well behave like rational beings. Of course I was teasing you; but that isn't the trouble. It's yourself you are angry with."

"What have I to be angry with myself about?"

"You are trying to make up your mind that you're willing to be poor for the sake of marrying Alice Endicott; but you know you wouldn't be equal to it. If I thought you would, I'd say go ahead. Do you think you'd be happy in a South End apartment house with the washing on a line between the chimneys, and a dry-goods box outside the window for a refrigerator?"

Jack mingled a groan and a laugh.

"You can't pay your debts as it is," she went on remorselessly. "We are a pair of paupers who have to live as if we were rich. You see what your father made of it, starting with a fortune. You can't suppose you'd do much better when you've nothing but debts."

"I think I'll enlist, or run away to sea," Jack declared, tugging viciously at his mustache.

"No, you'll accept your destiny. You'll like it better than you think, when you're settled down to it. You'll stay here and marry May Calthorpe."

"You must think I'm a whelp to marry a girl just for her money."

"Oh, you must fall in love with her. Any man is a wretch who'd marry a girl just for her money, but a man's a fool that can't fall in love with a pretty girl worth half a million."

Jack dropped his mother's hand from his arm with more emphasis than politeness, and stopped to face her on the corner of the street.

"The very Old Boy is in you to-day, mother," he said. "I won't listen to another word."

She regarded him with a saucy, laughing face, and put out her hand.

"Well, good-night then," she said. "Come in and see me as soon as you can. I have a lot of things to tell you about Washington. By the way, what do you think of my going there, and setting up as a lobbyist? They say women make no end of money that way."

He swung hastily round, and left her without a word. She went on her way, but her face turned suddenly careworn and haggard as she walked in the gathering twilight toward the little apartment where she lived in fashionable poverty.

VIII THE TEST OF LOVE

One of the distinctive features of "good society" is that its talk is chiefly of persons. Less distinguished circles may waste precious time on the discussion of ideas, but in company really select such conversation is looked upon as dull and pedantic. One of the first requisites for entrance into the world of fashion is a thorough knowledge of the concerns of those who are included in its alluring round; and not to be informed in this branch of wisdom marks at once the outsider. It follows that concealment of personal affairs is pretty nearly impossible. Humanity being frail, it frequently happens that fashionable folk delude themselves by the fond belief that they have escaped the universal law of their surroundings; but the minute familiarity which each might boast of all that relates to his neighbors should undeceive them. That of which all the world talks is not to be concealed.

Everybody in their set knew perfectly well that Jack Neligage had been in love with Alice Endicott from the days when they had paddled in the sand on the walks of the Public Garden. The smart nursery maids whose occupation it was to convey their charges thither and keep them out of the fountains, between whiles exchanging gossip about the parents of the babies, had begun the talk. The opinions of fashionable society are generally first formed by servants, and then served up with a garnish of fancifully distorted facts for the edification of their mistresses; and in due time the loves of the Public Garden, reported and decorated by the nursery maids, serve as topics for afternoon calls. Master Jack was known to be in love with Miss Alice before either of them could have written the word, and in this case the passion had been so lasting that it excited remark not only for itself as an ordinary attachment, but as an extraordinary case of unusual constancy.

Society knew, of course, the impossibility of the situation. It was common knowledge that neither of the lovers had anything to marry on. Jack's handsome and spendthrift father had effectually dissipated the property which he inherited, only his timely death preserving to Mrs. Neligage and her son the small remnant which kept them from actual destitution. Alice was dependent upon the bounty of her aunt, Miss Wentstile. Miss Wentstile, it is true, was abundantly able to provide for Alice, but the old lady seriously disapproved of Jack Neligage, and of his mother she disapproved more strongly yet. Everybody said – and despite all the sarcastic observations of that most objectionable class, the satirists, what everybody says nobody likes to disregard – that if Jack and Alice were so rash as to marry they would never touch a penny of the aunt's money. Jack, moreover, was in debt. Nobody blamed him much for this, because he was a general favorite, and all his acquaintance recognized how impossible it was for a young man to live within an income so small as from any rational point of view to be regarded as much the same thing as no income at all; but of course it was recognized also that it is not well in the present day to marry nothing upon a capital of less than nothing. It has been successfully done, it is true; but it calls for more energy and ingenuity than was possessed by easy-going Jack Neligage. In view of all these facts, frequently discussed, society was unanimously agreed that Jack and Alice could never marry.

This impossibility excited a faint sort of romantic sympathy for the young couple. They were invited to the same houses and thrown together, apparently with the idea that they should play with fire as steadily and as long as possible. The unphrased feeling probably was that since the culmination of their hopes in matrimony was out of the question, it was only common humanity to afford them opportunities for getting from the ill-starred attachment all the pleasure that was to be had. Society approves strongly of romance so long as it stops short of disastrous marriages; and since Jack and Alice were not to be united, to see them dallying with the temptation of making an imprudent match was a spectacle at once piquant and diverting.

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