CHAMBERS ROBERT WILLIAM

THE YOUNGER SET

Robert Chambers

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Содержание

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"Gave into his keeping soul and body."—Page 513

CHAPTER I
HIS OWN PEOPLE

"You never met Selwyn, did you?"

"No, sir."

"Never heard anything definite about his trouble?" insisted Gerard.

"Oh, yes, sir!" replied young Erroll, "I've heard a good deal about it. Everybody has, you know."

"Well, I *don't* know," retorted Austin Gerard irritably, "what 'everybody' has heard, but I suppose it's the usual garbled version made up of distorted fact and malicious gossip. That's why I sent for you. Sit down."

Gerald Erroll seated himself on the edge of the big, polished table in Austin's private office, one leg swinging, an unlighted cigarette between his lips.

Austin Gerard, his late guardian, big, florid, with that peculiar blue eye which seems to characterise hasty temper, stood by the window, tossing up and catching the glittering gold piece—souvenir of the directors' meeting which he had just left.

"What has happened," he said, "is this. Captain Selwyn is back in town—sent up his card to me, but they told him I was attending a directors' meeting. When the meeting was over I found his card and a message scribbled, saying he'd recently landed and was going uptown to call on Nina. She'll keep him there, of course, until I get home, so I shall see him this evening. Now, before you meet him, I want you to plainly understand the truth about this unfortunate affair; and that's why I telephoned your gimlet-eyed friend Neergard just now to let you come around here for half an hour."

The boy nodded and, drawing a gold matchbox from his waistcoat pocket, lighted his cigarette.

"Why the devil don't you smoke cigars?" growled Austin, more to himself than to Gerald; then, pocketing the gold piece, seated himself heavily in his big leather desk-chair.

"In the first place," he said, "Captain Selwyn is my brother-in-law—which wouldn't make an atom of difference to me in my judgment of what has happened if he had been at fault. But the facts of the case are these." He held up an impressive forefinger and laid it flat across the large, ruddy palm of the other hand. "First of all, he married a cat! C-a-t, cat. Is that clear, Gerald?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good! What sort of a dance she led him out there in Manila, I've heard. Never mind that, now. What I want you to know is how he behaved—with what quiet dignity, steady patience, and sweet temper under constant provocation and mortification, he conducted himself. Then that fellow Ruthven turned up—and—Selwyn is above that sort of suspicion. Besides, his scouts took the field within a week."

He dropped a heavy, highly coloured fist on his desk with a bang.

"After that hike, Selwyn came back, to find that Alixe had sailed with Jack Ruthven. And what did he do; take legal measures to free himself, as you or I or anybody with an ounce of temper in 'em would have done? No; he didn't. That infernal Selwyn conscience began to get busy, making him believe that if a woman kicks over the traces it must be because of some occult shortcoming on his part. In some way or other that man persuaded himself of his responsibility for her misbehaviour. He knew what it meant if he didn't ask the law to aid him to get rid of her; he knew perfectly well that his silence meant acknowledgment of culpability; that he couldn't remain in the service under such suspicion.

"And now, Gerald," continued Austin, striking his broad palm with extended forefinger and leaning heavily forward, "I'll tell you what sort of a man Philip Selwyn is. He permitted Alixe to sue him for absolute divorce—and, to give her every chance to marry Ruthven, he refused to defend the suit. That sort of chivalry is very picturesque, no doubt, but it cost him his career—set him adrift

at thirty-five, a man branded as having been divorced from his wife for cause, with no profession left him, no business, not much money—a man in the prime of life and hope and ambition, clean in thought and deed; an upright, just, generous, sensitive man, whose whole career has been blasted because he was too merciful, too generous to throw the blame where it belonged. And it belongs on the shoulders of that Mrs. Jack Ruthven—Alixe Ruthven—whose name you may see in the columns of any paper that truckles to the sort of society she figures in."

Austin stood up, thrust his big hands into his pockets, paced the room for a few moments, and halted before Gerald.

"If any woman ever played me a dirty trick," he said, "I'd see that the public made no mistake in placing the blame. I'm that sort"—he shrugged—"Phil Selwyn isn't; that's the difference—and it may be in his favour from an ethical and sentimental point of view. All right; let it go at that. But all I meant you to understand is that he is every inch a man; and when you have the honour to meet him, keep that fact in the back of your head, among the few brains with which Providence has equipped you."

"Thanks!" said Gerald, colouring up. He cast his cigarette into the empty fireplace, slid off the edge of the table, and picked up his hat. Austin eyed him without particular approval.

"You buy too many clothes," he observed. "That's a new suit, isn't it?"

"Certainly," said Gerald; "I needed it."

"Oh! if you can afford it, all right. . . . How's the nimble Mr. Neergard?"

"Neergard is flourishing. We put through that Rose Valley deal. I tell you what, Austin, I wish you could see your way clear to finance one or two—"

Austin's frown cut him short.

"Oh, all right! You know your own business, of course," said the boy, a little resentfully. "Only as Fane, Harmon & Co. have thought it worth while—"

"I don't care what Fane, Harmon think," growled Austin, touching a button over his desk. His stenographer entered; he nodded a curt dismissal to Gerald, adding, as the boy reached the door:

"Your sister expects you to be on hand to-night—and so do we."

Gerald halted.

"I'd clean forgotten," he began; "I made another—a rather important engagement—"

But Austin was not listening; in fact, he had already begun to dictate to his demure stenographer, and Gerald stood a moment, hesitating, then turned on his heel and went away down the resounding marble corridor.

"They never let me alone," he muttered; "they're always at me—following me up as though I were a schoolboy. . . . Austin's the worst—never satisfied. . . . What do I care for all these functions—sitting around with the younger set and keeping the cradle of conversation rocking? I won't go to that infernal baby-show!"

He entered the elevator and shot down to the great rotunda, still scowling over his grievance. For he had made arrangements to join a card-party at Julius Neergard's rooms that night, and he had no intention of foregoing that pleasure just because his sister's first grown-up dinner-party was fixed for the same date.

As for this man Selwyn, whom he had never met, he saw no reason why he should drop business and scuttle uptown in order to welcome him. No doubt he was a good fellow; no doubt he had behaved very decently in a matter which, until a few moments before, he had heard little about. He meant to be civil; he'd look up Selwyn when he had a chance, and ask him to dine at the club. But this afternoon he couldn't do it; and, as for the evening, he had made his arrangements, and he had no intention of disturbing them on Austin's account.

When he reached his office he picked up the telephone and called up Gerard's house; but neither his sister nor anybody else was there except the children and servants, and Captain Selwyn had not yet called. So he left no message, merely saying that he'd call up again. Which he forgot to do.

Meanwhile Captain Selwyn was sauntering along Fifth Avenue under the leafless trees, scanning the houses of the rich and great across the way; and these new houses of the rich and great stared back at him out of a thousand casements as polished and expressionless as the monocles of the mighty.

And, strolling at leisure in the pleasant winter weather, he came presently to a street, stretching eastward in all the cold impressiveness of very new limestone and plate-glass.

Could this be the street where his sister now lived?

As usual when perplexed he slowly raised his hand to his moustache; and his pleasant gray eyes, still slightly blood-shot from the glare of the tropics, narrowed as he inspected this unfamiliar house.

The house was a big elaborate limestone affair, evidently new. Winter sunshine sparkled on lace-hung casement, on glass marquise, and the burnished bronze foliations of grille and door.

It was flood-tide along Fifth Avenue; motor, brougham, and victoria swept by on the glittering current; pretty women glanced out from limousine and tonneau; young men of his own type, silk-hatted, frock-coated, the crooks of their walking sticks tucked up under their left arms, passed on the Park side.

But the nods of recognition, lifted hats, the mellow warnings of motor horns, clattering hoofs, the sun flashing on carriage wheels and polished panels, on liveries, harness, on the satin coats of horses—a gem like a spark of fire smothered by the sables at a woman's throat, and the bright indifference of her beauty—all this had long since lost any meaning for him. For him the pageant passed as the west wind passes in Samar over the glimmering valley grasses; and he saw it through sun-dazzled eyes—all this, and the leafless trees beyond against the sky, and the trees mirrored in a little wintry lake as brown as the brown of the eyes which were closed to him now forever.

As he stood there, again he seemed to hear the whistle signal, clear, distant, rippling across the wind-blown grasses where the brown constabulary lay firing in the sunshine; but the rifle shots were the crack of whips, and it was only a fat policeman of the traffic squad whistling to clear the swarming jungle trails of the great metropolis.

Again Selwyn turned to the house, hesitating, unreconciled. Every sun-lit window stared back at him.

He had not been prepared for so much limestone and marquise magnificence where there was more renaissance than architecture and more bay-window than both; but the number was the number of his sister's house; and, as the street and the avenue corroborated the numbered information, he mounted the doorstep, rang, and leisurely examined four stiff box-trees flanking the ornate portal—meagre vegetation compared to what he had been accustomed to for so many years.

Nobody came; once or twice he fancied he heard sounds proceeding from inside the house. He rang again and fumbled for his card case. Somebody was coming.

The moment that the door opened he was aware of a distant and curious uproar—far away echoes of cheering, and the faint barking of dogs. These seemed to cease as the man in waiting admitted him; but before he could make an inquiry or produce a card, bedlam itself apparently broke loose somewhere in the immediate upper landing—noise in its crudest elemental definition—through which the mortified man at the door strove to make himself heard: "Beg pardon, sir, it's the children broke loose an' runnin' wild-like—"

"The *what*?"

"Only the children, sir—fox-huntin' the cat, sir—"

His voice was lost in the yelling dissonance descending crescendo from floor to floor. Then an avalanche of children and dogs poured down the hall-stairs in pursuit of a rumpled and bored cat, tumbling with yelps and cheers and thuds among the thick rugs on the floor.

Here the cat turned and soundly cuffed a pair of fat beagle puppies, who shrieked and fled, burrowing for safety into the yelling heap of children and dogs on the floor. Above this heap legs, arms, and the tails of dogs waved wildly for a moment, then a small boy, blond hair in disorder,

staggered to his knees, and, setting hollowed hand to cheek, shouted: "Hi! for'rard! Harkaway for'rard! Take him, Rags! Now, Tatters! After him, Owney! Get on, there, Schnitzel! Worry him, Stinger! Tally-ho-o!"

At which encouraging invitation the two fat beagle pups, a waddling dachshund, a cocker, and an Irish terrier flew at Selwyn's nicely creased trousers; and the small boy, rising to his feet, became aware of that astonished gentleman for the first time.

"Steady, there!" exclaimed Selwyn, bringing his walking stick to a brisk bayonet defence; "steady, men! Prepare to receive infantry—and doggery, too!" he added, backing away. "No quarter! Remember the Alamo!"

The man at the door had been too horrified to speak, but he found his voice now.

"Oh, you hush up, Dawson!" said the boy; and to Selwyn he added tentatively, "Hello!"

"Hello yourself," replied Selwyn, keeping off the circling pups with the point of his stick. "What is this, anyway—a Walpurgis hunt?—or Eliza and the bloodhounds?"

Several children, disentangling themselves from the heap, rose to confront the visitor; the shocked man, Dawson, attempted to speak again, but Selwyn's raised hand quieted him.

The small boy with the blond hair stepped forward and dragged several dogs from the vicinity of Selwyn's shins.

"This is the Shallowbrook hunt," he explained; "I am Master of Hounds; my sister Drina, there, is one of the whips. Part of the game is to all fall down together and pretend we've come croppers. You see, don't you?"

"I see," nodded Selwyn; "it's a pretty stiff hunting country, isn't it?"

"Yes, it is. There's wire, you know," volunteered the girl, Drina, rubbing the bruises on her plump shins.

"Exactly," agreed Selwyn; "bad thing, wire. Your whips should warn you."

The big black cat, horribly bored by the proceedings, had settled down on a hall seat, keeping one disdainful yellow eye on the dogs.

"All the same, we had a pretty good run," said Drina, taking the cat into her arms and seating herself on the cushions; "didn't we, Kit-Ki?" And, turning to Selwyn, "Kit-Ki makes a pretty good fox—only she isn't enough afraid of us to run away very fast. Won't you sit down? Our mother is not at home, but we are."

"Would you really like to have me stay?" asked Selwyn.

"Well," admitted Drina frankly, "of course we can't tell yet how interesting you are because we don't know you. We are trying to be polite—" and, in a fierce whisper, turning on the smaller of the boys—"Winthrop! take your finger out of your mouth and stop staring at guests! Billy, you make him behave himself."

The blond-haired M.F.H. reached for his younger brother; the infant culprit avoided him and sullenly withdrew the sucked finger but not his fascinated gaze.

"I want to know who he ith," he lisped in a loud aside.

"So do I," admitted a tiny maid in stickout skirts.

Drina dropped the cat, swept the curly hair from her eyes, and stood up very straight in her kilts and bare knees.

"They don't really mean to be rude," she explained; "they're only children." Then, detecting the glimmering smile in Selwyn's eyes, "But perhaps you wouldn't mind telling us who you are because we all would like to know, but we are not going to be ill-bred enough to ask."

Their direct expectant gaze slightly embarrassed him; he laughed a little, but there was no response from them.

"Well," he said, "as a matter of fact and record, I am a sort of relative of yours—a species of avuncular relation."

"What is that?" asked Drina coldly.

"That," said Selwyn, "means that I'm more or less of an uncle to you. Hope you don't mind. You don't have to entertain me, you know."

"An uncle!" repeated Drina.

"Our uncle?" echoed Billy. "You are not our soldier uncle, are you? You are not our Uncle Philip, are you?"

"It amounts to that," admitted Selwyn. "Is it all right?"

There was a dead silence, broken abruptly by Billy; "Where is your sword, then?"

"At the hotel. Would you like to see it, Billy?"

The five children drew a step nearer, inspecting him with merciless candour.

"Is it all right?" asked Selwyn again, smilingly uneasy under the concentrated scrutiny. "How about it, Drina? Shall we shake hands?"

Drina spoke at last: "Ye-es," she said slowly, "I think it is all right to shake hands." She took a step forward, stretching out her hand.

Selwyn stooped; she laid her right hand across his, hesitated, looked up fearlessly, and then, raising herself on tiptoe, placed both arms upon his shoulders, offering her lips.

One by one the other children came forward to greet this promising new uncle whom the younger among them had never before seen, and whom Drina, the oldest, had forgotten except as that fabled warrior of legendary exploits whose name and fame had become cherished classics of their nursery.

And now children and dogs clustered amicably around him; under foot tails wagged, noses sniffed; playful puppy teeth tweaked at his coat-skirts; and in front and at either hand eager flushed little faces were upturned to his, shy hands sought his and nestled confidently into the hollow of his palms or took firm proprietary hold of sleeve and coat.

"I infer," observed Selwyn blandly, "that your father and mother are not at home. Perhaps I'd better stop in later."

"But you are going to stay here, aren't you?" exclaimed Drina in dismay. "Don't you expect to tell us stories? Don't you expect to stay here and live with us and put on your uniform for us and show us your swords and pistols? *Don't* you?"

"We have waited such a very long time for you to do this," added Billy.

"If you'll come up to the nursery we'll have a drag-hunt for you," pleaded Drina. "Everybody is out of the house and we can make as much noise as we please! Will you?"

"Haven't you any governesses or nurses or something?" asked Selwyn, finding himself already on the stairway, and still being dragged upward.

"Our governess is away," said Billy triumphantly, "and our nurses can do nothing with us."

"I don't doubt it," murmured Selwyn; "but where are they?"

"Somebody must have locked them in the schoolroom," observed Billy carelessly. "Come on, Uncle Philip; we'll have a first-class drag-hunt before we unlock the schoolroom and let them out."

"Anyway, they can brew tea there if they are lonely," added Drina, ushering Selwyn into the big sunny nursery, where he stood, irresolute, looking about him, aware that he was conniving at open mutiny. From somewhere on the floor above persistent hammering and muffled appeals satisfied him as to the location and indignation of the schoolroom prisoners.

"You ought to let them out," he said. "You'll surely be punished."

"We will let them out after we've made noise enough," said Billy calmly. "We'll probably be punished anyway, so we may as well make a noise."

"Yes," added Drina, "we are going to make all the noise we can while we have the opportunity. Billy, is everything ready?"

And before Selwyn understood precisely what was happening, he found himself the centre of a circle of madly racing children and dogs. Round and round him they tore. Billy yelled for the hurdles and Josephine knocked over some chairs and dragged them across the course of the route; and over

them leaped and scrambled children and puppies, splitting the air with that same quality of din which had greeted him upon his entrance to his sister's house.

When there was no more breath left in the children, and when the dogs lay about, grinning and lolling, Drina approached him, bland and dishevelled.

"That circus," she explained, "was for your entertainment. Now will you please do something for ours?"

"Certainly," said Selwyn, looking about him vaguely; "shall we—er—build blocks, or shall I read to you—er—out of that big picture-book—"

"*Picture*-book!" repeated Billy with scorn; "that's good enough for nurses to read. You're a soldier, you know. Soldiers have real stories to tell."

"I see," he said meekly. "What am I to tell you about—our missionaries in Sulu?"

"In the first place," began Drina, "you are to lie down flat on the floor and creep about and show us how the Moros wriggle through the grass to bolo our sentinels."

"Why, it's—it's this way," began Selwyn, leaning back in his rocking-chair and comfortably crossing one knee over the other; "for instance, suppose—"

"Oh, but you must *show* us!" interrupted Billy. "Get down on the floor please, uncle."

"I can tell it better!" protested Selwyn; "I can show you just the—"

"Please lie down and show us how they wriggle?" begged Drina.

"I don't want to get down on the floor," he said feebly; "is it necessary?"

But they had already discovered that he could be bullied, and they had it their own way; and presently Selwyn lay prone upon the nursery floor, impersonating a ladrone while pleasant shivers chased themselves over Drina, whom he was stalking.

And it was while all were passionately intent upon the pleasing and snake-like progress of their uncle that a young girl in furs, ascending the stairs two at a time, peeped perfunctorily into the nursery as she passed the hallway—and halted amazed.

Selwyn, sitting up rumpled and cross-legged on the floor, after having boloed Drina to everybody's exquisite satisfaction, looked around at the sudden rustle of skirts to catch a glimpse of a vanishing figure—a glimmer of ruddy hair and the white curve of a youthful face, half-buried in a muff.

Mortified, he got to his feet, glanced out into the hallway, and began adjusting his attire.

"No, you don't!" he said mildly, "I decline to perform again. If you want any more wriggling you must accomplish it yourselves. Drina, has your governess—by any unfortunate chance—er—red hair?"

"No," said the child; "and won't you *please* crawl across the floor and bolo me—just *once* more?"

"Bolo me!" insisted Billy. "I haven't been mangled yet!"

"Let Billy assassinate somebody himself. And, by the way, Drina, are there any maids or nurses or servants in this remarkable house who occasionally wear copper-tinted hair and black fox furs?"

"No. Eileen does. Won't you please wriggle—"

"Who is Eileen?"

"Eileen? Why—don't you know who Eileen is?"

"No, I don't," began Captain Selwyn, when a delighted shout from the children swung him toward the door again. His sister, Mrs. Gerard, stood there in carriage gown and sables, radiant with surprise.

"Phil! *You!* Exactly like you, Philip, to come strolling in from the antipodes—dear fellow!" recovering from the fraternal embrace and holding both lapels of his coat in her gloved hands. "Six years!" she said again and again, tenderly reproachful; "Alexandrine was a baby of six—Drina, child, do you remember my brother—do you remember your Uncle Philip? She doesn't remember; you can't expect her to recollect; she is only twelve, Phil—"

"I remember *one* thing," observed Drina serenely.

Brother and sister turned toward her in pride and delight; and the child went on: "My Aunt Alixe; I remember her. She was *so* pretty," concluded Drina, nodding thoughtfully in the effort to remember more; "Uncle Philip, where is she now?"

But her uncle seemed to have lost his voice as well as his colour, and Mrs. Gerard's gloved fingers tightened on the lapels of his coat.

"Drina—child—" she faltered; but Drina, immersed in reflection, smiled dreamily; "So pretty," she murmured; "I remember my Aunt Alixe—"

"Drina!" repeated her mother sharply, "go and find Bridget this minute!"

Selwyn's hesitating hand sought his moustache; he lifted his eyes—the steady gray eyes, slightly bloodshot—to his sister's distressed face.

"I never dreamed—" she began—"the child has never spoken of—of her from that time to this! I never dreamed she could remember—"

"I don't understand what you are talking about, mother," said Drina; but her pretty mother caught her by the shoulders, striving to speak lightly; "Where in the world is Bridget, child? Where is Katie? And what is all this I hear from Dawson? It can't be possible that you have been fox-hunting all over the house again! Your nurses know perfectly well that you are not to hunt anywhere except in your own nursery."

"I know it," said Drina, "but Kit-Ki got out and ran downstairs. We had to follow her, you know, until she went to earth."

Selwyn quietly bent over toward Billy: "'Ware wire, my friend," he said under his breath; "*you'd* better cut upstairs and unlock that schoolroom."

And while Mrs. Gerard turned her attention to the cluster of clamouring younger children, the boy vanished only to reappear a moment later, retreating before the vengeful exclamations of the lately imprisoned nurses who pursued him, caps and aprons flying, bewailing aloud their ignominious incarceration.

"Billy!" exclaimed his mother, "*did* you do that? Bridget, Master William is to take supper by himself in the schoolroom—and *no* marmalade!—No, Billy, not one drop!"

"We all saw him lock the door," said Drina honestly.

"And you let him? Oh, Drina!—And Ellen! Katie! No marmalade for Miss Drina—none for any of the children. Josie, mother feels dreadfully because you all have been so naughty. Winthrop! —your finger! Instantly! Clemence, baby, where on earth did you acquire all that grime on your face and fists?" And to her brother: "Such a household, Phil! Everybody incompetent—including me; everything topsy-turvy; and all five dogs perfectly possessed to lie on that pink rug in the music room. —*Have* they been there to-day, Drina?—while you were practising?"

"Yes, and there are some new spots, mother. I'm *very* sorry."

"Take the children away!" said Mrs. Gerard. But she bent over, kissing each culprit as the file passed out, convoyed by the amply revenged nurses. "No marmalade, remember; and mother has a great mind *not* to come up at bedtime and lean over you. Mother has no desire to lean over her babies to-night."

To "lean over" the children was always expected of this mother; the direst punishment on the rather brief list was to omit this intimate evening ceremony.

"M-mother," stammered the Master of Fox Hounds, "you *will* lean over us, won't you?"

"Mother hasn't decided—"

"Oh, muvver!" wailed Josie; and a howl of grief and dismay rose from Winthrop, modified to a gurgle by the forbidden finger.

"You *will*, won't you?" begged Drina. "We've been pretty bad, but not bad enough for that!"

"I—Oh, yes, I will. Stop that noise, Winthrop! Josie, I'm going to lean over you—and you, too, Clemence, baby. Katie, take those dogs away immediately; and remember about the marmalade."

Reassured, smiling through tears, the children trooped off, it being the bathing hour; and Mrs. Gerard threw her fur stole over one shoulder and linked her slender arm in her brother's.

"You see, I'm not much of a mother," she said; "if I was I'd stay here all day and every day, week in and year out, and try to make these poor infants happy. I have no business to leave them for one second!"

"Wouldn't they get too much of you?" suggested Selwyn.

"Thanks. I suppose that even a mother had better practise an artistic absence occasionally. Are they not sweet? *What* do you think of them? You never before saw the three youngest; you saw Drina when you went east—and Billy was a few months old—what do you think of them? Honestly, Phil?"

"All to the good, Ninette; very ornamental. Drina—and that Josephine kid are real beauties. I—er—take to Billy tremendously. He told me that he'd locked up his nurses. I ought to have interfered. It was really my fault, you see."

"And you didn't make him let them out? You are not going to be very good morally for my young. Tell me, Phil, have you seen Austin?"

"I went to the Trust Company, but he was attending a directors' confab. How is he? He's prosperous anyhow, I observe," with a humorous glance around the elaborate hallway which they were traversing.

"Don't dare laugh at us!" smiled his sister. "I wish we were back in Tenth Street. But so many children came—Billy, Josephine, Winthrop, and Tina—and the Tenth Street house wasn't half big enough; and a dreadful speculative builder built this house and persuaded Austin to buy it. Oh, dear, and here we are among the rich and great; and the steel kings and copper kings and oil kings and their heirs and dauphins. *Do* you like the house?"

"It's—ah—roomy," he said cheerfully.

"Oh! It isn't so bad from the outside. And we have just had it redecorated inside. Mizner did it. Look, dear, isn't that a cunning bedroom?" drawing him toward a partly open door. "Don't be so horridly critical. Austin is becoming used to it now, so don't stir him up and make fun of things. Anyway you're going to stay here."

"No, I'm at the Holland."

"Of *course* you're to live with us. You've resigned from the service, haven't you?"

He looked at her sharply, but did not reply.

A curious flash of telepathy passed between them; she hesitated, then:

"You once promised Austin and me that you would stay with us."

"But, Nina—"

"No, no, no! Wait," pressing an electric button; "Watson, Captain Selwyn's luggage is to be brought here immediately from the Holland! Immediately!" And to Selwyn: "Austin will not be at home before half-past six. Come up with me now and see your quarters—a perfectly charming place for you, with your own smoking-room and dressing-closet and bath. Wait, we'll take the elevator—as long as we have one."

Smilingly protesting, yet touched by the undisguised sincerity of his welcome, he suffered himself to be led into the elevator—a dainty white and rose rococo affair. His sister adjusted a tiny lever; the car moved smoothly upward and, presently stopped; and they emerged upon a wide landing.

"Here," said Nina, throwing open a door. "Isn't this comfortable? Is there anything you don't fancy about it? If there is, tell me frankly."

"Little sister," he said, imprisoning both her hands, "it is a paradise—but I don't intend to come here and squat on my relatives, and I won't!"

"Philip! You are common!"

"Oh, I know you and Austin *think* you want me."

"Phil!"

"All right, dear. I'll—it's awfully generous of you—so I'll pay you a visit—for a little while."

"You'll live here, that's what you'll do—though I suppose you are dreaming and scheming to have all sorts of secret caves and queer places to yourself—horrid, grimy, smoky bachelor quarters where you can behave *sans-façon*."

"I've had enough of *sans-façon*" he said grimly. "After shacks and bungalows and gun-boats and troopships, do you suppose this doesn't look rather heavenly?"

"Dear fellow!" she said, looking tenderly at him; and then under her breath: "What a ghastly life you have led!"

But he knew she did not refer to the military portion of his life.

He threw back his coat, dug both hands into his pockets, and began to wander about the rooms, halting sometimes to examine nondescript articles of ornament or bits of furniture as though politely interested. But she knew his thoughts were steadily elsewhere.

"'There is no reason,' she said, 'why you should not call this house home.'"

Sauntering about, aware at moments that her troubled eyes were following him, he came back, presently, to where she sat perched upon his bed.

"It all looks most inviting, Nina," he said cheerfully, seating himself beside her. "I—well, you can scarcely be expected to understand how this idea of a home takes hold of a man who has none."

"Yes, I do," she said.

"All this—" he paused, leisurely, to select his words—"all this—you—the children—that jolly nursery—" he stopped again, looking out of the window; and his sister looked at him through eyes grown misty.

"There is no reason," she said, "why you should not call this house home."

"N-no reason. Thank you. I will—for a few days."

"*No* reason, dear," she insisted. "We are your own people; we are all you have, Phil!—the children adore you already; Austin—you know what he thinks of you; and—and I—"

"You are very kind, Ninette." He sat partly turned from her, staring at the sunny window. Presently he slid his hand back along the bed-covers until it touched and tightened over hers. And in silence she raised it to her lips.

They remained so for a while, he still partly turned from her, his perplexed and narrowing gaze fixed on the window, she pressing his clenched hand to her lips, thoughtful and silent.

"Before Austin comes," he said at length, "let's get the thing over—and buried—as long as it will stay buried."

"Yes, dear."

"Well, then—then—" but his throat closed tight with the effort.

"Alixe is here," she said gently; "did you know it?"

He nodded.

"You know, of course, that she's married Jack Ruthven?"

He nodded again.

"Are you on leave, Phil, or have you really resigned?"

"Resigned."

"I knew it," she sighed.

He said: "As I did not defend the suit I couldn't remain in the service. There's too much said about us, anyway—about us who are appointed from civil life. And then—to have *that* happen!"

"Phil?"

"What?"

"Will you answer me one thing?"

"Yes, I guess so."

"Do you still care for—her?"

"I am sorry for her."

After a painful silence his sister said: "Could you tell me how it began, Phil?"

"How it began? I don't know that, either. When Bannard's command took the field I went with the scouts. Alixe remained in Manila. Ruthven was there for Fane, Harmon & Co. That's how it began, I suppose; and it's a rotten climate for morals; and that's how it began."

"Only that?"

"We had had differences. It's been one misunderstanding after another. If you mean was I mixed up with another woman—no! She knew that."

"She was very young, Phil."

He nodded: "I don't blame her."

"Couldn't anything have been done?"

"If it could, neither she nor I did it—or knew how to do it, I suppose. It went wrong from the beginning; it was founded on froth—she had been engaged to Harmon, and she threw him over for 'Boots' Lansing. Then I came along—Boots behaved like a thoroughbred—that is all there is to it—inexperience, romance, trouble—a quick beginning, a quick parting, and two more fools to give the lie to civilization, and justify the West Pointers in their opinions of civil appointees."

"Try not to be so bitter, Phil; did you know she was going before she left Manila?"

"I hadn't the remotest idea of the affair. I thought that we were trying to learn something about life and about each other. . . . Then that climax came."

He turned and stared out of the window, dropping his sister's hand. "She couldn't stand me, she couldn't stand the life, the climate, the inconveniences, the absence of what she was accustomed to. She was dead tired of it all. I can understand that. And I—I didn't know what to do about it. . . . So we drifted; and the catastrophe came very quickly. Let me tell you something; a West Pointer, an Annapolis man, knows what sort of life he's going into and what he is to expect when he marries. Usually, too, he marries into the Army or Navy set; and the girl knows, too, what kind of a married life that means.

"But I didn't. Neither did Alixe. And we went under; that's all—fighting each other heart and soul to the end. . . . Is she happy with Ruthven? I never knew him—and never cared to. I suppose they go about in town among the yellow set. Do they?"

"Yes. I've met Alixe once or twice. She was perfectly composed—formal but unembarrassed. She has shifted her milieu somewhat—it began with the influx of Ruthven's friends from the 'yellow' section of the younger married set—the Orchils, Fanes, Minsters, and Delmour-Carnes. Which is all right if she'd stay there. But in town you're likely to encounter anybody where the somebodies of one set merge into the somebodies of another. And we're always looking over our fences, you know. . . . By the way," she added cheerfully, "I'm dipping into the younger set myself to-night—on Eileen's account. I brought her out Thursday and I'm giving a dinner for her to-night."

"Who's Eileen?" he asked.

"Eileen? Why, don't you—why, of *course*, you don't know yet that I've taken Eileen for my own. I didn't want to write you; I wanted first to see how it would turn out; and when I saw that it was turning out perfectly, I thought it better to wait until you could return and hear all about it from me, because one can't write that sort of thing—"

"Nina!"

"What, dear?" she said, startled.

"Who the dickens *is* Eileen?"

"Philip! You are precisely like Austin; you grow impatient of preliminary details when I'm doing my very best attempting to explain just as clearly as I can. Now I will go on and say that Eileen is Molly Erroll's daughter, and the courts appointed Austin and me guardians for her and for her brother Gerald."

"Oh!"

"Now is it clear to you?"

"Yes," he said, thinking of the tragedy which had left the child so utterly alone in the world, save for her brother and a distant kinship by marriage with the Gerards.

For a while he sat brooding, arms loosely folded, immersed once more in his own troubles.

"It seems a shame," he said, "that a family like ours, whose name has always spelled decency, should find themselves entangled in the very things their race has always hated and managed to avoid. And through me, too."

"It was not your fault, Phil."

"No, not the divorce part. Do you suppose I wouldn't have taken any kind of medicine before resorting to that! But what's the use; for you can try as you may to keep your name clean, and then you can fold your arms and wait to see what a hopeless fool fate makes of you."

"But no disgrace touches you, dear," she said tremulously.

"I've been all over that, too," he said with quiet bitterness. "You are partly right; nobody cares in this town. Even though I did not defend the suit, nobody cares. And there's no disgrace, I suppose, if nobody cares enough even to condone. Divorce is no longer noticed; it is a matter of ordinary occurrence—a matter of routine in some sets. Who cares?—except decent folk? And they only think it's a pity—and wouldn't do it themselves. The horrified clamour comes from outside the social registers and blue books; we know they're right, but it doesn't affect us. What does affect us is that we *were* the decent folk who permitted ourselves the luxury of being sorry for others who resorted to divorce as a remedy but wouldn't do it ourselves! . . . Now we've done it and—"

"Phil! I will not have you feel that way."

"What way?"

"The way you feel. We are older than we were—everybody is older—the world is, too. What we were brought up to consider impossible—"

"What we were brought up to consider impossible was what kept me up to the mark out there, Nina." He made a gesture toward the East. "Now, I come back here and learn that we've all outgrown those ideas—"

"Phil! I never meant that."

He said: "If Alixe found that she cared for Ruthven, I don't blame her. Laws and statutes can't govern such matters. If she found she no longer cared for me, I could not blame her. But two people, mismated, have only one chance in this world—to live their tragedy through with dignity. That is absolutely all life holds for them. Beyond that, outside of that dead line—treachery to self and race and civilisation! That is my conclusion after a year's experience in hell." He rose and began to pace the floor, fingers worrying his moustache. "Law? Can a law, which I do not accept, let me loose to risk it all again with another woman?"

She said slowly, her hands folded in her lap: "It is well you've come to me at last. You've been turning round and round in that wheeled cage until you think you've made enormous progress; and you haven't. Dear, listen to me; what you honestly believe to be unselfish and high-minded adherence to principle, is nothing but the circling reasoning of a hurt mind—an intelligence still numbed from shock, a mental and physical life forced by sheer courage into mechanical routine. . . . Wait a moment; there is nobody else to say this to you; and if I did not love you I would not interfere with this great mistake you are so honestly making of your life, and which, perhaps, is the only comfort left you. I say, 'perhaps,' for I do not believe that life holds nothing happier for you than the sullen content of martyrdom."

"Nina!"

"I am right!" she said, almost fiercely; "I've been married thirteen years and I've lost that fear of men's portentous judgments which all girls outgrow one day. And do you think I am going to acquiesce in this attitude of yours toward life? Do you think I can't distinguish between a tragical mistake and a mistaken tragedy? I tell you your life is not finished; it is not yet begun!"

He looked at her, incensed; but she sprang to the floor, her face bright with colour, her eyes clear, determined: "I thought, when you took the oath of military service, you swore to obey the laws of the land? And the very first law that interferes with your preconceived notions—crack!—you say it's not for you! Look at me—you great, big, wise brother of mine—who knows enough to march a hundred and three men into battle, but not enough to know where pride begins and conscience ends. You're badly hurt; you are deeply humiliated over your resignation; you believe that ambition for a career, for happiness, for marriage, and for children is ended for you. You need fresh air—and I'm going to see you have it. You need new duties, new faces, new scenes, new problems. You shall have them. Dear, believe me, few men as young as you—as attractive, as human, as lovable, as affectionate as you, wilfully ruin their lives because of a hurt pride which they mistake for conscience. You will understand that when you become convalescent. Now kiss me and tell me you're much obliged—for I hear Austin's voice on the stairs."

He held her at arms' length, gazing at her, half amused, half indignant; then, unbidden, a second flash of the old telepathy passed between them—a pale glimmer lighted his own dark heart in sympathy; and for a moment he seemed to have a brief glimpse of the truth; and the truth was not as he had imagined it. But it was a glimpse only—a fleeting suspicion of his own fallibility; then it vanished into the old, dull, aching, obstinate humiliation. For truth would not be truth if it were so easily discovered.

"Well, we've buried it now," breathed Selwyn. "You're all right, Nina—from your own standpoint—and I'm not going to make a stalking nuisance of myself; no fear, little sister. Hello!"—turning swiftly—"here's that preposterous husband of yours."

They exchanged a firm hand clasp; Austin Gerard, big, smooth shaven, humorously inclined toward the ruddy heaviness of successful middle age; Selwyn, lean, bronzed, erect, and direct in all the powerful symmetry and perfect health of a man within sight of maturity.

"Hail to the chief—et cetera," said Austin, in his large, bantering voice. "Glad to see you home, my bolo-punctured soldier boy. Welcome to our city! I suppose you've both pockets stuffed with loot, now haven't you?—pearls and sarongs and dattos—yes? Have you inspected the kids? What's your opinion of the Gerard batallion? Pretty fit? Nina's commanding, so it's up to her if we don't pass dress parade. By the way, your enormous luggage is here—consisting of one dinky trunk and a sword done up in chamois skin."

"Nina's good enough to want me for a few days—" began Selwyn, but his big brother-in-law laughed scornfully:

"A few days! We've got you now!" And to his wife: "Nina, I suppose I'm due to lean over those infernal kids before I can have a minute with your brother. Are they in bed yet? All right, Phil; we'll be down in a minute; there's tea and things in the library. Make Eileen give you some."

He turned, unaffectedly taking his pretty wife's hand in his large florid paw, and Selwyn, intensely amused, saw them making for the nursery absorbed in conjugal confab. He lingered to watch them go their way, until they disappeared; and he stood a moment longer alone there in the hallway; then the humour faded from his sun-burnt face; he swung wearily on his heel, and descended the stairway, his hand heavy on the velvet rail.

The library was large and comfortable, full of agreeably wadded corners and fat, helpless chairs —a big, inviting place, solidly satisfying in dull reds and mahogany. The porcelain of tea paraphernalia caught the glow of the fire; a reading lamp burned on a centre table, shedding subdued lustre over ceiling, walls, books, and over the floor where lay a few ancient rugs of Beloochistan, themselves full of mysterious, sombre fire.

Hands clasped behind his back, he stood in the centre of the room, considering his environment with the grave, absent air habitual to him when brooding. And, as he stood there, a sound at the door aroused him, and he turned to confront a young girl in hat, veil, and furs, who was leisurely advancing toward him, stripping the gloves from a pair of very white hands.

"How do you do, Captain Selwyn," she said. "I am Eileen Erroll and I am commissioned to give you some tea. Nina and Austin are in the nursery telling bedtime stories and hearing assorted prayers. The children seem to be quite crazy about you—" She unfastened her veil, threw back stole and coat, and, rolling up her gloves on her wrists, seated herself by the table. "—*Quite* crazy about you," she continued, "and you're to be included in bedtime prayers, I believe—No sugar? Lemon? —Drina's mad about you and threatens to give you her new maltese puppy. I congratulate you on your popularity."

"Did you see me in the nursery on all fours?" inquired Selwyn, recognising her bronze-red hair.

Unfeigned laughter was his answer. He laughed, too, not very heartily.

"My first glimpse of our legendary nursery warrior was certainly astonishing," she said, looking around at him with frank malice. Then, quickly: "But you don't mind, do you? It's all in the family, of course."

"Of course," he agreed with good grace; "no use to pretend dignity here; you all see through me in a few moments."

She had given him his tea. Now she sat upright in her chair, smiling, *distraite*, her hat casting a luminous shadow across her eyes; the fluffy furs, fallen from throat and shoulder, settled loosely around her waist.

Glancing up from her short reverie she encountered his curious gaze.

"To-night is to be my first dinner dance, you know," she said. Faint tints of excitement stained her white skin; the vivid scarlet contrast of her mouth was almost startling. "On Thursday I was introduced—" she explained, "and now I'm to have the gayest winter I ever dreamed of. . . . And I'm going to leave you in a moment if Nina doesn't hurry and come. Do you mind?"

"Of course I mind," he protested amiably, "but I suppose you wish to devote several hours to dressing."

She nodded. "Such a dream of a gown! Nina's present! You'll see it. I hope Gerald will be here to see it. He promised. You'll say you like it if you do like it, won't you?"

"I'll say it, anyway."

"Oh, well—if you are contented to be commonplace like other men—"

"I've no ambition to be different at my age."

"Your age?" she repeated, looking up quickly. "You are as young as Nina, aren't you? Half the men in the younger set are no younger than you—and you know it," she concluded—"you are only trying to make me say so—and you've succeeded. I'm not very experienced yet. Does tea bring wisdom, Captain Selwyn?" pouring herself a cup. "I'd better arm myself immediately." She sank back into the depths of the chair, looking gaily at him over her lifted cup. "To my rapid education in worldly wisdom!" She nodded, and sipped the tea almost pensively.

He certainly did seem young there in the firelight, his narrow, thoroughbred head turned toward the fire. Youth, too, sat lightly on his shoulders; and it was scarcely a noticeably mature hand that touched the short sun-burnt moustache at intervals. From head to waist, from his loosely coupled, well-made limbs to his strong, slim foot, strength seemed to be the keynote to a physical harmony most agreeable to look at.

The idea entered her head that he might appear to advantage on horseback.

"We must ride together," she said, returning her teacup to the tray; "if you don't mind riding with me? Do you? Gerald never has time, so I go with a groom. But if you would care to go—" she laughed. "Oh, you see I am already beginning a selfish family claim on you. I foresee that you'll be very busy with us all persistently tugging at your coat-sleeves; and what with being civil to me and a martyr to Drina, you'll have very little time to yourself. And—I hope you'll like my brother Gerald when you meet him. Now I *must* go."

Then, rising and partly turning to collect her furs:

"It's quite exciting to have you here. We will be good friends, won't we? . . . and I think I had better stop my chatter and go, because my cunning little Alsatian maid is not very clever yet. . . . Good-bye."

She stretched out one of her amazingly white hands across the table, giving him a friendly leave-taking and welcome all in one frank handshake; and left him standing there, the fresh contact still cool in his palm.

Nina came in presently to find him seated before the fire, one hand shading his eyes; and, as he prepared to rise, she rested both arms on his shoulders, forcing him into his chair again.

"So you've bewitched Eileen, too, have you?" she said tenderly. "Isn't she the sweetest little thing?"

"She's—ah—as tall as I am," he said, blinking at the fire.

"She's only nineteen; pathetically unspoiled—a perfect dear. Men are going to rave over her and—*not* spoil her. Did you ever see such hair?—that thick, ruddy, lustrous, copper tint?—and sometimes it's like gold afire. And a skin like snow and peaches!—she's sound to the core. I've had her exercised and groomed and hardened and trained from the very beginning—every inch of her minutely cared for exactly like my own babies. I've done my best," she concluded with a satisfied sigh, and dropped into a chair beside her brother.

"Thoroughbred," commented Selwyn, "to be turned out to-night. Is she bridle-wise and intelligent?"

"More than sufficiently. That's one trouble—she's had, at times, a depressing, sponge-like desire for absorbing all sorts of irrelevant things that no girl ought to concern herself with. I—to tell the truth—if I had not rigorously drilled her—she might have become a trifle tiresome; I don't mean precisely frumpy—but one of those earnest young things whose intellectual conversation becomes a visitation—one of the wants-to-know-for-the-sake-of-knowledge sort—a dreadful human blotter!

Oh, dear; show me a girl with her mind soaking up 'isms' and I'll show you a social failure with a wisp of hair on her cheek, who looks the dowdier the more expensively she's gowned."

"So you believe you've got that wisp of copper-tinted hair tucked up snugly?" asked Selwyn, amused.

"I—it's still a worry to me; at intervals she's inclined to let it slop. Thank Heaven, I've made her spine permanently straight and her head is screwed properly to her neck. There's not a slump to her from crown to heel—*I* know, you know. She's had specialists to forestall every blemish. I made up my mind to do it; I'm doing it for my own babies. That's what a mother is for—to turn out her offspring to the world as flawless and wholesome as when they came into it!—physically and mentally sound—or a woman betrays her stewardship. They must be as healthy of body and limb as they are innocent and wholesome minded. The happiest of all creatures are drilled thoroughbreds. Show me a young girl, unspoiled mentally and spiritually untroubled, with a superb physique, and I'll show you a girl equipped for the happiness of this world. And that is what Eileen is."

"I should say," observed Selwyn, "that she's equipped for the slaughter of man."

"Yes, but *I* am selecting the victim," replied his sister demurely.

"Oh! Have you? Already?"

"Tentatively."

"Who?"

"Sudbury Gray, I think—with Scott Innis for an understudy—perhaps the Draymore man as alternate—I don't know; there's time."

"Plenty," he said vaguely, staring into the fire where a log had collapsed into incandescent ashes.

She continued to talk about Eileen until she noticed that his mind was on other matters—his preoccupied stare enlightened her. She said nothing for a while.

But he woke up when Austin came in and settled his big body in a chair.

"Drina, the little minx, called me back on some flimsy pretext," he said, relighting his cigar; "I forgot that time was going—and she was wily enough to keep me talking until Miss Paisely caught me at it and showed me out. I tell you," turning on Selwyn—"children are what make life worth wh—" He ceased abruptly at a gentle tap from his wife's foot, and Selwyn looked up.

Whether or not he divined the interference he said very quietly: "I'd rather have had children than anything in the world. They're about the best there is in life; I agree with you, Austin."

His sister, watching him askance, was relieved to see his troubled face become serene, though she divined the effort.

"Kids are the best," he repeated, smiling at her. "Failing them, for second choice, I've taken to the laboratory. Some day I'll invent something and astonish you, Nina."

"We'll fit you up a corking laboratory," began Austin cordially; "there is—"

"You're very good; perhaps you'll all be civil enough to move out of the house if I need more room for bottles and retorts—"

"Of *course*, Phil must have his laboratory," insisted Nina. "There's loads of unused room in this big barn—only you don't mind being at the top of the house, do you, Phil?"

"Yes, I do; I want to be in the drawing-room—or somewhere so that you all may enjoy the odours and get the benefit of premature explosions. Oh, come now, Austin, if you think I'm going to plant myself here on you—"

"Don't notice him, Austin," said Nina, "he only wishes to be implored. And, by the same token, you'd both better let me implore you to dress!" She rose and bent forward in the firelight to peer at the clock. "Goodness! Do you creatures think I'm going to give Eileen half an hour's start with her maid?—and I carrying my twelve years' handicap, too. No, indeed! I'm decrepit but I'm going to die fighting. Austin, get up! You're horribly slow, anyhow. Phil, Austin's man—such as he is—will be at your disposal, and your luggage is unpacked."

"Am I really expected to grace this festival of babes?" inquired Selwyn. "Can't you send me a tray of toast or a bowl of gruel and let me hide my old bones in a dressing-gown somewhere?"

"Oh, come on," said Austin, smothering the yawn in his voice and casting his cigar into the ashes. "You're about ripe for the younger set—one of them, anyhow. If you can't stand the intellectual strain we'll side-step the show later and play a little—what do you call it in the army?—pontoons?"

They strolled toward the door, Nina's arms linked in theirs, her slim fingers interlocked on her breast.

"We are certainly going to be happy—we three—in this innocent *ménage à trois*," she said. "I don't know what more you two men could ask for—or I, either—or the children or Eileen. Only one thing; I think it is perfectly horrid of Gerald not to be here."

Traversing the hall she said: "It always frightens me to be perfectly happy—and remember all the ghastly things that *could* happen. . . . I'm going to take a glance at the children before I dress. . . . Austin, did you remember your tonic?"

She looked up surprised when her husband laughed.

"I've taken my tonic and nobody's kidnapped the kids," he said. She hesitated, then picking up her skirts she ran upstairs for one more look at her slumbering progeny.

The two men glanced at one another; their silence was the tolerant, amused silence of the wiser sex, posing as such for each other's benefit; but deep under the surface stirred the tremors of the same instinctive solicitude that had sent Nina to the nursery.

"I used to think," said Gerard, "that the more kids you had the less anxiety per kid. The contrary is true; you're more nervous over half a dozen than you are over one, and your wife is always going to the nursery to see that the cat hasn't got in or the place isn't afire or spots haven't come out all over the children."

They laughed tolerantly, lingering on the sill of Selwyn's bedroom.

"Come in and smoke a cigarette," suggested the latter. "I have nothing to do except to write some letters and dress."

But Gerard said: "There seems to be a draught through this hallway; I'll just step upstairs to be sure that the nursery windows are not too wide open. See you later, Phil. If there's anything you need just dingle that bell."

And he went away upstairs, only to return in a few minutes, laughing under his breath: "I say, Phil, don't you want to see the kids asleep? Billy's flat on his back with a white 'Teddy bear' in either arm; and Drina and Josephine are rolled up like two kittens in pajamas; and you should see Winthrop's legs—"

"Certainly," said Selwyn gravely, "I'll be with you in a second."

And turning to his dresser he laid away the letters and the small photograph which he had been examining under the drop-light, locking them securely in the worn despatch box until he should have time to decide whether to burn them all or only the picture. Then he slipped on his smoking jacket.

"—Ah, about Winthrop's legs—" he repeated vaguely, "certainly; I should be very glad to examine them, Austin."

"I don't want you to examine them," retorted Gerard resentfully, "I want you to see them. There's nothing the matter with them, you understand."

"Exactly," nodded Selwyn, following his big brother-in-law into the hall, where, from beside a lamp-lit sewing table a trim maid rose smiling:

"Miss Erroll desires to know whether Captain Selwyn would care to see her gown when she is ready to go down?"

"By all means," said Selwyn, "I should like to see that, too. Will you let me know when Miss Erroll is ready? Thank you."

Austin said as they reached the nursery door: "Funny thing, feminine vanity—almost pathetic, isn't it? . . . Don't make too much noise! . . . What do you think of that pair of legs, Phil?—and

he's not yet five. . . . And I want you to speak frankly; *did* you ever see anything to beat that bunch of infants? Not because they're ours and we happen to be your own people—" he checked himself and the smile faded as he laid his big ruddy hand on Selwyn's shoulder;—"*your own people*, Phil. Do you understand? . . . And if I have not ventured to say anything about—what has happened—you understand that, too, don't you? You know I'm just as loyal to you as Nina is—as it is natural and fitting that your own people should be. Only a man finds it difficult to convey his—his—"

"Don't say 'sympathies'!" cut in Selwyn nervously.

"I wasn't going to, confound you! I was going to say 'sentiments.' I'm sorry I said anything. Go to the deuce!"

Selwyn did not even deign to glance around at him. "You big red-pepper box," he muttered affectionately, "you'll wake up Drina. Look at her in her cunning pajamas! Oh, but she is a darling, Austin. And look at that boy with his two white bears! He's a corker! He's a wonder—honestly, Austin. As for that Josephine kid she can have me on demand; I'll answer to voice, whistle, or hand. . . . I say, ought we to go away and leave Winthrop's thumb in his mouth?"

"I guess I can get it out without waking him," whispered Gerard. A moment later he accomplished the office, leaned down and drew the bed-covers closer to Tina's dimpled chin, then grasped Selwyn above the elbow in sudden alarm: "If that trained terror, Miss Paisely, finds us in here when she comes from dinner, we'll both catch it! Come on; I'll turn off the light. Anyway, we ought to have been dressed long ago; but you insisted on butting in here."

In the hallway below they encountered a radiant and bewildering vision awaiting them: Eileen, in all her glory.

"Wonderful!" said Gerard, patting the vision's rounded bare arm as he hurried past—"fine gown! fine girl!—but I've got to dress and so has Philip—" He meant well.

"*Do* you like it, Captain Selwyn?" asked the girl, turning to confront him, where he had halted. "Gerald isn't coming and—I thought perhaps you'd be interested—"

The formal, half-patronising compliment on his tongue's tip remained there, unsaid. He stood silent, touched by the faint under-ringing wistfulness in the laughing voice that challenged his opinion; and something within him responded in time:

"Your gown is a beauty; such wonderful lace. Of course, anybody would know it came straight from Paris or from some other celestial region—"

"But it didn't!" cried the girl, delighted. "It looks it, doesn't it? But it was made by Letellier! Is there anything you don't like about it, Captain Selwyn? *Anything*?"

"Nothing," he said solemnly; "it is as adorable as the girl inside it, who makes it look like a Parisian importation from Paradise!"

She colored enchantingly, and with pretty, frank impulse held out both her hands to him:

"You *are* a dear, Captain Selwyn! It is my first real dinner gown and I'm quite mad about it; and—somehow I wanted the family to share my madness with me. Nina will—she gave it to me, the darling. Austin admires it, too, of course, but he doesn't notice such things very closely; and Gerald isn't here. . . . Thank you for letting me show it to you before I go down."

She gave both his hands a friendly little shake and, glancing down at her skirt in blissful consciousness of its perfection, stepped backward into her own room.

Later, while he stood at his dresser constructing an immaculate knot in his white tie, Nina knocked.

"Hurry, Phil! Oh, may I come in? . . . You ought to be downstairs with us, you know. . . . And it was very sweet of you to be so nice to Eileen. The child had tears in her eyes when I went in. Oh, just a single diamond drop in each eye; your sympathy and interest did it. . . . I think the child misses her father on an occasion such as this—the beginning of life—the first step out into the world. Men do not understand what it means to us; Gerald doesn't, I'm sure. I've been watching her, and I know the shadow of that dreadful tragedy falls on her more often than Austin and I are

aware of. . . . Shall I fix that tie for you, dear? . . . Certainly I can; Austin won't let a man touch him. . . . There, Phil. . . . Wait! . . . Now if you are decently grateful you'll tell me I look well. Do I? Really? Nonsense, I *don't* look twenty; but—say it, Phil. Ah, that clever maid of mine knows some secrets—never mind!—but Drina thinks I'm a beauty. . . . Come, dear; and thank you for being kind to Eileen. One's own kin counts so much in this world. And when a girl has none, except a useless brother, little things like that mean a lot to her." She turned, her hand falling on his sleeve. "*You* are among your own people, anyhow!"

His own people! The impatient tenderness of his sister's words had been sounding in his ears all through the evening. They rang out clear and insistent amid the gay tumult of the dinner; he heard them in the laughing confusion of youthful voices; they stole into the delicate undertones of the music to mock him; the rustling of silk and lace repeated them; the high heels of satin slippers echoed them in irony.

His own people!

The scent of overheated flowers, the sudden warm breeze eddying from a capricious fan, the mourning thrill of the violins emphasised the emphasis of the words.

And they sounded sadder and more meaningless now to him, here in his own room, until the monotony of their recurrent mockery began to unnerve him.

He turned on the electricity, shrank from it, extinguished it. And for a long time he sat there in the darkness of early morning, his unfilled pipe clutched in his nerveless hand.

CHAPTER II
A DREAM ENDS

To pick up once more and tighten and knot together the loosened threads which represented the unfinished record that his race had woven into the social fabric of the metropolis was merely an automatic matter for Selwyn.

His own people had always been among the makers of that fabric. Into part of its vast and intricate pattern they had woven an inconspicuously honourable record—chronicles of births and deaths and marriages, a plain memorandum of plain living, and upright dealing with their fellow men.

Some public service of modest nature they had performed, not seeking it, not shirking; accomplishing it cleanly when it was intrusted to them.

His forefathers had been, as a rule, professional men—physicians and lawyers; his grandfather died under the walls of Chapultepec Castle while twisting a tourniquet for a cursing dragoon; an uncle remained indefinitely at Malvern Hill; an only brother at Montauk Point having sickened in the trenches before Santiago.

His father's services as division medical officer in Sheridan's cavalry had been, perhaps, no more devoted, no more loyal than the services of thousands of officers and troopers; and his reward was a pension offer, declined. He practised until his wife died, then retired to his country home, from which house his daughter Nina was married to Austin Gerard.

Mr. Selwyn, senior, continued to pay his taxes on his father's house in Tenth Street, voted in that district, spent a month every year with the Gerards, read a Republican morning newspaper, and judiciously enlarged the family reservation in Greenwood—whither he retired, in due time, without other ostentation than half a column in the *Evening Post*, which paper he had, in life, avoided.

The first gun off the Florida Keys sent Selwyn's only brother from his law office in hot haste to San Antonio—the first *étape* on his first and last campaign with Wood's cavalry.

That same gun interrupted Selwyn's connection with Neergard & Co., operators in Long Island real estate; and, a year later, the captaincy offered him in a Western volunteer regiment operating on the Island of Leyte, completed the rupture.

And now he was back again, a chance career ended, with option of picking up the severed threads—his inheritance at the loom—and of retying them, warp and weft, and continuing the pattern according to the designs of the tufted, tinted pile-yarn, knotted in by his ancestors before him.

There was nothing else to do; so he did it. Civil and certain social obligations were mechanically reassumed; he appeared in his sister's pew for worship, he reënrolled in his clubs as a resident member once more; the directors of such charities as he meddled with he notified of his return; he remitted his dues to the various museums and municipal or private organisations which had always expected support from his family; he subscribed to the *Sun*.

He was more conservative, however, in mending the purely social strands so long relaxed or severed. The various registers and blue-books recorded his residence under "dilatory domiciles"; he did not subscribe to the opera, preferring to chance it in case harmony-hunger attacked him; pre-Yuletide functions he dodged, considering that his sister's days in January and attendance at other family formalities were sufficient.

Meanwhile he was looking for two things—an apartment and a job—the first energetically combated by his immediate family.

It was rather odd—the scarcity of jobs. Of course Austin offered him one which Selwyn declined at once, comfortably enraging his brother-in-law for nearly ten minutes.

"But what do I know about the investment of trust funds?" demanded Selwyn; "you wouldn't take me if I were not your wife's brother—and that's nepotism."

Austin's harmless fury raged for nearly ten minutes, after which he cheered up, relighted his cigar, and resumed his discussion with Selwyn concerning the merits of various boys' schools—the victim in prospective being Billy.

A little later, reverting to the subject of his own enforced idleness, Selwyn said: "I've been on the point of going to see Neergard—but somehow I can't quite bring myself to it—slinking into his office as a rank failure in one profession, to ask him if he has any use for me again."

"Stuff and fancy!" growled Gerard; "it's all stuff and fancy about your being any kind of a failure. If you want to resume with that Dutchman, go to him and say so. If you want to invest anything in his Long Island schemes he'll take you in fast enough. He took in Gerald and some twenty thousand."

"Isn't he very prosperous, Austin?"

"Very—on paper. Long Island farm lands and mortgages on Hampton hen-coops are not fragrant propositions to me. But there's always one more way of making a living after you counted 'em all up on your fingers. If you've any capital to offer Neergard, he won't shriek for help."

"But isn't suburban property—"

"On the jump? Yes—both ways. Oh, I suppose that Neergard is all right—if he wasn't I wouldn't have permitted Gerald to go into it. Neergard sticks to his commissions and doesn't back his fancy in certified checks. I don't know exactly how he operates; I only know that we find nothing in that sort of thing for our own account. But Fane, Harmon & Co. do. That's their affair, too; it's all a matter of taste, I tell you."

Selwyn reflected: "I believe I'd go and see Neergard if I were perfectly sure of my personal sentiments toward him. . . . He's been civil enough to me, of course, but I have always had a curious feeling about Neergard—that he's for ever on the edge of doing something—doubtful—"

"His business reputation is all right. He shaves the dead line like a safety razor, but he's never yet cut through it. On principle, however, look out for an apple-faced Dutchman with a thin nose and no lips. Neither Jew, Yankee, nor American stands any chance in a deal with that type of financier. Personally my feeling is this: if I've got to play games with Julius Neergard, I'd prefer to be his partner. And so I told Gerald. By the way—"

Austin checked himself, looked down at his cigar, turned it over and over several times, then continued quietly:

–"By the way, I suppose Gerald is like other young men of his age and times—immersed in his own affairs—thoughtless perhaps, perhaps a trifle selfish in the cross-country gallop after pleasure. . . . I was rather severe with him about his neglect of his sister. He ought to have come here to pay his respects to you, too—"

"Oh, don't put such notions into his head—"

"Yes, I will!" insisted Austin; "however indifferent and thoughtless and selfish he is to other people, he's got to be considerate toward his own family. And I told him so. Have you seen him lately?"

"N-o," admitted Selwyn.

"Not since that first time when he came to do the civil by you?"

"No; but don't—"

"Yes, I will," repeated his brother-in-law; "and I'm going to have a thorough explanation with him and learn what he's up to. He's got to be decent to his sister; he ought to report to me occasionally; that's all there is to it. He has entirely too much liberty with his bachelor quarters and his junior whipper-snapper club, and his house parties and his cruises on Neergard's boat!"

He got up, casting his cigar from him, and moved about bulkily, muttering of matters to be regulated, and firmly, too. But Selwyn, looking out of the window across the Park, knew perfectly well that young Erroll, now of age, with a small portion of his handsome income at his mercy, was past the regulating stage and beyond the authority of Austin. There was no harm in him; he was

simply a joyous, pleasure-loving cub, chock full of energetic instincts, good and bad, right and wrong, out of which, formed from the acts which become habits, character matures. This was his estimate of Gerald.

The next morning, riding in the Park with Eileen, he found a chance to speak cordially of her brother.

"I've meant to look up Gerald," he said, as though the neglect were his own fault, "but every time something happens to switch me on to another track."

"I'm afraid that I do a great deal of the switching," she said; "don't I? But you've been so nice to me and to the children that—"

Miss Erroll's horse was behaving badly, and for a few moments she became too thoroughly occupied with her mount to finish her sentence.

The belted groom galloped up, prepared for emergencies, and he and Selwyn sat their saddles watching a pretty battle for mastery between a beautiful horse determined to be bad and a very determined young girl who had decided he was going to be good.

Once or twice the excitement of solicitude sent the colour flying into Selwyn's temples; the bridle-path was narrow and stiff with freezing sand, and the trees were too near for such lively manoeuvres; but Miss Erroll had made up her mind—and Selwyn already had a humorous idea that this was no light matter. The horse found it serious enough, too, and suddenly concluded to be good. And the pretty scene ended so abruptly that Selwyn laughed aloud as he rejoined her:

"There was a man—'Boots' Lansing—in Bannard's command. One night on Samar the bolo-men rushed us, and Lansing got into the six-foot major's boots by mistake—seven-leaguers, you know—and his horse bucked him clean out of them."

"Hence his Christian name, I suppose," said the girl; "but why such a story, Captain Selwyn? I believe I stuck to my saddle?"

"With both hands," he said cordially, always alert to plague her. For she was adorable when teased—especially in the beginning of their acquaintance, before she had found out that it was a habit of his—and her bright confusion always delighted him into further mischief.

"But I wasn't a bit worried," he continued; "you had him so firmly around the neck. Besides, what horse or man could resist such a pleading pair of arms around the neck?"

"What you saw," she said, flushing up, "is exactly the way I shall do any pleading with the two animals you mention."

"Spur and curb and thrash us? Oh, my!"

"Not if you're bridle-wise, Captain Selwyn," she returned sweetly. "And you know you always are. And sometimes"—she crossed her crop and looked around at him reflectively—"*sometimes*, do you know, I am almost afraid that you are so very, very good, that perhaps you are becoming almost goody-good."

"*What*!" he exclaimed indignantly; but his only answer was her head thrown back and a ripple of enchanting laughter.

Later she remarked: "It's just as Nina says, after all, isn't it?"

"I suppose so," he replied suspiciously; "what?"

"That Gerald isn't really very wicked, but he likes to have us think so. It's a sign of extreme self-consciousness, isn't it," she added innocently, "when a man is afraid that a woman thinks he is very, very good?"

"That," he said, "is the limit. I'm going to ride by myself."

Her pleasure in Selwyn's society had gradually become such genuine pleasure, her confidence in his kindness so unaffectedly sincere, that, insensibly, she had fallen into something of his manner of badinage—especially since she realised how much amusement he found in her own smiling confusion when unexpectedly assailed. Also, to her surprise, she found that he could be plagued very easily, though she did not quite dare to at first, in view of his impressive years and experience.

But once goaded to it, she was astonished to find how suddenly it seemed to readjust their personal relations—years and experience falling from his shoulders like a cloak which had concealed a man very nearly her own age; years and experience adding themselves to her, and at least an inch to her stature to redress the balance between them.

It had amused him immensely as he realised the subtle change; and it pleased him, too, because no man of thirty-five cares to be treated *en grandpère* by a girl of nineteen, even if she has not yet worn the polish from her first pair of high-heeled shoes.

"It's astonishing," he said, "how little respect infirmity and age command in these days."

"I do respect you," she insisted, "especially your infirmity of purpose. You said you were going to ride by yourself. But, do you know, I don't believe you are of a particularly solitary disposition; are you?"

He laughed at first, then suddenly his face fell.

"Not from choice," he said, under his breath. Her quick ear heard, and she turned, semi-serious, questioning him with raised eyebrows.

"Nothing; I was just muttering. I've a villainous habit of muttering mushy nothings—"

"You *did* say something!"

"No; only ghoulish gabble; the mere murky mouthings of a meagre mind."

"You *did*. It's rude not to repeat it when I ask you."

"I didn't mean to be rude."

"Then repeat what you said to yourself."

"Do you wish me to?" he asked, raising his eyes so gravely that the smile faded from lip and voice when she answered: "I beg your pardon, Captain Selwyn. I did not know you were serious."

"Oh, I'm not," he returned lightly, "I'm never serious. No man who soliloquises can be taken seriously. Don't you know, Miss Erroll, that the crowning absurdity of all tragedy is the soliloquy?"

Her smile became delightfully uncertain; she did not quite understand him—though her instinct warned her that, for a second, something had menaced their understanding.

Riding forward with him through the crisp sunshine of mid-December, the word "tragedy" still sounding in her ears, her thoughts reverted naturally to the only tragedy besides her own which had ever come very near to her—his own.

Could he have meant *that*? Did people mention such things after they had happened? Did they not rather conceal them, hide them deeper and deeper with the aid of time and the kindly years for a burial past all recollection?

Troubled, uncomfortably intent on evading every thought or train of ideas evoked, she put her mount to a gallop. But thought kept pace with her.

She was, of course, aware of the situation regarding Selwyn's domestic affairs; she could not very well have been kept long in ignorance of the facts; so Nina had told her carefully, leaving in the young girl's mind only a bewildered sympathy for man and wife whom a dreadful and incomprehensible catastrophe had overtaken; only an impression of something new and fearsome which she had hitherto been unaware of in the world, and which was to be added to her small but, unhappily, growing list of sad and incredible things.

The finality of the affair, according to Nina, was what had seemed to her the most distressing—as though those two were already dead people. She was unable to understand it. Could no glimmer of hope remain that, in that magic "some day" of all young minds, the evil mystery might dissolve? Could there be no living "happily ever after" in the wake of such a storm? She had managed to hope for that, and believe in it.

Then, in some way, the news of Alixe's marriage to Ruthven filtered through the family silence. She had gone straight to Nina, horrified, unbelieving. And, when the long, tender, intimate interview was over, another unhappy truth, very gently revealed, was added to the growing list already learned by this young girl.

Then Selwyn came. She had already learned something of the world's customs and manners before his advent; she had learned more since his advent; and she was learning something else, too —to understand how happily ignorant of many matters she had been, had better be, and had best remain. And she harboured no malsane desire to know more than was necessary, and every innocent instinct to preserve her ignorance intact as long as the world permitted.

As for the man riding there at her side, his problem was simple enough as he summed it up: to face the world, however it might chance to spin, that small, ridiculous, haphazard world rattling like a rickety roulette ball among the numbered nights and days where he had no longer any vital stake at hazard—no longer any chance to win or lose.

This was an unstable state of mind, particularly as he had not yet destroyed the photograph which he kept locked in his despatch box. He had not returned it, either; it was too late by several months to do that, but he was still fool enough to consider the idea at moments—sometimes after a nursery romp with the children, or after a good-night kiss from Drina on the lamp-lit landing, or when some commonplace episode of the domesticity around him hurt him, cutting him to the quick with its very simplicity, as when Nina's hand fell naturally into Austin's on their way to "lean over" the children at bedtime, or their frank absorption in conjugal discussion to his own exclusion as he sat brooding by the embers in the library.

"I'm like a dead man at times," he said to himself; "nothing to expect of a man who is done for; and worst of all, I no longer expect anything of myself."

This was sufficiently morbid, and he usually proved it by going early to his own quarters, where dawn sometimes surprised him asleep in his chair, white and worn, all the youth in his hollow face extinct, his wife's picture fallen face downward on the floor.

But he always picked it up again when he awoke, and carefully dusted it, too, even when half stupefied with sleep.

Returning from their gallop, Miss Erroll had very little to say. Selwyn, too, was silent and absent-minded. The girl glanced furtively at him from time to time, not at all enlightened. Man, naturally, was to her an unknown quantity. In fact she had no reason to suspect him of being anything more intricate than the platitudinous dance or dinner partner in black and white, or any frock-coated entity in the afternoon, or any flannelled individual at the nets or on the links or cantering about the veranda of club, casino, or cottage, in evident anxiety to be considerate and agreeable.

This one, however, appeared to have individual peculiarities; he differed from his brother Caucasians, who should all resemble one another to any normal girl. For one thing he was subject to illogical moods—apparently not caring whether she noticed them or not. For another, he permitted himself the liberty of long and unreasonable silences whenever he pleased. This she had accepted unquestioningly in the early days when she was a little in awe of him, when the discrepancy of their ages and experiences had not been dissipated by her first presumptuous laughter at his expense.

Now it puzzled her, appearing as a specific trait differentiating him from Man in the abstract.

He had another trick, too, of retiring within himself, even when smiling at her sallies or banteringly evading her challenge to a duel of wits. At such times he no longer looked very young; she had noticed that more than once. He looked old, and ill-tempered.

Perhaps some sorrow—the actuality being vague in her mind; perhaps some hidden suffering —but she learned that he had never been wounded in battle and had never even had measles.

The sudden sullen pallor, the capricious fits of silent reserve, the smiling aloofness, she never attributed to the real source. How could she? The Incomprehensible Thing was a Finality accomplished according to law. And the woman concerned was now another man's wife. Which conclusively proved that there could be no regret arising from the Incomprehensible Finality, and that nobody involved cared, much less suffered. Hence *that* was certainly not the cause of any erratic or specific phenomena exhibited by this sample of man who differed, as she had noticed, somewhat from the rank and file of his neutral-tinted brothers.

"It's this particular specimen, *per se*," she concluded; "it's himself, *sui generis*—just as I happen to have red hair. That is all."

And she rode on quite happily, content, confident of his interest and kindness. For she had never forgotten his warm response to her when she stood on the threshold of her first real dinner party, in her first real dinner gown—a trivial incident, trivial words! But they had meant more to her than any man specimen could understand—including the man who had uttered them; and the violets, which she found later with his card, must remain for her ever after the delicately fragrant symbol of all he had done for her in a solitude, the completeness of which she herself was only vaguely beginning to realise.

Thinking of this now, she thought of her brother—and the old hurt at his absence on that night throbbed again. Forgive? Yes. But how could she forget it?

"I wish you knew Gerald well," she said impulsively; "he is such a dear fellow; and I think you'd be good for him—and besides," she hastened to add, with instinctive loyalty, lest he misconstrue, "Gerald would be good for you. We were a great deal together—at one time."

He nodded, smilingly attentive.

"Of course when he went away to school it was different," she added. "And then he went to Yale; that was four more years, you see."

"I was a Yale man," remarked Selwyn; "did he—" but he broke off abruptly, for he knew quite well that young Erroll could have made no senior society without his hearing of it. And he had not heard of it—not in the cane-brakes of Leyte where, on his sweat-soaked shirt, a small pin of heavy gold had clung through many a hike and many a scout and by many a camp-fire where the talk was of home and of the chances of crews and of quarter-backs.

"What were you going to ask me, Captain Selwyn?"

"Did he row—your brother Gerald?"

"No," she said. She did not add that he had broken training; that was her own sorrow, to be concealed even from Gerald. "No; he played polo sometimes. He rides beautifully, Captain Selwyn, and he is so clever when he cares to be—at the traps, for example—and—oh—anything. He once swam—oh, dear, I forget; was it five or fifteen or fifty miles? Is that *too* far? Do people swim those distances?"

"Some of those distances," replied Selwyn.

"Well, then, Gerald swam some of those distances—and everybody was amazed. . . . I do wish you knew him well."

"I mean to," he said. "I must look him up at his rooms or his club or—perhaps—at Neergard & Co."

"*Will* you do this?" she asked, so earnestly that he glanced up surprised.

"Yes," he said; and after a moment: "I'll do it to-day, I think; this afternoon."

"Have you time? You mustn't let me—"

"Time?" he repeated; "I have nothing else, except a watch to help me get rid of it."

"I'm afraid I help you get rid of it, too. I heard Nina warning the children to let you alone occasionally—and I suppose she meant that for me, too. But I only take your mornings, don't I? Nina is unreasonable; I never bother you in the afternoons or evenings; do you know I have not dined at home for nearly a month—except when we've asked people?"

"Are you having a good time?" he asked condescendingly, but without intention.

"Heavenly. How can you ask that?—with every day filled and a chance to decline something every day. If you'd only go to one—just one of the dances and teas and dinners, you'd be able to see for yourself what a good time I am having. . . . I don't know why I should be so delightfully lucky, but everybody asks me to dance, and every man I meet is particularly nice, and nobody has been very horrid to me; perhaps because I like everybody—"

She rode on beside him; they were walking their horses now; and as her silken-coated mount paced forward through the sunshine she sat at ease, straight as a slender Amazon in her habit, ruddy hair glistening at the nape of her neck, the scarlet of her lips always a vivid contrast to that wonderful unblemished skin of snow.

He thought to himself, quite impersonally: "She's a real beauty, that youngster. No wonder they ask her to dance and nobody is horrid. Men are likely enough to go quite mad about her as Nina predicts: probably some of 'em have already—that chuckle-headed youth who was there Tuesday, gulping up the tea—" And, "What was his name?" he asked aloud.

"Whose name?" she inquired, roused by his voice from smiling retrospection.

"That chuckle head—the young man who continued to haunt you so persistently when you poured tea for Nina on Tuesday. Of course they *all* haunted you," he explained politely, as she shook her head in sign of non-comprehension; "but there was one who—ah—gulped at his cup."

"Please—you are rather dreadful, aren't you?"

"Yes. So was he; I mean the infatuated chinless gentleman whose facial ensemble remotely resembled the features of a pleased and placid lizard of the Reptilian period."

"Oh, George Fane! That is particularly disagreeable of you, Captain Selwyn, because his wife has been very nice to me—Rosamund Fane—and she spoke most cordially of you—"

"Which one was she?"

"The Dresden china one. She looks—she simply cannot look as though she were married. It's most amusing—for people always take her for somebody's youngest sister who will be out next winter. . . . Don't you remember seeing her?"

"No, I don't. But there were dozens coming and going every minute whom I didn't know. Still, I behaved well, didn't I?"

"Pretty badly—to Kathleen Lawn, whom you cornered so that she couldn't escape until her mother made her go without any tea."

"Was *that* the reason that old lady looked at me so queerly?"

"Probably. I did, too, but you were taking chances, not hints. . . . She *is* attractive, isn't she?"

"Very fetching," he said, leaning down to examine his stirrup leathers which he had already lengthened twice. "I've got to have Cummins punch these again," he muttered; "or am I growing queer-legged in my old age?"

As he straightened up, Miss Erroll said: "Here comes Mr. Fane now—with a strikingly pretty girl. How beautifully they are mounted"—smilingly returning Fane's salute—"and she—oh! so you *do* know her, Captain Selwyn? Who is she?"

Crop raised mechanically in dazed salute, Selwyn's light touch on the bridle had tightened to a nervous clutch which brought his horse up sharply.

"What is it?" she asked, drawing bridle in her turn and looking back into his white, stupefied face.

"Pain," he said, unconscious that he spoke. At the same instant the stunned eyes found their focus—and found her beside his stirrup, leaning wide from her seat in sweet concern, one gloved hand resting on the pommel of his saddle.

"Are you ill?" she asked; "shall we dismount? If you feel dizzy, please lean against me."

"I am all right," he said coolly; and as she recovered her seat he set his horse in motion. His face had become very red now; he looked at her, then beyond her, with all the deliberate concentration of aloof indifference.

Confused, conscious that something had happened which she did not comprehend, and sensitively aware of the preoccupation which, if it did not ignore her, accepted her presence as of no consequence, she permitted her horse to set his own pace.

Neither self-command nor self-control was lacking now in Selwyn; he simply was too self-absorbed to care what she thought—whether she thought at all. And into his consciousness, throbbing

heavily under the rushing reaction from shock, crowded the crude fact that Alixe was no longer an apparition evoked in sleeplessness, in sun-lit brooding; in the solitude of crowded avenues and swarming streets; she was an actual presence again in his life—she was here, bodily, unchanged—unchanged!—for he had conceived a strange idea that she must have changed physically, that her appearance had altered. He knew it was a grotesquely senseless idea, but it clung to him, and he had nursed it unconsciously.

He had, truly enough, expected to encounter her in life again—somewhere; though what he had been preparing to see, Heaven alone knew; but certainly not the supple, laughing girl he had known—that smooth, slender, dark-eyed, dainty visitor who had played at marriage with him through a troubled and unreal dream; and was gone when he awoke—so swift the brief two years had passed, as swift in sorrow as in happiness.

Two vision-tinted years!—ended as an hour ends with the muffled chimes of a clock, leaving the air of an empty room vibrant. Two years!—a swift, restless dream aglow with exotic colour, echoing with laughter and bugle-call and the noise of the surf on Samar rocks—a dream through which stirred the rustle of strange brocades and the whisper of breezes blowing over the grasses of Leyte; and the light, dry report of rifles, and the shuffle of bare feet in darkened bungalows, and the whisper of dawn in Manila town.

Two years!—wherever they came from, wherever they had gone. And now, out of the ghostly, shadowy memory, behold *her* stepping into the world again!—living, breathing, quickening with the fire of life undimmed in her. And he had seen the bright colour spreading to her eyes, and the dark eyes widen to his stare; he had seen the vivid blush, the forced smile, the nod, the voiceless parting of her stiffened lips. Then she was gone, leaving the whole world peopled with her living presence and the very sky ringing with the words her lips had never uttered, never would utter while sun and moon and stars endured.

Shrinking from the clamouring tumult of his thoughts he looked around, hard-eyed and drawn of mouth, to find Miss Erroll riding a length in advance, her gaze fixed resolutely between her horse's ears.

How much had she noticed? How much had she divined?—this straight, white-throated young girl, with her self-possession and her rounded, firm young figure, this child with the pure, curved cheek, the clear, fearless eyes, untainted, ignorant, incredulous of shame, of evil.

Severe, confident, untroubled in the freshness of adolescence, she rode on, straight before her, symbolic innocence leading the disillusioned. And he followed, hard, dry eyes narrowing, ever narrowing and flinching under the smiling gaze of the dark-eyed, red-mouthed ghost that sat there on his saddle bow, facing him, almost in his very arms.

Luncheon had not been served when they returned. Without lingering on the landing as usual, they exchanged a formal word or two, then Eileen mounted to her own quarters and Selwyn walked nervously through the library, where he saw Nina evidently prepared for some mid-day festivity, for she wore hat and furs, and the brougham was outside.

"Oh, Phil," she said, "Eileen probably forgot that I was going out; it's a directors' luncheon at the exchange. Please tell Eileen that I can't wait for her; where is she?"

"Dressing, I suppose. Nina, I—"

"One moment, dear. I promised the children that you would lunch with them in the nursery. Do you mind? I did it to keep them quiet; I was weak enough to compromise between a fox hunt or fudge; so I said you'd lunch with them.. Will you?"

"Certainly. . . . And, Nina—what sort of a man is this George Fane?"

"Fane?"

"Yes—the chinless gentleman with gentle brown and protruding eyes and the expression of a tame brontosaurus."

"Why—how do you mean, Phil? What sort of man? He's a banker. He isn't very pretty, but he's popular."

"Oh, popular!" he nodded, as close to a sneer as he could ever get.

"He has a very popular wife, too; haven't you met Rosamund? People like him; he's about everywhere—very useful, very devoted to pretty women; but I'm really in a hurry, Phil. Won't you please explain to Eileen that I couldn't wait? You and she were almost an hour late. Now I must pick up my skirts and fly, or there'll be some indignant dowagers downtown. . . . Good-bye, dear. . . . And *don't* let the children eat too fast! Make Drina take thirty-six chews to every bite; and Winthrop is to have no bread if he has potatoes—" Her voice dwindled and died, away through the hall; the front door clanged.

He went to his quarters, drove out Austin's man, arranged his own fresh linen, took a sulky plunge; and, an unlighted cigarette between his teeth, completed his dressing in sullen introspection.

When he had tied his scarf and bitten his cigarette to pieces, he paced the room once or twice, squared his shoulders, breathed deeply, and, unbending his eyebrows, walked off to the nursery.

"Hello, you kids!" he said, with an effort. "I've come to luncheon. Very nice of you to want me, Drina."

"I wanted you, too!" said Billy; "I'm to sit beside you—"

"So am I," observed Drina, pushing Winthrop out of the chair and sliding in close to Selwyn. She had the cat, Kit-Ki, in her arms. Kit-Ki, divining nourishment, was purring loudly.

Josephine and Clemence, in pinafores and stickout skirts, sat wriggling, with Winthrop between them; the five dogs sat in a row behind; Katie and Bridget assumed the functions of Hibernian Hebes; and luncheon began with a clatter of spoons.

It being also the children's dinner—supper and bed occurring from five to six—meat figured on the card, and Kit-Ki's purring increased to an ecstatic and wheezy squeal, and her rigid tail, as she stood up on Drina's lap, was constantly brushing Selwyn's features.

"The cat is shedding, too," he remarked, as he dodged her caudal appendage for the twentieth time; "it will go in with the next spoonful, Drina, if you're not careful about opening your mouth."

"I love Kit-Ki," said Drina placidly. "I have written a poem to her—where is it?—hand it to me, Bridget."

And, laying down her fork and crossing her bare legs under the table, Drina took breath and read rapidly:

"LINES TO MY CAT

"Why
Do I love Kit-Ki
And run after
Her with laughter
And rub her fur
So she will purr?
Why do I know
That Kit-Ki loves me so?
I know it if
Her tail stands up stiff
And she beguiles
Me with smiles—"

"Huh!" said Billy, "cats don't smile!"

"They do. When they look pleasant they smile," said Drina, and continued reading from her own works:

"Be kind in all
You say and do
For God made Kit-Ki
The same as you.

"Yours truly,"
ALEXANDRINA GERARD.

She looked doubtfully at Selwyn. "Is it all right to sign a poem? I believe that poets sign their works, don't they, Uncle Philip?"

"Certainly. Drina, I'll give you a dollar for that poem."

"You may have it, anyway," said Drina, generously; and, as an after-thought: "My birthday is next Wednesday."

"What a hint!" jeered Billy, casting a morsel at the dogs.

"It isn't a hint. It had nothing to do with my poem, and I'll write you several more, Uncle Philip," protested the child, cuddling against him, spoon in hand, and inadvertently decorating his sleeve with cranberry sauce.

Cat hairs and cranberry are a great deal for a man to endure, but he gave Drina a reassuring hug and a whisper, and leaned back to remove traces of the affectionate encounter just as Miss Erroll entered.

"Oh, Eileen! Eileen!" cried the children; "are you coming to luncheon with us?"

As Selwyn rose, she nodded, amused.

"I am rather hurt," she said. "I went down to luncheon, but as soon as I heard where you all were I marched straight up here to demand the reason of my ostracism."

"We thought you had gone with mother," explained Drina, looking about for a chair.

Selwyn brought it. "I was commissioned to say that Nina couldn't wait—dowagers and cakes and all that, you know. Won't you sit down? It's rather messy and the cat is the guest of honour."

"We have three guests of honour," said Drina; "you, Eileen, and Kit-Ki. Uncle Philip, mother has forbidden me to speak of it, so I shall tell her and be punished—but *wouldn't* it be splendid if Aunt Alixe were only here with us?"

Selwyn turned sharply, every atom of colour gone; and the child smiled up at him. "*Wouldn't* it?" she pleaded.

"Yes," he said, so quietly that something silenced the child. And Eileen, giving ostentatious and undivided attention to the dogs, was now enveloped by snooping, eager muzzles and frantically wagging tails.

"My lap is full of paws!" she exclaimed; "take them away, Katie! And oh!—my gown, my gown!—Billy, stop waving your tumbler around my face! If you spill that milk on me I shall ask your Uncle Philip to put you in the guard-house!"

"You're going to bolo us, aren't you, Uncle Philip?" inquired Billy. "It's my turn to be killed, you remember—"

"I have an idea," said Selwyn, "that Miss Erroll is going to play for you to sing."

They liked that. The infant Gerards were musically inclined, and nothing pleased them better than to lift their voices in unison. Besides, it always distressed Kit-Ki, and they never tired laughing to see the unhappy cat retreat before the first minor chord struck on the piano. More than that, the dogs always protested, noses pointed heavenward. It meant noise, which was always welcome in any form.

"Will you play, Miss Erroll?" inquired Selwyn.

Miss Erroll would play.

"Why do you always call her 'Miss Erroll'?" asked Billy. "Why don't you say 'Eileen'?"

Selwyn laughed. "I don't know, Billy; ask her; perhaps she knows."

Eileen laughed, too, delicately embarrassed and aware of his teasing smile. But Drina, always impressed by formality, said: "Uncle Philip isn't Eileen's uncle. People who are not relations say *Miss and Mrs*."

"Are faver and muvver relations?" asked Josephine timidly.

"Y-es—no!—I don't know," admitted Drina; "*are* they, Eileen?"

"Why, yes—that is—that is to say—" And turning to Selwyn: "What dreadful questions. *Are* they relations, Captain Selwyn? Of course they are!"

"They were not before they were married," he said, laughing.

"If you married Eileen," began Billy, "you'd call her Eileen, I suppose."

"Certainly," said Selwyn.

"Why don't you?"

"That is another thing you must ask her, my son."

"Well, then, Eileen—"

But Miss Erroll was already seated at the nursery piano, and his demands were drowned in a decisive chord which brought the children clustering around her, while their nurses ran among them untying bibs and scrubbing faces and fingers in fresh water.

They sang like seraphs, grouped around the piano, fingers linked behind their backs. First it was "The Vicar of Bray." Then—and the cat fled at the first chord—"Lochleven Castle":

"Put off, put off,
And row with speed
For now is the time and the hour of need."

Miss Erroll sang, too; her voice leading—a charmingly trained, but childlike voice, of no pretensions, as fresh and unspoiled as the girl herself.

There was an interval after "Castles in the Air"; Eileen sat, with her marvellously white hands resting on the keys, awaiting further suggestion.

"Sing that funny song, Uncle Philip!" pleaded Billy; "you know—the one about:

"She hit him with a shingle
Which made his breeches tingle
Because he pinched his little baby brother;
And he ran down the lane
With his pants full of pain.
Oh, a boy's best friend is his mother!"

"*Billy!*" gasped Miss Erroll.

Selwyn, mortified, said severely: "That is a very dreadful song, Billy—"

"But *you* taught it to me—"

Eileen swung around on the piano stool, but Selwyn had seized Billy and was promising to bolo him as soon as he wished.

And Eileen, surveying the scene from her perch, thought that Selwyn's years seemed to depend entirely upon his occupation, for he looked very boyish down there on his knees among the children; and she had not yet forgotten the sunken pallor of his features in the Park—no, nor her own question to him, still unanswered. For she had asked him who that woman was who had been so direct in her smiling salute. And he had not yet replied; probably never would; for she did not expect to ask him again.

Meanwhile the bolo-men were rushing the outposts to the outposts' intense satisfaction.

"Bang-bang!" repeated Winthrop; "I hit you, Uncle Philip. You are dead, you know!"

"Yes, but here comes another! Fire!" shouted Billy. "Save the flag! Hurrah! Pound on the piano, Eileen, and pretend it's cannon."

Chord after chord reverberated through the big sunny room, punctuated by all the cavalry music she had picked up from West Point and her friends in the squadron.

"We can't get 'em up!
We can't get 'em up!
We can't get 'em up
In the morning!"

she sang, calmly watching the progress of the battle, until Selwyn disengaged himself from the *mêlée* and sank breathlessly into a chair.

"All over," he said, declining further combat. "Play the 'Star-spangled Banner,' Miss Erroll."

"Boom!" crashed the chord for the sunset gun; then she played the anthem; Selwyn rose, and the children stood up at salute.

The party was over.

Selwyn and Miss Erroll, strolling together out of the nursery and down the stairs, fell unconsciously into the amiable exchange of badinage again; she taunting him with his undignified behaviour, he retorting in kind.

"Anyway that was a perfectly dreadful verse you taught Billy," she concluded.

"Not as dreadful as the chorus," he remarked, wincing.

"You're exactly like a bad small boy, Captain Selwyn; you look like one now—so sheepish! I've seen Gerald attempt to avoid admonition in exactly that fashion."

"How about a jolly brisk walk?" he inquired blandly; "unless you've something on. I suppose you have."

"Yes, I have; a tea at the Fanes, a function at the Grays. . . . Do you know Sudbury Gray? It's his mother."

They had strolled into the living room—a big, square, sunny place, in golden greens and browns, where a bay-window overlooked the Park.

Kneeling on the cushions of the deep window seat she flattened her delicate nose against the glass, peering out through the lace hangings.

"Everybody and his family are driving," she said over her shoulder. "The rich and great are cornering the fresh-air supply. It's interesting, isn't it, merely to sit here and count coteries! There is Mrs. Vendenning and Gladys Orchil of the Black Fells set; there is that pretty Mrs. Delmour-Carnes; Newport! Here come some Cedarhurst people—the Fleetwoods. It always surprises one to see them out of the saddle. There is Evelyn Cardwell; she came out when I did; and there comes Sandon Craig with a very old lady—there, in that old-fashioned coach—oh, it is Mrs. Jan Van Elten, senior. What a very, very quaint old lady! I have been presented at court," she added, with a little laugh, "and now all the law has been fulfilled."

For a while she kneeled there, silently intent on the passing pageant with all the unconscious curiosity of a child. Presently, without turning: "They speak of the younger set—but what is its limit? So many, so many people! The hunting crowd—the silly crowd—the wealthy sets—the dreadful yellow set—then all those others made out of metals—copper and coal and iron and—" She shrugged her youthful shoulders, still intent on the passing show.

"Then there are the intellectuals—the artistic, the illuminated, the musical sorts. I—I wish I knew more of them. They were my father's friends—some of them." She looked over her shoulder

to see where Selwyn was, and whether he was listening; smiled at him, and turned, resting one hand on the window seat. "So many kinds of people," she said, with a shrug.

"Yes," said Selwyn lazily, "there are all kinds of kinds. You remember that beautiful nature-poem:

"'The sea-gull
And the eagul
And the dipper-dapper-duck
And the Jew-fish
And the blue-fish
And the turtle in the muck;
And the squir'l
And the girl
And the flippy floppy bat
Are differ-ent
As gent from gent.
So let it go at that!'"

"What hideous nonsense," she laughed, in open encouragement; but he could recall nothing more—or pretended he couldn't.

"You asked me," he said, "whether I know Sudbury Gray. I do, slightly. What about him?" And he waited, remembering Nina's suggestion as to that wealthy young man's eligibility.

"He's one of the nicest men I know," she replied frankly.

"Yes, but you don't know 'Boots' Lansing."

"The gentleman who was bucked out of his footwear? Is he attractive?"

"Rather. Shrieks rent the air when 'Boots' left Manila."

"Feminine shrieks?"

"Exclusively. The men were glad enough. He has three months' leave this winter, so you'll see him soon."

She thanked him mockingly for the promise, watching him from amused eyes. After a moment she said:

"I ought to arise and go forth with timbrels and with dances; but, do you know, I am not inclined to revels? There has been a little—just a very little bit too much festivity so far. . . . Not that I don't adore dinners and gossip and dances; not that I do not love to pervade bright and glittering places. Oh, no. Only—I—"

She looked shyly a moment at Selwyn: "I sometimes feel a curious desire for other things. I have been feeling it all day."

"What things?"

"I—don't know—exactly; substantial things. I'd like to learn about things. My father was the head of the American School of Archæology in Crete. My mother was his intellectual equal, I believe—"

Her voice had fallen as she spoke. "Do you wonder that physical pleasure palls a little at times? I inherit something besides a capacity for dancing."

He nodded, watching her with an interest and curiosity totally new.

"When I was ten years old I was taken abroad for the winter. I saw the excavations in Crete for the buried city which father discovered near Præsos. We lived for a while with Professor Flanders in the Fayum district; I saw the ruins of Kahun, built nearly three thousand years before the coming of Christ; I myself picked up a scarab as old as the ruins! . . . Captain Selwyn—I was only a child of ten; I could understand very little of what I saw and heard, but I have never, never forgotten the

happiness of that winter! . . . And that is why, at times, pleasures tire me a little; and a little discontent creeps in. It is ungrateful and ungracious of me to say so, but I did wish so much to go to college—to have something to care for—as mother cared for father's work. Why, do you know that my mother accidentally discovered the thirty-seventh sign in the Karian Signary?"

"No," said Selwyn, "I did not know that." He forbore to add that he did not know what a Signary resembled or where Karia might be.

Miss Erroll's elbow was on her knee, her chin resting within her open palm.

"Do you know about my parents?" she asked. "They were lost in the *Argolis* off Cyprus. You have heard. I think they meant that I should go to college—as well as Gerald; I don't know. Perhaps after all it is better for me to do what other young girls do. Besides, I enjoy it; and my mother did, too, when she was my age, they say. She was very much gayer than I am; my mother was a beauty and a brilliant woman. . . . But there were other qualities. I—have her letters to father when Gerald and I were very little; and her letters to us from London. . . . I have missed her more, this winter, it seems to me, than even in that dreadful time—"

She sat silent, chin in hand, delicate fingers restlessly worrying her red lips; then, in quick impulse:

"You will not mistake me, Captain Selwyn! Nina and Austin have been perfectly sweet to me and to Gerald."

"I am not mistaking a word you utter," he said.

"No, of course not. . . . Only there are times . . . moments . . ."

Her voice died; her clear eyes looked out into space while the silent seconds lengthened into minutes. One slender finger had slipped between her lips and teeth; the burnished strand of hair which Nina dreaded lay neglected against her cheek.

"I should like to know," she began, as though to herself, "something about everything. That being out of the question, I should like to know everything about something. That also being out of the question, for third choice I should like to know something about something. I am not too ambitious, am I?"

Selwyn did not offer to answer.

"*Am* I?" she repeated, looking directly at him.

"I thought you were asking yourself."

"But you need not reply; there is no sense in my question."

She stood up, indifferent, absent-eyed, half turning toward the window; and, raising her hand, she carelessly brought the rebel strand of hair under discipline.

"You *said* you were going to look up Gerald," she observed.

"I am; now. What are you going to do?"

"I? Oh, dress, I suppose. Nina ought to be back now, and she expects me to go out with her."

She nodded a smiling termination of their duet, and moved toward the door. Then, on impulse, she turned, a question on her lips—left unuttered through instinct. It had to do with the identity of the pretty woman who had so directly saluted him in the Park—a perfectly friendly, simple, and natural question. Yet it remained unuttered.

She turned again to the doorway; a maid stood there holding a note on a salver.

"For Captain Selwyn, please," murmured the maid.

Miss Erroll passed out.

Selwyn took the note and broke the seal:

> "MY DEAR SELWYN: I'm in a beastly fix—an I.O.U. due to-night and *pas de quoi*! Obviously I don't want Neergard to know, being associated as I am with him in business. As for Austin, he's a peppery old boy, bless his heart, and I'm not very secure in his good graces at present. Fact is I got into a rather stiff game last

night—and it's a matter of honour. So can you help me to tide it over? I'll square it on the first of the month.

"Yours sincerely,

"GERALD ERROLL.

"P.S.—I've meant to look you up for ever so long, and will the first moment I have free."

Below this was pencilled the amount due; and Selwyn's face grew very serious.

The letter he wrote in return ran:

"DEAR GERALD: Check enclosed to your order. By the way, can't you lunch with me at the Lenox Club some day this week? Write, wire, or telephone when.

"Yours,

"SELWYN."

When he had sent the note away by the messenger he walked back to the bay-window, hands in his pockets, a worried expression in his gray eyes. This sort of thing must not be repeated; the boy must halt in his tracks and face sharply the other way. Besides, his own income was limited—much too limited to admit of many more loans of that sort.

He ought to see Gerald at once, but somehow he could not in decency appear personally on the heels of his loan. A certain interval must elapse between the loan and the lecture; in fact he didn't see very well how he could admonish and instruct until the loan had been cancelled—that is, until the first of the New Year.

Pacing the floor, disturbed, uncertain as to the course he should pursue, he looked up presently to see Miss Erroll descending the stairs, fresh and sweet in her radiant plumage. As she caught his eye she waved a silvery chinchilla muff at him—a marching salute—and passed on, calling back to him: "Don't forget Gerald!"

"No," he said, "I won't forget Gerald." He stood a moment at the window watching the brougham below where Nina awaited Miss Erroll. Then, abruptly, he turned back into the room and picked up the telephone receiver, muttering: "This is no time to mince matters for the sake of appearances." And he called up Gerald at the offices of Neergard & Co.

"Is it you, Gerald?" he asked pleasantly. "It's all right about that matter; I've sent you a note by your messenger. But I want to talk to you about another matter—something concerning myself—I want to ask your advice, in a way. Can you be at the Lenox by six? . . . You have an engagement at eight? Oh, that's all right; I won't keep you. . . . It's understood, then; the Lenox at six. . . . Good-bye."

There was the usual early evening influx of men at the Lenox who dropped in for a glance at the ticker, or for a cocktail or a game of billiards or a bit of gossip before going home to dress.

Selwyn sauntered over to the basket, inspected a yard or two of tape, then strolled toward the window, nodding to Bradley Harmon and Sandon Craig.

As he turned his face to the window and his back to the room, Harmon came up rather effusively, offering an unusually thin flat hand and further hospitality, pleasantly declined by Selwyn.

"Horrible thing, a cocktail," observed Harmon, after giving his own order and seating himself opposite Selwyn. "I don't usually do it. Here comes the man who persuades me!—my own partner—"

Selwyn looked up to see Fane approaching; and instantly a dark flush overspread his face.

"You know George Fane, don't you?" continued Harmon easily; "well, that's odd; I thought, of course—Captain Selwyn, Mr. Fane. It's not usual—but it's done."

They exchanged formalities—dry and brief on Selwyn's part, gracefully urbane on Fane's.

"I've heard so pleasantly of you from Gerald Erroll," he said, "and of course our people have always been on cordial terms. Neither Mrs. Fane nor I was fortunate enough to meet you last Tuesday at the Gerards—such a crush, you know. Are you not joining us, Captain Selwyn?" as the servant appeared to take orders.

Selwyn declined again, glancing at Harmon—a large-framed, bony young man with blond, closely trimmed and pointed beard, and the fair colour of a Swede. He had the high, flat cheek-bones of one, too; and a thicket of corn-tinted hair, which was usually damp at the ends, and curled flat against his forehead. He seemed to be always in a slight perspiration—he had been, anyway, every time Selwyn met him anywhere.

Sandon Craig and Billy Fleetwood came wandering up and joined them; one or two other men, drifting by, adhered to the group.

Selwyn, involved in small talk, glanced sideways at the great clock, and gathered himself together for departure.

Fleetwood was saying to Craig: "Certainly it was a stiff game—Bradley, myself, Gerald Erroll, Mrs. Delmour-Carnes, and the Ruthvens."

"Were you hit?" asked Craig, interested.

"No; about even. Gerald got it good and plenty, though. The Ruthvens were ahead as usual—"

Selwyn, apparently hearing nothing, quietly rose and stepped out of the circle, paused to set fire to a cigarette, and then strolled off toward the visitors' room, where Gerald was now due.

Fane stretched his neck, looking curiously after him. Then he said to Fleetwood: "Why begin to talk about Mrs. Ruthven when our friend yonder is about? Rotten judgment you show, Billy."

"Well, I clean forgot," said Fleetwood; "what did I say, anyway? A man can't always remember who's divorced from who in this town."

Harmon, whose civility to Selwyn had possibly been based on his desire for pleasant relations with Austin Gerard and the Arickaree Loan and Trust Company, looked at Fleetwood thoroughly vexed. But nobody could have suspected vexation in that high-boned smile which showed such very red lips through the blond beard.

Fane, too, smiled; his prominent soft brown eyes expressed gentlest good-humour, and he passed his hand reflectively over his unusually small and retreating chin. Perhaps he was thinking of the meeting in the Park that morning. It was amusing; but men do not speak of such things at their clubs, no matter how amusing. Besides, if the story were aired and were traced to him, Ruthven might turn ugly. There was no counting on Ruthven.

Meanwhile Selwyn, perplexed and worried, found young Erroll just entering the visitors' room, and greeted him with nervous cordiality.

"If you can't stay and dine with me," he said, "I won't put you down. You know, of course, I can only ask you once in a year, so we'll stay here and chat a bit."

"Right you are," said young Erroll, flinging off his very new and very fashionable overcoat—a wonderfully handsome boy, with all the attraction that a quick, warm, impulsive manner carries. "And I say, Selwyn, it was awfully decent of you to—"

"Bosh! Friends are for that sort of thing, Gerald. Sit here—" He looked at the young man hesitatingly; but Gerald calmly took the matter out of his jurisdiction by nodding his order to the club attendant.

"Lord, but I'm tired," he said, sinking back into a big arm-chair; "I was up till daylight, and then I had to be in the office by nine, and to-night Billy Fleetwood is giving—oh, something or other. By the way, the market isn't doing a thing to the shorts! You're not in, are you, Selwyn?"

"No, not that way. I hope you are not, either; are you, Gerald?"

"Oh, it's all right," replied the young fellow confidently; and raising his glass, he nodded at Selwyn with a smile.

"You were mighty nice to me, anyhow," he said, setting his glass aside and lighting a cigar. "You see, I went to a dance, and after a while some of us cleared out, and Jack Ruthven offered us trouble; so half a dozen of us went there. I had the worst cards a man ever drew to a kicker. That was all about it."

The boy was utterly unconscious that he was treading on delicate ground as he rattled on in his warmhearted, frank, and generous way. Totally oblivious that the very name of Ruthven must be unwelcome if not offensive to his listener, he laughed through a description of the affair, its thrilling episodes, and Mrs. Jack Ruthven's blind luck in the draw.

"One moment," interrupted Selwyn, very gently; "do you mind saying whether you banked my check and drew against it?"

"Why, no; I just endorsed it over."

"To—to whom?—if I may venture—"

"Certainly," he said, with a laugh; "to Mrs. Jack—" Then, in a flash, for the first time the boy realised what he was saying, and stopped aghast, scarlet to his hair.

Selwyn's face had little colour remaining in it, but he said very kindly: "It's all right, Gerald; don't worry—"

"I'm a beast!" broke out the boy; "I beg your pardon a thousand times."

"Granted, old chap. But, Gerald, may I say one thing—or perhaps two?"

"Go ahead! Give it to me good and plenty!"

"It's only this: couldn't you and I see one another a little oftener? Don't be afraid of me; I'm no wet blanket. I'm not so very aged, either; I know something of the world—I understand something of men. I'm pretty good company, Gerald. What do you say?"

"I say, *sure*!" cried the boy warmly.

"It's a go, then. And one thing more: couldn't you manage to come up to the house a little oftener? Everybody misses you, of course; I think your sister is a trifle sensitive—"

"I will!" said Gerald, blushing. "Somehow I've had such a lot on hand—all day at the office, and something on every evening. I know perfectly well I've neglected Eily—and everybody. But the first moment I can find free—"

Selwyn nodded. "And last of all," he said, "there's something about my own affairs that I thought you might advise me on."

Gerald, proud, enchanted, stood very straight; the older man continued gravely:

"I've a little capital to invest—not very much. Suppose—and this, I need not add, is in confidence between us—suppose I suggested to Mr. Neergard—"

"Oh," cried young Erroll, delighted, "that is fine! Neergard would be glad enough. Why, we've got that Valleydale tract in shape now, and there are scores of schemes in the air—scores of them—important moves which may mean—anything!" he ended, excitedly.

"Then you think it would be all right—in case Neergard likes the idea?"

Gerald was enthusiastic. After a while they shook hands, it being time to separate. And for a long time Selwyn sat there alone in the visitors' room, absent-eyed, facing the blazing fire of cannel coal.

How to be friends with this boy without openly playing the mentor; how to gain his confidence without appearing to seek it; how to influence him without alarming him! No; there was no great harm in him yet; only the impulse of inconsiderate youth; only an enthusiastic capacity for pleasure.

One thing was imperative—the boy must cut out his card-playing for stakes at once; and there was a way to accomplish that by impressing Gerald with the idea that to do anything behind Neergard's back which he would not care to tell him about was a sort of treachery.

Who were these people, anyway, who would permit a boy of that age, and in a responsible position, to play for such stakes? Who were they to encourage such—?

Selwyn's tightening grasp on his chair suddenly relaxed; he sank back, staring at the brilliant coals. He, too, had forgotten.

Now he remembered, in humiliation unspeakable, in bitterness past all belief.

Time sped, and he sat there, motionless; and gradually the bitterness became less perceptible as he drifted, intent on drifting, back through the exotic sorcery of dead years—back into the sun

again, where honour was bright and life was young—where all the world awaited happy conquest —where there was no curfew in the red evening glow; no end to day, because the golden light had turned to silver; but where the earliest hint of dawn was a challenge, and where every yellow star whispered "Awake!"

And out of the magic *she* had come into his world again!

Sooner or later he would meet her now. That was sure. When? Where? And of what significance was it, after all?

Whom did it concern? Him? Her? And what had he to say to her, after all? Or she to him?

Not one word.

About midnight he roused himself and picked up his hat and coat.

"Do you wish a cab, please?" whispered the club servant who held his coat; "it is snowing very hard, sir."

CHAPTER III
UNDER THE ASHES

He had neither burned nor returned the photograph to Mrs. Ruthven. The prospect perplexed and depressed Selwyn.

He was sullenly aware that in a town where the divorced must ever be reckoned with when dance and dinner lists are made out, there is always some thoughtless hostess—and sometimes a mischievous one; and the chances were that he and Mrs. Jack Ruthven would collide, either through the forgetfulness or malice of somebody or, through sheer hazard, at some large affair where Destiny and Fate work busily together in criminal copartnership.

And he encountered her first at a masque and revel given by Mrs. Delmour-Carnes where Fate contrived that he should dance in the same set with his *ci-devant* wife before the unmasking, and where, unaware, they gaily exchanged salute and hand-clasp before the jolly *mêlée* of unmasking revealed how close together two people could come after parting for ever and a night at the uttermost ends of the earth.

When masks at last were off there was neither necessity nor occasion for the two surprised and rather pallid young people to renew civilities; but later, Destiny, the saturnine partner in the business, interfered; and some fool in the smoking room tried to introduce Selwyn to Ruthven. The slightest mistake on their parts would have rendered the incident ridiculous; and Ruthven made that mistake.

That was Selwyn's first encounter with the Ruthvens. A short time afterward at the opera Gerald dragged him into a parterre to say something amiable to one of the débutante Craig girls—and Selwyn found himself again facing Alixe.

If there was any awkwardness it was not apparent, although they both knew that they were in full view of the house.

A cool bow and its cooler acknowledgment, a formal word and more formal reply; and Selwyn made his way to the corridor, hot with vexation, unaware of where he was going, and oblivious of the distressed and apologetic young man, who so contritely kept step with him through the brilliantly crowded promenade.

That was the second time—not counting distant glimpses in crowded avenues, in the Park, at Sherry's, or across the hazy glitter of thronged theatres. But the third encounter was different.

It was all a mistake, born of the haste of a heedless and elderly matron, celebrated for managing to do the wrong thing, but who had been excessively nice to him that winter, and whose position in Manhattan was not to be assailed.

"Dear Captain Selwyn," she wheezed over the telephone, "I'm short one man; and we dine at eight and it's that now. *Could* you help me? It's the rich and yellow, this time, but you won't mind, will you?"

Selwyn, standing at the lower telephone in the hall, asked her to hold the wire a moment, and glanced up at his sister who was descending the stairs with Eileen, dinner having at that instant been announced.

"Mrs. T. West Minster—flying signals of distress," he said, carefully covering the transmitter as he spoke; "man overboard, and will I kindly take a turn at the wheel?"

"What a shame!" said Eileen; "you are going to spoil the first home dinner we have had together in weeks!"

"Tell her to get some yellow pup!" growled Austin, from above.

"As though anybody could get a yellow pup when they whistle," said Nina hopelessly.

"That's true," nodded Selwyn; "I'm the original old dog Tray. Whistle, and I come padding up. Ever faithful, you see."

And he uncovered the transmitter and explained to Mrs. T. West Minster his absurd delight at being whistled at. Then he sent for a cab and sauntered into the dining-room, where he was received with undisguised hostility.

"She's been civil to me," he said; "*jeunesse oblige*, you know. And that's why I—"

"There'll be a lot of débutantes there! What do you want to go for, you cradle robber!" protested Austin—"a lot of water-bibbing, olive-eating, talcum-powdered débutantes—"

Eileen straightened up stiffly, and Selwyn's teasing smile and his offered hand in adieu completed her indignation.

"Oh, good-bye! No, I won't shake hands. There's your cab, now. I wish you'd take Austin, too; Nina and I are tired of dining with the prematurely aged."

"Indeed, we are," said Mrs. Gerard; "go to your club, Austin, and give me a chance to telephone to somebody under the anesthetic age."

Selwyn departed, laughing, but he yawned in his cab all the way to Fifty-third Street, where he entered in the wake of the usual laggards and, surrendering hat and coat in the cloak room, picked up the small slim envelope bearing his name.

The card within disclosed the information that he was to take in Mrs. Somebody-or-Other; he made his way through a great many people, found his hostess, backed off, stood on one leg for a moment like a reflective water-fowl, then found Mrs. Somebody-or-Other and was absently good to her through a great deal of noise and some Spanish music, which seemed to squirt through a thicket of palms and bespatter everybody.

"Wonderful music," observed his dinner partner, with singular originality; "*so* like Carmen."

"Is it?" he replied, and took her away at a nod from his hostess, whose daughter Dorothy leaned forward from her partner's arm at the same moment, and whispered: "I *must* speak to you, mamma! You *can't* put Captain Selwyn there because—"

But her mother was deaf and smilingly sensitive about it, so she merely guessed what reply her child expected: "It's all settled, dear; Captain Selwyn arrived a moment ago." And she closed the file.

It was already too late, anyhow; and presently, turning to see who was seated on his left, Selwyn found himself gazing into the calm, flushed face of Alixe Ruthven. It was their third encounter.

They exchanged a dazed nod of recognition, a meaningless murmur, and turned again, apparently undisturbed, to their respective dinner partners.

A great many curious eyes, lingering on them, shifted elsewhere, in reluctant disappointment.

As for the hostess, she had, for one instant, come as near to passing heavenward as she could without doing it when she discovered the situation. Then she accepted it with true humour. She could afford to. But her daughters, Sheila and Dorothy, suffered acutely, being of this year's output and martyrs to responsibility.

Meanwhile, Selwyn, grimly aware of an accident somewhere, and perfectly conscious of the feelings which must by this time dominate his hostess, was wondering how best to avoid anything that might resemble a situation.

Instead of two or three dozen small tables, scattered among the palms of the winter garden, their hostess had preferred to construct a great oval board around the aquarium. The arrangement made it a little easier for Selwyn and Mrs. Ruthven. He talked to his dinner partner until she began to respond in monosyllables, which closed each subject that he opened and wearied him as much as he was boring her. But Bradley Harmon, the man on her right, evidently had better fortune; and presently Selwyn found himself with nobody to talk to, which came as near to embarrassing him as anything could, and which so enraged his hostess that she struck his partner's name from her lists for ever. People were already glancing at him askance in sly amusement or cold curiosity.

Then he did a thing which endeared him to Mrs. T. West Minster and to her two disconsolate children.

"Mrs. Ruthven," he said, very naturally and pleasantly, "I think perhaps we had better talk for a moment or two—if you don't mind."

She said quietly, "I don't mind," and turned with charming composure. Every eye shifted to them, then obeyed decency or training; and the slightest break in the gay tumult was closed up with chatter and laughter.

"Plucky," said Sandon Craig to his fair neighbour; "but by what chance did our unfortunate hostess do it?"

"She's usually doing it, isn't she? What occupies me," returned his partner, "is how on earth Alixe could have thrown away that adorable man for Jack Ruthven. Why, he is already trying to scramble into Rosamund Fane's lap—the horrid little poodle!—always curled up on the edge of your skirt!"

She stared at Mrs. Ruthven across the crystal reservoir brimming with rose and ivory-tinted water-lilies.

"That girl is marked for destruction," she said slowly; "the gods have done their work already."

But whatever Alixe had been, whatever she now was, she showed to her little world only a pale brunette symmetry—a strange and changeless lustre, varying as little as the moon's phases; and like that burnt-out planet, reflecting any flame that flared until her clear, young beauty seemed pulsating with the promise of hidden fire.

Selwyn, outwardly amiable and formal, was saying in a low voice: "My dinner partner is quite impossible, you see; and I happen to be here as a filler in—commanded to the presence only a few minutes ago. It's a pardonable error; I bear no malice. But I'm sorry for you."

There was a silence; Alixe straightened her slim figure, and turned; but young Innis, who had taken her in, had become confidential with Mrs. Fane. As for Selwyn's partner, she probably divined his conversational designs on her, but she merely turned her bare shoulder a trifle more unmistakably and continued her gossip with Bradley Harmon.

Alixe broke a tiny morsel from her bread, sensible of the tension.

"I suppose," she said, as though reciting to some new acquaintance an amusing bit of gossip —"that we are destined to this sort of thing occasionally and had better get used to it."

"I suppose so."

"Please," she added, after a pause, "aid me a little."

"I will if I can. What am I to say?"

"Have you nothing to say?" she asked, smiling; "it need not be very civil, you know—as long as nobody hears you."

To school his features for the deception of others, to school his voice and manner and at the same time look smilingly into the grave of his youth and hope called for the sort of self-command foreign to his character. Glancing at him under her smoothly fitted mask of amiability, she slowly grew afraid of the situation—but not of her ability to sustain her own part.

They exchanged a few meaningless phrases, then she resolutely took young Innis away from Rosamund Fane, leaving Selwyn to count the bubbles in his wine-glass.

But in a few moments, whether by accident or deliberate design, Rosamund interfered again, and Mrs. Ruthven was confronted with the choice of a squabble for possession of young Innis, of conspicuous silence, or of resuming once more with Selwyn. And she chose the last resort.

"You are living in town?" she asked pleasantly.

"Yes."

"Of course; I forgot. I met a man last night who said you had entered the firm of Neergard & Co."

"I have. Who was the man?"

"You can never guess, Captain Selwyn."

"I don't want to. Who was he?"

"Please don't terminate so abruptly the few subjects we have in reserve. We may be obliged to talk to each other for a number of minutes if Rosamund doesn't let us alone. . . . The man was 'Boots' Lansing."

"'Boots!' Here!"

"Arrived from Manila Sunday. *Sans gêne* as usual he introduced you as the subject, and told me—oh, dozens of things about you. I suppose he began inquiring for you before he crossed the troopers' gangplank; and somebody sent him to Neergard & Co. Haven't you seen him?"

"No," he said, staring at the brilliant fish, which glided along the crystal tank, goggling their eyes at the lights.

"You—you are living with the Gerards, I believe," she said carelessly.

"For a while."

"Oh, 'Boots' says that he is expecting to take an apartment with you somewhere."

"What! Has 'Boots' resigned?"

"So he says. He told me that you had resigned. I did not understand that; I imagined you were here on leave until I heard about Neergard & Co."

"Do you suppose I could have remained in the service?" he demanded. His voice was dry and almost accentless.

"Why not?" she returned, paling.

"You may answer that question more pleasantly than I can."

She usually avoided champagne; but she had to do something for herself now. As for him, he took what was offered without noticing what he took, and grew whiter and whiter; but a fixed glow gradually appeared and remained on her cheeks; courage, impatience, a sudden anger at the forced conditions steadied her nerves.

"Will you please prove equal to the situation?" she said under her breath, but with a charming smile. "Do you know you are scowling? These people here are ready to laugh; and I'd much prefer that they tear us to rags on suspicion of our over-friendliness."

"Who is that fool woman who is monopolising your partner?"

"Rosamund Fane; she's doing it on purpose. You must try to smile now and then."

"My face is stiff with grinning," he said, "but I'll do what I can for you—"

"Please include yourself, too."

"Oh, I can stand their opinions," he said; "I only meet the yellow sort occasionally; I don't herd with them."

"I do, thank you."

"How do you like them? What is your opinion of the yellow set? Here they sit all about you—the Phoenix Mottlys, Mrs. Delmour-Carnes yonder, the Draymores, the Orchils, the Vendenning lady, the Lawns of Westlawn—" he paused, then deliberately—"and the 'Jack' Ruthvens. I forgot, Alixe, that you are now perfectly equipped to carry aloft the golden hod."

"Go on," she said, drawing a deep breath, but the fixed smile never altered.

"No," he said; "I can't talk. I thought I could, but I can't. Take that boy away from Mrs. Fane as soon as you can."

"I can't yet. You must go on. I ask your aid to carry this thing through. I—I am afraid of their ridicule. Could you try to help me a little?"

"If you put it that way, of course." And, after a silence, "What am I to say? What in God's name shall I say to you, Alixe?"

"Anything bitter—as long as you control your voice and features. Try to smile at me when you speak, Philip."

"All right. I have no reason to be bitter, anyway," he said; "and every reason to be otherwise."

"That is not true. You tell me that I have ruined your career in the army. I did not know I was doing it. Can you believe me?"

And, as he made no response: "I did not dream you would have to resign. Do you believe me?"

"There is no choice," he said coldly. "Drop the subject!"

"That is brutal. I never thought—" She forced a smile and drew her glass toward her. The straw-tinted wine slopped over and frothed on the white skin of her arm.

"Well," she breathed, "this ghastly dinner is nearly ended."

He nodded pleasantly.

"And—Phil?"—a bit tremulous.

"What?"

"Was it all my fault? I mean in the beginning? I've wanted to ask you that—to know your view of it. Was it?"

"No. It was mine, most of it."

"Not all—not half! We did not know how; that is the wretched explanation of it all."

"And we could never have learned; that's the rest of the answer. But the fault is not there."

"I know; 'better to bear the ills we have.'"

"Yes; more respectable to bear them. Let us drop this in decency's name, Alixe!"

After a silence, she began: "One more thing—I must know it; and I am going to ask you—if I may. Shall I?"

He smiled cordially, and she laughed as though confiding a delightful bit of news to him:

"Do you regard me as sufficiently important to dislike me?"

"I do not—dislike you."

"Is it stronger than dislike, Phil?"

"Y-es."

"Contempt?"

"No."

"What is it?"

"It is that—I have not yet—become—reconciled."

"To my—folly?"

"To mine."

She strove to laugh lightly, and failing, raised her glass to her lips again.

"Now you know," he said, pitching his tones still lower. "I am glad after all that we have had this plain understanding. I have never felt unkindly toward you. I can't. What you did I might have prevented had I known enough; but I cannot help it now; nor can you if you would."

"If I would," she repeated gaily—for the people opposite were staring.

"We are done for," he said, nodding carelessly to a servant to refill his glass; "and I abide by conditions because I choose to; not," he added contemptuously, "because a complacent law has tethered you to—to the thing that has crawled up on your knees to have its ears rubbed."

The level insult to her husband stunned her; she sat there, upright, the white smile stamped on her stiffened lips, fingers tightening about the stem of her wine-glass.

He began to toss bread crumbs to the scarlet fish, laughing to himself in an ugly way. "*I* wish to punish you? Why, Alixe, only look at *him*!—Look at his gold wristlets; listen to his simper, his lisp. Little girl—oh, little girl, what have you done to yourself?—for you have done nothing to me, child, that can match it in sheer atrocity!"

Her colour was long in returning.

"Philip," she said unsteadily, "I don't think I can stand this—"

"Yes, you can."

"I am too close to the wall. I—"

"Talk to Scott Innis. Take him away from Rosamund Fane; that will tide you over. Or feed those fool fish; like this! Look how they rush and flap and spatter! That's amusing, isn't it—for people with the intellects of canaries. . . . Will you please try to say something? Mrs. T. West is exhibiting

the restless symptoms of a hen turkey at sundown and we'll all go to roost in another minute. . . . Don't shiver that way!"

"I c-can't control it; I will in a moment. . . . Give me a chance; talk to me, Phil."

"Certainly. The season has been unusually gay and the opera most stupidly brilliant; stocks continue to fluctuate; another old woman was tossed and gored by a mad motor this morning. . . . More time, Alixe? . . . With pleasure; Mrs. Vendenning has bought a third-rate castle in Wales; a man was found dead with a copy of the *Tribune* in his pocket—the verdict being in accordance with fact; the Panama Canal—"

But it was over at last; a flurry of sweeping skirts; ranks of black and white in escort to the passage of the fluttering silken procession.

"Good-bye," she said; "I am not staying for the dance."

"Good-bye," he said pleasantly; "I wish you better fortune for the future. I'm sorry I was rough."

He was not staying, either. A dull excitement possessed him, resembling suspense—as though he were awaiting a dénouement; as though there was yet some crisis to come.

Several men leaned forward to talk to him; he heard without heeding, replied at hazard, lighted his cigar with the others, and leaned back, his coffee before him—a smiling, attractive young fellow, apparently in lazy enjoyment of the time and place and without one care in the world he found so pleasant.

For a while his mind seemed to be absolutely blank; voices were voices only; he saw lights, and figures moving through a void. Then reality took shape sharply; and his pulses began again hammering out the irregular measure of suspense, though what it was that he was awaiting, what expecting, Heaven alone knew.

And after a while he found himself in the ballroom.

The younger set was arriving; he recognised several youthful people, friends of Eileen Erroll; and taking his bearings among these bright, fresh faces—amid this animated throng, constantly increased by the arrival of others, he started to find his hostess, now lost to sight in the breezy circle of silk and lace setting in from the stairs.

He heard names announced which meant nothing to him, which stirred no memory; names which sounded vaguely familiar; names which caused him to turn quickly—but seldom were the faces as familiar as the names.

He said to a girl, behind whose chair he was standing: "All the younger brothers and sisters are coming here to confound me; I hear a Miss Innis announced, but it turns out to be her younger sister—"

"By the way, do you know my name?" she asked.

"No," he said frankly, "do you know mine?"

"Of course, I do; I listened breathlessly when somebody presented you wholesale at your sister's the other day. I'm Rosamund Fane. You might as well be instructed because you're to take me in at the Orchils' next Thursday night, I believe."

"Rosamund Fane," he repeated coolly. "I wonder how we've avoided each other so consistently this winter? I never before had a good view of you, though I heard you talking to young Innis at dinner. And yet," he added, smiling, "if I had been instructed to look around and select somebody named Rosamund, I certainly should have decided on you."

"A compliment?" she asked, raising her delicate eyebrows.

"Ask yourself," he said.

"I do; and I get snubbed."

And, smiling still, he said: "Do you know the most mischievous air that Schubert ever worried us with?"

"'Rosamund,'" she said; "and—thank you, Captain Selwyn." She had coloured to the hair.

"'Rosamund,'" he nodded carelessly—"the most mischievous of melodies—" He stopped short, then coolly resumed: "That mischievous quality is largely a matter of accident, I fancy. Schubert never meant that 'Rosamund' should interfere with anybody's business."

"And—when did you first encounter the malice in 'Rosamund,' Captain Selwyn?" she asked with perfect self-possession.

He did not answer immediately; his smile had died out. Then: "The first time I really understood 'Rosamund' was when I heard Rosamund during a very delightful dinner."

She said: "If a woman keeps at a man long enough she'll extract compliments or yawns." And looking up at a chinless young man who had halted near her: "George, Captain Selwyn has acquired such a charmingly Oriental fluency during his residence in the East that I thought—if you ever desired to travel again—" She shrugged, and, glancing at Selwyn: "Have you met my husband? Oh, of course."

They exchanged a commonplace or two, then other people separated them without resistance on their part. And Selwyn found himself drifting, mildly interested in the vapid exchange of civilities which cost nobody a mental effort.

His sister, he had once thought, was certainly the most delightfully youthful matron in New York. But now he made an exception of Mrs. Fane; Rosamund Fane was much younger—must have been younger, for she still had something of that volatile freshness—that vague atmosphere of immaturity clinging to her like a perfume almost too delicate to detect. And under that the most profound capacity for mischief he had ever known of. Sauntering amiably amid the glittering groups continually forming and disintegrating under the clustered lights, he finally succeeded in reaching his hostess.

And Mrs. T. West Minster disengaged herself from the throng with intention as he approached.

No—and he was so sorry; and it was very amiable of his hostess to want him, but he was not remaining for the dance.

So much for the hostess, who stood there massive and gem-laden, her kindly and painted features tinted now with genuine emotion.

"*Je m'accuse, mon fils*!—but you acted like a perfect dear," she said. "*Mea culpa, mea culpa*; and *can* you forgive a very much mortified old lady who is really and truly fond of you?"

He laughed, holding her fat, ringed hands in both of his with all the attractive deference that explained his popularity. Rising excitement had sent the colour into his face and cleared his pleasant gray eyes; and he looked very young and handsome, his broad shoulders bent a trifle before the enamelled and bejewelled matron.

"Forgive you?" he repeated with a laugh of protest; "on the contrary, I thank you. Mrs. Ruthven is one of the most charming women I know, if that is what you mean?"

Looking after him as he made his way toward the cloak room: "The boy is thoroughbred," she reflected cynically; "and the only amusement anybody can get out of it will be at my expense! Rosamund is a perfect cat!"

He had sent for his cab, which, no doubt, was in line somewhere, wedged among the ranks of carriages stretching east and west along the snowy street; and he stood on the thick crimson carpet under the awning while it was being summoned. A few people like himself were not staying for the dance; others who had dined by prearrangement with other hostesses, had now begun to arrive, and the confusion grew as coach and brougham and motor came swaying up through the falling snow to deposit their jewelled cargoes of silks and laces under the vast awning picketed by policemen and lined with fur-swathed grooms and spindle-legged chauffeurs in coats of pony-skin.

The Cornelius Suydams, emerging from the house, offered Selwyn tonneau room, but he smilingly declined, having a mind for solitude and the Lenox Club. A phalanx of débutantes, opera bound, also left. Then the tide set heavily the other way, and there seemed no end to the line of arriving vehicles and guests, until he heard a name pronounced; a policeman warned back an approaching Fiat; and Selwyn saw Mrs. Ruthven, enveloped in white furs, step from the portal.

She saw him as he moved back, nodded, passed directly to her brougham, and set foot on the step. Pausing here, she looked about her, right and left, then over her shoulder straight back at Selwyn; and as she stood in silence evidently awaiting him, it became impossible for him any longer to misunderstand without a public affront to her.

When he started toward her she spoke to her maid, and the latter moved aside with a word to the groom in waiting.

"My maid will dismiss your carriage," she said pleasantly when he halted beside her. "There is one thing more which I must say to you."

Was this what he had expected hazard might bring to him?—was this the prophecy of his hammering pulses?

"Please hurry before people come out," she added, and entered the brougham.

"I can't do this," he muttered.

"I've sent away my maid," she said. "Nobody has noticed; those are servants out there. Will you please come before anybody arriving or departing does notice?"

And, as he did not move: "Are you going to make me conspicuous by this humiliation before servants?"

He said something between his set teeth and entered the brougham.

"Do you know what you've done?" he demanded harshly.

"Yes; nothing yet. But you would have done enough to stir this borough if you had delayed another second."

"Your maid saw—"

"My maid is *my* maid."

He leaned back in his corner, gray eyes narrowing.

"Naturally," he said, "you are the one to be considered, not the man in the case."

"Thank you. *Are* you the man in the case?"

"There is no case," he said coolly.

"Then why worry about me?"

He folded his arms, sullenly at bay; yet had no premonition of what to expect from her.

"You were very brutal to me," she said at length.

"I know it; and I did not intend to be. The words came."

"You had me at your mercy; and showed me little—a very little at first. Afterward, none."

"The words came," he repeated; "I'm sick with self-contempt, I tell you."

She set her white-gloved elbow on the window sill and rested her chin in her palm.

"That—money," she said with an effort. "You set—some—aside for me."

"Half," he nodded calmly.

"Why?"

He was silent.

"*Why*? I did not ask for it? There was nothing in the—the legal proceedings to lead you to believe that I desired it; was there?"

"No."

"Well, then," her breath came unsteadily, "what was there in *me* to make you think I would accept it?"

He did not reply.

"Answer me. This is the time to answer me."

"The answer is simple enough," he said in a low voice. "Together we had made a failure of partnership. When that partnership was dissolved, there remained the joint capital to be divided. And I divided it. Why not?"

"That capital was yours in the beginning; not mine. What I had of my own you never controlled; and I took it with me when I went."

"It was very little," he said.

"What of that? Did that concern you? Did you think I would have accepted anything from you? A thousand times I have been on the point of notifying you through attorney that the deposit now standing in my name is at your disposal."

"Why didn't you notify me then?" he asked, reddening to the temples.

"Because—I did not wish to hurt you—by doing it that way. . . . And I had not the courage to say it kindly over my own signature. That is why, Captain Selwyn."

And, as he remained silent: "That is what I had to say; not all—because—I wish to—to thank you for offering it. . . . You did not have very much, either; and you divided what you had. So I thank you—and I return it.". . . The tension forced her to attempt a laugh. "So we stand once more on equal terms; unless you have anything of mine to return—"

"I have your photograph," he said.

The silence lasted until he straightened up and, rubbing the fog from the window glass, looked out.

"We are in the Park," he remarked, turning toward her.

"Yes; I did not know how long it might take to explain matters. You are free of me now whenever you wish."

He picked up the telephone, hesitated: "Home?" he inquired with an effort. And at the forgotten word they looked at one another in stricken silence.

"Y-yes; to *your* home first, if you will let me drop you there—"

"Thank you; that might be imprudent."

"No, I think not. You say you are living at the Gerards?"

"Yes, temporarily. But I've already taken another place."

"Where?"

"Oh, it's only a bachelor's kennel—a couple of rooms—"

"Where, please?"

"Near Lexington and Sixty-sixth. I could go there; it's only partly furnished yet—"

"Then tell Hudson to drive there."

"Thank you, but it is not necessary—"

"Please let me; tell Hudson, or I will."

"You are very kind," he said; and gave the order.

Silence grew between them like a wall. She lay back in her corner, swathed to the eyes in her white furs; he in his corner sat upright, arms loosely folded, staring ahead at nothing. After a while he rubbed the moisture from the pane again.

"Still in the Park! He must have driven us nearly to Harlem Mere. It *is* the Mere! See the café lights yonder. It all looks rather gay through the snow."

"Very gay," she said, without moving. And, a moment later: "Will you tell me something? . . . You see"—with a forced laugh—"I can't keep my mind—from it."

"From what?" he asked.

"The—tragedy; ours."

"It has ceased to be that; hasn't it?"

"Has it? You said—you said that w-what I did to you was n-not as terrible as what I d-did to myself."

"That is true," he admitted grimly.

"Well, then, may I ask my question?"

"Ask it, child."

"Then—are you happy?"

He did not answer.

"—Because I desire it, Philip. I want you to be. You will be, won't you? I did not dream that I was ruining your army career when I—went mad—"

"How did it happen, Alixe?" he asked, with a cold curiosity that chilled her. "How did it come about?—wretched as we seemed to be together—unhappy, incapable of understanding each other—"

"Phil! There *were* days—"

He raised his eyes.

"You speak only of the unhappy ones," she said; "but there were moments—"

"Yes; I know it. And so I ask you, *why*?"

"Phil, I don't know. There was that last bitter quarrel—the night you left for Leyte after the dance. . . . I—it all grew suddenly intolerable. *You* seemed so horribly unreal—everything seemed unreal in that ghastly city—you, I, our marriage of crazy impulse—the people, the sunlight, the deathly odours, the torturing, endless creak of the punkha. . . . It was not a question of—of love, of anger, of hate. I tell you I was stunned—I had no emotions concerning you or myself—after that last scene—only a stupefied, blind necessity to get away; a groping instinct to move toward home—to make my way home and be rid for ever of the dream that drugged me! . . . And then—and then—"

"*He* came," said Selwyn very quietly. "Go on."

But she had nothing more to say.

"Alixe!"

She shook her head, closing her eyes.

"Little girl!—oh, little girl!" he said softly, the old familiar phrase finding its own way to his lips—and she trembled slightly; "was there no other way but that? Had marriage made the world such a living hell for you that there was no other way but *that*?"

"Phil, I helped to make it a hell."

"Yes—because I was pitiably inadequate to design anything better for us. I didn't know how. I didn't understand. I, the architect of our future—failed."

"It was worse than that, Phil; we"—she looked blindly at him—"we had yet to learn what love might be. We did not know. . . . If we could have waited—only waited!—perhaps—because there *were* moments—" She flushed crimson.

"I could not make you love me," he repeated; "I did not know how."

"Because you yourself had not learned how. But—at times—now looking back to it—I think—I think we were very near to it—at moments. . . . And then that dreadful dream closed down on us again. . . . And then—the end."

"If you could have held out," he breathed; "if I could have helped! It was I who failed you after all!"

For a long while they sat in silence; Mrs. Ruthven's white furs now covered her face. At last the carriage stopped.

As he sprang to the curb he became aware of another vehicle standing in front of the house—a cab—from which Mrs. Ruthven's maid descended.

"What is she doing here?" he asked, turning in astonishment to Mrs. Ruthven.

"Phil," she said in a low voice, "I knew you had taken this place. Gerald told me. Forgive me—but when I saw you under the awning it came to me in a flash what to do. And I've done it. . . . Are you sorry?"

"No. . . . Did Gerald tell you that I had taken this place?"

"Yes; I asked him."

Selwyn looked at her gravely; and she looked him very steadily in the eyes.

"Before I go—may I say one more word?" he asked gently.

"Yes—if you please. Is it about Gerald?"

"Yes. Don't let him gamble. . . . You saw the signature on that check?"

"Yes, Phil."

"Then you understand. Don't let him do it again."

"No. And—Phil?"

"What?"

"That check is—is deposited to your credit—with the rest. I have never dreamed of using it." Her cheeks were afire again, but with shame this time.

"You will have to accept it, Alixe."

"I cannot."

"You must! Don't you see you will affront Gerald? He has repaid me; that check is not mine, nor is it his."

"I can't take it," she said with a shudder. "What shall I do with it?"

"There are ways—hospitals, if you care to. . . . Good-night, child."

She stretched out her gloved arm to him; he took her hand very gently and retained it while he spoke.

"I wish you happiness," he said; "I ask your forgiveness."

"Give me mine, then."

"Yes—if there is anything to forgive. Good-night."

"Good-night—boy," she gasped.

He turned sharply, quivering under the familiar name. Her maid, standing in the snow, moved forward, and he motioned her to enter the brougham.

"Home," he said unsteadily; and stood there very still for a minute or two, even after the carriage had whirled away into the storm. Then, looking up at the house, he felt for his keys; but a sudden horror of being alone arrested him, and he stepped back, calling out to his cabman, who was already turning his horse's head, "Wait a moment; I think I'll drive back to Mrs. Gerard's. . . . And take your time."

It was still early—lacking a quarter of an hour to midnight—when he arrived. Nina had retired, but Austin sat in the library, obstinately plodding through the last chapters of a brand-new novel.

"This is a wretched excuse for sitting up," he yawned, laying the book flat on the table, but still open. "I ought never to be trusted alone with any book." Then he removed his reading glasses, yawned again, and surveyed Selwyn from head to foot.

"Very pretty," he said. "Well, how are the yellow ones, Phil? Or was it all débutante and slop-twaddle?"

"Few from the cradle, but bunches were arriving for the dance as I left."

"Eileen went at half-past eleven."

"I didn't know she was going," said Selwyn, surprised.

"She didn't want you to. The Playful Kitten business, you know—frisks apropos of nothing to frisk about. But we all fancied you'd stay for the dance." He yawned mightily, and gazed at Selwyn with ruddy gravity.

"Whisk?" he inquired.

"No."

"Cigar?"—mildly urgent.

"No, thanks."

"Bed?"

"I think so. But don't wait for me, Austin. . . . Is that the evening paper? Where is St. Paul?"

Austin passed it across the table and sat for a moment, alternately yawning and skimming the last chapter of his novel.

"Stuff and rubbish, mush and piffle!" he muttered, closing the book and pushing it from him across the table; "love, as usual, grossly out of proportion to the ensemble. That theory of the earth's rotation, you know; all these absurd books are built on it. Why do men read 'em? They grin when

they do it! Love is only the sixth sense—just one-sixth of a man's existence. The other five-sixths of his time he's using his other senses working for a living."

Selwyn looked up over his newspaper, then lowered and folded it.

"In these novels," continued Gerard, irritably, "five-sixths of the pages are devoted to love; everything else is subordinated to it; it controls all motives, it initiates all action, it drugs reason, it prolongs the tuppenny suspense, sustains cheap situations, and produces agonisingly profitable climaxes for the authors. . . . Does it act that way in real life?"

"Not usually," said Selwyn.

"Nobody else thinks so, either. Why doesn't somebody tell the truth? Why doesn't somebody tell us how a man sees a nice girl and gradually begins to tag after her when business hours are over? A respectable man is busy from eight or nine until five or six. In the evening he's usually at the club, or dining out, or asleep; isn't he? Well, then, how much time does it leave for love? Do the problem yourself in any way you wish; the result is a fraction every time; and that fraction represents the proper importance of the love interest in its proper ratio to a man's entire life."

He sat up, greatly pleased with himself at having reduced sentiment to a fixed proportion in the ingredients of life.

"If I had time," he said, "I could tell them how to write a book—" He paused, musing, while the confident smile spread. Selwyn stared at space.

"What does a young man know about love, anyway?" demanded his brother-in-law.

"Nothing," replied Selwyn listlessly.

"Of course not. Look at Gerald. He sits on the stairs with a pink and white ninny; and at the next party he does it with another. That's wholesome and natural; and that's the way things really are. Look at Eileen. Do you suppose she has the slightest suspicion of what love is?"

"Naturally not," said Selwyn.

"Correct. Only a fool novelist would attribute the deeper emotions to a child like that. What does she know about anything? Love isn't a mere emotion, either—that is all fol-de-rol and fizzle!—it's the false basis of modern romance. Love is reason—not a nervous phenomenon. Love is a sane passion, founded on a basic knowledge of good and evil. That's what love is; the rest!"—he lifted the book, waved it contemptuously, and pushed it farther away—"the rest is neuritis; the remedy a pill. I'm going to bed; are you?"

But Selwyn had lighted a cigar, and was again unfolding his evening paper; so his brother-in-law moved ponderously away, yawning frightfully at every heavy stride, and the younger man settled back in his chair, a fragrant cigar balanced between his strong, slim fingers, one leg dropped loosely over the other. After a while the newspaper fell to the floor.

He sat there without moving for a long time; his cigar, burning close, had gone out. The reading-lamp spread a circle of soft light over the floor; on the edge of it lay Kit-Ki, placid, staring at him. After a while he noticed her. "You?" he said absently; "you hid so they couldn't put you out."

At the sound of his voice she began to purr.

"Oh, it's all very well," he nodded; "but it's against the law. However," he added, "I'm rather tired of rules and regulations myself. Besides, the world outside is very cold to-night. Purr away, old lady; I'm going to bed."

But he did not stir.

A little later, the fire having burned low, he rose, laid a pair of heavy logs across the coals, dragged his chair to the hearth, and settled down in it deeply. Then he lifted the cat to his knees. Kit-Ki sang blissfully, spreading and relaxing her claws at intervals as she gazed at the mounting blaze.

"I'm going to bed, Kit-Ki," he repeated absently, "because that's a pretty good place for me . . . far better than sitting up here with you—and conscience."

But he only lay back deeper in the velvet chair and lighted another cigar.

"Kit-Ki," he said, "the words men utter count in the reckoning; but not as heavily as the words men leave unuttered; and what a man does scores deeply; but—alas for the scars of the deeds he has left undone."

The logs were now wrapped in flame, and their low mellow roaring mingled to a monotone with the droning of the cat on his knees.

Long after his cigar burnt bitter, he sat with eyes fixed on the blaze. When the flames at last began to flicker and subside, his lids fluttered, then drooped; but he had lost all reckoning of time when he opened them again to find Miss Erroll in furs and ball-gown kneeling on the hearth and heaping kindling on the coals, and her pretty little Alsatian maid beside her, laying a log across the andirons.

"Upon my word!" he murmured, confused; then rising quickly, "Is that you, Miss Erroll? What time is it?"

"Four o'clock in the morning, Captain Selwyn," she said, straightening up to her full height. "This room is icy; are you frozen?"

Chilled through, he stood looking about in a dazed way, incredulous of the hour and of his own slumber.

"I was conversing with Kit-Ki a moment ago," he protested, in such a tone of deep reproach that Eileen laughed while her maid relieved her of furs and scarf.

"Susanne, just unhook those two that I can't manage; light the fire in my bedroom; *et merci bien, ma petite!*"

The little maid vanished; Kit-Ki, who had been unceremoniously spilled from Selwyn's knees, sat yawning, then rose and walked noiselessly to the hearth.

"I don't know how I happened to do it," he muttered, still abashed by his plight.

"We rekindled the fire for your benefit," she said; "you had better use it before you retire." And she seated herself in the arm-chair, stretching out her ungloved hands to the blaze—smooth, innocent hands, so soft, so amazingly fresh and white.

He moved a step forward into the warmth, stood a moment, then reached forward for a chair and drew it up beside hers.

"Do you mean to say you are not sleepy?" he asked.

"I? No, not in the least. I will be to-morrow, though."

"Did you have a good time?"

"Yes—rather."

"Wasn't it gay?"

"Gay? Oh, very."

Her replies were unusually short—almost preoccupied. She was generally more communicative.

"You danced a lot, I dare say," he ventured.

"Yes—a lot," studying the floor.

"Decent partners?"

"Oh, yes."

"Who was there?"

She looked up at him. "*You* were not there," she said, smiling.

"No; I cut it. But I did not know you were going; you said nothing about it."

"Of course, you would have stayed if you had known, Captain Selwyn?" She was still smiling.

"Of course," he replied.

"Would you really?"

"Why, yes."

There was something not perfectly familiar to him in the girl's bright brevity, in her direct personal inquiry; for between them, hitherto, the gaily impersonal had ruled except in moments of lightest badinage.

"Was it an amusing dinner?" she asked, in her turn.

"Rather." Then he looked up at her, but she had stretched her slim silk-shod feet to the fender, and her head was bent aside, so that he could see only the curve of the cheek and the little close-set ear under its ruddy mass of gold.

"Who was there?" she asked, too, carelessly.

For a moment he did not speak; under his bronzed cheek the flat muscles stirred. Had some meddling, malicious fool ventured to whisper an unfit jest to this young girl? Had a word—or a smile and a phrase cut in two—awakened her to a sorry wisdom at his expense? Something had happened; and the idea stirred him to wrath—as when a child is wantonly frightened or a dumb creature misused.

"What did you ask me?" he inquired gently.

"I asked you who was there, Captain Selwyn."

He recalled some names, and laughingly mentioned his dinner partner's preference for Harmon. She listened absently, her chin nestling in her palm, only the close-set, perfect ear turned toward him.

"Who led the cotillion?" he asked.

"Jack Ruthven—dancing with Rosamund Fane."

She drew her feet from the fender and crossed them, still turned away from him; and so they remained in silence until again she shifted her position, almost impatiently.

"You are very tired," he said.

"No; wide awake."

"Don't you think it best for you to go to bed?"

"No. But you may go."

And, as he did not stir: "I mean that you are not to sit here because I do." And she looked around at him.

"What has gone wrong, Eileen?" he said quietly.

He had never before used her given name, and she flushed up.

"There is nothing the matter, Captain Selwyn. Why do you ask?"

"Yes, there is," he said.

"There is not, I tell you—"

"—And, if it is something you cannot understand," he continued pleasantly, "perhaps it might be well to ask Nina to explain it to you."

"There is nothing to explain."

"—Because," he went on, very gently, "one is sometimes led by malicious suggestion to draw false and unpleasant inferences from harmless facts—"

"Captain Selwyn—"

"Yes, Eileen."

But she could not go on; speech and thought itself remained sealed; only a confused consciousness of being hurt remained—somehow to be remedied by something he might say—might deny. Yet how could it help her for him to deny what she herself refused to believe?—refused through sheer instinct while ignorant of its meaning.

Even if he had done what she heard Rosamund Fane say he had done, it had remained meaningless to her save for the manner of the telling. But now—but now! Why had they laughed—why had their attitudes and manner and the disconnected phrases in French left her flushed and rigid among the idle group at supper? Why had they suddenly seemed to remember her presence—and express their abrupt consciousness of it in such furtive signals and silence?

It was false, anyway—whatever it meant. And, anyway, it was false that he had driven away in Mrs. Ruthven's brougham. But, oh, if he had only stayed—if he had only remained!—this friend of hers who had been so nice to her from the moment he came into her life—so generous, so considerate, so lovely to her—and to Gerald!

For a moment the glow remained, then a chill doubt crept in; would he have remained had he known she was to be there? *Where* did he go after the dinner? As for what they said, it was absurd. And yet—and yet—

He sat, savagely intent upon the waning fire; she turned restlessly again, elbows close together on her knees, face framed in her hands.

"You ask me if I am tired," she said. "I am—of the froth of life."

His face changed instantly. "What?" he exclaimed, laughing.

But she, very young and seriously intent, was now wrestling with the mighty platitudes of youth. First of all she desired to know what meaning life held for humanity. Then she expressed a doubt as to the necessity for human happiness; duty being her discovery as sufficient substitute.

But he heard in her childish babble the minor murmur of an undercurrent quickening for the first time; and he listened patiently and answered gravely, touched by her irremediable loneliness.

For Nina must remain but a substitute at best; what was wanting must remain wanting; and race and blood must interpret for itself the subtler and unasked questions of an innocence slowly awaking to a wisdom which makes us all less wise.

So when she said that she was tired of gaiety, that she would like to study, he said that he would take up anything she chose with her. And when she spoke vaguely of a life devoted to good works—of the wiser charity, of being morally equipped to aid those who required material aid, he was very serious, but ventured to suggest that she dance her first season through as a sort of flesh-mortifying penance preliminary to her spiritual novitiate.

"Yes," she admitted thoughtfully; "you are right. Nina would feel dreadfully if I did not go on—or if she imagined I cared so little for it all. But one season is enough to waste. Don't you think so?"

"Quite enough," he assured her.

"—And—why should I ever marry?" she demanded, lifting her clear, sweet eyes to his.

"Why indeed?" he repeated with conviction. "I can see no reason."

"I am glad you understand me," she said. "I am not a marrying woman."

"Not at all," he assured her.

"No, I am not; and Nina—the darling—doesn't understand. Why, what do you suppose!—but *would* it be a breach of confidence to anybody if I told you?"

"I doubt it," he said; "what is it you have to tell me?"

"Only—it's very, very silly—only several men—and one nice enough to know better—Sudbury Gray—"

"Asked you to marry them?" he finished, nodding his head at the cat.

"Yes," she admitted, frankly astonished; "but how did you know?"

"Inferred it. Go on."

"There is nothing more," she said, without embarrassment. "I told Nina each time; but she confused me by asking for details; and the details were too foolish and too annoying to repeat. . . . I do not wish to marry anybody. I think I made that very plain to—everybody."

"Right as usual," he said cheerfully; "you are too intelligent to consider that sort of thing just now."

"You *do* understand me, don't you?" she said gratefully. "There are so many serious things in life to learn and to think of, and that is the very last thing I should ever consider. . . . I am very, very glad I had this talk with you. Now I am rested and I shall retire for a good long sleep."

With which paradox she stood up, stifling a tiny yawn, and looked smilingly at him, all the old sweet confidence in her eyes. Then, suddenly mocking:

"Who suggested that you call me by my first name?" she asked.

"Some good angel or other. May I?"

"If you please; I rather like it. But I couldn't very well call you anything except 'Captain Selwyn.'"

"On account of my age?"

"Your *age*!"—contemptuous in her confident equality.

"Oh, my wisdom, then? You probably reverence me too deeply."

"Probably not. I don't know; I couldn't do it—somehow—"

"Try it—unless you're afraid."

"I'm not afraid!"

"Yes, you are, if you don't take a dare."

"You dare me?"

"I do."

"Philip," she said, hesitating, adorable in her embarrassment. "No! No! No! I can't do it that way in cold blood. It's got to be 'Captain Selwyn'. . . for a while, anyway. . . . Good-night."

He took her outstretched hand, laughing; the usual little friendly shake followed; then she turned gaily away, leaving him standing before the whitening ashes.

He thought the fire was dead; but when he turned out the lamp an hour later, under the ashes embers glowed in the darkness of the winter morning.

CHAPTER IV
MID-LENT

"Mid-Lent, and the Enemy grins," remarked Selwyn as he started for church with Nina and the children. Austin, knee-deep in a dozen Sunday supplements, refused to stir; poor little Eileen was now convalescent from grippe, but still unsteady on her legs; her maid had taken the grippe, and now moaned all day: "*Mon dieu! Mon dieu! Che fais mourir!*"

Boots Lansing called to see Eileen, but she wouldn't come down, saying her nose was too pink. Drina entertained Boots, and then Selwyn returned and talked army talk with him until tea was served. Drina poured tea very prettily; Nina had driven Austin to vespers. The family dined at seven so Drina could sit up; special treat on account of Boots's presence at table. Gerald was expected, but did not come.

The next morning, Selwyn went downtown at the usual hour and found Gerald, pale and shaky, hanging over his desk and trying to dictate letters to an uncomfortable stenographer.

So he dismissed the abashed girl for the moment, closed the door, and sat down beside the young man.

"Go home, Gerald" he said with decision; "when Neergard comes in I'll tell him you are not well. And, old fellow, don't ever come near the office again when you're in this condition."

"I'm a perfect fool," faltered the boy, his voice trembling; "I don't really care for that sort of thing, either; but you know how it is in that set—"

"What set?"

"Oh, the Fanes—the Ruthv—" He stammered himself into silence.

"I see. What happened last night?"

"The usual; two tables full of it. There was a wheel, too. . . . I had no intention—but you know yourself how it parches your throat—the jollying and laughing and excitement. . . . I forgot all about what you—what we talked over. . . . I'm ashamed and sorry; but I can stay here and attend to things, of course—"

"I don't want Neergard to see you," repeated Selwyn.

"W-why," stammered the boy, "do I look as rocky as that?"

"Yes. See here, you are not afraid of me, are you?"

"No—"

"You don't think I'm one of those long-faced, blue-nosed butters-in, do you? You have confidence in me, haven't you? You know I'm an average and normally sinful man who has made plenty of mistakes and who understands how others make them—you know that, don't you, old chap?"

"Y-es."

"Then you *will* listen, won't you, Gerald?"

The boy laid his arms on the desk and hid his face in them. Then he nodded.

For ten minutes Selwyn talked to him with all the terse and colloquial confidence of a comradeship founded upon respect for mutual fallibility. No instruction, no admonition, no blame, no reproach—only an affectionately logical review of matters as they stood—and as they threatened to stand.

The boy, fortunately, was still pliable and susceptible, still unalarmed and frank. It seemed that he had lost money again—this time to Jack Ruthven; and Selwyn's teeth remained sternly interlocked as, bit by bit, the story came out. But in the telling the boy was not quite as frank as he might have been; and Selwyn supposed he was able to stand his loss without seeking aid.

"Anyway," said Gerald in a muffled voice, "I've learned one lesson—that a business man can't acquire the habits and keep the infernal hours that suit people who can take all day to sleep it off."

"Right," said Selwyn.

"Besides, my income can't stand it," added Gerald naïvely.

"Neither could mine, old fellow. And, Gerald, cut out this card business; it's the final refuge of the feebleminded. . . . You like it? Oh, well, if you've got to play—if you've no better resource for leisure, and if non-participation isolates you too completely from other idiots—play the imbecile gentleman's game; which means a game where nobody need worry over the stakes."

"But—they'd laugh at me!"

"I know; but Boots Lansing wouldn't—and you have considerable respect for him."

Gerald nodded; he had immediately succumbed to Lansing like everybody else.

"And one thing more," said Selwyn; "don't play for stakes—no matter how insignificant—where women sit in the game. Fashionable or not, it is rotten sport—whatever the ethics may be. And, Gerald, tainted sport and a clean record can't take the same fence together."

The boy looked up, flushed and perplexed. "Why, every woman in town—"

"Oh, no. How about your sister and mine?"

"Of course not; they are different. Only—well, you approve of Rosamund Fane and—Gladys Orchil—don't you?"

"Gerald, men don't ask each other such questions—except as you ask, without expecting or desiring an answer from me, and merely to be saying something nice about two pretty women."

The reproof went home, deeply, but without a pang; and the boy sat silent, studying the blotter between his elbows.

A little later he started for home at Selwyn's advice. But the memory of his card losses frightened him, and he stopped on the way to see what money Austin would advance him.

Julius Neergard came up from Long Island, arriving at the office about noon. The weather was evidently cold on Long Island; he had the complexion of a raw ham, but the thick, fat hand, with its bitten nails, which he offered Selwyn as he entered his office, was unpleasantly hot, and, on the thin nose which split the broad expanse of face, a bead or two of sweat usually glistened, winter and summer.

"Where's Gerald?" he asked as an office-boy relieved him of his heavy box coat and brought his mail to him.

"I advised Gerald to go home," observed Selwyn carelessly; "he is not perfectly well."

Neergard's tiny mouse-like eyes, set close together, stole brightly in Selwyn's direction; but they usually looked just a little past a man, seldom at him.

"Grippe?" he asked.

"I don't think so," said Selwyn.

"Lots of grippe 'round town," observed Neergard, as though satisfied that Gerald had it. Then he sat down and rubbed his large, membranous ears.

"Captain Selwyn," he began, "I'm satisfied that it's a devilish good thing."

"Are you?"

"Emphatically. I've mastered the details—virtually all of 'em. Here's the situation in a grain of wheat!—the Siowitha Club owns a thousand or so acres of oak scrub, pine scrub, sand and weeds, and controls four thousand more; that is to say—the club pays the farmers' rents and fixes their fences and awards them odd jobs and prizes for the farm sustaining the biggest number of bevies. Also the club pays them to maintain the millet and buckwheat patches and to act as wardens. In return the farmers post their four thousand acres for the exclusive benefit of the club. Is that plain?"

"Perfectly."

"Very well, then. Now the Siowitha is largely composed of very rich men—among them Bradley Harmon, Jack Ruthven, George Fane, Sanxon Orchil, the Hon. Delmour-Carnes—*that* crowd—rich and stingy. That's why they are contented with a yearly agreement with the farmers instead of buying the four thousand acres. Why put a lot of good money out of commission when they can draw interest

on it and toss an insignificant fraction of that interest as a sop to the farmers? Do you see? That's your millionaire method—and it's what makes 'em in the first place."

He drew a large fancy handkerchief from his pistol-pocket and wiped the beads from the bridge of his limber nose. But they reappeared again.

"Now," he said, "I am satisfied that, working very carefully, we can secure options on every acre of the four thousand. There is money in it either way and any way we work it; we get it coming and going. First of all, if the Siowitha people find that they really cannot get on without controlling these acres—why"—and he snickered so that his nose curved into a thin, ruddy beak—"why, Captain, I suppose we *could* let them have the land. Eh? Oh, yes—if they *must* have it!"

Selwyn frowned slightly.

"But the point is," continued Neergard, "that it borders the railroad on the north; and where the land is not wavy it's flat as a pancake, and"—he sank his husky voice—"it's fairly riddled with water. I paid a thousand dollars for six tests."

"Water!" repeated Selwyn wonderingly; "why, it's dry as a desert!"

"*Underground water*!—only about forty feet on the average. Why, man, I can hit a well flowing three thousand gallons almost anywhere. It's a gold mine. I don't care what you do with the acreage—split it up into lots and advertise, or club the Siowitha people into submission—it's all the same; it's a gold mine—to be swiped and developed. Now there remains the title searching and the damnable job of financing it—because we've got to move cautiously, and knock softly at the doors of the money vaults, or we'll be waking up some Wall Street relatives or secret business associates of the yellow crowd; and if anybody bawls for help we'll be up in the air next New Year's, and still hiking skyward."

He stood up, gathering together the mail matter which his secretary had already opened for his attention. "There's plenty of time yet; their leases were renewed the first of this year, and they'll run the year out. But it's something to think about. Will you talk to Gerald, or shall I?"

"You," said Selwyn. "I'll think the matter over and give you my opinion. May I speak to my brother-in-law about it?"

Neergard turned in his tracks and looked almost at him.

"Do you think there's any chance of his financing the thing?"

"I haven't the slightest idea of what he might do. Especially"—he hesitated—"as you never have had any loans from his people—I understand—"

"No," said Neergard; "I haven't."

"It's rather out of their usual, I believe—"

"So they say. But Long Island acreage needn't beg favours now. That's all over, Captain Selwyn. Fane, Harmon & Co. know that; Mr. Gerard ought to know it, too."

Selwyn looked troubled. "Shall I consult Mr. Gerard?" he repeated. "I should like to if you have no objection."

Neergard's small, close-set eyes were focused on a spot just beyond Selwyn's left shoulder.

"Suppose you sound him," he suggested, "in strictest—"

"Naturally," cut in Selwyn dryly; and turning to his littered desk, opened the first letter his hand encountered. Now that his head was turned, Neergard looked full at the back of his neck for a long minute, then went out silently.

That night Selwyn stopped at his sister's house before going to his own rooms, and, finding Austin alone in the library, laid the matter before him exactly as Neergard had put it.

"You see," he added, "that I'm a sort of an ass about business methods. What I like—what I understand, is to use good judgment, go in and boldly buy a piece of property, wait until it becomes more valuable, either through improvements or the natural enhancement of good value, then take a legitimate profit, and repeat the process. That, in outline, is what I understand. But, Austin, this furtive pouncing on a thing and clubbing other people's money out of them with it—this slyly acquiring land that is necessary to an unsuspecting neighbour and then holding him up—I don't like. There's always

something of this sort that prevents my cordial co-operation with Neergard—always something in the schemes which hints of—of squeezing—of something underground—"

"Like the water which he's going to squeeze out of the wells?"

Selwyn laughed.

"Phil," said his brother-in-law, "if you think anybody can do a profitable business except at other people's expense, you are an ass."

"Am I?" asked Selwyn, still laughing frankly.

"Certainly. The land is there, plain enough for anybody to see. It's always been there; it's likely to remain for a few æons, I fancy.

"Now, along comes Meynheer Julius Neergard—the only man who seems to have brains enough to see the present value of that parcel to the Siowitha people. Everybody else had the same chance; nobody except Neergard knew enough to take it. Why shouldn't he profit by it?"

"Yes—but if he'd be satisfied to cut it up into lots and do what is fair—"

"Cut it up into nothing! Man alive, do you suppose the Siowitha people would let him? They've only a few thousand acres; they've *got* to control that land. What good is their club without it? Do you imagine they'd let a town grow up on three sides of their precious game-preserve? And, besides, I'll bet you that half of their streams and lakes take rise on other people's property—and that Neergard knows it—the Dutch fox!"

"That sort of—of business—that kind of coercion, does not appeal to me," said Selwyn gravely.

"Then you'd better go into something besides business in this town," observed Austin, turning red. "Good Lord, man, where would my Loan and Trust Company be if we never foreclosed, never swallowed a good thing when we see it?"

"But you don't threaten people."

Austin turned redder. "If people or corporations stand in our way and block progress, of course we threaten. Threaten? Isn't the threat of punishment the very basis of law and order itself? What are laws for? And we have laws, too—laws, under the law—"

"Of the State of New Jersey," said Selwyn, laughing. "Don't flare up, Austin; I'm probably not cut out for a business career, as you point out—otherwise I would not have consulted you. I know some laws—including 'The Survival of the Fittest,' and the 'Chain-of-Destruction'; and I have read the poem beginning

"'Big bugs have little bugs to bite 'em.'

"That's all right, too; but speaking of laws, I'm always trying to formulate one for my particular self-government; and you don't mind, do you?"

"No," said Gerard, much amused, "I don't mind. Only when you talk ethics—talk sense at the same time."

"I wish I knew how," he said.

They discussed Neergard's scheme for a little while longer; Austin, shrewd and cautious, declined any personal part in the financing of the deal, although he admitted the probability of prospective profits.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.