

Chambers Robert William

The Adventures of a Modest Man



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Robert W. Chambers

The Adventures of a Modest Man

TO

Mr. and Mrs. C. Wheaton Vaughan

This volume packed with bric-à-brac
I offer you with my affection, —
The story halts, the rhymes are slack —
Poor stuff to add to your collection.
Gems you possess from ages back:
It is the modern junk you lack.

We three once moused through marble halls,
Immersed in Art and deep dejection,
Mid golden thrones and choir-stalls
And gems beyond my recollection —
Yet soft! – my memory recalls
Red labels pasted on the walls!

And so, perhaps, *my* bric-à-brac
May pass the test of your inspection;
Perhaps you will not send it back,
But place it – if you've no objection —
Under some nick-nack laden rack
Where platters dangle on a tack.

So if you'll take this book from me
And hide it in your cupboards laden
Beside some Dresden filigree
And frivolously fetching maiden —
Who knows? – that Dresden maid may see
My book – and read it through pardie!

R. W. C.

AN INADVERTENT POEM

There is a little flow-urr
In our yard it does grow
Where many a happy hou-urr
I watch our rooster crow;
While clothes hang on the clothes-line
And plowing has began
– And the name they call this lit-tul vine
Is just "Old Man."

Old Man, Old Man
A-growing in our yard,
Every spring a-coming up
While yet the ground is har-rrd;
Pottering 'round the chickens' pan,
Creeping low and slow,
And why they call it Old Man
I never asked to know.
I never want to know.

Crawling through the chick-weed,
Dragging through the quack,
Pussly, tansy, tick-weed
Almost break his back.
Catnip, cockle, dock prevent
His travelling all they can,
But still he goes the ways he's went,
Poor Old Man!

Old Man, Old Man,
What's the use of you?
No one wants to see you, like
As if you hadn't grew.
You ain't no good to nothing
So far as I can see,
Unless some maiden fair will sing
These lines I've wrote to thee.
And sing 'em soft to me.

Some maiden fa-hair
With { ra-haven } hair
{ go-holden }
Will si-hing this so-hong
To me-hee-ee!

CHAPTER I

CONCERNING TWO GENTLEMEN FROM LONG ISLAND, DESTINY, AND A POT OF BLACK PAINT

"Hello, old man!" he began.

"Gillian," I said, "don't call me 'Old Man.' At twenty, it flattered me; at thirty, it was all right; at forty, I suspected *double entendre*; and now I don't like it."

"Of course, if you feel that way," he protested, smiling.

"Well, I do, dammit!" – the last a German phrase. I am rather strong on languages.

Now another thing that is irritating – I've got ahead of my story, partly, perhaps, because I hesitate to come to the point.

For I have a certain delicacy in admitting that my second visit abroad, after twenty years, was due to a pig. So now that the secret is out – the pig also – I'll begin properly.

I purchased the porker at a Long Island cattle show; why, I don't know, except that my neighbor, Gillian Schuyler Van Dieman, put me up to it.

We are an inoffensive community maintaining a hunt club and the traditions of a by-gone generation. To the latter our children refuse to subscribe.

Our houses are what are popularly known as "fine old Colonial mansions." They were built recently. So was the pig. You see, I can never get away from that pig, although – but the paradox might injure the story. It has sufficiently injured me – the pig and the story, both.

The architecture of the pig was a kind of degenerate Chippendale, modified by Louis XVI and traces of Bavarian baroque. And his squeal resembled the atmospheric preliminaries for a Texas norther.

Van Dieman said I ought to buy him. I bought him. My men built him a chaste bower to leeward of an edifice dedicated to cows.

Here I sometimes came to contemplate him while my horse was being saddled.

That particular morning, when Van Dieman saluted me so suspiciously at the country club, I had been gazing at the pig.

And now, as we settled down to our morning game of chess, I said:

"Van, that pig of mine seems to be in nowise remarkable. Why the devil do you suppose I bought him?"

"How do I know?"

"You ought to. You suggested that I buy him. Why did you?"

"To see whether you would."

I said rather warmly: "Did you think me weak-minded enough to do whatever you suggested?"

"The fact remains that you did," he said calmly, pushing the king's knight to queen's bishop six.

"Did what?" I snapped.

"What you didn't really want to do."

"Buy the pig?"

"Exactly."

I thought a moment, took a pawn with satisfaction, considered.

"Van," I said, "why do you suppose I bought that pig?"

"*Ennui*."

"A man doesn't buy pigs to escape from *ennui*!"

"You can't predict what a man will do to escape it," he said, smiling. "The trouble with you is that you're been here too long; you're in a rut; you're gone stale. Year in, year out, you do the same things in the same way, rise at the same time, retire at the same hour, see the same people, drive,

motor, ride, potter about your lawns and gardens, come here to the club – and it's enough to petrify anybody's intellect."

"Do you mean to say that *mine*– "

"Partly. Don't get mad. No man who lives year after year in a Long Island community could escape it. What you need is to go abroad. What you require is a good dose of Paris."

"For twenty odd years I have avoided Paris," I said, restlessly. "Why should I go back there?"

"Haven't you been there in twenty years?"

"No."

"Why?"

"Well, for one thing, to avoid meeting the entire United States."

"All right," said Van Dieman, "if you want to become an old uncle foozle, continue to take root in Long Island." He announced mate in two moves. After I had silently conceded it, he leaned back in his chair and lighted a cigarette.

"It's my opinion," he said, "that you've already gone too stale to take care of your own pig."

Even years of intimacy scarcely justified this.

"When the day comes," said I, "that I find myself no longer competent to look after my own affairs, I'll take your advice and get out of Long Island."

He looked up with a smile. "Suppose somebody stole that pig, for instance."

"They couldn't."

"Suppose they did, under your very nose."

"If anything happens to that pig," I said – "anything untoward, due to any negligence or stupidity of mine, I'll admit that I need waking up... Now get that pig if you can!"

"Will you promise to go to Paris for a jolly little jaunt if anything does happen to your pig?" he asked.

"Why the devil do *you* want *me* to go to Paris?"

"Do you good, intellectually."

Then I got mad.

"Van," I said, "if anybody can get that pig away from me, I'll do anything you suggest for the next six months."

"*À nous deux, alors!*" he said. He speaks French too fast for me to translate. It's a foolish way to talk a foreign language. But he has never yet been able to put it over me.

"*À la guerre comme à la guerre,*" I replied carelessly. It's a phrase one can use in reply to any remark that was ever uttered in French. I use it constantly.

That afternoon I went and took a good look at my pig. Later, as I was walking on the main street of Oyster Bay, a man touched his hat and asked me for a job. Instantly it occurred to me to hire him as night watchman for the pig. He had excellent references, and his countenance expressed a capacity for honest and faithful service. That night before I went to bed, I walked around to the sty. My man was there on duty.

"That," thought I, "will hold Van Dieman for a while."

When my daughters had retired and all the servants were abed, I did a thing I have not done in years – not since I was a freshman at Harvard: I sat up with my pipe and an unexpurgated translation of Henry James until nearly eleven o'clock. However, by midnight I was asleep.

It was full starlight when I awoke and jumped softly out of bed. Somebody was tapping at the front door. I put on a dressing-gown and slippers and waited; but no servants were aroused by the persistent rapping.

After a moment I went to the window, raised it gently and looked out. A farmer with a lantern stood below.

"Say, squire," he said, when he beheld my head, "I guess I'll have to ask for help. I'm on my way to market and my pig broke loose and I can't ketch him nohow."

"Hush!" I whispered; "I'll come down."

Very cautiously I unbarred the front door and stepped out into the lovely April starlight. In the road beyond my hedge stood a farm-wagon containing an empty crate. Near it moved the farmer, and just beyond his outstretched hands sported a playful pig. He was a black pig. Mine was white. Besides I went around to the pen and saw, in the darkness, my Oyster Bay retainer still on guard. So, it being a genuine case, I returned to the road.

The farmer's dilemma touched me. What in the world was so utterly hopeless to pursue, unaided, as a coy pig at midnight.

"If you will just stand there, squire, and sorter spread out your skirts, I'll git him in a jiffy," said the panting farmer.

I did as I was bidden. The farmer approached; the pig pranced between his legs.

"By gum!" exclaimed the protected of Ceres.

But, after half an hour, the pig became over-confident, and the tiller of phosphites seized him and bore him, shrieking, to the wooden crate in the wagon, there depositing him, fastening the door, and climbing into his seat with warm thanks to me for my aid.

I told the Brother to the Ox that he was welcome. Then, with heart serenely warmed by brotherly love and a knowledge of my own condescension, I retired to sleep soundly until Higgins came to shave me at eight o'clock next morning.

"Beg pardon, sir," said Higgins, stirring his lather as I returned from the bath to submit my chin to his razor – "beg pardon, sir, but – but the pig, sir – "

"What pig?" I asked sharply. Had Higgins beheld me pursuing that midnight porker? And if he had, was he going to tell about it?

"What pig, sir? Why, the pig, sir."

"I do not understand you, Higgins," I said coldly.

"Beg pardon, sir, but Miss Alida asked me to tell you, that the pig – "

"What pig?" I repeated exasperated.

"Why – why – ours, sir."

I turned to stare at him. "My pig?" I asked.

"Yes, sir – he's gone, sir – "

"Gone!" I thundered.

"Stolen, sir, out o' the pen last night."

Stunned, I could only stare at Higgins. Stolen? My pig? Last night?

"Some one," said Higgins, "went and opened that lovely fancy sty, sir; and the pig he bolted. It takes a handy thief to stop and steal a pig, sir. There must ha' been two on 'em to catch that pig!"

"Where's that miserable ruffian I hired to watch the sty?" I demanded hotly.

"He has gone back to work for Mr. Van Dieman, sir. His hands was all over black paint, and I see him a-wipin' of 'em onto your white picket fence."

The calmness of despair came over me. I saw it, now. I had been called out of bed to help catch my own pig. For nearly half an hour I had dodged about there in front of my own house, too stupid to suspect, too stupid even to recognize my own pig in the disguised and capricious porker shying and caracoling about in the moonlight. Good heavens! Van Dieman was right. A man who helps to steal his own pig is fit for nothing but Paris or a sanitarium.

"Shave me speedily, Higgins," I said. "I am not very well, and it is difficult for me to preserve sufficient composure to sit still. And, Higgins, it is not at all necessary for you to refer to that pig hereafter. You understand? Very well. Go to the telephone and call up the Cunard office."

Presently I was in communication with Bowling Green.

That morning in the breakfast-room, when I had kissed my daughter Alida, aged eighteen, and my daughter Dulcima, aged nineteen, the younger said: "Papa, do you know that our pig has been stolen?"

"Alida," I replied, "I myself disposed of him" – which was the dreadful truth.

"You sold him?" asked Dulcima in surprise.

"N – not exactly. These grape-fruit are too sour!"

"You gave him away?" inquired Alida.

"Yes – after a fashion. Is this the same coffee we have been using? It has a peculiar – "

"Who did you give him to?" persisted my younger child.

"A – man."

"What man?"

"Nobody you know, child."

"But – "

"Stop!" said I firmly. "It is a subject too complicated to discuss."

"Oh, pooh!" said Dulcima; "everybody discusses everything in Oyster Bay. And besides I want to know – "

"About the pig!" broke in Alida.

"And that man to whom you gave the pig – "

"Alida," said I, with misleading mildness, "how would you like to go to Paris?"

"Oh! papa – "

"And you, Dulcima?"

"Darling papa!"

"When?" cried Alida.

"Wednesday," I replied with false urbanity.

"Oh! The darling!" they cried in rapture, and made toward me.

"Wait!" I said with a hideous smile. "We have not yet left Sandy Hook! And I solemnly promise you both that if either of you ever again ask me one question concerning that pig – nay, if you so much as look askance at me over the breakfast bacon – neither you nor I will ever leave Sandy Hook alive!"

They have kept their promises – or I should never have trodden the deck of the *S. S. Cambodia*, the pride of the great Cunard Line, with my daughter Dulcima on one side and my daughter Alida on the other side of me, and my old friend Van Dieman waving me adieu from a crowded pier, where hundreds of handkerchiefs flutter in the breeze.

"*Au revoir et bon voyage!*" he called up to me.

"*Toujours la politesse,*" I muttered, nodding sagely.

"That was a funny reply to make, papa," said Dulcima.

"Not at all," I replied, with animation; "to know a language is to know when to use its idioms." They both looked a little blank, but continued to wave their handkerchiefs.

"*À bien-tôt!*" called Alida softly, as the towering black sides of the steamer slipped along the wooden wharf.

Van Dieman raised his hat on the pier below, and answered: "*À bien-tôt? C'est la mort, jusqu'à bien-tôt! Donc, vive la vie, Mademoiselle!*"

"There is no necessity in chattering like a Frenchman when you talk French," I observed to Alida. "Could you make out what Van Dieman said to you?"

"Y – yes," she admitted, with a slight blush.

I glanced at Dulcima. There was a mischievous light in her blue eyes.

"Pooh!" I thought; "Van Dieman is forty if he's a day."

While the ship slid on past Castle William and poked her nose toward the forts at the Narrows, I watched the distant pier which we had left. It was still black with people, moving like ants. And, as I looked, I muttered ever: "Pooh! Van Dieman's forty. There's nothing in it, nothing in it, nothing whatever."

Off Fort Hamilton I noticed that Alida had a tear in one of her brown eyes. "There's nothing in it," I repeated obstinately.

Off Sandy Hook we ran into a sea-storm. In a few minutes many of the passengers went below; in a few more minutes the remainder of the passengers went below; and I was on the way below with my daughter Alida on one arm and my daughter Dulcima on the other.

"There is nothing in it," I reflected, as the ship shuddered, pitched, and we involuntarily began running down a toboggan slide, taking little timorous steps. Then the deck flew up and caught the soles of our shoes before we were ready to put our feet down. "Alida," I said, "do you feel bored?"

There was no mistaking the tears in her eyes now. "There's nothing in it. There's nothing in anything," I muttered faintly. And I was right as far as it concerned the passengers on the pitching *Cambodia*.

CHAPTER II

A CHAPTER DEPICTING A RATHER GARRULOUS REUNION

The second day we ran out of the storm. I remember on that day that I wore a rather doggy suit of gray – a trifle too doggy for a man of my years. In my button-hole reposed a white carnation, and as I strolled into the smoking-room I was humming under my breath an air from "Miss Helyet" – a thing I had not thought of in twenty years.

"Well, upon my word!" exclaimed a man who looked up from his novel as I entered the doorway. "Gad! You haven't changed in twenty years! – except that your moustache is – "

"Sure! And my temples, Williams! Besides, I have two grown-up daughters aboard! How are you, anyway, you Latin Quarter come-back?"

We settled ourselves, hands still warmly clasped.

"You're not going back to Paris?" I asked.

"Why, man, I live there."

"By George, so you do! I forgot."

There was a silence – that smiling, retrospective silence which ends inevitably in a sigh not entirely painful.

"Are any of the old men left there?" I asked.

"Some."

"I – I suppose the city has changed a lot. Men who've been over since, say so."

"It hasn't changed, radically."

"Hasn't it, Williams?" I asked wistfully.

"No. The old café is exactly the same. The Luxembourg Quarter will seem familiar to you – "

"I'm not going there," I said hastily.

He smiled; I could see him doing it, askance. But my features remained dignified and my attitude detached.

"I wonder," I began carelessly, "whether – "

"She got married," he said casually; "I'm glad. She was a sweet little thing."

"She was exceedingly charming," I said, selecting a cigar. "And the other?"

"Which?"

"I forget her name."

"Oh, you mean Delancy's?"

"Yes."

"I don't know whatever became of her," he said.

"Whatever became of Delancy?"

"Oh, he did what we all usually do – he came back, married, and spent the better part of his life in trying to keep his daughter from marrying that young Harroll."

"Sir Peter's son?"

"Yes. I was a guest at the Delancy's at the time, and I nearly died. Harroll confided in me, Catharine Delancy confided in me, John Delancy told me his woes. It's an amusing story. Do you want to hear it?"

"Go ahead," I said. "My sympathies are already with Delancy. I've a pair of daughters myself, and I'm trying to shoo away every sort of man and keep 'em for myself a little longer."

Williams smiled:

"Well, you listen to what those two did to John Delancy. It was some."

I lit my cigar; he lit his; and I settled back, looking at him attentively as he began with a wave of his gloved hand, a story of peculiar interest to a man with two unusually attractive daughters:

Now, although Harroll had been refused a dozen times – not by Miss Delancy, but by her father – the young man's naturally optimistic spirits suffered only temporary depression; and a few evenings later he asked for her again, making it a bakers' dozen – an uncanny record.

"No," said Mr. Delancy.

"Won't you let me have her when I become tenth vice-president of the Half-Moon Title Guarantee and Trust – "

"No, I won't."

"When will you let me try for her?"

There was no reply.

"Well, sir," said the young man cheerfully, "there must be some way, of course."

"Really, Jim, I don't see what way," said Mr. Delancy, without emotion. "I don't want you for a son-in-law, and I'm not going to have you. That's one of the reasons I allow you the run of the house. My daughter sees too much of you to care for you. It's a theory of my own, and a good one, too."

"Why don't you want me for a son-in-law?" asked the young man, for the hundredth time.

"Can you give me one single reason why I should want you?" asked Mr. Delancy wearily.

Harroll stood buried in meditation for a few moments. "No," he said, "I can't recall any important reasons at the moment."

"I can supply you with one – your sense of honor – but it doesn't count in this case, because you wouldn't be in my house if you didn't have any."

Harroll looked at the fire.

"I've told you a hundred times that when my little girl marries, she marries one of her own kind. I don't like Englishmen. And that is all there is to it, Jim."

"Don't you like me?"

"I'm not infatuated with you."

"Well," said Harroll, slowly pacing the rug in front of the fire, "it's curious, isn't it? – but, do you know, I think that I am going to marry Catharine one of these days?"

"Oh, I think not," replied Mr. Delancy amiably. "And perhaps this is a good opportunity to say good-by for a while. You know we go to Palm Beach to-morrow?"

"Catharine told me," said the young man, placidly. "So I've wired for quarters at The Breakers – for two weeks."

The two men smiled at one another.

"You take your vacation late," said Mr. Delancy.

"Not too late, I trust."

"You think you can afford Palm Beach, Jim?"

"No; but I'm going."

Mr. Delancy rose and stood thoughtfully twirling his monocle by the string. Then he threw away his cigar, concealed a yawn, and glanced gravely at the clock on the mantel.

"May I go in and say good-night to Catharine, sir?" asked young Harroll.

Mr. Delancy looked bored, but nodded civilly enough.

"And, Jim," he drawled, as the young man started toward the drawing-room, "I wouldn't go to Palm Beach if I were you."

"Yes, you would, sir – if you were I."

"Young man," said Mr. Delancy, mildly, "I'm damned if I have you for a son-in-law! Good-night."

They shook hands. Harroll walked into the drawing-room and found it empty. The music-room, however, was lighted, and Catharine Delancy sat tucked up in a deep window-seat, studying a map of southern Florida and feeding bonbons to an enormous white Persian cat.

"Jim," she said, raising her dark eyes as he sauntered up, "you and father have lately fallen into the disreputable habit of sitting behind closed doors and gossiping. You have done it thirteen times in three months. Don't be such pigs; scandal, like other pleasures, was meant to be shared."

At a gesture of invitation he seated himself beside her and lifted the Persian pussy to his lap.

"Well," she inquired, "are you really going with us?"

"I can't go when you do, but I'm going to The Breakers for a week or two – solely to keep an eye on your behavior."

"That is jolly!" she said, flushing with pleasure. "Was father pleased when you told him?"

"He didn't say he was pleased."

"He is always reticent," she said, quickly. "But won't it be too jolly for words! We'll travel miles and miles together in bicycle-chairs, and we'll yacht and bathe and ride and golf, and catch amber-jack and sharks, and – you'll persuade father to let me gamble just once at the club – won't you?"

"Not much! Where did you hear that sort of talk, Catharine?"

"Don't tweak Omar's tail and I'll tell you – there! you've done it again, and I won't tell you."

He fell to stroking the cat's fur, gazing the while into space with an absent eye that piqued her curiosity. For a year now he had acquired that trick of suddenly detaching himself from earth and gazing speculatively toward heaven, lost in a reverie far from flattering to the ignored onlooker. And now he was doing it again under her very nose. What was he thinking about? He seemed, all at once, a thousand miles removed from her. Where were his thoughts?

Touched in her *amour propre*, she quietly resumed the map of southern Florida; but even the rustle of the paper did not disturb his self-centred and provoking meditation.

She looked at him, looked at the map, considered him again, and finally watched him.

Suddenly, for the first time in her life, she thought him dangerously attractive. Surprised and interested, she regarded him in this new light, impersonally for the moment. So far away had he apparently drifted in his meditation that it seemed to her as though she were observing a stranger – a most interesting and most unusual young man.

He turned and looked her straight in the eyes.

Twenty-two, and her first season half over, and to be caught blushing like a school-girl!

There was no constraint; her self-possession cooled her cheeks – and he was not looking at her, after all: he was looking through her, at something his fancy focused far, far beyond her.

Never had she thought any man half as attractive as this old friend in a new light – this handsome, well-built, careless young fellow absorbed in thoughts which excluded her. No doubt he was so habituated to herself in all her moods that nothing except the friendliest indifference could ever —

To her consternation another tint of warm color slowly spread over neck and cheek. He rose at the same moment, dropped the cat back among the cushions, and smiling down at her, held out his hand. She took it, met his eyes with an effort; but what message she divined in them Heaven alone knows, for all at once her heart stood still and a strange thrill left her fingers nerveless in his hand.

He was saying slowly, "Then I shall see you at Palm Beach next week?"

"Yes... You will come, won't you?"

"Yes, I will come."

"But if you – change your mind?"

"I never change. May I write you?"

"Good-night... You may write me if you wish."

"I will write, every day – if you don't mind."

"No – I don't mind," she said thoughtfully.

She withdrew her hand and stood perfectly still as he left the room. She heard a servant open the door, she heard Harroll's quick step echo on the stoop, then the door closed.

A second later Mr. Delancy in the library was aroused from complacent meditation by the swish of a silken skirt, and glancing up, beheld a tall, prettily formed girl looking at him with a sober and rather colorless face.

"Father," she said, "I'm in love with Jim Harroll!"

Mr. Delancy groped for his monocle, screwed it into his left eye, and examined his daughter.

"It's true, and I thought I'd better tell you," she said.

"Yes," he agreed, "it's as well to let me know. Ah – er – when and how did it occur?"

"I don't know, father. I was feeding Omar bonbons and looking over the map of South Florida, and thinking about nothing in particular, when Jim came in. He said he was going to Palm Beach, and I said, 'How jolly!' and he sat down and picked up Omar, and – I don't know how it was, but I began to think him very attractive, and the first thing I knew – it – happened!"

"Oh! So that's the way it happened?"

"I think it was, father."

"No doubt you'll outgrow it."

"Do you think so?"

"I haven't a doubt of it, little daughter."

"I have."

Mr. Delancy dropped his monocle and looked at the fire. The fire was all right.

"Do you – do you suppose that Jim is – does – thinks – knows – "

"I never speculate on what Jim is, does, thinks, or knows," said her father, thoughtfully, stirring the embers and spoiling a perfectly good fire. When he looked up again she had gone.

"One theory smashed!" observed Mr. Delancy. "I'll try another, with separation as the main ingredient."

He sat down before the fire and lighted a fresh cigar, which wasn't good for him.

"Must avoid making a martyr of Jim or there will be trouble," he mused. "There remains another way – make a martyr of myself."

He sat swinging his monocle around his forefinger, gazing vacantly at the pattern the shadows cast across the hearth.

"Avalon!" he said, abruptly. "Avalon! The 'back-to-nature' business, 'grass-cure' and all. It can't harm either Catharine or me, I fancy – or any other pair of donkeys!"

CHAPTER III

TROUBLE FOR TWO

A Note Found by Young Harroll on his Dresser the Evening of his Arrival at Palm Beach

"11.30 a. m.

"Dear Jim – Everything is spoiled, after all! Father's failing health has suddenly become a serious matter, and we are going to try the 'nature cure,' or whatever they call it, at Avalon Island. I had no idea he was really ill. Evidently he is alarmed, for we have only been here six days, and in a few minutes we are to start for Avalon. Isn't it perfectly horrid? And to think that you are coming this evening and expecting to find us here!

"Father says you can't come to Avalon; that only invalids are received (I didn't know I was one, but it seems I'm to take the treatment, too!), and he says that nobody is received for less than a month's treatment, so I suppose that bars you even if you were self-sacrificing enough to endure a 'nature cure' for the pleasure of spending two weeks with [*me*, crossed out] us.

"I'm actually on the verge of tears when I think of all we had planned to do together! And there's my maid at the door, knocking. Good-by. You will write, won't you?

"Catharine Delancy."

Mr. James Harroll to Miss Catharine Delancy, Avalon, Balboa County, Florida

"Holy Cross Light, February 15.

"Dear Catharine – Your father was right: they refuse to take me at Avalon. As soon as I found your note I telegraphed to Avalon for accommodations. It seems Avalon is an island, and they have to wait for the steamers to carry telegrams over from the mainland. So the reply has just reached me that they won't take me for less than a month; and my limit from business is two weeks or give up my position with your father.

"Yesterday I came out here to Holy Cross Spring to shoot ducks. I'd scarcely begun shooting, at dawn, when along came a couple of men through the fog, rowing like the mischief plump into my decoys, and I shouted out, 'What the deuce are you about?' and they begged my pardon, and said they had thought the point unoccupied, and that the fog was thicker than several things – which was true.

"So I invited them into the blind to – oh, the usual ceremony – and they came, and they turned out to be Jack Selden – the chap I told you about who was so decent to me in Paris – and his guide.

"So we had – ceremonies – several of them – and Selden stayed to shoot with me over my decoys, and our bag was fifty-three, all big duck except fifteen bluebills.

"Selden is a godsend to me. We're going to stay out here to-night at the lighthouse, and shoot all to-morrow if it doesn't blow too hard. It's blowing great

guns now. I'm here in the lighthouse, writing in the glow of a lamp in the keeper's living-room, with his good little wife sewing by the fire and a half-dozen of his kids tumbling about on the floor. It's a pretty sight; I love children and firesides and that sort of thing. They've got hold of Selden now, and are making him tell stories of adventure. He's been all over the world, and is perfectly crazy to get married. Says he would prefer a widow with yellow hair and blue eyes. Do you know any? He's a nice chap."

"Catharine, I wish I were in Avalon. They could put me in a strait-jacket and I wouldn't care as long as [*you were*, crossed out] I could be with [*you*, crossed out] your father and you in Avalon.

"It's growing late, and Selden and I should be on the ducking-grounds tomorrow before dawn. The keeper's wife says it will blow too hard, but Selden only smiles. He's a cool one, and if he has the nerve to go out I'll go, too.

"With sincere regards to your father and every wish for his speedy recovery, I remain

*"Yours faithfully,
"James Harroll."*

Lines Scribbled on the Leaf of a Note-book and Found in a Bottle in the Pocket of an old Shooting-coat a Year Later

*"Atlantic Ocean,
"Miles South of Holy Cross Light,
"February 16.*

"Catharine – I think this is the end. Selden and I have been blown out to sea in a rowboat, and it's leaking. I only want to say good-by. Telegraph Selden's mother, Lenox, Massachusetts. I have nobody to notify. Good-by.

"James Harroll."

Telegram to James Harroll, Received and Opened by the Keeper while Search- boats Were still Out after Mr. Harroll and Mr. Selden, Two Days Missing

"James Harroll, Holy Cross Light, Florida, East Coast:

"Don't run any risks. Be careful for our sakes. Terrible storm on the coast reported here. Wire me that you are safe.

*"Catharine Delancy,
"Avalon, Florida."*

Telegrams Addressed to Young Harroll, and Opened by the Keeper of the Lighthouse after the Search-boats Had Returned

No. 1

"Why don't you telegraph us? Your silence and the reports of the storm alarm us. Reply at once.

"Catharine."

No. 2

"Wire Catharine, Jim. You surely were not ass enough to go out in such a storm.

"S. Delancy."

No. 3

"For pity's sake telegraph to me that you are safe. I cannot sleep.

"Catharine."

Telegram to Miss Catharine Delancy, Avalon, Florida

"Holy Cross Light.

"Miss Catharine Delancy:

"Rowboat containing Mr. Harroll and Mr. Selden blown out to sea. Search-boats returned without finding any trace of them.

"Caswell, Keeper."

Telegram from Mr. Delancy to Keeper of Holy Cross Light

"Caswell:

"Charter a fast ocean-going tug and as many launches as necessary. Don't give up the search. Spare no expense. Check mailed to you to-day.

"I will give ten thousand dollars to the man who rescues James Harroll. You may draw on me for any amount necessary. Keep me constantly informed of your progress by wire.

"Stephen Delancy."

In from the open sea drifted the castaways, the sun rising in tropic splendor behind them, before them a far strip of snowy surf edging green shores.

Selden sat in the bow, bailing; Harroll dug vigorously into the Atlantic with both oars; a heavy flood-tide was doing the rest. Presently Selden picked up the ducking-glass and examined the shore.

Harroll rested his oars, took a pull at the mineral water, and sighed deeply. "Except for the scare and the confounded leak it's been rather amusing, hasn't it?" he said.

"It's all right... Hope you didn't set that farewell message afloat."

"What message?"

"Oh – I thought I saw you scribbling in your notebook and –"

"And what?"

"And stick the leaf into the bottle of gun-oil. If I was mistaken, kindly give me my bottle of gun-oil."

"Pooh!" said Harroll. "The storm was magnificent. Can't a man jot down impressions? Open a can of sardines, will you? And pass me the bread, you idiot!"

Selden constructed a sandwich and passed it aft. "When we near those ducks," he said, "we'd better give them a broadside – our larder's getting low. I'll load for us both."

He fished about among the cartridge-sacks for some dry shells, loaded the guns, and laid them ready.

"Bluebills," observed Harroll, as the boat drew near. "How tame they are! Look, Selden! It would be murder to shoot."

The boat, drifting rapidly, passed in among the raft of ducks; here and there a glistening silver-breasted bird paddled lazily out of the way, but the bulk of the flock floated serenely on either side, riding the swell, bright golden eyes fearlessly observing the intruders.

"Oh, a man can't shoot at things that act like that!" exclaimed Selden petulantly. "Shoo! Shoo – o!" he cried, waving his gun in hopes that a scurry and rise might justify assassination. But the birds only watched him in perfect confidence. The boat drove on; the young men sat staring across the waves, guns idly balanced across their knees. Presently Harroll finished his sandwich and resumed the oars.

"Better bail some more," he said. "What are you looking at?" – for Selden, using the ducking-glass, had begun to chuckle.

"Well, upon my word!" he said slowly – "of all luck! Where do you suppose we are?"

"Well, where the devil are we?"

"Off Avalon!"

"Avalon!" repeated Harroll, stupidly. "Why, man, it's a hundred miles south of Holy Cross!"

"Well, we've made it, I tell you. I can see one of their dinky little temples shining among the trees. Hark! There go the bells ringing for meditation!"

A mellow chime came across the water.

"It can't be Avalon," repeated Harroll, not daring to hope for such fortune. "What do you know about Avalon, anyway?"

"What I've heard."

"What's that?"

"Why, it's a resort for played-out people who've gone the pace. When a girl dances herself into the fidgets, or a Newport matron goes to pieces, or a Wall Street man begins to talk to himself, hither they toddle. It's the fashionable round-up for smashed nerves and wibbly-wobbly intellects – a sort of "back-to-nature" enterprise run by a "doctor." He makes 'em all wear garments cut in the style of the humble bed-sheet, and then he turns 'em out to grass; and they may roll on it or frisk on it or eat it if they like. Incidentally, I believe, they're obliged to wallow in the ocean several times a day, run races afoot, chuck the classic discus, go barefooted and sandal-shod, wear wreaths of flowers instead of hats, meditate in silence when the temple bells ring, eat grain and fruit and drink milk, and pay enormous bills to the quack who runs the place. It must be a merry life, Harroll. No tobacco, no billiards, no bridge. And hit the downy at nine-thirty by the curfew!"

"Good Lord!" muttered Harroll.

"That's Avalon," repeated Selden. "And we're almost there. Look sharp! Stand by for a ducking! This surf means trouble ahead!"

It certainly did; the boat soared skyward on the crest of the swell; a smashing roller hurled it into the surf, smothering craft and crew in hissing foam. A second later two heads appeared, and two half-suffocated young men floundered up the beach and dropped, dripping and speechless, on the sand.

They lay inert for a while, salt water oozing at every pore. Harroll was the first to sit up.

"Right?" he inquired.

"All right. Where's the boat?"

"Ashore below us." He rose, dripping, and made off toward the battered boat, which lay in the shoals, heeled over. Selden followed; together they dragged the wreck up high and dry; then they sat down on the sand, eying one another.

"It's a fine day," said Selden, with a vacant grin. He rolled over on his back, clutching handfuls of hot sand. "Isn't this immense?" he said. "My! how nice and dry and solid everything is! Roll on your back, Harroll! You'll enjoy it more that way."

But Harroll got up and began dragging the guns and cartridge-sacks from the boat.

"I've some friends here," he said briefly. "Come on."

"Are your friends hospitably inclined to the shipwrecked? I'm about ready to be killed with hospitality," observed Selden, shouldering gun and sack and slopping along in his wet boots.

They entered a thicket of sweet-bay and palmetto, breast-high, and forced a path through toward a bit of vivid green lawn, which gave underfoot like velvet.

"There's a patient now – in his toga," said Selden, in a low voice. "Better hit him with a piteous tale of shipwreck, hadn't we?"

The patient was seated on a carved bench of marble under the shade of a live oak. His attitude suggested *ennui*; he yawned at intervals; at intervals he dug in the turf with idle bare toes.

"The back of that gentleman's head," said Harroll, "resembles the back of a head I know."

"Oh! One of those friends you mentioned?"

"Well – I never saw him in toga and sandals, wearing a wreath of flowers on his head. Let's take a front view."

The squeaky, sloppy sound of Selden's hip boots aroused the gentleman in the toga from his attitude of bored meditation.

"How do you do, sir?" said Harroll, blandly, "I thought I'd come to Avalon."

The old gentleman fumbled in his toga, found a monocle, screwed it firmly into his eye, and inspected Harroll from head to heel.

"You're rather wet, Jim," he said, steadying his voice.

Harroll admitted it. "This is my old friend, Jack Selden – the Lenox Seldens, you know, sir." And, to Selden, he reverently named Mr. Delancy.

"How do?" said Mr. Delancy. "You're wet, too."

There was a silence. Mr. Delancy executed a facial contortion which released the monocle. Then he touched his faded eyes with the hem of his handkerchief. The lashes and furrowed cheeks were moist.

"You're so devilish abrupt, Jim," he said. "Did you get any telegrams from us?"

"Telegrams? No, sir. When?"

"No matter," said Mr. Delancy.

Another silence, and Harroll said: "Fact is, sir, we were blown out to sea, and that's how we came here. I fancy Selden wouldn't mind an invitation to dinner and a chance to dry his clothes."

Selden smiled hopefully and modestly as Mr. Delancy surveyed him.

"Pray accept my hospitality, gentlemen," said Mr. Delancy, with a grim smile. "I've been ass enough to take a villa in this forsaken place. The food I have to offer you might be relished by squirrels,

perhaps; the clothing resembles my own, and can be furnished you by the simple process of removing the sheets from your beds."

He rose, flung the flap of his toga over one shoulder, and passed his arm through Harroll's.

"Don't you like it here?" asked Harroll.

"*Like it!*" repeated Mr. Delancy.

"But – why did you come?"

"I came," said Mr. Delancy slowly, "because I desired to be rid of you."

Selden instinctively fell back out of earshot. Harroll reddened.

"I thought your theory was – "

"You smashed that theory – now you've shattered this – you and Catharine between you."

Harroll looked thoughtfully at Selden, who stood watching two pretty girls playing handball on the green.

"Young man," said Mr. Delancy, "do you realize what I've been through in one week? I have been obliged to wear this unspeakable garment, I've been obliged to endure every species of tomfoolery, I've been fed on bird seed, deprived of cigars, and sent to bed at half past nine. And I'm as sound in limb and body as you are. And all because I desired to be rid of you. I had two theories! both are smashed. I refuse to entertain any more theories concerning anything!"

Harroll laughed; then his attention became concentrated on the exquisite landscape, where amid green foliage white villas of Georgia marble glimmered, buried in blossoming thickets of oleander, wistaria, and Cherokee roses – where through the trees a placid lake lay reflecting the violet sky – where fallow-deer wandered, lipping young maple buds – where beneath a pergola heavily draped with golden jasmine a white-robed figure moved in the shade – a still, sunny world of green and gold and violet exhaling incense under a cloudless sky.

"I would like to see Catharine," he said, slowly, "with your permission – and in view of the fate of the theories."

"Jim," said Mr. Delancy, "you are doubtless unconscious of the trouble you have created in my family."

"Trouble, sir?" repeated the young man, flushing up.

"Trouble for two. My daughter and I believed you drowned."

Harroll stood perfectly still. Mr. Delancy took a step or two forward, turned, and came back across the lawn. "She is sitting under that pergola yonder, looking out to sea, and I'm afraid she's crying her eyes out for something she wants. It's probably not good for her, either. But – such as it is – she may have it."

The two men looked at one another steadily.

"I'm rather glad you were not drowned," said Mr. Delancy, "but I'm not infatuated with you."

They shook hands solemnly, then Mr. Delancy walked over and joined Selden, who appeared to be fascinated by an attractive girl in Greek robes and sandals who was playing handball on the green.

"Young man," said Mr. Delancy, "there's always trouble for two in this world. That young woman with yellow hair and violet eyes who is playing handball with her sister, and who appears to hypnotize you, is here to recuperate from the loss of an elderly husband."

"A widow with yellow hair and blue eyes!" murmured Selden, entranced.

"Precisely. Your train, however, leaves to-night – unless you mean to remain here on a diet of bird-seed."

Selden smiled absently. Bird-seed had no terror for him.

"Besides," he said, "I'm rather good at handball."

A moment later he looked around, presumably for Harroll. That young man was already half-way to the jasmine-covered arbor, where a young girl sat, dry-eyed, deathly pale, staring out to sea.

The sea was blue and smiling; the soft thunder of the surf came up to her. She heard the gulls mewing in the sky and the hum of bees in the wind-stirred blossoms; she saw a crested osprey plunge

into the shallows and a great tarpon fling its mass of silver into the sun. Paroquets gleaming like living jewels rustled and preened in the china-trees; black and gold butterflies, covered with pollen, crawled over and over the massed orange bloom. Ah, the mask of youth that the sly world wore to mock her! Ah, the living lie of the sky, and the false, smooth sea fawning at her feet!

Little persuasive breezes came whispering, plucking at the white hem of her robe to curry favor; the ingratiating surf purred, blinking with a million iridescent bubbles. The smug smile of nature appalled her; its hypocrisy sickened her; and she bent her dark eyes fiercely on the sea and clinched her little hands.

"Give up my dead!" she whispered. "Give up my dead!"

"Catharine!"

Dazed, she rose to her sandalled feet, the white folds of her robe falling straight and slim.

"Catharine!"

Her voiceless lips repeated his name; she swayed, steadying herself by the arm around her waist. Then trouble for two began.

As Williams ended, I looked at him with indignation.

"As far as I can see," I said, "you are acting as attorney for the defense. That's a fine story to tell a father of two attractive daughters. You needn't repeat it to them."

"But it happened, old man –"

"Don't call me 'old man,' either. I'll explain to you why." And I did, peevishly.

After that I saw less of Williams, from choice. He has a literary way with him in telling a story – and I didn't wish Alida and Dulcima to sympathize with young Harroll and that little ninny, Catharine Delancy. So I kept clear of Williams until we arrived in Paris.

CHAPTER IV

WHEREIN A MODEST MAN IS BULLIED AND A LITERARY MAN PRACTICES STYLE

"What was your first impression of Paris, Mr. Van Twiller?" inquired the young man from East Boston, as I was lighting my cigar in the corridor of the Hôtel des Michetons after breakfast.

"The first thing I noticed," said I, "was the entire United States walking down the Boulevard des Italiens."

"And your second impression, sir?" he asked somewhat uncertainly.

"The entire United States walking back again." He lighted a cigarette and tried to appear cheerful. He knew I possessed two daughters. A man in possession of such knowledge will endure much.

Presently the stout young man from Chicago came up to request a light for his cigar. "See Paris and die, eh?" he observed with odious affability.

"I doubt that the city can be as unhealthy as that," I said coldly.

Defeated, he joined forces with the young man from East Boston, and they retired to the terrace to sit and hate me.

My daughter Alida, my daughter Dulcima, and I spent our first day in Paris "*ong voitoor*" as the denizen of East Boston informed me later.

"What is your first impression, Alida?" I asked, as our taxi rolled smoothly down the Avenue de l'Opera.

"Paris? An enormous blossom carved out of stone! – a huge architectural Renaissance rose with white stone petals!"

I looked at my pretty daughter with pride.

"That is what Mr. Van Dieman says," she added conscientiously.

My enthusiasm cooled at once.

"Van Dieman exaggerates," I said. "Dulcima, what do you find to characterize Paris?"

"The gowns!" she cried. "Oh, papa! did you see that girl driving past just now?"

I opened my guidebook in silence. I *had* seen her.

The sunshine flooded everything; the scent of flowers filled the soft air; the city was a garden, sweet with green leaves, embroidered with green grass – a garden, too, in architecture, carved out in silvery gray foliage of stone. The streets are as smooth and clean as a steamer's deck, with little clear rivulets running in gutters that seem as inviting as country brooks. It did not resemble Manhattan.

Paris!

Paris is a big city full of red-legged soldiers.

Paris is a forest of pink and white chestnut blossoms under which the inhabitants sit without their hats.

Paris is a collection of vistas; at the end of every vista is a misty masterpiece of architecture; on the summit of every *monument* is a masterpiece of sculpture.

Paris is a city of several millions of inhabitants, every inhabitant holding both hands out to you for a tip.

Paris is a park, smothered in foliage, under which asphalted streets lead to Paradise.

Paris is a sanitarium so skillfully conducted that nobody can tell the patients from the physicians; and all the inmates are firmly convinced that the outside world is mad.

I looked back at the gilded mass of the Opera – that great pile of stone set lightly there as the toe of a ballet-girl's satin slipper —

"What are you thinking, papa?" asked Alida.

"Nothing," I said hastily, amazed at my own frivolity. "Notice," said I, "the exquisite harmony of the sky-line. Here in Paris the Government regulates the height of buildings. Nothing inharmonious can be built; the selfishness and indifference of private ownership which in New York erects skyscrapers around our loveliest architectural remains, the City Hall, would not be tolerated here, where artistic *ensemble* is as necessary to people as the bread they eat."

"Dear me, where have I read that?" exclaimed Alida innocently.

I said nothing more.

We were now passing through that wing of the Louvre which faces the Carousal, and we turned sharply to the right under the little arc, and straight past the Tuileries Gardens, all blooming with tulips and hyacinths, past the quaint weather-stained statues of an epoch as dead as its own sculptors, past the long arcades of the Rivoli, under which human spiders lurk for the tourist of Cook, and out into the Place de la Concorde – the finest square in the world.

The sun glittered on the brass inlaid base on which towered the monolith. The splashing of the great fountains filled the air with a fresh sweet sound. Round us, in a vast circle, sat the "Cities of France," with "Strasburg" smothered in crêpe and funeral wreaths, each still stone figure crowned with battlemented crowns and bearing the carved symbols of their ancient power on time-indented escutcheons, all of stone.

The fresh wet pavement blazed in the sunshine; men wheeled handcarts filled with violets or piled high with yellow jonquils and silvery hyacinths.

Violet, white, and yellow – these are the colors which Paris wears in springtime, twined in her chaplet of tender green.

I said this aloud to Dulcima, who replied that they were wearing blue in Paris this spring, and that she would like to know how soon we were going to the dressmakers.

Now at last we were rolling up the Champs Elysées, with the Arc de Triomphe, a bridge of pearl at the end of the finest vista in the world. Past us galloped gay cavalry officers, out for a morning canter in the Bois de Boulogne; past us whizzed automobiles of every hue, shape and species.

Past us, too, trotted shoals of people well diluted by our fellow countrymen, yet a truly Parisian crowd for all that. Hundreds of uniforms dotted the throngs; cuirassiers in short blue stable jackets, sabres hooked under their left elbows, little *piou-piou* lads, in baggy red trousers and shakos bound with yellow; hussars jingling along, wearing jackets of robin's-egg blue faced with white; chasseurs à Cheval, wearing turquoise blue braided with black; then came the priests in black, well groomed as jackdaws in April; policemen in sombre uniforms, wearing sword bayonets; gendarmes off duty – for the Republican Guard takes the place of the Gendarmerie within the walls of Paris; smart officers from the Fontainebleau artillery school, in cherry-red and black; Saint-Cyr soldiers in crude blues and reds, with the blue shako smothered under plumes; then Sisters, in their dark habits and white coifs, with sweet, serene faces looking out on the sinful world they spend their lives in praying for.

"Dulcima," I said, "what particular characteristic strikes you when you watch these passing throngs of women?"

"Their necks; every Parisienne is a beauty from behind – such exquisite necks and hair."

"Their ankles," added Alida innocently; "they are the best-shod women in the world!"

I had noticed something of the sort; in fact, there is no escape for a man's eyes in Paris. Look where he will, he is bound to bring up against two neat little shoes trotting along demurely about their own frivolous business. One cannot help wondering what that business may be or where those little polished shoes are going so lightly, tap! tap! across the polished asphalt. And there are thousands on thousands of such shoes, passing, repassing, twinkling everywhere, exquisite, shapely, gay little shoes of Paris, pattering through boulevard and avenue, square, and street until the whole city takes the cadence, keeping time, day and night, to the little tripping feet of the Parisienne – bless her, heart and sole!

"Of what are you thinking, papa?" asked Alida.

"Nothing, child, nothing," I muttered.

We left our taxi and mounted to the top of the Arc de Triomphe. The world around us was bathed in a delicate haze; silver-gray and emerald the view stretched on every side from the great Basilica on Montmâre to the silent Fortress of Mont-Valerien; from the vast dome of the Pantheon, springing up like a silver bubble in the sky, to the dull golden dome of the Invalides, and the dome of the Val-de-Grâce.

Spite of the Sainte Chapel, with its gilded lace-work, spite of the bizarre Tour Saint-Jacques, spite of the lean monster raised by Monsieur Eiffel, straddling the vase Esplanade in the west, the solid twin towers of Nôtre-Dame dominated the spreading city by their sheer majesty – dominated Saint-Sulpice, dominated the Trocadero, dominated even the Pantheon.

"From those towers," said I, "Quasimodo looked down and saw the slim body of Esmeralda hanging on the gibbet."

"What became of her goat?" asked Alida, who was fond of pets.

"That reminds me," began Dulcima, "that now we are safely in Paris we might be allowed to ask papa about that –"

"There is a steamer which sails for New York to-morrow," I said calmly. "Any mention of that pig will ensure us staterooms in half an hour."

Considerably subdued, the girls meekly opened their Baedekers and patronized the view, while I lighted a cigar and mused.

It was my second cigar that morning. Certainly I was a changed man – but was it a change for the better? Within me I felt something stirring – I knew not what.

It was that long-buried germ of gayety, that latent uncultivated and embryotic germ which lies dormant in all Anglo-Saxons; and usually dies dormant or is drowned in solitary cocktails at a solemn club.

Certainly I was changing. Van Dieman was right. Doubtless any change could not be the worse for a man who has not sufficient intelligence to take care of his own pig.

"There is," said Dulcima, referring to her guidebook, "a café near here in the Bois de Boulogne, called the Café des Fleurs de Chine. I should so love to breakfast at a Chinese café."

"With chopsticks!" added Alida, soulfully clasping her gloved hands.

"Your Café Chinois is doubtless a rendezvous for Apaches," I said, "but we'll try it if you wish."

I am wondering, now, just what sort of a place that café is, set like a jewel among the green trees of the Bois. I know it is expensive, but not very expensive; I know, also, that the dainty young persons who sipped mint on the terrace appeared to disregard certain conventionalities which I had been led to believe were never disregarded in France.

The safest way was to pretend a grave abstraction when their bright eyes wandered toward one; and I did this, without exactly knowing why I did.

"I wish," said I to Dulcima, "that Van Dieman were here. He understands all this surface life one sees in the parks and streets."

"Do you really wish that Mr. Van Dieman were here?" asked Alida, softly coloring.

I looked at her gravely.

"Because," she said, "I believe he is coming about the middle of May."

"Oh, he is, is he?" I said, without enthusiasm. "Well, we shall doubtless be in the Rhine by the middle of May."

"My gowns couldn't be finished until June any way," said Dulcima, laying her gloved fingers on Alida's chair.

So they were allies, then.

"I didn't know you had ordered any gowns," I said superciliously.

"I haven't – yet," she said coolly.

"Neither have I," began Alida; but I refused to hear any more.

"When you are at your modistes you may talk gowns until you faint away," said I; "but now let us try to take an intelligent interest in this famous and ancient capital of European civilization and liberty – "

"Did you notice that girl's gown?" motioned Alida to Dulcima.

I also looked. But it was not the beauty of the gown that I found so remarkable.

"I wonder," thought I – "but no matter. I wish that idiot Van Dieman were here."

That evening, after my daughters had retired, I determined to sit up later than I ought to. The reckless ideas which Paris inspired in me, alarmed me now and then. But I was game.

So I seated myself in the moonlit court of the hotel and lighted an unwise cigar and ordered what concerns nobody except the man who swallowed it, and, crossing my legs, looked amiably around.

Williams sat at the next table.

"Hello, old sport," he said affably.

"Williams," I said, "guess who I was thinking about a moment ago."

"A girl?"

"No, of course not. I was thinking of Jim Landon. What ever became of him?"

"Jim? Oh, he's all right."

"Successful?"

"Very. You ought to have heard of him over there; but I suppose you don't keep up with art news."

"No," I admitted, ashamed – "it's rather difficult to keep up with anything on Long Island. Does Jim Landon live here?"

"In Normandy, with his wife."

"Oh, he got married. Was it that wealthy St. Louis girl who – "

"No; she married into the British Peerage. No, Landon didn't do anything of that sort. Quite the contrary."

"He – he didn't marry his model, did he?"

"Yes – in a way."

"In a way?"

Williams summoned a waiter who shifted his equipment to my table.

"It's rather an unusual story," he said. "Would you care to hear it?"

"Does it portray, with your well known literary skill, the confusion of a parent?" I inquired cautiously. "If it does, don't tell it."

"It doesn't."

"Oh. Nobody puts it all over the old man?"

"No, not in this particular instance. Shall I begin?"

"Shoot," I said.

He began with his usual graceful gesture:

Landon was dead broke.

As it had not been convenient for him to breakfast that morning, he was irritable. The mockery of handsome hangings and antique furniture in the outer studio increased his irritation as he walked through it into the rough, inner workshop, which was hung with dusty casts and dreary with clay and plaster.

Here Ellis found him, an hour later, smoking a cigarette to deceive his appetite, and sulkily wetting down the clay bust of a sheep-faced old lady – an order of the post-mortem variety which he was executing from a gruesome photograph.

"How," inquired Ellis, "is the coy Muse treating you these palmy, balmy days?"

Landon swore and squirted a spongeful of water over the old lady's side curls.

"My! my! As bad as that?" commented Ellis, raising his eyebrows. "I thought you expected to be paid for that tombstone."

"Man, I've been eating, drinking, and sleeping on that tombstone all winter. Last night I gnawed off the 'Hic Jacet' and washed it down with the date. There's nothing left."

"You've – ah – breakfasted, dear friend?"

"That's all right – "

"Have you?"

"No. But there's a man from Fourth Avenue coming to buy some of that superfluous magnificence in the show studio. Besides, I'll be paid for this old lady in a day or two – Where are you going?"

"Out," said Ellis, briefly.

Landon, left alone, threw a bit of wet clay at the doorknob, stood irresolutely, first on one foot, then on the other; then with a hearty scowl at the sheep-faced old lady washed her complacent face with a dripping sponge.

"Williams!" I interrupted violently, "how do you know all those details?"

"My Lord, man!" he retorted; "I write for a living. I've got to know them."

"Go on, then," I said.

He went on:

A few moments later Ellis came in with rolls, milk and fruit.

"That's very decent of you," said Landon, but the other cut him short, excitedly.

"Jim, who is the divinity I just met in your hallway? Yours?"

"What divinity?"

"Her hair," said Ellis, a little wildly, "is the color of Tuscan gold; her eyes, ultra marine; and the skin of her is just pure snow with a brushful of carmine across the lips – and the Great Sculptor Himself must have moulded her body – "

Landon shrugged and buttered a roll. "You let her alone," he said.

"Reveal to me instantly her name, titles, and quality!" shouted Ellis, unsheathing a Japanese sword.

"Her name," said Landon, "is O'Connor; her quality is that of a shopgirl. She is motherless and alone, and inhabits a kennel across the hall. Don't make eyes at her. She'll probably believe whatever the first gentlemanly blackguard tells her."

Ellis said: "Why may I not – in a delicately detached and gayly impersonal, yet delightfully and evasively irrational manner, calculated to deceive nobody – "

"That would sound very funny in the Latin Quarter. This is New York." He rose, frowning. Presently he picked up the sponge. "Better let a lonely heart alone, unless you're in earnest," he said, and flung the sponge back into a bucket of water, dried his hands, and looked around.

"Have you sold any pictures yet?"

"Not one. I thought I had a Copper King nailed to the easel, but Fate separated us on a clinch and he got away and disappeared behind the bars of his safe deposit. How goes the market with you?"

"Dead. I can live on my furniture for a while."

"I thought you were going in on that competition for the Department of Peace at Washington."

"I am, if I have enough money left to hire a model."

Ellis rose, twirled his walking-stick meditatively, glanced at his carefully brushed hat, and placed it gravely on his head.

"Soon," he said cheerfully, "it will be time for straw hats. But where I'm going to get one I don't know. Poverty used to be considered funny in the Quarter; but it's no idle jest in this town. Well – I'll let your best girl alone, Jim, if you feel that way about it."

They laughed and shook hands.

In the corridor Ellis looked hard at the closed door opposite, and his volatile heart gave a tortured thump; he twirled his stick and sauntered out into Stuyvesant Square.

CHAPTER V

DREAMLAND

As winter faded into spring the first tracery of green fringed the branches in Stuyvesant Square. The municipal authorities decorated the grass with tulips and later with geraniums. Later still, cannas and foliage plants were planted, over which two fountains spurted aqua Crotonis.

But in spite of tasteless horticulture it is a quaint old square, a little sad and shabby, perhaps, yet mercifully green inside its two iron-railed parallelograms. Above the great sycamores and elms the truncated towers of St. George's brood heavily; along the short, leafy reach of Rutherford Place an old-time Quaker meeting-house keeps gentle vigil; northward, aged mansions peer at the square through time-dimmed windows; south, above the Sisters of The Assumption, a painted Virgin clasps her stone hands and looks down on the little children of the poor.

Along the east side of the square runs Livingston Place; behind it an elevated railroad roars; in front lies the square, shabby, unkempt, but lovely always, when night lends to it her mystery. For at night the trees loom gigantic; lights sparkle over lawn and fountain; the illuminated dial of St. George's hangs yellow as a harvest moon above the foliage; and the pleasant bell sounds from the towers, changing, for a moment, the streets' incessant monotone to a harmony.

Into this square went Landon; oftener, as the summer grew hotter and work grew scarcer.

Once, at the close of a scorching afternoon, his pretty neighbour from across the corridor came slowly into the square and rested for a few moments on the same bench he occupied.

So lovely and fresh and sweet she seemed in the early dusk that he, for an instant, was tempted from his parched loneliness to speak to her; but before he could bring himself to it she turned, recognized him, rose and went back to the house without a second glance.

"We've been neighbours for a year," he thought, "and she has never been civil enough to look at me yet – and I've been too civil to look at her. I was an ass."

He was wrong; she had looked at him often, when unafraid that his eyes might surprise her.

He was amusingly wrong. Waking, she remembered him; during the long day she thought of him; at night, when she returned from business, the radiance from his studio lamp streaming through the transom had for her all the thrilling fascination that a lighted shop window, at Christmas, has for a lonesome child passing in darkness.

From the dim monotony of her own life she had, at times, caught glimpses through his open door of splendours scarcely guessed. In her eyes an enchanted world lay just beyond his studio's threshold; a bright, warm, mellow wonderland, indistinct in the golden lamplight, where only a detail here and there half revealed a figured tapestry or carved foliation – perhaps some soft miracle of ancient Eastern weaving on the floor, perhaps a mysterious marble shape veiled in ruddy shadow – enough to set her youthful imagination on fire, enough to check her breath and start the pulses racing as she turned the key in her own door and reëntered the white dusk of her own life once more.

The three most important events of her brief career had occurred within the twelvemonth – her mother's death, her coming here to live – and love. That also had happened. But she did not call it love; it did not occur to her to consider him in any possible, tangible relation to herself.

She never even expected to know him, to speak to him, or that he could possibly care to speak to her. As far as the east is from the west, so far apart were their two worlds. For them the gusty corridor was wider than interstellar voids; she had not even a thought that a miracle might bridge the infinite from her tiny world to his, which seemed to her so bright and splendid; she had never advanced farther than the happiness of lying still after the day's work, and thinking, innocently, of what she knew about him and what she timidly divined.

At such times, stretched across her bed, the backs of her hands resting on her closed lids, she pondered on that alluring wonderland, his studio – of the mystery that so fittingly surrounded his artist's life. She saw him always amid the tints and hues of ancient textiles, sometimes dreaming, sometimes achieving with fiery inspiration – but precisely how or what he achieved remained to her part of his mystery. She cherished only the confused vision of the youth of him, and its glorious energy and wisdom.

He could be very human, too, she thought; and often the smile curved her lips and cheeks at the recollection of the noisy gayety coming in gusts through his transom on those nights when his friends were gathered there – laughter and song – the incense of tobacco drifting into her own white room from the corridor. She loved it; the odor seemed spicy with a delicate hint of sweet-brier, and she opened her transom wider to let it in.

Usually she fell asleep, the distant uproar of gayety lulling her into happier slumbers. And for days and nights afterward its recollection made life easier and pleasanter, as though she lived with amusing memories of events in which she herself had participated.

All day long, in a fashionable dry-goods shop, she sold cobweb finery and frail, intimate, lacy stuffs to very fine ladies, who usually drew a surprised breath at her beauty, and sometimes dealt with her as though they were dealing with one of their own caste.

At night, tired, she looked forward to her return, when, behind her own closed door, she could rest or read a little, or lie still and think of Landon. But even in the daring magic of waking dreams she had scarcely ventured any acquaintance with him; in dreamland they were as yet only just aware of one another. He had lately – oh, breathless and audacious imagination of hers! – smiled at her in the corridors of dreamland; and she had been a good many days trying to decide what she was going to do about it. In her phantom world matters were going well with her.

Meanwhile, except for the stupefying heat, the actual world was also going well with her. She had saved a little money, enough to give her ten days of luxury and fresh air when the time came. She needed it; the city had been hard on her. Yet the pleasure of going was not unmixed; for, as the day of her release drew nearer, she realized how, within the year, he had, in her dreams, insensibly become to her a part of her real life, and that she would miss him sorely. Which gave her courage to hasten their acquaintance in dreamland; and so it came about that he spoke to her one night as she lay dreaming, awake on her pillow; and she felt her cheeks burn in the dark as though it had all been real.

Yet he was very gentle with her in dreamland – quite wonderful – indeed, all that the most stilted vision of a young girl could desire.

Less unquiet, now that they knew each other, she looked forward to the real separation with comparative resignation.

Then came that unexpected episode when she seated herself on the same bench with him, unintentionally braving him in the flesh.

All that night she thought about it in consternation – piteously explaining it to him in dreamland. He understood – in dreamland – but did he understand in real life? Would he think she had meant to give him a chance to speak – horror of crimson dismay! Would he think her absurd to leave so abruptly when he caught her eye? And oh, she cared so much what he might think, so much more than she supposed she dared care!

All day long it made her miserable as she moved listlessly behind the counter; at night the heated pavements almost stunned her as she walked home to save the pennies.

She saw no light in his studio as she slipped through the corridor into her stifling room. Later, she bathed and dressed in a thinner gown, but it, also, was in black, in memory of her mother, and seemed to sere her body. The room grew hotter; she went out to the passage; no light threatened her from his transom, so she ventured to leave her door open.

But even this brought no relief; the heat became unendurable; and she rose at last, pinned on her big black hat of straw, and went out into the dusk.

Through the gates of the square she saw the poor surging into the park. The police had opened the scant bits of lawn to them. Men, women, children, lay half-naked on the grass, fighting for breath. And, after a little while, she crossed the street and went in among them.

The splash of the fountain was refreshing. She wandered at random, past the illuminated façade of the Lying-in Hospital, past the painted Virgin, then crossed Second Avenue, entered the gates again, and turned aimlessly by the second fountain. There seemed to be no resting-place for her on the crowded benches.

Beyond the fountain a shadowy sycamore stood in the centre of a strip of lawn. She went toward it, hesitated, glancing at the motionless, recumbent figures near by, then ventured to seat herself on the grass and lean back against the tree. Presently, she unpinned her hat, lifted a white face to the night, and closed her eyes.

How long she sat there she did not know when again she opened her tired lids.

A figure stood near her. For a moment she confused dream and reality and smiled at him; then sat up, rigid, breathless, as the figure stirred and came forward.

She remembered attempting to rise, remembered nothing else very distinctly – not even his first words, though his voice was gentle and pleasant, just as it was in dreamland.

"Do you mind my speaking to you?" he was asking now.

"No," she said faintly.

He raised his head and looked out across the feverish city, passing one thin hand across his eyes. Then, with a slight movement of his shoulders, he seated himself on the ground at her feet.

"We have been neighbours so long," he said, "that I thought perhaps I might dare to speak to you to-night. My name is Landon – James Landon. I think I know your last name."

"O'Connor – Ellie O'Connor – Eleanor, I mean," she added, unafraid. A curious peace seemed to possess her at the sound of his voice. There was a stillness in it that reassured.

The silence between them was ringed with the distant roar of the city. He looked around him at the shadowy forms flung across bench and lawn; his absent glance swept the surrounding walls of masonry and iron, all a-glitter with tiny, lighted windows. Overhead a tarnished moon looked down into the vast trap where five million souls lay caught, gasping for air – he among the others – and this young girl beside him – trapped, helpless, foredoomed. The city had got them all! But he sat up the straighter, giving the same slightly-impatient shake to his shoulders.

"I came," he said, "to ask you one or two questions – if I may."

"Ask them," she answered, as in a dream.

"Then – you go to business, do you not?"

"Yes."

He nodded: "And now I'm going to venture another question which may sound impertinent, but I do not mean it so. May I?"

"Yes," she said in a low, hushed voice, as though a clearer tone might break some spell.

"It is about your salary. I do not suppose it is very large."

"My wages? Shall I tell you?" she asked, so innocently that he flushed up.

"No, no! – I merely wish to – to find out from you whether you might care to take a chance of increasing your salary."

"I don't think I know what you mean," she said, looking at him.

"I know you don't," he said, patiently; "let me begin a little farther back. I am a sculptor. You know, of course, what that is –"

"Yes. I am educated." She even found courage to smile at him.

His answering smile covered both confusion and surprise; then perplexity etched a crease between his brows.

"That makes it rather harder for me" – he hesitated – "or easier; I don't know which."

"What makes it harder?" she asked.

"Your being – I don't know – different – from what I imagined – "

"Educated?"

"Y-yes – "

She laughed deliciously in her new-born confidence.

"What is it you wish to ask?"

"I'll tell you," he said. "I need a model – and I'm too poor to pay for one. I've pledged everything in my studio. A chance has come to me. It's only a chance, however. But I can't take it because I cannot afford a model."

There was a silence; then she inquired what he meant by a model. And he told her – not everything, not clearly.

"You mean that you wish me to sit for my portrait in marble?"

"There are two figures to be executed for the new Department of Peace in Washington," he explained, "and they are to be called 'Soul' and 'Body.' Six sculptors have been invited to compete. I am one. We have a year before us."

She remained silent.

"It is perfectly apparent, of course, that you are exquis – admirably fitted" – he stammered under her direct gaze, then went on; "I scarcely dared dream of such a model even if I had the means to afford – " He could get no further.

"Are you really poor?" she asked in gentle wonder.

"At present – yes."

"I never dreamed it," she said. "I thought – otherwise."

"Oh, it is nothing; some day things will come out right. Only – I have a chance now – if you – if you would help me... I *could* win with you; I know it. And if I do win – with your aid – I will double your present salary. And that is what I've come here to say. Is that fair?"

He waited, watching her intently. She had dropped her eyes, sitting there very silent at the foot of the tree, cradling the big straw hat in her lap.

"Whatever you decide to be fair – " he began again, but she looked up wistfully.

"I was not thinking of that," she said; "I was only – sorry."

"Sorry?"

"That you are poor."

He misunderstood her. "I know; I wish I could offer you something beside a chance – "

"Oh-h," she whispered, but so low that he heard only a long, indrawn breath.

She sat motionless, eyes on the grass. When again she lifted them their pure beauty held him.

"What is it you wish?" she asked. "That I should be your model for the – this prize which you desire to strive for?"

"Yes; for that."

"How can I? I work all day."

"I could use you at night and on Saturday afternoons, and all day Sunday. And – have you had your yearly vacation?"

She drew a quietly tired breath. "No," she said.

"Then – I will give you two hundred dollars extra for those ten days," he went on eagerly – so eagerly that he forgot the contingency on which hung any payment at all. As for her, payment was not even in her thoughts.

Through the deep, sweet content which came to her with the chance of serving him, ran an undercurrent of confused pain that he could so blindly misunderstand her. If she thought at all of the amazing possibility of such a fortune as he offered, she knew that she would not accept it from him. But this, and the pain of his misunderstanding, scarcely stirred the current of a strange, new happiness that flowed through every vein.

"Do you think I could really help you?"

"If you will." His voice trembled.

"Are you sure – quite sure? If you are – I will do what you wish."

He sprang up buoyant, transfigured.

"If I win it will be *you*!" he said. "Could you come into the studio a moment? I'll show you the two sketches I have made for 'Soul' and 'Body'."

On the prospect of a chance – the chance that had come at last – he was completely forgetting that she must be prepared to comprehend what he required of her; he forgot that she could know nothing of a sculptor's ways and methods of production. On the way to the studio, however, he tardily remembered, and it rather scared him.

"Do you know any painters or sculptors?" he asked, keeping impatient pace beside her.

"I know a woman who makes casts of hands and arms," she said shyly. "She stopped me in the street once and asked permission to cast my hands. Would you call her a sculptor?"

"N – well, perhaps she may be. We sculptors often use casts of the human body." He plunged into it more frankly: "You know, of course, that to become a sculptor or a painter, one has to model and paint from living people."

"Yes," she said, undisturbed.

"And," he continued, "it would be impossible for a sculptor to produce the beautiful marbles you have seen – er – around – unless he could pose a living model to copy from."

An unquiet little pulse began to beat in her breast; she looked up at him, but he was smiling so amiably that she smiled, too.

Mortally afraid of frightening her, he could not exactly estimate how much she divined of what was to be required of her.

He continued patiently: "Unless a student dissects he can never become a surgeon. It is the same with us; our inspiration and originality must be founded on a solid study of the human body. That is why we must always have before us as perfect a living model as we can find."

"Do – do you think – " she stopped, pink and confused.

"I think," he said, quietly impersonal, "that, speaking as a sculptor, you are as perfect and as beautiful a model as ever the old Greek masters saw, alive or in their dreams."

"I – did not – know it," she faltered, thrilling from head to foot.

They entered the corridor together. Her breath came faster as he unlocked his door and, turning up a lamp, invited her to enter.

At last in the magic world! And with *him*!

Figured tapestries hung from the golden mystery of the ceiling; ancient dyes glowed in the soft rugs under foot; the mellow light glimmered on dull foliations. She stood still, looking about her as in a trance.

"All this I will buy back again with your help," he said, laughingly; but his unsteady voice betrayed the tension to which he was keyed. A slow excitement was gaining on her, too.

"I will redeem all these things, never fear," he said, gayly.

"Oh – if you only can... It is too cruel to take such things from you."

The emotion in her eyes and voice surprised him for one troubled moment. Then the selfishness of the artist ignored all else save the work and the opportunity.

"You *will* help me, won't you?" he asked. "It is a promise?"

"Yes – I will."

"Is it a *promise*?"

"Yes," she said, wondering.

"Then please sit here. I will bring the sketches. They merely represent my first idea; they are done without a living model." He was off, lighting a match as he hastened. A tapestry fell back into place; she lifted her blue eyes to the faded figures of saints and seraphim stirring when the fabric moved.

CHAPTER VI

SOUL AND BODY

As in a blessed vision, doubting the reality of it all, she sat looking upward until his step on some outer floor aroused her to the wondrous reality.

He came, holding two clay figures. The first was an exquisite winged shape, standing with delicate limbs parallel, arms extended, palms outward. The head was lifted a little, poised exquisitely on the perfect neck. Its loveliness thrilled her.

"Is it an angel?" she asked, innocently.

"No... I thought you understood – this is only a sketch I made. And this is the other." And he placed on a table the second figure, a smooth, youthful, sensuous shape, looking aside and down at her own white fingers playing with her hair.

"Is it Eve?" she inquired, wondering.

"These," he said slowly, "are the first two sketches, done without a model, for my two figures 'Soul' and 'Body'."

She looked at him, not comprehending.

"I – I must have a *living* model – for these," he stammered. "Didn't you understand? I want *you* to work from."

From brow to throat the scarlet stain deepened and spread. She turned, laid one small hand on the back of the chair, faltered, sank onto it, covering her face.

"I thought you understood," he repeated stupidly. "Forgive me – I thought you understood what sort of help I needed." He dropped on one knee beside her. "I am so sorry. Try to reason a little. You – you must know I meant no offense – that I never could wish to offend you. Look at me, please; I am not that sort of a man. Can't you realize how desperate I was – how I dared hazard the chance that you might help me?"

She rose, her face still covered.

"*Can't* you comprehend?" he pleaded, "that I meant no offense?"

"Y-yes. Let me go."

"Can you forgive me?"

"I – yes."

"And you cannot – help me?"

"H-help you?.. Oh, no, no, no!" She broke down, sobbing in the chair, her golden head buried in her arms.

Confused, miserable, he watched her. Already the old helpless feeling had come surging back, that there was to be no chance for him in the world, no hope of all he had dared to believe in, no future. Watching her he felt his own courage falling with her tears, his own will drooping as she drooped there – slender and white in her thin, black gown.

Again he spoke, for the moment forgetting himself.

"Don't cry, because there is nothing to cry about. You know I did not mean to hurt you; I know that you would help me if you could. Isn't it true?"

"Y-yes," she sobbed.

"It was only a sculptor who asked you, not a man at all. You understand what I mean? – only a poor devil of a sculptor, carried away by the glamour of a chance for better fortune that seemed to open before him for a moment. So you must not feel distressed or sensitive or ashamed – "

She sat up, wet eyed, cheeks aflame.

"I am thinking of *you*!" she cried, almost fiercely, "not of myself; and you don't understand! Do you think I would cry over myself? I – it is because I cannot help *you*!"

He found no words to answer as she rose and moved toward the door. She crossed the threshold, turned and looked at him. Then she entered her own doorway.

And the world went badly for her that night, and, after that, day and night, the world went badly.

Always the confusion of shame and dread returned to burn her; but that was the least; for in the long hours, lying amid the fragments of her shattered dreams, the knowledge that he needed her and that she could not respond, overwhelmed her.

The house, the corridor, her room became unendurable; she desired to go – anywhere – and try to forget. But she could not; she could not leave, she could not forget, she could not go to him and offer the only aid he desired, she could not forgive herself.

In vain, in vain, white with the agony of courage, she strove to teach herself that she was nothing, her body nothing, that the cost was nothing, compared to the terrible importance of his necessity. She knew in her heart that she could have died for him; but – but – her courage could go no further.

In terrible silence she walked her room, thinking of him as one in peril, as one ruined for lack of the aid she withheld. Sometimes she passed hours on her knees, tearless, wordless; sometimes sheerest fear set her creeping to the door to peer out, dreading lest his closed door concealed a tragedy.

And always, burning like twin gray flames before her eyes, she saw the figures he had made, 'Soul' and 'Body.' Every detail remained clear; their terrible beauty haunted her. Night after night, rigid on her bed's edge, she stretched her bared, white arms, staring at them, then flung them hopelessly across her eyes, whispering, "I cannot – O God – I cannot – even for him."

And there came a day – a Saturday – when the silence of the house, of her room, the silence in her soul, became insupportable.

All day she walked in the icy, roaring streets, driving herself forward toward the phantom of forgetfulness which fled before her like her shadow. And at the edge of noon she found herself – where she knew she must come one day – seeking the woman who made plaster casts of hands and arms and shapely feet.

For a little while they talked together. The woman surprised, smiling sometimes, but always very gentle; the girl flushed, stammering, distressed in forming her naïve questions.

Yes, it could be done; it had been done. But it was a long process; it must be executed in sections, then set together limb by limb, for there were many difficulties – and it was not pleasant to endure, even sometimes painful.

"I do not mind the pain," said the girl. "Will it scar me?"

"No, not that... But, another thing; it would be expensive."

"I have my vacation money, and a little more." She named the sum timidly.

Yes, it was enough. And when could she come for the first casts to be taken?

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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