

Saltus Edgar

The Perfume of Eros: A Fifth Avenue Incident



Edgar Saltus

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THE PERFUME OF EROS

CHAPTER I

A MAN OF FASHION

"ROYAL," said the man's mother that evening, "are you still thinking of Fanny Price?"

It was in Gramercy Park. As you may or may not know, Gramercy Park is the least noisy spot in the metropolitan Bedlam. Without being unreasonably aristocratic it is sedate and what agents call exclusive.

The park itself is essentially that. Its design is rather English. The use is restricted to adjoining residents. About it is a fence of high iron. Within are trees, paths, grasses, benches, great vases and a fountain. But none of the usual loungers, none of the leprous men, rancid women, and epileptic children that swarm in other New York squares. Yet these squares are open to all. To enter this park you must have a key. By day it is a playground. Nurse-maids come there with little boys and girls, the subdued, undemonstrative, beautifully dressed children of the rich. At night it is empty as a vacant bier.

In a house that fronted the north side Royal Loftus lived with his mother, a proud, arrogant woman socially known to all, but who socially knew but few. Behind her, in the shade of the family tree, was her dead lord, Royal's father and, more impressively still, the latter's relatives, the entire Loftus contingent, a set of people super-respectable, supernally rich. She too was rich. She wore a wig, walked with a staff, spoke with a Mayfair intonation in a high-pitched voice, and, in the amplitudes of widowhood and wealth, entertained frequently but cared only for her son.

On this evening the two were seated together in a drawing-room that faced the park. The walls, after a fashion of long ago, were frescoed. The ceiling too was frescoed. The furniture belonged also to an earlier day. The modern note in the room was the absence of chandeliers and the appearance of Royal Loftus, who, in a Paris shirt and London clothes, was contemplating his painted nails.

At his feet was an Ardebil rug which originally had cost a small fortune and now was worth a big one. In allusion to it a girl to whom he had handed out the usual "You don't care for me," had retorted, "Not care for you! Why, Royal, I worship the rug you tread on."

That girl was Fanny Price.

"No," he answered in reply to his mother's question. The answer was strangely truthful. Fanny Price had tantalized him greatly. Semi-continuously he had thought of her for a long time. But not matrimonially. To him matrimony meant always one woman more and usually one man less. He had no wish to dwindle. When he was fifty he might, perhaps, to make a finish, marry some girl who wanted to begin. But that unselfishness was remote. He was quite young; what is worse, he was abominably good-looking. Fancy Aramis in a Piccadilly coat. That was the way he looked. His features were chiseled. On his lip was a mustache so slight that it might have been made with a crayon. His hair was black. His eyes were blue. Where they were not blue they were white, very white. They were wonderful eyes. With them he had done a great deal of execution.

At the time they rather haunted a young woman who moved in another sphere and whose acquaintance he had made quite adventurously. The name of this young woman was Marie Durand. It was of the latter, not of Fanny Price, that he was thinking.

"No," he repeated. "But was it for Annandale that you asked her for tonight?"

"How perfectly absurd of you, Royal. Have you forgotten that he is in love with Sylvia? I asked her partly for you, partly for Orr."

"Is he coming too! Good Lord! it is going to be ghastly."

But at the side of the room a portière was being drawn and a servant announced:

"Miss Waldron."

With the charming manner of the thoroughbred New York girl a young woman entered. She was tall, willowy, with a face such as those one used to see in keepsakes – delightful things which now, like so many other delightful things, are seen no more.

As she approached Mrs. Loftus, who had risen to greet her, she made a little courtesy.

"Sylvia, this is so dear of you. And is your mother very well?"

Again the portière was drawn. A voice announced:

"Miss Price."

Then there appeared a girl adorably constructed – constructed, too, to be adored. She was slight and very fair. Her mouth resembled the red pulp of some flower of flesh. Her eyes were pools of purple, her hair a turban of gold.

Cannibalistically Loftus looked the delicious apparition up and down. He could have eaten it.

"Mr. Annandale," the voice announced.

A man, big and blond, with a cavalry mustache and an amiable, aimless air, strolled in.

"Mr. Melanchthon Orr."

On the heels of Annandale came a cousin of Miss Waldron, a lawyer by trade, a man with a bulldog face that was positively attractive.

There were more how-do-you-do's, the usual platitudes, interrupted by the opening of doors at the further end of the room, where a butler, a squad of lackeys behind him, disclosed himself in silent announcement of dinner.

After the general move which then ensued and hosts and guests were seated at table, Orr created an immediate diversion by calling to Fanny Price and telling her that shortly she was to marry.

"Yes," he continued, "and my cousin Sylvia is to marry also, though not so soon; but either Annandale or Royal will never marry at all."

Bombarded by sudden questions Orr gazed calmly about.

"How do I know? Miranda told me. Miranda the spook. She charged five dollars for the information. If you like to make it up to me, I shall not mind in the least. On the contrary. You see, Mrs. Loftus," Orr added, turning to his hostess, "I happened, when I went to her, to have your very kind invitation for this evening in my pocket, and, as she wanted something to psychometrize, I gave her that. She held it to her forehead and said, 'I see you in the house of an elegant lady' – that is you, Mrs. Loftus; yes, there is no doubt about it – 'and there are present two young ladies, one fair, one dark, and two gentlemen; one of the gentlemen will never marry, but the dark young lady will marry in two years and the fair young lady in one. Five dollars. Thank you. Next.'"

"Did she say nothing about me except that I am an 'elegant lady'?" Mrs. Loftus, with a pained laugh and a high voice, inquired.

"Did she say whom I am to marry?" Fanny Price asked, smiling, as she spoke, at Royal.

"But, Melanchthon, surely you do not believe in these things?" said Sylvia gravely.

"Of course he does not," Loftus exclaimed. "He does not believe in anything. Do you, Orr?"

"I believe in a great many things," the lawyer replied. "I have precisely three hundred and sixty-five beliefs – one for every day in the year."

"When the twenty-ninth of February comes around how do you manage then?" said Fanny.

"Yes," said Annandale, "and how about April first?"

Orr raised a finger. "Jest if you will. But beliefs are a great comfort, or would be among people like you who have none except in fashion, and there is the oddity of it, for belief in this sort of thing

is very fashionable now, particularly in London. Yes, indeed, Lady Cloden – you remember her, she was Clara Hastings – well, she went to a spook in Tottenham Court Road, and the spook told her that she would have twins. Immediately she had herself insured. In London, you know, you can be insured against anything. The twins appeared and she got £5,000. Belief in this sort of thing is therefore not merely fashionable but convenient."

In the ripple of laughter which followed the logic, Orr turned to Mrs. Loftus, Annandale to Miss Waldron, Loftus to Fanny Price.

"You take very kindly to snubbing, don't you?" said the latter.

"I?"

"Oh, pooh! The other day I saw Mr. Royal Loftus trying to scrape acquaintance with a young person in the street. I never laughed more in my life. She would not look at you. Is that sort of thing amusing? Why don't you take a girl of your size?"

Loftus looked into Fanny's eyes. "If you want to know, because you are all so deuced prim."

"Ah!" and Fanny made a tantalizing little face, showing, as she did so, the point of her tongue. "Now tell me, what makes you think so?"

Across the table Annandale was talking to Sylvia Waldron. His manner was rather earnest, but his utterance had become a trifle thick.

"Oh, Arthur," the girl at last interrupted him. "Don't drink any more. You have had five glasses of champagne already."

Heroically Annandale put his glass down. "Since you wish it, I won't. But it does not hurt me. I can stand anything."

"I am afraid it may grow on you."

Annandale laughed. "Grow on me," he repeated. "I like that. Why, I am cultivating it."

Miss Waldron laughed too. "Yes, but you know you must not. I won't let you." Then at once, with that tact which was part of her, she changed the subject. "Doesn't Fanny look well tonight?"

"Very. She is the prettiest girl in New York. But you are the best and the dearest. What is more, you are an angel."

"To you I want to try to be."

"Only," resumed Annandale with a spark of the wit which is born of champagne, "don't try to be a saint – it is a step backward."

"Yes, Mrs. Loftus," Orr was saying, "Miranda is fat, very fat. All mediums are. The fatter they are the more confidence you may have."

Then there was more small talk. Courses succeeded each other. Sweets came and went. Presently Mrs. Loftus looked circuitously about and slowly arose. When she and the girls had gone and the men were reseated Loftus turned to Orr.

"Did the spook say anything else?"

Orr was selecting a cigar from a cabinet on wheels which a servant trundled about. He chose and lighted one before he replied. Then he looked at Loftus.

"Yes, she told me that she saw – " Orr paused. The cigar had gone out. He lighted it again. "She told me that she saw death hereabouts."

Loftus was also lighting a cigar. "Then I too am a spook," he replied. "I foretold that you would say something ghastly."

"But, my dear fellow," Orr rejoined, "truth is always that. People fancy that it is made of lace and pearls like a girl on her wedding day. It is not that at all. It is just what you call it. It is ghastly. Read history. Any reliable work is but a succession of groans. The more reliable it is the more groans there will be."

Annandale, who had been helping himself to brandy, interrupted. "Talking of reading things, I saw somewhere that after some dinner or other, when the women had gone, a chap began on a rather – well, don't you know, a sort of barnyard story and the host, who could not quite stomach it, said:

'Suppose we continue the conversation in the drawing-room?' So, Royal, what do you say? If Orr is going to shock us, suppose we do."

Loftus with a painted finger-tip flipped the ashes from his cigar.

"I fear that I have lost the ability to be shocked, but not the ability to be bored."

Yet presently, after another cigar and conscious perhaps that Fanny Price, though often exasperating, never bored, he returned with his guests to the drawing-room.

CHAPTER II

THE POCKET VENUS

"HOW do you like my hat?" said Fanny to Sylvia. Since the dinner a week had gone. The two girls were in Irving Place.

Irving Place is south of Gramercy Park. To the west are the multiple atrocities of Union Square, to the east are the nameless shames of Third avenue. Between the two Irving Place lies, a survival of the peace of old New York. At the lower end are the encroaching menaces of trade, but at the upper end, from which you enter Gramercy Park, there is a quiet, pervasive and almost provincial. It was here that Sylvia Waldron lived.

People take a house for six months or an apartment for a year and call it a home. That is a base use for a sacred word. A home is a place in which you are born, in which your people die and your progeny emerge. A home predicates the present, but particularly the past and with it the future. Any other variety of residence may be agreeable or the reverse, but it is not a home.

In Irving Place there are homes. Among them was the house in which Sylvia Waldron lived. It had been in her family for sixty years. In London a tenure such as that is common. In New York it is phenomenal.

To Sylvia the phenomenon was a matter of course. What amazed her were the migrations of others. Of Fanny, for instance. Each autumn Sylvia would say to her, "Where are you to be?" And Fanny, who at the time might be lodged in a hotel, or camping with a relative, or visiting at Tuxedo, or stopping in Westchester, never could tell. But by December the girl and her mother would find quarters somewhere and there remain until that acrobat, summer, turned handsprings into town and frightened them off.

Summer had not yet come. But May had and, with it, an eager glitter, skies of silk, all the caresses and surrenders of spring.

The season was becoming to Fanny. She fitted in it. She was a young Venus in Paris clothes – Aphrodite a maiden, touched up by Doucet. In her manner was a charm quite incandescent. In her voice were intonations that conveyed the sensation of a kiss. Her eyes were very loquacious. She could, when she chose, flood them with languors. She could, too, charge them with rebuke. You never knew, though, just what she would do. But you always did know what Sylvia would not.

Sylvia suggested the immateriality that the painters of long ago gave to certain figures which they wished to represent as floating from the canvas into space. You felt that her mind was clean as wholesome fruit, that her speech could no more weary than could a star, that her heart, like her house, was a home. She detained, but Fanny allured.

In spite of which or perhaps precisely because of their sheer dissimilarity the two girls were friends. But association weaves mysterious ties. It unites people who otherwise would come to blows. Fanny and Sylvia had been brought up together. The mesh woven in younger days was about them still, and on this particular noon in May they made a picture which, while contrasting, was charming.

"You really like my hat?"

The hat was gray. The girl's dress was gray. The skirt was of the variety known as trotabout. The whole thing was severely plain, yet astonishingly smart. Sylvia was also in street dress. The latter was black.

They were in the parlor. For in New York there are still parlors. And why not? A parlor – or parloir – is a talking-place. Yet in this instance not a gay place. It was spacious, sombre, severe.

"And now," said Fanny, after the hat had been properly praised, "tell me when it is to be?"

"When is what to be?"

"You and Arthur?"

"Next autumn."

"I shall send a fish knife," said Fanny, savorously. "A fish knife always looks so big and costs so little. Though if I could I would give you a diamond crown."

"Give me your promise to be bridesmaid, and you will have given me what I want from you most."

"But what am I to wear? And oh, Sylvia, how am I to get it? I don't dare any more to so much as look in on Annette, or Juliette, or Marguerite. There are streets into which I can no longer go. I told Loftus that, and he said – so sympathetically too – 'Ah, is it memories that prevent you?' 'Rubbish,' I told him, 'it's bills.'"

"Fanny! How could you? He might have offered to pay them."

"If he had only offered to owe them!" Fanny laughed as she spoke and patted her perfect skirt.

"But he has other fish to fry. Do you know the other day I saw him –"

But what Fanny had seen was never told, or at least not then. Annandale was invading the parlor.

"Conquering hero!" cried Fanny. "I am here congratulating Sylvia."

"I congratulate myself that you are. I have a motor at the door, and I propose to take you both to Sherry's, afterward, if you like, to the races. There you may congratulate me."

"What is this about Sherry's?" Again the parlor was invaded. This time by Sylvia's mother. She had bright cheeks, bright eyes, bright hair. In her voice was indulgence, in her manner ease. She gave a hand to Fanny, the other to Annandale.

"In my day," she resumed, "girls did not go lunching without someone to look after them."

"They certainly did not go to Sherry's," said Annandale. "There was no Sherry's to go to. But why won't you come with us?"

"Thank you, Arthur. It is not because Fanny or Sylvia needs looking after. But when I was their age anything of the sort would have been thought so common. Yet then, what was common at that time seems to have been accepted since. Now, there is a chance to call me old-fashioned."

"I can do better than that," said Annandale, "I can call you grande dame."

"Yes," Fanny threw in, "and that, don't you think, is so superior to being merely – ahem – demned grand."

"Why, Fanny!" And Mrs. Waldron, at once amused at the jest and startled at the expression, shook her finger at her.

But Annandale hastened to her rescue. "Fanny is quite right, Mrs. Waldron. You meet women nowadays whose grandfathers, if they had any, were paving the streets while your own were governing the country and who, just because they happen to be beastly rich, put on airs that would be comical in an empress. Now, won't you change your mind and come with us? At Sherry's there are always some choice selections on view."

"You are not very tempting, Arthur. But if the girls think otherwise, take them. And don't forget. You dine with us tonight."

Thereat, presently, after a scurry through sunshine and streets, Sherry's was reached.

There Annandale wanted to order a châteaubriand. The girls rebelled. A maitre d'hôtel suggested melons and a suprême with a bombe to follow.

Annandale turned to him severely. "Ferdinand, I object to your telling me what you want me to eat."

"Let me order," said Sylvia. "Fanny, what would you like?"

"Cucumbers, asparagus, strawberries."

"Chicken?"

Fanny nodded.

"Yes," said Annandale to the chastened waiter, "order that and some moselle, and I want a Scotch and soda. There's Orr," he interrupted himself to announce. "I wonder what he is doing uptown? And there's Loftus."

At the mention of Orr, Fanny, who had been eying an adjacent gown, evinced no interest. But at the mention of Loftus she glanced about the room.

It was large, high-ceiled, peopled with actresses and men-about-town, smart women and stupid boys, young girls and old beaux. From a balcony there dripped the twang of mandolins. In the air was the savor of pineapple, the smell of orris, the odor of food and flowers.

On entering Sylvia had stopped to say a word at one table, Fanny had loitered at another. Then in their trip to a table already reserved, a trip conducted by the maitre d'hôtel whom Annandale had rebuked, murmurs trailed after them, the echo of their names, observations profoundly analytical. "That's Fanny Price, the great beauty." "That's Miss Waldron, who is engaged to Arthur Annandale." "That is Annandale there" – the usual subtleties of the small people of a big city. Now, at the entrance, Orr and Loftus appeared.

"Shall I ask them to join us?" Annandale asked.

"Yes, do," said Fanny. "I like Mr. Orr so much."

But Loftus, who, with his hands in his pockets, a monocle in his eye, had been looking about with an air of great contempt for everybody, already with Orr was approaching. On reaching the table very little urging was required to induce them to sit, and, when seated they were, Loftus was next to Fanny.

"What are you doing uptown at this hour?" Annandale asked Orr, who had got between Loftus and Sylvia. "I thought you lawyers were all so infernally busy."

"Everybody ought to be," Orr replied. "Although an anarchist who had managed to get himself locked up, and whom I succeeded in getting out, confided to me that only imbeciles work. By way of exchange I had to confide to him that it is only imbeciles that do not."

"Now that," said Annandale, who had never done a stroke of work in his life, "is what I call a very dangerous theory."

"A theory that is not dangerous," Orr retorted, "can hardly be called a theory at all."

With superior tact Sylvia intervened. "But what is anarchy, Melanchthon? Socialism I know about, but anarchy – ?"

"To put it vulgarly, I drink and you pay."

"But suppose I am an anarchist?"

"Then Sherry pays."

"But supposing he is an anarchist?"

"Then there is a row. And there will be one. The country is drifting that way. It will, I think, be bloody, but I think, too, it will be brief. Anarchists, you know, maintain that of all prejudices capital and matrimony are the stupidest. What they demand is the free circulation of money and women. As a nation, we are great at entertaining, but we will never entertain that."

"Why, then, did you not let the beggar rot where he was?" Annandale swiftly and severely inquired.

"Oh, you know, if I had not got him out someone else would have, and I thought it better that the circulation of money should proceed directly from his pocket to mine."

"You haven't any stupid prejudices yourself, that's clear," said Annandale, helping himself as he spoke to more Scotch. "Sylvia," he continued, "if I am ever up for murder I will retain Melanchthon Orr."

Orr laughed. "That retainer will never reach me. You would not hurt a fly."

"Wouldn't I?" And Annandale assumed an expression of great ferocity. "You don't know me. I can imagine circumstances in which I could wade in gore. By the way, I have ordered a revolver."

"What!"

"Yes, a burglar got in my place the night before last and woke me up. If he comes back and wakes me up again I'll blow his head off."

Sylvia looked at him much as she might at a boastful child. "Yes, yes, Arthur, but please don't take so much of that whisky."

"I think I will have a drop of it, if I may," said Loftus, who meanwhile had been talking to Fanny. In a moment he turned to her anew.

"Where are you going this summer?"

"To Narragansett. It is cool and cheap. Why don't you come?"

"It is such a beastly hole."

"Well, perhaps. But do you think you would think so if I were there?"

"That would rather depend on how you treated me."

"You mean, don't you, that it would rather depend on how I let you treat me?" Fanny, as she spoke, looked Loftus in the eyes and made a face at him.

That face, Loftus, after a momentary interlude with knife and fork, tried to mimic. "If a chap gave you the chance you would drive him to the devil."

On Fanny's lips a smile bubbled. She shook her pretty head. "No, not half so far. Not even so far as the other end of Fifth avenue, where I saw you trying to scrape acquaintance with that girl. Apropos. You might tell me. How are matters progressing? Has the castle capitulated?"

"I haven't an idea what you are talking about."

"That's right. Assume a virtue though you have it not. It's a good plan."

"It does not appear to be yours."

"Appearances may be deceptive."

"And even may not be."

Sylvia interrupted them. "What are you two quarreling about?"

"Mr. Loftus does not like my hat. Don't you like it, Mr. Orr?"

"I like everything about you, everything, from the crown of your head to the soles of your feet."

"There!" exclaimed Fanny. "That is the way I like to have a man talk."

"It is dreadfully difficult," Loftus threw in.

"You seem to find it so," Fanny threw back.

Sylvia raised a finger. "Mr. Loftus, if you do not stop quarreling with Fanny I will make you come and sit by me."

"If I am to look upon that as a punishment, Miss Waldron," Loftus with negligent gallantry replied, "what would you have me regard as a reward?"

"Arthur! Arthur!" Fanny cried. "Did you hear that? This man is making up to Sylvia."

But Annandale did not seem in the least alarmed. He was looking about for Ferdinand. "Here," he began, when at last the waiter appeared. "You neglect us shamefully. We want some more moselle and more Scotch."

"None for me," said Loftus rising. "I have an appointment."

"Appointment," Fanny announced, "is very good English for *rendezvous*."

"And *taisez-vous, mademoiselle*, is very good French for I wish it were with yourself."

"I have not a doubt of it."

"Fanny!" Sylvia objected. "You are impossible."

"Yes," Fanny indolently replied. "Yet then, to be impossible and seem the reverse is the proper caper for a debutante. Heigho! I wish girls smoked here. I would give a little of my small change for a cigarette. Are you really off, Royal. Well, my love to the lady."

CHAPTER III

THE EX-FIRST LADY

LOFTUS, letting himself into a hansom, sailed away. At Morris Park that afternoon there were to be races, and up the maelstrom of Fifth avenue came scudding motors, fleeting traps.

As the hansom descended the current Loftus nodded to this acquaintance and to that, occasionally raising his hat as women smiled and bowed. Occasionally, too, he contemplated what he could of himself in the little mirror at the side of the cab. He looked triumphant and treacherous.

Fanny, he reflected, was ideal. But exacting, ambitious even. She had a perfect mania for matrimony. There was another girl that he had in mind whom he fancied more reasonable. This other was Marie Durand.

In just what way he had met her was never quite clear. Fanny, who had witnessed the preliminary skirmish, always believed that he had picked her up. Afterward, at the time of the trial, it was so reported. The report was false in addition to being vulgar. Marie Durand was not of that sort. There was nothing fast or flirtatious about her. But she was a human being. She had eyes. She had a heart. By nature she was sensitive. Moreover, she was but nineteen. Being human, sensitive, and not very old, having eyes to see and a heart that throbbed, she was impressionable and, to her misfortune, Loftus impressed her.

Loftus was rather used to impressing people. He saw the girl on Fifth avenue, followed her home, learned her name – or thought he did – and sent her flowers every day until he saw her again, when he presumed to accost her. At that impertinence Marie tilted her nose and trotted on, distant, disdainful, demure.

But not indifferent. Not oblivious either. Often she had seen him. Occasionally on a high drag behind a piebald four-in-hand. In crowded Fifth avenue, drags, with or without piebalds, are infrequent. This drag Marie had seen not merely tooling along the street but pictured in the press. With, of course, full accounts of the driver. As a consequence she knew who he was, knew that he was one of the rich young men of New York and that he moved and had his being in the upper circles.

Marie's own sphere of life was obscure. She lived with her father in Gay street. Her father, a tailor by trade, was a naturalized Frenchman, a gaunt Gaul, who had a sallow face, walked with a stoop, complained of his heart and adored his daughter. To him she was a pearl, a *perle*, rather. For though he had been long in New York and spoke English well, he had never quite acquired the accent.

Marie spoke English without any accent whatever. She also spoke French, sang in it, too, sang in Italian and, with a view to the lyric stage, or, more exactly, with the hope of studying for it abroad, was, at the time when this drama begins, taking lessons in what is termed the *bel canto*.

But her aspirations, in so far as they concerned Europe, her father was unable to gratify. He could not let her go alone and he could not afford to throw up what he called his beesness. Here, then, was this girl, pretty as a picture, with a lovely contralto voice, with aspirations entirely worldly, with wings, you might say, cooped in Gay street, spiritually and mentally starved there.

Gay street lies back of Jefferson Market. In shape a crescent, it curves briefly in a lost and dismal way through a region which, though but a block or two from Fifth avenue, is almost squalid. At one end of its short curve is a saloon, at the other an apothecary.

It was from this apothecary that Loftus learned Marie's name – or thought he did. For inadvertently the man got things mixed as his drugs and supplied Loftus with the name of a young woman who lived in a house next to the one in which Loftus had seen the girl enter.

What is more interesting is the fact that, though, while he was following her there, she had looked neither to the right nor to the left, or anywhere save straight ahead, she had been fully aware that he was behind her. How? We cannot tell. It is one of the mysteries of femininity. But once safely

in, boldly she peeked out. Loftus was crossing the street. Presently he entered the shop. For what, it did not take Marie more than a minute to conjecture.

Later in the day a motor van appeared in that street. On it was the name of a Broadway florist. Since the memory of man never before had such a thing happened. From the van a groom had hopped and, if you please, with roses. That, too, was phenomenal. Yet thereafter every day for a week there was the motor, the groom and flowers at a dollar and a half apiece. The recipient of these attentions was Miss Rebecca Cohen, the daughter of Mr. Abraham Cohen, who also, like Marie's father, was a tailor.

Marie saw the van, divined the mistake, and, being as full of fun as a kitten, greatly enjoyed the continued humor of it. For still into that sordid street the flowers poured. Every day, to the unhallowed surprise of Mr. Cohen and to the equal bewilderment of his offspring, a box of radiant roses was handed out.

In that surprise and bewilderment the neighborhood joined. Scandalized at the scandal Cohen questioned the groom, questioned the chauffeur. He might have saved himself the trouble. Then he inquired at the florist's. But there no one could be found who knew anything at all about anything whatever. Already he had questioned Rebecca. It seemed to him that in spite of her protests she must be engaged in some fathomless intrigue. But Rebecca, whose commercial instinct was beautifully developed, not only protested but appeased. She told her father that the roses were worth money. Furthermore, that which is worth money can be sold. Thereupon sold they were. But quite as inexplicably as the van had appeared so did its visits cease. When that happened Mr. Cohen felt and declared that he was robbed. He had come to regard the roses as assets.

Marie meanwhile, whom the humor of the situation had amused, ended by worrying over it. She was a good girl, as such conscientious, and it troubled her, at first only a little and then very much, to think that Loftus must believe that she was knowingly accepting his flowers. Moreover, her father had commented upon them; in commenting he had wondered. Marie began to fear that Loftus might discover the mistake and turn in and inundate her. She did not know quite what to do. She thought of writing to him, very distantly, in the third person, or else anonymously. But the letter did not seem to get itself framed. Then, from thinking of that, she fell to thinking of him.

To see him she had only to close her eyes. Once he visited her in dream. He came accompanied by butterflies that fluttered about her and changed into kisses on her lips. Again she fancied him much sought after by ladies and became hotly and unaccountably vexed at the idea. It would be so lovely to really know him, she always decided. But she did not see at all how that ever could come about.

Yet, of course, it did come about. It came about, moreover, in a fashion as sordid as the street she lived in.

That street, though sordid, is relatively silent. It is beyond, in Sixth avenue, that you get a sample of real New York noise. The slam-bang of the trains overhead, the grinding grunt of the surface cars, the demon draymen, the clanging motors, the ceaseless crowds, collaborate in an uproar beside which a bombardment is restful. But though the entire thoroughfare is appalling, Jefferson Market, behind which Gay street squats, is infernal.

Loftus loathed it. Until he pursued the girl into its horrors never before had he been there. Nor, save for her, would he have returned. But return he did. For recompense he beheld her. She was strolling along, a roll of music under her arm, in the direction of Fifth avenue.

It was there he attempted to accost her. Without deigning to seem even aware that he had presumed to do so, she passed on and, in passing, turned into Washington Square, where, ascending the steps of a house, she vanished. It was then three by the clock of a beautiful day in April.

Loftus was as well able as another to put two and two together. He knew that young girls do not stroll about with a music roll under their arm for the fun of it. A music roll predicates lessons, and there where lessons are must also be a teacher.

From that teacher he was unaware of any good and valid reason why he should not himself take lessons. But fate is not unrelenting. Of such toil he was spared. He spared himself too any further toil that day. He felt that he had done enough. He had quarried the girl again, stalked her to what was obviously a boarding-house. He turned on his heel.

The next day he was back at that house, inquiring at the door. As a result he was shown into a shabby back parlor where he made the acquaintance of Mme. Machin, a tired old Frenchwoman, who, with rouge on her yellow cheeks, powder on her pointed nose, confided to him that she had been prima donna, though whether *assoluta* or *dissoluta* she omitted to state.

But her antecedents, her possibilities as well, Loftus divined at a glance and, while he was at it, divining too, that, personally, she was no better, and, financially, no better off than the law allows, asked point-blank about the Miss Cohen who had come there at three the day before. Learning then from the ex-first lady that the girl's name was not Cohen but Durand, he damned the apothecary and offered a hundred dollars to be introduced. Poverty is not a crime. But it is rumored to be an incentive. The crime which Loftus proposed to Mme. Machin is one which the code does not specify and the law cannot reach. Knowing which, the woman may have been guilty of it before and, the opportunity occurring, was guilty again – salving her conscience, if she had a conscience, with the convenient, "Mon Dieu, il faut vivre!"

Anyway, at the offer she did not so much as blink. She smiled very receptively and declared that she would be charmed.

When, therefore, two days later Marie re-entered that shabby back parlor she found Loftus there. Generally the girl and the ex-first lady got to work at once, sometimes with the brindisi from "Lucrezia Borgia," sometimes with arias from "Aïda." Save themselves no one was ever present.

Now at the unexpected spectacle of the man the cream of the girl's delicate skin suffused. It was as though there were claret in it. She had not an idea what to do and, before she could decide, ceremoniously, with due regard for the pomps of etiquette, Loftus had been introduced.

If abrupt, the introduction was at least conventional, and Marie, who had not the remotest suspicion that it was all bought and paid for and who, if consciously startled, subconsciously was pleased, attributing the whole thing to accident and, flushing still, smiled and sat down.

"I think," said Loftus, "that I have had the pleasure of seeing you before."

At this inanity Marie looked first at him, then at the carpet. She did not know at all what he was saying. But in his voice was a deference, in his manner a sorcery and in his bearing and appearance something that went to her head. It was all very novel and delightful, and she flushed again.

"Yes," Loftus resumed, "and when I did see you I committed a very grave offense. Can you forgive me?"

For countenance sake the girl turned to Mme. Machin. But the ex-first lady, pretexting a pretext, had gone.

"Can you?" Loftus requested. "Can you forgive?"

Forgive indeed! Had she not so forgiven that she had almost wished a renewal of that grave offense? She did not answer. It was her face that spoke for her. But the silence Loftus affected to misconstrue.

"Couldn't you try?"

"Yes." The monosyllable fell from her softly, almost inaudibly. Yet for his purpose it sufficed.

"Thank you. I hoped that you would. But will you let me tell you now how I came to behave as I did?"

To this, timorously, with the slightest movement of her pretty head, the girl assented.

"Because I could not help myself. Because at the first sight of you I knew that I loved you. Because I felt that I could never love anyone else."

Marie started. She was crimson. Starting, she half got from her seat. Loftus caught at her hand. She disengaged it. But he caught at it again.

"I love you," he continued, burning her with his words, with the contact of his fingers, that had intertwined with hers. "Look at me, I love your eyes. Speak to me, I love your voice."

But the door opened. Preceded by a precautionary roulade, the ex-first lady reappeared.

"Allons!" she remarked to the ceiling. "Et maintenant, mademoiselle, au travail."

Loftus stood up, took Marie's hand again, held it a second, nodded at the woman. In a moment he had gone.

"Au revoir," the ex-first lady called after him. She turned to the girl. "A gallant monsieur. And good to look at." Then seating herself at the piano she attacked the brindisi from "Lucrezia." "Ah! the segreto!" she interrupted herself to exclaim, "il segreto per esser felice – the secret of happiness! Mais! There is but one! C'est l'amour! And with a gallant monsieur like that! And rich! C'est le rêve! N'est ce pas, mon enfant?"

"Je vous en prie, madame," said Marie severely, or rather as severely as she could, for she was trembling with emotion, saturated with the love that had been thrown at her head, drenched with it, frightened too at the apperception of the secret which the aria that her teacher was strumming revealed.

CHAPTER IV ENCHANTMENT

SAILING in the hansom down Fifth avenue, Loftus thought of that first interview with the girl, of the den in which it had occurred and of his subsequent visits there. Since the introduction he had seen her three times, seen, too, of course, that she was not up to Fanny, but he had seen also that she was less ambitious, more tractable in every way. Besides, one is not loved every afternoon. To him that was the main point, and of that point he was now tolerably sure.

Suddenly the hansom tacked, veered and landed him at the ex-first lady's door.

"Bonjour, mon beau seigneur," the woman began when, presently, he reached her lair. "The little one will not delay."

"And then?"

"Be tranquil. I have other cats to whip."

Mme. Machin was hatted and gloved. Loftus stuck his hand in his pocket. Mme. Machin was too genteel to notice. From the pocket he drew a roll of yellow bills. Mme. Machin affected entire unconcern. The bills he put in her paw. Mme. Machin was so entirely unconscious of the liberty that she turned to the mantel, picked up a bag of bead, opened it, took from it a little puff with which she dusted her nose. Then the puff went back into the bag. With it went the bills.

"I run," she announced. She moved to the door. There, looking at Loftus over her shoulder, she stopped. "You come again?"

For reply Loftus made a gesture.

"Yes," said the woman. "Naturally. It depends. But let me know. It is more commodious. Pas de scandale, eh?"

To this Loftus made no reply whatever. But his expression was translatable into "what do you take me for?"

"Allez!" the ex-first lady resumed. "I have confidence."

She opened the door and through it vanished. Loftus removed his gloves, seated himself at the piano, ran his fingers over the keys, struck a note which suggested another and attacked the waltz from "Faust." The appropriateness of it appealed to him. As he played he hummed. Then, passing upward with the score, he reached the "Salve Dimora," Faust's salute to Marguerite's home. But in the den where he sat the aria did not fit. He went back again to the waltz. Then, precisely as on the stage Marguerite appears, Marie entered.

Loftus jumped up, went to her, took her hand. It was trembling. He led her to a sofa, seating himself at her side, her hand still in his.

He looked at her. She had the prettiness and timidity of a kitten, a kitten's grace as well. Like a kitten, she could not have been vulgar or awkward had she tried. But association and environment had wrapped about her one of the invisible yet obvious mantles that differentiate class from class. Loftus was quite aware of that. He was, though, equally aware that love is a famous costumer. There are few mantles that it cannot remove and remake. That the girl loved him he knew. The tremor of her hand assured him more surely than words.

None the less he asked her. It seemed to him only civil. But she did not answer. The dinginess of the den oppressed him. It occurred to him that it might be oppressing her. Again he inquired. Only the tremor of the hand replied.

"Tell me," he repeated.

The girl disengaged her hand. She looked down and away.

"Won't you?" he insisted.

"I ought not to," she said at last.

"But why?"

With her parasol the girl poked at the carpet. "Because it is not right. It is not right that I should." But at once, with a little convulsive intake of the breath, she added, "Yet I do."

Then it seemed to her that the room was turning around, that the walls had receded, that there was but blankness. His lips were on hers. In their contact everything ceased to be save the consciousness of something so poignant, so new, that to still the pain of the joy of it she struggled to be free.

Kissing her again Loftus let her go. Dizzily she got from the sofa. The parasol had fallen. Her hat was awry. To straighten it she moved to a mirror. Her face was scarlet. Instantly fear possessed her, fear not of him but of herself. With uncertain fingers she tried to adjust the hat.

"I must go."

But Loftus came to her. Bending a bit he whispered in her ear: "Don't go – don't go ever."

Do what she might she could not manage with her hat. In the glass it was no longer that which she saw, nor her face, but an abyss, suddenly precipitate, that had opened there.

"No, don't go," Loftus was saying. "I love you and you love me."

It was, though, not love that was emotionalizing her then. It was fear. A fear of that abyss and of the lower depths beneath.

"Don't go," Loftus reiterated. "Don't, that is, if you do love me; and if you do, tell me, will you be my wife?"

At this, before her, in abrupt enchantment, the abyss disappeared. Where its depths had been were parterres of gems, slopes of asphodel, the gleam and brilliance of the gates of paradise.

"Your wife!" The wonder of it was in her voice and marveling eyes.

"Come." Taking her hand, Loftus led her to their former seat.

"But – "

"But what?"

"How can I be your wife? I am nobody."

"You are perfect. There is only one thing I fear – " Loftus hesitated. Nervously the girl looked at him.

"Only one," he continued. "I am not and never shall be half good enough for you."

"Oh!"

"Never half enough."

"Oh! How can you say that? It is not true. Could I care for you if it were?"

"And you do?"

"Don't you know it?"

"Then don't go, don't go from me ever."

"But – "

"Yes, I know. You are thinking of your father, of whom you have told me; perhaps, too, of my mother, of whom I told you. When she knows you and learns to love you, as she will, we can be married before all the world. We could now were I not dependent on her. Yet then, am I not dependent too on you? Come with me, and afterward – "

"I cannot," the girl cried; "it would kill my father."

"You have but to wire him that you have gone to be married, and it will be the truth."

"I cannot," the girl repeated. "Oh, what are you asking me to do?"

"I am asking you to be my wife. What is the ceremony to you? What are a few words mumbled by a hired priest? Love, love alone, is marriage."

"No, no. To you perhaps. But not to me."

"And the ceremony shall follow as soon as we can manage. Can you not trust me for that?"

"But – "

"Will you not trust me? If you are to put your whole life into my keeping you should at least begin by doing that."

The girl looked at the man and then away, at vistas he could not see, the winding slopes of asphodel, the sudden and precipitate abyss. Yet he spoke so fair, she told herself. Surely it was to the slopes he meant to take her, not to that blackening pit.

"Yet if you won't," Loftus continued, "it is best for both that we should part."

"For – for always?"

"Yes."

Just why he omitted to explain. But then there are explanations that explain nothing. Yet to her, for a moment, the threat was like a flash in darkness. For a moment she thought that she could not let him go. About her swarmed her dreams. Through them his kisses pierced. For a moment only. The flash had passed. She was in darkness again. Before her was the precipitate abyss. Shudderingly she drew from it.

But Loftus was very resolute. "If you will you have my promise."

For answer she looked at him, looked into his eyes, peered into them, deep down, striving to see what was there, trying to mirror her soul in his own.

"Before God and man I swear you shall be my wife."

At that, suddenly within her, fear melted away. If she had not seen his soul she had heard it. Where fear had been was faith. Dumb with the enchantment of a dream come true, she half arose. But his arms went about her and in them she lay like seaweed in the tide.

CHAPTER V

MARIE CHANGES HER NAME

GAY STREET knew Marie no more. Twenty-second street made her acquaintance. There, in the Arundel, an apartment house which is just around the corner from Gramercy Park, Loftus secured quarters for her.

These quarters, convenient for him, to her were temporary. She regarded them as a tent on the road to the slopes. Even in that light they were attractive. Though small, they were fastidiously furnished and formed what agents call a "bijou." Loftus, who had whims which the girl thought poetic, preferred "aviary." He preferred, too, that she should change her name. Durand seemed to him extremely plebeian. Mentally he cast about. Leroy suggested itself. It had in it an echo of France and also of old New York. As such it appealed to him and, therefore, to her. There and then Marie became known as Miss Leroy and, incidentally, very busy.

Every day Annette, Juliette and Marguerite had frocks for her to try on. There were hats to go with those frocks. There was lingerie to be selected, stuffs immaterial as moonbeams, cambrics that could be drawn through a ring. In addition, there was Signor Tambourini, who was to teach her how to handle her voice, and Baron Mesnilmontant, who was to teach her to handle a horse. When she so desired she had but to telephone and in five minutes there was a victoria at the door. For her sitting-room the florist who had so disturbed Mr. Cohen fetched flowers every other day.

In the flowers there were thorns, of course. Marie worried about many things, yet mainly because Mrs. Loftus had not yet "seen and learned to love her." Against that, though, there were difficulties. At first Mrs. Loftus had a dreadful cold. Then she had gone out of town to recuperate. This was very unfortunate, but like the quarters, only temporary. Loftus assured her of that. What he said was gospel.

The position in which the girl was placed worried her nevertheless. She knew it was wrong. But always she consoled herself with the belief that shortly it would be righted. On that belief she would have staked her soul. Had he not sworn it? Precisely how she would have acted had she realized that he had lied like a thief one may surmise and never know. The misery of life is the necessity of becoming accustomed to certain things. There are natures that adapt themselves more readily than others. There are also natures that cannot adapt themselves at all. Had Marie realized the truth it may be that she would have beaten her head against the walls. Yet it may also be that in the end adaptability would have come. But not happiness. Happiness consists, if it consists in anything, in being on good terms with oneself. Had Marie known the truth never could she have been that. In the circumstances it was considerate of Loftus to withhold it from her. But Loftus was a very considerate person. He hated tears, and scenes he frankly abominated.

Loftus, though considerate, was vain. It was regrettable to him that he could not parade Marie about. But social New York is severe. Among its members it refuses to countenance any open disregard for what's what. Though what occurs behind its back it is too high-bred to notice.

Loftus, unable to parade Marie about, paraded her in. To the aviary he brought men, some of whom having otherwise nothing to do with this drama need not delay its recital, but, among others, he brought Annandale and Orr.

Annandale, who could not keep a thing from Sylvia, told her about it. The story so shocked her that she first made a point of his not going there again and then debated whether she ought to recognize Loftus any more. In the process she confided the story to Fanny Price, who got suddenly red – a phenomenon rare with her and which annoyed her very much, so much that she bit her lip, desisting only through fear of making it bleed. What is the use of spoiling one's looks?

Marie, meanwhile, rather liked Annandale. She also rather liked Orr. One evening both were bidden to the aviary. At the bidding Annandale had hesitated. He did not wish to offend Sylvia. But

reflecting that she need never know, that, anyway, it was none of her business and, besides, what the deuce! he was not tied to her apron strings, was he? he concluded to go.

To that conclusion he was assisted by a cocktail. At the time he was in Madison Square, where on a ground floor he occupied a set of chambers, a suite of long, large rooms, sumptuously but soberly furnished with things massive and plain. Here he lived in much luxury and entire peace, save recently when he had lost a retainer and found a burglar. The memory of that intrusion recurring, he touched a bell.

A man appeared, smug and solemn, a new valet that he had got in to replace an old family servant whom an accident had eliminated.

"Harris, I forgot to ask. Did you get the revolver I told you to buy?"

"Yes, sir. A 32 calibre. It is in the pantry, sir."

"Put it in the drawer of my dressing-table."

"Yes, sir. Thank you, sir."

"And Harris, make me another cocktail." As the man was leaving Annandale called after him, "Make two."

It was these that assisted Annandale to his decision. A man of means, without immediate relatives, without ponderable cares, under their influence he felt rather free to do as he saw fit. The bidding to the aviary, telephoned for him to Harris, was for that evening. Yet that evening he was also expected in Irving Place. But Marie's invitation was for dinner, whereas he was not due at Sylvia's until later on.

It was not necessary, he told himself, to be in two places at once. He could dovetail one with another. Then presently, having dressed, he issued forth. But he had omitted to look at the evening papers. He was interested in certain stocks, and to learn what they were doing he stopped in at a neighboring club. There encountering men who asked him to drink, he accepted – though how much he was on the morrow unable to recall. Yet at the time the effect of the stuff, while insidious, was not apparent. When ultimately he reached the aviary he was feeling merely fit, a feeling which the dinner increased.

The dinner, perfect in itself, was perfectly served. The appointments were superior and the table a delight. Loftus when he did things did them well. Marie, in a creation of Paquin, imported by Annette, was a pleasure to behold. She had Orr at her right, Annandale at her left. Between them and Loftus were half a dozen other men. All were decorous and beautifully behaved. Except for the absence of feminine guests and one thing else, there was nothing to denote that they were not at the house of some smart young married woman. There was not a word uttered that could not have been bawled through a ballroom. There was not a suggestion not eminently discreet. In this respect only did the dinner differ from any other at which you might assist in the upper circles of New York life.

During the preliminary courses stocks were the sole topic. There was a boom on in the Street. Everybody was making money, including Marie, for whom Loftus had bought a few hundred A. O. T.

Orr alone had sold. "You are all mad," he declared. "The whole city is crazy. The country is on a debauch. Bulls cannot live forever. The corridas of the Street are just like those of Spain. It is the climax that differs. There the ring is swept by a supe, here it is struck by a crisis. That crisis may come next week, next month, next year. But it will come. It can no more desert the heavens of political economy than the stars can deviate from their course. It is not here yet, the bull is very lively, he is tossing everything sky high, but just when he is at his best and fiercest, just when you are shouting yourselves hoarse, the great espada, whose name is Time, with one swift thrust will transfix him. That is the fate of bulls."

"We are to be transfixed, are we?" said Annandale.

Marie looked over at Loftus. "Had I not better sell?"

Orr turned to her. "No; hold on and lose. A loss, particularly a fist loss, is always a good investment. Besides, if you will permit me to say, you should have no heed of such things. No, Miss

Leroy. You should content yourself with continuing to be. A woman who does only that acquires a charm almost supernatural. This was the occupation of the young goddesses of old Greece. How delightful they were! The rose was their model. They had learned the secret of its witchery. They charmed and did nothing. To charm is never easy, but to do nothing is the most difficult of all things, as it is, too, the most intellectual. Yes," Orr added after a moment, "it is also a thing which the rest of us sadly neglect."

"Oh, I say," Loftus threw in. "It is not so long ago that I heard you maintaining that only imbeciles were idle, that everybody should have something to do. You are rather contradictory, don't you think?"

"No, not a bit; and for the reason that then I was speaking of the generality of people, and now of the exceptional few. The idleness of the imbecile is always imbecilic, but the dreams of a poet have spells that enthrall. Try to fancy a busy poet. You cannot. It is an anomaly at which the imagination balks. By the same token you cannot fancy a useful Venus. You cannot fancy Psyche occupied with anything but love. Love is – or rather, should be – woman's sole occupation. The perfume of Eros should be about them all."

"The perfume of Eros!" muttered Annandale, to whom the phrase appealed. "The perfume of Eros!" he repeated and helped himself to wine. "I say, Orr, what the dickens is that?"

"Only the motor force of the universe."

"What?"

"Yes, indeed. It is the sublimate of love. And love is the source of human activity. It has no other. Without it civilization would retrograde and society return to the woods. Love is the basis of tragedy, the woof of romance, the incentive of commerce, of crime too, of heroism as well."

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