Van Schaick George

A Top-Floor Idyl

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CHAPTER I
THE NIGHT ALARM

I smiled at my friend Gordon, the distinguished painter, lifting up my glass and taking a sip of the *table d'hôte* claret, which the Widow Camus supplies with her famed sixty-five cent repast. It is, I must acknowledge, a somewhat turbid beverage, faintly harsh to the palate, and yet it may serve as a begetter of pleasant illusions. While drinking it, I can close my eyes, being of an imaginative nature, and permit its flavor to bring back memories of ever-blessed *tonnelles* by the Seine, redolent of fried gudgeons and mirific omelettes, and felicitous with gay laughter.

"Well, you old stick-in-the-mud," said my companion, "what are you looking so disgruntled about? I was under the impression that this feast was to be a merry-making to celebrate your fortieth birthday. Something like a grin just now passed over your otherwise uninteresting features, but it was at once succeeded by the mournful look that may well follow, but should not be permitted to accompany, riotous living."

At this I smiled again.

"Just a moment's wool-gathering, my dear fellow," I answered. "I was thinking of our old feasts, and then I began to wonder whether the tune played by that consumptive-looking young man at the piano might be a wild requiem to solemnize that burial of two-score years, or a song of triumphant achievement."

"I think it's what they call a fox-trot," remarked Gordon, doubtfully. "Your many sere and yellow years have brought you to a period in the world's history when the joy of the would-be young lies chiefly in wild contortion to the rhythm of barbaric tunes. I see that they are getting ready to clear away some of the tables and, since we are untrained in such new arts and graces, they will gradually push us away towards the doors. The bottle, I notice, is nearly half empty, which proves our entire sobriety; had it been *Pommard*, we should have paid more respectful attention to it. Give me a light, and let us make tracks."

We rose and went out. A few couples were beginning to gyrate among the fumes of spaghetti and *vin ordinaire*. Gordon McGrath, unlike myself, lives in one of the more select quarters of the city, wherefore we proceeded towards Fifth Avenue. The partial solitude of Washington Square enticed us, and we strolled towards it, sitting of common accord upon one of the benches, in the prelude of long silence resulting from philosophic bent and indulgence in rather tough veal. It was finally broken by Gordon; being younger, speech is more necessary to him.

"What about that sarcophagus you've lately selected for yourself?" he asked me.

"They are pleasant diggings," I answered. "Being on the top floor, they are remote as possible from hand-organs and the fragrance of Mrs. Milliken's kitchen. The room is quite large and possesses a bath. It gives me ample space for my books and mother's old piano."

"Wherefore a piano?" he asked, lighting another cigarette. "You can't even play with one finger."

"Well, my sister Jane took out nearly all the furniture, and the remainder went to a junkman, with the exception of the piano. Jane couldn't use it; no room for it in her Weehawken bungalow, besides which she already has a phonograph, purchased at the cost of much saving. You see, Gordon, that old Steinway was rather more intimately connected with my mother, in my memory, than anything else she left. She played it for us when we were kiddies. You have no idea of what a smile that dear woman had when she turned her head towards us and watched us trying to dance! Later on, when she was a good deal alone, it was mostly 'Songs without Words,' or improvisations such as suited her moods. Dear me! She looked beautiful when she played! So, of course, I took it, and it required more room, so that I moved. I've had it tuned; the man said that it was in very good condition yet."

"You were always a silly dreamer, Dave."

"I don't quite see," I began, "what – "

"I'll enlighten your ignorance. Of course you don't. David, old man, you've had the old rattle-trap tuned because of the

hope that rises eternal. Visions keep on coming to you of a woman, some indistinct, shadowy, composite creature of your imagination. You expect her to float into your room, in the dim future and in defiance of all propriety, and sit down before that ancient spinet.

"You keep it ready for her; it awaits her coming. To tell you the truth, I'm glad you had it tuned. It shows that you still possess some human traits. I'll come, some day, and we'll go over and capture Frieda Long. We will take her to dinner at Camus, and give her a benedictine and six cups of black coffee. After that we'll get a derrick and hoist her to your top floor, and she'll play Schubert, till the cows come home or the landlady puts us out. She's a wonder!"

"She's a great artist and a dear, lovable woman," I declared.

"That's probably why she never had a love story," conjectured Gordon. "Always had so much affection for the general that she could never descend to the particular. By the way, I went to her studio for a look at her portrait of Professor Burberry."

"It's good, isn't it?"

"Man alive! It's so good, I should think the old fellow would be offended. Through her big dabs of paint he's shown up to the life. You can see his complacency bursting out like a flaming sunflower. Upon his homely mug are displayed all the platitudes of Marcus Aurelius. He is instinct with ignorance that Horace was a drummer for Italian wines and an agent for rural residences, just a smart advertiser, a precursor of the fellows

who write verse for the Road of Anthracite or canned soup, and Burberry has never found it out. He would buy splinters from the wooden horse of Troy, and only avoids gold bricks because they're modern. It's a stunning picture!"

That's one reason why I am so fond of Gordon. He's a great portraitist, and far more successful than Frieda, but he is genuine in his admiration of good work. He is rather too cynical, of course, but at the bottom of it there usually lies good advice to his friends. I'm very proud he continues to stick to me.

"I understand he was greatly pleased," I told him, "and I was awfully glad that Frieda got the commission. She needed it."

"Yes, I told her that she ought to go off for a rest in the country," he remarked, "but it seems she has one of her other queer ideas that must be worked out at once. She itched to be at it, even while she was painting Burberry. Mythological, I think, as usual, that latest notion of hers. Some demigod whispering soft nothings to a daughter of men. Showed me a dozen charcoal compositions for it, all deucedly clever. And how are the other animals in the menagerie you live in now?"

That's a way Gordon has. From one subject he leaps to another like a canary hopping on the sticks of his cage; but there is method in his madness. He swiftly exhausts the possibilities of a remark and goes to another without losing time.

"The animals," I answered, "are a rather dull and probably uninteresting lot. First, come two girls who live in a hall bedroom, together."

"It shows on their part an admirable power of concentration."

"I suppose so; their conversation is chiefly reminiscent and plentifully dotted with 'says I' and 'says she' and 'says he.' They are honest young persons and work in a large candy-shop. Hence they must be surfeited with sweets at a deplorably early age."

"Not with all of them; they will find some hitherto untasted, but just as cloying in the end," remarked Gordon.

"I hope not. There is also an elderly couple living on the bounty of a son who travels in collars and cuffs. Sells them, you know. Then I've seen three men who work somewhere and occasionally comment upon what they see in the newspaper. Murders fill them with joy, and, to them, accidents are beer and skittles. I suspect that they esteem themselves as what they are pleased to call 'wise guys,' but they are of refreshing innocence and sterling honesty. One of them borrowed a dollar from me, the other day, to take the two girls to the movies. He returned it on next pay day."

"Look out, David, he may be trying to establish a credit," Gordon warned me. "You are such an easy mark!"

"I'll be careful," I assured him. "Then we have a poor relation of the landlady. He looks out for the furnace in winter and is a night watchman in a bank. An inoffensive creature who reads the papers the other boarders throw away."

"Altogether it makes up a beautiful and cheering totality of ineptitude, endowed with the souls of shuttles or cogwheels," opined Gordon.

"Well, as Shylock says, if you prick them, they bleed," I protested. "At any rate they must have some close affinity with the general scheme of Nature."

"Nature, my dear Dave, is a dustbin in which a few ragmen succeed in finding an occasional crust of dry bread wherewith to help fill the pot and make their hearts glad. It is a horribly wasteful organization by which a lady cod produces a million eggs that one fish may possibly reach maturity and chowder. Four trees planted on a hill commonly die, but, if you stick in a few thousands, there may be a percentage of survivals, besides nuts for the squirrels. Humanity represents a few tall trees and a host of scrubs."

Thus does Gordon always lay down the law, to which I generally listen with some amusement. He is dogmatic and incredulous, though he lacks scepticism in regard to his own opinions.

"Then all honor to the scrubs, my dear Gordon!" I interjected. "I admire and revere the courage and persistency with which they keep on growing, seeking a bit of sunlight here and there, airing their little passions, bearing their trials bravely. But I forgot to mention another inmate of my caravanserai. She's only there for a day or two, in a room opposite mine, hitherto vacant and only tenanted yesterday. I met her as she was coming up the stairs. She walked heavily, poor thing. I could only see her by the dim light of the gas-jet on the landing. It was a young face, deeply lined and unhappy. Downstairs I came across Mrs. Milliken, my landlady,

who explained that the person I had met expected to go next day to a hospital. The Milliken woman had known her husband. He went off to the war, months ago, and the young wife's been teaching French and giving piano lessons, till she couldn't work any longer. The French government allows her twenty-five or thirty cents a day."

"I'm glad it keeps a paternal eye on the wives of its brave defenders," remarked Gordon.

"It does, to that extent, but it doesn't go very far in this country. She has a remarkable face; looks a good deal like that Madonna of Murillo's in the Louvre."

"That's a back number at this stage of the world's history. Most of us prefer snub noses. I notice that you said she plays the piano."

"I don't see what – "

"Well, you've just had yours tuned. Oh! I forgot you said she was going off to the hospital. Never mind, Dave, they come out again, so don't worry. I've known you to be disturbed for a whole week over somebody's sick dog and to go two blocks out of your way to steer a strayed and unpleasantly ragged blind man. What is it, appendicitis?"

"Mrs. Milliken darkly hinted, I think, that it was an expected baby."

"Oh! Well, I suppose a baby had to go with a Murillo; the picture would have been incomplete. I'm glad that this particular case appears to be a perfectly safe one."

"What do you know about it?" I asked.

"I mean from your standpoint. I dare presume that the Milliken female has a holy horror of sprouting infants, like all landladies. She would naturally foresee a notice to quit from the old couple, disturbed in their slumbers, and extravagance in the use of hot water and linen would stare her in the face. You have made me sympathize with you for nothing, for your Murillo-woman will vanish into space and become the handmaiden of a scrub in the making. Henceforth, the case will only interest the Bureau of Vital Statistics and the manufacturers of improvements on mother's milk. Give me another cigarette."

I handed him the cardboard box, for, although I have a silver case, I never know where it is. If I did, I wouldn't use it since I don't believe in flaunting one's vices. He took a cigarette, tapped it on the back of his hand, and engaged in conversation the lonely policeman, who had strolled over to see that we were not flouting the majesty of the law by dozing on the bench. He remarked that the night was fine but warm, Gordon assenting. Then my friend suddenly asked him what kind of boots he wore, and put down the address most carefully on his cuff, thanking him effusively, after which the guardian walked off, ponderously.

"Will you kindly explain your object?" I asked Gordon, who has what the French call the *coquetterie du pied* and asserts there's only one man in New York who can make boots, a delusion that costs him about fifteen dollars a pair.

"You're not lacking in sympathy," he instructed me, "but, on

your part, the feeling is but an unintelligent instinct. Any idiot can feel sorry for a cripple or a man compelled by poverty to smoke cheap tobacco. I now call your attention to the fact that this old minion is ancient and corpulent. He's on his feet during all working hours, and his cogitations must often turn to his nether extremities. He carefully nurses them, while he raps those of lawless slumberers on these seats. Civilly, I spoke to him of the subject uppermost in his mind, and now he has left us, happy in the thought that he has put a fellowman on the right road. That's what I call taking a sympathetic interest in a deserving old ass. You didn't suppose for a moment that I'd wear such beastly things, did you?"

"You would rather go barefooted," I told him.

"I would," he assented. "If Gordon McGrath appeared in the street, naked as to his toes, the papers would mention the fact. The *Banner* would send me the famed Cordelia, who would insist on photographing my feet for publication in a Sunday supplement, with a hint to the effect that I am a rather well known painter. It would be an advertisement."

"If I went without boots, benevolent old ladies would stop me and hand out copper pennies," I remarked, without jealousy.

"You just wait till the 'Land o' Love' is out, old man," he told me, "and the same old dames will write for your autograph."

Gordon is quite daffy over the book I sent to my publishers last week. He has read the first, one middle and the last chapter, and predicts great things for it. Of course, I know better, for it

will be just like the others. From four to six thousand copies sold, a few flattering notices, mostly in journals unheard of, and swift oblivion after some months. But I care nothing that I may be a scrub among writers, for the occupation suits me. I am not ambitious, and I can rise late in the morning, pound the keys of my old machine for an hour before lunch, waste a good part of the afternoon in one of the libraries, and go to work again after the hand-organs and knife-grinders have been abed some hours. Then, some time before sunrise, the rattle of milk-carts remind me of Mrs. Milliken's bedspring and mattress, and I go to bed. I am not doing so badly, and sell one or two short stories every month. Last year I opened an account in the savings bank. The time may come when I shall be classed among the malefactors of great wealth.

"But one reader ever wrote to me," I finally answered. "It was a young person anxious to know whether I could recommend the 'City's Wrath' as a birthday present to a Baptist aunt. I advised against it, thus cheating myself out of ten per cent. royalty on a dollar thirty-five."

"Oh! She'd have sent a second-hand copy," he answered consolingly, and shifted to a discussion of the ultimate blackening of vermilions, which seemed to give him some concern.

After this he looked at his watch and declared he had just twenty-five minutes to get to the Lambs Club. That's just like him; he will loll and sprawl around for hours with you, looking

like a man without a responsibility in the world, and suddenly arise and sprint away to far regions, always arriving in the nick of time. My way is to prepare far in advance to meet my rare engagements, to think of them persistently, and, usually, to arrive ten minutes late.

I walked over to the subway with him, at such a breathless pace that I wondered if the friendly policeman would change his mind about us, should we meet him in crossing the square. Gordon left me at the entrance, with a wave of one hand, the other searching for a nickel, and I was permitted to return leisurely to my domicile, in a profuse perspiration. I felt my wilted collar, knowing that Gordon would unquestionably reach the club, looking spick and span. That's also one of his traits.

As I crossed the square again, I saw a belated tramp leading an emaciated yellow dog by a string. The man looked hungrier than the dog, and I broke all precepts of political economy by handing him a dime. He was blameworthy, for he should have looked out for himself, and not have assumed foolish responsibilities. He was entirely wrong. What business had he to seek affection, to require the faithfulness of a rust-colored mongrel? How dared he ask charity that should have gone to the widow and orphan, wherewith to feed a useless quadruped? I sat down again, for it was only midnight, and thought pleasantly upon the vagaries of human nature. Suddenly, a splendid story suggested itself to me about a dog and tramp. It would be good for about four thousand words, and I hurried away to Mrs. Milliken's lest the inspiration

might vanish on the way. I would have a dog all but human, a tramp all but dog, and the animal would sacrifice itself for a master redeemed at last by the spectacle of canine virtue. I knew just what magazine might accept it. A few minutes later I reached the house, which, like the Milliken woman, has seen better days. The frittering brownstone and discolored brick suit me as naturally as a hole in the sand befits a prairie dog. I let myself in, softly, with due regard to the slumbers of people compelled by the tragedy of life to go to bed at the behest of a clock, and trod the creaking stairs in utter darkness, guided by a friendly but shaky balustrade. Then I reached my landing, opened my door, turned on the light, put on my slippers and fired my coat on the bed. As soon as I had dropped my collar and tie on the floor, I was ready for work and sat down to my machine. Thank goodness, the inspiration had remained; clearly and cogently the sentences flowed; after I had finished the first page, I was already weeping in spirit for my noble dog. Then, suddenly, came a rap at my door, hurried, eager, impatient.

"Great Heavens!" I thought at once. "I am to be interrupted because that blessed woman objects to loud typewriting at one a.m. I'm glad she's going away to the hospital."

I went to the door, assuming my most austere mien, and opened it.

CHAPTER II
FRIEDA THE ANGEL

"Please help me!" cried the woman hoarsely. "My God! What shall I do?"

It was, as I had surmised, the Murillo-faced occupant of the room on the other side of the landing. In my dismay the desperate thought came to me that a lonely bachelor was the last individual she should have sought aid from. But her look of haggardness, the teeth pressed into her lips, the clenched hands, the chin carried forward in an expression of agonized supplication rebuked my egotism.

"I – I don't know," I confessed humbly.

She turned half way around, seized the balustrade and stared at me vacantly.

"Allow me to help you back to your room," I suggested shakily. "Then I'll run downstairs and get Mrs. Milliken."

She went with me, haltingly, and threw herself upon the decrepit horsehair sofa, as I abandoned her and ran downstairs, nearly breaking my neck on account of my slovenly old slippers. At the landlady's door I pounded till I chanced to remember she had informed me that she expected to spend the night at her married daughter's, in Fort Lee. In despond I bethought myself of the young women who sold candy. No! Such problems were not

of their solving. Of course there was the negro cook, hidden in some ancillary cavern of the basement, but cowardice prevented me from penetrating such darkness, and I ran out of the house, coatless. Half way down the block were two doctors' signs. One shining in the freshness of new nickelling; the other an old thing of battered tin, with faded gold letters.

"This," I decided, "is a case requiring the mature experience of age," and I rang furiously, awaiting the appearance of the venerable owner of the ancient sign. A shock-headed and red-haired youth opened the door, clad in pajamas and rubbing his eyes.

"Yes," he said pleasantly.

"I need the doctor's services at once," I informed him. "Hustle him up immediately, my good fellow. Please be quick, it may be a matter of life and death."

"Oh! I'm the doctor," he said, "and I'll be with you in a few seconds. Sit right down."

He left me in the darkness of the hallway and I sank down on a wooden seat, upon a palm leaf fan that crackled dismally beneath my slender weight. Faintly, in the back, I discerned a ghostly folding bed and heard the swishing of garments flying across the room. In spite of my feverish impatience the doctor came out again as fast as if he had been clothed by some magic art.

"What kind of a case?" he asked.

"I believe you are wanted to help increase and multiply," I

answered.

"Should have told me at once. Got the wrong bag!" he reproved me, disappearing. At once he returned. I went out first, and he followed me, slamming the door with a sound that reverberated through the quiet street, and we sprinted off. I used the key with a shaking hand.

"Top floor," I informed him.

"All my patients seem to live on top floors," he replied.

At the woman's door I knocked.

"I – I have brought you assistance," I told her. "This – this young gentleman knows all about such things; he's a doctor. I – I'll be in the next room, if there's anything else I can do for you."

"Is there no woman in the place?" inquired the young man.

"No. Only some girls who know nothing save the price of caramels and the intricacies of tango. But I can find one inside of twenty minutes; I'll go and get her."

"That's good," he assented cheerfully, going to his patient, who looked at him in some fear.

But I reflected that the doctor seemed kindly, and by no means overwhelmed by the responsibility thrust upon him, so that I took the time to slip on my boots, after which I ran to Eleventh Street, where Frieda Long burrows in a small flat. Her studio, shared with another woman, is farther uptown. Finally she opened the door, clad in a hoary dressing-gown and blinking, for she had not been able to find her spectacles.

"Who is it?" she demanded placidly, as if being awakened at

two fifteen in the morning had been a common incident of her life.

"It's Dave, just Dave Cole," I answered. "I want you, Frieda – that is to say, a woman wants you badly, at my house – taking her share of the primal curse. Don't know who she is, but Mrs. Milliken's away. She's alone with a little half-hatched doctor, and – and – "

"Come in. Sit there in the front room. Cigarettes on that table. I'll close the door and be with you in five minutes," she assured me tranquilly.

I tried to smoke, but the thing tasted like Dead Sea fruit and I pitched it out of the open window. An amazingly short time afterwards Frieda was ready, bespectacled and wearing an awful hat. I think she generally picks them out of rag bags.

As we walked along, she entertained me with her latest idea for a picture. It would be a belted Orion pursuing the daughters of Pleione, who would be changing into stars. She explained some of the difficulties and beauties of the subject, and her conception of it, while I looked at her in wonder. I must say that, from her stubby, capable fingers, there flow pure poetry of thought and exquisiteness of coloring. Her form, reminding one of a pillow tied none too tightly in the middle, her tousled head containing a brain masculine in power and feminine in tenderness, her deep contralto, might be appanages of some back-to-the-earth female with an uncomfortable mission. But she's simply the best woman in the world.

She panted to the top floor and, at my desire, followed me into my room, where I had left the door open and the gas burning. She gave a swift glance around the place, and her eyes manifested disapproval.

"I wonder how you can ever find anything on that desk," she reproved me, as I searched in a bureau drawer. To my utter terror she began to put some papers in order.

"Here's an unopened letter from *Paisley's Magazine*," she announced.

I pounced upon it and tore it open, to discover a check for eighty dollars.

"Good!" I exclaimed. "I'd forgotten that story. It was called 'Cynthia's Mule'; I wonder what possessed me to write about a mule? Don't know anything about them."

"That's why it sold, most likely," said Frieda. "The public prefers poetry to truth in its prose. What are you wasting time for, fooling in that drawer?"

"I have it. It's a twenty-dollar bill," I told her. "I put it among my socks so that I shouldn't spend it. Might be very handy, you know. She might need something, and you could go out and buy it."

"Can you afford it, Dave?" she asked me.

"Of course, and you forget the check I've just received. Mrs. Milliken will cash it for me at her butcher's. He's very obliging."

Just then we heard something. Frieda stuffed the bill in some part of her ample bosom and ran away. I heard her knock at the

door and go in.

There was nothing for me to do but to look at the nearly finished page that was still in the embrace of my typewriter. For some silly reason my gorge rose at the idea of the virtuous dog, but I remembered, as I was about to pull out and lacerate the paper, that my mind sometimes plays me scurvy tricks. When I am interrupted in the beginning of a story, and look over it again, it always seems deplorably bad. Another day I will look at it more indulgently. Moreover, what was the use of thinking about such trivialities when the world's great problem was unfolding itself, just seven steps away over the worn strip of Brussels on the landing.

So I settled down in my old Morris chair to ponder over the matter of babies coming to the just and the unjust, provided with silver spoons or lucky to be wrapped up in an ancient flannel petticoat. The most beautiful gift of a kindly Nature or its sorriest practical joke, welcome or otherwise, the arriving infant is entitled to respect and commiseration. I wondered what might be the fate of this one. In a few hours it will be frowned down upon by Mrs. Milliken, who will consider it as an insult to the genus landlady. The mother, naturally, will smile upon the poor little thing; she will dote upon it as women do on the ordinarily useless articles they purchase with money or pain at the bargain counter of life. This wee white and pink mite, since its daddy's away fighting and the mother is poor, must prove a tragedy, I am afraid. It will be a little vampire, pretending to feed on milk but

really gorging itself on a heart's blood.

My cogitations were interrupted by the rattle of a thousand milk cans, more or less, clattering through the street, on top of a huge, white motor truck. I took off my coat, instinctively thinking that it was time to go to bed, and put it on again because my door was open and it behooved me to keep awake, since I might be required to run other errands. The question of sleep thus disposed of, I brought out my percolator.

For a wonder there was alcohol in the lamp, and I found the coffee in a can I discovered in my cardboard hat-box. Two months before, my sister Jane had told me that a silk hat was proper for the following of one's mother to the grave, and I obeyed her. Poor darling! It was the least and last thing I could do for her.

The lamp was alight and the steam coming, when the doctor came out, looking rather spectral in a white gown.

"Thank goodness!" I exclaimed, dropping some pulverized bean on the floor. "So it is all over!"

"Not yet," he informed me, smiling, "but so far everything goes well. The big, fat Providence in gig-lamps is sitting by the patient. Sometimes three make poor company. The solid dame came in and called her 'my dear' and rummaged things out of the trunk and fixed up the bed, and tears began to flow. It must be a wonderful thing for a woman, who feels abandoned of God and man, to have such a big brave creature come in to pound the pillows and make one feel that there is yet corn in Egypt. I left

them with their heads together. The poor thing was crying a bit and beginning to tell the story of her past life. Yes, thanks! I'll be glad of a cup, with three lumps of sugar. Great little machine, that! And so I thought I'd walk in here for a minute. Some things a woman tells another must be pretty sacred, don't you think?"

I poured out the coffee appreciatively.

"The person whom you call the solid dame," I told him, "is no less a woman than Frieda Long, the poet in pigments."

"Keeps a Beauty Shop?" he inquired.

"If you mean to ask whether she shampoos and manicures females and supplies them with hair," I answered, "your guess is utterly wrong. She paints women, and men too, on canvas, and any ordinary individual, such as you and I, ought to grovel before her."

"Just say the word," he answered, "and I'll make a start. She's the best old girl I've come across in many a long day."

"Frieda Long is hardly thirty-eight," I told him, "and, to change the subject for a moment, I will acknowledge that I deemed such cases best attended by the sere and ancient. I rang you up because your sign suggested long experience."

"Not half bad, is it?" he replied. "I aged it by setting it up in the backyard and firing brickbats at it. Old Cummerly, next door to me, had his replated."

He swallowed his coffee, without winking, though I thought it was boiling hot, and left me hurriedly again. I took greater leisure in my own beverage and leaned back in my chair. This

young fellow appealed to me. The man of tact is born, not made. What serves him for a soul possesses refinement to dictate his leaving, for a few minutes, while one woman poured out her heart to another. I think he is considerate and kindly; he is probably destined to make many friends and little money.

I rose and looked out of the window. The dawn was beginning and promised another stifling, red-hot day. A very *décolleté* baker had come out of a cave beneath the bread and cake shop, opposite, and sponged off his forehead with the back of his hand. An Italian woman, clad in violent colors, passed with a hundredweight or so of broken laths poised on her head. At the corner the policeman was conversing with a low-browed individual, issued from the saloon with a mop. New York was awakening, and I decided I might as well shave, to pass away the time. Taking my strop and razor I sat down to give the latter a thorough overhauling. I suppose I fell asleep during the process.

"Contemplating suicide?" I heard Frieda ask suddenly.

I jumped up, startled, with the weapon in my hand.

"Put that thing down," she ordered me. "It makes me nervous. She's sleeping quietly, and the doctor's gone. An awfully nice fellow. It's a boy with brown hair."

"Not the doctor," I objected, somewhat dazed.

"No, the baby, you silly! The doctor is very nice. I am going out to get my washerwoman's sister to come and stay with Madame Dupont – might as well say Mrs. Dupont. Her husband's French, but she comes from Rhode Island. You can go with me.

Never mind about shaving now, you can stop at a barber's later on. Your hair needs cutting. Put on a clean collar. After I get that woman, we'll stop at the flat; the milk will be there and I'll give you some breakfast. Come along!"

Frieda is a woman of the compelling kind, but it's a joy to obey her. After I had adjusted my collar and tie we started, but when we reached the door opposite she opened it, very quietly, while I waited, and tiptoed in.

"She's awake," she said, again opening the door. "She says she would like to thank you for your kindness. She knows she would have died, if you had not sought help for her."

"Stuff and nonsense," I said, quite low. "You don't expect me to go in there, do you?"

"I certainly do, because she wishes it. Don't be stupid!"

So I entered, rather embarrassed, thinking to see the face of a woman crucified. But her smile was the sweetest thing I had ever beheld, I'm very sure. I could hardly recognize her after that memory of haggard and tortured features. She put out her hand to me, weakly.

"I – I want to thank you – ever so much," she said. "It was so awfully kind of you, and – and you sent me an angel."

"Oh, yes," said Frieda, grinning. "I see myself with wings sprouting from my shoulder-blades. Good-by for a short time, my dear. You'll only be alone for a few minutes. Yes, the baby will be all right; don't you worry. No, he won't be hungry for a long time, the doctor said, and you are to let him sleep and do

the same yourself. Now come along, David."

I was delighted to have Frieda's escort, as I scented danger below. Her support gave me boundless joy when, at the foot of the stairs, I saw Mrs. Milliken, returned on some frightfully early ferryboat. She looked at us with amazement and suspicion.

"My dear Mrs. Milliken," I began, in my most ingratiating tones, "a new boarder has arrived during the night. I can assure you the young man would not have intruded had he possessed greater experience of life. We will have to forgive him on account of his tender youth."

"They must be packed off at once," cried the woman. "How could you?"

"I beg to observe that it was not my tender heart but yours that gave her shelter," I said. "My own responsibility is extremely limited, and my part in the affair a most subsidiary one."

"And besides, Mrs. Milliken," put in Frieda, "no one but David Cole lives on that floor. If he makes no complaint, no others are very likely to, and then it would be inhuman to put the poor thing out now. In a few days she will be able to move. I am going to send a woman immediately, and you won't have the slightest trouble."

"For any little matter of extra expense, Mrs. Milliken, I will see that you are properly compensated," I added.

Had I been alone, Mrs. Milliken would probably have argued the matter for an hour, at the end of which I should have retired in defeat. But I think Frieda's size overawed her. She only

stammered rather weakly that she knew it would all end badly.

"Don't mind her, David," said my friend, as we went out. "You can't expect the keeper of a cheap boarding-house to be an optimist. Her prediction may or not come true, but no one thinks that the bit of humanity upstairs can turn the world topsy-turvy for some time."

I felt greatly relieved and followed her towards the river, where, just west of Ninth Avenue, we found a tenement on the fourth floor of which there was a sort of rabbit-hutch where dwelt two women and a bevy of infants. I remained on the landing, while Frieda went in. Some of the children came out and contemplated me, all with fingers in their mouths. Remembering that I had changed a nickel on the previous evening, while waiting for Gordon, in order to obtain a cent's worth of assorted misinformation from my favorite paper, I pulled out the four remaining pennies and distributed them. By the infants my action was accepted as gentlemanly and urbane, I think, for they no longer considered me as a suspicious character and the gravity of their expressions changed into a look of unstinted approval.

"It's all right," said Frieda, coming out in a cloud of soapy steam. "She'll go at once. Putting her hat on now. Come along. I'm hungry as a hyena."

So I breakfasted with her at her flat. She had certainly worked much harder than I, during the night, and taken a great deal more out of herself, but she insisted on my sitting down while she juggled with a gas-stove and bacon and eggs and a pot of jam.

Her coffee, I thought, was better than mine. At eight o'clock we parted at the corner of the street.

"I must hurry along," she said. "I have an appointment with a man who can pose as Orion."

I had time but for a few words of heartfelt thanks before she was in the middle of the avenue, waving a hand to the motorman of her car. She scrambled aboard, smiling at me cheerfully from the step, and I was alone, wondering at the luck of a chap who could pose as Orion for Frieda. I would rather have her think well of me than any one I know of, I am very sure, and I regretted that my lank form and ill-thatched head were so unsuited to the make-up of a Greek demigod. Never mind, I know that when my next book comes out she will send for me, hurriedly, and make me feel for some minutes as if I were really worthy of tying her big, ugly, sensible shoes. She has read every one of my stories and possesses all the books I ever perpetrated, bless her soul! It is good indeed for a man to be able to look up to a woman, to know in his heart of hearts that she deserves it, and that she doesn't want to marry him, and he doesn't want to marry her. It is fine to think they are a pair of great friends just because they're capable of friendship, a much rarer accomplishment than most people are aware of.

So I returned to the scene of the night's invasion and climbed up the stairs, rather wearily. I had the morning paper, three circulars and a fresh box of cigarettes. Upon my landing I met a large female with a moustache and decided it must be the

washerwoman's sister. She smiled pleasantly at me and I returned the courtesy.

In such words as I remembered from my erstwhile residence in Paris I asked how the mother and child were doing.

The lady, she informed me, was doing ever so well. As for the infant, it had beautiful eyes and was a cherished little cabbage.

Wondering upon the philosophy of endearments as attained by foreign nations I entered my room, closing the door carefully, and looked over those pages about the virtuous dog. They were promising, I thought. After putting them down, I took up my razor, for I hate a barber's scraping, and indulged in the luxury of a shave.

The instrument, I thought, possessed a splendid edge. Who knows, some day I might bequeath it to a cherished cabbage.

CHAPTER III
I WATCH AN INFANT

It was all very well for Frieda to tell Mrs. Milliken that, if I had no objection to that baby, no one else could resent its presence. She assumes too much. If I had really belonged to the order of vertebrates I should have objected most strenuously, for its presence is disturbing. It diverts my attention from literary effort. But of course, since I am as spineless as a mollusk, I sought to accept this heaven-sent visitation with due resignation. My endeavor to continue that story was a most pitiful farce. Four times, in reading over a single page, I found the word *baby* inserted where I had meant to write *dog* or one of the few available synonyms. I wondered whether it was owing to lack of sleep that my efforts failed and threw myself upon the bed, but my seeking for balmy slumber was more ghastly than my attempt at literature. Never in all my life had I been more arrantly wakeful. A desperate resolve came to me and I flipped a quarter. Heads and I would sit down and play solitaire; tails and I would take a boat to Coney Island, a place I abhor. The coin rolled under the bed, and I was hunting clumsily for it with a stick when a tremendous knock came at the door, followed by the immediate entrance of the washerwoman's sister, whom I afterwards knew as Eulalie Carpaux.

I explained my position, half under the bed, feeling that she had caught me in an attitude lacking in dignity, but the good creature sympathized with me and discovered my money at once, after which she insisted on taking my whiskbroom and vigorously dusting my knees.

"I have come, Monsieur," she informed me, "to ask if your door may be left open. The heat is terrible and the poor, dear lamb has perspiration on her forehead. I know that currents of air are dangerous, but suffocation is worse. What shall I do?"

"You will open as many doors as you please," I answered meekly.

"Thank you. One can see that Monsieur has a good heart, but then any friend of Mademoiselle Frieda must be a good man. She is adorable and uses a great deal of linen. May I ask who does Monsieur's washing?"

"A Chinaman," I answered shortly. "He scrubs it with cinders and irons it with a nutmeg grater. I keep it in this closet on the floor."

"My sister," she informed me, "has four children and washes beautifully. I am sure that if Monsieur allowed me to take his linen, he would be greatly pleased."

"Take it," I said, and waved my hand to signify that the interview was closed, whereupon she mopped her red face, joyfully, with her apron and withdrew.

Here was a pretty kettle of fish. Immediately the most gorgeous ideas for my story crowded my brain and the language

came to me, beautiful and touching. But the Murillo-woman's door was open and so was mine. Since Eulalie had ventured to leave the room, it was most probable that her charge was sleeping. The typewriter, of course, would awaken her at once. Was that infant destined to deprive me of a living, to snatch the bread from my mouth? But I reflected that temperatures of ninety in the shade were inconstant phenomena. It would be but a temporary annoyance and the best thing I could do, since I was driven out of house and home, was to take my hat and go to the beach for a swim. The die was cast and I moved to the door, but had to return to place a paperweight on loose sheets littering my desk, whereupon my eyes fell on the old pack of cards and I threw the hat upon the bed and began solitaire. My plans often work out in such fashion. Ten minutes later I was electrified by a cry, a tiny squeak that could hardly have disturbed Herod himself. But it aroused my curiosity and I tiptoed along the hallway, suspecting that the woman Eulalie might not be attending properly to her duties, whatever they were. Everything was still again, and the unjustly mistrusted party was rocking ponderously, with an amorphous bundle in her lap. She smiled at me, graciously. Upon the bed I caught a glimpse of wonderful chestnut hair touched by a thread of sunlight streaming tenuously from the side of a lowered blind; also, I saw a rounded arm. Eulalie put a fat finger to rubicund lips and I retired, cautiously.

How in the world could I have been bothering my head about a trumpery and impossible dog? In that room Nature was making

apologetic amends. A woman had obeyed the law of God and man, which, like all other laws, falls heaviest on the weak. She was being graciously permitted to forget past misery and, perchance, dream of happier days to come, while David Cole, scrub coiner of empty phrases, bemoaned the need of keeping quiet for a few hours. I decided that I ought to be ashamed of myself. "The Professor at the Breakfast Table" was at my hand and I took it up, the volume opening spontaneously at the "Story of Iris," and I lost myself in its delight.

An hour later came a light step, swiftly, and the little doctor appeared. He is as tall as I, but looks so very young that he seems small to me. He entered my room, cheerfully, looking as fresh and nice as if rosy dreams had filled his night.

"Well! How are things wagging?" he inquired breezily.

He was fanning himself with his neat straw hat, and I asked him to sit down for a moment.

"Sure! But only for a minute or two. I have a throat clinic to attend at one o'clock. There's just time for this visit, then a bite at Childs' and a skip to Bellevue."

I looked at my watch and found he had allowed himself just fifty minutes for these various occupations.

"Don't let me detain you, my dear boy," I told him. "I – I just wanted to say that I haven't the least idea whether – whether that young creature in the other room has a cent to bless herself with. It seems to me – I think that she should have every care, and I shall be glad if you will consider me responsible – er – within the

limits of a moderate income."

"Thanks," he said, "that's very kind of you."

His eyes strayed on my desk, and he pounced upon a copy of "The City's Wrath."

"Tell you what," he said, "that's a tip-top book. I borrowed my mother's copy and read it all night. The fellow who wrote it knows something about the slender connection between body and soul, in this big city. He's looked pretty deep into people's lives."

No compliments I ever received, with the exception of Frieda's, gave me greater pleasure than the appreciation of this honest, strong lad.

"Will you kindly give me your full name?" I asked him.

"Thomas Lawrence Porter," he answered.

I took the volume and wrote it down on the first page, adding kindest regards and my signature, and handed it to him, whereat he stared at me.

"D'ye mean to say you're the chap who wrote that book," he said, and wrung my hand, painfully. "I'm proud to meet you. If you don't mind, I'd like to come in some time and – and chat about things with you, any evening when you're not busy. You know an awful lot about – about people."

"My good friend," I told him, "don't permit youthful enthusiasm to run away with you. But I shall be delighted to have you drop in. And now, since your time is so limited, you had better go and see your patient."

He tucked his book under his arm and went down the hallway.

After remaining in the room for perhaps a quarter of an hour, he came out again, cheerfully.

"Doing exceedingly well," he called to me. "By-by; see you again very soon, I hope."

He vanished down the stairs, and I took up my book again, holding it in one hand while I went to the windows, intending to draw down a blind against the sunlight that was streaming in. The heat was entering in gusts and, for a second, a sparrow sat on my window ledge with head drooping, as if it were about to succumb. Then I drew down the blinds and immediately let them up again, reflecting that in the room opposite mine they were lowered for the sake of darkness and air and that my action would lessen the latter. So I sponged off my cranium and panted. It was being revealed to me that babies, whatever their other qualifications, were exquisitely complicated nuisances.

Yet an Arab, I told myself, refuses to step on a piece of paper, lest upon it might be written the name of the Deity, while some Hindoos carry little brooms and sweep the path before them, that they may not tread upon one of Buddha's creatures. Who knows whether divinity does not leave its signature on every infant, and who can reasonably doubt that infinite goodness possesses an equity in prospective men and women. Shall I be less civil than a sand-washed Bedouin or the monk of a Benares shrine? It behooves me to welcome a chance to acquire merit by showing patience.

The book I held was as charming as ever, of course, but

since I knew the story by heart I dropped it on my knees and waged a losing fight against a fly, which persisted in perching itself on my brow. Before me flitted the idea that a skull-cap made of sticky fly-paper might be patentable and sell by the million, combining protection and revenge; I must look into the matter. Finally hunger troubled me and I decided to go out for refreshment. Before my neighbor's door I stopped for an instant, my eyes seeking to penetrate the dimness. Eulalie came to me at once and began to whisper.

"Would Monsieur be so very kind as to remain here for a few moments and watch?" she said. "I am going to run over to my sister's and tell her to buy a chicken and make broth. It will be very good for our poor, dear lady. In ten minutes I will be back."

Man's freedom of action is apparently a mere academic concept. Theoretically, I was entirely at liberty to refuse, to look down upon this woman from the superior height of my alleged intellectuality and inform her that my soul craved for an immediate glass of iced tea and some poached eggs on toast. I could have asserted that I did not purpose to allow myself to be bulldozed by an infant seven hours and ten minutes old. As a matter of fact, I was helpless and consented, Eulalie shaking the stairs during her cautious, down-ward progress. It was with some of the feelings of an apprentice in the art of lion-taming that I entered the room. Would the proceeding be tranquil and dignified, or accompanied by roars?

I sat down upon the rocker just vacated by Eulalie and

gazed on the horsehair sofa as if the package resting on it were explosive, with a fuse alight. I had feared that it would be thrust upon my lap, but it is likely that my competency had been justifiably suspected. I dared not move the chair, fearing to make a noise, and could see nothing of the white arms or the Murillo face. Suddenly, an orgy of steam-whistling began, rousing my apprehensions while recalling workers to their factories. It proved but a false alarm and stillness prevailed in the top-floor back, for at least three minutes, when the dreaded wail arose.

"Please, Eulalie," came a husky, low voice. "Give me my baby."

It was then that my already damp brow began to stream. She wanted her baby and wouldn't be happy till she got it. My duty, I realized, was to go to the sofa and pick up the animated and noisy parcel. It would then have to be conveyed to the bed! Nervously, I prepared to obey.

"Eulalie has gone out for a few minutes," I explained, in the subdued tones I deemed suitable to a sickroom. "Here – here is the bundle. I think it wriggles."

"Thank you ever so much and – and please turn him the other way – yes, those are the feet. And would you pull up the shade a little bit, I think I would have more air."

I raised the thing, letting in a flood of light, and feasted my eyes in utter liberty. Poor child, she must have a cold, for she suffers from hoarseness. She paid little more heed to me than did the ancient Roman ladies to the slaves they refused to recognize

as men. I realized my small importance when she tenderly pushed aside the little folds and revealed diminutive features over which she sighed, contentedly, while I drew my chair a little nearer to the bed. Since a Murillo was on free exhibition, I might as well gaze upon it and admire. That faint little wailing had stopped at once.

"Don't you think he is ever so good and well-behaved?" she asked me, after a while.

I assented, forbearing to tell her that his existence had not yet been sufficiently long to prove him entirely free from all taint of original sin.

"It's such a comfort," she assured me.

Already, by the saintly grace of a mother's heart, she was endowing her offspring with all the virtues. The wondrous optics of motherhood revealed beauty, wisdom, good intent, the promise of great things to come, all concentrated in this tabloid form of man. So mote it be!

The tiny head rested on her outstretched rounded arm and she closed her eyes once more. The plentiful chestnut hair had been braided tight and pinned at the top of her head.

"I wish Gordon McGrath could see her," I told myself. "No, Frieda wouldn't do the picture justice. She would seek to improve on Nature's handiwork; she would etherealize it, make it so dainty that it would become poetry instead of the beautiful plain language the universal mother sometimes speaks. Gordon would paint something that lived and breathed. He would draw real

flesh and blood, recognizing that truth unadorned is often very splendid."

At this time I bethought myself of the baby's father. The man was over there, taking his part in the greatest tragedy ever enacted. At this very moment, perhaps, he was engaged in destroying life and knew nothing of this little son. I pitied him. Ye Gods! But for the strength and insolence of some of the mighty ones of this earth he would have been in this room, and I should have been quietly engaged in consuming poached eggs. He would have been appeasing the hunger of his eyes and the longing of his soul with the sight of the picture now before me, in the solemn happiness that must surely come to a man at such a time. A feeling of chilliness came over me as I inopportunely remembered an interview I had some months ago with a fellow called Hawkins. I was in his office downtown when the telephone rang, and he took down the receiver.

"A son," he called back. "Good enough! I was afraid it might be another girl!"

Then he dictated a short letter to his stenographer and calmly picked up his hat.

"Come along, Cole," he said. "They tell me I have a boy. Let's go out and have a highball."

Knowing Hawkins as I do, I am certain he would have had the drink anyway. This new-born offspring of his merely served him as a peg whereon to hang the responsibility for his tipple. The great and wonderful news really affected him little.

But why was I thinking of such monsters? The father of this little baby, I am sure, must be a decent and normal man. He would have come in, hatless and breathless, and thrown himself upon his knees to worship and adore. The very first clumsy touch upon the tiny cheek would have sent a thrill through him, and tears would have welled up in his eyes!

Such were my thoughts when I remembered that, as a delver in fiction, it was probably becoming my second nature to exaggerate a little. To me, after all, a recent father was perhaps like the mule whose story had brought the check. My notions in regard to them were of pure imagination, and I only knew them as potentially picturesque ingredients of literary concoctions. Yet, on further reflection, I conceded to myself the right to imagine newly made fathers as I saw fit. Millions of them are produced every year and among them must be some counterparts of my special conception of the type.

I was thus comforting myself when I heard a familiar wheezy breathing on the stairs. It was Frieda, who presently irrupted into the room.

"David," she commanded, "you go right out and have something to eat. I'm sure you are starving. I will stay here till that woman comes back. I left her at the corner, carrying a fowl to her sister's, and she told me I would find you here."

She deposited voluminous parcels on the sofa, handled the infant with absolute confidence in her ability, and waved me out of the room. Some men are born meek and lowly, while others

become monarchs and janitors; my place was to obey, after I had caught the smile suddenly come to the Murillo-woman's pale features. Frieda, I know, sees more affectionate grins than any one in Greater New York. Her presence suffices to make them sprout and grow. Mrs. Dupont had also smiled at me, true enough, but I think it was but a ray of sunshine really intended for the baby, and I had found myself in the same general direction and intercepted a trivial beam of it.

Downstairs, Mrs. Milliken met me with a frown, but her features relaxed when I handed her my week's rental and board, which I seldom partake of. Seeing her in such a happy disposition, I hastened to the door.

"I'm going upstairs to take a look at it," she announced gloomily.

I thanked Providence that Frieda was on guard and felt that I had no cause for worry. The landlady, after all, is undeniably a woman and I believe she is the erstwhile mother of several. Her asperity must surely be smoothed down by the sight of the baby's face.

As I put my hand upon the door, the old lady appeared.

"How is that baby?" she shouted, putting a hard-rubber contrivance to her ear.

"Doing splendidly and endowed with all the virtues," I clamored in the instrument.

"I'd give him sugared water for it," she responded severely.

I rushed out. Dr. Porter had strictly forbidden the stuff,

calling it a fount of potential colic. I must say that I felt a sneaking sympathy with the old lady's view. Why refuse a bit of sweetness to a tiny infant, perhaps destined to taste little of it in afterlife? But, fortunately, the realization of my ineptitude came uppermost. That silly, romantic tendency of mine was leading me to think more of future privations than immediate pains in a diminutive stomach. I wondered whether I should ever become a practical member of society. The doctor's orders must and shall be obeyed, or my name is not David Cole!

CHAPTER IV
THE BOLT

"And by the way," asked Gordon, a few days later, "how's Frieda getting along?"

"Very well," I answered. "I think she's painting nymphs and angels, as usual."

"Angels, eh? The natural history of such fowl is interesting."

I had met him in the middle of Bryant Park as I was on the way to the Public Library to look up information in regard to feminine garb of the Revolutionary period. It appeared that he was returning from an interview with a Fifth Avenue picture dealer. At once we sought a bench and found seats between a doubtfully-clean young gentleman, reading the sporting page of a dilapidated paper, and an old lady, with rheumy eyes, who watched a ragged urchin.

I nodded, much interested, and he pursued the subject.

"You may have noticed that the very first angels all belonged to the masculine persuasion and you are, perhaps, also aware that it was rather late in the world's growth before women were accorded the possession of a soul. Hence, at the time, there could be no female angels, either worthy or evil. To-day, we have changed all that, as Molière said. In order to flatter the feminine taste people began to talk of little boy angels, because women

think more of boy babies than of girl ones. The time arrived when men forgot about the women, the dogs and the walnut trees and, instead of taking a club to the ladies, they began to write sonnets to them. It is evident that no one can rhyme words without everlastingly trying to gild the lily. To call a spade a spade, or a woman a woman, became scant courtesy, and, hence, the poets devised female angels. The painters and sculptors naturally pounced upon them, for their decorative effect, and the she-angel took a firmly-established place in art and fiction. Let me see, I think you said that your Murillo lady describes her little sprout as an angel. This merely shows her to be a normal creature of her sex."

"You are entirely wrong, if by normal you mean just average," I retorted reproachfully. "Frieda declares that she is the most beautiful thing she ever saw."

"Frieda is a waddling and inspired goose, whose goslings are all swans," he asserted disrespectfully. "Through her unbecoming goggles humanity assumes pink and mauve colors instead of remaining drab. It may be good for Frieda and enables her to turn out some very attractive stuff, but it isn't the real thing. Well, I'll have to run away! Couple of fellows waiting to drive me over to Long Beach. By-by!"

He was gone with his usual startling suddenness, and I went off to the library, pondering. When Gordon is talking to me, I can hardly help believing him. Indeed, if the man had been a life insurance agent he would have made a fortune. At first, one

feels absolutely compelled to accept all his statements, and it is only after he departs that I begin to wonder whether some flaws can't be picked in his arguments. I occasionally discover a few, I am quite sure. Humanity is no more drab than the flowers of the field, except in terms of the million. There is but slight beauty in violets by the ton, as I have seen them in Southern France, brought in cartloads to the perfume factories. They become but a strongly-scented mass of color. I desire to pick mine as I wander afield, one at a time, and admire the petals, while making myself believe that they grew for my pleasure. Gordon would scoff at the idea and declare it an accidental meeting, but what does he know of the forces that may direct our footsteps? There is comfort in the Mohammedan belief that everything is written before-hand.

The particular book I wanted was being read by a snuffy old gentleman, seated at the long table in the Department of History. I wondered why he should be interested in the frocks and flounces of a past century, and asked for a volume on Charles the Great, a ponderous tome I carried reverently to the big oaken table.

It was exceedingly warm, and flies were buzzing drowsily. A big handsome girl was extracting wisdom from a dusty folio and taking notes on sheets of yellow paper. I remember that her face was finely colored and her lashes long. Three chairs away, on the opposite side, a little deformed man looked up from his book, stealthily, and glanced at her. She never saw him, I am very certain, nor was she ever conscious of the deep-set and suffering

eyes that feasted on her beauty. To him she could be no more than a splendid dream, something as far from his reach as the Koh-i-noor might be from mine. But I wondered whether such visions may not be predestined parts of life, making for happiness and charm. The young women at Mrs. Milliken's, who sell candy, will hand you out material sugar-plums, yet even those have but an evanescent flavor and become only memories.

Frieda has returned my twenty-dollar bill, which I stuffed in my pocket.

"One has to be very careful about such things," she told me. "Neither of us would offend the poor thing for any consideration. I have found out that she has a little money, but it cannot be very much because she was very anxious about the doctor's fee and how much Eulalie would charge. But I didn't think it best to proffer any help just now, saving such as we can render by making her feel that she has a friend or two in the world. Isn't it hot?"

I assured her that it was and said I was very glad that Mrs. Dupont was not quite destitute. By this time the baby was a week old and most reasonably silent. Mrs. Milliken felt reassured, and the two young women who sold candy had come up, one evening, to admire the infant. From the goodness of their hearts they had brought an offering of gummy sweets, which I subsequently confiscated and bestowed upon Eulalie for her sister's children, who, she assures me, are to be envied in the possession of iron stomachs. The commercial young men have

instinctively slammed their doors less violently, and the deaf old lady, precluded by age from ascending to top floors, sent up a pair of microscopic blue and white socks and a receipt for the fashioning of junket, which, I understand, is an edible substance.

"Tell you what!" exclaimed Frieda. "You might take me to Camus this evening. Dutch treat, you know. I insist on it. I'm tired to-day and don't want to wrestle with my gas-stove. Besides, I want to talk to you about Kid Sullivan."

"I'm afraid I'm unacquainted with the youthful Hibernian," I said. "Is it another baby that you take a vicarious interest in?"

"No, he would have been the lightweight champion, but for his losing a fight, quite accidentally," she explained. "He told me exactly how it happened, but I don't remember. At any rate, it was the greatest pity."

"My dear Frieda," I told her, "no one admires more than I a true democracy of acquaintance and catholicity of friendship, but don't you think that consorting with prizefighters is a little out of your line?"

"Don't talk nonsense," she said, in her decided way. "I just had to get a model for Orion, and he's my janitress's brother. The most beautiful lad you ever saw. He already has a wife and two little children, and his shoulders are a dream!"

"So far," I told her, "I have fought shy of the squared circle in my literary studies and know little about it. But I surmise that, if your Orion continues his occupation, he is likely to lose some of his good looks. Be sure and paint his face first, Frieda, while the

painting is still good, and before his nose is pushed askew and he becomes adorned with cauliflower ears."

"I know nothing of such things," she answered, "and he's a delight to paint."

"But for that perfectly accidental defeat, the man would have refused to appear as a demigod," I asserted. "A champion would think himself too far above such an individual."

"That's neither here nor there," she asserted, impatiently. "When I try to talk, you're always wandering off into all sorts of devious paths. What I wanted to say was that, if any of your acquaintances happen to require a very competent truck-driver, the Kid is out of a job. Of course I can't afford to pay him much. He poses for me to oblige his sister."

"The youth appears to have several strings to his bow," I remarked, wondering why Frieda should ever think I could possibly know people in need of truck-drivers. But then, she never leaves a stone unturned, when she seeks to help more or less deserving people.

In my honor she put on her most terrific hat, and we went arm in arm to Camus, where she revelled in olives and radishes and conscientiously went through the bill of fare.

"Do you know, Frieda, I am thanking goodness for the advent of that baby," I told her. "It has permitted me to enjoy more of your company than I have for months and months. Every minute I can feel that you are growing nearer and dearer to me."

She showed her fine teeth, laughing heartily. She delights in

having violent love made to her by some one who doesn't mean it. To her it constitutes, apparently, an excruciatingly funny joke. Also to me, when I consider her hat, but, when she is bareheaded, I am more serious, for, then, she often looks like a real woman, possessing in her heart the golden casket wherein are locked the winged passions. *Quien sabe?* She is, perhaps, fortunate in that filmy goddesses and ethereal youths have so filled her thoughts that a mere man, to her, is only the gross covering of something spiritual that has sufficed for her needs. Poor, dear, fat Frieda! A big gold and crimson love bursting out from beneath the varnish covering her hazy pigments would probably appal and frighten her.

"Will you have some of the *sole au vin blanc*?" she asked, bringing me down to earth again.

I thanked her and accepted, admiring the witchery whereby the Widow Camus can take a vulgar flounder and, with magic passes, translate it into a fair imitation of a more heavenly fish. One nice thing about Frieda is that she never appears to think it incumbent upon her companion to devote every second of his attention to her. If I chance to see a tip-tilted nose, which would serve nicely in the description of some story-girl, and wish to study it carefully and, I hope, unobtrusively, she is willing to let her own eyes wander about and enjoy herself, until I turn to her again. I was observing the details of a very fetching and merry little countenance, when a girl rose from an adjoining table and came up to Frieda.

"I happened to turn my head and see you," she exclaimed. "So I just had to come over and say howdy. I'm so glad to see you. I have my cousin from Mackville with me and am showing him the town."

She was a dainty thing, modestly clad, crowned with fluffy auburn, and with a face pigmented with the most genuine of cream and peaches. Frieda presented me, and she smiled, graciously, saying a few bright nothings about the heat, after which she rejoined her companion, a rather tall and gawky youth.

"She posed for me as Niobe two years ago," said my friend. "At present, she teaches physical culture."

"What!" I exclaimed, "that wisp of a girl."

"Yes, I don't know how many pounds she can lift; ever so many. She's a perfect darling and looks after an old mother, who still deplores Mackville Four Corners. Her cousin is in safe hands."

I took another look at the six-footer with her, who smoked a cigarette with evident unfamiliarity.

"Would," I said, "that every youth, confronted by the perils of New York for the first time, might be guided in such security. She is showing him the revelry of Camus and has proved to him that a slightly Bohemian atmosphere is not incompatible with personal cleanliness and a soul kept white. It will broaden his horizon. Then she will take him home at a respectable hour, after having demonstrated to him the important fact that pleasure, edible viands and a cheerful atmosphere may be procured here

out of a two-dollar bill, leaving a little change for carfare."

"If I were a man," said Frieda, "I should fall in love with her."

"If you were a man, my dear, you would fall in love a dozen times a day."

"Gordon McGrath says it's the only safe way," she retorted.

"Don't be quoting him to me," I advised her. "To him it is a mere egotistic formula. Like yourself, he has always been afraid to descend from generalities. I don't like the trait in him, whereas, in you, I admire it, because, with you, it is the mere following of a tendency to wholesale affection for your fellow-beings. Yet it is a slightly curious and abnormal condition."

"Like having to wear spectacles," she helped me out.

"Just so, whereas in Gordon it is simply the result of a deliberate policy, a line of conduct prepared in advance, like a chess-opening. Some day, in that game of his, a little pawn may move in an unexpected way, and he will be hoist with his own petard."

"I hope so," she answered cheerfully. "It will probably be very good for him."

"But it might also break his heart," I suggested.

"Don't get gloomy," Frieda advised me. "What about yourself? Here you are abusing your friends because they fight shy of the archer godling. I should like to know what you have done to show any superiority."

"Well, if my memory serves me right, I have proposed to you, once or twice."

"O dear no! You may have meant to, perhaps, but never really got to the point," she answered, laughing. "I haven't the slightest doubt that once or twice you came to my flat all prepared for the sacrifice. But, suddenly, you doubtless became interested in some other trifling matter. Give me three lumps of sugar in my coffee, and don't let them splash down. This is my best gown."

We left Camus and returned together to Mrs. Milliken's. Frieda had a curious notion to the effect that, as she hadn't seen the baby since several hours, something very fatal might happen to it, if she failed to run in again. My landlady and her ancient male relative were sitting on the steps, fanning themselves and discussing the price of coal. By this time, the woman ate right out of Frieda's hand, although the latter does not seem to be aware that she has accomplished the apparently impossible. The old night-watchman informed us that he was enjoying a week's holiday from the bank. He was spending it, cheerfully, dividing his leisure between the front steps and the backyard. He also told us of a vague and ambitious project simmering in his mind. He was actually planning to go all the way to Flatbush and see a niece of his. For several years he had contemplated this trip, which, he apprised us, would take at least an hour each way. I bade him good courage, and we went upstairs. While Frieda went into Mrs. Dupont's room, I turned on the gas in mine and sat before my window, with my feet on the ledge, smoking my calabash.

"Has Monsieur looked upon his bed?" Eulalie startled me by asking suddenly.

Now, in order to respond with decent civility, I was compelled to remove my feet from their resting place, to take the pipe from my mouth and turn in my chair. Women can sometimes be considerable nuisances.

"No," I answered, "I have not looked upon the bed. Why should I? A bed is the last resource of the weary and afflicted, it is one of the things one may be compelled to submit to without becoming reconciled to it. I take good care never to look at it so long as I can hold a book in my hand or watch passers-by in the street."

"Very well, Monsieur," she answered placidly. "It is all there, and I have darned the holes in the socks."

This was highly interesting and I hastily rose to inspect her handiwork. She had placed my washing on the coverlet and the result looked like an improvement on Celestial efforts. I took up the topmost pair of socks and gazed upon it, while a soft and chastened feeling stole over me.

"Thank you, Eulalie," I said, with some emotion. "It is exceedingly nice; I am glad you called my attention to it. In the future I shall be obliged, if you will stuff it in the chiffonier. Had I first seen all this on going to bed, I am afraid I should have pitched it on the floor, as usual, and been sorry for it next morning."

She smilingly complied at once with my request and withdrew, bidding me a good night, while I sat again, feeling great contentment. I had now discovered that a man, if lucky, might

have his socks darned without being compelled to take a wife unto himself, with all the uncomfortable appurtenances thereof. It was a new and cheering revelation. No sooner had I begun to cogitate over the exquisiteness of my fate than I was disturbed again, however. Frieda partly obeyed conventionality by knocking upon my open door and walking in.

"Frances Dupont wants me to thank you ever so much for the pretty roses, David," she told me. "It was really very kind of you to bring them. I have snipped the stems and changed the water and put them on the window sill for the night."

"Yes," I explained, "I had to change that twenty-dollar bill, and there was a hungry-looking man at the corner of Fourteenth Street, who offered them to me for a quarter. So we had to go over to the cigar store to get the note broken up into elementals. The fellow really looked as if he needed money a great deal more than roses, so I gave him a dollar."

"But then why didn't you take a dollar's worth of flowers?" asked Frieda, high-priestess of the poetic brush, who is a practical woman, if ever there was one.

"Never thought of it," I acknowledged; "besides, he had only three bunches left."

"And so you didn't want to clean out his stock in trade. Never mind, Dave, it was very sweet of you."

She hurried away, and, finally, I heard the front door closing, after which I made a clean copy of that dog story, flattering myself that it had turned out rather neatly. It was finished at two

o'clock, and I went to bed.

The next morning was a Sunday. I dawdled at length over my dressing and sallied forth at eleven, after Mrs. Milliken had knocked at my door twice to know if she could make the room. If I were an Edison, I should invent an automatic room-making and womanless contrivance. These great men, after all, do little that is truly useful and practical.

My neighbor's door was open. I coughed somewhat emphatically, after which I discreetly knocked upon the doorframe.

"Come in, Mr. Cole," said a cheery, but slightly husky, voice. "Come in and look at the darling."

"That was my purpose, Madame Dupont," I said most veraciously.

"Eulalie has gone out again," I was informed, after the infant had been duly exhibited, as it slept with its two fists tightly closed. "She has gone for a box of Graham crackers and the Sunday paper."

I smiled, civilly, and opined that the day's heat would not be so oppressing.

"Don't you want to sit down for a moment?" she asked me.

I was about to obey, when I heard the elephantine step of the washerwoman's sister, who entered, bearing her parcels and the *Courrier des Etats Unis*.

"Excuse me for just a second," said the husky little voice.

I bowed and looked out of the window, upon yards where I

caught the cheery note of a blooming wisteria.

Suddenly, there came a cry. The bedsprings creaked as the young woman, who had raised herself upon one elbow, fell back inertly.

"*Oh, mon Dieu!*" bellowed Eulalie, open-mouthed and with helpless arms hanging down.

I rushed to the bed, with some vague idea of bringing first aid. In the poor little jar of roses I dipped my handkerchief and passed it over Mrs. Dupont's brow, scared more than half to death. Presently, she seemed to revive a little. She breathed and sighed, and then came a flood of tears. She stared at me with great, deep, frightened eyes, and with a finger pointed to a column of the paper. I took it from her and held it out at a convenient distance from my eyes, about two feet away. There was a printed list referring to reservists gone from New York. For many weeks, doubtless, she had scanned it, fearing, hopeful, with quick-beating heart that was only stilled when she failed to find that which she tremblingly sought.

I caught the name, among other announcements of men fallen at the front.

– Paul Dupont —

I also looked at her, open-mouthed, stupidly. She stared again at me, as if I could have reassured her, sworn that it was a mistake, told her not to believe her eyes.

Then, she rose again on her elbow and turned to the slumbering mite at her side, but, although the salty drops of her

anguish fell on the baby's face, he continued to sleep on.

CHAPTER V
GORDON HELPS

The passing of the next week or two can only be referred to in a few words, for how can a man gauge the distress of a soul, measure the intensity of its pangs, weight the heavy burden of sorrow? That good little Dr. Porter came in very often. Most tactfully he pretended that his visits were chiefly to me, and would merely drop into the other room on his way out of mine; at any rate the smallness of the bill he rendered long afterwards made me surmise that this was the case.

In the meanwhile, the weather remained very warm and the doors were often left open. I went into the room quite frequently. Eulalie is the salt of the earth, but she still has a little of the roughness of the unground crystal so that, for conversational purposes, Frances Dupont perhaps found my presence more congenial. Her faithful, but temporary, retainer was always there, exuding an atmosphere of robust health and lending propriety to my visits. She was generally darning socks.

The hungry one snatches at any morsel presented to him, while those who are dying of thirst pay little heed to the turbidity of pools they may chance upon. The poor Murillo-girl, perforce, had to be content with such friendship and care as her two new friends could give her. Frieda always came in once a day, but

she was tremendously busy with her Orion. Indeed, her visits were eagerly awaited; she brought little doses of comfort, tiny portions of cheer that vied with Porter's remedies in efficacy and, possibly, were much pleasanter to take.

From my friend Hawkins I borrowed baby-scales, fallen into desuetude, and triumphantly jotted down the ounces gained each week by Baby Paul. I believe that the humorous peculiarities of my countenance excited the infant's risibilities; at any rate, the young mother assured me that he smiled when he looked at me. Presently, after the violence of the blow had been slightly assuaged and the hours of silent weeping began to grow shorter, she managed, at times, to look at me as if I also brought a little consolation.

I remember so well the morning when I found the bed empty and neatly made up and the young woman sitting in an uncomfortable rocker. I insisted on returning at once to my room for my old Morris chair, knowing that she would be much easier in it. At first, to my consternation, she refused to accept it, under some plea that she did not want me to be deprived of it. When she finally consented, her eyes were a little moist and I was delighted when she acknowledged that it gave her excellent comfort. A little later came the chapter of confidences, memories of brief happy days with her husband, the warp and woof of an existence that had already suffered from broken threads and heart-strings sorely strained.

She had an Aunt Lucinda, it appeared, and when the teacher

of singing in Providence had declared that the girl's voice was an uncut jewel of great price that must be smoothed over to perfection by study abroad, the aunt had consented to extend some help and Frances had gone over.

There had been nearly two years of hard study, with some disappointments and rebuffs, and, finally, great improvement. The crabbed teacher had begun to smile at her and pat her on the back, so that other young women had been envious. This, I presume, was tantamount to a badge of merit. Then, she had sung in one or two concerts and, suddenly, Paul Dupont, the marvelous, had come into her life. He was a first prize of the *Conservatoire*, for the violin, and, people said, the coming man. There had been another concert and, among other things, Frances had sung Gounod's "Ave Maria" while Paul had played the obligato. It was then that, for the first time, her own voice thrilled her. Joined to the vibrant notes the man could cause to weep and cry out in hope, her song had sounded like a solemn pæan of victorious achievement. Critics had written of her power and brilliancy, of her splendid ease of execution.

And then had come the making of love. He had played again for her, and she had put her soul in the songs, for him to revel in, for her to cry out the beating of her heart. It seemed to have come with the swiftness of a summer storm, and they had married, with just a few friends present to witness the ceremony and rejoice in their happiness.

Aunt Lucinda had written that a woman, who would go abroad

and espouse a Papist and a fiddler, was utterly beyond the pale. Let her never show her face in Providence again!

But what did it matter! Happiness lay in the hollow of their hands, rosy and bright, full of wondrous promise. Yet she had written to Aunt Lucinda, dutifully, expressing hope that at some later time she might be looked upon with greater indulgence. And there had been more beautiful songs, and Paul had played, and their souls had vibrated together. Finally, a man from New York had engaged them to come over to America and give a series of concerts. When they started away, she thought she was getting a bad cold, for her voice was beginning to get a little husky. Paul asserted that the trip at sea and the long rest would certainly make everything all right. But in New York she had been compelled to call on a doctor, who was an exceedingly busy man, with hosts of patients, who sprayed her throat and gave her medicine to take and charged very high fees, and – and the voice had kept on growing huskier and – and it was no use trying to sing, and – and the engagement had been broken. And Paul had been so good and swore she would be better by and by, and he had played in concerts, without her, and everything went on very well, except her voice. Then, one day, she had told a most marvelous secret to Paul, and they had rejoiced together and been very happy. Then the war had come like a bolt from the blue, and Paul had taken the very first boat with hundreds of other reservists. She would follow him to France after the baby was born, and there she would wait for him in the dear old house of his parents, who

were country people, cultivating a farm and oh! so proud of their wonderful son. They had been ever so good and kind to her. She had written to them several times, but no answer had ever come and then some one told her that the small village in which they lived had been razed to the ground. It was over there on the other side of the Marne. And now it was ever so long since she had received any word from Paul, and they had saved very little, because money came so easily, and – and now Paul was dead and she couldn't sing!

Frieda was in the room with me when the tale was told. She rushed out, and I found her, a few minutes later, in my room, her nose swollen and her eyes devastated by weeping. But she used my wash-basin and towels for plentiful ablutions and returned to the room where I left her alone with Frances Dupont, realizing the futility of a man in such circumstances.

At the end of another week our stout angel burst again into my room. Eulalie had been discharged, with mutual regrets, and little Paul was growing apace. Three and a half ounces in seven days!

"Dave! We've got to find something for Frances to do! In a very short time she will not have a penny left. Go to work at once and, in the meanwhile, I'll do my best also. Yes, I know perfectly well that the two of us will see that she doesn't suffer, but she doesn't want charity; she wants work!"

She was off again, and I knew that she would at once inquire of the butcher, the baker and the candlestick-maker in regard to positions suited to a young woman with a Murillo-face and a

baby. I put on my hat and went at once to Gordon's studio, facing Central Park. I was lucky enough to find him in.

"Sit down and don't bother me," he said pleasantly. "I must use up the last of this light."

Before him stood an easel with a wonderful portrait of a young woman endowed with splendid neck and arms. He was working at some detail of the gown, which the lady had evidently sent over for him, since the garment was disposed about a large mannikin with a vacuous face. I watched delightedly the sure touches with which he reproduced the sheen of the silk. Gordon doesn't want to talk while he paints, pretending that in order to do his best work a man must bend all his energies to it, whether he is sawing wood or writing elegies.

"People wouldn't begin chatting to a fellow while he played Chopin," he told me one day. "What right have they to disturb the harmonies in a man's mind when he's creating melodies in color? Hang their impertinence!"

I presume, however, that painting a silk dress was somewhat mechanical work to him, for, after some minutes of silent toil, during which he only stepped back once to survey his work, he began to speak. Like many other people, he has not the slightest objection to the infringing of his own rules. It only behooves others to obey them.

"That's Miss Sophia Van Rossum," he told me, taking his short pipe out of his mouth and putting it down on his stool. "She's been coming in from Southampton three times a week, to pose.

Drives her own car, you know, and has been arrested a dozen times for speeding. So I finished the face and hands first, and now I'm sticking in the dress. Don't need her for that."

"Very rich people, are they not?" I asked.

"You bet. Zinc and lead, I believe; the old man made it in. Fine buxom creature, isn't she? And mighty good hearted in her way. She hasn't much more brains than a linnet, I think, and she swims and rows and shoots. Golf and tennis, too. Found her rather hard to paint, because it's difficult for her to keep still. Keeps on asking indignantly why I put blue on her nose, and reaching out for the box of chocolates. I told her last time I couldn't paint her with one cheek all bulged out with *pralinés*. It made her laugh, and I lost fifteen minutes before I could quiet her down."

He worked hard for another ten minutes, during which I considered that he was rather severe on the young lady, or else had idealized her, which is not a habit of his. To me she looks kindly and not a bit unintelligent, a rather fine specimen of the robustious modern young woman. Gordon picked up his brushes.

"That'll do," he said. "The light is changing. Now what the devil do you want? Awfully glad to see you."

My friend is a good listener. I told him about Frances Dupont, giving him a brief account of her story and explaining that Frieda and I wanted to find something for her to do.

"Of course," I finally said, "I suppose that you are going away very soon to spend the rest of this hot summer in the country. Otherwise, I would have asked if you couldn't make use of her

for a model, at least till we can find something else."

"I'm not going away yet," he answered, "and I emphatically cannot employ her, or, at any rate, I won't, which comes to the same thing. Hitherto I have kept my serenity of mind unimpaired by the simple process of fighting shy of females in distress. There are lots of models who can be depended on to keep their mouths shut and not bother a fellow. My interest is in my picture and nothing else, and I refuse to have it diverted by the economical problems of ladies on their uppers. If you want a check, I'll give it to you for her, not on her account, but because you're the best, old, weak-minded idiot in this burg and I'm glad to help you out, however silly your quixotic ideas may be. Wait a minute, I'll write one out for you."

"No," I answered, "I've just sold two stories and got some advance royalty on my novel. I'd come and ask you for money, if I needed it, urgently. I might have to, some day. But this poor thing's worrying herself to death and that's what I want to remedy at once, if possible. A little occupation would give her something else to think about. If I tell her that she will have to pose in silence, that it's a part of the work she's engaged for, she won't say a word. She's an intelligent woman."

"Why doesn't Frieda employ her?" he asked.

"Because she's no slender, ethereal sprite. Doesn't have anything of the woodland nymph about her, that's why. Besides, Frieda's doing an Orion with a covey of Pleiades scattering before him, at present."

"I have nothing for the Winter Academy, just now," said Gordon, appearing to relent a little. "Strangely enough, Miss Van Rossum doesn't care to have her portrait exhibited. If I really found a remarkable type, I'd like to do a mother and child. If you really think this Mrs. Dupont will keep still and is willing to earn a few weeks of bread and cheese by the silence of her tongue and some ability to sit quietly in a chair without getting the fidgets, I shouldn't mind trying her. But, of course, she'd have to come up to specifications. I'll have to look at her first. Have you spoken to her about it?"

"Not a word," I answered, "I didn't want to see her disappointed."

"Of course, it's a foolish thing to do," he said, "but you're so anxious about it that I'll see whether it can be managed. She's just heard of her husband's death, has she? Well, she won't be thinking of other men for a while and won't expect to be made love to. Take up your hat, and we'll go over to that nursery of yours. I'll look her over."

If I hadn't known him so well, I should have been provoked at his speaking as if the woman had been some second-hand terrier I wanted to dispose of. We took the elevator and were shot down to the ground floor.

"Mind you," he warned me, "it's ten to one that I'll discover something that will make this errand useless. The mere fact of a woman's having a broken-down voice and a baby doesn't necessarily qualify her to pose as a mother. The woods are full of

them. You've probably endowed her with good looks that exist only in your imagination."

To this I made no answer. The mere fact of his having consented to investigate was already a distinct triumph for me. Twenty minutes later we were climbing up the stairs of what he called my zoological boarding-house.

On the second landing, he stopped abruptly and listened. Then he turned to me with a corner of his mouth twisted in the beginning of one of his sarcastic grins.

"Who's that playing your piano?" he asked.

"I – I fancy it must be Mrs. Dupont," I answered. "You see, she's very much alone, and my door was open, and I suppose she saw the thing and walked in, not knowing that I should return so soon."

"Oh! You needn't look so sheepish," he told me. "You look as if a policeman had caught you with a jimmy in your hip-pocket. My dear old boy, I hope she isn't the straw that's going to break your back, you old Bactrian camel! The little wagons they use for the carrying of dynamite in New York, wherewith to soften its tough old heart and permit the laying of foundations, are painted red and marked *explosives*. Were I the world's czar, I should have every woman labelled the same way. They're dangerous things."

Gordon is somewhat apt to mix his metaphors, a thing rather natural to one who seeks to wed his wit with a pose of scepticism. Really simple language, clothing ordinary common sense, is inadequate for a scoffer; also, I am afraid, for a man who writes

about mules and virtuous dogs.

I think we both instinctively stepped more lightly in ascending the remaining stairs. She was playing very softly. It was a dreamy thing with recurring little sobs of notes. For a moment we stopped again; I think it had appealed to us. Then I went in, accompanied by Gordon, and she ceased at once, startled and coloring a little.

"I am so glad you were diverting yourself with the old piano," I told her. "I hope you will always use it when I am out, and – and perhaps once in a while when I am in. My mother used to play such things; she wasn't always happy. I beg to present my friend Gordon McGrath, who is a great painter. He's awfully fond of Frieda."

This, I think, was a canny and effective introduction. Any friend of Frieda's must be very welcome to her.

"Madame," said Gordon, after she had proffered her hand, "won't you oblige us by sitting down. You have been caught in the act and deserve the penalty of being humbly begged to play that over again."

She looked at me, uncertainly.

"It would give me ever so much pleasure," I assured her.

At once she sat again and touched the keys. I know so little of music that my opinions in regard to it are utterly worthless, but I knew at once that she was no marvelous pianist. No, she was only a woman with a soul for harmony, which found soft and tender expression on my mother's old Steinway. Gordon, I

noted, sat down in my worst chair, with an elbow on his knee, his chin resting on the closed knuckles. It was evident that he was watching her, studying her every motion, the faint swaying of her shapely head, the wandering of her hands over the keyboard. Once, she stopped very suddenly and listened.

"I beg your pardon," she said, "I thought it was Baby."

She went on, reassured, to an ending that came very soon. It left in me a desire for more, but I could not ask her to continue. She had brought a tiny bit of herself into the room, but she belonged body and soul to the mite in the other.

"I am ever so much obliged to you," I said, as she rose.

"Madame," said Gordon, "it was indeed a treat."

"I am very glad you liked it," she said very simply, "and – and now I must go back."

She smiled, faintly, and inclined her head. We had both risen and thanked her again. She passed out of the room and, once she had regained her own, I heard her faint, husky voice.

"It's mother's own wee lamb!" it said.

Gordon picked up one of my cigarettes, looked at it, put it down, and took one of his own from his case. Then, he went and stood in front of my open window, looking out, with his hands stuffed deeply in his trousers pockets. I maintained a discreet silence.

"Come over here," he ordered, brusquely, as is often his way, and I complied, holding on to my calabash and filling it from my pouch.

"Dave," he said, very low, that his voice might not carry through the open doors into the next room. "Those powder-wagons aren't in it. When the dynamite happens to blow up some Dago, it's a mere accident; the stuff itself is intended for permissible purposes. A woman like that is bound to play havoc with some one, and I'm afraid you're the poor old idiot marked by fate. You're as weak as a decrepit cat. I can see the whole programme; sympathy at first and the desire to console, all mixed up with the imagination that has permitted you to write that 'Land o' Love.' My dear man, you might just as well go and commit suicide in some decent way. If you don't look out, you're done for!"

"Don't be an ass, Gordon," I told him, lighting my pipe.

"All right, it's your own funeral. But don't come to me, afterwards, and weep on my shirtfront, that's all. Women get over the loss of a husband, they even become reconciled to the death of a baby, sometimes. And this one has music in her soul, and for ever and a day she is going to deplore the song that fled from her lips. She'll always be unhappy and you'll have to keep on consoling, and the freedom of your thoughts will vanish, and, when you try to write, you will have her and her miseries always before you. Then you will shed tears on your typewriter instead of producing anything. Better give Frieda some money for her and go fishing. Don't come back until the Milliken woman sends a postal telling you that the coast is clear."

"I know nothing about fishing," I answered.

"Then go and learn."

"You're talking arrant nonsense," I informed him.

"I am giving you the quintessence of solid wisdom," he retorted. "But now I'll tell you about her posing for me. I'm not doing this for your sake or hers, but because she has a really interesting head, and I know myself. I can get a good picture out of her, and I'll employ her for about three weeks. That'll be plenty. After that, I expect to go away and stay with the Van Rossums in the country. While Mrs. Dupont is busy posing for me, you and Frieda can look up another job for her. Let me see; I might possibly be able to pass her on to some other studio, if she takes to posing, properly."

I put my pipe down, intending to strike while the iron was hot.

"Come in with me," I told him.

"Of course you understand that in some ways she's going to be a good deal of a nuisance," he said hurriedly. "The baby squalling when I've just happened to get into my stride and the mother having to retire to feed the thing. But never mind, she's got quite a stunning face."

I knocked at her door, although I could see her sitting at the window with the baby in her arms.

"Please don't trouble to get up," I said. "My friend Gordon happens to need a model; he's thinking of a picture of a mother and child and has told me that, if you could pose for him, he would be glad to employ you. It wouldn't last very long, but you would have the baby with you. By the way, painters have to think

very hard when they're at work and so they can't talk much at the same time, so that models have to keep very still. I know you won't mind that, because it's part of the work."

The top button of her waist was open. Instinctively her hand went up to it and covered the very small expanse of white neck that had been revealed.

"A model!" she exclaimed huskily. "I – I don't know – "

Gordon's face looked as if it was graven in stone.

"It is just for the face and hands," he said coldly. "It will be a picture of a woman sitting at an open window; just as you were when we came in. Of course, if you don't care to – "

"Oh! Indeed, I shall be very glad and – and grateful," she answered, very low. "I will do my best to please you."

"Thanks! I shall be obliged, if you will come on Monday morning at ten."

"Certainly. I shall be there without fail," she answered.

"Very well. I am glad to have met you, Mrs. Dupont. David, I wish I could dine with you at Camus, this evening, but I have an appointment to meet some people at Claremont. Good-by."

He bowed civilly to Frances Dupont, waved a hand at me, and was gone.

"Gordon is a tip-top painter," I told her. "His ways are sometimes rather gruff, but you mustn't mind them. He means all right."

"Oh! That makes no difference. Some of my teachers were pretty gruff, but I paid no attention. I only thought of the work

to be done."

"Of course, that's the only thing to keep in mind," I answered.

"Yes, and I am ever so much obliged to you," she said gratefully. "You're the best and kindest of friends."

With this I left her and returned to my room, hoping that Gordon wouldn't be too exacting with her, and thinking with much amusement of all his warnings and his fears for my safety. That's the trouble with being so tremendously wise and cynical; it doesn't make for optimism.

CHAPTER VI
A BIT OF SUNSHINE

The ignorance of modern man is deplorable and stupendous. The excellent and far-famed Pico della Mirandola, for one whole week, victoriously sustained a thesis upon "*De Omne Scibile*." Now we have to confess that human knowledge, even as it affects such a detail as women's raiment, is altogether too complicated for a fellow to pretend he possesses it all. The display windows of department stores or a mere glance at an encyclopedia always fill me with humility.

Frances sadly showed us some things she had pulled out of a trunk and, foolishly, I exclaimed upon their prettiness. She looked upon them, and then at me, with a rather pitiful air.

"I can't wear them now," she said, her lip quivering a little. "But this black one might do, if – "

This halting was not in her speech and merely represents my own limitations. She explained some of the legerdemain required by the garment, and Frieda told her of a woman, related to Eulalie, who was talented in juggling with old dresses and renovating them. This one looked exceedingly nice to me, just as it was, but I was pityingly informed that some things were to be added and others removed, before it could possibly be worn. The sleeves, as far as I could understand, were either too long or

short; the shoulders positively superannuated and the skirt, as was evident to the meanest intellect, much too narrow, or, possibly, too wide.

Also, there was the absolute need of a new hat. They discussed the matter, and Frieda led her away to unexplored streets adjoining the East River. With great caution I warned the young woman, secretly directing her attention to Frieda's impossible headgear, but I received a confident and reassuring glance. After a time they returned with an ample hat-box adorned with one of the prominent names of the Ghetto, and pulled the thing out, having come to my room to exhibit to me the result of their excursion.

"How much do you think we paid for it?" asked Frieda, with a gleam of triumph.

"I can speak more judiciously, if Mrs. Dupont will be so kind as to put it on," I told her.

My request was immediately acceded to. I surveyed the hat from many angles and guessed that it had cost eighteen dollars. I was proudly informed that the price had been three twenty-seven, reduced from eight seventy-nine, and that they had entered every shop in Division Street before they had unearthed it.

"It is very nice and quiet," Frieda informed me. "There wasn't much choice of color, since it had to be black. I think it suits her remarkably well."

"It certainly does," I assented. "Oh, by the way, Frieda, you may be glad to hear that my publishers have accepted the 'Land

o' Love' and are to bring it out very early next Spring. It is a very long time to wait. I am afraid that Jamieson, their Chief High Lord Executioner, is rather doubtful in regard to it. He's afraid it is somewhat of a risky departure from my usual manner and may disappoint my following, such as it is."

"Poor old Dave," said Frieda encouragingly. "Don't worry, I'm sure it will sell just like the others."

"I hope so, and now what do you say to celebrating that new hat by going over to Camus for dinner?"

"Oh! I couldn't think of such a thing!" exclaimed Frances Dupont. "In – in the first place it is much too soon – after – and then you know I haven't a thing to wear."

"In the first place, not a soul will know you at Camus," said Frieda firmly, "and, in the second, you have a hat anyway, and I'm going to fix that black dress a little. Just a dozen stitches and some pins. Come into your room with me."

She dragged her out of the room, and I was left to wonder how that complicating baby would be disposed of. I had begun to think the infant sometimes recognized me. When I touched one of his little hands with my finger, he really appeared to respond with some manifestations of pleasure; at least it never seemed to terrify or dismay him. His mother was confident that he liked it.

Perhaps an hour later they came out, and I looked at Frances in some surprise. I gained the impression that she was taller and more slender than I had thought.

"You give me that baby," commanded Frieda. "I want you to

save your strength, my dear. I should make David carry it, but he would drop it or hold it upside down. Come along, my precious, we're going out to walk a by-by."

Master Paul seemed to make no objection. I call it a dreadful shame that Frieda never married and had a half a dozen of her own. She's the most motherly old maid in the world, and infants take to her with absolute enthusiasm. I followed them, somewhat doubtfully, wondering what figure Master Paul would cut at Camus. I knew that they allowed little dogs and there was a big tortoise-shell cat that wandered under the chairs and sometimes scratched your knee for a bit of fish, but I had never seen any young babies in the widow's establishment. This one might be deemed revolutionary or iconoclastic. Should we be met by uplifted and deprecating palms and informed with profuse apologies that the rules of the house did not favor the admission of such youthful guests?

In a few minutes my doubts were set at rest, for we walked off to the hive inhabited by the washerwoman. At the foot of the stairs Mrs. Dupont kissed her baby, as if she were seeing it for the last time. Then Frieda hastened upstairs with it and came down, two minutes later, blowing like a porpoise.

"He'll be perfectly safe," she declared. "Madame Boivin says he is an angel, and Eulalie was there. She said he would sleep straight on end for two hours. I told her we should be back before – I mean in good time. Now come along!"

I could see that the young mother only half approved of the

scheme originated in Frieda's fertile brain. Two or three times she looked back as if minded to return at once and snatch up her baby, never to leave it again.

"My dear," said Frieda, "don't be getting nervous. Nothing can possibly happen, and you know how very careful Eulalie is. Little by little you must get back into the world. How are you going to face it, if it frightens you? Put on a brave, bold front. Here is a chance for you to have a few moments of enjoyment. Seize upon it and don't let go. A dark cellar is no place to pick up courage in, and you must come out of the gloom, child, and live a little with the others so that you may be able to live for Baby Paul. There's a good girl!"

Frances opened a little black bag and pulled out a handkerchief with which she dabbed her eyes once or twice. Then she looked up again.

"Oh! Frieda! I ought to be thanking God on my bended knees for sending you to me, and – and Mr. Cole too. Indeed I'll do my best to be brave. It's – it's difficult, sometimes, but I'm going to try, ever so hard."

I am afraid that the little smile with which she ended these words was somewhat forced, but I was glad to see it. It was a plucky effort. She was seeking to contend against a current carrying her out to sea and realized that she must struggle to reach the shore in safety. I saw Frieda give her arm a good hug, and the three of us walked to Seventh Avenue, then north a couple of blocks, after which we turned to the right till we came to

the electric lights of the Widow Camus's flamboyant sign, that winked a welcome at us.

I remember little about the dinner itself, but, after the rather insipid fare at Mrs. Milliken's, I know that Frances enjoyed it. The place did not surprise her, nor the people. During her life in Paris, after her marriage, she had probably been with her husband to some more or less Bohemian resorts, such as are beloved of artists. At first, she choked a little over the radishes and olives, but took her *consommé* with greater assurance and was quite at her ease before the chicken and salad. With her last leaf of lettuce, however, came over her a look of anxiety, and I pulled out my watch.

"Don't be afraid," I told her, "we have only been away from the washerlady for fifty minutes. See yourself, there is no deception."

"I am absolutely certain that he is sleeping yet," Frieda assured her, and turned to the perspiring waiter, ordering three Nesselrodes and coffees.

Now, when I treat myself to a *table d'hôte* dinner, I love to linger over my repast, to study the people about me, or at least pretend to. Also, I sip my coffee very slowly and enjoy a Chartreuse, in tiny gulps. Frieda, if anything, is more dilatory than myself. But the dear old girl positively hurried over the little block of ice-cream, and I suspect that she scalded her mouth a trifle with her coffee. A few minutes later we were out in the street again, hurrying towards Madame Boivin's, and I wondered

whether such unseemly haste could be compatible with proper digestion. We reached the tenement in a very short time.

"Frances is going upstairs with me," announced Frieda. "You had better not wait for us, for we might be detained a little. I'll bring her home, and we shall be perfectly safe. You go right back and smoke your old pipe till we return."

"Don't hurry," I told her. "I might as well wait here as anywhere else. It is an interesting street. If I get tired of waiting, I'll stroll home; take your time."

So they went up the stairs, Frieda panting behind, and I leaned against a decrepit iron railing. A few steps away some colored men were assembled about a lamppost, their laughter coming explosively, in repeated peals. Opposite me, within an exiguous front yard, a very fat man sat on a rickety chair, the back resting against the wall, and gave me an uncomfortable sense of impending collapse of the spindly legs. Boys, playing ball in the middle of the street, stopped suddenly and assumed an air of profound detachment from things terrestrial as a policeman went by, majestic and leisurely, swinging his club. Somewhere west of me an accordion was whining variations on Annie Laurie, but, suddenly, its grievous voice was drowned by a curtain lecture addressed to a deep bass by an exasperated soprano. To the whole world his sins were proclaimed with a wealth of detail and an imagery of expression that excited my admiration. Then the clamor ceased abruptly and a man's head appeared at the window. I speculated whether he was contemplating self-

destruction, but he vanished, to appear a moment later in the street, garmented in trousers, carpet-slippers and undershirt and armed with an empty beer-pail. With this he faded away in the corner saloon, to come forth again with his peace-offering.

With such observations I solaced myself and whiled away the time. Humanity in the rough is to me fully as interesting as the dull stones picked up in Brazil or the Cape Colony. Some are hopelessly flawed, while others need but patient grinding to develop into diamonds of the first water.

Nearly a half an hour had gone by, and I had seated myself upon the railing, in a position once dear to me when I shared a fence with Sadie Briggs, aged fourteen, and thought that the ultimate had come to me in the way of love and passion. Fortunate Sadie! She afterwards married a blacksmith and did her duty to the world by raising a large family, while I pounded typewriter keys and wrote of imaginary loves, in shirt-sleeves and slippers, lucky in the egotistic peace of the enviable mortal responsible for no human being's bread and butter but his own.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.