

Chambers Robert William

The Dark Star



Robert Chambers

The Dark Star

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TO MY FRIEND

EDGAR SISSON

Dans c'métier-là, faut rien chercher à comprendre.
René Benjamin

ALAK'S SONG

Where are you going,
Naïa?
Through the still noon —
Where are you going?

To hear the thunder of the sea
And the wind blowing! —
To find a stormy moon to comfort me
Across the dune!

Why are you weeping,
Naïa?
Through the still noon —
Why are you weeping?

Because I found no wind, no sea,
No white surf leaping,
Nor any flying moon to comfort me
Upon the dune.

What did you see there,
Naïa?
In the still noon —
What did you see there?

Only the parched world drowsed in drought,
And a fat bee, there,
Prying and probing at a poppy's mouth
That drooped a-swoon.

What did you hear there,

Naïa?
In the still noon —
What did you hear there?

Only a kestrel's lonely cry
From the wood near there —
A rustle in the wheat as I passed by —
A cricket's rune.

Who led you homeward,
Naïa?
Through the still noon —
Who led you homeward?

My soul within me sought the sea,
Leading me foam-ward:
But the lost moon's ghost returned with me
Through the high noon.

Where is your soul then,
Naïa?
Lost at high noon —
Where is your soul then?

It wanders East – or West – I think —
Or near the Pole, then —
Or died – perhaps there on the dune's dry brink
Seeking the moon.

THE DARK STAR

“The dying star grew dark; the last light faded from it; went out. Prince Erlik laughed.

“And suddenly the old order of things began to pass away more swiftly.

“Between earth and outer space – between Creator and created, confusing and confounding their identities, – a rushing darkness grew – the hurrying wrack of immemorial storms heralding whirlwinds through which Truth alone survives.

“Awaiting the inevitable reestablishment of such temporary conventions as render the incident of human existence possible, the brooding Demon which men call Truth stares steadily at Tengri under the high stars which are passing too, and which at last shall pass away and leave the Demon watching all alone amid the ruins of eternity.”

The Prophet of the Kiot Bordjiguen

PREFACE

CHILDREN OF THE STAR

Not the dark companion of Sirius, brightest of all stars – not our own chill and spectral planet rushing toward Vega in the constellation of Lyra – presided at the birth of millions born to corroborate a bloody horoscope.

But a Dark Star, speeding unseen through space, known to the ancients, by them called Erlik, after the Prince of Darkness, ruled at the birth of those myriad souls destined to be engulfed in the earthquake of the ages, or flung by it out of the ordered pathway of their lives into strange byways, stranger highways – into deeps and deserts never dreamed of.

Also one of the dozen odd temporary stars on record blazed up on that day, flared for a month or two, dwindled to a cinder, and went out.

But the Dark Star Erlik, terribly immortal, sped on through space to complete a two-hundred-thousand-year circuit of the heavens, and begin anew an immemorial journey by the will of the Most High.

What spectroscope is to horoscope, destiny is to chance. The black star Erlik rushed through interstellar darkness unseen; those born under its violent augury squalled in their cradles, or, thumb in mouth, slumbered the dreamless slumber of the newly born.

One of these, a tiny girl baby, fussed and fidgeted in her mother's arms, tortured by prickly heat when the hot winds blew through Trebizond.

Overhead vultures circled; a *stein-adler*, cleaving the blue, looked down where the surf made a thin white line along the coast, then set his lofty course for China.

Thousands of miles to the westward, a little boy of eight gazed out across the ruffled waters of the mill pond at Neeland's Mills, and wondered whether the ocean might not look that way.

And, wondering, with the salt sea effervescence working in his inland-born body, he fitted a cork to his fishing line and flung the baited hook far out across the ripples. Then he seated himself on the parapet of the stone bridge and waited for monsters of the deep to come.

And again, off Seraglio Point, men were rowing in a boat; and a corded sack lay in the stern, horridly and limply heavy.

There was also a box lying in the boat, oddly bound and clamped with metal which glistened like silver under the Eastern stars when the waves of the Bosphorus dashed high, and the flying scud rained down on box and sack and the red-capped rowers.

In Petrograd a little girl of twelve was learning to eat other things than sour milk and cheese; learning to ride otherwise than like a demon on a Cossack saddle; learning deportment, too, and languages, and social graces and the fine arts. And, most thoroughly of all, the little girl was learning how deathless should be her hatred for the Turkish Empire and all its works; and how only less perfect than our Lord in Paradise was the Czar on his throne amid that earthly paradise known as "All the Russias."

Her little brother was learning these things, too, in the Corps of Officers. Also he was already proficient on the balalaika.

And again, in the mountains of a conquered province, the little daughter of a gamekeeper to nobility was preparing to emigrate with her father to a new home in the Western world, where she would learn to perform miracles with rifle and revolver, and where the beauty of the hermit thrush's song would startle her into comparing it to the beauty of her own untried voice. But to her father, and to her, the most beautiful thing in all the world was love of Fatherland.

Over these, and millions of others, brooded the spell of the Dark Star. Even the world itself lay under it, vaguely uneasy, sometimes startled to momentary seismic panic. Then, ere mundane

self-control restored terrestrial equilibrium, a few mountains exploded, an island or two lay shattered by earthquake, boiling mud and pumice blotted out one city; earth-shock and fire another; a tidal wave a third.

But the world settled down and balanced itself once more on the edge of the perpetual abyss into which it must fall some day; the invisible shadow of the Dark Star swept it at intervals when some far and nameless sun blazed out unseen; days dawned; the sun of the solar system rose furtively each day and hung around the heavens until that dusky huntress, Night, chased him once more beyond the earth's horizon.

The shadow of the Dark Star was always there, though none saw it in sunshine or in moonlight, or in the silvery lustre of the planets.

A boy, born under it, stood outside the fringe of willow and alder, through which moved two English setters followed and controlled by the boy's father.

"Mark!" called the father.

Out of the willows like a feathered bomb burst a big grouse, and the green foliage that barred its flight seemed to explode as the strong bird sheered out into the sunshine.

The boy's gun, slanting upward at thirty degrees, glittered in the sun an instant, then the left barrel spoke; and the grouse, as though struck by lightning in mid-air, stopped with a jerk, then slanted swiftly and struck the ground.

"Dead!" cried the boy, as a setter appeared, leading on straight to the heavy mass of feathers lying on the pasture grass.

"Clean work, Jim," said his father, strolling out of the willows. "But wasn't it a bit risky, considering the little girl yonder?"

"Father!" exclaimed the boy, very red. "I never even saw her. I'm ashamed."

They stood looking across the pasture, where a little girl in a pink gingham dress lingered watching them, evidently lured by her curiosity from the old house at the crossroads just beyond.

Jim Neeland, still red with mortification, took the big cock-grouse from the dog which brought it – a tender-mouthed, beautifully trained Belton, who stood with his feathered offering in his jaws, very serious, very proud, awaiting praise from the Neelands, father and son.

Neeland senior "drew" the bird and distributed the sacrifice impartially between both dogs – it being the custom of the country.

Neeland junior broke his gun, replaced the exploded shell, content indeed with his one hundred per cent performance.

"Better run over and speak to the little girl, Jim," suggested old Dick Neeland, as he motioned the dogs into covert again.

So Jim ran lightly across the stony, clover-set ground to where the little girl roamed along the old snake fence, picking berries sometimes, sometimes watching the sportsmen out of shy, golden-grey eyes.

"Little girl," he said, "I'm afraid the shot from my gun came rattling rather close to you that time. You'll have to be careful. I've noticed you here before. It won't do; you'll have to keep out of range of those bushes, because when we're inside we can't see exactly where we're firing."

The child said nothing. She looked up at the boy, smiled shyly, then, with much composure, began her retreat, not neglecting any tempting blackberry on the way.

The sun hung low over the hazy Gayfield hills; the beeches and oaks of Mohawk County burned brown and crimson; silver birches supported their delicate canopies of burnt gold; and imperial white pines clothed hill and vale in a stately robe of green.

Jim Neeland forgot the child – or remembered her only to exercise caution in the Brookhollow covert.

The little girl Ruhannah, who had once fidgeted with prickly heat in her mother's arms outside the walls of Trebizond, did not forget this easily smiling, tall young fellow – a grown man to her – who had come across the pasture lot to warn her.

But it was many a day before they met again, though these two also had been born under the invisible shadow of the Dark Star. But the shadow of Erlik is always passing like swift lightning across the Phantom Planet which has fled the other way since Time was born.

Allahou Ekber, O Tchinguiz Khagan!

A native Mongol missionary said to Ruhannah's father:

“As the chronicles of the Eighurs have it, long ago there fell metal from the Black Racer of the skies; the first dagger was made of it; and the first image of the Prince of Darkness. These pass from Kurd to Cossack by theft, by gift, by loss; they pass from nation to nation by accident, which is Divine design.

“And where they remain, war is. And lasts until image and dagger are carried to another land where war shall be. But where there is war, only the predestined suffer – those born under Erlik – children of the Dark Star.”

“I thought,” said the Reverend Wilbour Carew, “that my brother had confessed Christ.”

“I am but repeating to you what my father believed; and Temujin before him,” replied the native convert, his remote gaze lost in reflection.

His eyes were quite little and coloured like a lion's; and sometimes, in deep reverie, the corners of his upper lip twitched.

This happened when Ruhannah lay fretting in her mother's arms, and the hot wind blew on Trebizond.

Under the Dark Star, too, a boy grew up in Minetta Lane, not less combative than other ragged boys about him, but he was inclined to arrange and superintend fist fights rather than to participate in battle, except with his wits.

His name was Eddie Brandes; his first fortune of three dollars was amassed at craps; he became a hanger-on in ward politics, at race-tracks, stable, club, squared ring, vaudeville, burlesque. Long Acre attracted him – but always the gambling end of the operation.

Which predilection, with its years of ups and downs, landed him one day in Western Canada with an “Unknown” to match against an Athabasca blacksmith, and a training camp as the prospect for the next six weeks.

There lived there, gradually dying, one Albrecht Dumont, lately head gamekeeper to nobility in the mountains of a Lost Province, and wearing the Iron Cross of 1870 on the ruins of a gigantic and bony chest, now as hollow as a Gothic ruin.

And if, like a thousand fellow patriots, he had been ordered to the Western World to watch and report to his Government the trend and tendency of that Western, English-speaking world, only his Government and his daughter knew it – a child of the Dark Star now grown to early womanhood, with a voice like a hermit thrush and the skill of a sorceress with anything that sped a bullet.

Before the Unknown was quite ready to meet the Athabasca blacksmith, Albrecht Dumont, dying faster now, signed his last report to the Government at Berlin, which his daughter Ilse had written for him – something about Canadian canals and stupid Yankees and their greed, indifference, cowardice, and sloth.

Dumont's mind wandered:

“After the well-born Herr Gott relieves me at my post,” he whispered, “do thou pick up my burden and stand guard, little Ilse.”

“Yes, father.”

“Thy sacred promise?”

“My promise.”

The next day Dumont felt better than he had felt for a year.

“Ilse, who is the short and broadly constructed American who comes now already every day to see thee and to hear thee sing?”

“His name is Eddie Brandes.”

“He is of the fight *gesellschaft*, not?”

“He should gain much money by the fight. A theatre in Chicago may he willingly control, in which light opera shall be given.”

“Is it for that he hears so willingly thy voice?”

“It is for that... And love.”

“And what of Herr Max Venem, who has asked of me thy little hand in marriage?”

The girl was silent.

“Thou dost not love him?”

“No.”

Toward sunset, Dumont, lying by the window, opened his eyes of a dying *Lämmergeier*:

“My Ilse.”

“Father?”

“What has thou to this man said?”

“That I will be engaged to him if thou approve.”

“He has gained the fight?”

“Today... And many thousand dollars. The theatre in Chicago is his when he desires. Riches, leisure, opportunity to study for a career upon his stage, are mine if I desire.”

“Dost thou desire this, little Ilse?”

“Yes.”

“And the man Venem who has followed thee so long?”

“I cannot be what he would have me – a *Hausfrau* – to mend his linen for my board and lodging.”

“And the Fatherland which placed me here on outpost?”

“I take thy place when God relieves thee.”

“*So ist's recht!.. Grüs Gott– Ilse–*”

Among the German settlers a five-piece brass band had been organised the year before.

It marched at the funeral of Albrecht Dumont, lately head gamekeeper to nobility in the mountains of a long-lost province.

Three months later Ilse Dumont arrived in Chicago to marry Eddie Brandes. One Benjamin Stull was best man. Others present included “Captain” Quint, “Doc” Curfoot, “Parson” Smawley, Abe Gordon – friends of the bridegroom.

Invited by the bride, among others were Theodor Weishelm, the Hon. Charles Wilson, M. P., and Herr Johann Kestner, a wealthy gentleman from Leipsic seeking safe and promising investments in Canada and the United States.

A year later Ilse Dumont Brandes, assuming the stage name of Minna Minti, sang the rôle of *Bettina* in “The Mascotte,” at the Brandes Theatre in Chicago.

A year later, when she created the part of *Kathi* in “The White Horse,” Max Venem sent word to her that she would live to see her husband lying in the gutter under his heel. Which made the girl unhappy in her triumph.

But Venem hunted up Abe Grittlefeld and told him very coolly that he meant to ruin Brandes.

And within a month the latest public favourite, Minna Minti, sat in her dressing-room, wet-eyed, enraged, with the reports of Venem’s private detectives locked in the drawer of her dressing table, and the curtain waiting.

So complex was life already becoming to these few among the million children of the Dark Star Erlik – to everyone, from the child that fretted in its mother’s arms under the hot wind near Trebizond, to a deposed Sultan, cowering behind the ivory screen in his zenana, weeping tears that rolled like oil over his fat jowl to which still adhered the powdered sugar of a Turkish sweetmeat.

Allahou Ekber, *Khodja*; God is great. Great also, *Ande*, is Ali, the Fourth Caliph, cousin-companion of Mahomet the Prophet. But, *O tougtchi*, be thy name Niaz and thy surname Bai, for Prince Erlik speeds on his Dark Star, and beneath the end of the argument between those two last survivors of a burnt-out world – behold! The sword!

CHAPTER I

THE WONDER-BOX

As long as she could remember she had been permitted to play with the contents of the late Herr Conrad Wilner's wonder-box. The programme on such occasions varied little; the child was permitted to rummage among the treasures in the box until she had satisfied her perennial curiosity; conversation with her absent-minded father ensued, which ultimately included a personal narrative, dragged out piecemeal from the reticent, dreamy invalid. Then always a few pages of the diary kept by the late Herr Wilner were read as a bedtime story. And bath and bed and dreamland followed. That was the invariable routine, now once more in full swing.

Her father lay on his invalid's chair, reading; his rubber-shod crutches rested against the wall, within easy reach. By him, beside the kerosene lamp, her mother sat, mending her child's stockings and underwear.

Outside the circle of lamplight the incandescent eyes of the stove glowed steadily through the semi-dusk; and the child, always fascinated by anything that aroused her imagination, lifted her gaze furtively from time to time to convince herself that it really was the big, familiar stove which glared redly back at her, and not a dragon into which her creative fancy had so often transformed it.

Reassured, she continued to explore the contents of the wonder-box – a toy she preferred to her doll, but not to her beloved set of water-colours and crayon pencils.

Some centuries ago Pandora's box let loose a world of troubles; Herr Wilner's box apparently contained only pleasure for a little child whose pleasures were mostly of her own invention.

It was a curious old box, made of olive wood and bound with bands of some lacquered silvery metal to make it strong – rupee silver, perhaps – strangely wrought with Arabic characters engraved and in shallow relief. It had handles on either side, like a sea-chest; a silver-lacquered lock and hasp which retained traces of violent usage; and six heavy strap hinges of the same lacquered metal.

Within it the little child knew that a most fascinating collection of articles was to be discovered, taken out one by one with greatest care, played with discreetly, and, at her mother's command, returned to their several places in Herr Wilner's box.

There were, in this box, two rather murderous-looking Kurdish daggers in sheaths of fretted silver – never to be unsheathed, it was solemnly understood, except by the child's father.

There was a pair of German army revolvers of the pattern of 1900, the unexploded cartridges of which had long since been extracted and cautiously thrown into the mill pond by the child's mother, much to the surprise, no doubt, of the pickerel and sunfish.

There were writing materials of sandalwood, a few sea shells, a dozen books in German with many steel plate engravings; also a red Turkish fez with a dark blue tassel; two pairs of gold-rimmed spectacles; several tobacco pipes of Dresden porcelain, a case full of instruments for mechanical drawing, a thick blank book bound in calf and containing the diary of the late Herr Wilner down to within a few minutes before his death.

Also there was a figure in bronze, encrusted with tarnished gold and faded traces of polychrome decoration.

Erlik, the Yellow Devil, as Herr Wilner called it, seemed too heavy to be a hollow casting, and yet, when shaken, something within rattled faintly, as though when the molten metal was cooling a fissure formed inside, into which a few loose fragments of bronze had fallen.

It apparently had not been made to represent any benign Chinese god; the aspect of the yellow figure was anything but benevolent. The features were terrific; scowls infested its grotesque countenance; threatening brows bent inward; angry eyes rolled in apparent fury; its double gesture with sword and javelin was violent and almost humorously menacing. And Ruhannah adored it.

For a little while the child played her usual game of frightening her doll with the Yellow Devil and then rescuing her by the aid of a fairy prince which she herself had designed, smeared with water-colours, and cut out with scissors from a piece of cardboard.

After a time she turned to the remaining treasures in the wonder-box. These consisted of several volumes containing photographs, others full of sketches in pencil and water-colour, and a thick roll of glazed linen scrolls covered with designs in India ink.

The photographs were of all sorts – landscapes, rivers, ships in dock, dry dock, and at sea; lighthouses, forts, horses carrying soldiers armed with lances and wearing the red fez; artillery on the march, infantry, groups of officers, all wearing the same sort of fez which lay there in Herr Wilner's box of olive wood.

There were drawings, too – sketches of cannon, of rifles, of swords; drawings of soldiers in various gay uniforms, all carefully coloured by hand. There were pictures of ships, from the sterns of which the crescent flag floated lazily; sketches of great, ugly-looking objects which her father explained were Turkish ironclads. The name "ironclad" always sounded menacing and formidable to the child, and the forbidding pictures fascinated her.

Then there were scores and scores of scrolls made out of slippery white linen, on which had been drawn all sorts of most amazing geometrical designs in ink.

"Plans," her father explained vaguely. And, when pressed by reiterated questions: "Plans for military works, I believe – forts, docks, barracks, fortified cuts and bridges. You are not yet quite old enough to understand, Ruhannah."

"Who did draw them, daddy?"

"A German friend of mine, Herr Conrad Wilner."

"What for?"

"I think his master sent him to Turkey to make those pictures."

"For the Sultan?"

"No; for his Emperor."

"Why?"

"I don't exactly know, Rue."

At this stage of the conversation her father usually laid aside his book and composed himself for the inevitable narrative soon to be demanded of him.

Then, although having heard the story many times from her crippled father's lips, but never weary of the repetition, the child's eyes would grow round and very solemn in preparation for her next and inevitable question:

"And did Herr Wilner *die*, daddy?"

"Yes, dear."

"Tell me!"

"Well, it was when I was a missionary in the Trebizond district, and your mother and I went—"

"And *me*, daddy? And *me*, too!"

"Yes; you were a little baby in arms. And we all went to Gallipoli to attend the opening of a beautiful new school which was built for little Mohammedan converts to Christianity—"

"Did I see those little Christian children, daddy?"

"Yes, you saw them. But you are too young to remember."

"Tell me. Don't stop!"

"Then listen attentively without interrupting, Rue: Your mother and you and I went to Gallipoli; and my friend, Herr Wilner, who had been staying with us at a town called Tchardak, came along with us to attend the opening of the American school.

"And the night we arrived there was trouble. The Turkish people, urged on by some bad officials in the Sanjak, came with guns and swords and spears and set fire to the mission school.

“They did not offer to harm us. We had already collected our converts and our personal baggage. Our caravan was starting. The mob might not have done anything worse than burn the school if Herr Wilner had not lost his temper and threatened them with a dog whip. Then they killed him with stones, there in the walled yard.”

At this point in the tragedy, the eagerly awaited and ardently desired shivers passed up and down the child’s back.

“O – oh! Did they kill him *dead*?”

“Yes, dear.”

“Was he a martyr?”

“In a way he was a martyr to his duty, I suppose. At least I gather so from his diary and from what he once told me of his life.”

“And then what happened? Tell me, daddy.”

“A Greek steamer took us and our baggage to Trebizond.”

“And what then?”

“And then, a year later, the terrible massacre at our Trebizond mission occurred—”

That was what the child was waiting for.

“I know!” she interrupted eagerly. “The wicked Turks and the cruel Kurds did come galloping and shouting ‘Allah!’ And all the poor, converted people became martyrs. And God loves martyrs, doesn’t He?”

“Yes, dear—”

“And then they did kill all the poor little Christian children!” exclaimed the child excitedly. “And they did cut you with swords and guns! And then the kind sailors with the American flag took you and mamma and me to a ship and saved us by the grace of our Lord Jesus!”

“Yes, dear—”

“Tell me!”

“That is all—”

“No; you walk on two crutches, and you cannot be a missionary any more because you are sick all the time! Tell me, daddy!”

“Yes. And that is all, Rue—”

“Oh, no! Please! Tell me!.. And then, don’t you remember how the brave British sailors and our brave American sailors pointed their cannon at the *I-ronclads*, and they said, ‘Do not shoot or we shall shoot you to pieces.’ And then the brave American sailors went on shore and brought back some poor little wounded converted children, and your baggage and the magic box of Herr Wilner!”

“Yes, dear. And now that is enough tonight—”

“Oh, daddy, you must first read in the di-a-ry which Herr Wilner made!”

“Bring me the book, Rue.”

With an interest forever new, the Carew family prepared to listen to the words written by a strange man who had died only a few moments after he had made the last entry in the book – before even the ink was entirely dry on the pages.

The child, sitting cross-legged on the floor, clasped her little hands tightly; her mother laid aside her sewing, folded it, and placed it in her lap; her father searched through the pencilled translation which he had written in between the lines of German script, found where he had left off the time before, then continued the diary of Herr Conrad Wilner, deceased:

March 3. My original plans have been sent to the Yildiz Palace. My duplicates are to go to Berlin when a messenger from our Embassy arrives. Murad Bey knows this. I am sorry he knows it. But nobody except myself is aware that I have a third set of plans carefully hidden.

March 4. All day with Murad's men setting wire entanglements under water; two Turkish destroyers patrolling the entrance to the bay, and cavalry patrols on the heights to warn away the curious.

March 6. Forts Alamout and Shah Abbas are being reconstructed from the new plans. Wired areas under water and along the coves and shoals are being plotted. Murad Bey is unusually polite and effusive, conversing with me in German and French. A spidery man and very dangerous.

March 7. A strange and tragic affair last night. The heat being severe, I left my tent about midnight and went down to the dock where my little sailboat lay, with the object of cooling myself on the water. There was a hot land breeze; I sailed out into the bay and cruised north along the coves which I have wired. As I rounded a little rocky point I was surprised to see in the moonlight, very near, a steam yacht at anchor, carrying no lights. The longer I looked at her the more certain I became that I was gazing at the Imperial yacht. I had no idea what the yacht might be doing here; I ran my sailboat close under the overhanging rocks and anchored. Then I saw a small boat in the moonlight, pulling from the yacht toward shore, where the crescent cove had already been thoroughly staked and the bottom closely covered with barbed wire as far as the edge of the deep channel which curves in here like a scimitar.

It must have been that the people in the boat miscalculated the location of the channel, for they were well over the sunken barbed wire when they lifted and threw overboard what they had come there to get rid of – two dark bulks that splashed.

I watched the boat pull back to the Imperial yacht. A little later the yacht weighed anchor and steamed northward, burning no lights. Only the red reflection tingeing the smoke from her stacks was visible. I watched her until she was lost in the moonlight, thinking all the while of those weighted sacks so often dropped overboard along the Bosphorus and off Seraglio Point from that same Imperial yacht.

When the steamer had disappeared, I got out my sweeps and rowed for the place where the dark objects had been dropped overboard. I knew that they must be resting somewhere on the closely criss-crossed mesh of wires just below the surface of the water; but I probed for an hour before I located anything. Another hour passed in trying to hook into the object with the little three-fluked grapnel which I used as an anchor. I got hold of something finally; a heavy chest of olive wood bound with metal; but I had to rig a tackle before I could hoist it aboard.

Then I cast out again; and very soon my grapnel hooked into what I expected – a canvas sack, weighted with a round shot. When I got it aboard, I hesitated a long while before opening it. Finally I made a long slit in the canvas with my knife...

She was very young – not over sixteen, I think, and she was really beautiful, even under her wet, dark hair. She seemed to be a Caucasian girl – maybe a Georgian. She wore a small gold cross which hung from a gold cord around her neck. There was another, and tighter, cord around her neck, too. I cut the silk bowstring and closed and bound her eyes with my handkerchief before I rowed out a little farther and lowered her into the deep channel which cuts eastward here like the scimitar of that true believer, Abdul Hamid.

Then I hoisted sail and beat up slowly toward my little dock under a moon which had become ghastly under the pallid aura of a gathering storm–

“A poor dead young lady!” interrupted the child, clasping her hands more tightly. “Did the Sultan kill her, daddy?”

“It seems so, Ruhannah.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know. He was a very cruel and wicked Sultan.”

“I don’t see why he killed the beautiful poor dead lady.”

“If you will listen and not interrupt, you shall learn why.”

“And was the chest that Herr Wilner pulled up the very same chest that is here on the floor beside me?” insisted the child.

“The very same. Now listen, Rue, and I shall read a little more in Herr Wilner’s diary, and then you must have your bath and be put to bed—”

“Please read, daddy!”

The Reverend Wilbour Carew turned the page and quietly continued:

March 20. In my own quarters at Trebizond again, and rid of Murad for a while.

A canvas cover and rope handles concealed the character of my olive wood chest. I do not believe anybody suspects it to be anything except one of the various boxes containing my own personal effects. I shall open it tonight with a file and chisel, if possible.

March 21. The contents of the chest reveal something of the tragedy. The box is full of letters written in Russian, and full of stones which weigh collectively a hundred pounds at least. There is nothing else in the chest except a broken Ikon and a bronze figure of Erlik, a Yildiz relic, no doubt, of some Kurdish raid into Mongolia, and probably placed beside the dead girl by her murderers in derision. I am translating the letters and arranging them in sequence.

March 25. I have translated the letters. The dead girl’s name was evidently Tatyana, one of several children of some Cossack chief or petty prince, and on the eve of her marriage to a young officer named Mitya the Kurds raided the town. They carried poor Tatyana off along with her wedding chest – the chest fished up with my grapnel.

In brief, the chest and the girl found their way into Abdul’s seraglio. The letters of the dead girl – which were written and entrusted probably to a faithless slave, but which evidently never left the seraglio – throw some light on the tragedy, for they breathe indignation and contempt of Islam, and call on her affianced, on her parents, and on her people to rescue her and avenge her.

And after a while, no doubt Abdul tired of reading fierce, unreconciled little Tatyana’s stolen letters, and simply ended the matter by having her bowstrung and dumped overboard in a sack, together with her marriage chest, her letters, and the Yellow Devil in bronze as a final insult.

She seems to have had a sister, Naïa, thirteen years old, betrothed to a Prince Mistchenka, a cavalry officer in the Terek Cossacks. Her father had been Hetman of the Don Cossacks before the Emperor Nicholas reserved that title for Imperial use. And *she* ended in a sack off Gallipoli! That is the story of Tatyana and her wedding chest.

March 29. Murad arrived, murderously bland and assiduous in his solicitude for my health and comfort. I am almost positive he knows that I fished up something from Cove No. 37 under the theoretical guns of theoretical Fort Osman, both long plotted out but long delayed.

April 5. My duplicate plans for Gallipoli have been stolen. I have a third set still. Colonel Murad Bey is not to be trusted. My position is awkward and is becoming serious. There is no faith to be placed in Abdul Hamid. My credentials, the secret agreement with my Government, are no longer regarded even with toleration in the Yildiz Kiosque. A hundred insignificant incidents prove it every day. And if

Abdul dare not break with Germany it is only because he is not yet ready to defy the Young Turk party. The British Embassy is very active and bothers me a great deal.

April 10. My secret correspondence with Enver Bey has been discovered, and my letters opened. This is a very bad business. I have notified my Government that the Turkish Government does not want me here; that the plan of a Germanised Turkish army is becoming objectionable to the Porte; that the duplicate plans of our engineers for the Dardanelles and the Gallipoli Peninsula have been stolen.

April 13. A secret interview with Enver Bey, who promises that our ideas shall be carried out when his party comes into power. Evidently he does not know that my duplicates have been stolen.

Troubles threaten in the Vilayet of Trebizond, where is an American Mission. I fear that our emissaries and the emissaries of Enver Bey are deliberately fomenting disorders because Americans are not desired by our Government. Enver denies this; but it is idle to believe anyone in this country.

April 16. Another interview with Enver Bey. His scheme is flatly revolutionary, namely, the deposition of Abdul, a secret alliance, offensive and defensive, with us; the Germanisation of the Turkish army and navy; the fortification of the Gallipoli district according to our plans; a steadily increasing pressure on Serbia; a final reckoning with Russia which is definitely to settle the status of Albania and Serbia and leave the Balkan grouping to be settled between Austria, Germany, and Turkey.

I spoke several times about India and Egypt, but he does not desire to arouse England unless she interferes.

I spoke also of Abdul Hamid's secret and growing fear of Germany, and his increasing inclination toward England once more.

No trace of my stolen plans. The originals are in the Yildiz Palace. I have a third set secreted, about which nobody knows.

April 21. I have been summoned to the Yildiz Palace. It possibly means my assassination. I have confided my box of data, photographs, and plans, to the Reverend Wilbour Carew, an American missionary in the Trebizond sanjak.

There are rumours that Abdul has become mentally unhinged through dread of assassination. One of his own aides-de-camp, while being granted an audience in the Yildiz, made a sudden and abrupt movement to find his handkerchief; and Abdul Hamid whipped out a pistol and shot him dead. This is authentic.

April 30. Back at Tchardak with my good missionary and his wife. A strange interview with Abdul. There were twenty French clocks in the room, all going and all striking at various intervals. The walls were set with French mirrors.

Abdul's cordiality was terrifying; the full original set of my Gallipoli plans was brought in. After a while, the Sultan reminded me that the plans were in duplicate, and asked me where were these duplicates. What duplicity! But I said pleasantly that they were to be sent to General Staff Headquarters in Berlin.

He pretended to understand that this was contrary to the agreement, and insisted that the plans should first be sent to him for comparison. I merely referred him to his agreement with my Government. But all the while we were talking I was absolutely convinced that the stolen duplicates were at that moment in the Yildiz Kiosque. Abdul must have known that I believed it. Yet we both merely smiled our confidence in each other.

He seemed to be unusually good-natured and gracious, saying that no doubt I was quite right in sending the plans to Berlin. He spoke of Enver Bey cordially, and

said he hoped to be reconciled to him and his friends very soon. When Abdul Hamid becomes reconciled to anybody who disagrees with him, the latter is *always* dead.

He asked me where I was going. I told him about the plans I was preparing for the Trebizond district. He offered me an escort of Kurdish cavalry, saying that he had been told the district was not very safe. I thanked him and declined his escort of assassins.

I saw it all very plainly. Like a pirate captain, Abdul orders his crew to dig a secret hole for his treasure, and when the hole is dug and the treasure hidden, he murders the men who hid it for him, so that they shall never betray its location. I am one of those men. That is what he means for me, who have given him his Gallipoli plans. No wonder that in England they call him Abdul the Damned!

May 3. In the Bazaar at Tchardak yesterday two men tried to stab me. I got their daggers, but they escaped in the confusion. Murad called to express horror and regret. Yes; regret that I had not been murdered.

May 5. I have written to my Government that my usefulness here seems to be ended; that my life is in hourly danger; that I desire to be more thoroughly informed concerning the relations between Berlin and the Yildiz Palace.

May 6. I am in disgrace. My Government is furious because my correspondence with Enver Bey has been stolen. The Porte has complained about me to Berlin; Berlin disowns me, disclaims all knowledge of my political activities outside of my engineering work.

This is what failure to carry out secret instructions invariably brings – desertion by the Government from which such instructions are received. In diplomacy, failure is a crime never forgiven. Abandoned by my Government I am now little better than an outlaw here. Two courses remain open to me – to go back in disgrace and live obscurely for the remainder of my life, or to risk my life by hanging on desperately here with an almost hopeless possibility before me of accomplishing something to serve my Government and rehabilitate myself.

The matter of the stolen plans is being taken up by our Ambassador at the Sublime Porte. The British Embassy is suspected. What folly! I possess a third set of plans. Our Embassy ought to send to Trebizond for them. I don't know what to do.

May 12. A letter I wrote May 10 to the German Embassy has been stolen. I am now greatly worried about the third set of plans. It seems safest to include the box containing them among the baggage of the American missionary, the Reverend Wilbour Carew; and, too, for me to seek shelter with him.

As I am now afraid that an enemy may impersonate an official of the German Embassy, I have the missionary's promise that he will retain and conceal the contents of my box until I instruct him otherwise. I am practically in hiding at his house, and in actual fear of my life.

May 15. The missionary and his wife and baby travel to Gallipoli, where an American school for girls is about to be opened.

Today, in a café, I noticed that the flies, swarming on the edge of my coffee cup, fell into the saucer dead. I did not taste my coffee.

May 16. Last night a shot was fired through my door. I have decided to travel to Gallipoli with the missionary.

May 18. My groom stole and ate an orange from my breakfast tray. He is dead.

May 20. The Reverend Mr. Carew and his wife are most kind and sympathetic. They are good people, simple, kindly, brave, faithful, and fearlessly devoted to God's service in this vile land of treachery and lies.

May 21. I have confessed to the Reverend Mr. Carew as I would confess to a priest in holy orders. I have told him all under pledge of secrecy. I told him also that the sanctuary he offers might be violated with evil consequences to him; and that I would travel as far as Gallipoli with him and then leave. But the kind, courageous missionary and his wife insist that I remain under the protection which he says the flag of his country affords me. If I could only get my third set of plans out of the country!

May 22. Today my coffee was again poisoned. I don't know what prevented me from tasting it – some vague premonition. A pariah dog ate the bread I soaked in it, and died before he could yelp.

It looks to me as though my end were inevitable. Today I gave my bronze figure of Erlik, the Yellow Devil, to Mrs. Carew to keep as a dowry for her little daughter, now a baby in arms. If it is hollow, as I feel sure, there are certain to be one or two jewels in it. And the figure itself might bring five hundred marks at an antiquary's.

May 30. Arrived at the Gallipoli mission. Three Turkish ironclads lying close inshore. A British cruiser, the *Cobra*, and an American cruiser, the *Oneida*, appeared about sunset and anchored near the ironclads. The bugles on deck were plainly audible. If a German warship appears I shall carry my box on board. My only chance to rehabilitate myself is to get the third set of plans to Berlin.

June 1. In the middle of the religious exercises with which the new school is being inaugurated, cries of "Allah" come from a great crowd which has gathered. From my window where I am writing I can see how insolent the attitude of this Mohammedan riffraff is becoming. They spit upon the ground – a pebble is tossed at a convert – a sudden shout of "Allah" – pushing and jostling – a lighted torch blazes! I take my whip of rhinoceros hide and go down into the court to put a stop to this insolence–

Her father slowly closed the book.

"Daddy! Is that where poor Herr Wilner died?"

"Yes, dear."

After a silence his wife said thoughtfully:

"I have always considered it very strange that the German Government did not send for Herr Wilner's papers."

"Probably they did, Mary. And very probably Murad Bey told them that the papers had been destroyed."

"And you never believed it to be your duty to send the papers to the German Government?"

"No. It was an unholy alliance that Germany sought with that monster Abdul. And when Enver Pasha seized the reins of government such an alliance would have been none the less unholy. You know and so do I that if Germany did not actually incite the Armenian massacres she at least was cognisant of preparations made to begin them. Germany is still hostile to all British or American missions, all Anglo-Saxon influence in Turkey.

"No; I did not send Herr Wilner's papers to Berlin; and the events of the last fifteen years have demonstrated that I was right in withholding them."

His wife nodded, laid aside her work basket, and rose.

"Come, Ruhannah," she said with decision; "put everything back into the wonder-box."

And, stooping, she lifted and laid away in it the scowling, menacing Yellow Devil.

And so, every month or two, the wonder-box was opened for the child to play with, the same story told, extracts from the diary read; but these ceremonies, after a while, began to recur at lengthening intervals as the years passed and the child grew older.

And finally it was left to her to open the box when she desired, and to read for herself the pencilled translation of the diary, which her father had made during some of the idle and trying moments of his isolated and restricted life. And, when she had been going to school for some years, other and more vivid interests replaced her dolls and her wonder-box; but not her beloved case of water-colours and crayon pencils.

CHAPTER II

BROOKHOLLOW

The mother, shading the candle with her work-worn hand, looked down at the child in silence. The subdued light fell on a freckled cheek where dark lashes rested, on a slim neck and thin shoulders framed by a mass of short, curly chestnut hair.

Though it was still dark, the mill whistle was blowing for six o'clock. Like a goblin horn it sounded ominously through Ruhannah's dream. She stirred in her sleep; her mother stole across the room, closed the window, and went away carrying the candle with her.

At seven the whistle blew again; the child turned over and unclosed her eyes. A brassy light glimmered between leafless apple branches outside her window. Through the frosty radiance of sunrise a blue jay screamed.

Ruhannah cuddled deeper among the blankets and buried the tip of her chilly nose. But the grey eyes remained wide open and, under the faded quilt, her little ears were listening intently.

Presently from the floor below came the expected summons:

"Ruhannah!"

"Oh, *please*, mother!"

"It's after seven—"

"I know: I'll be ready in time!"

"It's after seven, Rue!"

"I'm so cold, mother dear!"

"I closed your window. You may bathe and dress down here."

"B-r-r-r! I can see my own breath when I breathe!"

"Come down and dress by the kitchen range," repeated her mother. "I've warm water all ready for you."

The brassy light behind the trees was becoming golden; slim bluish shadows already stretched from the base of every tree across frozen fields dusted with snow.

As usual, the lank black cat came walking into the room, its mysterious crystal-green eyes brilliant in the glowing light.

Listening, the child heard her father moving heavily about in the adjoining room.

Then, from below again:

"Ruhannah!"

"I'm going to get up, mother!"

"Rue! Obey me!"

"I'm *up*! I'm on my way!" She sprang out amid a tempest of bedclothes, hopped gingerly across the chilly carpet, seized her garments in one hand, comb and toothbrush in the other, ran into the hallway and pattered downstairs.

The cat followed leisurely, twitching a coal-black tail.

"Mother, could I have my breakfast first? I'm so hungry—"

Her mother turned from the range and kissed her as she huddled close to it. The sheet of zinc underneath warmed her bare feet delightfully. She sighed with satisfaction, looked wistfully at the coffeepot simmering, sniffed at the biscuits and sizzling ham.

"Could I have one little taste before I—"

"Come, dear. There's the basin. Bathe quickly, now."

Ruhannah frowned and cast a tragic glance upon the tin washtub on the kitchen floor. Presently she stole over, tested the water with her finger-tip, found it not unreasonably cold, dropped the night-

dress from her frail shoulders, and stepped into the tub with a perfunctory shiver – a thin, overgrown child of fifteen, with pipestem limbs and every rib anatomically apparent.

Her hair, which had been cropped to shoulder length, seemed to turn from chestnut to bronze fire, gleaming and crackling under the comb which she hastily passed through it before twisting it up.

“Quickly but thoroughly,” said her mother. “Hasten, Rue.”

Ruhannah seized soap and sponge, gasped, shut her grey eyes tightly, and fell to scrubbing with the fury of despair.

“Don’t splash, dear–”

“Did you warm my towel, mother?” – blindly stretching out one thin and dripping arm.

Her mother wrapped her in a big crash towel from head to foot.

Later, pulling on stockings and shoes by the range, she managed to achieve a buttered biscuit at the same time, and was already betraying further designs upon another one when her mother sent her to set the table in the sitting-room.

Thither sauntered Ruhannah, partly dressed, still dressing.

By the nickel-trimmed stove she completed her toilet, then hastily laid the breakfast cloth and arranged the china and plated tableware, and filled the water pitcher.

Her father came in on his crutches; she hurried from the table, syrup jug in one hand, cruet in the other, and lifted her face to be kissed; then she brought hot plates, coffeepot, and platters, and seated herself at the table where her father and mother were waiting in silence.

When she was seated her father folded his large, pallid, bony hands; her mother clasped hers on the edge of the table, bowing her head; and Ruhannah imitated them. Between her fingers she could see the cat under the table, and she watched it arch its back and gently rub against her chair.

“For what we are about to receive, make us grateful, Eternal Father. This day we should go hungry except for Thy bounty. Without presuming to importune Thee, may we ask Thee to remember all who awake hungry on this winter day... Amen.”

Ruhannah instantly became very busy with her breakfast. The cat beside her chair purred loudly and rose at intervals on its hind legs to twitch her dress; and Ruhannah occasionally bestowed alms and conversation upon it.

“Rue,” said her mother, “you should try to do better with your algebra this week.”

“Yes, I do really mean to.”

“Have you had any more bad-conduct marks?”

“Yes, mother.”

Her father lifted his mild, dreamy eyes of an invalid. Her mother asked:

“What for?”

“For wasting my time in study hour,” said the girl truthfully.

“Were you drawing?”

“Yes, mother.”

“Rue! Again! Why do you persist in drawing pictures in your copy books when you have an hour’s lesson in drawing every week? Besides, you may draw pictures at home whenever you wish.”

“I don’t exactly know why,” replied the girl slowly. “It just happens before I notice what I am doing... Of course,” she explained, “I do recollect that I oughtn’t to be drawing in study hour. But that’s after I’ve begun, and then it seems a pity not to finish.”

Her mother looked across the table at her husband:

“Speak to her seriously, Wilbour.”

The Reverend Mr. Carew looked solemnly at his long-legged and rapidly growing daughter, whose grey eyes gazed back into her father’s sallow visage.

“Rue,” he said in his colourless voice, “try to get all you can out of your school. I haven’t sufficient means to educate you in drawing and in similar accomplishments. So get all you can out of your school. Because, some day, you will have to help yourself, and perhaps help us a little.”

He bent his head with a detached air and sat gazing mildly at vacancy – already, perhaps, forgetting what the conversation was about.

“Mother?”

“What, Rue?”

“What am I going to do to earn my living?”

“I don’t know.”

“Do you mean I must go into the mill like everybody else?”

“There are other things. Girls work at many things in these days.”

“What kind of things?”

“They may learn to keep accounts, help in shops—”

“If father could afford it, couldn’t I learn to do something more interesting? What do girls work at whose fathers can afford to let them learn how to work?”

“They may become teachers, learn stenography and typewriting; they can, of course, become dressmakers; they can nurse—”

“Mother!”

“Yes?”

“Could I choose the business of drawing pictures? I know how!”

“Dear, I don’t believe it is practical to—”

“Couldn’t I draw pictures for books and magazines? Everybody says I draw very nicely. You say so, too. Couldn’t I earn enough money to live on and to take care of you and father?”

Wilbour Carew looked up from his reverie:

“To learn to draw correctly and with taste,” he said in his gentle, pedantic voice, “requires a special training which we cannot afford to give you, Ruhannah.”

“Must I wait till I’m twenty-five before I can have my money?” she asked for the hundredth time. “I do so need it to educate myself. Why did grandma do such a thing, mother?”

“Your grandmother never supposed you would need the money until you were a grown woman, dear. Your father and I were young, vigorous, full of energy; your father’s income was ample for us then.”

“Have I got to marry a man before I can get enough money to take lessons in drawing with?”

Her mother’s drawn smile was not very genuine. When a child asks such questions no mother finds it easy to smile.

“If you marry, dear, it is not likely you’ll marry in order to take lessons in drawing. Twenty-five is not old. If you still desire to study art you will be able to do so.”

“Twenty-five!” repeated Rue, aghast. “I’ll be an old woman.”

“Many begin their life’s work at an older age—”

“Mother! I’d rather marry somebody and begin to study art. Oh, *don’t* you think that even now I could support myself by making pictures for magazines? Don’t you, mother dear?”

“Rue, as your father explained, a special course of instruction is necessary before one can become an artist—”

“But I *do* draw very nicely!” She slipped from her chair, ran to the old secretary where the accumulated masterpieces of her brief career were treasured, and brought them for her parents’ inspection, as she had brought them many times before.

Her father looked at them listlessly; he did not understand such things. Her mother took them one by one from Ruhannah’s eager hands and examined these grimy Records of her daughter’s childhood.

There were drawings of every description in pencil, in crayon, in mussy water-colours, done on scraps of paper of every shape and size. The mother knew them all by heart, every single one, but she examined each with a devotion and an interest forever new.

There were many pictures of the cat; many of her parents, too – odd, shaky, smeared portraits all out of proportion, but usually recognisable.

A few landscapes varied the collection – a view or two of the stone bridge opposite, a careful drawing of the ruined paper mill. But the majority of the subjects were purely imaginary; pictures of demons and angels, of damsels and fairy princes – paragons of beauty – with castles on adjacent crags and swans adorning convenient ponds.

Her mother rose after a few moments, laid aside the pile of drawings, went to the kitchen and returned with her daughter's schoolbooks and lunch basket.

“Rue, you'll be late again. Get on your rubbers immediately.”

The child's shabby winter coat was already too short in skirt and sleeve, and could be lengthened no further. She pulled the blue toboggan cap over her head, took a hasty osculatory leave of her father, seized books and lunch basket, and followed her mother to the door.

Below the house the Brookhollow road ran south across an old stone bridge and around a hill to Gayfield, half a mile away.

Rue, drawing on her woollen gloves, looked up at her mother. Her lip trembled very slightly. She said:

“I shouldn't know what to do if I couldn't draw pictures... When I draw a princess I mean her for myself... It is pleasant – to pretend to live with swans.”

She opened the door, paused on the step; the frosty breath drifted from her lips. Then she looked back over her shoulder; her mother kissed her, held her tightly for a moment.

“If I'm to be forbidden to draw pictures,” repeated the girl, “I don't know what will become of me. Because I really live there – in the pictures I make.”

“We'll talk it over this evening, darling. Don't draw in study hour any more, will you?”

“I'll try to remember, mother.”

When the spindle-limbed, boyish figure had sped away beyond sight, Mrs. Carew shut the door, drew her wool shawl closer, and returned slowly to the sitting-room. Her husband, deep in a padded rocking-chair by the window, was already absorbed in the volume which lay open on his knees – the life of the Reverend Adoniram Judson – one of the world's good men. Ruhannah had named her cat after him.

His wife seated herself. She had dishes to do, two bedrooms, preparations for noonday dinner – the usual and unchangeable routine. She turned and looked out of the window across brown fields thinly powdered with snow. Along a brawling, wintry-dark stream, fringed with grey alders, ran the Brookhollow road. Clumps of pines and elms bordered it. There was nothing else to see except a distant crow in a ten-acre lot, walking solemnly about all by himself.

... Like the vultures that wandered through the compound that dreadful day in May ... she thought involuntarily.

But it was a far cry from Trebizond to Brookhollow. And her husband had been obliged to give up after the last massacre, when every convert had been dragged out and killed in the floating shadow of the Stars and Stripes, languidly brilliant overhead.

For the Sublime Porte and the Kurds had had their usual way at last; there was nothing left of the Mission; school and converts were gone; her wounded husband, her baby, and herself refugees in a foreign consulate; and the Turkish Government making apologies with its fat tongue in its greasy cheek.

The Koran says: “Woe to those who pray, and in their prayers are careless.”

The Koran also says: “In the name of God the Compassionate, the Merciful: What thinkest thou of him who treateth our religion as a lie?”

Mrs. Carew and her crippled husband knew, now, what the Sublime Porte thought about it, and what was the opinion of the Kurdish cavalry concerning missionaries and converts who treated the Moslem religion as a lie.

She looked at her pallid and crippled husband; he was still reading; his crutches lay beside him on the floor. She turned her eyes to the window. Out there the solitary crow was still walking busily about in the frozen pasture. And again she remembered the vultures that hulked and waddled amid the débris of the burned Mission.

Only that had been in May; and above the sunny silence in that place of death had sounded the unbroken and awful humming of a million million flies...

And so, her husband being now hopelessly broken and useless, they had come back with their child, Ruhannah, to their home in Brookhollow.

Here they had lived ever since; here her grey life was passing; here her daughter was already emerging into womanhood amid the stark, unlovely environments of a country crossroads, arid in summer, iron naked in winter, with no horizon except the Gayfield hills, no outlook save the Brookhollow road. And that led to the mill.

She had done what she could – was still doing it. But there was nothing to save. Her child's destiny seemed to be fixed.

Her husband corresponded with the Board of Missions, wrote now and then for the *Christian Pioneer*, and lived on the scanty pension allowed to those who, like himself, had become incapacitated in line of duty. There was no other income.

There was, however, the six thousand dollars left to Ruhannah by her grandmother, slowly accumulating interest in the Mohawk Bank at Orangeville, the county seat, and not to be withdrawn, under the terms of the will, until the day Ruhannah married or attained, unmarried, her twenty-fifth year.

Neither principal nor interest of this legacy was available at present. Life in the Carew family at Brookhollow was hard sledding, and bid fair to continue so indefinitely.

The life of Ruhannah's father was passed in reading or in gazing silently from the window – a tall, sallow, bearded man with the eyes of a dreaming martyr and the hands of an invalid – who still saw in the winter sky, across brown, snow-powdered fields, the minarets of Trebizond.

In reading, in reflection, in dreaming, in spiritual acquiescence, life was passing in sombre shadows for this middle-aged man who had been hopelessly crushed in Christ's service; and who had never regretted that service, never complained, never doubted the wisdom and the mercy of his Leader's inscrutable manœuvres with the soldiers who enlist to follow Him. As far as that is concerned, the Reverend Wilbour Carew had been born with a believing mind; doubt of divine goodness in Deity was impossible for him; doubt of human goodness almost as difficult.

Such men have little chance in a brisk, busy, and jaunty world; but they prefer it should be that way with them. And of these few believers in the goodness of God and man are our fools and gentlemen composed.

On that dreadful day, the Kurd who had mangled him so frightfully that he recovered only to limp through life on crutches bent over him and shouted in his face:

“Now, you Christian dog, before I cut your throat show me how this Christ of yours can be a god!”

“Is it necessary,” replied the missionary faintly, “to light a candle in order to show a man the midday sun?”

Which was possibly what saved his life, and the lives of his wife and child. Your Moslem adores and understands such figurative answers. So he left the Reverend Mr. Carew lying half dead in the blackened doorway and started cheerfully after a frightened convert praying under the compound wall.

CHAPTER III IN EMBRYO

A child on the floor, flat on her stomach in the red light of the stove, drawing pictures; her mother by the shaded lamp mending stockings; her father reading; a faint odour of kerosene from the glass lamp in the room, and the rattle of sleet on roof and window; this was one of her childhood memories which never faded through all the years of Ruhannah's life.

Of her waking hours she preferred that hour after supper when, lying prone on the worn carpet, with pencil and paper, just outside the lamp's yellow circle of light, her youthful imagination kindled and caught fire.

For at that hour the magic of the stove's glowing eyes transformed the sitting-room chairs to furtive watchers of herself, made of her mother's work-table a sly and spidery thing on legs, crouching in ambush; bewitched the ancient cottage piano so that its ivory keys menaced her like a row of monstrous teeth.

She adored it all. The tall secretary stared at her with owlish significance. Through that neutral veil where lamplight and shadow meet upon the wall, the engraved portrait of a famous and godly missionary peered down at her out of altered and malicious eyes; the claw-footed, haircloth sofa was a stealthy creature offering to entrap her with wide, inviting arms; three folded umbrellas leaned over the edge of their shadowy stand, looking down at her like scrawny and baleful birds, ready to peck at her with crooked handles. And as for Adoniram, her lank black cat, the child's restless creative fancy was ever transforming him from goblin into warlock, from hydra to hippogriff, until the earnestness of pretence sent agreeable shivers down her back, and she edged a trifle nearer to her mother.

But when pretence became a bit too real and too grotesque she had always a perfect antidote. It was merely necessary to make a quick picture of an angel or two, a fairy prince, a swan, and she felt herself in their company, and delightfully protected.

There was a night when the flowing roar of the gale outside filled the lamplit silence; when the snow was drifting level with the window sills; when Adoniram, unable to prowl abroad, lay curled up tight and sound asleep beside her where she sat on the carpet in the stove radiance. Wearied of drawing castles and swans, she had been listening to her father reading passages aloud from the book on his knees to her mother who was sewing by the lamp.

Presently he continued his reading:

"I asked Alaro the angel: 'Which place is this, and which people are these?'"

"And he answered: 'This place is the star-track; and these are they who in the world offered no prayers and chanted no liturgies. Through other works they have attained felicity.'"

Her mother nodded, continuing to sew. Ruhannah considered what her father had read, then:

"Father?"

"Yes—" He looked down at her absently.

"What were you reading?"

"A quotation from the Sacred Anthology."

"Isn't prayer really necessary?"

Her mother said:

"Yes, dear."

"Then how did those people who offered no prayers go to Heaven?"

Her father said:

"Eternal life is not attained by praise or prayer alone, Ruhannah. Those things which alone justify prayer are also necessary."

"What are they?"

“What we really *think* and what we *do*— both only in Christ’s name. Without these nothing else counts very much — neither form nor convention nor those individual garments called creed and denomination, which belief usually wears throughout the world.”

Her mother, sewing, glanced gravely down at her daughter:

“Your father is very tolerant of what other people believe — as long as they really do believe. Your father thinks that Christ would have found friends in Buddha and Mahomet.”

“Do such people go to Heaven?” asked Ruhannah, astonished.

“Listen,” said her father, reading again:

“I came to a place and I saw the souls of the liberal, adorned above all other souls in splendour. And it seemed to me sublime.

“I saw the souls of the truthful who walked in lofty splendour. And it seemed to me sublime.

“I saw the souls of teachers and inquirers; I saw the friendly souls of interceders and peacemakers; and these walked brilliantly in the light. And it seemed to me sublime—”

He turned to his wife:

“To see and know *is* sublime. We know, Mary; and Ruhannah is intelligent. But in spite of her faith in what she has learned from us, like us she must one day travel the common way, seeking for herself the reasons and the evidences of immortality.”

“Perhaps her faith, Wilbour—”

“Perhaps. But with the intelligent, faith, which is emotional, usually follows belief; and belief comes only from reasoning. I think that Ruhannah is destined to travel the way of all intelligence when she is ready to think for herself.”

“I am ready now,” said the girl. “I have faith in our Lord Jesus, and in my father and mother.”

Her father looked at her:

“It is good building material. Some day, God willing, you shall build a very lofty temple with it. But the foundation of the temple must first be certain. Intelligence ultimately requires reasons for belief. You will have to seek them for yourself, Ruhannah. Then, on them build your shrine of faith; and nothing shall shake it down.”

“I don’t understand.”

“And I cannot explain. Only this; as you grow older, all around you in the world you will become aware of people, countless millions and millions of people, asking themselves — ready with the slightest encouragement, or without it, to ask you the question which is the most vital of all questions to them. And whatever way it is answered always they ask for evidence. You, too, will one day ask for evidence. All the world asks for it. But few recognise it as evidence when it is offered.”

He closed his book and dropped a heavy hand upon it.

“Amid the myriad pursuits and interests and trades and professions of the human race, amid their multitudinous aspirations, perplexities, doubts, passions, endeavours, deep within every intelligent man remains one dominant desire, one persistent question to be answered if possible.”

“What desire, father?”

“The universal desire for another chance — for immortality. Man’s never-ending demand for evidence of an immortality which shall terminate for him the most tremendous of all uncertainties, which shall solve for him the most vital of all questions: What is to become of him after physical death? Is he to live again? Is he to see once more those whom he loved the best?”

Ruhannah sat thinking in the red stove light, cross-legged, her slim ankles clasped in either hand.

“But our souls are immortal,” she said at last.

“Yes.”

“Our Lord Jesus has said it.”

“Yes.”

“Then why should anybody not believe it?”

“Try to believe it always. Particularly after your mother and I are no longer here, try to believe it... You are unusually intelligent; and if some day your intelligence discovers that it requires evidence for belief seek for that evidence. It is obtainable. Try to recognise it when you encounter it... Only, in any event, remember this: never alter your early faith, never destroy your childhood’s belief until evidence to prove the contrary convinces you.”

“No... There is no such evidence, is there, father?”

“I know of none.”

“Then,” said the girl calmly, “I shall take Christ’s evidence that I shall live again if I do no evil... Father?”

“Yes.”

“Is there any evidence that Adoniram has no soul?”

“I know of none.”

“Is there any that he has a soul?”

“Yes, I think there is.”

“Are you sure?”

“Not entirely.”

“I wonder,” mused the girl, looking gravely at the sleeping cat.

It was the first serious doubt that Ruhannah had ever entertained in her brief career.

That night she dreamed of the Yellow Devil in Herr Wilner’s box, and, awaking, remembered her dream. It seemed odd, too, because she had not even thought of the Yellow Devil for over a year.

But the menacing Mongol figure seemed bound to intrude into her life once more and demand her attention as though resentful of long oblivion and neglect; for, a week later, an old missionary from Indo-China – a native Chinese – who had lectured at the Baptist Church in Gayfield the evening previous, came to pay his respects to the Reverend Wilbour Carew. And Rue had taken the Yellow Devil from the olive-wood box that day and was busily making a pencil drawing of it.

At sight of the figure the native missionary’s narrow almond eyes opened extremely wide, and he leaned on the table and regarded the bronze demon very intently.

Then he took from his pocket and adjusted to his button nose a pair of large, horn spectacles; and he carefully examined the Chinese characters engraved on the base of the ancient bronze, following them slowly with a yellow and clawlike forefinger.

“Can you read what is written there?” inquired the Reverend Mr. Carew.

“Yes, brother. This is what is written: ‘I am Erlik, Ruler of Chaos and of All that Was. The old order passes when I arrive. I bring confusion among the peoples; I hurl down emperors; kingdoms crumble where I pass; the world begins to rock and tip, spilling nations into outer darkness. When there are no more kingdoms and no more kings; no more empires and no emperors; and when only the humble till, the blameless sow, the pure reap; and when only the teachers teach in the shadow of the Tree, and when the Thinker sits unstirring under the high stars, then, from the dark edges of the world I let go my grasp and drop into those immeasurable deeps from which I came – I, Erlik, Ruler of All that Was.’”

After a silence the Reverend Mr. Carew asked whether the figure was a very old one.

“It is before the period called ‘Han’ – a dynasty during which the Mongols were a mighty people. This inscription is Mongol. Erlik was the Yellow Devil of the Mongols.”

“Not a heathen god, then?”

“No, a heathen devil. Their Prince of Darkness.”

Ruhannah, pencil in hand, looked curiously at this heathen Prince of Darkness, arrived out of the dark ages to sit to her for his scowling portrait.

“I wonder what he thinks of America,” she said, partly to herself.

The native missionary smiled, picked up the Yellow Devil, shook the figure, listening.

“There is something inside,” he said; “perhaps jewels. If you drilled a hole in him you could find out.”

The Reverend Mr. Carew nodded absently:

“Yes; it might be worth while,” he said.

“If there is a jewel,” repeated the missionary, “you had better take it, then cast away the figure. Erlik brings disaster to the land where his image is set up.”

The Reverend Mr. Carew smiled at his Chinese and Christian confrère’s ineradicable vein of superstition.

CHAPTER IV

THE TRODDEN WAY

There came the indeterminate year when Ruhannah finished school and there was no money available to send her elsewhere for further embellishment, no farther horizon than the sky over the Gayfield hills, no other perspective than the main street of Gayfield with the knitting mill at the end of it.

So into Gayfield Mill the girl walked, and found a place immediately among the unskilled. And her career appeared to be predetermined now, and her destiny a simple one – to work, to share the toil and the gaieties of Gayfield with the majority of the other girls she knew; to marry, ultimately, some boy, some clerk in one of the Gayfield stores, some farmer lad, perhaps, possibly a school teacher or a local lawyer or physician, or possibly the head of some department in the mill, or maybe a minister – she was sufficiently well bred and educated for any one of these.

The winter of her seventeenth year found her still very much a child at heart, physically backward, a late adolescent, a little shy, inclined to silences, romantic, sensitive to all beauty, and passionately expressing herself only when curled up by the stove with her pencil and the red light of the coals falling athwart the slim hand that guided it.

She went sometimes to village parties, learned very easily to dance, had no preferences among the youths of Gayfield, no romances. For that matter, while she was liked and even furtively admired, her slight shyness, reticence, and a vague, indefinite something about her seemed to discourage familiar rustic gallantry. Also, she was as thin and awkward as an overgrown lad, not thought to be pretty, known to be poor. But for all that more than one young man was vaguely haunted at intervals by some memory of her grey eyes and the peculiar sweetness of her mouth, forgetting for the moment several freckles on the delicate bridge of her nose and several more on her sun-tanned cheeks.

She had an agreeable time that winter, enchanted to learn dancing, happy at “showers” and parties, at sleigh rides and “chicken suppers,” and the various species of village gaiety which ranged from moving pictures every Thursday and Saturday nights to church entertainments, amateur theatricals at the town hall, and lectures under the auspices of the aristocratic D. O. F. – Daughters of the Old Frontier.

But she never saw any boy she preferred to any other, never was conscious of being preferred, excepting once – and she was not quite certain about that.

It was old Dick Neeland’s son, Jim – vaguely understood to have been for several years in Paris studying art – and who now turned up in Gayfield during Christmas week.

Ruhannah remembered seeing him on several occasions when she was a little child. He was usually tramping across country with his sturdy father, Dick Neeland of Neeland’s Mills – an odd, picturesque pair with their setter dogs and burnished guns, and old Dick’s face as red as a wrinkled winter apple, and his hair snow-white.

There was six years’ difference between their ages, Jim Neeland’s and hers, and she had always considered him a grown and formidable man in those days. But that winter, when somebody at the movies pointed him out to her, she was surprised to find him no older than the other youths she skated with and danced with.

Afterward, at a noisy village party, she saw him dancing with every girl in town, and the drop of Irish blood in this handsome, careless young fellow established him at once as a fascinating favourite.

Rue became quite tremulous over the prospect of dancing with him. Presently her turn came; she rose with a sudden odd loss of self-possession as he was presented, stood dumb, shy, unresponsive, suffered him to lead her out, became slowly conscious that he danced rather badly. But awe of him persisted even when he trod on her slender foot.

He brought her an ice afterward, and seated himself beside her.

“I’m a clumsy dancer,” he said. “How many times did I spike you?”

She flushed and would have found a pleasant word to reassure him, but discovered nothing to say, it being perfectly patent to them both that she had retired from the floor with a slight limp.

“I’m a steam roller,” he repeated carelessly. “But you dance very well, don’t you?”

“I have only learned to dance this winter.”

“I thought you an expert. Do you live here?”

“Yes... I mean I live at Brookhollow.”

“Funny. I don’t remember you. Besides, I don’t know your name – people mumble so when they introduce a man.”

“I’m Ruhannah Carew.”

“Carew,” he repeated, while a crease came between his eyebrows. “Of Brookhollow– Oh, I know! Your father is the retired missionary – red house facing the bridge.”

“Yes.”

“Certainly,” he said, taking another look at her; “you’re the little girl daddy and I used to see across the fields when we were shooting woodcock in the willows.”

“I remember you,” she said.

“I remember *you!*”

She coloured gratefully.

“Because,” he added, “dad and I were always afraid you’d wander into range and we’d pepper you from the bushes. You’ve grown a lot, haven’t you?” He had a nice, direct smile though his speech and manners were a trifle breezy, confident, and *sans façon*. But he was at that age – which succeeds the age of bumptiousness – with life and career before him, attainment, realisation, success, everything the mystery of life holds for a young man who has just flung open the gates and who takes the magic road to the future with a stride instead of his accustomed pace.

He was already a man with a profession, and meant that she should become aware of it.

Later in the evening somebody told her what a *personage* he had become, and she became even more deeply thrilled, impressed, and tremulously desirous that he should seek her out again, not venturing to seek him, not dreaming of encouraging him to notice her by glance or attitude – not even knowing, as yet, how to do such things. She thought he had already forgotten her existence.

But that this thin, freckled young thing with grey eyes ought to learn how much of a man he was remained somewhere in the back of Neeland’s head; and when he heard his hostess say that somebody would have to see Rue Carew home, he offered to do it. And presently went over and asked the girl if he might – not too patronisingly.

In the cutter, under fur, with the moonlight electrically brilliant and the world buried in white, she ventured to speak of his art, timidly, as in the presence of the very great.

“Oh, yes,” he said. “I studied in Paris. Wish I were back there. But I’ve got to draw for magazines and illustrated papers; got to make a living, you see. I teach at the Art League, too.”

“How happy you must be in your career!” she said, devoutly meaning it, knowing no better than to say it.

“It’s a business,” he corrected her, kindly.

“But – yes – but it is art, too.”

“Oh, art!” he laughed. It was the fashion that year to shrug when art was mentioned – reaction from too much gabble.

“We don’t busy ourselves with art; we busy ourselves with business. When they use my stuff I feel I’m getting on. You see,” he admitted with reluctant honesty, “I’m young at it yet – I haven’t had very much of my stuff in magazines yet.”

After a silence, cursed by an instinctive truthfulness which always spoiled any little plan to swagger:

“I’ve had several – well, about a dozen pictures reproduced.”

One picture accepted by any magazine would have awed her sufficiently. The mere fact that he was an artist had been enough to impress her.

“Do you care for that sort of thing – drawing, painting, I mean?” he inquired kindly.

She drew a quick breath, steadied her voice, and said she did.

“Perhaps you may turn out stuff yourself some day.”

She scarcely knew how to take the word “stuff.” Vaguely she surmised it to be professional vernacular.

She admitted shyly that she cared for nothing so much as drawing, that she longed for instruction, but that such a dream was hopeless.

At first he did not comprehend that poverty barred the way to her; he urged her to cultivate her talent, bestowed advice concerning the Art League, boarding houses, studios, ways, means, and ends, until she felt obliged to tell him how far beyond her means such magic splendours lay.

He remained silent, sorry for her, thinking also that the chances were against her having any particular talent, consoling a heart that was unusually sympathetic and tender with the conclusion that this girl would be happier here in Brookhollow than scratching around the purlieus of New York to make both ends meet.

“It’s a tough deal,” he remarked abruptly. “– I mean this art stuff. You work like the dickens and kick your heels in ante-rooms. If they take your stuff they send you back to alter it or redraw it. I don’t know how anybody makes a living at it – in the beginning.”

“Don’t *you*?”

“I? No.” He reddened; but she could not notice it in the moonlight. “No,” he repeated; “I have an allowance from my father. I’m new at it yet.”

“Couldn’t a man – a girl – support herself by drawing pictures for magazines?” she inquired tremulously.

“Oh, well, of course there are some who have arrived – and they manage to get on. Some even make wads, you know.”

“W-wads?” she repeated, mystified.

“I mean a lot of money. There’s that girl on the *Star*, Jean Throssel, who makes all kinds of wealth, they say, out of her spidery, filmy girls in ringlets and cheesecloth dinner gowns.”

“Oh!”

“Yes, Jean Throssel, and that Waythorne girl, Belinda Waythorne, you know – does all that stuff for *The Looking Glass*– futurist graft, no mouths on her people – she makes *hers*, I understand.”

It was rather difficult for Rue to follow him amid the vernacular mazes.

“Then, of course,” he continued, “men like Alexander Fairless and Philip Lightwood who imitates him, make fortunes out of their drawing. I could name a dozen, perhaps. But the rest – hard sledding, Miss Carew!”

“Is it *very* hard?”

“Well, I don’t know what on earth I’d do if dad didn’t back me as his fancy.”

“A father ought to, if he can afford it.”

“Oh, I’ll pay my way some day. It’s in me. I feel it; I know it. I’ll make plenty of money,” he assured her confidently.

“I’m sure you will.”

“Thank you,” he smiled. “My friends tell me I’ve got it in me. I have one friend in particular – the Princess Mistchenka – who has all kinds of confidence in my future. When I’m blue she bolsters me up. She’s quite wonderful. I owe her a lot for asking me to her Sunday nights and for giving me her friendship.”

“A – a princess?” whispered the girl, who had drawn pictures of thousands but was a little startled to realise that such fabled creatures really exist.

“Is she *very* beautiful?” she added.

“She’s tremendously pretty.”

“Her – clothes are very beautiful, I suppose,” ventured Rue.

“Well – they’re very – smart. Everything about her is smart. Her Sunday night suppers are wonderful. You meet people who do things – all sorts – everybody who is somebody.”

He turned to her frankly:

“I think myself very lucky that the Princess Mistchenka should be my friend, because, honestly, Miss Carew, I don’t see what there is in me to interest such a woman.”

Rue thought she could see, but remained silent.

“If I had my way,” said Neeland, a few moments later, “I’d drop illustrating and paint battle scenes. But it wouldn’t pay, you see.”

“Couldn’t you support yourself by painting battles?”

“Not yet,” he said honestly. “Of course I have hopes – intentions–” he laughed, drew his reins; the silvery chimes clashed and jingled and flashed in the moonlight; they had arrived.

At the door he said:

“I hope some day you’ll have a chance to take lessons. Thank you for dancing with me... If you ever do come to New York to study, I hope you’ll let me know.”

“Yes,” she said, “I will.”

He was halfway to his sleigh, looked back, saw her looking back as she entered the lighted doorway.

“Good night, Rue,” he said impulsively, warmly sorry for her.

“Good night,” she said.

The drop of Irish blood in him prompted him to go back to where she stood framed in the lighted doorway. And the same drop was no doubt responsible for his taking her by the waist and tilting back her head in its fur hood and kissing her soft, warm lips.

She looked up at him in a flushed, bewildered sort of way, not resisting; but his eyes were so gay and mischievous, and his quick smile so engaging that a breathless, uncertain smile began to edge her lips; and it remained stamped there, stiffening even after he had jumped into his cutter and had driven away, jingling joyously out into the dazzling moonshine.

In bed, the window open, and the covers pulled to her chin, Rue lay wakeful, living over again the pleasures of the evening; and Neeland’s face was always before her open eyes, and his pleasant voice seemed to be sounding in her ears. As for the kiss, it did not trouble her. Girls she went with were not infrequently so saluted by boys. That, being her own first experience, was important only in that degree. And she shyly thought the experience agreeable. And, as she recalled, revived, and considered all that Neeland had said, it seemed to her that this young man led an enchanted life and that such as he were indeed companions fit for princesses.

“Princess Mistchenka,” she repeated aloud to herself. And somehow it sounded vaguely familiar to the girl, as though somewhere, long ago, she had heard another voice pronounce the name.

CHAPTER V EX MACHINA

After she had become accustomed to the smell of rancid oil and dyestuffs and the interminable racket of machinery she did not find her work at the knitting mill disagreeable. It was like any work, she imagined, an uninteresting task which had to be done.

The majority of the girls and young men of the village worked there in various capacities; wages were fair, salaries better, union regulations prevailed. There was nothing to complain of.

And nothing to expect except possible increase in wages, holidays, and a disquieting chance of getting caught in the machinery, which familiarity soon discounted.

As for the social status of the mill workers, the mill *was* Gayfield; and Gayfield was a village where the simpler traditions of the Republic still survived; where there existed no invidious distinction in vocations; a typical old-time community harbouring the remains of a Grand Army Post and too many churches of too many denominations; where the chance metropolitan stranger was systematically “done”; where distrust of all cities and desire to live in them was equalled only by a passion for moving pictures and automobiles; where the school trustees used double negatives and traced their ancestry to Colonial considerables – who, however, had signed their names in “lower case” or with a Maltese cross – the world in miniature, with its due proportion of petty graft, petty squabbles, envy, kindness, jealousy, generosity, laziness, ambition, stupidity, intelligence, honesty, hypocrisy, hatred, affection, badness and goodness, as standardised by the code established according to folk-ways on earth – in brief, a perfectly human community composed of the usual ingredients, worthy and unworthy – that was Gayfield, Mohawk County, New York.

Before spring came – before the first robin appeared, and while icy roads still lay icy under sunlit pools of snow-water – a whole winter indoors, and a sedentary one, had changed the smoothly tanned and slightly freckled cheeks of Rue Carew to a thinner and paler oval. Under her transparent skin a tea-rose pink came and went; under her grey eyes lay bluish shadows. Also, floating particles of dust, fleecy and microscopic motes of cotton and wool filling the air in the room where Ruhannah worked, had begun to irritate her throat and bronchial tubes; and the girl developed an intermittent cough.

When the first bluebird arrived in Gayfield the cough was no longer intermittent; and her mother sent her to the village doctor. So Rue Carew was transferred to the box factory adjoining, in which the mill made its own paper boxes, where young women sat all day at intelligent machines and fed them with squares of pasteboard and strips of gilt paper; and the intelligent and grateful machines responded by turning out hundreds and hundreds of complete boxes, all neatly gilded, pasted, and labelled. And after a little while Ruhannah was able to nourish one of these obliging and responsive machines. And by July her cough had left her, and two delicate freckles adorned the bridge of her nose.

The half-mile walk from and to Brookhollow twice a day was keeping her from rapid physical degeneration. Yet, like all northern American summers, the weather became fearfully hot in July and August, and the half-mile even in early morning and at six in the evening left her listless, nervously dreading the great concrete-lined room, the reek of glue and oil, the sweaty propinquity of her neighbours, and the monotonous appetite of the sprawling machine which she fed all day long with pasteboard squares.

She went to her work in early morning, bareheaded, in a limp pink dress very much open at the throat, which happened to be the merciful mode of the moment – a slender, sweet-lipped thing, beginning to move with grace now – and her chestnut hair burned gold-pale by the sun.

There came that movable holiday in August, when the annual shutdown for repairs closed the mill and box factory during forty-eight hours – a matter of prescribing oil and new bearings for the overfed machines so that their digestions should remain unimpaired and their dispositions amiable.

It was a hot August morning, intensely blue and still, with that slow, subtle concentration of suspended power in the sky, ominous of thunder brooding somewhere beyond the western edges of the world.

Ruhannah aided her mother with the housework, picked peas and a squash and a saucer full of yellow pansies in the weedy little garden, and, at noon, dined on the trophies of her husbandry, physically and aesthetically.

After dinner, dishes washed and room tidied, she sat down on the narrow, woodbine-infested verandah with pencil and paper, and attempted to draw the stone bridge and the little river where it spread in deeps and shallows above the broken dam.

Perspective was unknown to her; of classic composition she was also serenely ignorant, so the absence of these in her picture did not annoy her. On the contrary, there was something hideously modern and recessional in her vigorous endeavour to include in her drawing everything her grey eyes chanced to rest on. She even arose and gently urged a cow into the already overcrowded composition, and, having accomplished its portrait with Cezanne-like fidelity, was beginning to look about for Adoniram to include him also, when her mother called to her, holding out a pair of old gloves.

“Dear, we are going to save a little money this year. Do you think you could catch a few fish for supper?”

The girl nodded, took the gloves, laid aside her pencil and paper, picked up the long bamboo pole from the verandah floor, and walked slowly out into the garden.

A trowel was sticking in the dry earth near the flower bed, where poppies, and pansies, and petunias, and phlox bordered the walk.

Under a lilac the ground seemed moister and more promising for vermicular investigation; she drew on her gloves, dug a few holes with the trowel, extracted an angleworm, frowned slightly, holding it between gloved fingers, regarding its contortions with pity and aversion.

To bait a hook was not agreeable to the girl; she managed to do it, however, then shouldering her pole she walked across the road and down to the left, through rank grasses and patches of milkweed, bergamot, and queen’s lace, scattering a cloud of brown and silver-spotted butterflies.

Alder, elder, and Indian willow barred her way; rank thickets of jewelweed hung vivid blossoming drops across her path; woodbine and clematis trailed dainty snares to catch her in their fairy nets; a rabbit scurried out from behind the ruined paper mill as she came to the swift, shallow water below the dam.

Into this she presently plumped her line, and the next instant jerked it out again with a wriggling, silvery minnow flashing on the hook.

Carrying her pole with its tiny, glittering victim dangling aloft, Rue hastily retraced her steps to the road, crossed the bridge to the further end, seated herself on the limestone parapet, and, swinging her pole with both hands, cast line and hook and minnow far out into the pond. It was a business she did not care for – this extinguishing of the life-spark in anything. But, like her mill work, it appeared to be a necessary business, and, so regarding it, she went about it.

The pond above the half-ruined dam lay very still; her captive minnow swam about with apparently no discomfort, trailing on the surface of the pond above him the cork which buoyed the hook.

Rue, her pole clasped in both hands between her knees, gazed with preoccupied eyes out across the water. On the sandy shore, a pair of speckled tip-ups ran busily about, dipping and bobbing, or spread their white, striped wings to sheer the still surface of the pond, swing shoreward with bowed wings again, and resume their formal, quaint, and busy manners.

From the interstices of the limestone parapet grew a white bluebell – the only one Rue had ever seen. As long as she could remember it had come up there every year and bloomed, snow-white amid a world of its blue comrades in the grass below. She looked for it now, saw it in bud – three sturdy stalks sprouting at right angles from the wall and curving up parallel to it. Somehow or other she had come to associate this white freak of nature with herself – she scarcely knew why. It comforted her, oddly, to see it again, still surviving, still delicately vigorous, though where among those stone slabs it found its nourishment she never could imagine.

The intense blue of the sky had altered since noon; the west became gradually duller and the air stiller; and now, over the Gayfield hills, a tall cloud thrust up silvery-edged convolutions toward a zenith still royally and magnificently blue.

She had been sitting there watching her swimming cork for over an hour when the first light western breeze arrived, spreading a dainty ripple across the pond. Her cork danced, drifted; beneath it she caught the momentary glimmer of the minnow; then the cork was jerked under; she clasped the pole with all her strength, struck upward; and a heavy pickerel, all gold and green, sprang furiously from the water and fell back with a sharp splash.

Under the sudden strain of the fish she nearly lost her balance, scrambled hastily down from the parapet, propping the pole desperately against her body, and stood so, unbending, unyielding, her eyes fixed on the water where the taut line cut it at forty-five degrees.

At the same time two men in a red runabout speeding westward caught sight of the sharp turn by the bridge which the ruins of the paper mill had hidden. The man driving the car might have made it even then had he not seen Ruhannah in the centre of the bridge. It was instantly all off; so were both mud-guards and one wheel. So were driver and passenger, floundering on their backs among the rank grass and wild flowers. Ruhannah, petrified, still fast to her fish, gazed at the catastrophe over her right shoulder.

A broad, short, squarely built man of forty emerged from the weeds, went hastily to the car and did something to it. Noise ceased; clouds of steam continued to ascend from the crumpled hood.

The other man, even shorter, but slimmer, sauntered out of a bed of milkweed whither he had been catapulted. He dusted with his elbow a grey felt hat as he stood looking at the wrecked runabout; his comrade, still clutching a cigar between his teeth, continued to examine the car.

“Hell!” remarked the short, thickset man.

“It’s going to rain like it, too,” added the other. The thunder boomed again beyond Gayfield hills.

“What do you know about this!” growled the thickset man, in utter disgust. “Do we hunt for a garage, or what?”

“It’s up to you, Eddie. And say! What was the matter with you? Don’t you know a bridge when you see one?”

“That damn girl—” He turned and looked at Ruhannah, who was dragging the big flapping pickerel over the parapet by main strength.

The men scowled at her in silence, then the one addressed as Eddie rolled his cigar grimly into the left corner of his jaw.

“Damn little skirt,” he observed briefly. “It seems to worry her a lot what she’s done to us.”

“I wonder does she know she wrecked us,” suggested the other. He was a stunted, wiry little man of thirty-five. His head seemed slightly too large; he had a pasty face with the sloe-black eyes, button nose, and the widely chiselled mouth of a circus clown.

The eyes of the short, thickset man were narrow and greyish green in a round, smoothly shaven face. They narrowed still more as the thunder broke louder from the west.

Ruhannah, dragging her fish over the grass, was coming toward them; and the man called Eddie stepped forward to bar her progress.

“Say, girlie,” he began, the cigar still tightly screwed into his cheek, “is there a juice mill anywhere near us, d’y’know?”

“What?” said Rue.

“A garage.”

“Yes; there is one at Gayfield.”

“How far, girlie?”

Rue flushed, but answered:

“It is half a mile to Gayfield.”

The other man, noticing the colour in Ruhannah’s face, took off his pearl-grey hat. His language was less grammatical than his friend’s, but his instincts were better.

“Thank you,” he said – his companion staring all the while at the girl without the slightest expression. “Is there a telephone in any of them houses, miss?” – glancing around behind him at the three edifices which composed the crossroads called Brookhollow.

“No,” said Rue.

It thundered again; the world around had become very dusky and silent and the flash veined a rapidly blackening west.

“It’s going to rain buckets,” said the man called Eddie. “If you live around here, can you let us come into your house till it’s over, gir – er – miss?”

“Yes.”

“I’m Mr. Brandes – Ed Brandes of New York—” speaking through cigar-clutching teeth. “This is Mr. Ben Stull, of the same... It’s raining already. Is that your house?”

“I live *there*,” said Rue, nodding across the bridge. “You may go in.”

She walked ahead, dragging the fish; Stull went to the car, took two suitcases from the boot; Brandes threw both overcoats over his arm, and followed in the wake of Ruhannah and her fish.

“No Saratoga and no races today, Eddie,” remarked Stull. But Brandes’ narrow, grey-green eyes were following Ruhannah.

“It’s a pity,” continued Stull, “somebody didn’t learn you to drive a car before you ask your friends joy-riding.”

“Aw – shut up,” returned Brandes slowly, between his teeth.

They climbed the flight of steps to the verandah, through a rapidly thickening gloom which was ripped wide open at intervals by lightning.

So Brandes and his shadow, Bennie Stull, came into the home of Ruhannah Carew.

Her mother, who had observed their approach from the window, opened the door.

“Mother,” said Ruhannah, “here is the fish I caught – and two gentlemen.”

With which dubious but innocent explanation she continued on toward the kitchen, carrying her fish.

Stull offered a brief explanation to account for their plight and presence; Brandes, listening and watching the mother out of greenish, sleepy eyes, made up his mind concerning her.

While the spare room was being prepared by mother and daughter, he and Stull, seated in the sitting-room, their hats upon their knees, exchanged solemn commonplaces with the Reverend Mr. Carew.

Brandes, always the gambler, always wary and reticent by nature, did all the listening before he came to conclusions that relaxed the stiffness of his attitude and the immobility of his large, round face.

Then, at ease under circumstances and conditions which he began to comprehend and have an amiable contempt for, he became urbane and conversational, and a little amused to find navigation so simple, even when out of his proper element.

From the book on the invalid's knees, Brandes took his cue; and the conversation developed into a monologue on the present condition of foreign missions – skilfully inspired by the respectful attention and the brief and ingenious questions of Brandes.

“Doubtless,” concluded the Reverend Mr. Carew, “you are familiar with the life of the Reverend Adoniram Judson, Mr. Brandes.”

It turned out to be Brandes' favourite book.

“You will recollect, then, the amazing conditions in India which confronted Dr. Judson and his wife.”

Brandes recollected perfectly – with a slow glance at Stull.

“All that is changed,” said the invalid. “ – God be thanked. And conditions in Armenia are changing for the better, I hope.”

“Let us hope so,” returned Brandes solemnly.

“To doubt it is to doubt the goodness of the Almighty,” said the Reverend Mr. Carew. His dreamy eyes became fixed on the rain-splashed window, burned a little with sombre inward light.

“In Trebizond,” he began, “in my time–”

His wife came into the room, saying that the spare bedchamber was ready and that the gentlemen might wish to wash before supper, which would be ready in a little while.

On their way upstairs they encountered Ruhannah coming down. Stull passed with a polite grunt; Brandes ranged himself for the girl to pass him.

“Ever so much obliged to you, Miss Carew,” he said. “We have put you to a great deal of trouble, I am sure.”

Rue looked up surprised, shy, not quite understanding how to reconcile his polite words and pleasant voice with the voice and manner in which he had addressed her on the bridge.

“It is no trouble,” she said, flushing slightly. “I hope you will be comfortable.”

And she continued to descend the stairs a trifle more hastily, not quite sure she cared very much to talk to that kind of man.

In the spare bedroom, whither Stull and Brandes had been conducted, the latter was seated on the big and rather shaky maple bed, buttoning a fresh shirt and collar, while Stull took his turn at the basin. Rain beat heavily on the windows.

“Say, Ben,” remarked Brandes, “you want to be careful when we go downstairs that the old guy don't spot us for sporting men. He's a minister, or something.”

Stull lifted his dripping face of a circus clown from the basin.

“What's that?”

“I say we don't want to give the old people a shock. You know what they'd think of us.”

“What do I care what they think?”

“Can't you be polite?”

“I can be better than that; I can be honest,” said Stull, drying his sour visage with a flimsy towel. After Brandes had tied his polka-dotted tie carefully before the blurred mirror:

“What do you mean by that?” he asked stolidly.

“Ah – I know what I mean, Eddie. So do you. You're a smooth talker, all right. You can listen and look wise, too, when there's anything in it for you. Just see the way you got Stein to put up good money for you! And all you done was to listen to him and keep your mouth shut.”

Brandes rose with an air almost jocular and smote Stull upon the back.

“Stein thinks he's the greatest manager on earth. Let him tell you so if you want anything out of him,” he said, walking to the window.

The volleys of rain splashing on the panes obscured the outlook; Brandes flattened his nose against the glass and stood as though lost in thought.

Behind him Stull dried his features, rummaged in the suitcase, produced a bathrobe and slippers, put them on, and stretched himself out on the bed.

“Aren’t you coming down to buzz the preacher?” demanded Brandes, turning from the drenched window.

“So you can talk phony to the little kid? No.”

“Ah, get it out of your head that I mean phony.”

“Well, what do you mean?”

“Nothing.”

Stull gave him a contemptuous glance and turned over on the pillow.

“Are you coming down?”

“No.”

So Brandes took another survey of himself in the glass, used his comb and brushes again, added a studied twist to his tie, shot his cuffs, and walked out of the room with the solid deliberation which characterised his carriage at all times.

CHAPTER VI

THE END OF SOLITUDE

A rain-washed world, smelling sweet as a wet rose, a cloudless sky delicately blue, and a swollen stream tumbling and foaming under the bridge – of these Mr. Eddie Brandes was agreeably conscious as he stepped out on the verandah after breakfast, and, unclasping a large gold cigar case, inserted a cigar between his teeth.

He always had the appearance of having just come out of a Broadway barber shop with the visible traces of shave, shampoo, massage, and manicure patent upon his person.

His short, square figure was clothed in well-cut blue serge; a smart straw hat embellished his head, polished russet shoes his remarkably small feet. On his small fat fingers several heavy rings were conspicuous. And the odour of cologne exhaled from and subtly pervaded the ensemble.

Across the road, hub-deep in wet grass and weeds, he could see his wrecked runabout, glistening with raindrops.

He stood for a while on the verandah, both hands shoved deep into his pockets, his cigar screwed into his cheek. From time to time he jingled keys and loose coins in his pockets. Finally he sauntered down the steps and across the wet road to inspect the machine at closer view.

Contemplating it tranquilly, head on one side and his left eye closed to avoid the drifting cigar smoke, he presently became aware of a girl in a pink print dress leaning over the grey parapet of the bridge. And, picking his way among the puddles, he went toward her.

“Good morning, Miss Carew,” he said, taking off his straw hat.

She turned her head over her shoulder; the early sun glistened on his shiny, carefully parted hair and lingered in glory on a diamond scarf pin.

“Good morning,” she said, a little uncertainly, for the memory of their first meeting on the bridge had not entirely been forgotten.

“You had breakfast early,” he said.

“Yes.”

He kept his hat off; such little courtesies have their effect; also it was good for his hair which, he feared, had become a trifle thinner recently.

“It is beautiful weather,” said Mr. Brandes, squinting at her through his cigar smoke.

“Yes.” She looked down into the tumbling water.

“This is a beautiful country, isn’t it, Miss Carew?”

“Yes.”

With his head a little on one side he inspected her. There was only the fine curve of her cheek visible, and a white neck under the chestnut hair; and one slim, tanned hand resting on the stone parapet.

“Do you like motoring?” he asked.

She looked up:

“Yes... I have only been out a few times.”

“I’ll have another car up here in a few days. I’d like to take you out.”

She was silent.

“Ever go to Saratoga?” he inquired.

“No.”

“I’ll take you to the races – with your mother. Would you like to go?”

She remained silent so long that he became a trifle uneasy.

“With your mother,” he repeated, moving so he could see a little more of her face.

“I don’t think mother would go,” she said.

“Would she let you go?”

“I don’t think so.”

“There’s nothing wrong with racing,” he said, “if you don’t bet money on the horses.”

But Rue knew nothing about sport, and her ignorance as well as the suggested combination of Saratoga, automobile, and horse racing left her silent again.

Brandes sat down on the parapet of the bridge and held his straw hat on his fat knees.

“Then we’ll make it a family party,” he said, “your father and mother and you, shall we? And we’ll just go off for the day.”

“Thank you.”

“Would you like it?”

“Yes.”

“Will you go?”

“I – work in the mill.”

“Every day?”

“Yes.”

“How about Sunday?”

“We go to church... I don’t know... Perhaps we might go in the afternoon.”

“I’ll ask your father,” he said, watching the delicately flushed face with odd, almost sluggish persistency.

His grey-green eyes seemed hypnotised; he appeared unable to turn them elsewhere; and she, gradually becoming conscious of his scrutiny, kept her own eyes averted.

“What were you looking at in the water?” he asked.

“I was looking for our boat. It isn’t there. I’m afraid it has gone over the dam.”

“I’ll help you search for it,” he said, “when I come back from the village. I’m going to walk over and find somebody who’ll cart that runabout to the railroad station... You’re not going that way, are you?” he added, rising.

“No.”

“Then—” he lifted his hat high and put it on with care – “until a little later, Miss Carew... And I want to apologise for speaking so familiarly to you yesterday. I’m sorry. It’s a way we get into in New York. Broadway isn’t good for a man’s manners... Will you forgive me, Miss Carew?”

Embarrassment kept her silent; she nodded her head, and finally turned and looked at him. His smile was agreeable.

She smiled faintly, too, and rose.

“Until later, then,” he said. “This is the Gayfield road, isn’t it?”

“Yes.”

She turned and walked toward the house; and as though he could not help himself he walked beside her, his hat in his hand once more.

“I like this place,” he said. “I wonder if there is a hotel in Gayfield.”

“The Gayfield House.”

“Is it *very* bad?” he asked jocosely.

She seemed surprised. It was considered good, she thought.

With a slight, silent nod of dismissal she crossed the road and went into the house, leaving him standing beside his wrecked machine once more, looking after her out of sluggish eyes.

Presently, from the house, emerged Stull, his pasty face startling in its pallor under the cloudless sky, and walked slowly over to Brandes.

“Well, Ben,” said the latter pleasantly, “I’m going to Gayfield to telegraph for another car.”

“How soon can they get one up?” inquired Stull, inserting a large cigar into his slitted mouth and lighting it.

“Oh, in a couple of days, I guess. I don’t know. I don’t care much, either.”

“We can go on to Saratoga by train,” suggested Stull complacently.

“We can stay here, too.”

“What for?”

Brandes said in his tight-lipped, even voice:

“The fishing’s good. I guess I’ll try it.” He continued to contemplate the machine, but Stull’s black eyes were turned on him intently.

“How about the races?” he asked. “Do we go or not?”

“Certainly.”

“When?”

“When they send us a car to go in.”

“Isn’t the train good enough?”

“The fishing here is better.”

Stull’s pasty visage turned sourer:

“Do you mean we lose a couple of days in this God-forsaken dump because you’d rather go to Saratoga in a runabout than in a train?”

“I tell you I’m going to stick around for a while.”

“For how long?”

“Oh, I don’t know. When we get our car we can talk it over and—”

“Ah,” ejaculated Stull in disgust, “what the hell’s the matter with you? Is it that little skirt you was buzzing out here like you never seen one before?”

“How did you guess, Ben?” returned Brandes with the almost expressionless jocularly that characterised him at times.

“*That* little red-headed, spindling, freckled, milk-fed mill-hand—”

“Funny, ain’t it? But there’s no telling what will catch the tired business man, is there, Ben?”

“Well, what does catch him?” demanded Stull angrily. “What’s the answer?”

“I guess she’s the answer, Ben.”

“Ah, leave the kid alone—”

“I’m going to have the car sent up here. I’m going to take her out. Go on to Saratoga if you want to. I’ll meet you there—”

“When?”

“When I’m ready,” replied Brandes evenly. But he smiled.

Stull looked at him, and his white face, soured by dyspepsia, became sullen with wrath. At such times, too, his grammar suffered from indigestion.

“Say, Eddie,” he began, “can’t no one learn you nothin’ at all? How many times would you have been better off if you’d listened to me? Every time you throw me you hand yourself one. Now that you got a little money again and a little backing, don’t do anything like *that*—”

“Like what?”

“Like chasin’ dames! Don’t act foolish like you done in Chicago last summer! You wouldn’t listen to me then, would you? And that Denver business, too! Say, look at all the foolish things you done against all I could say to save you – like backing that cowboy plug against Battling Jensen! – Like taking that big hunk o’ beef, Walstein, to San Antonio, where Kid O’Rourke put him out in the first! And everybody’s laughing at you yet! Ah—” he exclaimed angrily, “somebody tell me why I don’t quit you, you big dill pickle! I wish someone would tell me why I stand for you, because I don’t know... And look what you’re doing now; you got some money of your own and plenty of syndicate money to put on the races and a big comish! You got a good theayter in town with Morris Stein to back you and everything – and look what you’re doing!” he ended bitterly.

Brandes tightened his dental grip on his cigar and squinted at him good-humouredly.

“Say, Ben,” he said, “would you believe it if I told you I’m stuck on her?”

“Ah, you’d fall for anything. I never seen a skirt you wouldn’t chase.”

“I don’t mean that kind.”

“What kind, then?”

“This is on the level, Ben.”

“What! Ah, go on! *You* on the level?”

“All the same, I am.”

“You can’t be on the level! You don’t know how.”

“Why?”

“You got a wife, and you know damn well you have.”

“Yes, and she’s getting her divorce.”

Stull regarded him with habitual and sullen distrust.

“She hasn’t got it yet.”

“She’ll get it. Don’t worry.”

“I thought you was for fighting it.”

“I was going to fight it; but—” His slow, narrow, greenish eyes stole toward the house across the road.

“Just like that,” he said, after a slight pause; “that’s the way the little girl hit me. I’m on the level, Ben. First skirt I ever saw that I wanted to find waiting dinner for me when I come home. Get me?”

“I don’t know whether I do or not.”

“Get this, then; she isn’t all over paint; she’s got freckles, thank God, and she smells sweet as a daisy field. Ah, what the hell—” he burst out between his parted teeth “ – when every woman in New York smells like a chorus girl! Don’t I get it all day? The whole city stinks like a star’s dressing room. And I married one! And I’m through. I want to get my breath and I’m getting it.”

Stull’s white features betrayed merely the morbid suffering of indigestion; he said nothing and sucked his cigar.

“I’m through,” repeated Brandes. “I want a home and a wife – the kind that even a fly cop won’t pinch on sight – the kind of little thing that’s over there in that old shack. Whatever I am, I don’t want a wife like me – nor kids, either.”

Stull remained sullenly unresponsive.

“Call her a hick if you like. All right, I want that kind.”

No comment from Stull, who was looking at the wrecked car.

“Understand, Ben?”

“I tell you I don’t know whether I do or not!”

“Well, what don’t you understand?”

“Nothin’... Well, then, your falling for a kid like that, first crack out o’ the box. I’m honest; I don’t understand it.”

“She hit me that way – so help me God!”

“And you’re on the level?”

“Absolutely, Ben.”

“What about the old guy and the mother? Take ’em to live with you?”

“If she wants ’em.”

Stull stared at him in uneasy astonishment:

“All right, Eddie. Only don’t act foolish till Minna passes you up. And get out of here or you will. If you’re on the level, as you say you are, you’ve got to mark time for a good long while yet—”

“Why?”

“You don’t have to ask me that, do you?”

“Yes, I do. Why? I want to marry her, I tell you. I mean to. I’m taking no chances that some hick will do it while I’m away. I’m going to stay right here.”

“And when the new car comes?”

“I’ll keep her humming between here and Saratoga.”

“And then what?”

Brandes’ greenish eyes rested on the car and he smoked in silence for a while. Then:

“Listen, Ben. I’m a busy man. I got to be back in town and I got to have a wedding trip too. You know me, Ben. You know what I mean. That’s me. When I do a thing I do it. Maybe I make plenty of mistakes. Hell! I’d rather make ’em than sit pat and do nothing!”

“You’re crazy.”

“Don’t bet on it, Ben. I know what I want. I’m going to make money. Things are going big with me—”

“You tinhorn! You always say that!”

“Watch me. I bet you I make a killing at Saratoga! I bet you I make good with Morris Stein! I bet you the first show I put on goes big! I bet—”

“Ah, can it!”

“Wait! I bet you I marry that little girl in two weeks and she stands for it when I tell her later we’d better get married again!”

“Say! Talk sense!”

“I am.”

“What’ll they do to you if your wife makes a holler?”

“Who ever heard of her or me in the East?”

“You want to take a chance like that?”

“I’ll fix it. I haven’t got time to wait for Minna to shake me loose. Besides, she’s in Seattle. I’ll fix it so she doesn’t hear until she gets her freedom. I’ll get a license right here. I guess I’ll use your name—”

“What!” yelled Stull.

“Shut your face!” retorted Brandes. “What do you think you’re going to do, squeal?”

“You think I’m going to stand for that?”

“Well, then, I won’t use your name. I’ll use my own. Why not? I mean honest. It’s dead level. I’ll remarry her. I want her, I tell you. I want a wedding trip, too, before I go back—”

“With the first rehearsal called for September fifteenth! What’s the matter with you? Do you think Stein is going to stand for—”

“*You’ll* be on hand,” said Brandes pleasantly. “I’m going to Paris for four weeks – two weeks there, two on the ocean—”

“You—”

“Save your voice, Ben. That’s settled.”

Stull turned upon him a dead white visage distorted with fury:

“I hope she throws you out!” he said breathlessly. “You talk about being on the level! Every level’s crooked with you. You don’t know what square means; a square has got more than four corners for you! Go on! Stick around. I don’t give a damn what you do. Go on and do it. But I quit right here.”

Both knew that the threat was empty. As a shadow clings to a man’s heels, as a lost soul haunts its slayer, as damnation stalks the damned, so had Stull followed Brandes; and would follow to the end. Why? Neither knew. It seemed to be their destiny, surviving everything – their bitter quarrels, the injustice and tyranny of Brandes, his contempt and ridicule sometimes – enduring through adversity, even penury, through good and bad days, through abundance and through want, through shame and disgrace, through trickery, treachery, and triumph – nothing had ever broken the occult bond which linked these two. And neither understood why, but both seemed to be vaguely conscious that neither was entirely complete without the other.

“Ben,” said Brandes affably, “I’m going to walk over to Gayfield. Want to come?”

They went off, together.

CHAPTER VII

OBSESSION

By the end of the week Brandes had done much to efface any unpleasant impression he had made on Ruhannah Carew.

The girl had never before had to do with any mature man. She was therefore at a disadvantage in every way, and her total lack of experience emphasised the odds.

Nobody had ever before pointedly preferred her, paid her undivided attention; no man had ever sought her, conversed with her, deferred to her, interested himself in her. It was entirely new to her, this attention which Brandes paid her. Nor could she make any comparisons between this man and other men, because she knew no other men. He was an entirely novel experience to her; he had made himself interesting, had proved amusing, considerate, kind, generous, and apparently interested in what interested her. And if his unfeigned preference for her society disturbed and perplexed her, his assiduous civilities toward her father and mother were gradually winning from her far more than anything he had done for her.

His white-faced, odd little friend had gone; he himself had taken quarters at the Gayfield House, where a car like the wrecked one was stabled for his use.

He had already taken her father and mother and herself everywhere within motoring distance; he had accompanied them to church; he escorted her to the movies; he walked with her in the August evenings after supper, rowed her about on the pond, fished from the bridge, told her strange stories in the moonlight on the verandah, her father and mother interested and attentive.

For the career of Mr. Eddie Brandes was capable of furnishing material for interesting stories if carefully edited, and related with discretion and circumspection. He had been many things to many men – and to several women – he had been a tinhorn gambler in the Southwest, a miner in Alaska, a saloon keeper in Wyoming, a fight promoter in Arizona. He had travelled profitably on popular ocean liners until requested to desist; Auteuil, Neuilly, Vincennes, and Longchamps knew him as tout, bookie, and, when fitfully prosperous, as a plunger. Epsom knew him once as a welcher; and knew him no more.

He had taken a comic opera company through the wheat-belt – one way; he had led a burlesque troupe into Arizona and had traded it there for a hotel.

“When Eddie *wants* to talk,” Stull used to say, “that smoke, *Othello*, hasn’t got nothing on him.”

However, Brandes seldom chose to talk. This was one of his rare garrulous occasions; and, with careful self-censorship, he was making an endless series of wonder-tales out of the episodes and *faits divers* common to the experience of such as he.

So, of moving accidents by flood and field this man had a store, and he contrived to make them artistically innocuous and perfectly fit for family consumption.

Further, two of his friends motored over from Saratoga to see him, were brought to supper at the Carew’s; and they gave him a clean bill of moral health. They were, respectively, “Doc” Curfoot – suave haunter of Peacock Alley and gentleman “capper” – whom Brandes introduced as the celebrated specialist, Doctor Elbert Curfoot – and Captain Harman Quint, partner in “Quint’s” celebrated temple of chance – introduced as the distinguished navigating officer which he appeared to be. The steering for their common craft, however, was the duty of the eminent Doc.

They spent the evening on the verandah with the family; and it was quite wonderful what a fine fellow each turned out to be – information confidentially imparted to the Reverend Mr. Carew by each of the three distinguished gentlemen in turn.

Doc Curfoot, whose business included the ability to talk convincingly on any topic, took the Reverend Mr. Carew's measure and chose literature; and his suave critique presently became an interesting monologue listened to in silence by those around him.

Brandes had said, "Put me in right, Doc," and Doc was accomplishing it, partly to oblige Brandes, partly for practice. His agreeable voice so nicely pitched, so delightfully persuasive, recapitulating all the commonplaces and cant phrases concerning the literature of the day, penetrated gratefully the intellectual isolation of these humble gentlepeople, and won very easily their innocent esteem. With the Reverend Mr. Carew Doc discussed such topics as the influence on fiction of the ethical ideal. With Mrs. Carew Captain Quint exchanged reminiscences of travel on distant seas. Brandes attempted to maintain low-voiced conversation with Rue, who responded in diffident monosyllables to his advances.

Brandes walked down to their car with them after they had taken their leave.

"What's the idea, Eddie?" inquired Doc Curfoot, pausing before the smart little speeder.

"It's straight."

"Oh," said Doc, softly, betraying no surprise – about the only thing he never betrayed. "Anything in it for you, Eddie?"

"Yes. A good girl. The kind you read about. Isn't that enough?"

"Minna chucked you?" inquired Captain Quint.

"She'll get her decree in two or three months. Then I'll have a home. And everything that you and I are keeps out of that home, Cap. See?"

"Certainly," said Quint. "Quite right, Eddie."

Doc Curfoot climbed in and took the wheel; Quint followed him.

"Say," he said in his pleasant, guarded voice, "watch out that Minna don't double-cross you, Eddie."

"How?"

"– Or shoot you up. She's some *schutzen-fest*, you know, when she turns loose–"

"Ah, I tell you she *wants* the divorce. Abe Grittlefeld's crazy about her. He'll get Abe Gordon to star her on Broadway; and that's enough for her. Besides, she'll marry Maxy Venem when she can afford to keep him."

"*You* never understood Minna Minti."

"Well, who ever understood any German?" demanded Brandes. "She's one of those sour-blooded, silent Dutch women that make me ache."

Doc pushed the self-starter; there came a click, a low humming. Brandes' face cleared and he held out his square-shaped hand:

"You fellows," he said, "have put me right with the old folks here. I'll do the same for you some day. Don't talk about this little girl and me, that's all."

"All the same," repeated Doc, "don't take any chances with Minna. She's on to you, and she's got a rotten Dutch disposition."

"That's right, Doc. And say, Harman," – to Quint – "tell Ben he's doing fine. Tell him to send me what's mine, because I'll want it very soon now. I'm going to take a month off and then I'm going to show Stein how a theatre can be run."

"Eddie," said Quint, "it's a good thing to think big, but it's a damn poor thing to talk big. Cut out the talk and you'll be a big man some day."

The graceful car moved forward into the moonlight; his two friends waved an airy adieu; and Brandes went slowly back to the dark verandah where sat a young girl, pitifully immature in mind and body – and two old people little less innocent for all their experience in the ranks of Christ, for all the wounds that scarred them both in the over-sea service which had broken them forever.

"A very handsome and distinguished gentleman, your friend Dr. Curfoot," said the Reverend Mr. Carew. "I imagine his practice in New York is not only fashionable but extensive."

“Both,” said Brandes.

“I assume so. He seems to be intimately acquainted with people whose names for generations have figured prominently in the social columns of the New York press.”

“Oh, yes, Curfoot and Quint know them all.”

Which was true enough. They had to. One must know people from whom one accepts promissory notes to liquidate those little affairs peculiar to the temple of chance. And New York’s best furnished the neophytes for these rites.

“I thought Captain Quint very interesting,” ventured Ruhannah. “He seems to have sailed over the entire globe.”

“Naval men are always delightful,” said her mother. And, laying her hand on her husband’s arm in the dark: “Do you remember, Wilbour, how kind the officers from the cruiser *Oneida* were when the rescue party took us aboard?”

“God sent the *Oneida* to us,” said her husband dreamily. “I thought it was the end of the world for us – for you and me and baby Rue – that dreadful flight from the mission to the sea.”

His bony fingers tightened over his wife’s toilworn hand. In the long grass along the creek fireflies sparkled, and their elfin lanterns, waning, glowing, drifted high in the calm August night.

The Reverend Mr. Carew gathered his crutches; the night was a trifle damp for him; besides, he desired to read. Brandes, as always, rose to aid him. His wife followed.

“Don’t stay out long, Rue,” she said in the doorway.

“No, mother.”

Brandes came back. Departing from his custom, he did not light a cigar, but sat in silence, his narrow eyes trying to see Ruhannah in the darkness. But she was only a delicate shadow shape to him, scarcely detached from the darkness that enveloped her.

He meant to speak to her then. And suddenly found he could not, realised, all at once, that he lacked the courage.

This was the more amazing and disturbing to him because he could not remember the time or occasion when the knack of fluent speech had ever failed him.

He had never foreseen such a situation; it had never occurred to him that he would find the slightest difficulty in saying easily and gracefully what he had determined to say to this young girl.

Now he sat there silent, disturbed, nervous, and tongue-tied. At first he did not quite comprehend what was making him afraid. After a long while he understood that it was some sort of fear of her – fear of her refusal, fear of losing her, fear that she might have – in some occult way – divined what he really was, that she might have heard things concerning him, his wife, his career. The idea turned him cold.

And all at once he realised how terribly in earnest he had become; how deeply involved; how vital this young girl had become to him.

Never before had he really wanted anything as compared to this desire of his for her. He was understanding, too, in a confused way, that such a girl and such a home for him as she could make was going not only to give him the happiness he expected, but that it also meant betterment for himself – straighter living, perhaps straighter thinking – the birth of something resembling self-respect, perhaps even aspiration – or at least the aspiration toward that respect from others which honest living dare demand.

He wanted her; he wanted her now; he wanted to marry her whether or not he had the legal right; he wanted to go away for a month with her, and then return and work for her, for them both – build up a fortune and a good reputation with Stein’s backing and Stein’s theatre – stand well with honest men, stand well with himself, stand always, with her, for everything a man should be.

If she loved him she would forgive him and quietly remarry him as soon as Minna kicked him loose. He was confident he could make her happy, make her love him if once he could find courage to speak – if once he could win her. And suddenly the only possible way to go about it occurred to him.

His voice was a trifle husky and unsteady from the nervous tension when he at last broke the silence:

“Miss Rue,” he said, “I have a word to say to your father and mother. Would you wait here until I come back?”

“I think I had better go in, too—”

“Please don’t.”

“Why?” She stopped short, instinctively, but not surmising.

“You will wait, then?” he asked.

“I was going in... But I’ll sit here a little while.”

He rose and went in, rather blindly.

Ruhannah, dreaming there deep in her splint armchair, slim feet crossed, watched the fireflies sailing over the alders. Sometimes she thought of Brandes, pleasantly, sometimes of other matters. Once the memory of her drive home through the wintry moonlight with young Neeland occurred to her, and the reminiscence was vaguely agreeable.

Listless, a trifle sleepy, dreamily watching the fireflies, the ceaseless noise of the creek in her ears, inconsequential thoughts flitted through her brain – the vague, aimless, guiltless thoughts of a young and unstained mind.

She was nearly asleep when Brandes came back, and she looked up at him where he stood beside her porch chair in the darkness.

“Miss Rue,” he said, “I have told your father and mother that I am in love with you and want to make you my wife.”

The girl lay there speechless, astounded.

CHAPTER VIII

A CHANGE IMPENDS

The racing season at Saratoga drew toward its close, and Brandes had appeared there only twice in person, both times with a very young girl.

“If you got to bring her here to the races, can’t you get her some clothes?” whispered Stull in his ear. “That get-up of hers is something fierce.”

Late hours, hot weather, indiscreet nourishment, and the feverish anxiety incident to betting other people’s money had told on Stull. His eyes were like two smears of charcoal on his pasty face; sourly he went about the business which Brandes should have attended to, nursing resentment – although he was doing better than Brandes had hoped to do.

Their joint commission from his winnings began to assume considerable proportions; at track and club and hotel people were beginning to turn and stare when the little man with the face of a sick circus clown appeared, always alone, greeting with pallid indifference his acquaintances, ignoring overtures, noticing neither sport, nor fashion, nor political importance, nor yet the fair and frail whose curiosity and envy he was gradually arousing.

Obsequiousness from club, hotel, and racing officials made no impression on him; he went about his business alone, sullen, preoccupied, deathly pale, asking no information, requesting no favours, conferring with nobody, doing no whispering and enduring none.

After a little study of that white, sardonic, impossible face, people who would have been glad to make use of him became discouraged. And those who first had recognised him in Saratoga found, at the end of the racing month, nothing to add to their general identification of him as “Ben Stull, partner of Eddie Brandes – Western sports.”

Stull, whispering in Brandes’ ear again, where he sat beside him in the grand stand, added to his earlier comment on Ruhannah’s appearance:

“Why don’t you fix her up, Eddie? It looks like you been robbing a country school.”

Brandes’ slow, greenish eyes marked sleepily the distant dust, where Mr. Sanford’s Nick Stoner was leading a brilliant field, steadily overhauling the favourite, Deborah Glenn.

“When the time comes for me to fix her up,” he said between thin lips which scarcely moved, “she’ll look like Washington Square in May – not like Fifth Avenue and Broadway.”

Nick Stoner continued to lead. Stull’s eyes resembled two holes burnt in a sheet; Brandes yawned. They were plunging the limit on the Sanford favourite.

As for Ruhannah, she sat with slender gloved hands tightly clasped, lips parted, intent, fascinated with the sunlit beauty of the scene.

Brandes looked at her, and his heavy, expressionless features altered subtly:

“Some running!” he said.

A breathless nod was her response. All around them repressed excitement was breaking out; men stood up and shouted; women rose, and the club house seemed suddenly to blossom like a magic garden of wind-tossed flowers.

Through the increasing cheering Stull looked on without a sign of emotion, although affluence or ruin, in the Sanford colours, sat astride the golden roan.

Suddenly Ruhannah stood up, one hand pressed to the ill-fitting blue serge over her wildly beating heart. Brandes rose beside her. Not a muscle in his features moved.

“Gawd!” whispered Stull in his ear, as they were leaving.

“Some killing, Ben!” nodded Brandes in his low, deliberate voice. His heavy, round face was deeply flushed; Fortune, the noisy wanton, had flung both arms around his neck. But his slow eyes

were continually turned on the slim young girl whom he was teaching to walk beside him without taking his arm.

“Ain’t she on to us?” Stull had enquired. And Brandes’ reply was correct; Ruhannah never dreamed that it made a penny’s difference to Brandes whether Nick Stoner won or whether it was Deborah Glenn which the wild-voiced throng saluted.

They did not remain in Saratoga for dinner. They took Stull back to his hotel on the rumble of the runabout, Brandes remarking that he thought he should need a chauffeur before long and suggesting that Stull look about Saratoga for a likely one.

Halted in the crush before the United States Hotel, Stull decided to descend there. Several men in the passing crowds bowed to Brandes; one, Norton Smawley, known to the fraternity as “Parson” Smawley, came out to the curb to shake hands. Brandes introduced him to Rue as “Parson” Smawley – whether with some sinister future purpose already beginning to take shape in his round, heavy head, or whether a perverted sense of humour prompted him to give Rue the idea that she had been in godly company, it is difficult to determine.

He added that Miss Carew was the daughter of a clergyman and a missionary. And the Parson took his cue. At any rate Rue, leaning from her seat, listened to the persuasive and finely modulated voice of Parson Smawley with pleasure, and found his sleek, graceful presence and courtly manners most agreeable. There were no such persons in Gayfield.

She hoped, shyly, that if he were in Gayfield he would call on her father. Once in a very long while clergymen called on her father, and their rare visits remained a pleasure to the lonely invalid for months.

The Parson promised to call, very gravely. It would not have embarrassed him to do so; it was his business in life to have a sufficient knowledge of every man’s business to enable him to converse convincingly with anybody.

He took polished leave of her; took leave of Brandes with the faintest flutter of one eyelid, as though he understood Brandes’ game. Which he did not; nor did Brandes himself, entirely.

They had thirty miles to go in the runabout. So they would not remain to dinner. Besides, Brandes did not care to make himself conspicuous in public just then. Too many people knew more or less about him – the sort of people who might possibly be in communication with his wife. There was no use slapping chance in the face. Two quiet visits to the races with Ruhannah was enough for the present. Even those two visits were scarcely discreet. It was time to go.

Stull and Brandes stood consulting together beside the runabout; Rue sat in the machine watching the press of carriages and automobiles on Broadway, and the thronged sidewalks along which brilliant, animated crowds were pouring.

“I’m not coming again, Ben,” said Brandes, dropping his voice. “No use to hunt the limelight just now. You can’t tell what some of these people might do. I’ll take no chances that some fresh guy might try to start something.”

“Stir up Minna?” Stull’s lips merely formed the question, and his eyes watched Ruhannah.

“They couldn’t. What would she care? All the same, I play safe, Ben. Well, be good. Better send me mine on pay day. I’ll need it.”

Stull’s face grew sourer:

“Can’t you wait till she gets her decree?”

“And lose a month off? No.”

“It’s all coming your way, Eddie. Stay wise and play safe. Don’t start anything now—”

“It’s safe. If I don’t take September off I wait a year for my – honeymoon. And I won’t. See?”

They both looked cautiously at Ruhannah, who sat motionless, absorbed in the turmoil of vehicles and people.

Brandes’ face slowly reddened; he dropped one hand on Stull’s shoulder and said, between thin lips that scarcely moved:

“She’s all I’m interested in. You don’t think much of her, Ben. She isn’t painted. She isn’t dolled up the way you like ’em. But there isn’t anything else that matters very much to me. All I want in the world is sitting in that runabout, looking out of her kid eyes at a thousand or two people who ain’t worth the pair of run-down shoes she’s wearing.”

But Stull’s expression remained sardonic and unconvinced.

So Brandes got into his car and took the wheel; and Stull watched them threading a tortuous path through the traffic tangle of Broadway.

They sped past the great hotels, along crowded sidewalks, along the park, and out into an endless stretch of highway where hundreds of other cars were travelling in the same direction.

“Did you have a good time?” he inquired, shifting his cigar and keeping his narrow eyes on the road.

“Yes; it was beautiful – exciting.”

“Some horse, Nick Stoner! Some race, eh?”

“I was so excited – with everybody standing up and shouting. And such beautiful horses – and such pretty women in their wonderful dresses! I – I never knew there were such things.”

He swung the car, sent it rushing past a lumbering limousine, slowed a little, gripped his cigar between his teeth, and watched the road, both hands on the wheel.

Yes, things were coming his way – coming faster and faster all the while. He had waited many years for this – for material fortune – for that chance which every gambler waits to seize when the psychological second ticks out. But he never had expected that the chance was to include a very young girl in a country-made dress and hat.

As they sped westward the freshening wind from distant pine woods whipped their cheeks; north, blue hills and bluer mountains beyond took fairy shape against the sky; and over all spread the tremendous heavens where fleets of white clouds sailed the uncharted wastes, and other fleets glimmered beyond the edges of the world, hull down, on vast horizons.

“I want to make you happy,” said Brandes in his low, even voice. It was, perhaps, the most honest statement he had ever uttered.

Ruhannah remained silent, her eyes riveted on the far horizon.

It was a week later, one hot evening, that he telegraphed to Stull in Saratoga:

“Find me a chauffeur who will be willing to go abroad. I’ll give you twenty-four hours to get him here.”

The next morning he called up Stull on the telephone from the drug store in Gayfield:

“Get my wire, Ben?”

“Yes. But I—”

“Wait. Here’s a postscript. I also want Parson Smawley. I want him to get a car and come over to the Gayfield House. Tell him I count on him. And he’s to wear black and a white tie.”

“Yes. But about that chauffeur you want—”

“Don’t argue. Have him here. Have the Parson, also. Tell him to bring a white tie. Understand?”

“Oh, yes, I understand you, Eddie! You don’t want anything of me, do you! Go out and get that combination? Just like that! What’ll I do? Step into the street and whistle?”

“It’s up to you. Get busy.”

“As usual,” retorted Stull in an acrid voice. “All the same. I’m telling you there ain’t a chauffeur you’d have in Saratoga. Who handed you that dope?”

“Try. I need the chauffeur part of the combine, anyway. If he won’t go abroad, I’ll leave him in town. Get a wiggle on, Ben. How’s things?”

“All right. We had War-axe and Lady Johnson. Some killing, eh? That stable is winning all along. We’ve got Adriutha and Queen Esther today. The Ocean Belle skate is scratched. Doc and Cap and me is thick with the Legislature outfit. We’ll trim ’em tonight. How are you feeling, Eddie?”

“Never better. I’ll call you up in the morning. Ding-dong!”

“Wait! Are you really going abroad?” shouted Stull.

But Brandes had already hung up.

He walked leisurely back to Brookhollow through the sunshine. He had never been as happy in all his life.

CHAPTER IX

NONRESISTANCE

“Long distance calling you, Mr. Stull. One moment, please... Here’s your party,” concluded the operator.

Stull, huddled sleepily on his bed, picked up the transmitter from the table beside him with a frightful yawn.

“Who is it?” he inquired sourly.

“It’s me – Ben!”

“Say, Eddie, have a heart, will you! I need the sleep—”

Brandes’ voice was almost jovial:

“Wake up, you poor tout! It’s nearly noon—”

“Well, wasn’t I singing hymns with Doc and Cap till breakfast time? And believe *me*, we trimmed the Senator’s bunch! They’ve got their transportation back to Albany, and that’s about all—”

“Careful what you say. I’m talking from the Gayfield House. The Parson got here all right. He’s just left. He’ll tell you about things. Listen, Ben, the chauffeur you sent me from Saratoga got here last evening, too. I went out with him and he drives all right. Did you look him up?”

“Now, how could I look him up when you gave me only a day to get him for you?”

“Did he have references?”

“Sure, a wad of them. But I couldn’t verify them.”

“Who is he?”

“I forget his name. You ought to know it by now.”

“How did you get him?”

“Left word at the desk. An hour later he came to my room with a couple of bums. I told him about the job. I told him you wanted a chauffeur willing to go abroad. He said he was all that and then some. So I sent him on. Anything you don’t fancy about him?”

“Nothing, I guess. He seems all right. Only I like to know about a man—”

“How can I find out if you don’t give me time?”

“All right, Ben. I guess he’ll do. By the way, I’m starting for town in ten minutes.”

“What’s the idea?”

“Ask the Parson. Have you any other news except that you killed that Albany bunch of grafters?”

“No... *Yes!* But it ain’t good news. I was going to call you soon as I waked up—”

“What’s the trouble?”

“There ain’t any trouble —*yet*. But a certain party has showed up here – a very smooth young man whose business is hunting trouble. Get me?”

After a silence Stull repeated:

“Get me, Eddie?”

“No.”

“Listen. A certain slippery party—”

“Who, damn it? Talk out. I’m in a hurry.”

“Very well, then. Maxy Venem is here!”

The name of his wife’s disbarred attorney sent a chill over Brandes.

“What’s he doing in Saratoga?” he demanded.

“I’m trying to find out. He was to the races yesterday. He seen Doc. Of course Doc hadn’t laid eyes on you for a year. Oh, no, indeed! Heard you was somewhere South, down and out. I don’t guess Maxy was fooled none. What we done here in Saratoga is growing too big to hush up—”

“What *we’ve* done? Whad’ye mean, *we*? I told you to work by yourself quietly, Ben, and keep me out of it.”

“That’s what I done. Didn’t I circulate the news that you and me had quit partnership? And even then you wouldn’t take my advice. Oh, no. You must show up here at the track with a young lady—”

“How long has Maxy Venem been in Saratoga?” snapped Brandes.

“He told Doc he just come, but Cap found out he’d been here a week. All I hope is he didn’t see you with the Brookhollow party—”

“Do you think he *did*?”

“Listen, Eddie. Max is a smooth guy—”

“Find out what he knows! Do you hear?”

“Who? Me? Me try to make Maxy Venem talk? That snake? If he isn’t on to you now, that would be enough to put him wise. Act like you had sense, Eddie. Call that *other matter* off and slide for town—”

“I can’t, Ben.”

“You got to!”

“I *can’t*, I tell you.”

“You’re nutty in the head! Don’t you suppose that Max is wise to what I’ve been doing here? And don’t you suppose he knows damn well that you’re back of whatever I do? If you ain’t crazy you’ll call that party off for a while.”

Brandes’ even voice over the telephone sounded a trifle unnatural, almost hoarse:

“I can’t call it off. *It’s done.*”

“What’s done?”

“What I told you I was going to do.”

“*That!*”

“The Parson married us.”

“Oh!”

“Wait! Parson Smawley married us, in church, assisted by the local dominie. I didn’t count on the dominie. It was her father’s idea. He butted in.”

“Then is it – is it—?”

“That’s what I’m not sure about. You see, the Parson did it, but the dominie stuck around. Whether he got a half nelson on me I don’t know till I ask. Anyway, I expected to clinch things – later – so it doesn’t really matter, unless Max Venem means bad. Does he, do you think?”

“He *always* does, Eddie.”

“Yes, I know. Well, then, I’ll wait for a cable from you. And if I’ve got to take three months off in Paris, why I’ve got to – that’s all.”

“Good God! What about Stein? What about the theaytre?”

“*You’ll* handle it for the first three months... Say, I’ve got to go, now. I think she’s waiting—”

“Who?”

“My – wife.”

“Oh!”

“Yes. The chauffeur took her back to the house in the car to put something in her suitcase that she forgot. I’m waiting for her here at the Gayfield House. We’re on our way to town. Going to motor in. Our trunks have gone by rail.”

After a silence, Stull’s voice sounded again, tense, constrained:

“You better go aboard tonight.”

“That’s right, too.”

“What’s your ship?”

“*Lusitania.*”

“What’ll I tell Stein?”

“Tell him I’ll be back in a month. You look out for my end. I’ll be back in time.”

“Will you cable me?”

“Sure. And if you get any later information about Max today, call me at the Knickerbocker. We’ll dine there and then go aboard.”

“I get you... Say, Eddie, I’m that worried! If this break of yours don’t kill our luck—”

“Don’t you believe it! I’m going to fight for what I got till someone hands me the count. She’s the first thing I ever wanted. I’ve got her and I guess I can keep her... And listen: there’s nothing like her in all God’s world!”

“When did you do – it?” demanded Stull, coldly.

“This morning at eleven. I just stepped over here to the garage. I’m talking to you from the bar. She’s back by this time and waiting, I guess. So take care of yourself till I see you.”

“Same to you, Eddie. And be leery of Max. He’s *bad*. When they disbar a man like that he’s twice as dangerous as he was. His ex-partner, Abe Grittlefeld, is a certain party’s attorney of record. Ask yourself what you’d be up against if that pair of wolves get started after you! You know what Max would do to you if he could. And Minna, too!”

“Don’t worry.”

“I *am* worrying! And you ought to. You know what you done to Max. Don’t think he ever forgets. He’ll do you if he can, same as Minna will.”

Brandes’ stolid face lost a little of its sanguine colour, where he stood in the telephone box behind the bar of the Gayfield House.

Yes, he knew well enough what he had once done to the disbarred lawyer out in Athabasca when he was handling the Unknown and Venem, the disbarred, was busy looking out for the Athabasca Blacksmith, furnishing the corrupt brains for the firm of Venem and Grittlefeld, and paying steady court to the prettiest girl in Athabasca, Ilse Dumont.

And Brandes’ Unknown had almost killed Max Venem’s blacksmith; Brandes had taken all Venem’s money, and then his girl; more than that, he had “made” this girl, in the theatrical sense of the word; and he had gambled on her beauty and her voice and had won out with both.

Then, while still banking her salary to reimburse himself for his trouble with her, he had tired of her sufficiently to prove unfaithful to his marriage vows at every opportunity. And opportunities were many. Venem had never forgiven him; Ilse Dumont could not understand treachery; and Venem’s detectives furnished her with food for thought that presently infuriated her.

And now she was employing Max Venem, once senior partner in the firm of Venem and Grittlefeld, to guide her with his legal advice. She wanted Brandes’ ruin, if that could be accomplished; she wanted her freedom anyway.

Until he had met Rue Carew he had taken measures to fight the statutory charges, hoping to involve Venem and escape alimony. Then he met Ruhannah, and became willing to pay for his freedom. And he was still swamped in the vile bog of charges and countercharges, not yet free from it, not yet on solid ground, when the eternal gambler in him suggested to him that he take the chance of marrying this young girl before he was legally free to do so.

Why on earth did he want to take such a chance? He had only a few months to wait. He had never before really cared for any woman. He loved her – as he understood love – as much as he was capable of loving. If in all the world there was anything sacred to him, it was his sentiment regarding Rue Carew. Yet, he was tempted to take the chance. Even she could not escape his ruling passion; at the last analysis, even she represented to him a gambler’s chance. But in Brandes there was another streak. He wanted to take the chance that he could marry her before he had a right to, and get away with it. But his nerve failed. And, at the last moment, he had hedged, engaging Parson Smawley to play the lead instead of an ordained clergyman.

All these things he now thought of as he stood undecided, worried, in the telephone booth behind the bar at the Gayfield House. Twice Stull had spoken, and had been bidden to wait and to hold the wire.

Finally, shaking off the premonition of coming trouble, Brandes called again:

“Ben?”

“Yes, I’m listening.”

“I’ll stay in Paris if there’s trouble.”

“And throw Stein down?”

“What else is there to do?”

“Well, you can wait, can’t you? You don’t seem to be able to do that any more, but you better learn.”

“All right. What next?”

“Make a quick getaway. *Now!*”

“Yes, I’m going at once. Keep me posted, Ben. Be good!”

He hung up and went out to the wide, tree-shaded street where Ruhannah sat in the runabout awaiting him, and the new chauffeur stood by the car.

He took off his straw hat, pulled a cap and goggles from his pocket. His man placed the straw hat in the boot.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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