

**ELLIOTT
FRANCIS
PERRY**

THE HAUNTED PAJAMAS

Francis Elliott

The Haunted Pajamas

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Содержание

| | |
|-----------------------------------|----|
| CHAPTER I | 5 |
| CHAPTER II | 8 |
| CHAPTER III | 12 |
| CHAPTER IV | 16 |
| CHAPTER V | 19 |
| CHAPTER VI | 24 |
| CHAPTER VII | 27 |
| CHAPTER VIII | 33 |
| CHAPTER IX | 37 |
| Конец ознакомительного фрагмента. | 39 |

Francis Perry Elliott

The Haunted Pajamas

CHAPTER I

A PRESENT FROM CHINA

It was the first thing I saw that night as I swung into my chambers. Fact is, for the moment, it was the only thing I saw. Somehow, its splash of yellow there under the shaded lamp seemed to catch my eye and hold it.

I screwed my glass tight and examined the thing with interest. Nothing remarkable; just a tiny, oblong package, bearing curious foreign markings, its wrapper plainly addressed to me, but —

"By Jove! From China!" I ejaculated.

Somebody in far-off China sending me a present, with duties and charges prepaid evidently.

What the deuce was it? I shook it without getting any revelation; then I weighed it in my hand.

The thing was devilish light! In fact, so light that, allowing for outside wrapper and box, dashed if I could see how there was anything at all.

Then I had an awful thought: Suppose, by Jove, they had forgotten to inclose the thing — whatever it was! Jolly tiresome, that, if they had. I felt devilish annoyed.

Really, awfully provoking to do that sort of thing, you know; and I was jolly sure now the dashed thing had been wrapped up empty. I wondered what silly ass I knew in China who would be likely to do a thing like that. I couldn't think of any one at all I knew in China, so I rang for Jenkins.

"Anybody I know in China, Jenkins?" I asked. And to help him out, I added: "Fact is, some chap's sent me a package, you know."

"Name on box, sir, perhaps." Said it offhand, just like that — no trouble of thinking, dash it all — never even blinked. Just instinct, by Jove!

And there it was, nicely printed in the corner with a pen:

Roland Mastermann, Government House, Hong Kong, China

I read it aloud — can't read anything, you know, unless I read it aloud — and looked at Jenkins inquiringly. But he came right up to the scratch; just seemed to get it from somewhere right out of the wall over my head:

"Beg pardon, sir; but think it's that London gentleman — entertained you at the Carlton when you were over the other side."

Mastermann! By Jove, so it was — I began to remember him now, because I remembered his dinner, several of them, in fact, during the three years I had lived over there, acquiring the English accent — manner, you know — and all that sort of thing!

Mastermann — oh, yes, I had him, now! Jolly rum old boy, but entertaining and clever — long hair, pink wart on jaw! And, by Jove, I had promised him — promised him — what the deuce *was* it I had promised him? Let me see: he was something or other in the foreign office; yes, I had that — and tremendously interested in mummies and psychical investigation and rum sort of things like that, and —

"By Jove!" I ejaculated, as it came to me. "And for that reason he wanted them to send him out to China."

"Beg pardon, sir," put in Jenkins, "but think you had a letter with a Chinese postmark last week."

He looked around at my little writing-desk and coughed slightly behind his hand.

"Was just a-wondering, sir, if it might not be among those you haven't opened – there are several piles. If I might look, sir – "

I nodded. Fact is, I allow Jenkins much privilege, owing to long service. Then, you know – oh, dash it, he's so original – so refreshing and that sort of thing – so surprising. Just as in this case, he thinks of so many devilishly ingenious, out-of-the-way sort of things!

It was Jenkins' idea that I find out what was in the box by just *opening* the dashed thing while he looked for the letter.

Clever that, eh? Well, rather!

So I unsheathed my little pocket manicure knife, cut the strings and removed the wrapper. Inside was just a little, straw-covered box with a telescope cover and inside the box, wrapped in tissue, was a tight roll of bright red silk.

That was all – not another thing but this little silk roll. It was a wad as thick as three fingers and perhaps twice as long, tied with a bit of common string, ending in a loose bowknot.

I gripped my glass a bit tighter in my eye and took a long shot at the thing. But dashed if I could make anything out of it at all. You see, the string went around it at least three or four times. Such a devilish secretive way to fix a thing, don't you think?

A queer, sweet, spicy sort of odor swept past me that reminded me of the atmosphere at Santine's and places in the Metropolitan Art Museum. I sat down, the better to think it over, turning the little roll in my hand and trying to think of all the things it might be.

"Looks like it might be a red silk muffler, Jenkins," I exclaimed in disgust. By Jove, I was never so devilish disappointed in my life – never – I'm sure of it! If I had been a girl I should have cried – dash it, I know I should.

I pinched the roll gloomily.

"If it's a red silk muffler, Jenkins, catch me wearing it, that's all!" I burst out indignantly. "Rotten bad form, if you ask *me*. I'd look like an out-and-out bounder!"

Then I had a horrible thought:

"Or – or the Salvation Army, dash it!"

Here Jenkins thrust a letter at me. "Perhaps this may explain it, sir," he suggested.

Sure enough, it was from Hong Kong, and from that chap, Mastermann. Out there on special mission for his government, he said. I don't know what it was – never did know, in fact, for I skipped down to this paragraph, which I read aloud:

"Every puff of those rare cigars you sent me has but reminded me that my debt to you is still unpaid."

I read thus far; then I read it again. But I could make nothing of it.

"Cigars – cigars?" I exclaimed, puzzled.

Then I forgot the letter as I stared at Jenkins.

"And what's the matter with *you*?" I demanded.

For I had caught him with his hand over his mouth, obviously trying to suppress a chuckle. He sobered instantly, but seemed embarrassed for a reply.

"Oh, I say, you know!" I urged him.

He started to speak, then pulled up. His breath went out in a sort of sigh. And he just stood there looking at me, and looking kind of scared.

Fact! Perfectly irreproachable service for five years; and now here, dash it, showing emotion and that sort of thing, just like – well, like *people*, by Jove! Gad, I don't mind saying I was devilish put out! I screwed my glass rather severely and he made another go:

"I hope, Mr. Lightnut, sir, you'll try to pardon me, sir, but I – Well, indeed, sir, the mistake wasn't mine; it was the dealer's fault, you know, sir."

"Oh!"

I stared, polished my glass and nodded. I even chirped up a smile, but I didn't utter a word. Dash it, what *was* there to say? But you mustn't let *them* know that, you know. So I just waited, and he squirmed a little and went on:

"It was too late after he told me about the mistake; and I was – well, I was afraid to mention it to you, sir."

"Mistake! What mistake?"

He gulped; dashed if I didn't think he was going to choke.

"I – I'm sure, sir, I wouldn't have had such a thing happen for – "

I could stand it no longer.

"Oh, I say! I haven't any idea what you're talking about!"

Jenkins cleared his throat with an effort, his eyes rolling at me apologetically. When he spoke there was a tremble in his utterance, and it was rather husky:

"Why, sir," he began in a low tone, "you told me to have your dealer ship this gentleman, this Mr. Mastermann, a dozen boxes of Paloma perfectos – your favorite brand, you know, sir – ninety dollars the hundred."

He paused, his fingers resting tremblingly on the edge of the table.

"I dare say," I yawned presently. "Well, what of it?" I was getting impatient. By Jove, he was making me downright nervous, don't you know! Besides, I was so devilish anxious to get on with Mastermann's letter. I wanted to find out, if possible, what it was the fellow had sent me.

Jenkins breathed hard and leaned toward me. Then he seemed to flunk again and dropped back. Dashed if I didn't think I heard him groan! But I stared at him through my glass, and he swallowed hard and went on:

"An error, sir, of the shipping clerk. He – "

With a murmured apology, Jenkins paused to wipe his forehead. I saw that the perspiration had gathered in great drops. Then he seemed to gather himself for a resolute effort, his eyes fixing themselves upon me with the most extraordinary expression – kind of half-frightened, half-desperate glare – that sort of thing, don't you know. I began to feel devilish uncomfortable and edged away.

And he made another plunge: "They sent him – "

And, dash me if he didn't stick again! It just looked like he couldn't get past. But I encouraged him – just like you have to do a horse, you know – and this time he got over:

"They sent him a dozen boxes of 'Hickey's Pride,' sir, instead!"

He spoke in a low, choking voice and looked me full in the eye – the kind of look you get when a chap's boxing with you, you know – that sort of thing.

CHAPTER II

AN OMINOUS DISCOVERY

I was puzzled.

"Hickey's Pride?" I repeated thoughtfully. "I don't seem to recall that one. Do I smoke it often?"

Jenkins seemed to gasp.

"You? Certainly *not*, sir! *Never!*"

And, by Jove, he turned pale! Anyhow, he looked devilish queer as he put his hands down on the table and bent to whisper:

"Mr. Lightnut, sir – " And the way he dropped his voice and turned his head to peer around into the corners was just creepy! That's what, creepy! This, with the glow from the green lampshade on his pale face as he leaned across the table – oh, it was something ghastly – awful, you know! It got on my nerves, and I could feel the hair slowly rising on each side of my part. He bent close, whispering behind his hand, and I knew he had been eating radishes for dinner:

"It's what's known in the trade, sir, as a 'twofer.'"

"A 'twofer!'" I repeated, puzzled.

"Two for five, sir." Jenkins spoke faintly. "I'm sure I'm ashamed to mention to a perfect gen – "

"By Jove, *I* know!" I lifted my finger suddenly. "I know now the kind you mean – big, fat, greasy-looking ones – the sort Vanderdecker and Colonel Boylston smoke over at the club." I shook my head. "Too jolly thick and heavy for me. So they're two for a 'V' – eh? Oh, I *see*– 'twofers!' By Jove!"

A brand new one, this – a ripper! I made up my mind to spring it on the fellows first chance – that is, if I could remember the jolly thing. I just looked at Jenkins' solemn face and laughed.

"Oh, I say, Jenkins – hang the expense, you know!" I remonstrated in some disgust. For this London chap had given me no end of a good time, you know; and it's such devilish bad form – rotten, I say – haggling about expense when you want to make a come-back and do the handsome. I was jolly glad the mistake had happened.

Just here I remembered the letter and went at it again, for I was keen to find out, if possible, if it *was* a muffler under the string. So I fixed my glass and read on:

"Realizing what these cigars are, I have given them, from time to time, to friends of mine – and others. Really, I don't think I ever had such unselfish, unalloyed pleasure from anything in my life. Gave one to a bus driver out Earl's Court way – chap who had never been known to speak to man, woman or child in years, and, after he lighted it – well, my word! He opened up and grew so bally loquacious I had to get off."

"By Jove!" I exclaimed.

I felt real pleased – that kind of fizzy glow – sort of bubbling-champagney-feeling you get, you know, whenever a friend does some clever, unexpected thing – like repaying a loan, for instance. Know about that, because I had it happen to me once. Fact!

"See that, Jenkins?" I said with a little triumph.

I wanted to reassure him, for I could see with half an eye that the poor fellow was devilish plucked about the expense. And Jenkins certainly looked regularly bowled over.

I read on:

"Had been trying to get Jorgins, my chief, to send me out here again to China, but he was ever finding some cold, beastly evasion. But when your package came to

the office, the first thing I did after I had tried the cigars was to hand the old iceberg a box with my compliments.

"Five minutes after, he came back, completely thawed out. Fact is, never saw him so warm toward any one. Asked me if the other boxes were to be given away outside. Said no; that his was the only box I could spare; was going to keep 'em all there at the office and smoke 'em myself. Never saw a man so moved – so worked up over a little thing. Next day he sent me out here to China."

"Coals of fire!" I ejaculated admiringly. "Regular out-and-out coals of fire, by Jove!"

"And so I have been looking about since I have been out here, trying to find something as rare, unique and full of surprises for your friends as your cigars have been for mine. I have found it."

"And devilish handsome of him, Jenkins, eh?" I commented gratefully; and I looked with renewed interest at the little roll in my hand. Jove, how I wished, though, he would come to the point and say what it was!

"You know what a curiously upside-down people the Chinese are. Example, they begin dinner with desert and end with soup; they drink hot, acid beverages in summer instead of iced ones; they write from right to left, vertically, while we write from left to right, horizontally; they mourn in white instead of black, and they are awfully honest and pay their debts.

"But there is one other point of difference still queerer: they wear pajamas all day, while we wear them only at night."

Here I yawned. Always hate that heavy, historical, instructive stuff, you know. If you have to hear it, gives you headache, unless you can slip off to sleep first.

So I reached the letter up to Jenkins.

"Just run over the rest of it yourself, and see if he says anything about his present," I said, settling comfortably. Clever idea of mine, don't you think?

And I was just dropping my head to have a snug little nap – just a little forty, you know – when, dash me, if I didn't have another idea! Awfully annoying, time like that.

Mind is so devilish alert, dash it! Always doing things like that; can't seem to get over it, you know. And this ripping idea that bobbed up now and got me all roused up was nothing more or less than to untie the string myself and see what the thing was. See?

"I believe, sir," said Jenkins, looking up, "the gentleman has sent you – h'm – has sent you –"

"By Jove, a suit of pajamas!" I exclaimed, holding them up.

It was neck and neck, but I beat Jenkins to it, after all!

"Gentleman says, sir," continued Jenkins, studying the letter, "that his present of a pair of pajamas may seem surprising, but you won't know how surprising until you have worn them."

"Jolly likely," I admitted, feeling the silk. By Jove, it was the finest, yet thinnest stuff I ever saw, soft as rose leaves and as filmy light as a spider's web. Not bad, that, for a comparison, eh? Caught the idea from a vase of full-blown roses that were beginning to shed their petals there on the table. And on one of the blossoms was a little brown spider. Catch the idea? Suggested spider's web, you know.

"They're rather red, sir," Jenkins commented dubiously.

Red? Well, I should say! My! How jolly red they were! We spread them under the light, and the red seemed to flow all over the table and fall from the edge. Why, they were as red as —

I tried to think of something they were as red as, but somehow I couldn't fetch the idea. I thought of red ink and blood and fireworks, but they didn't seem to be up to them at all. And a big, velvety petal that dropped from one of the crimson roses just seemed brown beside them.

And yet, dash it, I knew they reminded me of something, you know; I knew they *must*.

"They remind me – " I began, and had to pause – idea balked, you know. "They remind me of – of – Jenkins, what do they remind me of?"

"Of *him*, sir," replied Jenkins promptly.

"Eh?"

"Old Memphis Tuffles, sir," explained Jenkins darkly. "I saw him once in an opera, and he was that red."

"By Jove!" I said thoughtfully, and fell to watching the little spider. It was dropping a life-line or something down to the pajamas.

"But they say he ain't always red," Jenkins continued mysteriously. "A lady as is in the palmistry and card-reading line in Forty-second Street told me he turned black whenever he got down to business. Do you suppose that's where they get the idea of what they call black magic, sir?"

I answered absently, for I was wondering whether the little spider was curious about the jolly red color there below him. And just then Jenkins' hand went out and swept at the little thread. The spider dropped and shot into a fold of the pajamas.

"I say! Look out!" I exclaimed as Jenkins made another clutch. "Don't mash the beast on the silk; you'll ruin it – the silk, I mean!"

"There it goes, sir!" said Jenkins eagerly. "Over by your hand."

"No; by Jove; he's gone into a leg of the pajamas! Here, shake him out – gently now!"

Jenkins lifted the garment gingerly and lightly shook it. But nothing came forth.

"Why don't you look in the leg," I said, "and see if you can see it?"

Jenkins peered down one of the silken tubes and forthwith dropped it with a yell. He jumped back.

"Look out, sir," he cried excitedly; "don't touch 'em! There's a tarantula in there big as a sand crab, and it's alive."

"A tarantula? Nonsense! We don't have tarantulas in New York," I protested.

Jenkins gestured violently. "One's there, sir, anyhow! I saw one once on a bunch of bananas down in South Street. If they jump on you and bite, you might as well just walk around to the undertaker. A dago told me so."

I backed nervously from the crumpled crimson pile on the floor.

Crimson?

Of course, I knew it was crimson; it must be the shadow of the table there that made the things so dark —*black*, in fact. But my mind was on the tarantula; and I was thinking that it must have been wrapped with the pajamas. Yet I could not understand how this could be, considering how tightly the things had been rolled.

Anyhow, it was there; and Jenkins pointed excitedly.

"Look, sir! You can see it moving under the silk!"

By Jove, so you could! And the thing seemed nearly as big as a rat. It was making for the end of the leg. I climbed upon a chair.

"Get a club," I exclaimed, "and smash the thing as it comes out!"

Jenkins rushed out and returned with a brassie.

"Careful now," I warned from the chair. "Don't go and hit the dashed thing before it gets out, and make a devil of a mess on the silk! There it is – it's out! No, no – not yet! Wait, until it gets its whole body out! There now; he's drawing out his last beastly leg. Now —*now* let drive!"

And he did, and seemed to hit the thing squarely.

I knelt on the chair and craned over, while Jenkins still held the stick tightly at the point where the thing had struck.

"Get him?" I queried. "Where is it?"

"That's it, sir," said Jenkins in an odd voice. "It ain't here."

"Why, dash it, I saw you strike the beast, right where you're holding that club."

"Mr. Lightnut, sir" – Jenkins spoke a little huskily and glanced around at me queerly – "will you look under the end of this stick and see if you see what I see?"

I climbed down and examined cautiously.

"Why, by Jove, it's the little spider!" I exclaimed, surprised.

"Exactly, sir; what's left." Jenkins took a deep breath.

"Thank you, sir – it's a great relief," he sighed.

"Eh?"

"I mean, sir, I'm glad I ain't the only one who thought he saw that other. It's *some* comfort."

Jenkins spoke gloomily.

"*Thought* you saw?" I repeated.

But Jenkins only shook his head as he gathered up the remains of the spider and consigned them to a cuspidor.

"You mean – say, what the devil *do* you mean?" I asked sharply.

Jenkins straightened with air respectful but solemn.

"Mr. Lightnut, sir," he began gravely, "there's a party lectures on the street corner every night at nine on the fearful consequences of the drink habit, and passes around blank pledges to be signed. I'm going to get one first chance; and if you will accept it, sir – meaning no offense – I would be proud to get you one, too."

I stared at him aghast.

"Oh, I say, now," I murmured faintly, "you don't think it was that, do you?"

Jenkins' face was eloquent enough.

"I'm through, sir," he said sadly. "When it comes to seeing things like that – " He lifted his eyes. "No more for me, sir; my belief is, it's a warning – yes, sir, that's what, a warning."

I collapsed into a chair.

"By Jove!" I gasped uneasily.

I was awfully put out – annoyed, you know. It was the first time anything of the kind had ever happened to me. If I started in with tarantulas, what would I be seeing next?

Jenkins gulped nervously. "Why, sir," he whispered, leaning toward me, "these pajamas – you see for yourself how red they are – they actually seemed to lose color when that bug was in 'em."

"Oh, pshaw!" I said contemptuously. "I saw that, too." And I explained to him about the shadow of the table. He nodded.

"But that only makes it worse, sir," he commented dubiously. "It shows the 'mental condition,' as they say. You know, we were talking about the black art – remember, sir?"

I did remember; and also I remembered then we saw the spider. I recalled that spiders and tarantulas belonged to the same family. Of course Jenkins' suspicions hit the nail – it must be that – there was no getting around it – but still —

"By Jove, Jenkins!" I said, trying to go a feeble smile. "I never felt so fit for a corking stiff highball in my life – never!"

I took a screw on my glass and studied him curiously.

"And I say, you know – better take one yourself!" I added.

CHAPTER III

I DON THE PAJAMAS

"By Jove, Jenkins, they fit like a dream!"

I twisted before the glass and surveyed the pajamas with much satisfaction. They looked jolly right from every point. Moreover, with all their easy looseness, there was not an inch too much. They had a comfortable, personal feel.

"Lucky thing they weren't made originally for some whale like Jack Billings – eh, Jenkins?" I commented musingly.

Behind his hand Jenkins indulged in what is vulgarly known as a snicker.

"Mr. Billings, sir, he couldn't get one shoulder in 'em, much less a – h'm – leg," he chuckled. "They'd be in ribbons, sir!"

I yawned sleepily, and Jenkins instantly sobered to attention. He held his finger over the light switch as I punched a pillow and rolled over on the mattress.

"All right," I said; "push the jolly thing out." And with a click darkness fell about me.

"Good night, sir," came Jenkins' voice softly.

"Night," I murmured faintly, and I was off.

Sometime, hours later, I awoke, and with a devilish yearning for a smoke. It often takes me that way in the night.

I climbed out in the blackness and found my way into the other room. I remembered exactly where I had dropped my cigarette case when we were fooling with the pajamas by the table, and I found it without difficulty.

In the act of stooping for it, my hand clutched the edge of the table and I felt a spot yield under the pressure of my thumb. It was the button controlling the bell to Jenkins' room.

"Lucky thing he sleeps like a jolly porpoise," I reflected.

I pushed a wicker arm-chair into the moonlight and breeze by a window, and pulling a flame to a cigarette, leaned back, feeling jolly comfy. For the breeze was ripping and delicious, and the delicate silk of the pajamas flowed in little wavelets all the way from my heels to my neck.

And, thinking of the pajamas, I tried to fix my mind on it that I must tell Jenkins to have me write that chap, Mastermann, and send him another lot of those devilish good cigars he liked. I tried to recall what Jenkins had said was the name of the brand – something deuced clever, I remembered that much.

I was just about dropping off, when I heard some one hurrying along the private hall leading from the back. Jenkins himself popped into the room.

"Did you ring, sir?" he inquired, and advanced quickly.

And then, before I could think about it to reply, he halted suddenly, almost pitching forward. Then, with a kind of wheezy howl, he sprang to the wall. Next instant, I was blinking under the dazzling electrolier.

"Here, I say! Shut off that light!" I remonstrated, half blinded.

I heard a swift rush across the rugs, and the next thing I knew I was roughly jerked from out my chair; strong fingers clutched my throat, and I found myself glaring into a frightened but resolute face.

"Jen-Jenkins!" I tried to gasp, but only a gurgle came.

I was so taken unawares, I knew it must be some dashed dream. Perhaps another minute, and I would wake up. But he gripped me tighter and shook me like a rag.

"Say, who are you?" he hissed. "How did you get in here?"

And then, of course, I knew that he was crazy. Whether he was crazy in a dream or crazy with me awake, I couldn't guess. It made very little difference, anyhow, for I knew that in another minute

I should be either dream dead or real dead; and dash me if I could see any odds worth tossing for in either, you know.

But I don't belong to the athletic club quite for nothing, and have managed to pick up a few tricks, you know. So with the decision to chuck the dream theory, I shot my leg forward with a mix-up and twist that made Jenkins loosen his clutch and stagger backward.

"What's the matter with you?" I gasped, advancing toward him. "Are you trying to murder me?" But I was so hoarse, the only word that came out plainly was "murder."

Jenkins uttered a howl. "Help, Mr. Lightnut! Murder!"

"You old fool!" I cried, exasperated. "Come here!"

He was coming. He seized a light chair and swung it behind his head. Then he rushed me with a shout.

"Oh, Mr. Lightnut!"

"Gone clear off his nut!" was my thought. As he swung the chair, I ducked low, and man and chair went crashing to the floor. But he was up again in a jiffy and dancing at me.

"Mr. Lightnut, sir, why don't you help me?"

"Help you – you jolly idiot?" I muttered indignantly. Then my voice raised: "I've a mind to kill you!"

With a yell, he made a kangaroo jump and swung at me again.

"He says he's going to kill me, Mr. Lightnut!" he panted as I dodged again. "Help me – wake up, sir!"

Wake up? Wake up, indeed, when I had never been so devilish wide awake in all my life! I was *sure* now about that. I moved toward him cautiously.

"Stop your row!" I cried angrily; "you'll have somebody in. Think I want the police up here?"

With a glare at me, Jenkins darted past me to the bedroom I had just left. Its light switch clicked, and then back through the brightened doorway he sprang and dashed for a wall cabinet at the side. He began tugging at its little drawer. And suddenly I remembered the revolver there, an old forty-five from a friend in Denver – and loaded!

My spring to intercept him was quick, but not quick enough. Half-way to him I pulled up under the compelling argument of the long blue barrel pointed at my head.

"Here! Look out, you fool – it's loaded!" I warned, backing away to the window.

Jenkins advanced. "What have you done with him?" he panted hoarsely. "Where is he?"

"Where's who?" I asked savagely, for I was getting devilish tired of it all. But for the publicity, I should have yelled from the window.

"Where's Mr. Lightnut?" he demanded.

"Oh, he's all right." I decided to adopt that soothing tone that I had read somewhere was the proper caper with lunatics.

"Where?" Jenkins insisted, pushing nearer.

And dashed if I knew what to answer; for, if I made a mistake, it might be serious, by Jove! Perhaps some jocular reply would be safest – might divert his attention, you know.

The open window gave me an idea.

"Why, do you know," I said pleasantly, "I just chucked him down into the street."

It sounded like a cannon cracker, that gun! The shower of splintered glass from the picture between the windows barely missed me. But I never waited a second – for this last devilish straw was too much, don't you know, and something had to be done. I leaped for the weapon as it struck the hardwood floor between us, jerked from Jenkins' hand by the unfamiliar upward kick. Another instant and I was poking the muzzle into his side.

"I've just had enough of this, you fool!" I cried impatiently. "Here, take a good look at me!" I pushed my face closer. "Look at me, I tell you!"

By Jove, he shuddered! His eyes, wide distended with terror, rolled to the ceiling.

"I can't," he whispered; "I just can't – anything but that! Only, please – please don't kill me, too."

"Kill you?" I said, frowning sternly as he gave a furtive glance. "I certainly will, if you don't take a good look at me!"

He gave a sort of despairing sigh and closed his eyes so tightly the lashes disappeared. "All right, then," he said sullenly; "you may kill me!"

The way with these lunatics, I thought. Next thing, he would be begging and insisting that I kill him. I motioned to the door of my guest-room and gave him a push.

"In there," I said, "and keep perfectly quiet."

And as he shot inside, I closed the door and locked it. I just had to take the chance of his hurting himself against the walls and furniture; I didn't believe he was so crazy he would undertake the six-story leap to the ground. Listening, I heard something like a sob. Then I caught my name.

"Poor Mr. Lightnut," came chokingly; "the kindest, gentlest master!" And then more sobs and gulps.

By Jove, under his insane delusion, the poor beggar was grieving for me; not thinking of himself at all, you know. I felt my eyes grow a bit moist, somehow, and all at once my heart went heavy. Thought how long poor old Jenkins had been with me – ever since I was out of college, you know – five years – and remembered how devilish faithful and attached he had always been. Poor old Jenks! It was awful his going off this way! I recalled how he had taken to seeing things, earlier in the evening, and had made me see them, too, dash it! One thing I determined: whatever had to be done with him, he should have the finest of attention.

I knew that I ought to telephone to somebody or something, but dashed if I had any idea who or where. Oddly enough, not a soul seemed to have been roused by the pistol shot, but I saw by the little clock that it was close to three – the hour in a bachelor apartment house when everybody is asleep, if they're going to sleep at all.

I decided that the best thing to do first was to get into some clothes. And with this thought I was turning away, when it occurred to me to make an effort to see if poor Jenkins seemed more rational now or had gone to sleep.

I tapped upon the door. "Are you asleep?" I asked softly.

A howl of positive terror came back.

"I'm a-keeping quiet," he cried, "but don't let me hear your voice again, or I'll jump right out of the window."

I shook my head sadly and tiptoed into my room, where I slipped hurriedly out of the pajamas and into some clothes; then back I went to the telephone. It was on my little writing-desk close to the door confining Jenkins.

I lifted the receiver with a sigh.

"Hello, central," I began, responding to the operator. "I say, will you give me 'information?'"

A loud shout suddenly sounded from behind the closed door, and there came a frantic double-pounding of fists.

"Mr. Lightnut – Mr. Lightnut!" screamed Jenkins. "Oh, Mr. Lightnut, you're back – you're alive – I can hear your voice! This is Jenkins, Mr. Lightnut; yes, sir, Jenkins. They've got me locked in!"

I clapped the receiver on the hook and sprang to the door, unlocking it. Jenkins almost tumbled into my arms. By Jove, for a second I hung in the wind, he acted so crazy still; at least, it seemed so just at first. The fellow threw his arm about my neck and laughed – laughed and cried, dash it – and just wringing my hands and carrying on – Oh, awful! And even when I got him into a chair, he just sat there laughing and crying like a jolly old silly, patting my hand, you know, and wiping his eyes, what time they were not devouring me.

"Has he gone, sir?" he gasped huskily. "Did he jump from the window?" But I waved all questions aside.

"After you've had some sleep," I insisted. "Then I'll tell you the whole jolly story." And I just got him to his room myself, despite his distress and protests over my attention.

"Thank you, sir, and good night," he said as I left him. And he murmured placidly, "I guess we're all right now."

But I was not so sure as to *him*, when I viewed the broken chair and scattered fragments of glass – ominous reminders of the scene through which I had passed. And so, though I threw the pistol on top of a bookcase, I spent the rest of the night upon the soft cushions of my big divan.

CHAPTER IV

JENKINS DECLARES FOR THE WATER WAGON

"But this savage-looking Chinaman that you saw, Jenkins – how was he dressed?" I adopted a careless tone of inquiry.

It was high noon, and I was toying with an after luncheon, or rather after breakfast, cigar.

Jenkins' head shook dubiously. "I just remember something blackish. My, sir, I didn't have time to notice nothing like clothes!"

His tone conveyed aggrieved protest. He went on:

"Just as I'm telling you, sir, I saw some one sitting there by the window and walked toward him, thinking it was you. Then, all of a sudden, I see his awful face a scowling at me there in the moonlight."

"And he was smoking, you say?"

Jenkins sniffed indignantly. "Free and easy as a lord, sir! He held a long stick to his ugly mouth, and smoke was curling out of a little bowl near the end."

"Oh, opium pipe, eh?"

"Likely, sir," agreed Jenkins; "but I never saw one."

By Jove, I had my own opinion about that! I knew he *must* have seen one before; but I just went on questioning, to gain time, you know, and wondering all the while how I should ever be able to break the truth to the poor fellow.

"Tell me again what he was like," I said. "How did you know he was a Chinaman?"

"Why, by his long black pigtail, sir, and his onery color. But I never saw no Chinaman as ugly as this one – no sir. Oh, he was just too awful horrid to look at, sir. His forehead sloped away back, or maybe the front part of his head being all shaved made it look that way. And the skin about his eyes was painted white with red streaks shooting around like rays of light."

"No beard or mustache, I suppose?" I suggested, feeling my own smooth-shaven face. Jenkins' reply was a surprise:

"Yes, sir; there were long black kind of rat tails that dropped down from the sides of his mouth. And then his neck – ugh – all thick with woolly hair."

"Oh, it was, eh?" I said drily, thinking of the long red stripe that my collar concealed. "I suppose you felt this, eh, when you jumped at his throat?"

Jenkins rubbed his chin with a puzzled air.

"Why, that's uncommon queer, sir; but now that you remind me, I do remember that his neck felt perfectly smooth – and it wasn't so big, either. Why, I should say it felt just about like yours would, sir."

I eyed him ruefully.

"By Jove, I don't doubt it a minute!" I commented with some disgust. "See here, Jenkins, I suppose you've been to the Chinese theater down in Doyers Street, eh?"

For I had been down there with slumming parties, and I remembered the hideous sorcerers, fierce warriors and kings the Chinks represent in their interminable plays. And the facial make-up described by Jenkins tallied in a way with some I recalled from these ancient, semi-mythical plays.

But at my question, Jenkins' lip curled a little; dash me, but he looked almost insulted.

"I should say not, sir," he said with a sniff; "you don't catch me going down in them parts!" He added quickly: "Meaning no offense, sir."

"Sure?" I questioned sharply.

"Never, sir!" Jenkins' earnestness was unmistakable. But of course I knew the poor fellow had forgotten all about it.

"One of the jolly rum things that goes along with his affliction," I reflected sadly. "A month from now the poor beggar will be swearing he never saw me in his life." And how the devil was I going to break the truth to him? I sighed perplexedly. "Well, go on with your yarn," I said irresolutely. "You were telling, when I interrupted, about rushing into my bedroom."

"Yes, sir," he resumed with animation. "And when I didn't find you, I was just frantic, for I didn't know you had gone out, sir – never thought of that; I went for the ugly monster with the big pistol there in the cabinet – which, by the way, sir, the low down villain stole when he locked me up and lit out."

I had an inspiration.

"I see," I broke in carelessly; "and then you demanded to know where I was – that it? Then you backed him to that window, and he told you he had chucked me into the street – whereupon you tried to blow off his head and knocked the jolly daylight out of the lady with the fencing foil."

Jenkins, his mouth agape, viewed me with distended eyes.

"I didn't tell you that, sir," he faltered. "How – "

"And when you dropped the weapon," I went on, "this chap collared it, jabbed the beastly thing into you, and told you to look at him. And by Jove you wouldn't!"

Jenkins groaned slightly. The apologetic cough with which he strove to mantle the sound was dry and spiritless.

"No, sir; it seemed easier to die, sir," he murmured – "what with him grinning like a fiend and his long teeth a-sticking out over his lip – ugh!" Then he added wonderingly: "But what gets me is how you should know, sir."

I looked at him gravely.

"Jenkins," I said gently, "I know, because it so happens I was here all the time."

His eyes bulged incredulously.

"You, sir? You mean in this room?"

I nodded slowly. "I mean right in this room – I was a witness of the whole thing."

Jenkins just gulped. I motioned to a chair.

"You may sit down, Jenkins, my poor fellow," I said compassionately. I poured out some whisky and gave it to him.

"Yes, yes; I want you to drink that," I insisted as he took it hesitatingly. "You will need it. Drink every drop of it."

And I watched him do it. For somehow the poor devil seemed to be growing paler every minute, and I was afraid the shock of what I was going to say would send him into a swoon.

Jenkins replaced the empty glass with a positively trembling hand. By Jove, his face turned a kind of asparagus yellow.

It alarmed me a little, for I felt apprehensive that perhaps it was time for him to have another spell, you know. Of course, I knew that the devilishly adroit, tactful way I was breaking it to him wouldn't disturb the peace of a baby. Some people would have gone about the thing in some deuced abrupt way, don't you know, and alarmed him. I didn't want to do that – in fact, I took pains to tell him so at the start.

"I don't want to frighten you, my poor fellow," I said, leaning toward him and speaking in a low, earnest voice – just that way, you know – no excitement. "You mustn't let anything I say frighten you badly about yourself."

"No, sir. Thank you, sir." But I could hardly hear him.

I waited a moment, eyeing him steadily – just doing it all in that calm way, you know – and then:

"You must brace yourself for a great shock, my poor Jenkins," I said soothingly. And then I thought I had best hurry on, for I could tell by the way his eyes rolled and the blue color of his lips that probably I was just in time to head off another attack. And then I told him all.

"And here," I concluded, "are the marks of your fingers under my collar, and the pistol is on top of the bookcase."

Jenkins just sat there, kind of huddled up, you know, and his face as white as the what-you-call-it snow. Didn't seem able to say a word. By Jove, it was too much for me; my heart just went out to him.

"It's all right, Jenkins," I said kindly, and I patted his knee. "Doesn't make a jolly bit of difference to me, personally. Just told you because I thought you ought to know. You just go right along and continue your duties, so far as I am concerned."

Jenkins' hand slipped along his knee and ventured to touch mine timidly. He rose heavily.

"Mr. Lightnut, sir," he said huskily, "if you're not going to need me very much, could I be excused for a while to-night?"

"By Jove, yes, Jenkins! Go out and enjoy the evening; it will do you good. Stay as long as you like, dash it! You know I dine to-night at the club. Go to a roof garden and get some fresh air."

A toss of the head broke Jenkins' calm; his fist struck his palm.

"It ain't that, sir," he exclaimed. "I don't want no fresh air, but I do want fresh resolution and a fresh start. I'm going to find *him*."

"Him!" I was startled. Dash me, I half thought he meant the Chinaman.

"Him, sir; that temperance lecturer, I mean. I'm going to get out a paper against that old enemy there!" And he shook his fist at the whisky decanter.

CHAPTER V

THE GIRL FROM RADCLIFFE

"Long distance call from Mr. Billings, sir," said Jenkins, lifting the receiver.

By Jove, he had just caught me as I was about to leave.

"Hello! That you, Lightning?" came his voice. "Say, old chap, you remember you said you wouldn't mind putting up the kid overnight on the way home from college. Remember? Wants to rest over and come up the river on the day line."

Yes, I remembered, and said so.

"All right, then; it's to-night. Be there about nine from Boston. Don't go to any trouble, now, nor alter any plans. The kid will probably be dead tired and off to bed before you get home from your dinner."

"That's all right, old chap; Jenkins will look after the young one."

I heard Billings chuckle – I remembered that chuckle afterward.

"Not much of the young one there. Eighteen, you know. Never off to school, though, until last year – and by George, it was time! Between my mother and my sister the kid was being absolutely ruined – petted, mollycoddled, and was getting soft and silly – oh, something to make you sick. Well, so much obliged, Dicky. You know what these hotels are. Good-by."

I explained to Jenkins. "All right, sir," he said. "I won't go out until after nine. It'll be time enough."

And so I went off. I returned early, about ten, and sat reading. Jenkins was still away, and the door of my guest room was open.

"Good evening!"

The voice behind me was soft, musical, delicious.

I whirled about, and there, within the door, leaning against the frame, was the most beautiful creature I ever saw in all my life.

A girl! But oh, by Jove, *such* a girl! A lovely, rosy blonde, dash it! Golden-haired angel – long, droopy kind of lashes, don't you know – eyes like dreamy sapphire seas – oh, that sort of thing – a peach!

The leap that brought me to my feet sent my chair thudding backward.

"Why – er – good evening," I managed to stammer. Just managed, you know, for, give you my word, I never was so bowled over in my life – never! And on the instant I guessed what it meant. The "kid" that Billings referred to wasn't a kid brother at all, but was a kid sister – girl, by Jove!

"Are you busy?" I saw the flash of her perfect little teeth as her lips parted in a smile. "If not, may I talk to you a while?"

I mumbled something designed to be pleasant – dash me if I know what – and managed to summon sense enough to lift toward her a wicker arm-chair. Then I dashed into my bedroom to chuck the smoking-jacket and get into a coat. And all the while I was thinking harder than I ever had thought it possible.

Just the thing to have expected of an ass like Billings – a fellow with no sense of the proprieties! His kind of mind had never got any further than the fact that I had a guest-room and a quiet apartment. The further fact that it was in a bachelor apartment house and I a bachelor – and not yet out of my twenties, dash it – would never have presented itself to a chump like Billings as having any bearing on the matter.

"Of course, I must get right over to the club and leave her in possession – it's the only thing left to do." This was my thought as I slipped into my coat and gave my hair a touch – just a touch, don't you know. The thing to do was to carry it off as naturally as possible for a few minutes, and

then slip away. Probably she hadn't counted upon my being in town at all – had taken it for granted it was some sort of family apartment – with housekeeper, servant maids, all that sort of thing.

"Never mind," I thought, as I kicked off my half-shoes and jerked on the first things at hand. "Thing to do now is to keep that child's mind from being distressed. She'll have a good sleep and get off early in the morning on the Albany boat. Don't suppose she'd understand, anyhow – sweet, innocent, unsophisticated thing like that. What a fool Billings is!"

And I jammed in savagely the turquoise matrix pin with which I was replacing the pearl, because it went better with my tie.

"Now, just a few minutes of conversation to put her at her ease," I reflected, "and then I'm off. I'll get the janitor's wife to come up and stay near her."

And I dashed back, murmuring some jolly rubbish of apology. And then I just brought up speechless – almost fell over backward. For as she stood there under the light, I saw that what I had taken for a dress of black silk was not a dress at all, but a suit of pajamas – black, filmy pajamas, whose loose elegance concealed but could not wholly deny the goddess-like figure within.

"I'd have known you anywhere, Mr. Lightnut." And then I found that we were shaking hands, my fingers crushed in a grasp I never could have thought possible from that tiny hand. "From hearing Jack talk, your name is a sort of household word in the Billings family."

I mumbled something jolly idiotic – some acknowledgment. But I was pink about the ears, and I knew it, while she was cool and serene as a lily of the what-you-call-it, don't you know. I was trying not to see the pajamas, trying to pretend not to notice them, but dashed if I didn't only make it worse!

For she looked down at herself with a laugh – rather an embarrassed laugh, I thought; and her little shrug and glance directed attention to her attire.

"I see you're looking at the pajamas," she said smiling.

And her eyes looked at me through those drooping lashes – oh, such a way!

"Oh, no – I assure – certainly not," I stammered hastily. Dash it, I never was so rebuked and mortified in all my life. What an ass I had been to seem to notice at all!

She looked troubled. "Say, do you mind my wearing them?" she inquired.

"I? Certainly not – well, I should say not!" I retorted, almost with indignation.

"Sure?" By Jove, what ripping eyes she had!

"Of course not!" emphatically.

Her sunny head nodded satisfaction. "That's all right, then. I was afraid you wouldn't like it – afraid you would think I was acting a little *free*. But your man Jenkins – isn't that his name? – said he thought you would *like* for me to wear them."

I gasped.

"Jen – what's *that*?" I was amazed, indignant at Jenkins' effrontery. "He – he suggested that you wear – er – these?"

She nodded, her glorious eyes shining wistfully.

"You see, I went to a frat dance last night in Cambridge," she explained; "and in the hurry this morning, somehow, one of my bags – a suit-case – was left behind. And when I got here to-night and began piling the things out of my other bag – well, I saw I was up a tree. Not a thing to slip into, you know – not so much as a dressing-gown or even a bathrobe. Then your man saved my life – suggested these pajamas. See?"

"Oh, I see!"

I said so; but, dash it, I wasn't sure I did, for I knew so devilish little about girls. But I got hold of this much: I understood that this delicately reared creature had missed the restfulness and luxury of a shift to some sort of dressing-robe after her day of travel. Probably one of those ribbony, pinky-white fripperies one sees in the windows of the Avenue shops, rosy, foamy dreams like the – well, like the crest of a soda cocktail, don't you know. And the pajamas had been adopted as a comfortable makeshift.

By Jove! And here she was sitting, calmly telling me all about it – just as she might to Jack – never thinking a thing about it! My, how charming, how innocent she was! But, dash it, that was the reason she was so beautiful – of course, that was it – and I had never seen anybody like her in all the world before. I knew jolly well I never should again, either. But I knew I ought to go – and at once.

"I must cut along now," I thought; "infernally shame to be taking advantage of her this way!" And then I thought I would just wait a wee minute longer.

Just then she turned toward me, her elbow on the arm of the wicker chair, her dainty, manicured finger-tips supporting her chin.

"You know, Mr. Lightnut, I wasn't sure you would remember me at all," she said. "I was such a kid when you saw me last."

"Oh, yes," I said, trying to recall the rather hoydenish children I had seen on the motor trip to Billings' home five years before. "I remember you were quite a little girl – weren't you?"

I thought her face darkened a little; then her smile flashed through, like sunshine through a cloud. Her laugh came on top, like the mellow ripple of a tiny brook – that sort of thing – oh, you know!

"Oh, I say now, Mr. Lightnut, cut out the josh," she remonstrated; and I thought she grew a little red. "No more for mine those sissy, girlie ways – I've got well over all of that!"

She tossed one knee over the other and threw herself back in the chair. She seemed a little piqued. She went on:

"I just tell you what – there's nothing like a couple of years off at college for toughening you! Gets all those mamma's baby ways out of you, you bet your life, and all the slushiness you get from trying to be like your sisters. Shucks!"

I caught my breath. Of course, she had no idea how it sounded – this sort of talk; it was just her innocent frankness, her – what d'ye call it? – her *ingenuousness*– dash it!

She continued musingly: "Gee, but I was soft when I first went away – a regular pie-faced angel-child!" Her voice had in it a sneer. Then she straightened up, whirled her chair facing me, and gave me a sounding slap on the knee. "Say, maybe the fellows I met didn't educate that out of me mighty quick! Well, I reckon yes!" And she nodded, eying me sidewise, her pretty chin in the air.

But, dash me, I was so aghast I couldn't get out a word. Just sat there batting at her and turning hot and cold by turns. Came devilish near losing consciousness, by Jove, that's what!

Of course, I knew she didn't know what she was talking about. Hadn't any sisters myself, don't you know, and never had learned much about other fellows' sisters; but, dash it, I knew something about *faces*, and I would have staked my life on hers. You can nearly always tell, you know. But, anyhow, I thought I had better go now.

I got up. "I say, you want to just make yourself at home," I said. "And if you don't mind, I'll see you at the boat in the morning."

She stood up, too, looking rather surprised. "You're not going away?"

"Oh, no; not out of town." I thought that was what she meant. I added: "And as I go out, I'll stop down-stairs and have some one come up and stay with you."

She dropped to the arm of the chair, her pretty face showing dismay.

"Oh, but see here! I'm running you off – I know I am. Say, Mr. Lightnut, I don't want to do that. I thought sure you were going to be here. Brother insisted you would be."

Brother! Nice brother, indeed, for her – poor little thing!

"Oh, you'll be all right," I said reassuringly. "I'm just going over to the club, don't you know – not far away."

She came right up to me and placed a hand on each shoulder.

"Honest Injun, now," she said – and her smile was ravishing. "Honest, now, Mr. Lightnut, you're going just because I'm here. Say now, own up!"

And, dash it, there was nothing to do but admit it.

"All right," she said; and I thought her eyes flashed a little. "Then I go to a hotel – that's all!"

"A hotel! Why, you can't do that – oh, I say!"

"Why can't I?" She was downright angry – I could see it; and how distractingly lovely she was with that flame in her cheeks!

But she was just a child – an innocent little child; and how the deuce could I ever make her understand?

I stammered: "Why – er – not in New York, you know. They won't take a lady in at this time of night. They –"

She snapped her fingers. "Oh, I say, Mr. Lightnut, play easier on that girlie and lady pedal; cook up a fresh gag! I tell you, I've put all that behind me. Say, wait till you've known me a little, and I'll bet a purse you never call *me* a lady again! Lady! Say, that's *funny*!"

And it certainly seemed to strike her sense of humor. She gave me a sudden punch in the side that fairly left me breathless, and her laughter rang out birdlike, joyous. Of a sudden I felt devilish awkward and foolish.

"Oh, *please* stop stringing me, Mr. Lightnut – don't treat me like a kid. I want to get acquainted." Then her bright face sobered. "Say, was that on the level – that about your going to leave me? See here, I'm not bothering you, am I, Mr. Lightnut?"

"Bothering me!" I ejaculated. "Bothering *me*? I should say not!"

I think I must have said it heartily and convincingly, don't you know, for her lovely face looked pleased.

"Because if I am," she said earnestly, "I'll fade away into my own little room there." Her glance ranged toward her door. "It's sure some swell, that room."

"So jolly glad you like it," I said.

"Well, I should say!" Then her beautiful eyes looked at me full.

"You know, I didn't expect this – I mean having a room all to myself. Never."

And then, while I gasped, she went on, sweetly and calmly:

"Why, Mr. Lightnut, Brother Jack would throw seventeen thousand fits if I went to a hotel, because –" She laughed deliciously. "Well, I promised him that if he would let me come home by New York I would stay right here with you and behave myself."

"Behave yourself!" I echoed indignantly. "Why, look here, do you mean to say Jack Billings – your own brother, you know – thought you wouldn't – er, – do that at a hotel?"

"*Thought?*" Her laugh this time was explosive. "No, he never thought it; he *knew* I wouldn't! He knew I would be tearing around all night with the boys —*that's* what!"

And dash me, if she didn't throw herself back with a kind of swagger, by Jove!

"Why, you – you wouldn't do such a thing!" I uttered faintly.

"Wouldn't I?" She straightened suddenly, and her lovely blue eyes narrowed at me. "Say, Mr. Lightnut, I don't want you to get me sized up wrong. I'm none of your little waxy gardenias – not much! When I'm in New York, it's the bright lights and the Great White Way for mine – yes, sir, every time!"

And she gave me a blow on the shoulder that was like a stroke from a man's arm. It sent me down into my chair.

"If you don't believe me," she added, her face shining with excitement, "just you ask Jack about last summer when I came through – about that joy ride to Coney with three Columbia fellows, and how we got pinched. Oh, mamma, but didn't Jack swear at me!"

I heard a noise by the door. Jenkins stood there, his eyes sticking out like hard boiled eggs.

"I – I'm back, sir," he said rather falteringly. "Beg pardon, sir; just thought you'd want to know. I didn't know you – h'm!" And with an odd look and a little cough Jenkins slipped away. But I scarcely noticed him at all.

Poor misguided girl!

My brain was buzzing like a devilish hive of bees, don't you know. By Jove, this was something *awful!*

And yet – and yet – Her frank, sweet face met mine with a clear light that there was no mistaking. There was no going behind it – she was a thoroughbred, a queen – a *lady*, dash it! I *knew* it! And I just settled on that, and was ready to die right then and there if anybody dared to dispute it. I didn't care a jolly hang how she talked; it was just nothing – just the demoralizing swagger of a little boarding-school girl trying to show off like her brothers. And her language? Why, just the devilish, natural result of having a coarse, slangy brute like Billings for a brother. Poor little girl! It was a beastly shame.

She was watching me curiously, smilingly, as she sat there, her devilishly pretty mouth puckered into a cherry as she softly whistled and drummed her shining nails upon the chair arm.

"I'm afraid I've shocked you," she said. "Jack says you're so good."

Dash it, somehow I felt humiliated! She said it in a way that made me feel like a silly ass, you know.

But she wasn't thinking about me any more. Her eye fell on the tabouret, and her little hand stretched toward it.

"May I?" she said with an arch inquiring glance. "Your cigarettes look good to me. I emptied my case an hour ago."

And I proffered them with a show of alacrity. "Pray, pardon me," I said. "I – I never thought of you smoking." A chuckle came through the tiny teeth grasping the cigarette. "Thought I was too goody-goody, eh?"

I stammered something – dashed if I know what – and blinked a little gloomily as she drew a brisk fire from the flame I tendered.

Odd thing, by Jove; here I had been going to dinners, world without end, where fellows' wives and girls and sisters smoked cigarettes, and I never had thought a thing about it. But now, somehow, I didn't like it for *her*. Sort of thing well enough for other chaps' girls and sisters, you know, but – well, this was *different*, by Jove! Devilish queer thing, that, what a lot of things seem the caper for them that we don't like for "our own," eh?

And yet – oh, I say, she certainly did look fetching about it – downright bewitching, you know! I think maybe it was because she didn't fumble the thing as if she was afraid of it – as if it was just a red hot coal and going to burn her. Most of them do, you know. No, this girl really seemed to enjoy it. Inhaled the whole thing at three draws and reached for another.

"Do – er – you smoke much?" I ventured anxiously. "Cigarettes, you know?"

She pulled a sparkling half-inch as she shook her little head. I felt awfully relieved. "Not for me," she remarked carelessly. "I prefer a pipe."

"*Pipe!*" I repeated feebly.

The golden head inclined. "Bet you! Good old, well-seasoned brier for mine – well-caked and a little strong." Puff-puff. "Oh, damn your patent sanitary pipes, I say!"

And as backward I collapsed upon the cushions, she threw her leg over the arm of her chair and shot two long cones of smoke from her dainty nostrils.

CHAPTER VI

ARCADIAN SIMPLICITY

A moment later I had another shock.

"I don't blame you for looking at me so hard," she said, rubbing her chin and looking, I thought, a little confused. "For did you ever see a face like mine?"

"I – I never did!" I said stammeringly, for, by Jove, the question was so unexpected; but I knew I said it earnestly and with conviction in every word.

She nodded. "Never got a chance to shave, you know – caught the train by such a margin – and my kit's in that other bag. Guess I'll have to impose on you in the morning for one of your razors."

I stared at her in horror.

"Shave? You don't shave?" I protested blankly.

"Myself, you mean? Have to; I haven't got a man to do it for me." She seemed to sigh. "Not old enough yet to have a man, Jack says."

And just here her attention seemed to center on my cellarette over in the corner.

"Gee, but it's warm to-night, isn't it?" she remarked absently.

And there was nothing to do but take the hint or leave it; and after all, she was a guest, you know!

"Perhaps you will permit me to offer you some refreshment," I suggested, rising. I knew it sounded devilish stiff; and I knew, moreover, that I looked like a jolly muff, in fact.

"Perhaps I will," she chuckled. "Say, don't urge me too hard, Mr. Lightnut; you might embarrass me."

I did not want to embarrass her. "I thought perhaps a lemon soda would refresh you," I explained. "Or, if you will allow me, I will have Jenkins make you one of his famous seltzer lemonades. Perhaps, though, you would prefer just a plain – "

I halted in confusion, for she was laughing at me.

"A plain cup of tea," she gurgled, "or a *crème de menthe*!" And then her laughter burst deliciously. "Say, do you know, honestly, I'm only just getting on to that dry humor of yours. You've had me fooled. You do it with such a serious face, you know. Say, it's *great*!"

I tried to smile, but I knew it was a devilish sickly go – the more so, because just at that moment her slender fingers discarded the remnant of her last cigarette and reached for a cigar. Another instant, and she had deftly clipped and lighted it.

I decided I wouldn't ring for Jenkins.

I felt ashamed as I looked in the cellarette, and wondered what the deuce I should offer her. Couldn't think of anything I had ever heard of boarding-school girls going in for except ice-cream soda; and, dash it, I didn't have any ice-cream soda. Nearest thing would be a little seltzer and ginger ale. That would do.

"Oh, I say, I'm going to make you a highball," I said, trying to assume a frisky, jocular air.

Her voice lifted in alarm. "Nay, nay, Clarence – not for me!" she urged hastily.

"But it's only – "

"No fizzy adulterations in mine – not on your life." She followed me across the room. "Just give me the straight, pure goods – anything, just so it's whisky."

And before I could say a word – if, indeed, I could have said a word – she had selected a decanter of Scotch, and with cigar tilted upward in her tender mouth, was absorbingly pouring a shining stream of the amber fluid.

To see the slow curving of that delicately molded wrist, the challenging flash of the saucy eyes of blue, by Jove, it made me just forget all about what she was doing till the fluid ran over the brim.

And then, before I could intercept her, she had lightly gestured her glass to mine, and in a flash the stuff was gone.

Gone! A full whisky glass; and I recalled with a shiver of horror that it was very high proof liquor – something I seldom touched myself, but kept on hand for certain of my friends.

"I say, you know!" I gasped in consternation.

"I'm awfully afraid that will – er – will – " I gulped wordlessly.

The coral lips curved scornfully.

"Get *me* jingled?" She looked as she might have if I had insulted her. "Maybe so in those girlie-girlie days you were trying to josh me about, but not since these two years I've been at college." She shook her lovely, bright head, and following a long enjoyable pull at the cigar, projected five perfect rings at a frescoed cherub in the ceiling. The exquisite eyes softened dreamily as under the spell of some pleasing thought – some tender reminiscence.

"Why, do you know," she said, looking at me earnestly, "when I was home for the holidays – " Then she paused. "Don't tell Brother Jack I told you this – will you, Mr. Lightnut? He's so sensitive about it."

"Certainly not," I said feelingly.

I thought the wistful face brightened.

"Well, when I was home, then, I put Brother Jack under the table two nights running; and you know that's going some!"

And smiling proudly, she poured out another! But not any more, for I put away the decanter.

My brain was reeling, as they say in books; dash it, I was almost sick. Poor, poor little girl! And nobody to remonstrate with her. What a shame – what a shame!

By Jove, I wondered if she would listen to me! I fixed my glass resolutely as we resumed our seats, and bent toward her earnestly.

"May I say something very seriously, Miss Billings?" I began nervously. "Without offense, you know – "

But she was off in a fit of chuckling. Most girls giggled, I had always heard, but she chuckled. Somehow, I liked it less than anything she did; it sounded so devilish ghastly, you know. And then it was so awfully embarrassing – oh, awfully. If you've never tried to remonstrate with a girl about her vicious habits and had her chuckle, you just can't imagine! I felt my cheeks flushing jolly red and looked down, and then I had to look somewhere else quickly, for I seemed to be staring rudely at the ends of the pajamas, where her feet, as the poet chap says, "like little mice, stole in and out – " only, in this case, they were thrust into bedroom slippers, that looked oddly like a pair of my own – but miles and miles smaller.

"Say, do you know," she was chortling, "the way you do get off that Willie boy sort of talk – oh!" And she placed her hand to her side as she laughed. "I can see how Jack thinks you're the greatest ever, Mr. Lightnut."

She leaned forward eagerly.

"Look here, I do *wish* you would let me call you 'Dicky.'"

"Oh, I say – will you?" exploded from my mouth.

"*Will* I?" Her look made my blood leap. "You just watch me —*Dicky!* Oh, say, this is great; maybe it won't take a fall out of old Jack – always bragging that you allow only two or three to call you that."

"I hope you will always call me Dicky," I said – and said it very softly. By Jove, I could hardly keep from taking her hand!

"You bet I think it's awfully good of you, Lightnut – I mean, Dicky." Then her face grew pensive. "Say, do you know, I need a friend like you – just now, I mean – oh, worst kind."

"Do you?" I said eagerly, and hitched nearer. She proceeded:

"Haven't you had things sometimes you wanted to talk about to somebody – well, things you couldn't just tell to your brother or sisters – oh, nor even your room-mate? *You* understand."

I wasn't sure that I did, for she was blushing furiously, and in her eyes was an appeal.

By Jove, some jolly love affair, I guessed suddenly. My heart just sank like a lump of what's-its-name, but my whole soul went out in sympathy for her. I made up my mind, then and there, to put myself aside.

"Devilish glad – I mean delighted to have you tell me anything," I murmured rather weakly; "but – er – I should think your mother – "

"The mater – tell her!" Her hand lifted. "She'd guy the life out of me! Besides, she's in Europe." She paced to the window and back.

I protested indignantly: "I don't see how any mother – "

"Aw, forget it!" she broke in, and I winced again at slang from those sweet lips. "No, sir; I'm going to unload the whole thing on *you*, or nobody."

And, by Jove, the next thing I knew she had perched on the broad arm of the Morris chair in which I sat, her arm resting lightly above my shoulders.

"Here's what I want to know about," I heard her sigh. "When you're engaged to one person and meet another you like better, how are you going to – well, chuck it with the first, you know – and still do the square thing? There, that's what's hit me, Dicky; and I'm up against it for fair!" Her hand gently patted my shoulder. "I'm telling you, old chap, because I know you'll understand – because I like you better than any man I ever saw – that's right!"

I was just afraid to move! Afraid she'd stop; afraid she'd go on. And all the while I was feeling happier than I ever had in all my life – happier than I ever knew people could be, you know. I never thought her bold – dash it, no – knew it was just her adorable, delicious, Arcadian simplicity, by Jove! That explained it, just as it explained to me all her other unconventionality.

"So now it's up to you," she said, "and I want to know what's the answer."

The answer!

And how could I give her any answer? No, by Jove, I knew jolly well I couldn't take advantage of such circumstances – of her artless confession; knew devilish well it wouldn't do, you know. Might reproach me in years to come; and then – and then, there was Billings!

So I just contented myself with looking up smilingly, but it was hard – awfully, awfully hard, dash it – and I just felt like a jolly cad – or fool. Couldn't tell which.

CHAPTER VII

CONFIDENCES

This beautiful creature had proposed to me!

By Jove, that's what it amounted to practically; and now, as she said, it was up to me. Yet I couldn't say a word!

"Well, what must I do about the other one?" she insisted.

The question reminded me of the entanglement to which her frank simplicity had confessed. And she expected me, of all others, to tell her what to do! I looked up into the radiant, crimsoned face as she bent forward slightly, her lips parted, her eyes eager – expectant. She was hanging upon my reply.

I coughed slightly. "That question is hardly fair, you know," I said meaningly. "You see, it hits me rather personally."

"Oh!" she said.

I nodded and tried to find her hand as I looked down.

"So *that's* where the shoe pinches!" And she whistled thoughtfully.

And just then my upward reaching hand found hers. And yet no, it couldn't be her hand, either; it felt like the crash cover of the cushion – rough and fibrous. And yet, by Jove, it *was* a hand, for it gave mine a grip that almost broke my fingers and then dropped them. By the time I looked up, I saw only her little palm resting upward on her knee.

It was funny; but I had other things to think about than puzzles.

She sighed. "Well, I'm the one that can feel for you, Dicky." Here the sigh lifted and her laugh pealed like a chime of silver bells. "I guess Brother Jack doesn't know as much about your affairs as he thinks, does he – eh? Why, he told me you were more afraid of a girl than of a mad dog."

And a slapping grip fell on my shoulder that made me tingle from head to toe. And yet I wished she wouldn't do that; if she did it again, I should just lose my head – I knew I should.

But here she rose, stretched her arms, and dropped into the wicker arm-chair. She hitched it nearer to me.

"You see, it's like this," she began, assuming a confidential air. "You know my sister's up at school at Cambridge, too."

"At Radcliffe College – yes." I nodded.

"Why, yes. Well, it's her room-mate!"

"Eh? I don't believe I – " I paused perplexedly.

"That's right – her room-mate, I tell you! And in a day or two she's coming home with Sis for a visit. I want you to come up for a week end – won't you – and look her over – I mean, see her and tell me what you think of her. You'll go crazy about her – oh, I know you will!"

I entered a protest. "Oh, I say now, you know, there's only one girl I ever saw I would care to look at twice."

She smiled adorably. "Oh, don't I know all about how you feel? But I just want you to see this girl – she's the prettiest and swellest that's been around Boston for many a day; and on Sunday morning she could give the flag to all the Avenue. Why, Dicky, she's from China!"

"China!" I must have looked the scorn I felt. "Oh, come now, you don't think a Chinese girl is – "

"Not Chinese, Dicky." In her eagerness, she moved so near, the silk of her pajamas brushed my hand. "She's English. Her dad's the British Governor General of Hong Kong – Colonel Francis Kirkland, you know – beefy-looking old chap with white mutton chops – I saw his picture."

Hong Kong! I wondered if she knew Mastermann, the chap who had sent me the red pajamas. Why, dash it, of course she would; for this fellow Mastermann was out there on government business, and he and the Governor must be thrown together a good deal.

Her musical laugh broke in on my speculations. "But the funniest thing is, Dicky, her name's the same as mine."

Her name! By Jove, and until this moment, I had not thought —

"Oh, I say," I exclaimed eagerly, "what *is* your name, anyway?"

The lustrous eyes opened wide. "Why, you mean to say you don't know? Thought you knew I was named after the governor. And she's named after *hers*— Frances, from Francis, you know — just the difference in a letter. See?"

"Frances!" I murmured lingeringly. "So your name's Frances?"

"Yes, and hers is Frances — odd, isn't it?"

I assented, but I wished she would drop the other girl — I wasn't interested there, except just because she was.

Her bosom lifted with a sigh. "Don't you think Frances is a peach of a name?"

"It's heavenly!" I whispered. "And I'm glad to hear about your friend, too."

Her sweet face clouded. "Not much of a friend; she don't lose any sleep over me," she commented gloomily. "Then there's Sis double-crossing me with her influence ever since I got hauled up before Prexy at Easter. Sis is awfully prissy."

Her tone was almost savage. I strained incredulously after her meaning.

"Did I understand you to say you were brought up before the president there at Radcliffe?"

"Radcliffe?" Her head shook. "No — Harvard." And I nodded, recalling the affiliation between the two institutions at Cambridge.

I wondered what silly, tyrannical straining of red tape discipline on some one's part had subjected this sensitive, refined girl to the humiliating ordeal of having to appear before the president of the college. Probably for plucking some trashy flower, or, at the worst, looking twice at some sappy freshman acquaintance waving his hand from a frat house.

"By Jove, a devilish shame!" I ejaculated.

"I should say!" Her voice was aggrieved. "All for a measly prize fight."

"Prize fight!" I gasped.

She nodded brightly. "Oh, a modest one, you know — not, of course, a Jeffries-Johnson affair, but I tell you we had them going some for a round and a half. Athletics is my long suit — just you feel those biceps." And with sudden movement she swept upward the wide, silken sleeve, showing a limb like the lost arm of the Venus de what's-its-name.

"Go on — just feel it," she commanded, flexing the arm.

"I — I — " And I gulped and balked.

"*Feel* it, I tell you!" And I did.

And then I almost fell over, I received such a shock. For my fingers seemed to be clasping, not the soft, rounded contour I beheld, but a great massed protuberance, hard and unyielding as a bunch of dried putty. My fingers could not half span it.

I jerked them away, bewildered.

"Wonderful," I said faintly, and I batted perplexedly at the exquisite, symmetrical arm.

"Oh, that's nothing," she said indifferently, jerking down her sleeve. "I'm a little undertrained now; been putting in all my time on leg work. That's what counts in foot-ball.

"Foot-ball!" I questioned, astonished. "Why, I didn't know — "

"That I was on the team? Surest thing you know; that's why I've got all this mop of hair — comes below my collar — see?"

Her collar, indeed! It was easy to see that, if unbound, it would reach considerably below her waist. But *foot-ball!* Why, she must mean basket-ball, of course. I opened my mouth to remind her, when she proceeded:

"But I was going to tell you about this prize fight. Well, this fight was just a little one, you know. Purse of eighteen dollars; and we had to chip in afterward with an extra three to get Mug Kelly – that's the Charlestown Pet, you know – to stand the gaff for a second round. Why, he was all in on the count at the end of the first round – what do you think of that?"

"But I say, you know – " I began, but she lifted her hand.

"I know – I know what you're going to say, Dicky; you think we were a bunch of easy marks, that's what you think. But how could we tell what my room-mate was going to do to the Pet – we couldn't, you know."

"Your room-mate!" I exclaimed aghast. "A – an other young lady – in a pugilistic encounter? Oh, I say!"

She chuckled. "G'long; stop your kidding!" And she kicked playfully at me. Then she assumed a mincing air – finger on chin, lips pursed, and eyes rolling upward, you know.

"Yes, another sweet young peacherino – Miss Billings' little room-mate – a beef that hits the beam at about two-sixty – Little Lizzie, you know."

"Lizzie!" I repeated vaguely.

"Oh, say, Dicky, cut it out; let me finish. Well, another minute, and the Pet would have been put to sleep, but just then the coppers nailed us." She added gloomily: "And that's what queered me with Sis. Fierce, ain't it?"

She sighed and her beautiful lashes drooped sadly. By Jove, I was so jolly floored I couldn't manage a word. I knew, of course, that my heart was broken, but it didn't matter. I loved her just the same; I should always love her; and she had tried to let me know she loved me better than any man she had ever met. What the deuce did anything else matter, anyhow? We would marry and go out on a ranch or something of that sort, where the false, polished what-you-call-it of civilization didn't count, and no rude rebuff or sneer of society would ever chill her warm impulsiveness.

She smiled archly. "See here, Dicky, I thought we were going to tell each other the story of our lives. Your turn now; tell me how she looks to you, this girl that came at last – there's always the one girl comes at last, they say, if you wait long enough. Go on – tell me – what's she like?"

"Of course, you don't know!" I said significantly.

"Me? Of course I wouldn't know – I want you to tell me. Say, is she really so pretty?"

"Pretty," indeed! It was like this adorable child of nature not to understand that she was the most perfect and faultless creation on earth!

I leaned toward her. "*Is she pretty?*" I repeated reproachfully.

She eyed me slyly.

"Oh, of course I know how *you* feel," she said, "but draw me a *picture* of her."

"A picture!" I laughed. "All right, here goes: Eighteen, 'a daughter of the gods, divinely tall and most divinely fair' – that sort of thing. Features classic – perfect oval, you know, and profile to set an artist mad with joy. Eyes? Blue as Hebe's, but big and true and tender; hair, a great, shining nugget of virgin gold. Form divine – the ideal of a poet's dream – the alluring, the elusive, the unattainable, the despair of the sculptor's chisel."

"My!" said Miss Billings, staring.

But I was not through. "Complexion? Her skin as smooth as the heart of a seashell and as delicately warm as its rosy blush when kissed by the amorous tide."

"Gee!" ejaculated my darling.

I looked at her closely. "And in one matchless cheek a dimple divine such as might have been left by the barbed arrow of Cupid when it awoke Psyche from her swoon of death. In short, she might be the dainty fairy princess of our childhood fantasies, were she less superb in figure. On the other

hand, she might be the sunny-haired daughter of a Viking king, were she not too delicately featured and molded."

That was all I could remember from the description as I had read it in a novel, but I was glad I had stored it up, by Jove, for it suited her to a dot. She didn't say a word for a moment, but just sat there eying me kind of sidewise, her little upper lip lifted in an odd way. Then of a sudden she shook her head and swung her knees up over the arm of her chair.

"Well, Dicky, as a describer you sure are the slushy spreader. Say, you've got Eleanor Glyn backed off the boards."

She went on eagerly: "I don't care, though; slushy or not, your picture's just perfect for *her*. Why, your girl must be a ringer for the girl at Radcliffe. Only thing you left out was the freckle on the chin."

Freckle on the chin! By Jove, I left it out on purpose, for I thought she might not like it. I wondered if all girls at Radcliffe had freckles on the chin.

She lay back, regarding me inscrutably. "If she looks like that," she sighed, "you ought to love her very much, Dicky."

I couldn't say anything, for words are so deuced inadequate, you know. But I just made an effort to look it all.

"Of course," sighing, "you ought to feel that way; and, another thing, Dicky: you'll never forget where you first saw her, will you? One of the things one never forgets."

"Right in this room," I murmured; "and in that wicker chair."

"Really?" Her surprised ejaculation was delicious. By Jove, how entrancingly coquettish of her! How jolly clever!

"Go on; tell me how she was dressed – never mind any more picture business; just tell me in four or five words. Bet you can't do it!" She slipped over again to the arm of my chair.

In her eyes was a challenge and I took it up.

"In black silk pajamas," I said daringly.

Her blue eyes opened wide. For a moment I feared she would be offended at my audacity, but her birdlike carol of laughter reassured me.

"Say, *you're* not so slow, *are* you?"

And her hand came down on my back with a force that made me jump.

"Only shows," she gurgled merrily, "how little Jack knows about you. Say, you'd better never tell *him* about those black pajamas!"

She spoke chokingly through a storm of laughter as she rocked there against my shoulder.

"And say – the joke of it!" She banged me on the back with a clublike blow, incredible from that little hand. "The joke of it is, he thought I'd be so safe with you! Oh, mamma!"

And off she went again.

I shifted uneasily. I did not like it – her merriment over what was perfectly obvious and rational. Of course, Billings knew she would be safe. Why the deuce shouldn't he?

But the matter of the pajamas was another thing. Her receiving me in them was a contingency I could not possibly have anticipated and avoided, and yet a withdrawal because of them or even because of her presence here had been shown to be a course inexplicable to her. She was too innocent, too ingenuous, too *ingénue* to understand that I was invading the sanctuary of her privacy. Yet to have taken any course that would have appeared to make correction of her error come from me would have been appallingly caddish and cruel. No, the best course had seemed to be to go right on – take no notice – and then, as soon as she retired, slip away to the club. That seemed the gentlemanly thing.

Yet now her words implied a certain consciousness that her brother might frown upon her attire, might even visit me with reproach. I was troubled, and her next speech was not calculated to reassure me.

"But I'll – I'll never say a word, Dicky," she said, coming out of her laughter and panting breathlessly. "Never! And don't *you*, Dicky – don't you ever! Understand? Mum's the word!"

I looked up distressfully to protest, but her little head was shaking earnestly, the long, delicate hair wisps about her forehead wavering like tiny, curling wreaths of golden smoke.

"No, sir," she emphasized soberly; "if you ever let *that* cat out of the bag, it'll be all up with *me*— I mean Jack will never let me come again. You must promise me."

"But — "

"Oh, but me no 'buts' —*promise!*"

"Why, then — er — of course, if you wish it."

"That's right, because I want to come again — that is, if you *want* me. But if Brother Jack was on to you, Dicky, as I am, he would sooner have me at a hotel, that's all."

"But my dear Frances — "

"I tell you I *know*, Dicky; he doesn't approve of young ladies in pajamas." She chuckled. "Not even black ones."

She stood up, looking at herself and performing a graceful pirouette before the long pier glass.

"Now, if they had been crimson," she proceeded, "he might have felt different. Old Jack's great on Harvard, and so am I."

Of course. All Radcliffe girls were, I knew.

By Jove, how I wished I could show her the lovely crimson pajamas Mastermann had sent me from China! But I would have to summon Jenkins to find them, and besides, it would be of questionable taste to present them to her attention.

"Great idea, this, having pajamas in your college colors," she said. I thought so, too, as I noted admiringly the rich effect of her golden head above the black silk. But I thought the color a devilish odd one — somber, you know — for colors of a young girl's school.

"My! my!" she murmured, "wouldn't I just love *to live* in pajamas — just go about in 'em all the time, you know! Why can't we, I wonder?" Her face flashed me a ravishing smile; and while I was blinking over her question, she went on: "Funny how the girls even are taking to 'em — even Sis wears 'em!" She chuckled: "Hers are gray flannellette. But the girl I'm telling you about —*she* don't; Sis told the mater about it. It seems that before she left China, some high muck-a-muck gave her governor a swell pair of silk ones — something like these, I guess, but I don't know of what color. But, anyhow, they were too delicate and fine to be wasted on an old stiff like that, and he had sense enough to know it. So he passed 'em down the line to her — Frances, you know. Well, sir — " Here she sidled to the table and half leaned, half perched, upon its edge; and I was so distracted watching her graceful poise and gestures, that I lost what she was saying, by Jove.

It was her trill of laughter at something she had said, and the question: "Wasn't that funny?" that brought me back to what she was telling me.

"Yes, sir — said she just scared her maid — oh, *batty!* Because she looked so ugly in 'em — that's what *she* thinks, but of course —*shucks!* Anyhow, she never wore 'em any more, and a day or two later some coolie stole them — sold 'em probably."

Suddenly she yawned, stretched her arms above her head, and flashed me a dazzling smile. By Jove, in the loose-fitting garments she looked for all the world like an Oriental houri, or some jolly lovely thing like that.

"Gee, but I'm sleepy!" she said behind her little hand. "If you'll excuse me, Dicky, I believe it will be off to the springs — the bed springs, for little Frankie. Good night, then. See you in the morning."

And with another radiant smile, she moved toward her room.

"Good night," I said wistfully.

By Jove, somehow I had hoped she would offer to kiss me, now that we were engaged in a way. But then, of course, it wouldn't do — she knew that. So ought I. Perhaps in the morning at the boat!

And the door closed behind her. I stood blinking after her a moment; then I fixed my attention gloomily upon the cellarette. Poor little girl and her foolish – but adorably foolish – college bravado! Sorrowfully I locked the cellarette and dropped the key in my pocket.

Then I locked the outer doors of the hall and apartment, leaving the keys unmolested on the inside. On the whole I decided I would not have up the janitor's gossipy wife.

Next I sought Jenkins at the back.

"We will lock up back here, Jenkins, and go over to my rooms at the club for the night."

Jenkins stared fixedly over my head. "Certainly, sir."

"And Jenkins – h'm!" I crumpled a bill into his mechanical palm. "You will never allude to having seen that sweet – um – you understand, Jenkins? Never seem to remember, even to me, that you ever saw any one up here to-night."

"Certainly not, sir," indignantly. "I wouldn't, anyhow."

Yet his eyes, rolling back from the ceiling, seemed to hold me oddly for an instant. In them was a touch of sadness.

"But may I speak of that Mr. Billings, sir? You know, if he comes – "

"Jenkins!" sharply.

"Certainly, sir!" Jenkins' mouth closed, traplike.

But all in vain my early rise the next morning, my careful toilet and my dash in a taxi to a florist and then to Tiffany's for a ring. At the pier I dodged about in the crowd, the boy trailing behind me with the big purple box, but not a devilish thing could I see of Frances. By Jove, I almost broke my monocle straining! At last I was sure she must be left, for the last passengers were passing over the gang-plank.

"Hello, Dicky!"

The voice, coarse and hearty, came from an athletic young man in a hurrah suit. On his head, perched jauntily above a mass of yellow hair, was a straw hat with a crimson band.

I stared at him through my glass, but it was not any one I knew at all. I looked at him coldly, for there's nothing so devilish annoying as familiarities from strangers. I thought I could freeze him off.

But he only grinned. "Looking for Miss Billings?"

"I – I haven't seen her," I answered stiffly. But his question alarmed me.

He chuckled in my face. "Guess you don't know her in her clothes, eh, Dicky?" And I did not need the punch he gave me in the side to make me stagger backward. "A thousand thanks, and good-by, old chap. I see they're hauling in the plank."

He lingered for one bearlike grab at my hand.

"And say, don't forget – for I know Jack Billings better than you do – don't ever let him know about all that Scotch last night."

He called over his shoulder with a grin: "Keep it dark – as dark as those black pajamas, Dicky!"

And as long as I could see, he stood on the deck, waving his hat at me as I stood there with my mouth open, my eyes following him with horror.

By Jove, who was he, and what did he know?

CHAPTER VIII

HER BROTHER JACK

"Good night, Dicky!" came up the elevator shaft. And then more "good nights," growing fainter with their laughter as the car shot down.

"Good night," I called after them. "Devilish sorry you fellows won't stay longer!"

"Jolly good lie, Jenkins," I said, yawning sleepily, as I dropped back into my own apartment.

"Yes, sir," assented Jenkins demurely. "It's sleeping on the divan the other night, sir. Eight hours there ain't nothing like eight hours in bed and in your pajamas."

"Pajamas!" I ejaculated, startled.

For all day I had been thinking of *her*. I wondered if Billings would happen to think to invite me up for the week end. But he had so many times, and I had never gone.

"By Jove, that reminds me," I said. "Those red silk pajamas!"

"Yes, sir." Jenkins' face hardened in an odd, wooden way.

"I was wondering, Jenkins, if those pajamas were torn any in our little row the other night."

Poor Jenkins winced a little. "I think not, sir," he muttered humbly – "leastwise, they were all right last night when Mr. – " He seemed to catch himself abruptly. "I mean when I found them this morning, sir."

He returned with the garments I had received from Mastermann, and again we spread them under the lamp on the table. They looked singularly smooth and unwrinkled. There was not a single tear or break, not even with the delicate cords that twisted to form the frogs of the coat.

"My, sir! But ain't they red!" breathed Jenkins. "Them cords look like little red snakes."

I cut an anxious glance at Jenkins, for I did not like his reference to snakes. Seemed ominous, somehow. But his appearance was composed and reassuring. And, by Jove, come to look, the cords did look just like tiny, coiled serpents of glowing fire. Why, they were so jolly red they hurt your eyes. Fact! And thin as the beautiful stuff was, this brighter red ran all over the other, covering every inch of it and forming the closest, finest what-you-call-it embroidery. It was as faint and dainty a pattern as that on a soap bubble! Fact is, I could not trace it, even with my glass.

The only part that wasn't covered with this embroidery business was the stuff used to cover the knots, or little balls, over which the cords were meant to hook. In working with some of these cords, idly fastening and unfastening them, I got a little impatient with one that seemed tight, you know, and I used my manicure knife to pull the knot through.

"Careful, sir," warned Jenkins. "Likely to cut something."

By Jove! No sooner said, than I did it!

The dashed blade slipped somehow and cut into the threads that tied the covers or caps or whatever-you-call-'ems, over the knots. And when I pulled, the beastly piece of silk came off in my fingers.

And then – oh, but I say! I just gave a sort of yell and dropped the whole thing!

Ever have some silly ass try to scare you by poking a red hot cigar at you in the dark? Know how you jerk back? Well, there you are! For, give you my word, when I peeled off the little cloth cap, regular blazes of crimson fire seemed to shoot from the end of the knot.

Fact is, it wasn't a knot at all, but a button – a devilish glassy button, something bigger than a dime, perhaps, and thick as the end of your little finger. And there it lay against the silk, burning its way through it like a red coal of fire.

Dashed if it didn't look that way, anyhow. I just sat there blinking like a jolly owl, waiting to see the stuff begin to smoke, before I had presence of mind to tell Jenkins to touch it to see if it would burn.

But Jenkins wouldn't. He just stood there with his jaw hanging and his eyes bulging like champagne corks!

And it was just then that Billings rolled in.

I say "rolled in," because it always looks that way. That's the way Billings is built, you know.

"I say, Dicky," he panted, "just missed another infernal express! Plenty more trains, but I had a great inspiration strike me that I'd let you put me up for the night. Hat, Jenkins! Now, don't say a word, Dicky, old chap. Cane, Jenkins! Great pleasure, assure you – won't inconvenience me at all. Gloves, Jenkins! Just give me something to sleep in, and I'll be as comfortable here as I would be at the club – so don't worry any about me, old chap. By the way, want to thank you for taking care of the kid. Got home all right, I understand."

He plunked like a jolly elephant into the largest and most comfortable chair in the room and wheezed for breath.

"And, Jenkins!" He raised one fat finger while he took a gasp. "Don't mind if I do have a package of Dicky's Koroskos and a sloe fizz – not too sweet, you know; and you may –"

He halted, his eyes suddenly riveted to the table, and straightened inquiringly, his big hands poised upon the padded arms of the chair.

"Suffering Thomas cats! What's that?" he exclaimed. "The scream there – flag of Morocco?"

And then, without pausing for reply, he dashed on:

"I say, old chap, if you're picking up those, I can get you a few for nothing. You know Higgins, cashier-that-was of the Widows' National, eh? Well, Higgins sent the governor a Morocco flag the other day from Tangier. Fact is, he sent one to every director of the bank – and an extra large one to that bank examiner!"

He chuckled wabblingly, like a jolly jellyfish.

"Talk about a red flag to a bull," he exploded, "why, they –"

Billings broke off suddenly. Then he climbed heavily to his feet, and without warning, heaved himself across the room and seized the button I had just uncovered. Dashed if he didn't almost upset me.

"Here, I say!" I protested. "Don't lose that cap." I picked it up from where he had jerked it to the floor. "It's the cover to hide that glass, you know."

"Wh-a-a-t!"

Billings swung round, staring at me with the most curious expression.

"See here, Dicky," he exclaimed rather excitedly, but in a low tone, as he cut a side glance at Jenkins siphoning the fizz over at the cellarette. "What in thunder have you been doing now?"

By Jove, I turned cold for a minute, I was that startled. I thought he was going to use the pajamas as an introduction for reference to last night. But in a minute I saw that he did not mean that.

"Where on earth did *you* get anything like this?" And he held up the button and the garment.

"Oh, I say now!" I remonstrated, alarm changing to a mild dudgeon. Billings' devilish rude manners are so offensive at times. "What do you mean? It's a present from a friend in China."

"Present!" Billings' eyes bulged queerly. He stooped toward me, whispering: "Did he know what this button was?"

"Why, of course he didn't," I answered indignantly. "Never dreamed of it, of course. I tell you, it was all nicely covered, was what-you-call-it – upholstered, you know – with devilish nice silk. I cut it off accidentally, trying to force the thing through that loop. That left the marble exposed."

Billings took the glass mechanically from the tray tendered by Jenkins and sipped it slowly, eying me curiously over the top. Then he set it back, very deliberately, wiped his mouth with the bit of napery, and without taking his glance from me, waited until Jenkins had left the room. Whereupon, after another searching look at the button, he dropped it with the garment upon the table, and with hands jammed deep in his pockets, faced me with a long-drawn whistle.

"Well, I'll be hanged!" he exclaimed. Just a coarse, vulgar outburst, you know – no sense to it; no point at all, you know – that's Billings.

He caught up the coat again. "And these others – four of them – are they just the same?" he demanded sharply.

"Dash it, how should I know? I suppose so," I answered indifferently. And I closed my eyes and leaned back, feeling a bit – just a bit – weary. Somehow, Billings is always so exhausting when he gets started on something.

"Oh, cut it out, old chap," I protested, drowsy-like.

"I will," I heard him say. Then I guess I must have dropped off a bit, for the next thing I knew he was shaking me.

"Dicky! Dicky! Say, look here! *Look*, I tell you!"

I did look, and – well, I was jolly vexed, that's all.

"Oh, I say now!" I spoke severely – just that way, you know. I went on, remonstrating: "Devilish silly joke, if you ask me. You've gone and ruined the thing, Billings! Flashy buttons like that, you know – too tawdry, too cheap."

"*Cheap!*" He almost shouted it. Then he leaned over the back of the leather chair and pounded his fat head against the cushions, writhing his big bulk from side to side.

"Quite impossible," I said firmly. "Not *en règle* at all, you know!" And I fixed my glass and stared gloomily at the things. The five shiny buttons just lay there against the delicate silk like so many fiery crimson cherries. And they reminded me of something – something – what the deuce was it? Something devilish familiar, whatever it was. And then of a sudden I had it!

"By Jove, you know!" And I just fell back in consternation. "This is awful! I'd look like a – er – dashed human cocktail. Oh, I say!"

Then Billings, who was already gasping like a jolly what's-its-name, dropped upon the arm of the chair and held his side.

"Dicky, you – you'll be the death of me yet," he panted.

I never try to follow Billings. Nobody ever does. So I paid no attention to him. Shaking his head, he lifted the garment again and held it out of the direct rays of the shaded lamp. The five buttons leaped out of the shadow like port lights down the bay on a moonless night.

He leered at me, chuckling. "Look *cheap* to you, eh? What you might call *outré*, so to speak?"

"By Jove, of course," I answered ruefully. "I can't sleep in the things now, you know. What would people say?"

Billings stared at me disagreeably a moment and said something under his breath. Then he caught up the buttons and the silk, and crushing them in his hands, buried his face in the mass.

"Oh you beauties, you darlings!" I heard him murmur.

Then he looked at the buttons again, and dash it, he kissed one. Maudlin – jolly maudlin, I say, if you ask me!

"I say, Dicky," he said carelessly. "You may not care for them, but I've taken rather a shine to these buttons. Mind letting me have one, eh?"

He flashed a quick glance at me and then away.

"Mind? Why, certainly not; take 'em all, old chap, and welcome." Yet I responded gloomily enough, scarcely polite, you know. And I felt too jolly prostrated to be curious as to what he could possibly want with the things. Waistcoat buttons, likely – Billings was given to loud dress and other boulder stunts. But he just sat there looking down after I spoke, and presently stole a queer glance at me.

"Dicky," he said, and paused. Then he fished out that perfectly impossible pipe of his and began to pack it, slowly shaking his head. "Dicky, anybody that would take advantage of you would lift a baby's milk gurgler."

Of course, I saw no more sense in that than you do, you know, but I understood that in his crude, vulgar way he meant some sort of a compliment.

"Dash it, of course," I said offhand, straightening up and recrossing my legs. I always say that and do that way when fellows say stupid things. Such a jolly good way to keep from hurting their feelings, you know, and saves talking and thinking. Got on to it myself.

Billings' eye ranged at me as he lighted his pipe. The smoke seemed to make him cough, and it was this, I suppose, that set him chuckling.

He suddenly held up the row of red buttons again.

"Look here, you blessed dodo," he exclaimed brusquely. "Have you really no idea what these are, these glass buttons you are yapping about? Of course you haven't, you jolly chowder head, but I'm going to tell you."

He threw the coat into my lap.

"They are rubies, old man, that's all," he said quietly. "Oriental rubies, at that – flawless and perfect – the rarest and most precious things in the world."

CHAPTER IX

AN AMAZING REVELATION

I stared blankly at Billings. "Rubies!" I gasped.

He nodded. "Genuine pigeon bloods, my son, no less."

"Oh, come now, Billings," I protested. I felt a little miffed, just a little you know. So jolly raw to try it on that way.

"By jove, old chap, you must think me a common ass," I suggested disgustedly.

Billings grinned at the very idea.

"*You* a common ass, Dicky?" he ejaculated. "Nobody who knows you would ever think that, old man."

"But, I say – "

"See here, Dicky boy, I'm in dead earnest," he interrupted eagerly. "Don't you remember my one fad – gems? Got enough tied up in them to build two apartment houses as big as this. Best amateur collection in New York, if I do say it. But I haven't anything like one of these rubies, and neither has any one else – no one else in this country, anyhow. There's nothing like them in all New York, from Tiffany's down to Maiden Lane, and never has been. I never saw anything like – near like any of them – except the one in the Russian crown of Anna Ivanovana. That's bigger, but it hasn't the same fire."

I just laughed at him. "Why, Billings, these pajamas were sent me by a friend in China, and I assure you – "

"Assure? What can you assure – what do *you* know about it?" said Billings rudely. "What did your friend know, or the one he had these things from – or the one before him – or the one still before that? Pshaw!" And he snapped his fingers.

With his hand he swept up the little caps and the long, wirelike threads that held them and sniffed the handful curiously.

"H'm! Funky sort of aromatic smell – balsam, cedar oil or something like that," he muttered half aloud. "That accounts for the preservation. But still – "

He crossed his legs and puffed thoughtfully.

"Tell you how I figure this out, Dicky," he said finally. "These nighties your friend has sent you are awfully rare and old; and for delicate, dainty elegance and that sort of thing they've got everything else in the silk way shoved off the clothes-line. But as to these jewels, you can just bet all you've got that whoever passed them on was not wise to them being under these covers."

Here he got to looking at one of the buttons and murmuring his admiration – regular trance, you know.

"By Jove!" I remarked, just to stir him up a bit. And he unloaded a great funnel of smoke and continued:

"My theory is that during some danger, some mandarins' war, likely, somebody got cold feet about these jewels and roped them in with these bits of silk – see how different they are from the rest of the stuff! Then, when the roughhouse came, these pajamas were swept along in the sacking – sort of spoils of pillage, you know. It was a clever method of concealment – clever because simple – a hiding place unlikely to be thought of because right under the eye. You recall Poe's story of *The Purloined Letter*?"

I tried to remember. "Can't say I do, dear boy," I had to admit. "Don't seem to place that one. Only one I remember hearing him tell is that one he brought back from Paris. Let me see — *The Story of the Lonely Lobster*, I think he called it." I chortled delightedly as it came back to me. "By Jove, that was devilish neat! Don't know when I've ever heard – "

An offensive remark by Billings interrupted me.

"Here, Dicky, Dicky, what do you think you're talking about?" he added rudely. Evidently his mind had wandered from the subject. So I replied with dignity – dignity, with just a touch of sarcasm:

"Pogue – 'Mickey' Pogue of our club. Perhaps you don't know Mickey Pogue?" And, by Jove, that fetched him! He stared at me a moment, and then, getting up, he reached over and solemnly shook me by the hand.

"Dicky," he said, wagging his head, "I apologize. You take the *brioche*!" And he turned his back a second.

I asked Billings how much he thought one of the rubies was worth. I had in mind how devilish hungrily he had looked at them. But he sighed, then frowned and answered impatiently:

"That's it! That's the trouble about all the rare and beautiful things of this life! Always some debasing, prohibitive sordid money value, dammit!"

He squinted at the stones again and let the weight of one rest upon his finger. He shook his head, sighing.

"Well, they're over twenty carats each, and therefore, of course, many times the value of first water diamonds. After you get above five carats with real Oriental rubies, diamonds are not in it."

With an abrupt gesture he pushed the things away and rose. His pipe had gone out, but I noticed that he did not relight it. I held the gems full in the rays of the lamp, and Billings paused, holding a hungry gaze over his shoulder.

"I say, Billings, how much did you say one was worth?" I asked carelessly. For a moment he did not reply, but muttered to himself.

"I didn't say," he finally replied, and rather crossly. Then he whirled on me impulsively. "See here, Lightning," he exclaimed, "if you'll let me have one of those for my collection, I'll give you twenty-five thousand for it – there!"

He gulped and continued:

"I'll have to make some sacrifices, but I don't mind that. I – "

But I shook my head. Really, I could hardly keep from laughing in his face.

"Sorry! Can't see it, old chap," I said. "Wouldn't sell one of them at any price."

Billings gulped again. "I suppose not; don't blame you. Way you're fixed, you don't have to." He walked slowly to the window and back. "Take my advice, Dicky, and get those fire coals into your safe deposit vault first thing in the morning. Hello, you're cutting them off! That's wise."

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