

CHAMBERS
ROBERT
WILLIAM

THE COMMON LAW

Robert Chambers

The Common Law

«Public Domain»

Chambers R.

The Common Law / R. Chambers — «Public Domain»,

Содержание

| | |
|-----------------------------------|----|
| CHAPTER I | 5 |
| CHAPTER II | 19 |
| CHAPTER III | 36 |
| CHAPTER IV | 44 |
| Конец ознакомительного фрагмента. | 55 |

Robert W. Chambers

The Common Law

CHAPTER I

There was a long, brisk, decisive ring at the door. He continued working. After an interval the bell rang again, briefly, as though the light touch on the electric button had lost its assurance.

"Somebody's confidence has departed," he thought to himself, busy with a lead-weighted string and a stick of soft charcoal wrapped in silver foil. For a few moments he continued working, not inclined to trouble himself to answer the door, but the hesitating timidity of a third appeal amused him, and he walked out into the hallway and opened the door. In the dim light a departing figure turned from the stairway:

"Do you wish a model?" she asked in an unsteady voice.

"No," he said, vexed.

"Then—I beg your pardon for disturbing you—"

"Who gave you my name?" he demanded.

"Why—nobody—"

"Who sent you to me? Didn't anybody send you?"

"No."

"But how did you get in?"

"I—walked in."

There was a scarcely perceptible pause; then she turned away in the dim light of the corridor.

"You know," he said, "models are not supposed to come here unless sent for. It isn't done in this building." He pointed to a black and white sign on his door which bore the words: "No Admittance."

"I am very sorry. I didn't understand—"

"Oh, it's all right; only, I don't see how you got up here at all. Didn't the elevator boy question you? It's his business."

"I didn't come up on the elevator."

"You didn't *walk* up!"

"Yes."

"Twelve stories!"

"Both elevators happened to be in service. Besides, I was not quite certain that models were expected to use the elevators."

"Good Lord!" he exclaimed, "you must have wanted an engagement pretty badly."

"Yes, I did."

He stared: "I suppose you do, still,"

"If you would care to try me."

"I'll take your name and address, anyhow. Twelve flights! For the love of—oh, come in anyway and rest."

It was dusky in the private hallway through which he preceded her, but there was light enough in the great studio. Through the vast sheets of glass fleecy clouds showed blue sky between. The morning was clearing.

He went over to an ornate Louis XV table, picked up a note book, motioned her to be seated, dropped into a chair himself, and began to sharpen a pencil. As yet he had scarcely glanced at her, and now, while he leisurely shaved the cedar and scraped the lead to a point, he absent-mindedly and good-humouredly admonished her:

"You models have your own guild, your club, your regular routine, and it would make it much easier for us if you'd all register and quietly wait until we send for you.

"You see we painters know what we want and we know where to apply for it. But if you all go wandering over studio buildings in search of engagements, we won't have any leisure to employ you because it will take all our time to answer the bell. And it will end by our not answering it at all. And that's why it is fit and proper for good little models to remain *chez eux*."

He had achieved a point to his pencil. Now he opened his model book, looked up at her with his absent smile, and remained looking.

"Aren't you going to remove your veil?"

"Oh—I beg your pardon!" Slender gloved fingers flew up, were nervously busy a moment. She removed her veil and sat as though awaiting his comment. None came.

After a moment's pause she said: "Did you wish—my name and address?"

He nodded, still looking intently at her.

"Miss West," she said, calmly. He wrote it down.

"Is that all? Just 'Miss West'?"

"Valerie West—if that is custom—necessary."

He wrote "Valerie West"; and, as she gave it to him, he noted her address.

"Head and shoulders?" he asked, quietly.

"Yes," very confidently.

"Figure?"

"Yes,"—less confidently.

"Draped or undraped?"

When he looked up again, for an instant he thought her skin even whiter than it had been; perhaps not, for, except the vivid lips and a carnation tint in the cheeks, the snowy beauty of her face and neck had already preoccupied him.

"Do you pose undraped?" he repeated, interested.

"I—expect to do—what is—required of—models."

"Sensible," he commented, noting the detail in his book. "Now, Miss

West, for whom have you recently posed?"

And, as she made no reply, he looked up amiably, balancing his pencil in his hand and repeating the question.

"Is it necessary to—tell you?"

"Not at all. One usually asks that question, probably because you models are always so everlastingly anxious to tell us—particularly when the men for whom you have posed are more famous than the poor devil who offers you an engagement."

There was something very good humoured in his smile, and she strove to smile, too, but her calmness was now all forced, and her heart was beating very fast, and her black-gloved fingers were closing and doubling till the hands that rested on the arms of the gilded antique chair lay tightly clenched.

He was leisurely writing in his note book under her name:

"Height, medium; eyes, a dark brown; hair, thick, lustrous, and brown; head, unusually beautiful; throat and neck, perfect—"

He stopped writing and lifted his eyes:

"How much of your time is taken ahead, I wonder?"

"What?"

"How many engagements have you? Is your time all cut up—as I fancy it is?"

"N-no."

"Could you give me what time I might require?"

"I think so."

"What I mean, Miss West, is this: suppose that your figure is what I have an idea it is; could you give me a lot of time ahead?"

She remained silent so long that he had started to write, "probably unreliable," under his notes; but, as his pencil began to move, her lips unclosed with, a low, breathless sound that became a ghost of a voice:

"I will do what you require of me. I meant to answer."

"Do you mean that you are in a position to make a time contract with me?—provided you prove to be what I need?"

She nodded uncertainly.

"I'm beginning the ceiling, lunettes, and panels for the Byzantine Theatre," he added, sternly stroking his short mustache, "and under those circumstances I suppose you know what a contract between us means."

She nodded again, but in her eyes was bewilderment, and in her heart, fear.

"Yes," she managed to say, "I think I understand."

"Very well. I merely want to say that a model threw me down hard in the very middle of the Bimmington's ball-room. Max Schindler put on a show, and she put for the spot-light. She'd better stay put," he added grimly: "she'll never have another chance in your guild."

Then the frown vanished, and the exceedingly engaging smile glimmered in his eyes:

"You wouldn't do such a thing as that to me," he added; "would you, Miss West?"

"Oh, no," she replied, not clearly comprehending the enormity of the Schindler recruit's behaviour.

"And you'll stand by me if our engagement goes through?"

"Yes, I—will try to."

"Good business! Now, if you really are what I have an idea you are, I'll know pretty quick whether I can use you for the Byzantine job." He rose, walked over to a pair of closed folding doors and opened them. "You can undress in there," he said. "I think you will find everything you need."

For a second she sat rigid, her black-gloved hands doubled, her eyes fastened on him as though fascinated. He had already turned and sauntered over to one of several easels where he picked up the lump of charcoal in its silver foil.

The colour began to come back into her face—swifter, more swiftly: the vast blank window with its amber curtains stared at her; she lifted her tragic gaze and saw the sheet of glass above swimming in crystal light. Through it clouds were dissolving in the bluest of skies; against it a spiderweb of pendant cords drooped from the high ceiling; and she saw the looming mystery of huge canvases beside which stepladders rose surmounted by little crow's-nests where the graceful oval of palettes curved, tinted with scraped brilliancy.

"What a dreamer you are!" he called across the studio to her. "The light is fine, now. Hadn't we better take advantage of it?"

She managed to find her footing; contrived to rise, to move with apparent self-possession toward the folding doors.

"Better hurry," he said, pleasantly. "If you're what I need we might start things now. I am all ready for the sort of figure I expect you have."

She stepped inside the room and became desperately busy for a moment trying to close the doors; but either her hands had suddenly become powerless or they shook too much; and when he turned, almost impatiently, from his easel to see what all that rattling meant, she shrank hastily aside into the room beyond, keeping out of his view.

The room was charming—not like the studio, but modern and fresh and dainty with chintz and flowered wall-paper and the graceful white furniture of a bed-room. There was a flowered screen there, too. Behind it stood a chair, and onto this she sank, laid her hands for an instant against her

burning face, then stooped and, scarcely knowing what she was about, began to untie her patent-leather shoes.

He remained standing at his easel, very busy with his string and lump of charcoal; but after a while it occurred to him that she was taking an annoyingly long time about a simple matter.

"What on earth is the trouble?" he called. "Do you realise you've been in there a quarter of an hour?"

She made no answer. A second later he thought he heard an indistinct sound—and it disquieted him.

"Miss West?"

There was no reply.

Impatient, a little disturbed, he walked across to the folding doors; and the same low, suppressed sound caught his ear.

"What in the name of—" he began, walking into the room; and halted, amazed.

She sat all huddled together behind the screen, partly undressed, her face hidden in her hands; and between the slender fingers tears ran down brightly.

"Are you ill?" he asked, anxiously.

After a moment she slowly shook her head.

"Then—what in the name of Mike—"

"P—please forgive me. I—I will be ready in a in-moment—if you wouldn't mind going out—"

"Are you ill? Answer me?"

"N-no."

"Has anything disturbed you so that you don't feel up to posing to-day?"

"No.... I—am—almost ready—if you will go out—"

He considered her, uneasy and perplexed. Then:

"All right," he said, briefly. "Take your own time, Miss West."

At his easel, fussing with yard-stick and crayon, he began to square off his canvas, muttering to himself:

"What the deuce is the matter with that girl? Nice moment to nurse secret sorrows or blighted affections. There's always something wrong with the best lookers.... And she is a real beauty—or I miss my guess." He went on ruling off, measuring, grumbling, until slowly there came over him the sense of the nearness of another person. He had not heard her enter, but he turned around, knowing she was there.

She stood silent, motionless, as though motion terrified her and inertia were salvation. Her dark hair rippled to her waist; her white arms hung limp, yet the fingers had curled till every delicate nail was pressed deep into the pink palm. She was trying to look at him. Her face was as white as a flower.

"All right," he said under his breath, "you're practically faultless. I suppose you realise it!"

A scarcely perceptible shiver passed over her entire body, then, as he stepped back, his keen artist's gaze narrowing, there stole over her a delicate flush, faintly staining her from brow to ankle, transfiguring the pallour exquisitely, enchantingly. And her small head drooped forward, shadowed by her hair.

"You're what I want," he said. "You're about everything I require in colour and form and texture."

She neither spoke nor moved as much as an eyelash.

"Look here, Miss West," he said in a slightly excited voice, "let's go about this thing intelligently." He swung another easel on its rollers, displaying a sketch in soft, brilliant colours—a multitude of figures amid a swirl of sunset-tinted clouds and patches of azure sky.

"You're intelligent," he went on with animation,— "I saw that—somehow or other—though you haven't said very much." He laughed, and laid his hand on the painted canvas beside him:

"You're a model, and it's not necessary to inform you that this is only a preliminary sketch. Your experience tells you that. But it is necessary to tell you that it's the final composition. I've decided on this arrangement for the ceiling: You see for yourself that you're perfectly fitted to stand or sit for all these floating, drifting, cloud-cradled goddesses. You're an inspiration in yourself—for the perfections of Olympus!" he added, laughing, "and that's no idle compliment. But of course other artists have often told you this before—as though you didn't have eyes of your own. I And beautiful ones at that!" He laughed again, turned and dragged a two-storied model-stand across the floor, tossed up one or two silk cushions, and nodded to her.

"Don't be afraid; it's rickety but safe. It will hold us both. Are you ready?"

As in a dream she set one little bare foot on the steps, mounted, balancing with arms extended and the tips of her fingers resting on his outstretched hand.

Standing on the steps he arranged the cushions, told her where to be seated, how to recline, placed the wedges and blocks to support her feet, chalked the bases, marked positions with arrows, and wedged and blocked up her elbow. Then he threw over her a soft, white, wool robe, swathing her from throat to feet, descended the steps, touched an electric bell, and picking up a huge clean palette began to squeeze out coils of colour from a dozen plump tubes.

Presently a short, squarely built man entered. He wore a blue jumper; there were traces of paint on it, on his large square hands, on his square, serious face.

"O'Hara?"

"Sorr?"

"We're going to begin *now*!—thank Heaven. So if you'll be kind enough to help move forward the ceiling canvas—"

O'Hara glanced up carelessly at the swathed and motionless figure above, then calmly spat upon his hands and laid hold of one side of the huge canvas indicated. The painter took the other side.

"Now, O'Hara, careful! Back off a little!—don't let it sway! There—that's where I want it. Get a ladder and clamp the tops. Pitch it a little forward—more!—stop! Fix those pulley ropes; I'll make things snug below."

For ten minutes they worked deftly, rapidly, making fast the great blank canvas which had been squared and set with an enormous oval in heavy outline.

From her lofty eyrie she looked down at them as in a dream while they shifted other enormous framed canvases and settled the oval one into place. Everything below seemed to be on rubber wheels or casters, easels, stepladders, colour cabinets, even the great base where the oval set canvas rested.

She looked up at the blue sky. Sparrows dropped out of the brilliant void into unseen canons far below from whence came the softened roar of traffic. Northward the city spread away between its rivers, glittering under the early April sun; the Park lay like a grey and green map set with, the irregular silver of water; beyond, the huge unfinished cathedral loomed dark against the big white hospital of St. Luke; farther still a lilac-tinted haze hung along the edges of the Bronx.

"All right, O'Hara. Much obliged. I won't need you again."

"Very good, Sorr."

The short, broad Irishman went out with another incurious glance aloft, and closed the outer door.

High up on her perch she watched the man below. He calmly removed coat and waistcoat, pulled a painter's linen blouse over his curly head, lighted a cigarette, picked up his palette, fastened a tin cup to the edge, filled it from a bottle, took a handful of brushes and a bunch of cheese cloth, and began to climb up a stepladder opposite her, lugging his sketch in the other hand.

He fastened the little sketch to an upright and stood on the ladder halfway up, one leg higher than the other.

"Now, Miss West," he said decisively.

At the sound of his voice fear again leaped through her like a flame, burning her face as she let slip the white wool robe.

"All right," he said. "Don't move while I'm drawing unless you have to."

She could see him working. He seemed to be drawing with a brush, rapidly, and with, a kind of assurance that appeared almost careless.

At first she could make out little of the lines. They were all dark in tint, thin, tinged with plum colour. There seemed to be no curves in them—and at first she could not comprehend that he was drawing her figure. But after a little while curves appeared; long delicate outlines began to emerge as rounded surfaces in monochrome, casting definite shadows on other surfaces. She could recognise the shape of a human head; saw it gradually become a colourless drawing; saw shoulders, arms, a body emerging into shadowy shape; saw the long fine limbs appear, the slender indication of feet.

Then flat on the cheek lay a patch of brilliant colour, another on the mouth. A great swirl of cloud forms sprang into view high piled in a corner of the canvas.

And now he seemed to be eternally running up and down his ladder, shifting it here and there across the vast white background of canvas, drawing great meaningless lines in distant expanses of the texture, then, always consulting her with his keen, impersonal gaze, he pushed back his ladder, mounted, wiped the big brushes, selected others smaller and flatter, considering her in penetrating silence between every brush, stroke.

She saw a face and hair growing lovely under her eyes, bathed in an iris-tinted light; saw little exquisite flecks of colour set here and there on the white expanse; watched all so intently, so wonderingly, that the numbness of her body became a throbbing pain before she was aware that she was enduring torture.

She strove to move, gave a little gasp; and he was down from his ladder and up on hers before her half-paralysed body had swayed to the edge of danger.

"Why didn't you say so?" he asked, sharply. "I can't keep track of time when I'm working!"

With arms and fingers that scarcely obeyed her she contrived to gather the white wool covering around her shoulders and limbs and lay back.

"You know," he said, "that it's foolish to act this way. I don't want to kill you, Miss West."

She only lowered her head amid its lovely crown of hair.

"You know your own limits," he said, resentfully. He looked down at the big clock: "It's a full hour. You had only to speak. Why didn't you?"

"I—I didn't know what to say."

"Didn't know!" He paused, astonished. Then: "Well, you felt yourself getting numb, didn't you?"

"Y-yes. But I thought it was—to be expected"—she blushed vividly under his astonished gaze: "I think I had better tell you that—that this is—the first time."

"The first time!"

"Yes.... I ought to have told you. I was afraid you might not want me."

"Lord above!" he breathed. "You poor—poor little thing!"

She began to cry silently; he saw the drops fall shining on the white wool robe, and leaned one elbow on the ladder, watching them. After a while they ceased, but she still held her head low, and her face was bent in the warm shadow of her hair.

"How could I understand?" he asked very gently.

"I—should have told you. I was afraid."

He said: "I'm terribly sorry. It must have been perfect torture for you to undress—to come into the studio. If you'd only given me an idea of how matters stood I could have made it a little easier. I'm afraid I was brusque—taking it for granted that you were a model and knew your business.... I'm terribly sorry."

She lifted her head, looked at him, with the tears still clinging to her lashes.

"You have been very nice to me. It is all my own fault."

He smiled. "Then it's all right, now that we understand. Isn't it?"

"Yes."

"You make a stunning model," he said frankly.

"Do I? Then you will let me come again?"

"Let you!" He laughed; "I'll be more likely to beg you."

"Oh, you won't have to," she said; "I'll come as long as you want me."

"That is simply angelic of you. Tell me, do you wish to descend to terra firma?"

She glanced below, doubtfully:

"N-no, thank you. If I could only stretch my—legs—"

"Stretch away," he said, much amused, "but don't tumble off and break into pieces. I like you better as you are than as an antique and limbless Venus."

She cautiously and daintily extended first one leg then the other under the wool robe, then eased the cramped muscles of her back, straightening her body and flexing her arms with a little sigh of relief. As her shy sidelong gaze reverted to him she saw to her relief that he was not noticing her. A slight sense of warmth, suffused her body, and she stretched herself again, more confidently, and ventured to glance around.

"Speaking of terms," he said in an absent way, apparently preoccupied with the palette which he was carefully scraping, "do you happen to know what is the usual recompense for a model's service?"

She said that she had heard, and added with quick diffidence that she could not expect so much, being only a beginner.

He polished the surface of the palette with a handful of cheese cloth:

"Don't you think that you are worth it?"

"How can I be until I know how to pose for you?"

"You will never have to learn how to pose, Miss West."

"I don't know exactly what you mean."

"I mean that some models never learn. Some know how already—you, for example."

She flushed slightly: "Do you really mean that?"

"Oh, I wouldn't say so if I didn't. It's merely necessary for you to accustom yourself to holding a pose; the rest you already know instinctively."

"What is the rest?" she ventured to ask. "I don't quite understand what you see in me—"

"Well," he said placidly, "you are beautifully made. That is nine-tenths of the matter. Your head is set logically on your neck, and your neck is correctly placed on your spine, and your legs and arms are properly attached to your torso—your entire body, anatomically speaking, is hinged, hung, supported, developed as the ideal body should be. It's undeformed, unmarred, unspoiled, and that's partly luck, partly inheritance, and mostly decent habits and digestion."

She was listening intently, interested, surprised, her pink lips slightly parted.

"Another point," he continued; "you seem unable to move or rest ungracefully. Few women are so built that an ungraceful motion is impossible for them. You are one of the few. It's all a matter of anatomy."

She remained silent, watching him curiously.

He said: "But the final clincher to your qualifications is that you are intelligent. I have known pretty women," he added with, sarcasm, "who were not what learned men would call precisely intelligent. But you are. I showed you my sketch, indicated in a general way what I wanted, and instinctively and intelligently you assumed the proper attitude. I didn't have to take you by the chin and twist your head as though you were a lay figure; I didn't have to pull you about and flex and bend and twist you. You knew that I wanted you to look like some sort of an ethereal immortality, deliciously relaxed, adrift in sunset clouds. And you *were* it—somehow or other."

She looked down, thoughtfully, nestling to the chin in the white wool folds. A smile, almost imperceptible, curved her lips.

"You are making it very easy for me," she said.

"You make it easy for yourself."

"I was horribly afraid," she said thoughtfully.

"I have no doubt of it."

"Oh, you don't know—nobody can know—no man can understand the terror of—of the first time—"

"It must be a ghastly experience."

"It is!—I don't mean that you have not done everything to make it easier—but—there in the little room—my courage left me—I almost died. I'd have run away only—I was afraid you wouldn't let me—"

He began to laugh; she tried to, but the terror of it all was as yet too recent.

"At first," she said, "I was afraid I wouldn't do for a model—not exactly afraid of my—my appearance, but because I was a novice; and I imagined that one had to know exactly how to pose—"

"I think," he interrupted smilingly, "that you might take the pose again if you are rested. Go on talking; I don't mind it."

She sat erect, loosened the white wool robe and dropped it from her with less consciousness and effort than before. Very carefully she set her feet on the blocks, fitting the shapely heels to the chalked outlines; found the mark for her elbow, adjusted her slim, smooth body and looked at him, flushing.

"All right," he said briefly; "go ahead and talk to me."

"Do you wish me to?"

"Yes; I'd rather."

"I don't know exactly what to say."

"Say anything," he returned absently, selecting a flat brush with a very long handle.

She thought a moment, then, lifting her eyes:

"I might ask you your name."

"What? Don't you know it? Oh, Lord! Oh, Vanity! I thought you'd heard of me."

She blushed, confused by her ignorance and what she feared was annoyance on his part; then perceived that he was merely amused; and her face cleared.

"We folk who create concrete amusement for the public always imagine ourselves much better known to that public than we are, Miss West. It's our little vanity—rather harmless after all. We're a pretty decent lot, sometimes absurd, especially in our tragic moments; sometimes emotional, usually illogical, often impulsive, frequently tender-hearted as well as supersensitive.

"Now it was a pleasant little vanity for me to take it for granted that somehow you had heard of me and had climbed twelve flights of stairs for the privilege of sitting for me."

He laughed so frankly that the shy, responsive smile made her face enchanting; and he coolly took advantage of it, and while exciting and stimulating it, affixed it immortally on the exquisite creature he was painting.

"So you didn't climb those twelve flights solely for the privilege of having me paint you?"

"No," she admitted, laughingly, "I was merely going to begin at the top and apply for work all the way down until somebody took me—or nobody took me."

"But why begin at the top?"

"It is easier to bear disappointment going down," she said, seriously; "if two or three artists had refused me on the first and second floors, my legs would not have carried me up very far."

"Bad logic," he commented. "We mount by experience, using our wrecked hopes as footholds."

"You don't know how much a girl can endure. There comes a time—after years of steady descent—when misfortune and disappointment become endurable; when hope deferred no longer sickens. It is in rising toward better things that disappointments hurt most cruelly."

He turned his head in surprise; then went on painting:

"Your philosophy is the philosophy of submission."

"Do you call a struggle of years, submission?"

"But it was giving up after all—acquiescence, despondency, a *laissez faire* policy."

"One may tire of fighting."

"One may. Another may not."

"I think you have never had to fight very hard."

He turned his head abruptly; after a moment's silent survey of her, he resumed his painting with a sharp, impersonal glance before every swift and decisive brush stroke:

"No; I have never had to fight, Miss West.... It was keen of you to recognise it. I have never had to fight at all. Things come easily to me—things have a habit of coming my way.... I suppose I'm not exactly the man to lecture anybody on the art of fighting fortune. She's always been decent to me.... Sometimes I'm afraid—I have an instinct that she's too friendly.... And it troubles me. Do you understand what I mean?"

"Yes."

He looked up at her: "Are you sure?"

"I think so. I have been watching you painting. I never imagined anybody could draw so swiftly, so easily—paint so surely, so accurately—that every brush stroke could be so—so significant, so decisive.... Is it not unusual? And is not that what is called facility?"

"Lord in Heaven!" he said; "what kind of a girl am I dealing with?—or what kind of a girl is dealing so unmercifully with me?"

"I—I didn't mean—"

"Yes, you did. Those very lovely and wonderfully shaped eyes of yours are not entirely for ornament. Inside that pretty head there's an apparatus designed for thinking; and it isn't idle."

He laughed gaily, a trifle defiantly:

"You've said it. You've found the fly in the amber. I'm cursed with facility. Worse still it gives me keenest pleasure to employ it. It does scare me occasionally—has for years—makes me miserable at intervals—fills me full of all kinds of fears and doubts."

He turned toward her, standing on his ladder, the big palette curving up over his left shoulder, a wet brush extended in his right hand:

"What shall I do!" he exclaimed so earnestly that she sat up straight, startled, forgetting her pose. "Ought I to stifle the vigour, the energy, the restless desire that drives me to express myself—that will not tolerate the inertia of calculation and ponderous reflection? Ought I to check myself, consider, worry, entangle myself in psychologies, seek for subtleties where none exist—split hairs, relapse into introspective philosophy when my fingers itch for a lump of charcoal and every colour on my set palette yells at me to be about my business?"

He passed the flat tip of his wet brush through the mass of rags in his left hand with a graceful motion like one unsheathing a sword:

"I tell you I do the things which I do, as easily, as naturally, as happily as any fool of a dicky-bird does his infernal twittering on an April morning. God knows whether there's anything in my work or in his twitter; but neither he nor I are likely to improve our output by pondering and cogitation.... Please resume the pose."

She did so, her dark young eyes on him; and he continued painting and talking in his clear, rapid, decisive manner:

"My name is Louis Neville. They call me Kelly—my friends do," he added, laughing. "Have you ever seen any of my work?"

"Yes."

He laughed again: "That's more soothing. However, I suppose you saw that big canvas of mine for the ceiling of the Metropolitan Museum's new northwest wing. The entire town saw it."

"Yes, I saw it."

"Did you care for it?"

She had cared for it too intensely to give him any adequate answer. Never before had her sense of colour and form and beauty been so exquisitely satisfied by the painted magic of any living painter. So this was the man who had enveloped her, swayed her senses, whirled her upward into his ocean of limpid light! This was the man who had done that miracle before which, all day long, crowds of the sober, decent, unimaginative—the solid, essentials of the nation—had lingered fascinated! This was the man—across there on a stepladder. And he was evidently not yet thirty; and his name was Neville and his friends called him Kelly.

"Yes," she said, diffidently, "I cared for it."

"Really?"

He caught her eye, laughed, and went on with his work.

"The critics were savage," he said. "Lord! It hurts, too. But I've simply got to be busy. What good would it do me to sit down and draw casts with a thin, needle-pointed stick of hard charcoal. Not that they say I can't draw. They admit that I can. They admit that I can paint, too."

He laughed, stretched his arms:

"Draw! A blank canvas sets me mad. When I look at one I feel like covering it with a thousand figures twisted into every intricacy and difficulty of foreshortening! I wish I were like that Hindu god with a dozen arms; and even then I couldn't paint fast enough to satisfy what my eyes and brain have already evoked upon an untouched canvas.... It's a sort of intoxication that gets hold of me; I'm perfectly cool, too, which seems a paradox but isn't. And all the while, inside me, is a constant, hushed kind of laughter, bubbling, which accompanies every brush stroke with an 'I told you so!'—if you know what I'm trying to say—*do* you?"

"N-not exactly. But I suppose you mean that you are self-confident."

"Lord! Listen to this girl say in a dozen words what I'm trying to say in a volume so that it won't scare me! Yes! That's it. I am confident. And it's that self-confidence which sometimes scares me half to death."

From his ladder he pointed with his brush to the preliminary sketch that faced her, touching figure after figure:

"I'm going to draw them in, now," he said; "first this one. Can you catch the pose? It's going to be hard; I'll block up your heels, later; that's it! Stand up straight, stretch as though the next moment you were going to rise on tiptoe and float upward without an effort—"

He was working like lightning in long, beautiful, clean outline strokes, brushed here and there with shadow shapes and masses. And time flew at first, then went slowly, more slowly, until it dragged at her delicate body and set every nerve aching.

"I—may I rest a moment?"

"Sure thing!" he said, cordially, laying aside palette and brushes. "Come on, Miss West, and we'll have luncheon."

She hastily swathed herself in the wool robe.

"Do you mean—here?"

"Yes. There's a dumb-waiter. I'll ring for the card."

"I'd like to," she said, "but do you think I had better?"

"Why not?"

"You mean—take lunch with you?"

"Why not?"

"Is it customary?"

"No, it isn't."

"Then I think I will go out to lunch somewhere—"

"I'm not going to let you get away," he said, laughing. "You're too good to be real; I'm worried half to death for fear that you'll vanish in a golden cloud, or something equally futile and inconsiderate. No, I want you to stay. You don't mind, do you?"

He was aiding her to descend from her eyrie, her little white hand balanced on his arm. When she set foot on the floor she looked up at him gravely:

"You wouldn't let me do anything that I ought not to, would you, Mr. Kelly—I mean Mr. Neville?" she added in confusion.

"No. Anyway I don't know what you ought or ought not to do. Luncheon is a simple matter of routine. It's sole significance is two empty stomachs. I suppose if you go out you *will* come back, but—I'd rather you'd remain."

"Why?"

"Well," he admitted with a laugh, "it's probably because I like to hear myself talk to you. Besides, I've always the hope that you'll suddenly become conversational, and that's a possibility exciting enough to give anybody an appetite."

"But I *have* conversed with you," she said.

"Only a little. What you said acted like a cocktail to inspire me for a desire for more."

"I am afraid that you were not named Kelly in vain."

"You mean blarney? No, it's merely frankness. Let me get you some bath-slippers—"

"Oh—but if I am to lunch here—I can't do it this way!" she exclaimed in flushed consternation.

"Indeed you must learn to do that without embarrassment, Miss West. Tie up your robe at the throat, tuck up your sleeves, slip your feet into a nice pair of brand-new bath-slippers, and I'll ring for luncheon."

"I—don't—want to—" she began; but he went away into the hall, rang, and presently she heard the ascending clatter of a dumb-waiter. From it he took the luncheon card and returned to where she was sitting at a rococo table. She blushed as he laid the card before her, and would have nothing to do with it. The result was that he did the ordering, sent the dumb-waiter down with his scribbled memorandum, and came wandering back with long, cool glances at his canvas and the work he had done on it.

"I mean to make a stunning thing of it," he remarked, eyeing the huge chassis critically. "All this—deviltry—whatever it is inside of me—must come out somehow. And that canvas is the place for it." He laughed and sat down opposite her:

"Man is born to folly, Miss West—born full of it. I get rid of mine on canvas. It's a safer outlet for original sin than some other ways."

She lay back in her antique gilded chair, hands extended along the arms, looking at him with a smile that was still shy.

"My idea of you—of an artist—was so different," she said.

"There are all kinds, mostly the seriously inspired and humourless variety who makes a mystic religion of a very respectable profession. This world is full of pale, enraptured artists; full of muscular, thumb-smearing artists; full of dreamy weavers of visions, usually deficient in spinal process; full of unwashed little inverters to whom the world really resembles a kaleidoscope full of things that wiggle—"

They began to laugh, he with a singular delight in her comprehension of his idle, irresponsible chatter, she from sheer pleasure in listening and looking at this man who was so different from anybody she had ever known—and, thank God!—so young.

And when the bell rang and the clatter announced the advent of luncheon, she settled in her chair with a little shiver of happiness, blushing at her capacity for it, and at her acquiescence in the strangest conditions in which she had ever found herself in all her life,—conditions so bizarre, so grotesque, so impossible that there was no use in trying to consider them—alas! no point in blushing now.

Mechanically she settled her little naked feet deep into the big bath-slippers, tucked up her white wool sleeves to the dimpled elbow, and surveyed the soup which he had placed before her to serve.

"I know perfectly well that this isn't right," she said, helping him and then herself. "But I am wondering what there is about it that isn't right."

"Isn't it demoralising!" he said, amused.

"I—wonder if it is?"

He laughed: "Such ideas are nonsense, Miss West. Listen to me: you and I—everybody except those with whom something is physically wrong—are born with a full and healthy capacity for demoralisation and mischief. Mischief is only one form of energy. If lightning flies about unguided it's likely to do somebody some damage; if it's conducted properly to a safe terminal there's no damage done and probably a little good."

"Your brushes are your lightning-rods?" she suggested, laughing.

"Certainly. I only demoralise canvas. What outlet have you for your perfectly normal deviltry?"

"I haven't any."

"Any deviltry?"

"Any outlet."

"You ought to have."

"Ought I?"

"Certainly. You are as full of restless energy as I am."

"Oh, I don't think I am."

"You are. Look at yourself! I never saw anybody so sound, so superbly healthy, so"—he laughed—"adapted to dynamics. You've got to have an outlet. Or there'll be the deuce to pay."

She looked at her fruit salad gravely, tasted it, and glanced up at him:

"I have never in all my life had any outlet—never even any outlook, Mr. Neville."

"You should have had both," he grumbled, annoyed at himself for the interest her words had for him; uneasy, now that she had responded, yet curious to learn something about this fair young girl, approximately his intellectual equal, who came to his door looking for work as a model. He thought to himself that probably it was some distressing tale which he couldn't help, and the recital of which would do neither of them any good. Of stories of models' lives he was tired, satiated. There was no use encouraging her to family revelations; an easy, pleasant footing was far more amusing to maintain. The other hinted of intimacy; and that he had never tolerated in his employees.

Yet, looking now across the table at her, a not unkind curiosity began to prod him. He could easily have left matters where they were, maintained the *status quo* indefinitely—or as long as he needed her services.

"Outlets are necessary," he said, cautiously. "Otherwise we go to the bow-wows."

"Or—die."

"What?" sharply.

She looked up without a trace of self-consciousness or the least hint of the dramatic:

"I would die unless I had an outlet. This is almost one. At least it gives me something to do with my life."

"Posing?"

"Yes."

"I don't quite understand you."

"Why, I only mean that—the other"—she smiled—"what you call the bow-wows, would not have been an outlet for me.... I was a show-girl for two months last winter; I ought to know. And I'd rather have died than—"

"I see," he said; "that outlet was too stupid to have attracted you."

She nodded. "Besides, I have principles," she said, candidly.

"Which effectually blocked that outlet. They sometimes kill, too, as you say. Youth stifled too long means death—the death of youth at least. Outlets mean life. The idea is to find a safe one."

She flushed in quick, sensitive response:

"*That* is it; that is what I meant. Mr. Neville, I am twenty-one; and do you know I never had a childhood? And I am simply wild for it—for the girlhood and the playtime that I never had—"

She checked herself, looking across at him uncertainly.

"Go on," he nodded.

"That is all."

"No; tell me the rest."

She sat with head bent, slender fingers picking at her napkin; then, without raising her troubled eyes:

"Life has been—curious. My mother was bedridden. My childhood and girlhood were passed caring for her. That is all I ever did until—a year ago," she added, her voice falling so low he could scarcely hear her.

"She died, then?"

"A year ago last February."

"You went to school. You must have made friends there."

"I went to a public school for a year. After that mother taught me."

"She must have been extremely cultivated."

The girl nodded, looking absently at the cloth. Then, glancing up:

"I wonder whether you will understand me when I tell you why I decided to ask employment of artists."

"I'll try to," he said, smiling.

"It was an intense desire to be among cultivated people—if only for a few hours. Besides, I had read about artists; and their lives seemed so young, so gay, so worth living—please don't think me foolish and immature, Mr. Neville—but I was so stifled, so cut off from such people, so uninspired, so—so starved for a little gaiety—and I needed youthful companionship—surroundings where people of my own age and intelligence sometimes entered—and I had never had it—"

She looked at him with a strained, wistful expression as though begging him to understand her:

"I couldn't remain at the theatre," she said. "I had little talent—no chance except chances I would not tolerate; no companionship except what I was unfitted for by education and inclination.... The men were—impossible. There may have been girls I could have liked—but I did not meet them. So, as I had to do something—and my years of seclusion with mother had unfitted me for any business—for office work or shop work—I thought that artists might care to employ me—might give me—or let me see—be near—something of the gayer, brighter, more pleasant and youthful side of life—"

She ceased, bent her head thoughtfully.

"You want—friends? Young ones—with intellects? You want to combine these with a chance of making a decent living?"

"Yes." She looked up candidly: "I am simply starved for it. You must believe that when you see what I have submitted to—gone through with in your studio"—she blushed vividly—"in a—desperate attempt to escape the—the loneliness, the silence and isolation"—she raised her dark eyes—"the isolation of the poor," she said. "You don't know what that means."

After a moment she added, level-eyed: "For which there is supposed to be but one outlet—if a girl is attractive."

He rose, walked to and fro for a few moments, then, halting:

"All memory of the initial terror and distress and uncertainty aside, have you not enjoyed this morning, Miss West?"

"Yes, I—have. I—you have no idea what it has meant to me."

"It has given you an outlook, anyway."

"Yes.... Only—I'm terrified at the idea of going through it again—with another man—"

He laughed, and she tried to, saying:

"But if all artists are as kind and considerate—"

"Plenty of 'em are more so. There are a few bounders, a moderate number of beasts. You'll find them everywhere in the world from the purlieus to the pulpit.... I'm going to make a contract with you. After that, regretfully, I'll see that you meet the men who will be valuable to you.... I wish there was some way I could box you up in a jeweller's case so that nobody else could have you and I could find you when I needed you!"

She laughed shyly, extended her slim white hand for him to support her while she mounted to her eyrie. Then, erect, delicately flushed, she let the robe fall from her and stood looking down at him in silence.

CHAPTER II

Spring came unusually early that year. By the first of the month a few willows and thorn bushes in the Park had turned green; then, in a single day, the entire Park became lovely with golden bell-flowers, and the first mowing machine clinked over the greenswards leaving a fragrance of clipped verdure in its wake.

Under a characteristic blue sky April unfolded its myriad leaves beneath which robins ran over shaven lawns and purple grackle bustled busily about, and the water fowl quacked and whistled and rushed through the water nipping and chasing one another or, sidling alongside, began that nodding, bowing, bobbing acquaintance preliminary to aquatic courtship.

Many of the wild birds had mated; many were mating; amorous caterwauling on back fences made night an inferno; pigeons cooed and bubbled and made endless nuisances of themselves all day long.

In lofts, offices, and shops youthful faces, whitened by the winter's pallour, appeared at open windows gazing into the blue above, or, with, pretty, inscrutable eyes, studied the passing throng till the lifted eyes of youth below completed the occult circuit with a smile.

And the spring sunshine grew hot, and sprinkling carts appeared, and the metropolis moulted its overcoats, and the derby became a burden, and the annual spring exhibition of the National Academy of Design remained uncrowded.

Neville, lunching at the Syrinx Club, carelessly caught the ball of conversation tossed toward him and contributed his final comment:

"Burleson—and you, Sam Ogilvy—and you, Annan, all say that the exhibition is rotten. You say so every year; so does the majority of people. And the majority will continue saying the same thing throughout the coming decades as long as there are any exhibitions to damn.

"It is the same thing in other countries. For a hundred years the majority has pronounced every Salon rotten. And it will so continue.

"But the facts are these: the average does not vary much. A mediocrity, not disagreeable, always rules; supremity has been, is, and always will be the stick in the riddle around which the little whirlpool will always centre. This year it happens to be José Querida who stems the sparkling mediocrity and sticks up from the bottom gravel making a fine little swirl. Next year—or next decade it may be anybody—you, Annan, or Sam—perhaps," he added with a slight smile, "it might be I. *Quand même*. The exhibitions are no rottener than they have ever been; and it's up to us to go about our business. And I'm going. Good-bye."

He rose from the table, laid aside the remains of his cigar, nodded good-humouredly to the others, and went out with that quick, graceful, elastic step which was noticed by everybody and envied by many.

"Hell," observed John Burleson, hitching his broad shoulders forward and swallowing a goblet of claret at a single gulp, "it's all right for Kelly Neville to shed sweetness and light over a rotten exhibition where half the people are crowded around his own picture."

"What a success he's having," mused Ogilvy, looking sideways out of the window at a pretty girl across the street.

Annan nodded: "He works hard enough for it."

"He works all the time," grumbled Burleson, "but, does he work *hard*?"

"A cat scrambling in a molasses barrel works hard," observed Ogilvy—"if you see any merit in that, John."

Burleson reared his huge frame and his symmetrical features became more bovine than ever:

"What the devil has a cat in a molasses barrel to do with the subject?" he demanded.

Annan laughed: "Poor old honest, literal John," he said, lazily. "Listen; from my back window in the country, yesterday, I observed one of my hens scratching her ear with her foot. How would you like to be able to accomplish that, John?"

"I wouldn't like it at all!" roared Burleson in serious disapproval.

"That's because you're a sculptor and a Unitarian," said Annan, gravely.

"My God!" shouted Burleson, "what's that got to do with a hen scratching herself!"

Ogilvy was too weak with laughter to continue the favourite pastime of "touching up John"; and Burleson who, under provocation, never exhibited any emotion except impatient wonder at the foolishness of others, emptied his claret bottle with unruffled confidence in his own common-sense and the futility of his friends.

"Kelly, they say, is making a stunning lot of stuff for that Byzantine Theatre," he said in his honest, resonant voice. "I wish to Heaven I could paint like him."

Annan passed his delicate hand over his pale, handsome face: "Kelly Neville is, without exception, the most gifted man I ever knew."

"No, the most skilful," suggested Ogilvy. "I have known more gifted men who never became skilful."

"What hair is that you're splitting, Sam?" demanded Burleson. "Don't you like Kelly's work?"

"Sure I do."

"What's the matter with it, then?"

There was a silence. One or two men at neighbouring tables turned partly around to listen. There seemed to be something in the very simple and honest question of John Burleson that arrested the attention of every man at the Syrinx Club who had heard it. Because, for the first time, the question which every man there had silently, involuntarily asked himself had been uttered aloud at last by John Burleson—voiced in utter good faith and with all confidence that the answer could be only that there was nothing whatever the matter with Louis Neville's work. And his answer had been a universal silence.

Clive Gail, lately admitted to the Academy said: "I have never in my life seen or believed possible such facility as is Louis Neville's."

"Sure thing," grunted Burleson.

"His personal manner of doing his work—which the critics and public term 'tek—nee—ee—eek,'" laughed Annan, "is simply gloriously bewildering. There is a sweeping splendour to it—and *what* colour!"

There ensued murmured and emphatic approbation; and another silence.

Ogilvy's dark, pleasant face was troubled when he broke the quiet, and everybody turned toward him:

"Then," he said, slowly, "what *is* the matter with Neville?"

Somebody said: "He *does* convince you; it isn't that, is it?"

A voice replied: "Does he convince himself?"

"There is—there always has been something lacking in all that big, glorious, splendid work. It only needs that one thing—whatever it is," said Ogilvy, quietly. "Kelly is too sure, too powerfully perfect, too omniscient—"

"And we mortals can't stand that," commented Annan, laughing. "'Raus mit Neville!' He paints joy and sorrow as though he'd never known either—"

And his voice checked itself of its own instinct in the startled silence.

"That man, Neville, has never known the pain of work," said Gail, deliberately. "When he has passed through it and it has made his hand less steady, less omnipotent—"

"That's right. We can't love a man who has never endured what we have," said another. "No genius can hide his own immunity. That man paints with an unscarred soul. A little hell for his—and no living painter could stand beside him."

"Piffle," observed John Burleson.

Ogilvy said: "It is true, I think, that out of human suffering a quality is distilled which affects everything one does. Those who have known sorrow can best depict it—not perhaps most plausibly, but most convincingly—and with fewer accessories, more reticence, and—better taste."

"Why do you want to paint tragedies?" demanded Burleson.

"One need not paint them, John, but one needs to understand them to paint anything else—needs to have lived them, perhaps, to become a master of pictured happiness, physical or spiritual."

"That's piffle, too!" said Burleson in his rumbling bass—"like that damn hen you lugged in—"

A shout of laughter relieved everybody.

"Do you want a fellow to go and poke his head into trouble and get himself mixed up in a tragedy so that he can paint better?" insisted Burleson, scornfully.

"There's usually no necessity to hunt trouble," said Annan.

"But you say that Kelly never had any and that he'd paint better if he had."

"Trouble *might* be the making of Kelly Neville," mused Ogilvy, "and it might not. It depends, John, not on the amount and quality of the hell, but on the man who's frying on the gridiron."

Annan said: "Personally I don't see how Kelly *could* paint happiness or sorrow or wonder or fear into any of his creations any more convincingly than he does. And yet—and yet—sometimes we love men for their shortcomings—for the sincerity of their blunders—for the fallible humanity in them. That after all is where love starts. The rest—what Kelly shows us—evokes wonder, delight, awe, enthusiasm.... If he could only make us love him—"

"I love him!" said Burleson.

"We all are inclined to—if we could get near enough to him," said Annan with a faint smile.

"Him—or his work?"

"Both, John. There's a vast amount of nonsense talked about the necessity of separation between a man and his work—that the public has no business with the creator, only with his creations. It is partly true. Still, no man ever created anything in which he did not include a sample of himself—if not what he himself is, at least what he would like to be and what he likes and dislikes in others. No creator who shows his work can hope to remain entirely anonymous. And—I am not yet certain that the public has no right to make its comments on the man who did the work as well as on the work which it is asked to judge."

"The man is nothing; the work everything," quoted Burleson, heavily.

"So I've heard," observed Annan, blandly. "It's rather a precious thought, isn't it, John?"

"Do you consider that statement to be pure piffle?"

"Partly, dear friend. But I'm one of those nobodies who cherish a degenerate belief that man comes first, and then his works, and that the main idea is to get through life as happily as possible with the minimum of inconvenience to others. Human happiness is what I venture to consider more important than the gim-cracks created by those same humans. Man first, then man's work, that's the order of mundane importance to me. And if you've got to criticise the work, for God's sake do it with your hand on the man's shoulder."

"Our little socialist," said Ogilvy, patting Annan's blonde head. "He wants to love everybody and everybody to love him, especially when they're ornamental and feminine. Yes? No?" he asked, fondly coddling Annan, who submitted with a bored air and tried to kick his shins.

Later, standing in a chance group on the sidewalk before scattering to their several occupations, Burleson said:

"That's a winner of a model—that Miss West. I used her for the fountain I'm doing for Cardemon's sunken garden. I never saw a model put together as she is. And that's going some."

"She's a dream," said Ogilvy—"un *pen sauvage*—no inclination to socialism there, Annan. I know because I was considering the advisability of bestowing upon her one of those innocent,

inadvertent, and fascinatingly chaste salutes—just to break the formality. She wouldn't have it. I'd taken her to the theatre, too. Girls are astonishing problems."

"You're a joyous beast, aren't you, Sam?" observed Burleson.

"I may be a trifle joyous. I tried to explain that to her, but she wouldn't listen. Heaven knows my intentions are child-like. I liked her because she's the sort of girl you can take anywhere and not queer yourself if you collide with your fiancée—visiting relative from 'Frisco, you know. She's equipped to impersonate anything from the younger set to the prune and pickle class."

"She certainly is a looker," nodded Annan.

"She can deliver the cultivated goods, too, and make a perfectly good play at the unsophisticated intellectual," said Ogilvy with conviction. "And it's a rare combination to find a dream that looks as real at the Opera as it does in a lobster palace. But she's no socialist, Harry—she'll ride in a taxi with you and sit up half the night with you, but it's nix for getting closer, and the frozen Fownes for the chaste embrace—that's all."

"She's a curious kind of girl," mused Burleson;—"seems perfectly willing to go about with you;—enjoys it like one of those bread-and-butter objects that the department shops call a 'Miss.'"

Annan said: "The girl is unusual, everyway. You don't know where to place her. She's a girl without a caste. I like her. I made some studies from her; Kelly let me."

"Does Kelly own her?" asked Burleson, puffing out his chest.

"He discovered her. He has first call."

Allaire, who had come up, caught the drift of the conversation.

"Oh, hell," he said, in his loud, careless voice, "anybody can take Valerie West to supper. The town's full of her kind."

"Have you taken her anywhere?" asked Annan, casually.

Allaire flushed up: "I haven't had time." He added something which changed the fixed smile on his symmetrical, highly coloured face into an expression not entirely agreeable.

"The girl's all right," said Burleson, reddening. "She's damn decent to everybody. What are you talking about, Allaire? Kelly will put a head on you!"

Allaire, careless and assertive, shrugged away the rebuke with a laugh:

"Neville is one of those professional virgins we read about in our neatly manicured fiction. He's what is known as the original mark. Jezebel and Potiphar's wife in combination with Salome and the daughters of Lot couldn't disturb his confidence in them or in himself. And—in my opinion—he paints that way, too." And he went away laughing and swinging his athletic shoulders and twirling his cane, his hat not mathematically straight on his handsome, curly head.

"There strides a joyous boulder," observed Ogilvy.

"Curious," mused Annan. "His family is oldest New York. You see 'em that way, at times."

Burleson, who came from New England, grunted his scorn for Manhattan, ancient or recent, and, nodding a brusque adieu, walked away with ponderous and powerful strides. And the others followed, presently, each in pursuit of his own vocation, Annan and Ogilvy remaining together as their common destination was the big new studio building which they as well as Neville inhabited.

Passing Neville's door they saw it still ajar, and heard laughter and a piano and gay voices.

"Hi!" exclaimed Ogilvy, softly, "let's assist at the festivities. Probably we're not wanted, but does that matter, Harry?"

"It merely adds piquancy to our indiscretion," said Annan, gravely, following him in unannounced—"Oh, hello, Miss West! Was that you playing? Hello, Rita"—greeting a handsome blonde young girl who stretched out a gloved hand to them both and nodded amiably. Then she glanced upward where, perched on his ladder, big palette curving over his left elbow, Neville stood undisturbed by the noise below, outlining great masses of clouds on a canvas where a celestial company, sketched in from models, soared, floated, or hung suspended, cradled in mid air with a vast

confusion of wide wings spreading, fluttering, hovering, beating the vast ethereal void, all in pursuit of a single exquisite shape darting up into space.

"What's all that, Kelly? Leda chased by swans?" asked Ogilvy, with all the disrespect of cordial appreciation.

"It's the classic game of follow my Leda," observed Annan.

"Oh—oh!" exclaimed Valerie West, laughing; "such a wretched witticism, Mr. Annan!"

"Your composition is one magnificent vista of legs, Kelly," insisted Ogilvy. "Put pants on those swans."

Neville merely turned and threw an empty paint tube at him, and continued his cloud outlining with undisturbed composure.

"Where have you been, Rita?" asked Ogilvy, dropping into a chair.

"Nobody sees you any more."

"That's because nobody went to the show, and that's why they took it off," said Rita Tevis, resentfully. "I had a perfectly good part which nobody crabbled because nobody wanted it, which suited me beautifully because I hate to have anything that others want. Now there's nothing doing in the millinery line and I'm ready for suggestions."

"Dinner with me," said Ogilvy, fondly. But she turned up her dainty nose:

"Have *you* anything more interesting to offer, Mr. Annan?"

"Only my heart, hand, and Ogilvy's fortune," said Annan, regretfully.

"But I believe Archie Allaire was looking for a model of your type—"

"I don't want to pose for Mr. Allaire," said the girl, pouting and twirling the handle of her parasol.

But neither Annan nor Ogilvy could use her then; and Neville had just finished a solid week of her.

"What I'll do," she said with decision, "will be to telephone John Burleson. I never knew him to fail a girl in search of an engagement."

"Isn't he a dear," said Valerie, smiling. "I adore him."

She sat at the piano, running her fingers lightly over the keyboard, listening to what was being said, watching with happy interest everything that was going on around her, and casting an occasional glance over her shoulder and upward to where Neville stood at work.

"John Burleson," observed Rita, looking fixedly at Ogilvy, "is easily the nicest man I know."

"Help!" said Ogilvy, feebly.

Valerie glanced across the top of the piano, laughing, while her hands passed idly here and there over the keys:

"Sam *can* be very nice, Rita; but you've got to make him," she said.

"Did you ever know a really interesting man who didn't require watching?" inquired Annan, mildly.

Rita surveyed him with disdain: "Plenty."

"Don't believe it. No girl has any very enthusiastic use for a man in whom she has perfect confidence."

"Here's another profound observation," added Ogilvy; "when a woman loses confidence in a man she finds a brand-new interest in him. But when a man once really loses confidence in a woman, he never regains it, and it's the beginning of the end. What do you think about that, Miss West?"

Valerie, still smiling, struck a light chord or two, considering:

"I don't know how it would be," she said, "to lose confidence in a man you really care much about. I should think it would break a girl's heart."

"It doesn't," said Rita, with supreme contempt. "You become accustomed to it."

Valerie leaned forward against the keyboard, laughing:

"Oh, Rita!" she said, "what a confession!"

"You silly child," retorted Rita, "I'm twenty-two. Do you think I have the audacity to pretend I've never been in love?"

Ogilvy said with a grin: "How about you, Miss West?"—hoping to embarrass her; but she only smiled gaily and continued to play a light accompaniment to the fugitive air that was running through her head.

"Don't be selfish with your experiences," urged Ogilvy. "Come on, Miss West! 'Raus mit 'em!'"

"What do you wish me to say, Sam?"

"That you've been in love several times."

"But I haven't."

"Not once?"

Her lowered face was still smiling, as her pliant fingers drifted into Grieg's "Spring Song."

"Not one pretty amourette to cheer those twenty-one years of yours?" insisted Ogilvy.

But his only answer was her lowered head and the faint smile edging her lips, and the "Spring Song," low, clear, exquisitely persistent in the hush.

When the last note died out in the stillness Rita emphasised the finish with the ferrule of her parasol and rose with decision:

"I require several new frocks," she said, "and how am I to acquire them unless I pose for somebody? Good-bye, Mr. Neville—bye-bye! Sam—good-bye, Mr. Annan—good-bye, dear,"—to Valerie—"if you've nothing better on hand drop in this evening. I've a duck of a new hat."

The girl nodded, and, as Rita Tevis walked out, turning up her nose at Ogilvy who opened the door for her, Valerie glanced up over her shoulder at Neville:

"I don't believe you are going to need me to-day after all, are you?" she asked.

"No," he said, absently. "I've a lot of things to do. You needn't stay, Miss West."

"Now will you be good!" said Annan, smiling at her with his humourous, bantering air. And to his surprise and discomfiture he saw the least trace of annoyance in her dark eyes.

"Come up to the studio and have a julep," he said with hasty cordiality. "And suppose we dine together at Arrowhead—if you've nothing else on hand—"

She shook her head—the movement was scarcely perceptible. The smile had returned to her lips.

"Won't you, Miss West?"

"Isn't it like you to ask me when you heard Rita's invitation? You're a fraud, Mr. Annan."

"Are you going to sit in that boarding-house parlour and examine Rita's new bonnet all this glorious evening?"

She laughed: "Is there any man on earth who can prophesy what any woman on earth is likely to do? If *you* can, please begin."

Ogilvy, hands clasped behind him, balancing alternately on heels and toes, stood regarding Neville's work. Annan looked up, too, watching Neville where he stood on the scaffolding, busy as always, with the only recreation he cared anything for—work.

"I wish to Heaven I were infected with the bacillus of industry," broke out Ogilvy. "I never come into this place but I see Kelly busily doing something."

"You're an inhuman sort of brute, Kelly!" added Annan. "What do you work that way for—money? If I had my way I'd spend three quarters of my time shooting and fishing and one quarter painting—and I'm as devotedly stuck on art as any healthy man ought to be."

"Art's a bum mistress if she makes you hustle like that!" commented Ogilvy. "Shake her, Kelly. She's a wampire mit a sarpint's tongue!"

"The worst of Kelly is that he'd *rather* paint," said Annan, hopelessly. "It's sufficient to sicken the proverbial cat."

"Get a machine and take us all out to Woodmanston?" suggested Ogilvy.

"It's a bee—u—tiful day, dearie!"

"Get out of here!" retorted Neville, painting composedly.

"Your industry saddens us," insisted Annan. "It's only in mediocrity that you encounter industry. Genius frivols; talent takes numerous vacations on itself—"

"And at its own expense," added Valerie, demurely. "I knew a man who couldn't finish his 'Spring Academy' in time: and he had all winter to finish it. But he didn't. Did you ever hear about that man, Sam?"

"Me," said Ogilvy, bowing with hand on heart. "And with that cruel jab from *you*—false fair one—I'll continue heavenward in the elevator. Come on, Harry."

Annan took an elaborate farewell of Valerie which she met in the same mock-serious manner; then she waved a gay and dainty adieu to Ogilvy, and reseated herself after their departure. But this time she settled down into a great armchair facing Neville and his canvas, and lay back extending her arms and resting the back of her head on the cushions.

Whether or not Neville was conscious of her presence below she could not determine, so preoccupied did he appear to be with the work in hand. She lay there in the pleasant, mellow light of the great windows, watching him, at first intently, then, soothed by the soft spring wind that fitfully stirred the hair at her temples, she relaxed her attention, idly contented, happy without any particular reason.

Now and then a pigeon flashed by the windows, sheering away high above the sunlit city. Once, wind-caught, or wandering into unaccustomed heights, high in the blue a white butterfly glimmered, still mounting to infinite altitudes, fluttering, breeze-blown, a silvery speck adrift.

"Like a poor soul aspiring," she thought listlessly, watching with dark eyes over which the lids dropped lazily at moments, only to lift again as her gaze reverted to the man above.

She thought about him, too; she usually did—about his niceness to her, his never-to-be-forgotten kindness; her own gratitude to him for her never-to-be-forgotten initiation.

It seemed scarcely possible that two months had passed since her novitiate—that two months ago she still knew nothing of the people, the friendships, the interest, the surcease from loneliness and hopeless apathy, that these new conditions had brought to her.

Had she known Louis Neville only two months? Did all this new buoyancy date from two short months' experience—this quickened interest in life, this happy development of intelligence so long starved, this unfolding of youth in the atmosphere of youth? She found it difficult to realise, lying there so contentedly, so happily, following, with an interest and appreciation always developing, the progress of the work.

Already, to herself, she could interpret much that she saw in this new world. Cant phrases, bits of studio lore, artists' patter, their ways of looking at things, their manners of expression, their mannerisms, their little vanities, their ideas, ideals, aspirations, were fast becoming familiar to her. Also she was beginning to notice and secretly to reflect on their generic characteristics—their profoundly serious convictions concerning themselves and their art modified by surface individualities; their composite lack of humour—exceptions like Ogilvy and Annan, and even Neville only proving the rule; their simplicity, running the entire gamut from candour to stupidity; their patience which was half courage, half a capacity for suffering; and, in the latter, more woman-like than like a man.

Simplicity, courage, lack of humour—those appeared to be the fundamentals characterising the ensemble—supplemented by the extremes of restless intelligence and grim conservatism.

And the whole fabric seemed to be founded not on industry but on impulse born of sentiment. In this new, busy, inspiring, delightful world logic became a synthesis erected upon some inceptive absurdity, carried solemnly to a picturesque and erroneous conclusion.

She had been aware, in stage folk, of the tendency to sentimental impulse; and she again discovered it in this new world, in a form slightly modified by the higher average of reasoning power.

In both professions the heart played the dominant part in creator and creation. The exceptions to the rule were the few in either profession who might be called distinguished.

Neville had once said to her: "Nothing that amounts to anything in art is ever done accidentally or merely because the person who creates it loves to do it."

She was thinking of this, now, as she lay there watching him.

He had added: "Enthusiasm is excellent while you're dressing for breakfast; but good pictures are painted in cold blood. Go out into the back yard and yell your appreciation of the universe if you want to; but the studio is a silent place; and a blank canvas a mathematical proposition."

Could this be true? Was all the beauty, all the joyous charm, all the splendour of shape and colour the result of working out a mathematical proposition? Was this exquisite surety of touch and handling, of mass and line composition, all these lovely depths and vast ethereal spaces superbly peopled, merely the logical result of solving that problem? Was it all clear, limpid, steady, nerveless intelligence; and was nothing due to the chance and hazard of inspiration?

Gladys, the cat, walked in, gently flourishing her tail, hesitated, looked around with narrowing green-jewelled eyes, and, ignoring the whispered invitation and the outstretched hand, leaped lightly to a chair and settled down on a silken cushion, paws and tail folded under her jet-black body.

Valerie reproached her in a whisper, reminding her of past caresses and attentions, but the cat only blinked at her pleasantly.

On a low revolving stand at Valerie's elbow lay a large lump of green modelling wax. This wax Neville sometimes used to fashion, with his facile hands, little figures sketched from his models. These he arranged in groups as though to verify the composition on the canvas before him, and this work and the pliant material which he employed had for her a particular and never-flagging interest. And now, without thinking, purely instinctively, she leaned forward and laid her hand caressingly on the lump of wax. There was something about the yielding, velvety texture that fascinated her, as though in her slim fingers some delicate nerves were responding to the pleasure of contact.

For a while she moulded little cubes and pyramids, pinched out bread-crumb chickens and pigs and cats.

"What do you think of this little wax kitten, Gladys?" she whispered, holding it up for the cat's inspection. Gladys regarded it without interest and resumed her pleasant contemplation of space.

Valerie, elbows on knees, seated at the revolving stool with all the naïve absorption of a child constructing mud pies, began to make out of the fascinating green wax an image of Gladys dozing.

Time fled away in the studio; intent, absorbed, she pinched little morsels of wax from the lump and pushed them into place with a snowy, pink-tipped thumb, or with the delicate nail of her forefinger removed superfluous material.

Stepping noiselessly so not to disturb Neville she made frequent journeys around to the other side of the cat, sometimes passing sensitive fingers over silky feline contours, which, research inspired a loud purring.

As she worked sometimes she talked under her breath to herself, to Gladys, to Neville:

"I am making a perfectly good cat, Valerie," she whispered. "Gladys, aren't you a little bit flattered? I suppose you think it's honour enough to belong to that man up there on the scaffolding. I imagine it is; he is a very wonderful man, Gladys, very high above us in intellect as he is in body. He doesn't pay very much attention to you and me down here on the floor; he's just satisfied to own us and be amiable to us when he thinks about us.

"I don't mean that in any critical or reproachful sense, Gladys. Don't you dare think I do—not for one moment! Do you hear me? Well then! If you are stupid enough to misunderstand me I'll put a perfectly horrid pair of ears on you!... I've made a very dainty pair of ears for you, dear; I only said that to frighten you. You and I like that man up there—tremendously, don't we? And we're very grateful to him for—for a great many happy moments—and for his unfailing kindness and consideration.... You don't mind posing for me; *you* wear fur. But I didn't wear anything, dear, when

I first sat to him as a novice; and, kitty, I was a fortunate girl in my choice of the man before whom I was to make a début. And I—"

The rattle of brushes and the creak of the scaffolding arrested her: Neville was coming down for a view of his work.

"Hello," he said, pleasantly, noticing for the first time that she was still in the studio.

"Have I disturbed you, Mr. Neville?"

"Not a bit. You never do any more than does Gladys." He glanced absently at the cat, then, facing his canvas, backed away from it, palette in hand.

For ten minutes he examined his work, shifting his position from minute to minute, until the change of positions brought him backed up beside Valerie, and his thigh brushing her arm made him aware of her. Glancing down with smiling apology his eye fell on the wax, and was arrested. Then he bent over the work she had done, examining it, twirled the top of the stool, and inspected it carefully from every side.

"Have you ever studied modelling, Miss West?"

"No," she said, blushing, "you must know that I haven't." And looked up expecting to see laughter in his eyes; and saw only the curiosity of interest.

"How did you know how to start this?"

"I have often watched you."

"Is that all the instruction you've ever had in modelling?"

She could not quite bring herself to believe in his pleasant seriousness:

"Y-yes," she admitted, "except when I have watched John Burleson. But—this is simply rotten—childish—isn't it?"

"No," he said in a matter of fact tone, "it's interesting."

"Do you really think—mean—"

He looked down at her, considering her while the smile that she knew and liked best and thought best suited to his face, began to glimmer; that amused, boyish, bantering smile hinting of experience and wisdom delightfully beyond her.

"I really think that you're a very unusual girl," he said. "I don't want to spoil you by telling you so every minute."

"You don't spoil me by telling me so. Sometimes I think you may spoil me by not telling me so."

"Miss West! You're spoiled already! I'm throwing bouquets at you every minute! You're about the only girl who ever sat for me with whom I talk unreservedly and incessantly."

"Really, Mr. Neville?"

"Yes—really, Mr. Neville," he repeated, laughing—"you bad, spoiled little beauty! You know devilish well that if there's any intellectual space between you and me it's purely a matter of circumstance and opportunity."

"Do you think me silly enough to believe that!"

"I think you clever enough to know it without my telling you."

"I wish you wouldn't say that."

She was still smiling but in the depths of her eyes he felt that the smile was not genuine.

"See here," he said, "I don't want you to think that I don't mean what I say. I do. You're as intelligent a woman as I ever knew. I've known girls more cultivated in general and in particular, but, I say again, that is the hazard of circumstance. Is all clear between us now, Miss West?"

"Yes."

He held out his hand; she glanced up, smiled, and laid her own in it. And they shook hands heartily.

"Good business," he said with satisfaction. "Don't ever let anything threaten our very charming accord. The moment you don't approve of anything I say or do come straight to me and complain—and don't let me divine it in your eyes, Miss West."

"Did you?"

"Certainly I did. Your lips were smiling but in your eyes was something that did not corroborate your lips."

"Yes.... But how could you see it?"

"After all," he said, "it's part of my business to notice such things." He seated himself on the arm of her chair and bent over the wax model, his shoulder against hers. And the chance contact meant nothing to either: but what he said about men and things in the world was inevitably arousing the intelligence in her to a gratitude, a happiness, at first timid, then stirring subtly, tremulously, toward passionate response.

No man can do that to a girl and leave the higher side of her indifferent or unresponsive. What he had aroused—what he was awakening every day in her was what he must some day reckon with. Loyalty is born of the spirit, devotion of the mind; and spiritual intelligence arouses fiercer passions than the sensuous emotions born of the flesh.

Leaning there above the table, shoulder to shoulder, his light finger tips caressing the wax model which she had begun, he told her clearly, and with the engaging candour which she already had begun to adore in him, all about what she had achieved in the interesting trifle before them—explained to her wherein she had failed not only to accomplish but to see correctly—wherein she had seen clearly and wrought intelligently.

He might have been talking to a brother sculptor—and therein lay the fascination of this man—for her—that, and the pains he always took with her—which courtesy was only part of him—part of the wonder of this man; of his unerring goodness in all things to her.

Listening, absorbed in all that he said she still was conscious of a parallel thread of thought accompanying—a tiny filament of innocent praise in her heart that chance had given her this man to listen to and to heed and talk to and to think about.

"I won't touch what you've done, Miss West," he said, smilingly; "but just take a pinch of wax—*that* way!—and accent that relaxed flank muscle!... Don't be afraid; watch the shape of the shadows.... That's it! Do you see? Never be afraid of dealing vigorously with your subject. Every modification of the first vigorous touch is bound to weaken and sometimes to emasculate.... I don't mean for you to parade crudity and bunches of exaggerated muscle as an ultimate expression of vigour. Only the devotee of the obvious is satisfied with that sort of result; and our exhibitions reek with them. But there is no reason why the satin skin and smooth contour of a naked child shouldn't express virility and vigour—no reason why the flawless delicacy of Venus herself should not, if necessary, express violence unexaggerated and without either distortion or lack of finish."

He glanced across at the dozing cat:

"Under that silky black fur there are bones and fibres and muscles. Don't exaggerate them and call your task finished; merely remember always that they're there framing and padding the velvet skin. More is done by skilful inference than by parading every abstract fact you know and translating the sum-accumulative of your knowledge into the over-accented concrete. Reticence is a kind of vigour. It can even approach violence. The mentally garrulous kill their own inspiration. Inadequacy loves to lump things and gamble with chance for effective results."

He rose, walked over and examined Gladys, touched her contemplatively with the button of his mahl-stick, and listened absently to her responsive purr. Then, palette still in hand, he sat down opposite Valerie, gazing at her in that detached manner which some mistook for indifference:

"There are, I think, two reasons for failure in art," he said, "excess of creative emotion, excess of psychological hair-splitting. The one produces the normal and lovable failures which, decorate our art exhibitions; the other results in those curious products which amuse the public to good-humoured contempt—I mean those pictures full of violent colour laid on in streaks, in great sweeps, in patches, in dots. The painter has turned half theorist, half scientist; the theories of the juxtaposition of colour,

and the science of complementary colours, engrosses his attention. He is no longer an artist; he is a chemist and physiologist and an artisan.

"Every now and then there is a revolt from the accepted order of things. New groups form, sometimes damning what they call the artificial lighting of the studio, sometimes exclaiming against the carnival of harmonious or crude colour generally known as 'plein air.' Impressionists scorn the classic, and *vice versa*. But, Miss West, as a matter of fact, all schools are as good as all religions.

"To speak of studio lighting as artificial and unworthy is silly. It is pretty hard to find anything really artificial in the world, indoors, or out, or even in the glare of the footlights. I think the main idea is that a man should prefer doing what the public calls his work, to any other form of recreation—should use enough reason—not too much—enough inspiration—but watching himself at every brush stroke; and finally should feel physically unfettered—that is, have the *a b c*, the drudgery, the artisan's part of the work at his finger tips. Then, if he does what makes him happy, whether in a spirit of realism or romanticism, he can safely leave the rest to Fate."

He looked at her, curiously for a moment, then a smile wholly involuntary broke over his face:

"Lord! What a lecture! And you listened to all that nonsense like an angel!"

The dreamy absorption died out in her eyes; she clasped her hands on her knee, looked down, then up at him almost irritably:

"Please go on, Mr. Neville."

"Not much. I've a few stunts to execute aloft there—"

He contemplated her in amused silence, which became more serious:

"You have talent, Miss West. Artistic talent is not unusual among Americans, but patience is. That is one reason why talent accomplishes so little in this country."

"Isn't another reason that patience is too expensive to be indulged in by talent?"

He laughed: "That is perfectly true. The majority of us have to make a living before we know how."

"Did you have to do that?"

"No, I didn't."

"You were fortunate?"

"Yes. I was—perhaps.... I'm not sure."

She touched the lump of green wax gravely, absently. He remained looking at her, busy with his own reflections.

"Would you like to have a chance to study?" he asked.

"Study? What?"

"Sculpture—any old thing! Would you like to try?"

"What chance have I for such expensive amusements as study?" she laughed.

"I'll be responsible for you."

"*You?*"—in blank surprise.

"I'll attend to the material part of it, if you like. I'll see that you can afford the—patience."

"Mr. Neville, I don't understand."

"What don't you understand?" he asked, lazily humorous.

"Do you mean—that you offer me—an opportunity—"

"Yes; an opportunity to exercise patience. It's an offer, Miss West. But I'm perfectly certain you won't take it."

For a long while she sat, her cheek resting on one palm, looking fixedly into space. Then she stirred, glanced up, blushed vividly, sprang to her feet and crossed to where he sat.

"I've been considering your offer," she said, striving to speak without effort.

"I'll bet you won't accept it!"

"You win your wager, Mr. Neville."

"I wonder why?" he said with his bantering smile: "but I think I know. Talent in America is seldom intellectually ambitious."

To his amazement and vexation tears sprang to her eyes; she said, biting her lower lip: "My ambition is humble. I care—more than anything in the world—to be of use to—to your career."

Taken completely by surprise he said, "Nonsense," and rose to confront her where she stood wholly charming in her nervous, flushed emotion:

"It isn't nonsense, Mr. Neville; it is my happiness."

"I don't believe you realise what your career means to me. I would not willingly consider anything that might interrupt my humble part in it—in this happy companionship.... After all, happiness is the essential. You said so once. I am happier here than I possibly could be in an isolation where I might perhaps study—learn—" Her voice broke deliciously as he met her gaze in cool, curious disapproval.

"You *can't* understand it!" she said, flushing almost fiercely. "You can't comprehend what the daily intimacy with a man of your sort has done—is doing for me every moment of my life. How can you understand? You, who have your own place in the world—in life—in this country—in this city! You, who have family, friends, clubs, your social life in city and country, and abroad. Life is very full for you—has always been. But—what I am now learning in contact with you and with the people to whom you have introduced me—is utterly new to me—and—very—pleasant.... I have tasted it; I cannot live without it now."

She drew a deep quick breath, then, looking up at him with a tremulous smile:

"What would you think if I told you that, until Sam took me, I had never even been inside a theatre except when I was engaged by Schindler? It is perfectly true. Mother did not approve. Until I went with John Burleson I had never even been in a restaurant; until I was engaged by Schindler I had never seen the city lighted at night—I mean where the theatres and cafés and hotels are.... And, Mr. Neville, until I came here to you, I had never had an opportunity to talk to a cultivated man of my own age—I mean the kind of man you are."

She dropped her eyes, considering, while the smile still played faintly with the edges of her lips; then:

"Is it very hard for you to realise that what is an ordinary matter of course to the young of my age is, to me, all a delightful novelty?—that I am enjoying to a perfectly heavenly degree what to you and others may be commonplace and uninteresting? All I ask is to be permitted to enjoy it while I am still young enough. I—I *must*! I really need it, Mr. Neville. It seems, at moments, as if I could never have enough—after the years—where I had—nothing."

Neville had begun walking to and fro in front of her with the quick, decisive step that characterised his movements; but his restlessness seemed only to emphasise the attention he concentrated on every word she spoke; and, though he merely glanced at her from moment to moment, she was conscious that the man now understood, and was responding more directly to her than ever before in their brief and superficial acquaintance.

"I don't want to go away and study," she said. "It is perfectly dear of you to offer it—I—there is no use in trying to thank you—"

"Valerie!"

"What!" she said, startled by his use of her given name for the first time in their acquaintance. He said, smilingly grave: "You didn't think there was a string attached to anything I offered?"

"A—a string?"

"Did you?"

She blushed hotly: "No, of course not."

"It's all right then," he nodded; but she began to think of that new idea in a confused, startled, helpless sort of way.

"How could you think *that* of me?" she faltered.

"I didn't—"

"You—it must have been in your mind—"

"I wanted to be sure it wasn't in *yours*—"

"You ought to have known! Haven't you learned anything at all about me in two months?"

"Do you think any man can learn anything about anybody in two months?" he asked, lightly.

"Yes, I do. I've learned a good deal about you—enough, anyway, not to attribute anything—unworthy—"

"You silly child; you've learned nothing about me if that's what you think you've discovered."

"I *have* discovered it!" she retorted, tremulously; "I've learned horrid things about other men, too—and they're not like you!"

"Valerie! Valerie! I'm precisely like all the rest—my selfishness is a little more concentrated than theirs, that's the only difference. For God's sake don't make a god of me."

She sat down on the head of the sofa, looking straight at him, pretty head lowered a trifle so that her gaze was accented by the lovely level of her brows:

"I've long wanted to have a thorough talk with you," she said. "Have you got time now?"

He hesitated, controlling his secret amusement under an anxious gravity as he consulted the clock.

"Suppose you give me an hour on those figures up there? The light will be too poor to work by in another hour. Then we'll have tea and 'thorough talks.'"

"All right," she said, calmly.

He picked up palette and mahl-stick and mounted to his perch on the scaffolding; she walked slowly into the farther room, stood motionless a moment, then raising both arms she began to unhook the collar of her gown.

When she was ready she stepped into her sandals, threw the white wool robe over her body, and tossed one end across her bare shoulder.

He descended, aided her aloft to her own eyrie, walked across the planking to his own, and resumed palette and brushes in excellent humour with himself, talking gaily while he was working:

"I'm devoured by curiosity to know what that 'thorough talk' of yours is going to be about. You and I, in our briefly connected careers, have discussed every subject on earth, gravely or flippantly, and what in the world this 'thorough talk' is going to resemble is beyond me—"

"It might have to do with your lack of ceremony—a few minutes ago," she said, laughing at him.

"My—what?"

"Lack of ceremony. You called me Valerie."

"You can easily revenge that presumption, you know."

"I think I will—Kelly."

He smiled as he painted:

"I don't know why the devil they call me Kelly," he mused. "No episode that I ever heard of is responsible for that Milesian misnomer. *Quand même!* It sounds prettier from you than it ever did before. I'd rather hear you call me Kelly than Caruso sing my name as Algernon."

"Shall I really call you Kelly?"

"Sure thing! Why not?"

"I don't know. You're rather celebrated—to have a girl call you Kelly."

He puffed out his chest in pretence of pompous satisfaction:

"True, child. Good men are scarce—but the good and great are too nearly extinct for such familiarity. Call me *Mr.* Kelly."

"I won't. You are only a big boy, anyway—Louis Neville—and sometimes I shall call you Kelly, and sometimes Louis, and very occasionally Mr. Neville."

"All right," he said, absently—"only hold that distractingly ornamental head and those incomparable shoulders a trifle more steady, please—rest solidly on the left leg—let the right hip fall into its natural position—*that's* it. Thank you."

Holding the pose her eyes wandered from him and his canvas to the evening tinted clouds already edged with deeper gold. Through the sheet of glass above she saw a shred of white fleece in mid-heaven turn to a pale pink.

"I wonder why you asked me to tea?" she mused.

"What?" He turned around to look at her.

"You never before asked me to do such a thing," she said, candidly.

"You're an absent-minded man, Mr. Neville."

"It never occurred to me," he retorted, amused. "Tea is weak-minded."

"It occurred to me. That's what part of my 'thorough talk' is to be about; your carelessness in noticing me except professionally."

He continued working, rapidly now; and it seemed to her as though something—a hint of the sombre—had come into his face—nothing definite—but the smile was no longer there, and the brows were slightly knitted.

Later he glanced up impatiently at the sky: the summer clouds wore a deeper rose and gold.

"We'd better have our foolish tea," he said, abruptly, driving his brushes into a bowl of black soap and laying aside his palette for his servant to clean later.

For a while, not noticing her, he fussed about his canvas, using a knife here, a rag there, passing to and fro across the scaffolding, oblivious of the flight of time, until at length the waning light began to prophesy dusk, and he came to himself with a guilty start.

Below, in the studio, Valerie sat, fully dressed except for hat and gloves, head resting in the padded depths of an armchair, watching him in silence.

"I declare," he said, looking down at her contritely, "I never meant to keep you all this time. Good Lord! Have I been puttering up here for an hour and a half! It's nearly eight o'clock! Why on earth didn't you speak to me, Valerie?"

"It's a braver girl than I am who'll venture to interrupt you at work, Kelly," she said, laughingly. "I'm a little afraid of you."

"Nonsense! I wasn't doing anything. My Heaven!—*can* it be eight o'clock?"

"It is.... You *said* we were going to have tea."

"Tea! Child, you can't have tea at eight o'clock! I'm terribly sorry"—he came down the ladder, vexed with himself, wiping the paint from his hands with a bunch of cheese cloth—"I'm humiliated and ashamed, Miss West. Wait a moment—"

He walked hastily through the next room into his small suite of apartments, washed his hands, changed his painter's linen blouse for his street coat, and came back into the dim studio.

"I'm really sorry, Valerie," he said. "It was rotten rude of me."

"So am I sorry. It's absurd, but I feel like a perfectly unreasonable kid about it.... You never before asked me—and I—wanted to—stay—so much—"

"Why didn't you remind me, you foolish child!"

"Somehow I couldn't.... I wanted *you* to think of it."

"Well, I'm a chump...." He stood before her in the dim light; she still reclined in the armchair, not looking at him, one arm crook'd over her head and the fingers closed tightly over the rosy palm which was turned outward, resting across her forehead.

For a few moments neither spoke; then:

"I'm horridly lonely to-night," she said, abruptly.

"Why, Valerie! What a—*an* unusual—"

"I want to talk to you.... I suppose you are too hungry to want to talk now."

"N-no, I'm not." He began to laugh: "What's the matter, Valerie? What is on your mind? Have you any serious fidgets, or are you just a spoiled, pretty girl?"

"Spoiled, Kelly. There's nothing really the matter. I just felt like—what you asked me to do—"

She jumped up suddenly, biting her lips with vexation: "I don't know what I'm saying—except that it's rather rude of me—and I've got to go home. Good-night—I think my hat is in the dressing-room—"

He stood uneasily watching her pin it before the mirror; he could just see her profile and the slender, busy hands white in the dusk.

When she returned, slowly drawing on her long gloves, she said to him with composure:

"Some day ask me again. I really would like it—if you would."

"Do you really think that you could stand the excitement of taking a cup of weak tea with me," he said, jestingly—"after all those jolly dinners and suppers and theatres and motor parties that I hear about?"

She nodded and held out her hand with decision:

"Good-night."

He retained her hand a moment, not meaning to—not really intending to ask her what he did ask her. And she raised her velvet eyes gravely:

"Do you really want me?"

"Yes.... I don't know why I never asked you before—"

"It was absurd not to," she said, impulsively; "I'd have gone anywhere with you the first day I ever knew you! Besides, I dress well enough for you not to be ashamed of me."

He began to laugh: "Valerie, you funny little thing! You funny, funny little thing!"

"Not in the slightest," she retorted, sedately. "I'm having a heavenly time for the first time in my life, and I have so wanted you to be part of it ... of course you *are* part of it," she added, hastily—"most of it! I only meant that I—I'd like to be a little in your other life—have you enter mine, a little—just so I can remember, in years to come, an evening with you now and then—to see things going on around us—to hear what you think of things that we see together.... Because, with you, I feel so divinely free, so unembarrassed, so entirely off my guard.... I don't mean to say that I don't have a splendid time with the others even when I have to watch them; I do—and even the watching is fun—"

The child-like audacity and laughing frankness, the confidence of her attitude toward him were delightfully refreshing. He looked into her pretty, eager, engaging face, smiling, captivated.

"Valerie," he said, "tell me something—will you?"

"Yes, if I can."

"I'm more or less of a painting machine. I've made myself so, deliberately—to the exclusion of other interests. I wonder"—he looked at her musingly—"whether I'm carrying it too far for my own good."

"I don't understand."

"I mean—is there anything machine-made about my work? Does it lack—does it lack anything?"

"No!" she said, indignantly loyal. "Why do you ask me that?"

"People—some people say it does lack—a certain quality."

She said with supreme contempt: "You must not believe them. I also hear things—and I know it is an unworthy jealousy that—"

"What have you heard?" he interrupted.

"Absurdities. I don't wish even to think of them—"

"I wish you to. Please. Such things are sometimes significant."

"But—is there any significance in what a few envious artists say—or a few silly models—"

"More significance in what they say than in a whole chorus of professional critics."

"Are you serious?" she asked, astonished.

"Perfectly. Without naming anybody or betraying any confidence, what have you heard in criticism of my work? It's from models and brother painters that the real truth comes—usually distorted, half told, maliciously hinted sometimes—but usually the germ of truth is to be found in what they say, however they may choose to say it."

Valerie leaned back against the door, hands clasped behind her, eyebrows bent slightly inward in an unwilling effort to remember.

Finally she said impatiently: "They don't know what they're talking about. They all say, substantially, the same thing—"

"What is that thing?"

"Why—oh, it's too silly to repeat—but they say there is nothing lovable about your work—that it's inhumanly and coldly perfect—too—too—" she flushed and laughed uncertainly—"too damn omniscient" is what one celebrated man said. And I could have boxed his large, thin, celebrated ears for him!"

"Go on," he nodded; "what else do they say?"

"Nothing. That's all they can find to say—all they dare say. You know what they are—what other men are—and some of the younger girls, too. Not that I don't like them—and they are very sweet to me—only they're not like you—"

"They're more human. Is that it, Valerie?"

"No, I don't mean that!"

"Yes, you do. You mean that the others take life in a perfectly human manner—find enjoyment, amusement in each other, in a hundred things outside of their work. They act like men and women, not like a painting machine; if they experience impulses and emotions they don't entirely stifle 'em. They have time and leisure to foregather, laugh, be silly, discuss, banter, flirt, make love, and cut up all the various harmless capers that humanity is heir to. *That's* what you mean, but you don't realise it. And you think, and they think, that my solemn and owlish self-suppression is drying me up, squeezing out of me the essence of that warm, lovable humanity in which, they say, my work is deficient. They say, too, that my inspiration is lacking in that it is not founded on personal experience; that I have never known any deep emotion, any suffering, any of the sterner, darker regrets—anything of that passion which I sometimes depict. They say that the personal and convincing element is totally absent because I have not lived"—he laughed—"and loved; that my work lacks the one thing which only the self-knowledge of great happiness and great pain can lend to it.... And—I think they are right, Valerie. What do you think?"

The girl stood silent, with lowered eyes, reflecting for a moment. Then she looked up curiously.

"Have you never been very unhappy?"

"I had a toothache once."

She said, unsmiling: "Haven't you ever suffered mentally?"

"No—not seriously. Oh, I've regretted little secret meannesses—bad temper, jealousy—"

"Nothing else? Have you never experienced deep unhappiness—through death, for example?"

"No, thank God. My father and mother and sister are living.... It is rather strange," he added, partly to himself, "that the usual troubles and sorrows have so far passed me by. I am twenty-seven; there has never been a death in my family, or among my intimate friends."

"Have you any intimate friends?"

"Well—perhaps not—in the strict sense. I don't confide."

"Have you never cared, very much, for anybody—any woman?"

"Not sentimentally," he returned, laughing. "Do you think that a good course of modern flirtation—a thorough schooling in the old-fashioned misfortunes of true love would inject into my canvases that elusively occult quality they're all howling for?"

She remained smilingly silent.

"Perhaps something less strenuous would do," he said, mischievously—"a pretty amourette?—just one of those gay, frivolous, Louis XV affairs with some daintily receptive girl, not really improper, but only ultra fashionable. Do you think *that* would help some, Valerie?"

She raised her eyes, still smiling, a little incredulous, very slightly embarrassed:

"I don't think your painting requires any such sacrifices of you, Mr. Neville.... Are you going to take me somewhere to dinner? I'm dreadfully hungry."

"You poor little girl, of course I am. Besides, you must be suffering under the terrible suppression of that 'thorough talk' which you—"

"It doesn't really require a thorough talk," she said; "I'll tell you now what I had to say. No, don't interrupt, please! I want to—please let me—so that nothing will mar our enjoyment of each other and of the gay world around us when we are dining.... It is this: Sometimes—once in a while—I become absurdly lonely, which makes me a fool, temporarily. And—will you let me telephone you at such times?—just to talk to you—perhaps see you for a minute?"

"Of course. You know my telephone number. Call me up whenever you like."

"*Could* I see you at such moments? I—there's a—some—a kind of sentiment about me—when I'm *very* lonely; and I've been foolish enough to let one or two men see it—in fact I've been rather indiscreet—silly—with a man—several men—now and then. A lonely girl is easily sympathised with—and rather likes it; and is inclined to let herself go a little.... I don't want to.... And at times I've done it.... Sam Ogilvy nearly kissed me, which really doesn't count—does it? But I let Harry Annan do it, once.... If I'm weak enough to drift into such silliness I'd better find a safeguard. I've been thinking—thinking—that it really does originate in a sort of foolish loneliness ...not in anything worse. So I thought I'd have a thorough talk with you about it. I'm twenty-one—with all my experience of life and of men crowded into a single winter and spring. I have as friends only the few people I have met through you. I have nobody to see unless I see them—nowhere to go unless I go where they ask me.... So I thought I'd ask you to let me depend a little on you, sometimes—as a refuge from isolation and morbid thinking now and then. And from other mischief—for which I apparently have a capacity—to judge by what I've done—and what I've let men do already."

She laid her hand lightly on his arm in sudden and impulsive confidence:

"That's my 'thorough talk.' I haven't any one else to tell it to. And I've told you the worst." She smiled at him adorably: "And now I am ready to go out with you," she said,— "go anywhere in the world with you, Kelly. And I am going to be perfectly happy—if you are."

CHAPTER III

One day toward the middle of June Valerie did not arrive on time at the studio. She had never before been late.

About two o'clock Sam Ogilvy sauntered in, a skull pipe in his mouth, his hair rumpled:

"It's that damn mermaid of mine," he said, "can't you come up and look at her and tell me what's the trouble, Kelly?"

"Not now. Who's posing?"

"Rita. She's in a volatile humour, too—fidgets; denies fidgeting; reproaches me for making her keep quiet; says I draw like a bum chimney—no wonder my work's rotten! Besides, she's in a tub of water, wearing that suit of fish-scales I had made for Violet Cliland, and she says it's too tight and she's tired of the job, anyway. Fancy my mental condition."

"Oh, she won't throw you down. Rita is a good sport," said Neville.

"I hope so. It's an important picture. Really, Kelly, it's great stuff—a still, turquoise-tinted pool among wet rocks; ebb tide; a corking little mermaid caught in a pool left by the receding waves—all tones and subtle values," he declared, waving his arm.

"Don't paint things in the air with your thumb," said Neville, coldly.

"No wonder Rita is nervous."

"Rita is nervous," said Ogilvy, "because she's been on a bat and supped somewhere until the coy and rosy dawn chased her homeward. And your pretty paragon, Miss West, was with the party—"

"What?" said Neville, sharply.

"Sure thing! Harry Annan, Rita, Burleson, Valerie—and I don't know who else. They feasted somewhere east of Coney—where the best is like the wüerst—and ultimately became full of green corn, clams, watermelon, and assorted fidgets.... Can't you come up and look at my picture?"

Neville got up, frowning, and followed Ogilvy upstairs.

Rita Tevis, swathed in a blanket from which protruded a dripping tinselled fish's tail, sat disconsolately on a chair, knitting a red-silk necktie for some party of the second part, as yet unidentified.

"Mr. Neville," she said, "Sam has been quarrelling with me every minute while I'm doing my best in that horrid tub of water. If anybody thinks it's a comfortable pose, let them try it! I wish—I *wish* I could have the happiness of seeing Sam afloat in this old fish-scale suit with every spangle sticking into him and his legs cramped into this unspeakable tail!"

She extended a bare arm, shook hands, pulled up her blanket wrap, and resumed her knitting with a fierce glance at Ogilvy, who had attempted an appealing smile.

Neville stood stock-still before the canvas. The picture promised well; it was really beautiful—the combined result of several outdoor studies now being cleverly worked up. But Ogilvy's pictures never kept their promise.

"Also," observed Rita, reproachfully, "I posed *en plein air* for those rainbow sketches of his—and though it was a lonely cove with a cunningly secluded little crescent beach, I was horribly afraid of somebody coming—and besides I got most cruelly sun-burned—"

"Rita! You *said* you enjoyed that excursion!" exclaimed Ogilvy, with pathos.

"I said it to flatter that enormous vanity of yours, Sam. I had a perfectly wretched time."

"What sort of a time did you have last evening?" inquired Neville, turning from the picture.

"Horrid. Everybody ate too much, and Valerie spooned with a new man—I don't remember his name. She went out in a canoe with him and they sang 'She kissed him on the gangplank when the boat moved out.'"

Neville, silent, turned to the picture once more. In a low rapid voice he indicated to Ogilvy where matters might be differently treated, stepped back a few paces, nodded decisively, and turned again to Rita:

"I've been waiting for Miss West," he said. "Have you any reason to think that she might not keep her appointment this morning?"

"She had a headache when we got home," said Rita. "She stayed with me last night. I left her asleep. Why don't you ring her up. You know my number."

"All right," said Neville, shortly, and went out.

When he first tried to ring her up the wire was busy. It was a party wire, yet a curious uneasiness set him pacing the studio, smoking, brows knitted, until he decided it was time to try again.

This time he recognised her distant voice: "Hello—hello! *Is* that you, Mr. Neville?"

"Valerie!"

"Oh, it *is* you, Kelly? I hoped you would call me up. I *knew* it must be *you*!"

"Yes, it is. What the deuce is the matter? Are you ill?"

"Oh, dear, no."

"*What*, then?"

"I was *so* sleepy, Kelly. Please forgive me. We had such a late party—and it was daylight before I went to bed. Please forgive me; won't you?"

"When I called you a few minutes ago your wire was busy. Were you conversing?"

"Yes. I was talking to José Querida."

"H'm!"

"José was with us last evening.... I went canoeing with him. He just called me up to ask how I felt."

"Hunh!"

"What?"

"Nothing."

"Are you annoyed, Louis?"

"No!"

"Oh, I thought it sounded as though you were irritated. I am so ashamed at having overslept. Who told you I was here? Oh, Rita, I suppose. Poor child, she was more faithful than I. The alarm clock woke her and she was plucky enough to get up—and I only yawned and thought of you, and I was *so* sleepy! Are you sure you do forgive me?"

"Of course."

"You don't say it very kindly."

"I mean it cordially," he snapped. He could hear her sigh: "I suppose you do." Then she added:

"I am dressing, Kelly. I don't wish for any breakfast, and I'll come to the studio as soon as I can—"

"Take your breakfast first!"

"No, I really don't care for—"

"All right. Come ahead."

"I will. Good-bye, Kelly, dear."

He rang off, picked up the telephone again, called the great Hotel Regina, and ordered breakfast sent to his studio immediately.

When Valerie arrived she found silver, crystal, and snowy linen awaiting her with chilled grapefruit, African melon, fragrant coffee, toast, and pigeon's eggs poached on Astrakan caviar.

"Oh, Louis!" she exclaimed, enraptured; "I don't deserve this—but it is perfectly dear of you—and I *am* hungry!... Good-morning," she added, shyly extending a fresh cool hand; "I am really none the worse for wear you see."

That was plain enough. In her fresh and youthful beauty the only sign of the night's unwisdom was in the scarcely perceptible violet tint under her thick lashes. Her skin was clear and white and dewy fresh, her dark eyes unwearied—her gracefully slender presence fairly fragrant with health and vigour.

She seated herself—offered to share with him in dumb appeal, urged him in delicious pantomime, and smiled encouragingly as he reluctantly found a chair beside her and divided the magnificent melon.

"Did you have a good time?" he asked, trying not to speak ungraciously.

"Y-yes.... It was a silly sort of a time."

"Silly?"

"I was rather sentimental—with Querida."

He said nothing—grimly.

"I told you last night, Louis. Why couldn't you see me?"

"I was dining out; I couldn't."

She sipped her chilled grapefruit meditatively:

"I hadn't seen you for a week," she laughed, glancing sideways at him, "and that lonely feeling began about five o'clock; and I called you up at seven because I couldn't stand it.... But you wouldn't see me; and so when Rita and the others came in a big touring car—do you blame me very much for going with them?"

"No."

Her expression became serious, a trifle appealing:

"My room isn't very attractive," she said, timidly. "It is scarcely big enough for the iron bed and one chair—and I get so tired trying to read or sew every evening by the gas—and it's very hot in there."

"Are you making excuses for going?"

"I do not know.... Unless people ask me, I have nowhere to go except to my room; and when a girl sits there evening after evening alone it—it is not very gay."

She tried the rich, luscious melon with much content, and presently her smile came back:

"Louis, it was a funny party. To begin we had one of those terrible clambakes—like a huge, horrid feast of the Middle Ages—and it did not agree with everybody—or perhaps it was because we weren't middle-aged—or perhaps it was just the beer. I drank water; so did the beautiful José Querida.... I think he is pretty nearly the handsomest man I ever saw; don't you?"

"He's handsome, cultivated, a charming conversationalist, and a really great painter," said Neville, drily.

She looked absently at the melon; tasted it: "He is very romantic ... when he laughs and shows those beautiful, even teeth.... He's really quite adorable, Kelly—and so gentle and considerate—"

"That's the Latin in him."

"His parents were born in New York."

She sipped her coffee, tried a pigeon egg, inquired what it was, ate it, enchanted.

"How thoroughly nice you always are to me, Kelly!" she said, looking up in the engagingly fearless way characteristic of her when with him.

"Isn't everybody nice to you?" he said with a shrug which escaped her notice.

"Nice?" She coloured a trifle and laughed. "Not in *your* way, Kelly. In the sillier sense they are—some of them."

"Even Querida?" he said, carelessly.

"Oh, just like other men—generously ready for any event. What self-sacrificing opportunists men are! After all, Kelly," she added, slipping easily into the vernacular, "it's always up to the girl."

"Is it?"

"Yes, I think so. I knew perfectly well that I had no business to let Querida's arm remain around me. But—there was a moon, Kelly."

"Certainly."

"Why do you say 'certainly'?"

"Because there *was* one."

"But you say it in a manner—" She hesitated, continued her breakfast in leisurely reflection for a while, then:

"Louis?"

"Yes."

"Am I too frank with you?"

"Why?"

"I don't know; I was just thinking. I tell you pretty nearly everything. If I didn't have you to tell—have somebody—" She considered, with brows slightly knitted—"if I didn't have *somebody* to talk to, it wouldn't be very good for me. I realise that."

"You need a grandmother," he said, drily; "and I'm the closest resemblance to one procurable."

The imagery struck her as humorous and she laughed.

"Poor Kelly," she said aloud to herself, "he is used and abused and imposed upon, and in revenge he offers his ungrateful tormentor delicious breakfasts. *What* shall his reward be?—or must he await it in Paradise where he truly belongs amid the martyrs and the blessed saints!"

Neville grunted.

"Oh, *oh!* such a post-Raphaelite scowl! Job won't bow to you when you go aloft, Kelly. Besides, polite martyrs smile pleasantly while enduring torment.... What are you going to do with me to-day?" she added, glancing around with frank curiosity at an easel which was set with a full-length virgin canvas.

"Portrait," he replied, tersely.

"Oh," she said, surprised. He had never before painted her clothed.

From moment to moment, as she leisurely breakfasted, she glanced around at the canvas, interested in the new idea of his painting her draped; a trifle perplexed, too.

"Louis," she said, "I don't quite see how you're ever going to find a purchaser for just a plain portrait of me."

He said, irritably: "I don't have to work for a living *every* minute, do I? For Heaven's sake give me a day off to study."

"But—it seems like wasted time—"

"What is wasted time?"

"Why just to paint a portrait of me as I am. Isn't it?" She looked up smilingly, perfectly innocent of any self-consciousness. "In the big canvases for the Byzantine Theatre you always made my features too radiant, too glorious for portraits. It seems rather a slump to paint me as I am—just a girl in street clothes."

A singular expression passed over his face.

"Yes," he said, after a moment—"just a girl in street clothes. No clouds, no sky, no diaphanous draperies of silk; no folds of cloth of gold; no gemmed girdles, no jewels. Nothing of the old glamour, the old glory; no sunburst laced with mist; no 'light that never was on sea or land.' ... Just a young girl standing in the half light of my studio.... And by God!—if I can not do it—the rest is worthless."

Amazed at his tone and expression she turned quickly, set back her cup, remained gazing at him, bewildered by the first note of bitterness she had ever heard in his voice.

He had risen and walked to his easel, back partly turned. She saw him fussing with his palette, colours, and brushes, watched him for a few moments, then she went away into the farther room where she had a glass shelf to herself with toilet requisites—a casual and dainty gift from him.

When she returned he was still bending over his colour-table; and she walked up and laid her hand on his shoulder—not quite understanding why she did it.

He straightened up to his full stature, surprised, turning his head to meet a very clear, very sweetly disturbed gaze.

"Kelly, dear, are you unhappy?"

"Why—no."

"You seem to be a little discontented."

"I hope I am. It's a healthy sign."

"Healthy?"

"Certainly. The satisfied never get anywhere.... That Byzanite business has begun to wear on my nerves."

"Thousands and thousands of people have gone to see it, and have praised it. You know what the papers have been saying—"

Under her light hand she felt the impatient movement of his shoulders, and her hand fell away.

"Don't you care for it, now that it's finished?" she asked, wondering.

"I'm devilish sick of it," he said, so savagely that every nerve in her recoiled with a tiny shock. She remained silent, motionless, awaiting his pleasure. He set his palette, frowning. She had never before seen him like this.

After a while she said, quietly: "If you are waiting for me, please tell me what you expect me to do, because I don't know, Kelly."

"Oh, just stand over there," he said, vaguely; "just walk about and stop anywhere when you feel like stopping."

She walked a few steps at hazard, partly turned to look back at him with a movement adorable in its hesitation.

"Don't budge!" he said, brusquely.

"Am I to remain like this?"

"Exactly."

He picked up a bit of white chalk, went over to her, knelt down, and traced on the floor the outline of her shoes.

Then he went back, and, with his superbly cool assurance, began to draw with his brush upon the untouched canvas.

From where she stood, and as far as she could determine, he seemed, however, to work less rapidly than usual—with a trifle less decision—less precision. Another thing she noticed; the calm had vanished from his face. The vivid animation, the cool self-confidence, the half indolent relapse into careless certainty—all familiar phases of the man as she had so often seen him painting—were now not perceptible. There seemed to be, too, a curious lack of authority about his brush strokes at intervals—moments of grave perplexity, indecision almost resembling the hesitation of inexperience—and for the first time she saw in his gray eyes the narrowing concentration of mental uncertainty.

It seemed to her sometimes as though she were looking at a total stranger. She had never thought of him as having any capacity for the ordinary and lesser ills, vanities, and vexations—the trivial worries that beset other artists.

"Louis?" she said, full of curiosity.

"What?" he demanded, ungraciously.

"You are not one bit like yourself to-day."

He made no comment. She ventured again:

"Do I hold the pose properly?"

"Yes, thanks," he said, absently.

"May I talk?"

"I'd rather you didn't, Valerie, just at present."

"All right," she rejoined, cheerfully; but her pretty eyes watched him very earnestly, a little troubled.

When she was tired the pose ended; that had been their rule; but long after her neck and back and thighs and limbs begged for relief, she held the pose, reluctant to interrupt him. When at last she could endure it no longer she moved; but her right leg had lost not only all sense of feeling but all power to support her; and down she came with a surprised and frightened little exclamation—and he sprang to her and swung her to her feet again.

"Valerie! You bad little thing! Don't you know enough to stop when you're tired?"

"I—didn't know I was so utterly gone," she said, bewildered.

He passed his arm around her and supported her to the sofa where she sat, demure, a little surprised at her collapse, yet shyly enjoying his disconcerted attentions to her.

"It's your fault, Kelly. You had such a queer expression—not at all like you—that I tried harder than ever to help you—and fell down for my pains."

"You're an angel," he said, contritely, "but a silly one."

"A scared one, Kelly—and a fallen one." She laughed, flexing the muscles of her benumbed leg: "Your expression intimidated me. I didn't recognise you; I could not form any opinion of what was going on inside that very stern and frowning head of yours. If you look like that I'll never dare call you Kelly."

"Did I seem inhuman?"

"N-no. On the contrary—very human—ordinary—like the usual ill-tempered artist man, with whom I have learned how to deal. You know," she added, teasingly, "that you are calm and god-like, usually—and when you suddenly became a mere mortal—"

"I'll tell you what I'll do with you," he said; "I'll pick you up and put you to bed."

"I wish you would, Kelly. I haven't had half enough sleep."

He sat down beside her on the sofa: "Don't talk any more of that god-like business," he growled, "or I'll find the proper punishment."

"Would *you* punish *me*, Kelly?"

"I sure would."

"If I displeased you?"

"You bet."

"Really?" She turned partly toward him, half in earnest. "Suppose—suppose—" but she stopped suddenly, with a light little laugh that lingered pleasantly in the vast, still room.

She said: "I begin to think that there are two Kellys—no, *one* Kelly and *one* Louis. Kelly is familiar to me; I seem to have known him all my life—the happy part of my life. Louis I have just seen for the first time—there at the easel, painting, peering from me to his canvas with Kelly's good-looking eyes all narrow with worry—"

"What on earth are you chattering about, Valerie?"

"You and Kelly.... I don't quite know which I like best—the dear, sweet, kind, clever, brilliant, impersonal, god-like Kelly, or this new Louis—so very abrupt in speaking to me—"

"Valerie, dear! Forgive me. I'm out of sorts somehow. It began—I don't know—waiting for you—wondering if you could be ill—all alone. Then that ass, Sam Ogilvy—oh, it's just oversmoking I guess, or—I don't know what."

She sat regarding him, head tipped unconsciously on one side in an attitude suggesting a mind concocting malice.

"Louis?"

"What?"

"You're very attractive when you're god-like—"

"You little wretch!"

"But—you're positively dangerous when you're human."

"Valerie! I'll—"

"The great god Kelly, or the fascinating, fearsome, erring Louis! Which is it to be? I've an idea that the time is come to decide!"

Fairly radiating a charming aura of malice she sat back, nursing one knee, distractingly pretty and defiant, saying: "I *will* call you a god if I like!"

"I'll tell you what, Valerie," he said, half in earnest; "I've played grandmother to you long enough, by Heck!"

"Oh, Kelly, be lofty and Olympian! Be a god and shame the rest of us!"

"I'll shamefully resemble one of 'em in another moment if you continue tormenting me!"

"Which one, great one?"

"Jupiter, little lady. He was the boss philanderer you know."

"What is a philanderer, my Olympian friend?"

"Oh, one of those Olympian divinities who always began the day by kissing the girls all around."

"Before breakfast?"

"Certainly."

"It's—after breakfast, Kelly."

"Luncheon and dinner still impend."

"Besides—I'm not a bit lonely to-day.... I'm afraid I wouldn't let you, Kel—I mean Louis."

"Why didn't you say 'Kelly'?"

"Kelly is too god-like to kiss."

"Oh! So *that's* the difference! Kelly isn't human; Louis is."

"Kelly, to me," she admitted, "is practically kissless.... I haven't thought about Louis in that regard."

"Consider the matter thoroughly."

"Do you wish me to?" She bent her head, smiling. Then, looking up with enchanting audacity:

"I really don't know, Mr. Neville. Some day when I'm lonely—and if Louis is at home and Kelly is out—you and I might spend an evening together on a moonlit lake and see how much of a human being Louis can be."

She laughed, watching him under the dark lashes, charming mouth mocking him in every curve.

"Do you think you're likely to be lonely to-night?" he asked, surprised at the slight acceleration of his pulses.

"No, I don't. Besides, you'd be only the great god Kelly to me this evening. Besides that I'm going to dinner with Querida, and afterward we're going to see the 'Joy of the Town' at the Folly Theatre."

"I didn't know," he said, curtly. For a few moments he sat there, looking interestedly at a familiar door-knob. Then rising: "Do you feel all right for posing?"

"Yes."

"Alors—"

"Allons, mon dieu!" she laughed.

Work began. She thought, watching him with sudden and unexpected shyness, that he seemed even more aloof, more preoccupied, more worried, more intent than before. In this new phase the man she had known as a friend was now entirely gone, vanished! Here stood an utter stranger, very human, very determined, very deeply perplexed, very much in earnest. Everything about this man was unknown to her. There seemed to be nothing about him that particularly appealed to her confidence, either; yet the very uncertainty was interesting her now—intensely.

This other phase of his dual personality had been so completely a surprise that, captivated, curious, she could keep neither her gaze from him nor her thoughts. Was it that she was going to miss in him the other charm, lose the delight in his speech, his impersonal and kindly manner, miss the comfortable security she had enjoyed with him, perhaps after some half gay, half sentimental conflict with lesser men?

What was she to expect from this brand-new incarnation of Louis Neville? The delightful indifference, fascinating absent-mindedness and personal neglect of the other phase? Would he be good enough to be less to her, now? Man enough to be more than other men? For a moment she had a little shrinking, a miniature panic lest this man turn too much like other men. But she let her eyes rest on him, and knew he would not. Whatever Protean changes might yet be reserved for her to witness, she came to the conclusion that this man was a man apart, different, and would not disappoint her no matter what he turned into.

She thought to herself: "If I want Kelly to lean on, he'll surely appear, god-like, impersonally nice, and kindly as ever; if I want Louis to torment and provoke and flirt with—a little—a very little—I'm quite sure he'll come, too. Whatever else is contained in Mr. Neville I don't know; but I like him separately and compositely, and I'm happy when I'm with him."

With which healthy conclusion she asked if she might rest, and came around to look at the canvas.

As she had stood in silence for some time, he asked her, a little nervously, what she thought of it.

"Louis—I don't know."

"Is your opinion unfavourable?"

"N-no. I *am* like that, am I not?"

"In a shadowy way. It *will* be like you."

"Am I as—interesting?"

"More so," he said.

"Are you going to make me—beautiful?"

"Yes—or cut this canvas into shreds."

"Oh-h!" she exclaimed with a soft intake of breath; "would you have the heart to destroy me after you've made me?"

"I don't know what I'd do, Valerie. I never felt just this way about anything. If I can't paint you—a human, breathing *you*—with all of you there on the canvas—*all* of you, soul, mind, and body—all of your beauty, your youth, your sadness, happiness—your errors, your nobility—*you*, Valerie!—then there's no telling what I'll do."

She said nothing. Presently she resumed the pose and he his painting.

It became very still in the sunny studio.

CHAPTER IV

In that month of June, for the first time in his deliberately active career, Neville experienced a disinclination to paint. And when he realised that it was disinclination, it appalled him. Something—he didn't understand what—had suddenly left him satiated—and with all the uneasiness and discontent of satiation he forced matters until he could force no further.

He had commissions, several, and valuable; and let them lie. For the first time in all his life the blank canvas of an unexecuted commission left him untempted, unresponsive, weary.

He had, also, his portrait of Valerie to continue. He continued it mentally, at intervals; but for several days, now, he had not laid a brush to it.

"It's funny," he said to Querida, going out on the train to his sister's country home one delicious morning—"it's confoundedly odd that I should turn lazy in my old age. Do you think I'm worked out?" He gulped down a sudden throb of fear smilingly.

"Lie fallow," said Querida, gently. "No soil is deep enough to yield without rest."

"Yours does."

"Oh, for me," said Querida, showing his snowy teeth, "I often sicken of my fat sunlight, frying everything to an iridescent omelette." He shrugged, laughed: "I turn lazy for months every year. Try it, my friend. Don't you even keep *mi-carême*?"

Neville stared out of the window at the station platform past which they were gliding, and rose with Querida as the train stopped. His sister's touring car was waiting; into it stepped Querida, and he followed; and away they sped over the beautiful rolling country, where handsome cattle tried to behave like genuine Troyon's, and silvery sheep attempted to imitate Mauve, and even the trees, separately or in groups, did their best to look like sections of Rousseau, Diaz, and even Corot—but succeeded only in resembling questionable imitations.

"There's to be quite a week-end party?" inquired Querida.

"I don't know. My sister telephoned me to fill in. I fancy the party is for you."

"For *me*!" exclaimed Querida with delightful enthusiasm. "That is most charming of Mrs. Collis."

"They'll all think it charming of you. Lord, what a rage you've become and what a furor you've aroused!... And you deserve it," added Neville, coolly.

Querida looked at him, calm intelligence in his dark gaze; and understood the honesty of the comment.

"That," he said, "if you permit the vigour of expression, is damn nice of you, Neville. But you can afford to be generous to other painters."

"Can I?" Neville turned and gazed at Querida, gray eyes clear in their searching inquiry. Then he laughed a little and looked out over the sunny landscape.

Querida's olive cheeks had reddened a trifle.

Neville said: "What *is* the trouble with my work, anyway? Is it what some of you fellows say?"

Querida did not pretend to misunderstand:

"You're really a great painter, Neville. And you know it. Must you have *everything*?"

"Well—I'm going after it."

"Surely—surely. I, also. God knows my work lacks many, many things—"

"But it doesn't lack that one essential which mine lacks. *What* is it?"

Querida laughed: "I can't explain. For me—your Byzantine canvas—there is in it something not intimate—"

"Austere?"

"Yes—even in those divine and lovely throngs. There is, perhaps, an aloofness—even a self-denial—" He laughed again: "I deny myself nothing—on canvas—even I have the audacity to try to draw as you do!"

Neville sat thinking, watching the landscape speed away on either side in a running riot of green.

"Self-denial—too much of it—separates you from your kind," said Querida. "The solitary fasters are never personally pleasant; hermits are the world's public admiration and private abomination. Oh, the good world dearly loves to rub elbows with a talented sinner and patronise him and sentimentalise over him—one whose miracles don't hurt their eyes enough to blind them to the pleasant discovery that his halo is tarnished in spots and needs polishing, and that there's a patch on the seat of his carefully creased toga."

Neville laughed. Presently he said: "Until recently I've cherished theories. One of 'em was to subordinate everything in life to the enjoyment of a single pleasure—the pleasure of work.... I guess experience is putting that theory on the blink."

"Surely. You might as well make an entire meal of one favourite dish. For a day you could stand it, even like it, perhaps. After that—" he shrugged.

"But—I'd *rather* spend my time painting—if I could stand the diet."

"Would you? I don't know what I'd rather do. I like almost everything. It makes me paint better to talk to a pretty woman, for example. To kiss her inspires a masterpiece."

"Does it?" said Neville, thoughtfully.

"Of course. A week or two of motoring—riding, dancing, white flannel idleness—all these I adore. And," tapping his carefully pinned lilac tie—"inside of me I know that every pleasant experience, every pleasure I offer myself, is going to make me a better painter!"

"Experience," repeated the other.

"By all means and every means—experience in pleasure, in idleness, in love, in sorrow—but experience!—always experience, by hook or by crook, and at any cost. That is the main idea, Neville—*my* main idea—like the luscious agglomeration of juicy green things which that cow is eating; they all go to make good milk. Bah!—that's a stupid simile," he added, reddening.

Neville laughed. Presently he pointed across the meadows.

"Is *that* your sister's place?" asked Querida with enthusiasm, interested and disappointed. "What a charming house!"

"That is Ashuelyn, my sister's house. Beyond is El Naúar, Cardemon's place.... Here we are."

The small touring car stopped; the young men descended to a grassy terrace where a few people in white flannels had gathered after breakfast. A slender woman, small of bone and built like an undeveloped girl, came forward, the sun shining on her thick chestnut hair.

"Hello, Lily," said Neville.

"Hello, Louis. Thank you for coming, Mr. Querida—it is exceedingly nice of you to come—" She gave him her firm, cool hand, smiled on him with unfeigned approval, turned and presented him to the others—Miss Aulne, Miss Swift, Miss Annan, a Mr. Cameron, and, a moment later, to her husband, Gordon Collis, a good-looking, deeply sun-burned young man whose only passion, except his wife and baby, was Ashuelyn, the home of his father.

But it was a quiet passion which bored nobody, not even his wife.

When conversation became general, with Querida as the centre around which it eddied, Neville, who had seated himself on the gray stone parapet near his sister, said in a low voice:

"Well, how goes it, Lily?"

"All right," she replied with boyish directness, but in the same low tone. "Mother and father have spent a week with us. You saw them in town?"

"Of course. I'll run up to Spindrift House to see them as often as I can this summer.... How's the kid?"

"Fine. Do you want to see him?"

"Yes, I'd like to."

His sister caught his hand, jumped up, and led him into the house to the nursery where a normal and in nowise extraordinary specimen of infancy reposed in a cradle, pink with slumber, one thumb inserted in its mouth.

"Isn't he a wonder," murmured Neville, venturing to release the thumb.

The young mother bent over, examining her offspring in all the eloquent silence of pride unutterable. After a little while she said: "I've got to feed him. Go back to the others, Louis, and say I'll be down after a while."

He sauntered back through the comfortable but modest house, glancing absently about him on his way to the terrace, nodding to familiar faces among the servants, stopping to inspect a sketch of his own which he had done long ago and which his sister loved and he hated.

"Rotten," he murmured—"it has an innocence about it that is actually more offensive than stupidity."

On the terrace Stephanie Swift came over to him:

"Do you want a single at tennis, Louis? The others are hot for Bridge—except Gordon Collis—and he is going to dicker with a farmer over some land he wants to buy."

Neville looked at the others:

"Do you mean to say that you people are going to sit here all hunched up around a table on a glorious day like this?"

"We are," said Alexander Cameron, calmly breaking the seal of two fresh, packs. "You artists have nothing to do for a living except to paint pretty models, and when the week end comes you're in fine shape to caper and cut up didoes. But we business men are too tired to go galumphing over the greensward when Saturday arrives. It's a wicker chair and a 'high one,' and peaceful and improving cards for ours."

Alice Annan laughed and glanced at Querida degrees Cameron's idea was her idea of what her brother Harry was doing for a living; but she wasn't sure that Querida would think it either flattering or humorous.

But Jose Querida laughed, too, saying: "Quite right, Mr. Cameron. It's only bluff with, us; we never work. Life is one continual comic opera."

"It's a cinch," murmured Cameron. "Stocks and bonds are exciting, but *your* business puts it all over us. Nobody would have to drive me to business every morning if there was a pretty model in a cosey studio awaiting me."

"Sandy, you're rather horrid," said Miss Aulne, watching him sort out the jokers from the new packs and, with a skilful flip, send them scaling out, across the grass, for somebody to pick up.

Cameron said: "How about this Trilby business, anyway, Miss Annan? You have a brother in it. Is the world of art full of pretty models clad in ballet skirts—when they wear anything? Is it all one mad, joyous melange of high-brow conversation discreetly peppered with low-brow revelry? Yes? No? Inform an art lover, please—as they say in the *Times Saturday Review*."

"I don't know," said Miss Annan, laughing. "Harry never has anybody interesting in the studio when he lets me take tea there."

Rose Aulne said: "I saw some photographs of a very beautiful girl in Sam Ogilvy's studio—a model. What is her name, Alice?—the one Sam and Harry are always raving over?"

"They call her Valerie, I believe."

"Yes, that's the one—Valerie West, isn't it? *Is* it, Louis? You know her, of course."

Neville nodded coolly.

"Introduce me," murmured Cameron, spreading a pack for cutting. "Perhaps she'd like to see the Stock Exchange when I'm at my best."

"Is she such a beauty? Do you know her, too, Mr. Querida?" asked Rose Aulne.

Querida laughed: "I do. Miss West is a most engaging, most amiable and cultivated girl, and truly very beautiful."

"Oh! They *are* sometimes educated?" asked Stephanie, surprised.

"Sometimes they are even equipped to enter almost any drawing-room in New York. It doesn't always require the very highest equipment to do that," he added, laughing.

"That sounds like romantic fiction," observed Alice Annan. "You are a poet, Mr. Querida."

"Oh, it's not often a girl like Valerie West crosses our path. I admit that. Now and then such a comet passes across our sky—or is reported. I never before saw any except this one."

"If she's as much of a winner as all that," began Cameron with decision,

"I want to meet her immediately—"

"Mere brokers are out of it," said Alice.... "Cut, please."

Rose Aulne said: "If you painters only knew it, your stupid studio teas would be far more interesting if you'd have a girl like this Valerie West to pour for you ... and for us to see."

"Yes," added Alice; "but they're a vain lot. They think we are unsophisticated enough to want to go to their old studios and be perfectly satisfied to look at their precious pictures, and listen to their art patter. I've told Harry that what we want is to see something of the real studio life; and he tries to convince me that it's about as exciting as a lawyer's life when he dictates to his stenographer."

"Is it?" asked Stephanie of Neville.

"Just about as exciting. Some few business men may smirk at their stenographers; some few painters may behave in the same way to their models. I fancy it's the exception to the rule in any kind of business—isn't it, Sandy?"

"Certainly," said Cameron, hastily. "I never winked at my stenographer—never! never! Will you deal, Mr. Querida?" he asked, courteously.

"I should think a girl like that would be interesting to know," said Lily Collis, who had come up behind her brother and Stephanie Swift and stood, a hand on each of their shoulders, listening and looking on at the card game.

"That is what I wanted to say, too," nodded Stephanie. "I'd like to meet a really nice girl who is courageous enough, and romantic enough to pose for artists—"

"You mean poor enough, don't you?" said Neville. "They don't do it because it's romantic."

"It must be romantic work."

"It isn't, I assure you. It's drudgery—and sometimes torture."

Stephanie laughed: "I believe it's easy work and a gay existence full of romance. Don't deceive me, Louis. And I think you're selfish not to let us meet your beautiful Valerie at tea."

"Why not?" added his sister. "I'd like to see her myself."

"Oh, Lily, you know perfectly well that oil and water don't mix," he said with a weary shrug.

"I suppose we're the oil," remarked Rose Aulne—"horrid, smooth, insinuating stuff. And his beautiful Valerie is the clear, crystalline, uncontaminated fountain of inspiration."

Lily Collis dropped her hands from Stephanie's and her brother's shoulders:

"Do ask us to tea to meet her, Louis," she coaxed.

"We've never seen a model—"

"Do you want me to exhibit a sensitive girl as a museum freak?" he asked, impatiently.

"Don't you suppose we know how to behave toward her? Really, Louis, you—"

"Probably you know how to behave. And I can assure you that she knows perfectly well how to behave toward anybody. But that isn't the question. You want to see her out of curiosity. You wouldn't make a friend of her—or even an acquaintance. And I tell you, frankly, I don't think it's square to her and I won't do it. Women are nuisances in studios, anyway."

"What a charming way your brother has of explaining things," laughed Stephanie, passing her arm through Lily's: "Shall we reveal to him that he was seen with his Valerie at the St. Regis a week ago?"

"Why not?" he said, coolly, but inwardly exasperated. "She's as ornamental as anybody who dines there."

"I don't do *that* with *my* stenographers!" called out Cameron gleefully, cleaning up three odd in spades. "Oh, don't talk to me, Louis! You're a gay bunch all right!—you're qualified, every one of you, artists and models, to join the merry, merry!"

Stephanie dropped Lily's arm with a light laugh, swung her tennis bat, tossed a ball into the sunshine, and knocked it over toward the tennis court.

"I'll take you on if you like, Louis!" she called back over her shoulder, then continued her swift, graceful pace, white serge skirts swinging above her ankles, bright hair wind-blown—a lithe, full, wholesome figure, very comforting to look at.

"Come upstairs; I'll show you where Gordon's shoes are," said his sister.

Gordon's white shoes fitted him, also his white trousers. When he was dressed he came out of the room and joined his sister, who was seated on the stairs, balancing his racquet across her knees.

"Louis," she said, "how about the good taste of taking that model of yours to the St. Regis?"

"It was perfectly good taste," he said, carelessly.

"Stephanie took it like an angel," mused his sister.

"Why shouldn't she? If there was anything queer about it, you don't suppose I'd select the St. Regis, do you?"

"Nobody supposed there was anything queer."

"Well, then," he demanded, impatiently, "what's the row?"

"There is no row. Stephanie doesn't make what you call rows. Neither does anybody in your immediate family. I was merely questioning the wisdom of your public appearance—under the circumstances."

"What circumstances?"

His sister looked at him calmly:

"The circumstances of your understanding with Stephanie.... An understanding of years, which, in her mind at least, amounts to a tacit engagement."

"I'm glad you said that," he began, after a moment's steady thinking. "If that is the way that Stephanie and you still regard a college affair—"

"A—what!"

"A boy-and-girl preference which became an undergraduate romance—and has never amounted to anything more—"

"Louis!"

"What?"

"Don't you *care* for her?"

"Certainly; as much as I ever did—as much, as she really and actually cares for me," he answered, defiantly. "You know perfectly well what such affairs ever amount to—in the sentimental-ever-after line. Infant sweethearts almost never marry. She has no more idea of it than have I. We are fond of each other; neither of us has happened, so far, to encounter the real thing. But as soon as the right man comes along Stephanie will spread her wings and take flight—"

"You don't know her! Well—of all faithless wretches—your inconstancy makes me positively ill!"

"Inconstancy! I'm not inconstant. I never saw a girl I liked better than Stephanie. I'm not likely to. But that doesn't mean that I want to marry her—"

"For shame!"

"Nonsense! Why do you talk about inconstancy? It's a ridiculous word. What is constancy in love? Either an accident or a fortunate state of mind. To promise constancy in love is promising to continue in a state of mind over which your will has no control. It's never an honest promise; it can be only an honest hope. Love comes and goes and no man can stay it, and no man is its prophet. Coming

unasked, sometimes undesired, often unwelcome, it goes unbidden, without reason, without logic, as inexorably as it came, governed by laws that no man has ever yet understood—"

"Louis!" exclaimed his sister, bewildered; "what in the world are you lecturing about? Why, to hear you expound the anatomy of love—"

He began to laugh, caught her hands, and kissed her:

"Little goose, that was all impromptu and horribly trite and commonplace. Only it was new to me because I never before took the trouble to consider it. But it's true, even if it is trite. People love or they don't love, and a regard for ethics controls only what they do about it."

"That's another Tupperesque truism, isn't it, dear?"

"Sure thing. Who am I to mock at the Proverbial One when I've never yet evolved anything better?... Listen; you don't want me to marry Stephanie, do you?"

"Yes, I do."

"No, you don't. You think you do—"

"I do, I do, Louis! She's the sweetest, finest, most generous, most suitable—"

"Sure," he said, hastily, "she's all that except 'suitable'—and she isn't that, and I'm not, either. For the love of Mike, Lily, let me go on admiring her, even loving her in a perfectly harmless—"

"It *isn't* harmless to caress a girl—"

"Why—you can't call it caressing—"

"What do you call it?"

"Nothing. We've always been on an intimate footing. She's perfectly unembarrassed about—whatever impulsive—er—fugitive impulses—"

"You *do* kiss her!"

"Seldom—very seldom. At moments the conditions happen accidentally to—suggest—some slight demonstration—of a very warm friendship—"

"You positively sicken me! Do you think a nice girl is going to let a man paw her if she doesn't consider him pledged to her?"

"I don't think anything about it. Nice girls have done madder things than their eulogists admit. As a plain matter of fact you can't tell what anybody nice is going to do under theoretical circumstances. And the nicer they are the bigger the gamble—particularly if they're endowed with brains—"

"*That's* cynicism. You seem to be developing several streaks—"

"Polite blinking of facts never changes them. Conforming to conventional and accepted theories never yet appealed to intelligence. I'm not going to be dishonest with myself; that's one of the streaks I've developed. You ask me if I love Stephanie enough to marry her, and I say I don't. What's the good of blinking it? I don't love anybody enough to marry 'em; but I like a number of girls well enough to spoon with them."

"*That* is disgusting!"

"No, it isn't," he said, with smiling weariness; "it's the unvarnished truth about the average man. Why wink at it? The average man can like a lot of girls enough to spoon and sentimentalise with them. It's the pure accident of circumstance and environment that chooses for him the one he marries. There are myriads of others in the world with whom, under proper circumstances and environment, he'd have been just as happy—often happier. Choice is a mystery, constancy a gamble, discontent the one best bet. It isn't pleasant; it isn't nice fiction and delightful romance; it isn't poetry or precept as it is popularly inculcated; it's the brutal truth about the average man.... And I'm going to find Stephanie. Have you any objection?"

"Louis—I'm terribly disappointed in you—"

"I'm disappointed, too. Until you spoke to me so plainly a few minutes ago I never clearly understood that I couldn't marry Stephanie. When I thought of it at all it seemed a vague and shadowy something, too far away to be really impending—threatening—like death—"

"Oh!" cried his sister in revolt. "I shall make it my business to see that Stephanie understands you thoroughly before this goes any farther—"

"I wish to heaven you would," he said, so heartily that his sister, exasperated, turned her back and marched away to the nursery.

When he went out to the tennis court he found Stephanie idly batting the balls across the net with Cameron, who, being dummy, had strolled down to gibe at her—a pastime both enjoyed:

"Here comes your Alonzo, fair lady—lightly skipping o'er the green—yes, yes—wearing the panties of his brother-in-law!" He fell into an admiring attitude and contemplated Neville with a simper, his ruddy, prematurely bald head cocked on one side:

"Oh, girls! *Ain't* he just grand!" he exclaimed. "Honest, Stephanie, your young man has me in the ditch with two blow-outs and the gas afire!"

"Get out of this court," said Neville, hurling a ball at him.

"Isn't he the jealous old thing!" cried Cameron, flouncing away with an affectation of feminine indignation. And presently the tennis balls began to fly, and the little jets of white dust floated away on the June breeze.

They were very evenly matched; they always had been, never asking odds or offering handicaps in anything. It had always been so; at the traps she could break as many clay birds as he could; she rode as well, drove as well; their averages usually balanced. From the beginning—even as children—it had been always give and take and no favour.

And so it was now; sets were even; it was a matter of service.

Luncheon interrupted a drawn game; Stephanie, flushed, smiling, came around to his side of the net to join him on the way to the house:

"How do you keep up your game, Louis? Or do I never improve? It's curious, isn't it, that we are always deadlocked."

Bare-armed, bright hair in charming disorder, she swung along beside him with that quick, buoyant step so characteristic of a spirit ever undaunted, saluting the others on the terrace with high-lifted racquet.

"Nobody won," she said. "Come on, Alice, if you're going to scrub before luncheon. Thank you, Louis; I've had a splendid game—" She stretched out a frank hand to him, going, and the tips of her fingers just brushed his.

His sister gave him a tragic look, which he ignored, and a little later luncheon was on and Cameron garrulous, and Querida his own gentle, expressive, fascinating self, devotedly receptive to any woman who was inclined to talk to him or to listen.

That evening Neville said to his sister: "There's a train at midnight; I don't think I'll stay over—"

"Why?"

"I want to be in town early."

"Why?"

"The early light is the best."

"I thought you'd stopped painting for a while."

"I have, practically. There's one thing I keep on with, in a desultory sort of way—"

"What is it?"

"Oh, nothing of importance—" he hesitated—"that is, it may be important. I can't be sure, yet."

"Will you tell me what it is?"

"Why, yes. It's a portrait—a study—"

"Of whom, dear?"

"Oh, of nobody you know—"

"Is it a portrait of Valerie West?"

"Yes," he said, carelessly.

There was a silence; in the starlight his shadowy face was not clearly visible to his sister.

"Are you leaving just to continue that portrait?"

"Yes. I'm interested in it."

"Don't go," she said, in a low voice.

"Don't be silly," he returned shortly.

"Dear, I am not silly, but I suspect you are beginning to be. And over a model!"

"Lily, you little idiot," he laughed, exasperated; "what in the world is worrying you?"

"Your taking that girl to the St. Regis. It isn't like you."

"Good Lord! How many girls do you suppose I've taken to various places?"

"Not many," she said, smiling at him. "Your reputation for gallantries is not alarming."

Ho reddened. "You're perfectly right. That sort of thing never appealed to me."

"Then why does it appeal to you now?"

"It doesn't. Can't you understand that this girl is entirely different—"

"Yes, I understand. And that is what worries me."

"It needn't. It's precisely like taking any girl you know and like—"

"Then let me know her—if you mean to decorate-public places with her."

They looked at one another steadily.

"Louis," she said, "this pretty Valerie is not your sister's sort, or you wouldn't hesitate."

"I—hesitate—yes, certainly I do. It's absurd on the face of it. She's too fine a nature to be patronised—too inexperienced in the things of your world—too ignorant of petty conventions and formalities—too free and fearless and confident and independent to appeal to the world you live in."

"Isn't that a rather scornful indictment against my world, dear?"

"No. Your world is all right in its way. You and I were brought up in it. I got out of it. There are other worlds. The one I now inhabit is more interesting to me. It's purely a matter of personal taste, dear. Valerie West inhabits a world that suits her."

"Has she had any choice in the matter?"

"I—yes. She's had the sense and the courage to keep out of the various unsafe planets where electric light furnishes the principal illumination."

"But has she had a chance for choosing a better planet than the one you say she prefers? Your choice was free. Was hers?"

"Look here, Lily! Why on earth are you so significant about a girl you never saw—scarcely ever heard of—"

"Dear, I have not told you everything. I *have* heard of her—of her charm, her beauty, her apparent innocence—yes, her audacity, her popularity with men.... Such things are not unobserved and unreported between your new planet and mine. Harry Annan is frankly crazy about her, and his sister Alice is scared to death. Mr. Ogilvy, Mr. Burselon, Clive Gail, dozens of men I know are quite mad about her.... If it was she whom you used as model for the figures in the Byzantine decorations, she is divine—the loveliest creature to look at! And I don't care, Louis; I don't care a straw one way or the other except that I know you have never bothered with the more or less Innocently irregular gaieties which attract many men of your age and temperament. And so—when I hear that you are frequently seen—"

"Frequently?"

"Is that St. Regis affair the only one?"

"No, of course not. But, as for my being with her frequently—"

"Well?"

He was silent for a moment, then, looking up with a laugh:

"I like her immensely. Until this moment I didn't realise how much I do like her—how pleasant it is to be with a girl who is absolutely fearless, clever, witty, intelligent, and unspoiled."

"Are there no girls in your own set who conform to this standard?"

"Plenty. But their very environment and conventional traditions kill them—make them a nuisance."

"Louis!"

"That's more plain truth, which no woman likes. Will you tell me what girl in your world, who approaches the qualitative standard set by Valerie West, would go about by day or evening with any man except her brother? Valerie does. What girl would be fearless enough to ignore the cast-iron fetters of her caste? Valerie West is a law unto herself—a law as sweet and good and excellent and as inflexible as any law made by men to restrain women's liberty, arouse them to unhappy self-consciousness and infect them with suspicion. Every one of you are the terrified slaves of custom, and you know it. Most men like it. I don't. I'm no tea drinker, no cruncher of macaroons, no gabbler at receptions, no top-hatted haunter of weddings, no social graduate of the Ecole Turvydrop. And these places—if I want to find companionship in any girl of your world—must frequent. And I won't. And so there you are."

His sister came up to him and placed her arms around his neck.

"Such—a—wrong-headed—illogical—boy," she sighed, kissing him leisurely to punctuate her words. "'If you marry a girl you love you can have all the roaming and unrestrained companionship you want. Did that ever occur to you?'"

"At that price," he said, laughing, "I'll do without it."

"Wrong head, handsome head! I'm in despair about you. Why in the world cannot artists conform to the recognised customs of a perfectly pleasant and respectable world? Don't answer me! You'll make me very unhappy.... Now go and talk to Stephanie. The child won't understand your going to-night, but make the best of it to her."

"Good Lord, Lily! I haven't a string tied to me. It doesn't matter to Stephanie what I do—why I go or remain. You're all wrong. Stephanie and I understand each other."

"I'll see that she understands *you*" said his sister, sorrowfully.

He laughed and kissed her again, impatient. But why he was impatient he himself did not know. Certainly it was not to find Stephanie, for whom he started to look—and, on the way, glanced at his watch, determined not to miss the train that would bring him into town in time to talk to Valerie West over the telephone.

Passing the lighted and open windows, he saw Querida and Alice absorbed in a tête-à-tête, ensconced in a corner of the big living room; saw Gordon playing with Heinz, the dog—named Heinz because of the celebrated "57 varieties" of dog in his pedigree—saw Miss Aulne at solitaire, exchanging lively civilities with Sandy Cameron at the piano between charming bits of a classic ballad which he was inclined to sing:

"I'd share my pottage
With you, dear, but
True love in a cottage
Is hell in a hut."

"Is that you, Stephanie?" he asked, as a dark figure, seated on the veranda, turned a shadowy head toward him.

"Yes. Isn't this starlight magnificent? I've been up to the nursery looking at the infant wonder—just wild to hug him; but he's asleep, and his nurse glared at me. So I thought I'd come and look at something else as unattainable—the stars, Louis," she added, laughing—"not you."

"Sure," he said, smiling, "I'm always obtainable. Unlike the infant upon whom you had designs," he added, "I'm neither asleep nor will any nurse glare at you if you care to steal a kiss from me."

"I've no inclination to transfer my instinctively maternal transports to you," she said, serenely, "though, maternal solicitude might not be amiss concerning you."

"Do you think I need moral supervision?"

"Not by me."

"By whom?"

"Ask me an easier one, Louis. And—I didn't *say* you needed it at all, did I?"

He sat beside her, silent, head lifted, examining the stars.

"I'm going back on the midnight," he remarked, casually.

"Oh, I'm sorry!" she exclaimed, with her winning frankness.

"I'm—there's something I have to attend to in town—"

"Work?"

"It has to do with my work—indirectly—"

She glanced sideways at him, and remained for a moment curiously observant.

"How is the work going, anyway?" she asked.

He hesitated. "I've apparently come up slap against a blank wall. It isn't easy to explain how I feel—but I've no confidence in myself—"

"*You!* No confidence? How absurd!"

"It's true," he said a little sullenly.

"You are having a spasm of progressive development," she said, calmly. "You take it as a child takes teething—with a squirm and a mental howl instead of a physical yell."

He laughed. "I suppose it's something of that sort. But there's more—a self-distrust amounting to self-disgust at moments.... Stephanie, I *want* to do something good—"

"You have—dozens of times."

"People say so. The world forgets what is really good—" he made a nervous gesture—"always before us poor twentieth-century men looms the goal guarded by the vast, austere, menacing phantoms of the Masters."

"Nobody ever won a race looking behind him," she said, gaily; "let 'em menace and loom!"

He laughed in a half-hearted fashion, then his head fell again slowly, and he sat there brooding, silent.

"Louis, why are you always dissatisfied?"

"I always will be, I suppose." His discontented gaze grew more vague.

"Can you never learn to enjoy the moment?"

"It goes too quickly, and there are so many others which promise more, and will never fulfil their promise; I know it. We painters know it when we dare to think clearly. It is better not to think too clearly—better to go on and pretend to expect attainment.... Stephanie, sometimes I wish I were in an honest business—selling, buying—and could close up shop and go home to pleasant dreams."

"Can't you?"

"No. It's eternal obsession. A painter's work is never ended. It goes on with some after they are asleep; and then they go crazy," he added, and laughed and laid his hand lightly and unthinkingly over hers where it rested on the arm of her chair. And he remained unaware of her delicate response to the contact.

The stars were clear and liquid-bright, swarming in myriads in the June sky. A big meteor fell, leaving an incandescent arc which faded instantly.

"I wonder what time it is," Be said.

"You mustn't miss your train, must you?"

"No." ... Suddenly it struck him that it would be one o'clock before he could get to the studio and call up Valerie. That would be too late. He couldn't awake her just for the pleasure of talking to her. Besides, he was sure to see her in the morning when she came to him for her portrait.... Yet—yet—he wanted to talk to her.... There seemed to be no particular reason for this desire.

"I think I'll just step to the telephone a moment." He rose, and her fingers dropped from his hand. "You don't mind, do you?"

"Not at all," she smiled. "The stars are very faithful friends. I'll be well guarded until you come back, Louis."

What she said, for some reason, made him slightly uncomfortable. He was thinking of her words as he called up "long distance" and waited. Presently Central called him with a brisk "Here's your party!" And very far away he heard her voice:

"I know it is *you*. Is it?"

"Who?"

"It is! I recognise your voice. But *which* is it—Kelly or Louis or Mr. Neville?"

"All three," he replied, laughing.

"But which gentleman is in the ascendant? The god-like one? Or the conventional Mr. Neville? Or—the bad and very lovable and very human Louis?"

"Stop talking-nonsense, Valerie. What are you doing?"

"Conversing with an abrupt gentleman called Louis Neville. I *was* reading."

"All alone in your room?"

"Naturally. Two people *couldn't* get into it unless one of them also got into bed."

"You poor child! What are you reading?"

"Will you promise not to laugh?"

"Yes, I will."

"Then—I was reading the nineteenth psalm."

"It's a beauty, isn't it," he said.

"Oh, Louis, it is glorious!—I don't know what in it appeals most thrillingly to me—the wisdom or the beauty of the verse—but I love it."

"It is fine," he said. "... And are you there in your room all alone this beautiful starry night, reading the psalms of old King David?"

"Yes. What are you doing? Where are you?"

"At Ashuelyn, my sister's home."

"Oh! Well, it is perfectly sweet of you to think of me and to call me up—"

"I usually—I—well, naturally I think of you. I thought I'd just call you up to say good night. You see my train doesn't get in until one this morning; and of course I couldn't wake you—"

"Yes, you could. I am perfectly willing to have you wake me."

"But that would be the limit!"

"Is *that* your limit, Louis? If it is you will never disturb my peace of mind." He heard her laughing at the other end of the wire, delighted with her own audacity.

He said: "Shall I call you up at one o'clock when I get into town?"

"Try it. I may awake."

"Very well then. I'll make them ring till daylight."

"Oh, they won't have to do that! I always know, about five minutes before you call me, that you are going to."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, [купив полную легальную версию](#) на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.