

CHAMBERS ROBERT WILLIAM

BETWEEN FRIENDS

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I

Like a man who reenters a closed and darkened house and lies down; lying there, remains conscious of sunlight outside, of bird-calls, and the breeze in the trees, so had Drene entered into the obscurity of himself.

Through the chambers of his brain the twilight corridors where cringed his bruised and disfigured soul, there nothing stirring except the automatic pulses which never cease.

Sometimes, when the sky itself crashes earthward and the world lies in ruins from horizon to horizon, life goes on.

The things that men live through—and live!

But no doubt Death was too busy elsewhere to attend to Drene.

He had become very lean by the time it was all over. Gray glistened on his temples; gray softened his sandy mustache: youth was finished as far as he was concerned.

An odd idea persisted in his mind that it had been winter for many years. And the world thawed out very slowly for him.

But broken trees leaf out, and hewed roots sprout; and what he had so long mistaken for wintry ashes now gleamed warmly like the orange and gold of early autumn. After a while he began to

go about more or less—little excursions from the dim privacy of mind and soul—and he found the sun not very gray; and a south wind blowing in the world once more.

Quair and Guilder were in the studio that day on business; Drene continued to modify his composition in accordance with Guilder's suggestions; Quair, always curious concerning Drene, was becoming slyly impudent.

"And listen to me, Guilder. What the devil's a woman between friends?" argued Quair, with a malicious side glance at Drene. "You take my best girl away from me—"

"But I don't," remarked his partner dryly.

"For the sake of argument, you do. What happens? Do I raise hell? No. I merely thank you. Why? Because I don't want her if you can get her away. That," he added, with satisfaction, "is philosophy. Isn't it, Drene?"

Guilder intervened pleasantly:

"I don't think Drene is particularly interested in philosophy. I'm sure I'm not. Shut up, please."

Drene, gravely annoyed, continued to pinch bits of modeling wax out of a round tin box, and to stick them all over the sketch he was modifying.

Now and then he gave a twirl to the top of his working table, which revolved with a rusty squeak.

"If you two unusually intelligent gentlemen ask me what good a woman the world—" began Quair.

"But we don't," interrupted Guilder, in the temperate voice

peculiar to his negative character.

“Anyway,” insisted Quair, “here’s what I think of ‘em—”

“My model, yonder,” said Drene, a slight shrug of contempt, “happens to be feminine, and may also be human. Be decent enough to defer the development of your rather tiresome theory.”

The girl on the model-stand laughed outright at the rebuke, stretched her limbs and body, and relaxed, launching a questioning glance at Drene.

“All right; rest a bit,” said the sculptor, smearing the bit of wax he was pinching over the sketch before him.

He gave another twirl or two to the table, wiped his bony fingers on a handful of cotton waste, picked up his empty pipe, and blew into the stem, reflectively.

Quair, one of the associated architects of the new opera, who had been born a gentleman and looked the perfect bounder, sauntered over to examine the sketch. He was still red from the rebuke he had invited.

Guilder, his senior colleague, got up from the lounge and walked over also. Drene fitted the sketch into the roughly designed group, where it belonged, and stood aside, sucking meditatively on his empty pipe.

After a silence:

“It’s all right,” said Guilder.

Quair remarked that the group seemed to lack flamboyancy. It is true, however, that, except for Guilder’s habitual restraint, the celebrated firm of architects was inclined to express themselves

flamboyantly, and to interpret Renaissance in terms of Baroque.

“She’s some girl,” added Quair, looking at the lithe, modeled figure, and then half turning to include the model, who had seated herself on the lounge, and was now gazing with interest at the composition sketched in by Drene for the facade of the new opera.

“Carpeaux and his eternal group—it’s the murderous but inevitable standard of comparison,” mused Drene, with a whimsical glance at the photograph on the wall.

“Carpeaux has nothing on this young lady,” insisted Quair flippantly; and he pivoted on his heel and sat down beside the model. Once or twice the two others, consulting before the wax group, heard the girl’s light, untroubled laughter behind their backs gaily responsive to Quair’s wit. Perhaps Quair’s inheritance had been humor, but to some it seemed perilously akin to mother-wit.

The pockets of Guilder’s loose, ill-fitting clothes bulged with linen tracings and rolls of blue-prints. He and Drene consulted over these for a while, semi-conscious of Quair’s bantering voice and the girl’s easily provoked laughter behind them. And, finally:

“All right, Guilder,” said Drene briefly. And the firm of celebrated architects prepared to evacuate the studio—Quair exhibiting symptoms of incipient skylarking, in which he was said to be at his best.

“Drop in on me at the office some time,” he suggested to the youthful model, in a gracious tone born of absolute self-

satisfaction.

“For luncheon or dinner?” retorted the girl, with smiling audacity.

“You may stay to breakfast also—”

“Oh, come on,” drawled Guilder, taking his colleague’s elbow.

The sculptor yawned as Quair went out: then he closed the door then celebrated firm of architects, and wandered back rather aimlessly.

For a while he stood by the great window, watching the pigeons on neighboring roof. Presently he returned to his table, withdrew the dancing figure with its graceful, wide flung arms, set it upon the squeaky revolving table once more, and studied it, yawning at intervals.

The girl got up from the sofa behind him, went to the model-stand, and mounted it. For a few moments she was busy adjusting her feet to the chalk marks and blocks. Finally she took the pose. She always seemed inclined to be more or less vocal while Drene worked; her voice, if untrained, was untroubled. Her singing had never bothered Drene, nor, until the last few days, had he even particularly noticed her blithe trilling—as a man a field, preoccupied, is scarcely aware of the wild birds’ gay irrelevancy along the way.

He happened to notice it now, and a thought passed through his mind that the country must be very lovely in the mild spring sunshine.

As he worked, the brief visualization of young grass and the

faint blue of skies, evoked, perhaps, by the girl's careless singing, made for his dull concentration subtly pleasant environment.

"May I rest?" she asked at length.

"Certainly, if it's necessary."

"I've brought my lunch. It's twelve," she explained.

He glanced at her absently, rolling a morsel of wax; then, with slight irritation which ended in a shrug, he motioned her to descend.

After all, girls, like birds, were eternally eating. Except for that, and incessant preening, existence meant nothing more important to either species.

He had been busy for a few moments with the group when she said something to him, and he looked around from his abstraction. She was holding out toward him a chicken sandwich.

When his mind came back from wool gathering, he curtly declined the offer, and, as an afterthought, bestowed upon her a wholly mechanical smile, in recognition of a generosity not welcome.

"Why don't you ever eat luncheon?" she asked.

"Why should I?" he replied, preoccupied.

"It's bad for you not to. Besides, you are growing thin."

"Is that your final conclusion concerning me, Cecile?" he asked, absently.

"Won't you please take this sandwich?"

Her outstretched arm more than what she said arrested his drifting attention again.

"Why the devil do you want me to eat?" he inquired, fishing out his empty pipe and filling it.

"You smoke too much. It's bad for you. It will do very queer things to the lining of your stomach if you smoke your luncheon instead of eating it."

He yawned.

"Is that so?" he said.

"Certainly it's so. Please take this sandwich."

He stood looking at the outstretched arm, thinking of other things and the girl sprang to her feet, caught his hand, opened the fingers, placed the sandwich on the palm, then, with a short laugh as though slightly disconcerted by her own audacity, she snatched the pipe from his left hand and tossed it upon the table. When she had reseated herself on the lounge beside her pasteboard box of luncheon, she became even more uncertain concerning the result of what she had done, and began to view with rising alarm the steady gray eyes that were so silently inspecting her.

But after a moment Drene walked over to the sofa, seated himself, curiously scrutinized the sandwich which lay across the palm of his hand, then gravely tasted it.

"This will doubtless give me indigestion," he remarked. "Why, Cecile, do you squander your wages on nourishment for me?"

"It cost only five cents."

"But why present five cents to me?" "I gave ten to a beggar this morning."

"Why?"

"I don't know."

"Was he grateful?"

"He seemed to be."

"This sandwich is excellent; but if I feel the worse for it, I'll not be very grateful to you." But he continued eating.

"The woman tempted me," she quoted, glancing at him sideways.

After a moment's survey of her:

"You're one of those bright, saucy, pretty, inexplicable things that throng this town and occasionally flit through this profession—aren't you?"

"Am I?"

"Yes. Nobody looks for anything except mediocrity; you're one of the surprises. Nobody expects you; nobody can account for you, but you appear now and then, here and there, anywhere, even everywhere—a pretty sparkle against the gray monotony of life, a momentary flash like a golden moat afloat in sunshine—and what then?"

She laughed.

"What then? What becomes of you? Where do you go? What do you turn into?"

"I don't know."

"You go somewhere, don't you? You change into something, don't you? What happens to you, petite Cigale?"

"When?"

"When the sunshine is turned off and the snow comes."

"I don't know, Mr. Drene." She broke her chocolate cake into halves and laid one on his knee.

"Thanks for further temptation," he said grimly.

"You are welcome. It's good, isn't it?"

"Excellent. Adam liked the apple, too. But it raised hell with him."

She laughed, shot a direct glance at him, and began to nibble her cake, with her eyes still fixed on him.

Once or twice he encountered her gaze but his own always wandered absently elsewhere.

"You think a great deal, don't you?" she remarked.

"Don't you?"

"I try not to—too much."

"What?" he asked, swallowing the last morsel of cake.

She shrugged her shoulders:

"What's the advantage of thinking?"

He considered her reply for a moment, her blue and rather childish eyes, and the very pure oval of her face. Then his attention flagged as usual—was wandering—when she sighed, very lightly, so that he scarcely heard it—merely noticed it sufficiently to conclude that, as usual, there was the inevitable hard luck story afloat in her vicinity, and that he lacked the interest to listen to it.

"Thinking," she said, "is a luxury to a tranquil mind and a punishment to a troubled one. So I try not to."

It was a moment or two before it occurred to him that the girl

had uttered an unconscious epigram.

"It sounded like somebody—probably Montaigne. Was it?" he inquired.

"I don't know what you mean."

"Oh. Then it wasn't. You're a funny little girl, aren't you?"

"Yes, rather."

"On purpose?"

"Yes, sometimes."

He looked into her very clear eyes, now brightly blue with intelligent perception of his not too civil badinage.

"And sometimes," he went on, "you're funny when you don't intend to be."

"You are, too, Mr. Drene."

"What?"

"Didn't you know it?"

A dull color tinted his cheek bones.

"No," he said, "I didn't know it."

"But you are. For instance, you don't walk; you stalk. You do what novelists make their gloomy heroes do—you stride. It's rather funny."

"Really. And do you find my movements comic?"

She was a trifle scared, now, but she laughed her breathless, youthful laugh:

"You are really very dramatic—a perfect story-book man. But, you know, sometimes they are funny when the author doesn't intend them to be.... Please don't be angry."

Why the impudence of a model should have irritated him he was at a loss to understand—unless there lurked under that impudence a trace of unflattering truth.

As he sat looking at her, all at once, and in an unexpected flash of self-illumination, he realized that habit had made of him an actor; that for a while—a long while—a space of time he could not at the moment conveniently compute—he had been playing a role merely because he had become accustomed to it.

Disaster had cast him for a part. For a long while he had been that part. Now he was still playing it from sheer force of habit. His tragedy had really become only the shadow of a memory. Already he had emerged from that shadow into the everyday outer world. But he had forgotten that he still wore a somber makeup and costume which in the sunshine might appear grotesque. No wonder the world thought him funny.

Glancing up from a perplexed and chagrined meditation he caught her eye—and found it penitent, troubled, and anxious.

“You’re quite right,” he said, smiling easily and naturally; “I am unintentionally funny. And I really didn’t know it—didn’t suspect it—until this moment.”

“Oh,” she said quickly. “I didn’t mean—I know you are often unhappy—”

“Nonsense!”

“You are! Anybody can see—and you really do not seem to be very old, either—when you smile—”

“I’m not very old,” he said, amused. “I’m not unhappy, either.

If I ever was, the truth is that I've almost forgotten by this time what it was all about—”

“A woman,” she quoted, “between friends”—and checked herself, frightened that she had dared interpret Quair’s malice.

He changed countenance at that; the dull red of anger clouded his visage.

“Oh,” she faltered, “I was not saucy, only sorry.... I have been sorry for you so long—”

“Who intimated to you that a woman ever played any part in my career?”

“It’s generally supposed. I don’t know anything more than that. But I’ve been—sorry. Love is a very dreadful thing,” she said under her breath.

“Is it?” he asked, controlling a sudden desire to laugh.

“Don’t you think so?”

“I have not thought of it that way, recently.... I haven’t thought about it at all—for some years.... Have you?” he added, trying to speak gravely.

“Oh, yes. I have thought of it,” she admitted.

“And you conclude it to be a rather dreadful business?”

“Yes, it is.”

“How?”

“Oh, I don’t know. A girl usually loves the wrong man. To be poor is always bad enough, but to be in love, too, is really very dreadful. It usually finishes us—you know.”

“Are you in love?” he inquired, managing to repress his

amusement.

"I could be. I know that much." She went to the sink, turned on the water, washed her hands, and stood with dripping fingers looking about for a towel.

"I'll get you one," he said. When he brought it, she laughed and held out her hands to be dried.

"Do you think you are a Sultana?" he inquired, draping the towel across her outstretched arms and leaving it there.

"I thought perhaps you'd dry them," she said sweetly.

"Not in the business," he remarked; and lighted his pipe.

Her hands were her particular beauty, soft and snowy. She was much in demand among painters, and had posed many times for pictures of the Virgin, her hands usually resting against her breast.

Now she bestowed great care upon them, thoroughly drying each separate, slender finger. Then she pushed back the heavy masses of her hair—"a miracle of silk and sunshine," as Quair had whispered to her. That same hair, also, was very popular among painters.

It was her figure that fascinated sculptors.

"Are you ready?" grunted Drene. Work presently recommenced.

She was entirely accustomed to praise from men, for her general attractiveness, for various separate features in what really was an unusually lovely ensemble.

She was also accustomed to flattery, to importunity, to the

ordinary variety of masculine solicitation; to the revelation of genuine feeling, too, in its various modes of expression—sentimental, explosive, insinuating—the entire gamut.

She had remained, however, untouched; curious and amused, perhaps, yet quite satisfied, so far, to be amused; and entirely content with her own curiosity.

She coquetted when she thought it safe; learned many things she had not suspected; was more cautious afterwards, but still, at intervals, ventured to use her attractiveness as a natural lure, as an excuse, as a reason, as a weapon, when the probable consequences threatened no embarrassment or unpleasantness for her.

She was much liked, much admired, much attempted, and entirely untempted.

When the Make-up Club gave its annual play depicting the foibles of artists and writers in the public eye, Cecile White was always cast for a role which included singing and dancing.

On and off for the last year or two she had posed for Drene, had dropped into his studio to lounge about when he had no need of her professionally, and when she had half an hour of idleness confronting her.

As she stood there now on the model stand, gazing dreamily from his busy hands to his lean, intent features, it occurred to her that this day had not been a sample of their usual humdrum relations. From the very beginning of their business relations he had remained merely her employer, self-centered, darkly

absorbed in his work, or, when not working, bored and often yawning. She had never come to know him any better than when she first laid eyes on him.

Always she had been a little interested in him, a little afraid, sometimes venturing an innocent audacity, out of sheer curiosity concerning the effect on him. But never had she succeeded in stirring him to any expression of personal feeling in regard to herself, one way or the other.

Probably he had no personal feeling concerning her. It seemed odd to her; model and master thrown alone together, day after day, usually became friends in some degree. But there had been nothing at all of camaraderie in their relationship, only a colorless, professional *sans-gene*, the informality of intimacy without the kindly essence of personal interest on his part.

He paid her wages promptly; said good morning when she came, and good night when she went; answered her questions when she asked them seriously; relapsed into indifference or into a lazy and not too civil *badinage* when she provoked him to it; and that was all.

He never complimented her, never praised her; yet he must have thought her a good model, or he would not have continued to send for her.

"Do you think me pretty?" she had asked one day, saucily invading one of his yawning silences.

"I think you're pretty good," he replied, "as a model. You'd be quite perfect if you were also deaf and dumb."

That had been nearly a year ago. She thought of it now, a slight heat in her cheeks as she remembered the snub, and her almost childish amazement, and the hurt and offended silence which lasted all that morning, but which, if he noticed at all, was doubtless entirely gratifying to him.

“May I rest?”

“If it’s necessary.”

She sprang lightly to the floor walked around behind him, and stood looking at his work.

“Do you want to know my opinion?” she asked.

“Yes,” he said, with unexpected urbanity; “if you are clever enough to have an opinion. What is it?”

She said, looking at the wax figure of herself and speaking with deliberation:

“In the last hour you have made out of a rather commonplace study an entirely spontaneous and charming creation.”

“What!” he exclaimed, his face reddening with pleasure at her opinion, and with surprise at her mode of expressing it.

“It’s quite true. That dancing figure is wholly charming. It is no study; it is pure creation.”

He knew it; was a little thrilled that she, representing to him an average and mediocre public, should recognize it so intelligently.

“As though,” she continued, “you had laid aside childish things.”

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