

Chambers Robert William

The Streets of Ascalon



Robert Chambers
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Robert W. Chambers

The Streets of Ascalon Episodes in the Unfinished Career of Richard Quarren, Esqre

CHAPTER I

It being rent day, and Saturday, the staff of the "Irish Legation," with the exception of Westguard, began to migrate uptown for the monthly conference, returning one by one from that mysterious financial jungle popularly known as "Downtown." As for Westguard, he had been in his apartment all day as usual. He worked where he resided.

A little before five o'clock John Desmond Lacy, Jr., came in, went directly to his rooms on the top floor, fished out a check-book, and tried to persuade himself that he had a pleasing balance at the bank – not because he was likely to have any balance either there or in his youthful brain, but because he *had* to have one somewhere. God being good to the Irish he found he had not overdrawn his account.

Roger O'Hara knocked on his door, later, and receiving no response called out: "Are you in there, Jack?"

"No," said Lacy, scratching away with his pen in passionate hopes of discovering a still bigger balance.

"Sportin' your oak, old Skeezicks?" inquired O'Hara, affectionately, delivering a kick at the door.

"Let me alone, you wild Irishman!" shouted Lacy. "If I can't dig out an extra hundred somewhere the State Superintendent is likely to sport my oak for keeps!"

A big, lumbering, broad-shouldered young fellow was coming up the stairs behind O'Hara, a blank book and some papers tucked under his arm, and O'Hara nodded to him and opened Mr. Lacy's door without further parleying.

"Here's Westguard, now," he said; "and as we can't shoot landlords in the close season we'll have to make arrangements to pay for bed and board, Jack."

Lacy glanced up from the sheet of figures before him, then waved his guests to seats and lighted a cigarette.

"Hooray," he remarked to Westguard; "I can draw you a check, Karl, and live to tell the tale." And he rose and gave his place at the desk to the man addressed, who seated himself heavily, as though tired.

"Before we go over the accounts," he began, "I want to say a word or two – "

"Hadn't you better wait till Quarren comes in?" interrupted O'Hara, smoking and stretching out his long legs.

"No; I want to talk to you two fellows first. And I'll tell you at once what's the matter: Quarren's check came back marked 'no funds.' This is the third time; and one of us ought to talk to him."

"It's only a slip," said Lacy – "it's the tendency in him that considers the lilies of the field – "

"It isn't square," said Westguard doggedly.

"Nonsense, Karl, Rix means to be square – "

"That's all right, too, but he isn't succeeding. It humiliates me; it hurts like hell to have to call his attention to such oversights."

"Oh, he's the gay tra-la-la," said O'Hara, indulgently; "do you think he bothers his elegant noddle about such trifles as checks? Besides he's almost as Irish as I am – God bless his mother and damn all landlords, Lester Caldera included."

"What does Quarren do with all his money, then?" mused Lacy – "soaking the public in Tappan-Zee Park and sitting up so close and snug to the rich and great!"

"It's his business," said Westguard, "to see that any check he draws is properly covered. Overdrafts may be funny in a woman, and in novels, but once is too often for any man. And this makes three times for Rix."

"Ah, thin, lave the poor la-ad be! ye could-blooded Sassenach!" said Lacy, pretending to the brogue. "Phwat the divil! – 'tis the cashier ye should blame whin Rix tells him to pay, an' he refuses to projuce the long-green wad!"

But Westguard, unsmiling, consulted his memoranda, then, holding up his sheet of figures:

"There's a quorum here," he said. "Rix can read this over when he comes in, if he likes. Here's the situation." And he read off the items of liabilities and assets, showing exactly, and to a penny, how the house had been run for the past month.

Everything was there, rent, servants' wages, repairs, provisions, bills for heating and lighting, extras, incidentals – all disbursements and receipts; then, pausing for comments, and hearing none, he closed the ledger with a sharp slap.

"The roof's leakin'," observed O'Hara without particular interest.

"Write to the landlord," said Lacy – "the stingy millionaire."

"He won't fix it," returned the other. "Did you ever hear of Lester Caldera spendin' a cent?"

"On himself, yes."

"That's not spendin'; it all goes inside or outside of him somewhere." He stretched his legs, crossed them, sucked on his empty pipe, and looked around at Westguard, who was still fussing over the figures.

"Are you goin' to the Wycherlys', Karl?"

"I think so."

"What costume?"

"None of your business," retorted Westguard pleasantly.

"I'm going as the family Banshee," observed Lacy.

"Did you ever hear me screech, Karl?" And, pointing his nose skyward and ruffling up his auburn hair he emitted a yell so unendurable that it brought Westguard to his feet, protesting.

"Shut up!" he said. "Do you want to have this house pinched, you crazy Milesian?"

"Get out of my rooms if you don't like it," said Lacy. "If I'm going to a masked dance as a Banshee I've got to practice screaming, haven't I?"

"I," said O'Hara, "am goin' as a bingle."

"What's a bingle?"

"Nobody knows. Neither do I; and it's killin' me to think up a costume... Dick Quarren's goin', isn't he?"

"Does he ever miss anything?" said Lacy.

"He's missing most of his life," said Westguard so sharply that the others opened their eyes.

A flush had settled under Westguard's cheek-bones; he was still jotting down figures with a flat silver pencil, but presently he looked up.

"It's the cold and uncomplimentary truth about Ricky," he said. "That set he runs with is making an utter fool of him."

"That set," repeated Lacy, grinning. "Why, we all have wealthy relatives in it – wealthy, charming, and respectable – h'm!"

"Which is why we're at liberty to curse it out," observed O'Hara, complacently. "We all know what it is. Karl is right. If a man is goin' to make anythin' of himself he can't run with that expensive pack. One may venture to visit the kennels now and then, and look over the new litters – perhaps do a little huntin' once in a while – just enough – so that the M. F. H. recognises your coat tails when

you come a cropper. But nix for wire or water! Me for the gate, please. Ah, do you think a *man* can stand what the papers call 'the realm of society' very long?"

"Rix is doing well."

Westguard said: "They've gradually been getting a strangle-hold on him. Women are crazy about that sort of man – with his good looks and good humour and his infernally easy way of obliging a hundred people at once... Look back a few years! Before he joined that whipper-snapper junior club he was full of decent ambition, full of go, unspoiled, fresh from college and as promising a youngster as anybody ever met. Where is his ambition now? What future has he? – except possibly to marry a million at forty-five and settle down with a comfortable grunt in the trough. It's coming, I tell you. Look what he was four years ago – a boy with clear eyes and a clear skin, frank, clean set, clean minded. Look at him now – sallow, wiry, unprofitably wise, rangé, disillusioned – oh, hell! they've mauled him to a shadow of a rag!"

Lacy lighted another cigarette and winked at O'Hara. "Karl's off again," he said. "Now we're going to get the Bible and the Sword for fair!"

"Doesn't everybody need them both!" said Westguard, smiling. Then his heavy features altered: "I care a good deal for Dick Quarren," he said. "That's why his loose and careless financial methods make me mad – that's why this loose and careless transformation of a decent, sincere, innocent boy into an experienced, easy-going, cynical man makes me tired. I've got to stand for it, I suppose, but I don't want to. He's a gifted, clever, lovable fellow, but he hasn't any money and any right to leisure, and these people are turning him into one of those dancing things that leads cotillions and arranges tableaux, and plays social diplomat and forgets secrets and has his pockets full of boudoir keys – good Lord! I hate to say it, but they're making a tame cat of him – they're using him ignobly, I tell you – and that's the truth – if he had a friend with courage enough to tell him! I've tried, but I can't talk this way to him."

There was a silence: then O'Hara crossed one lank leg over the other, gingerly, and contemplated his left shoe.

"Karl," he said, "character never really changes; it only develops. What's born in the cradle is lowered into the grave, as some Russian guy said. You're a writer, and you know what I say is true."

"Granted. But Quarren's character isn't developing; it's being stifled, strangled. He could have been a professional man – a lawyer, and a brilliant one – or an engineer, or a physician – any old thing. He's in real estate – if you can call it that. All right; why doesn't he *do* something in it? I'll tell you why," he added, angrily answering his own question; "these silly women are turning Quarren's ambition into laziness, his ideals into mockery, his convictions into cynicism –"

He stopped short. The door opened, and Quarren sauntered in.

"Couldn't help hearing part of your sermon, Karl," he said laughing. "Go ahead; I don't mind the Bible and the Sword – it's good for Jack Lacy, too – and that scoundrel O'Hara. Hit us again, old Ironsides. We're no good." And he sat down on the edge of Lacy's bed, and presently stretched out on it, gracefully, arms under his blond head.

"You've been catchin' it, Ricky," said O'Hara with a grin. "Karl says that fashionable society is a bally wampire a-gorgin' of hisself at the expense of bright young men like you. What's the come-back to that, sonny?"

"Thanks old fellow," said Quarren laughing and slightly lifting his head to look across at Westguard. "Go ahead and talk hell and brimstone. A fight is the only free luxury in the Irish Legation. I'll swat you with a pillow when I get mad enough."

Westguard bent his heavy head and looked down at the yellow check on the table.

"Rix," he said, "I've got to tell you that you have forgotten to make a deposit at your bank."

"Oh, Lord!" exclaimed Quarren with weary but amiable vexation – "that is the third time. What are you fellows going to do? Put me out of the Legation?"

"Why the devil are you so careless?" growled Westguard.

"I honestly don't know. I didn't suppose I was so short. I thought I had a balance."

"Rot! The minute a man begins to *think* he has a balance he knows damn well that he hasn't! I don't care, Rix – but, take it from me, you'll have a mortifying experience one of these days."

"I guess that's right," said Quarren with a kind of careless contrition. "I never seem to be more than a lap or two ahead of old lady Ruin. And I break the speed-laws, too."

"No youngster ever beat that old woman in a foot-race," observed Lacy. "Pay up and give her enough carfare to travel the other way; that's your only chance, Ricky."

"Oh, certainly. No fellow need be in debt if he pays up, you Hibernian idiot!"

"Do you want some money?" asked Westguard bluntly.

"Sure, Karl, oodles of it! But not from you, old chap."

"You know you can have it from me, too, don't you?" said O'Hara.

Quarren nodded cordially: "I'll get it; no fear. I'm terribly sorry about that check. But it will be all right to-morrow, Karl."

Lacy thought to himself with a grin: "He'll kill somebody at Auction to square himself – that's what Ricky means to do. God be good to the wealthy this winter night!"

O'Hara, lank, carefully scrubbed, carefully turned out as one of his own hunters, stood up with a yawn and glanced at his watch.

"Didn't somebody say somebody was comin' in to tea?" he asked generally.

"My cousin, Mrs. Wycherly," said Westguard – "and a friend of hers – I've forgotten –"

"Mrs. Leeds," observed Lacy. "And she is reputed to be a radiant peach. Did any of you fellows ever meet her in the old days?"

Nobody there had ever seen her.

"Did Mrs. Wycherly say she is a looker?" asked O'Hara, sceptically.

Westguard shrugged: "You know what to expect when one woman tells you that another woman is good-looking. Probably she has a face that would kill a caterpillar."

Quarren laughed lazily from the bed:

"I hear she's pretty. She's come out of the West. You know, of course, who she was."

"Reggie Leeds's wife," said O'Hara, slowly.

There was a silence. Perhaps the men were thinking of the late Reginald Leeds, and of the deep damnation of his taking off.

"Have you never seen her?" asked Lacy.

"Nobody ever has. She's never before been here," said Quarren, yawning.

"Then come down and set the kettle on, Ricky. She may be the peachiest kind of a peach in a special crate directed to your address and marked 'Perishable! Rush! With care!' So we'll have to be very careful in rushing her –"

"Oh, for Heaven's sake stop that lady-patter," protested O'Hara, linking his arm in Lacy's and sauntering toward the door. "That sort of conversation is Ricky's line of tea-talk. You'll reduce him to a pitiable silence if you take away his only asset."

Westguard gathered up his papers, pausing a moment at the doorway:

"Coming?" he asked briefly of Quarren who was laughing.

"Certainly he's coming," said Lacy returning and attempting to drag him from the bed. "Come on, you tea-cup-rattling, macaroon-crunching, caste-smitten, fashion-bitten Arbiter Elegantiarum!"

They fought for a moment, then Lacy staggered back under repeated wallops from one of his own pillows, and presently retired to his bath-room to brush his thick red hair. This hair was his pride and sorrow: it defied him in a brilliant cowlick until plastered flat with water. However, well soaked, his hair darkened to what he considered a chestnut colour. And that made him very proud.

When he had soaked and subdued his ruddy locks he came out to where Westguard still stood.

"Are you coming, Rix?" demanded the latter again.

"Not unless you particularly want me," returned Quarren, yawning amiably. "I could take a nap if that red-headed Mick would get out of here."

Westguard said: "Suit yourself," and followed Lacy and O'Hara down the stairs.

The two latter young fellows turned aside into O'Hara's apartments to further remake a killing and deadly toilet. Westguard continued on to the first floor which he inhabited, and where he found a Japanese servant already preparing the tea paraphernalia. A few minutes later Mrs. Wycherly arrived with Mrs. Leeds.

All women, experienced or otherwise, never quite lose their curiosity concerning a bachelor's quarters. The haunts of men interest woman, fascinating the married as well as the unwedded. Deep in their gentle souls they know that the most luxurious masculine abode could easily be made twice as comfortable by the kindly advice of any woman. Toleration, curiosity, sympathy are the emotions which stir feminine hearts when inspecting the solitary lair of the human male.

"So these are the new rooms," said Molly Wycherly, patronisingly, after O'Hara and Lacy had appeared and everybody had been presented to everybody else. "Strelsa, do look at those early Edwards prints! It's utterly impossible to find any of them now for sale anywhere."

Strelsa Leeds looked up at the Botticelli Madonna and at Madame Royale; and the three men looked at her as though hypnotised.

So this was Reginald Leeds's wife – this distractingly pretty woman – even yet scarcely more than a girl – with her delicate colour and vivid lips and unspoiled eyes – dark eyes – a kind of purplish gray, very purely and exquisitely shaped. But in their grayish-violet depths there was murder. And the assassination of Lacy and O'Hara had already been accomplished.

Her hat, gown, gloves, furs were black – as though the tragic shadow of two years ago still fell across her slender body.

She looked around at the room; Molly Wycherly, pouring tea, nodded to Westguard, and he handed the cup to Mrs. Leeds.

She said, smilingly: "And – do you three unprotected men live in this big house all by yourselves?"

"There are four of us in the Legation," said Lacy, "and several servants to beat off the suffragettes who become enamoured of us."

"The —*legation*?" she repeated, amused at the term.

"Our friends call this house the Irish Legation," he explained. "We're all Irish by descent except Westguard who's a Sassenach – and Dick Quarren, who is only half Irish."

"And who is Dick Quarren?" she asked innocently.

"Oh, Strelsa!" cautioned Molly Wycherly – "you really mustn't argue yourself unknown."

"But I am unknown," insisted the girl, laughing and looking at the men in turn with an engaging candour that bowled them over again, one by one. "I *don't* know who Mr. Quarren is, so why not admit it? *Is* he such a very wonderful personage, Mr. Lacy?"

"Not at all, Mrs. Leeds. He and I share the top floor of the Legation. We are, as a matter of record, the two financial wrecks of this establishment, so naturally we go to the garret. Poverty is my only distinction; Mr. Quarren, however, also leads the grand march at Lyric Hall now and then I believe – "

"What is Lyric Hall? Ought I to know?"

Everybody was laughing, and Molly Wycherly said:

"Richard Quarren, known variously as Rix, Ricky, and Dick Quarren, is an exceedingly popular and indispensable young man in this town. You'll meet him, Strelsa, and probably adore him. We all do."

"Must I wait very long?" asked Strelsa, laughing. "I'd like to have the adoration begin."

Lacy said to O'Hara: "Go up and pull that pitiable dub off the bed, Roger. The lady wishes to inspect him."

"That's not very civil of Rix," said Mrs. Wycherly; "but I fancy I know why he requires slumber." She added, glancing around mischievously at the three men who were all looking languishingly at Mrs. Leeds: "He'll be sorry when you three gentlemen describe Strelsa to him. I can prophesy that much."

"Certainly," said Lacy, airily; "we're all at Mrs. Leeds's feet! Even the blind bat of Drumgool could see that! So why deny it?"

"You're not denying it, Mr. Lacy," said Strelsa, laughing. "But I realise perfectly that I am in the Irish Legation. So I shall carefully salt everything you say to me."

"If you think *I've* kissed the blessed pebble you ought to listen to that other bankrupt upstairs," said Lacy.

"As far as pretty speeches are concerned you seem to be perfectly solvent," said Strelsa gaily, looking around her at the various adornments of this masculine abode. "I wonder where you dine," she added with curiosity unabashed.

"We've a fine dining-room below," he said proudly, "haven't we, Roger? And as soon as Dick Quarren and I are sufficiently solvent to warrant it, the Legation is going to give a series of brilliant banquets; will you come, Mrs. Leeds?"

"When you are solvent, perhaps," said Strelsa, smiling.

"Westguard and I will give you a banquet at an hour's notice," said O'Hara, eagerly. "Will you accept?"

"Such overwhelming offers of hospitality!" she protested. "I had believed the contrary about New Yorkers. You see I've just emerged from the West, and I don't really know what to think of such bewildering cordiality."

"Karl," said Mrs. Wycherly, "are you going to show us over the house? If you are we must hurry, as Strelsa and I are to decorate the Calderas' box this evening, and it takes me an hour to paint my face." She turned a fresh, winsome countenance to Westguard, who laughed, rose, and took his pretty cousin by the hand.

Under triple escort Mrs. Wycherly and Mrs. Leeds examined the Legation from kitchen to garret – and Strelsa, inadvertently glancing in at a room just as Westguard started to close the door, caught sight of a recumbent shape on a bed – just a glimpse of a blond, symmetrical head and a well-coupled figure, graceful even in the careless relaxation of sleep.

Westguard asked her pardon: "That's Quarren. He was probably up till daylight."

"He was," said Molly Wycherly; "and by the same token so was I. Thank you so much, Karl... Thank you, Mr. O'Hara – and you, too, Jack!" – offering her hand – "We've had a splendid party... Strelsa, we really ought to go at once – "

"Will you come again?"

"We will come again if you ask us," said Strelsa; "we're perfectly fascinated by the Legation."

"And its personnel?" hinted Lacy. "Do you like us, Mrs. Leeds?"

"I've only seen three of you," parried Strelsa, much amused.

"We refuse to commit ourselves," said Molly. "Good-bye. I suppose you all are coming to my house-warming."

They all looked at Mrs. Leeds and said that they were coming – said so fervently.

Molly laughed: she had no envy in her make-up, perhaps because she was too pretty herself.

"Oh, yes," she said, replying to their unasked questions, "Mrs. Leeds will be there – and I plainly see *my* miserable fate. But what can a wretched woman expect from the Irish? Not constancy. Strelsa, take warning. They loved me once!"

After Westguard had put them in their limousine, he came back to find Quarren in his sitting-room, wearing a dressing-gown, and Lacy madly detailing to him the charms of Strelsa Leeds:

"Take it from me, Dicky, she's some queen! You didn't miss a thing but the prettiest woman in town! And there's a *something* about her – a kind of a sort of a something – "

"You appear to be in love, dear friend," observed Quarren kindly.

"I am. So's every man here who met her. We don't deny it! We glory in our fall! What was that costume of hers, Karl? Mourning?"

"Fancy a glorious creature like her wearin' black for that nasty little cad," observed O'Hara disgustedly.

"It's probably fashion, not grief," remarked Westguard.

"I guess it's nix for the weeps," said O'Hara – "after all she probably went through with Reggie Leeds, I fancy she had no tears left over."

"I want to talk," cried Lacy; "I want to tell Rix what he missed. I'd got as far as her gown, I think –"

"Go on," smiled Quarren.

"Anyway," said Lacy, "she wore a sort of mourning as far as her veil went, and her furs and gown and gloves were black, and her purse was gun-metal and black opals – rather brisk? Yes? – And all the dingles on her were gun-metal – everything black and sober – and that ruddy gold head – and – those eyes! – a kind of a purple-gray, Ricky, slanting a little, with long black lashes – I noticed 'em – and her lips were very vivid – not paint, but a kind of noticeably healthy scarlet – and that straight nose – and the fresh fragrant youth of her –"

"For Heaven's sake, Jack –"

"Sure. I'm through with 'em all. I'm wise to the sex. That was merely a word picture. I'm talking like a writer, that's all. That's how you boobs talk, isn't it, Karl?"

"Always," said Westguard gravely.

"Me for Mrs. Leeds," remarked O'Hara frankly. "I'd ask her to marry me on the drop of a hat."

"Well, I'll drop no hat for *you*!" said Lacy. "And there'll be plenty of lunatics in this town who'll go madder than you or me before they forget Mrs. Leeds. Wait! Town is going to sit up and take notice when this new planet swims into its social ken. How's that epigram, Karl?"

Westguard said thoughtfully: "There'll be notoriety, too, I'm afraid. If nobody knows her everybody knows about that wretched boy she married."

Quarren added: "I have always understood that the girl did not want to marry him. It was her mother's doings."

O'Hara scowled. "I also have heard that the mother engineered it... What was Mrs. Leeds's name? I forget –"

"Strelsa Lanark," said Quarren who never forgot anything.

"Ugh," grunted Westguard. "Fancy a mother throwing her daughter at the head of a boy like Reggie Leeds! – as vicious and unclean a little whelp as ever – Oh, what's the use? – and *de mortuis nihil* – et cetera, cock-a-doodle-do!"

"That poor girl had two entire years of him," observed Lacy. "She doesn't look more than twenty now – and he's been in – been dead two years. Good Heavens! What a child she must have been when she married him!"

Westguard nodded: "She had two years of him – and I suppose he seldom drew a perfectly sober breath... He dragged her all over the world with him – she standing for his rotten behaviour, trying to play the game with the cards hopelessly stacked against her. Vincent Wier met them in Naples; Mallison ran across them in Egypt; so did Lydon in Vienna. They said it was heartbreaking to see her trying to keep up appearances – trying to smile under his nagging or his drunken insults in public places. Lydon told me that she behaved like a brick – stuck to Reggie, tried to shield him, excuse him, make something out of the miserable pup who was doing his best to drag her to his own level and deprave her. But I guess she was too young or too unhappy or something, because there's no depravity in the girl who was here a few minutes ago. I'll swear to that."

After a moment Lacy said: "Well, he got his at last!"

"What was comin' to him," added O'Hara, with satisfaction.

Lacy added, curiously: "*How* can a man misbehave when he has such a woman for a wife?"

"I wonder," observed Quarren, "how many solid citizens read the account in the papers and remained scared longer than six weeks?"

"Lord help the wives of men," growled Westguard... "If any of you fellows are dressing for dinner you'd better be about it... Wait a moment, Rix!" – as Quarren, the last to leave, was already passing the threshold.

The young fellow turned, smiling: the others went on; Westguard stood silent for a moment, then:

"You're about the only man I care for very much," he said bluntly. "If I am continually giving you the Bible and the Sword it's the best I have to give."

Quarren replied laughingly.

"Don't worry, old fellow. I take what you say all right. And I really mean to cut out a lot of fussing and begin to hustle... Only, isn't it a wise thing to keep next to possible clients?"

"The people you train with don't buy lots in Tappan-Zee Park."

"But I may induce them to go into more fashionable enterprises – "

"Not they! The eagle yells on every dollar they finger. If there's any bleeding to be done they'll do it, my son."

"Lester Caldera has already asked me about acreage in Westchester."

"Did he do more than ask?"

"No."

"Did you charge him for the consultation?"

"Of course not."

"Then he got your professional opinion for nothing."

"But he, or others, may try to assemble several farms – "

"Why don't they then? – instead of dragging you about at their heels from house to house, from card-room to ball-room, from café to opera, from one week-end to the next! – robbing you of time, of leisure, of opportunity, of ambition – spoiling you – making a bally monkey of you! You're always in some fat woman's opera box or on some fat man's yacht or coach, or doing some damn thing – with your name figuring in everything from Newport to Hot Springs – and – and how can you ever turn into anything except a tame cat!"

Quarren's face reddened slightly.

"I'd be perfectly willing to sit in an office all day and all night if anybody would give me any business. But what's the use of chewing pencils and watching traffic on Forty-second Street?"

"Then go into another business!"

"I haven't any money."

"I'll lend it to you!"

"I can't risk *your* money, Karl. I'm too uncertain of myself. If anybody else offered to stake me I'd try the gamble." ... He looked up at Westguard, ashamed, troubled, and showing it like a boy. "I'm afraid I don't amount to anything, Karl. I'm afraid I'm no good except in the kind of thing I seem to have a talent for."

"Fetching and carrying for the fashionable and wealthy," sneered Westguard.

Quarren's face flushed again: "I suppose that's it."

Westguard glared at him: "I wish I could shake it out of you!"

"I guess the poison's there," said Quarren in a low voice. "The worst of it is I like it – except when I understand your contempt."

"You *like* to fetch and carry and go about with your pocket full of boudoir keys!"

"People give me as much as I give them."

"They don't!" said the other angrily. "They've taken a decent fellow and put him in livery!"

Quarren bit his lip as the blood leaped to his face.

"Don't talk that way, Karl," he said quietly. "Even you have no business to take that tone with me."

There was a silence. After a few moments Westguard came over and held out his hand. Quarren took it, looked at him.

"I tell you," he said, "there's nothing to me. It's your kindness, Karl, that sees in me possibilities that never were."

"They're there. I'll do my duty almost to the point of breaking our friendship. But – I'll have to stop short of that point."

A quick smile came over Quarren's face, gay, affectionate:

"You couldn't do that, Karl... And don't worry. I'll cut out a lot of frills and try to do things that are worth while. I mean it, really. Don't worry, old fellow."

"All right," said Westguard, smiling.

CHAPTER II

A masked dance, which for so long has been out of fashion in the world that pretends to it, was the experiment selected by Molly Wycherly for the warming up of her new house on Park Avenue.

The snowy avenue for blocks was a mass of motors and carriages; a platoon of police took charge of the vehicular mess. Outside of the storm-coated lines the penniless world of shreds and patches craned a thousand necks as the glittering costumes passed from brougham and limousine under the awnings into the great house.

Already in the new ball-room, along the edges of the whirl, masqueraders in tumultuous throngs were crowding forward to watch the dancers or drifting into the eddies and set-backs where ranks of overloaded gilt chairs creaked under jewelled dowagers, and where rickety old beaux impersonated tinselled courtiers on wavering but devoted legs.

Aloft in their rococo sky gallery a popular orchestra fiddled frenziedly; the great curtains of living green set with thousands of gardenias swayed in the air currents like Chinese tapestries; a harmonious tumult swept the big new ball-room from end to end – a composite uproar in which were mingled the rushing noise of silk, clatter of sole and heel, laughter and cries of capering maskers gathered from the four quarters of fashionable Gath to grace the opening of the House of Wycherly. They were all there, dowager, matron, débutante, old beaux, young gallant, dancing, laughing, coquetting, flirting. Young eyes mocked the masked eyes that wooed them; adolescence tormented maturity; the toothless ogled the toothsome. Unmasking alone could set right this topsy-turvy world of carnival.

A sinuous Harlequin, his skin-tight lozenge-patterned dress shimmering like the red and gold skin of a Malay snake, came weaving his way through the edges of the maelstrom, his eyes under the black half-mask glittering maliciously at the victims of his lathe-sword. With it he recklessly slapped whatever tempted him, patting gently the rounded arms and shoulders of nymph and shepherdess, using more vigour on the plump contours of fat and elderly courtiers, spinning on the points of his pump-toes, his limber lathe-sword curved in both hands above his head, leaping lithely over a chair here and there, and landing always as lightly as a cat on silent feet – a wiry, symmetrical figure under the rakish bi-corne, instinct with mischief and grace infernal.

Encountering a burly masker dressed like one of Cromwell's ponderous Ironsides, he hit him a resounding whack over his aluminum cuirass, and whispered:

"That Ironside rig doesn't conceal you: it reveals you, Karl! Out with your Bible and your Sword and preach the wrath to come!"

"It will come all right," said Westguard. "Do you know how many hundred thousand dollars are wasted here to-night?.. And yesterday a woman died of hunger in Carmine Street. Don't worry about the wrath of God as long as people die of cold and hunger in the streets of Ascalon."

"That's not as bad as dying of inanition – which would happen to the majority here if they didn't have things like this to amuse 'em. For decency's sake, Karl, pity the perplexities of the rich for a change!"

Westguard grunted something under his casque; then, adjusting his aluminum mask:

"Are you having a good time, Dicky? I suppose you are."

"Oh, *I'm* gay enough," returned the Harlequin airily – "but there's never much genuine gaiety among the overfed." And he slapped a passing gallant with his wooden sword, spun around on his toes, bent over gracefully and stood on his hands, legs twinkling above him in the air. Then, with a bound he was on his nimble feet again, and, linking his arm in the arm of the Cromwellian trooper, strolled along the ranks of fanning dowagers, glancing amiably into their masked faces.

"Same old battle-line," he observed to his companion – "their jewels give them away. Same old tiaras, same old ladies – all fat, all fifty, all fanning away like the damned. Your aunt has on about a ton of emeralds. I think she does it for the purpose of banting, don't you, Karl – "

The uproar drowned his voice: Westguard, colossal in his armour, gazed gloomily around at the gorgeous spectacle for which his cousin Molly Wycherly was responsible.

"It's monkey-shines like this that breed anarchists," he growled. "Did you notice that rubbering crowd outside the police lines in the snow? Molly and Jim ought to see it."

"Oh, cut it out, Karl," retorted the Harlequin gaily; "there'll be rich and poor in the world as long as the bally old show runs – there'll be reserved seats and gallery seats and standing room only, and ninety-nine percent of the world cooling its shabby heels outside."

"I don't care to discuss the problem with *you*," observed Westguard. After a moment he added: "I'm going to dance once or twice and get out... I suppose you'll flit about doing the agreeable and fashionable until daylight."

"I suppose so," said the Harlequin, tranquilly. "Why not? Also *you* ought to find material here for one of your novels."

"A man doesn't have to hunt for material. It's in his bedroom when he wakes; it's all around him all day long. There's no more here than there is outside in the snow; and no less... But dancing all night isn't going to help *your* business, Ricky."

"It won't hurt any business I'm likely to do."

"Isn't your Tappan-Zee Park panning out?"

"Fizzling out. Nobody's bought any building sites."

"Why not?"

"How the deuce do I know, Karl! I don't want to talk business, here – "

He ceased speaking as three or four white masked Bacchantes in fluttering raiment came dancing by to the wild music of Philemon and Baucis. Shaking their be-ribboned tambourines, flowery garlands and lynx-skins flying from their shoulders, they sped away on fleet little feet, hotly pursued by adorers.

"Come on," said the Harlequin briskly; "I think one of those skylarkers ought to prove amusing! Shall I catch you one?"

But he found no encouragement in the swift courtship he attempted; for the Bacchantes, loudly protesting at his interference, banged him over his head and shoulders with their resounding tambourines and danced away unheeding his blandishments.

"Flappers," observed a painted and powdered clown whose voice betrayed him as O'Hara; "this town is overstocked with fudge-fed broilers. They're always playin' about under foot, spoilin' your huntin'; and if you touch 'em they ki-yi no end."

"I suppose you're looking for Mrs. Leeds," said Westguard, smiling.

"I fancy every man here is doin' the same thing," replied the clown. "What's her costume? Do you know, Ironsides?"

"I wouldn't tell you if I did," said Westguard frankly.

The Harlequin shrugged.

"This world," he remarked, "is principally encumbered with women, and naturally a man supposes the choice is unlimited. But as you live to drift from girl to girl you'll discover that there are just two kinds; the kind you can kiss and the kind you can't. So finally you marry the latter. Does Mrs. Leeds flirt?"

"Will a fish swim?" rejoined the clown. "You bet she will flirt. Haven't you met her?"

"I? No," said the Harlequin carelessly. Which secretly amused both Westguard and O'Hara, for it had been whispered about that the new beauty not only had taken no pains to meet Quarren, but had pointedly ignored an opportunity when the choice lay with her, remarking that dancing men were one of the social necessities which everybody took for granted – like flowers and champagne.

And the comment had been carried straight to Quarren, who had laughed at the time – and had never forgotten it, nor the apparently causeless contempt that evidently had inspired it.

The clown brandished his bunch of toy balloons, and gazed about him:

"Anybody who likes can go and tell Mrs. Leeds that I'm her declared suitor. I don't care who knows it. I'm foolish about her. She's different from any woman I ever saw. And if I don't find her pretty soon I'll smash every balloon over your head, Ricky!"

The Harlequin laughed. "Women," he said, "are cut out in various and amusing patterns like animal crackers, but the fundamental paste never varies, and the same pastry cook seasoned it."

"That's a sickly and degenerate sentiment," observed Westguard.

"You might say that about the unfledged," added O'Hara – "like those kittenish Bacchantes. Winifred Miller and the youngest Vernon girl were two of those Flappers, I think. But there's no real jollity among the satiated," he added despondently. "A mask, a hungry stomach, and empty pockets are the proper ingredients for gaiety – take it from me, Karl." And he wandered off, beating everybody with his bunch of toy balloons.

Quarren leaped to the seat of a chair and squatted there drawing his shimmering legs up under him like a great jewelled spider.

"Bet you ten that the voluminous domino yonder envelops my aunt, Mrs. Sprowl," whispered Westguard.

"You're betting on a certainty and a fat ankle."

"Sure. I've seen her ankles going upstairs too often... What the devil is the old lady wearing under that domino?"

"Wait till you see her later," said Quarren, delightedly. "She has come as Brunhilda."

"I don't want to see three hundred pounds of relative as Brunhilda," growled Westguard.

"You will, to-morrow. She's given her photograph to a *Herald* man."

"What did you let her do it for?" demanded Westguard wrathfully.

"Could I help it?"

"You could have stopped her. She thinks your opinion is the last lisp in fashionable art problems."

"There are some things you can't tell a woman," said Quarren. "One of 'em concerns her weight."

"Are you afraid of Mrs. Sprowl?"

The Harlequin laughed:

"Where would I be if I incurred your aunt's displeasure, dear friend?"

"Out of the monkey house for good I suppose," admitted Westguard. "Lord, Ricky, what a lot you have had to swallow for the sake of staying put among these people!"

Quarren sat meditating under his mask, cross-legged, twirling his sword, the crash of the floor orchestra dinning in his close-set ears.

"Yes," he said without resentment, "I've endured my share. That's one reason why I don't want to let several years of humiliation go for nothing. I've earned whatever place I have. And I mean to keep it."

Westguard turned on him half angrily, hesitated, then remained silent. What was the use? If Quarren had not been guilty of actually fawning, toadying, currying favour, he had certainly permitted himself to be rudely used. He had learned very thoroughly his art in the school of the courtier – learned how and when to be blind, silent, deaf; how to offer, how to yield, when and how to demand and exact. Which, to Westguard, meant the prostitution of intelligence. And he loathed the game like a man who is free to play it if he cares to. Of those who are denied participation, few really hate it.

But he said nothing more; and the Harlequin, indolently stretching his glittering limbs, dropped a light hand on Westguard's cuirassed shoulder:

"Don't be forever spoiling things for me, Karl. I really do enjoy the game as it lies."

"It *does* lie – that is the trouble, Rix."

"I can't afford to criticise it... Listen; I'm a mediocre man; I'd never count among real men. I count in the set which I amuse and which accepts me. Let me enjoy it, can't you?"

An aged dandy, masked, painted, wizened, and dressed like Henri II, tottered by with a young girl on his arm, his shrill, falsetto giggle piercing the racket around them.

"Do you wish to live to be like that?" asked Westguard sharply.

"Oh, I'll die long before that," said Quarren cheerfully, and leaped lightly to his feet. "I shall now accomplish a little dancing," he said, pointing with his wooden sword at the tossing throng. "Venus send me a pretty married woman who really loves her husband... By Bacchus! Those dancers are going it! Come on, Karl. Leave us foot it!"

Many maskers were throwing confetti now: multi-tinted serpents shot out across the clamorous gulf; bunches of roses flung high, rising in swift arcs of flight, crossed and recrossed. All along the edges of the dance, like froth and autumn leaves cast up from a whirlpool, fluffy feminine derelicts and gorgeous masculine escorts were flung pell-mell out of the maelstrom and left stranded or drifting breathless among the eddies setting in toward the supper-room.

Suddenly, as the Harlequin bent forward to plunge into the crush, the very centre of the whirlpool parted, and out of it floated a fluttering, jingling, dazzling figure all gold – slender, bare-armed and bare of throat and shoulders, auriferous, scintillating from crown to ankle – for her sleeveless tabard was cloth-of-gold, and her mask was gold; so were her jewelled shoes and the gemmed fillet that bound her locks; and her thick hair clustering against her cheeks had the lustre of precious metal.

Jingling, fluttering, gems clashing musically, the Byzantine dancer, besieged by adorers, deftly evaded their pressing gallantries – evaded the Harlequin, too, with laughing mockery, skilfully disengaging herself from the throng of suitors stumbling around her, crowded and buffeted on every side.

After her like a flash sped Harlequin: for an instant, just ahead of him, she appeared in plain sight, glimmering brightly against the green and swaying tapestry of living leaves and flowers, then even as her pursuers looked at her, she vanished before their very eyes.

They ran about distractedly hunting for her, Turk, Drum Major, Indian Chief, and Charles the First, then reluctantly gave up the quest and drifted off to seek for another ideal. All women are ideal under the piquant promise of the mask.

A pretty shepherdess, lingering near, whispered close to Quarren's shoulder behind her fan:

"Check to you, Harlequin! That golden dancer was the only girl in town who hasn't taken any pains to meet you!"

He turned his head, warily, divining Molly Wycherly under the disguise, realising, too, that she recognised him.

"You'll never find her now," laughed the shepherdess. "Besides she does not care a rap about meeting a mere Harlequin. It's refreshing to see you so thoroughly snubbed once in a while." And she danced gaily away, arms akimbo, her garlanded crook over her shoulder; and her taunting laughter floated back to him where he stood irresolute, wondering how the golden dancer could have so completely vanished.

Suddenly he recollected going over the house before its completion with Jim Wycherly, who had been his own architect, and the memory of a certain peculiarity in the construction of the ball-room flashed into his mind. The only possible explanation for her disappearance was that somebody had pointed out to her the low door behind the third pillar, and she was now in the gilded swallow's-nest aloft.

It was a whim of Wycherly – this concealed stair – he recalled it perfectly now – and, parting the living tapestry of blossoms, he laid his hand on the ivory and gilded paneling, pressing the heart

of one carved rose after another, until with a click! a tiny door swung inward, revealing a narrow spiral of stairs, lighted rosily by electricity.

He stepped inside, closed the door, and listened, then mounted noiselessly. Half way up he caught the aroma of a cigarette; and, a second later he stepped out onto a tiny latticed balcony, completely screened.

The golden dancer, who evidently had been gazing down on the carnival scene below from behind the lattice, whirled around to confront him in a little flurry of cigarette smoke.

For a moment they faced each other, then:

"How did you know where to find me, Harlequin?"

"I'd have died if I hadn't found you, fairest, loveliest – "

"That is no answer! Answer me!"

"Why did you flee?" he asked. "Answer that, first."

She glanced at her cigarette and shrugged her shoulders:

"You see why I fled, don't you? Now answer me."

The Harlequin presented the hilt of his sword which was set with a tiny mirror.

"You see why I fled after you," he said, "don't you?"

"All the same," she insisted, smilingly, "I have been informed on excellent authority that I am the only one, except the family, who knows of this balcony. And here comes a Harlequin blundering in! *You* are not Mr. Wycherly; and you're certainly not Molly."

"Alas! My ultimate ends are not as shapely."

"Then who are you?" She added, laughing: "They're shapely enough, too."

"I am only a poor wandering, love-smitten Harlequin – " he said, "scorned, despised, and mocked by beauty – "

"Love-smitten?" she repeated.

"Can you doubt it, now?"

She laughed gaily and leaned back against the balcony's velvet rail:

"You lose no time in declaring yourself, do you, Harlequin? – that is, if you are hinting that *I* have smitten you with the pretty passion."

"Through and through, beautiful dancer – "

"How do you know that I am beautiful under this mask?"

"I know many things. That's my compensation for being only a poor mountebank of a Harlequin – magic penetration – the clairvoyance of radium."

"Did you expect to find *me* at the top of those cork-screw stairs?"

"I did."

"Why?"

"Inference. Every toad hides a jewel in its head. So I argued that somewhere in the ugliness of darkest Philistia a gem must be hidden; and I've searched for years – up and down throughout the haunts of men from Gath to Ascalon. And – behold! My quest is ended at your pretty feet! – Rose-Diamond of the World!"

He sank lithely on one knee; she laughed deliciously, looking down at his masked face.

"Who are you, Harlequin? – whose wits and legs seem to be equally supple and symmetrical?"

"Tell it not in Gath; Publish it not in the streets of Ascalon; I am that man for whom you were destined before either you or I were born. Are you frightened?"

The Byzantine dancer laughed and shook her head till all the golden metal on her was set chiming.

He said, still on one knee at her feet:

"Exquisite phantom of an Empire dead, from what emblazoned sarcophagus have you danced forth across our modern oceans to bewitch the Philistia of to-day? Who clothed you in scarlet delicately? Who put ornaments of gold upon your apparel – "

"You court me with Scripture as smoothly as Heaven's great Enemy," she said – "and to your own ends, as does he. Are you leagued with him, O agile and intrusive Harlequin, to steal away my peace of mind?"

Lithely, silently he leaped up to the balustrade and, gathering his ankles under him, squatted there, cross-legged, peering sideways at her through the slanting eye-holes.

"If that screen behind you gives way," she warned him, "you will have accomplished your last harlequinade."

He glanced coolly over his shoulder:

"How far is it to the floor below, do you suppose?"

"Far enough to make a good harlequin out of a live one," she said... "Please be careful; I really mean it."

"Child," he said solemnly, "do you suppose that I mind falling a hundred feet or so on my head? I've already fallen infinitely farther than that this evening."

"And it didn't kill you?" she exclaimed, clasping her hands, dramatically.

"No. Because our destiny must first be accomplished before I die."

"Ours?"

"Yours and mine, pretty dancer! I've already fulfilled *my* destiny by falling in love with you at first sight. That was a long fall, wasn't it?"

"Very. Am I to fulfil mine in a similar manner?"

"You are."

"Will it – kill me, do you think?"

"I don't think so. Try it."

"Will it hurt? – this terrible fall? And how far must I descend to fall in love with you?"

"Sometimes falling in love does hurt," he said gravely, "when the fall is a long one."

"Is this to be a long one?"

"You may think so."

"Then I decline to tumble. Please go somewhere about your business, Master Harlequin. I'm inclined to like you."

"Dancer, my life's business is wherever you happen to be."

"Why are you so sure?"

"Magic," he said seriously. "I deal in it."

"Wonderful! Your accomplishments overwhelm me. Perhaps, through the aid of magic, you can even tell me who I am!"

"I think I can."

"Is that another threat of magic?"

"It's a bet, too, if you like."

"Are you offering to bet me that, before I unmask, you will be able to discover who I am?"

"Yes. Will you make it a wager?" She stood, silent, irresolute, cautious but curious; then:

"Do you mean that you can find out who *I am*? Now? Here in this balcony?"

"Certainly."

"That is sheer nonsense," she said with decision. "I'll bet you anything you like."

"What stakes?"

"Why there's nothing to bet except the usual, is there?"

"You mean flowers, gloves, stockings, bon-bons?"

"Yes."

The Harlequin, smiling at her askance, drew from the hilt of his lathe-sword a fresh cigarette, lighted it, looked across at the level chandelier, and sent a ring of smoke toward the twinkling wilderness of prisms hanging in mid-air.

"Let's be original or perish," he said. "I'll bet you a day out of my life against a day out of yours that I discover who you are in ten minutes."

"I won't accept such a silly wager! What would you do with me for a day?"

The Harlequin bent his masked head. Over his body the lozenges of scarlet and gold slid crinkling as though with suppressed and serpentine mirth.

"*What* are you laughing at?" she demanded half vexed, half amused.

"Your fears, pretty dancer."

"I am *not* afraid!"

"Very well. Prove it! I have offered to bet you a day out of my life that I'll tell you who you are. Are you afraid to wager a day out of yours that I can't do it?"

She shook her head so that the burnished locks clustered against her cheeks, and all over her slim figure the jingling gold rang melodiously.

"I haven't long to live," she observed. "A day out of life is too much to risk."

"Why don't you think that you have long to live?"

"I haven't. I know it."

"*How* do you know?"

"I just know... Besides, I don't wish to live very long."

"You don't wish to live long?"

"Only as long as I'm young enough to be forgetful. Old age is a horror – in some cases. I don't desire ever to be forty. After forty they say one lives on memory. I don't wish to."

Through the slits of his mask his curious eyes watched her steadily.

"You're not yet twenty-four," he said.

"Not quite. That is a good guess, Harlequin."

"And you don't want to live to be old?"

"No, I don't wish to."

"But you are rather keen on living while you're young."

"I've never thought much about it. If I live, it's all right; if I die, I don't think I'll mind it... I'm sure I shouldn't."

Her cigarette had gone out. She tossed it aside and daintily consented to exchange cigarettes with him, offering her little gold case.

"You're carefully inspecting my initials, aren't you?" she observed, amused. "But that monogram will not help you, Master Harlequin."

"Marriage alters only the final initial. Are you, by any unhappy chance – "

"That's for you to find out! I didn't say I was! I believe you *are* making me tell you things!"

She threw back the lustrous hair that shadowed her cheeks and leaned forward, her shadowed eyes fixed intently upon him through the apertures of her golden mask.

"I'm beginning to wonder uneasily who *you* may be, Monsieur Harlequin! You alarm me a little."

"Aha!" he said. "I've told you I deal in magic! That you don't know who I am, even after that confession, makes me reasonably certain who *you* are."

"You're trying to scare me," she said, disdainfully.

"I'll do it, yet."

"I wonder."

"You'll wonder more than ever in a few moments... I'm going to tell you who you are. But first of all I want you to fix the forfeit – "

"Why – I don't know... What do you want of me?" she asked, mockingly.

"Whatever you care to risk."

"Then you'll have to name it. Because I don't particularly care to offer you anything... And please hasten – I'll be missed presently – "

"Won't you bet one day out of your life?"

"No, I won't. I told you I wouldn't."

"Then – one hour. Just a single hour?"

"An hour?"

"Yes, sixty minutes, payable on demand: If I win, you will place at my disposal one entire hour out of your life. Will you dare that much, pretty dancer?"

She laughed, looked up at him; then readjusting her mask, she nodded disdainfully. "Because," she observed, "it is quite impossible for you ever to guess who I am. So do your very worst."

He sprang from the balustrade, landing lightly, his left hand spread over his heart, his bi-corne flourished in the other.

"You are Strelsa Leeds!" he said in a low voice.

The golden dancer straightened up to her full height, astounded, and a bright flood of colour stained her cheeks under the mask's curved edge.

"It – it is impossible that you should know – " she began, exasperated. "How *could* you? Only one person knew what I was to wear to-night! I came by myself with my maid. It – it *is* magic! It is infernal – abominable magic – "

She checked herself, still standing very straight, the gorgeous, blossom-woven cloth-of-gold rippling; the jewels shooting light from the fillet that bound her hair.

After a silence:

"How did you know?" she asked, striving to smile through the flushed chagrin. "It is perfectly horrid of you – anyhow – "

Curiosity checked her again; she stood gazing at him in silence, striving to pierce the eye-slits of that black skin-mask – trying to interpret the expression of the mischievous mobile mouth below it – or, perhaps the malice was all in those slanting slits behind which two strange eyes sparkled steadily out at her from the shadow.

"Strelsa Leeds," he repeated, and flourished one hand in graceful emphasis as she coloured hotly again. And he saw the teeth catch at her under lip.

"It is outrageous," she declared. "Tell me instantly who you are!"

"First," he insisted, mischievously, "I claim the forfeit."

"The – the forfeit!" she faltered.

"Did you not lose your wager?"

She nodded reluctantly, searching the disguised features before her in vain for a clew to his identity. Then, a trifle uneasily:

"Yes, of course I lost my wager. But – I did not clearly understand what you meant by an hour out of my life."

"It is to be an hour at my disposal," he explained with another grotesque bow. "I think that was the wager?"

"Y-yes."

"Unless," he remarked carelessly, "you desire the – ah – privilege and indisputable prerogative of your delightful sex."

"The privilege of my sex? What is that?" she asked, dangerously polite.

"Why, to change your divine mind – repudiate the obligation – "

"Harlequin!"

"Madame?" with an elaborate and wriggling bow.

"I pay what I owe – always... *Always!* Do you understand?"

The Harlequin bowed again in arabesques, very low, yet with a singular and almost devilish grace:

"Madame concedes that the poor Harlequin has won his wager?"

"Yes, I do – and you don't appear to be particularly humble, either."

"Madame insists on paying?" he inquired suavely.

"Yes, of course I do!" she said, uneasily. "I promised you an hour out of my life. Am I to pay it now?"

"You pay by the minute – one minute a day for sixty days. I am going to take the first minute now. *Perhaps* I may ask for the other fifty-nine, also."

"How?"

"Shall I show you how?"

"Very well."

"A magic pass or two, first," he said gaily, crooking one spangled knee and spinning around. Then he whipped out his lathe-sword, held it above his head, coolly passed a glittering arm around her waist, and looked down into her flushed face.

"You will have to count out the sixty seconds," he said. "I shall be otherwise occupied, and I can't trust myself to do two things at once."

"*What* are you about to do? Sink through a trap-door with me?"

"I am about to salute you with the magic kiss. After that you'll be my Columbine forever."

"That is not included in the bet! Is it?" she asked in real consternation.

"I may do as I please with my hour, may I not?"

"Was it the bet that you were to be at liberty to – to kiss me?"

"I control absolutely an hour out of your life, do I not? I may use it as I please. You had better count out sixty seconds."

She looked down, biting her lip, and touched one hand against her cheeks, alternately, as though to cool them with the snowy contact.

He waited in silence for her reply.

"Very well," she said resolutely, "if you elect to use the first minute of your hour as frivolously as that, I must submit, I suppose."

And she began to count aloud, rapidly: "One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, ni –"

Her face was averted; he could see the tip of one small ear all aflame. Presently she ventured a swift glance around at him and saw that he was laughing.

"Ten, eleven, twelve," she counted nervously, still watching him; "thirteen, fourteen, fifteen –" panic threatened her; she doubled both hands in the effort of self-control and timed her counting as though the rapid beating of the tempo could hasten her immunity – "sixteen, seventeen, eighteen, nineteen, twenty, one, two, three –"

"Play fair!" he exclaimed.

"I am trying to. Can't I say it that way up to ten, and then say thirty?"

"Oh, certainly. I've still half a minute. You'd better hurry! I may begin at any moment."

"Four – five – six – seven – m-m-m – thirty!" she cried, and the swift numbers fled from her lips fairly stumbling over one another, tumbling the sequence of hurrying numerals into one breathless gasp of: "Forty!"

His arm slid away from her waist; he stepped backward, and stood, watching her, one finger crooked, supporting his chin, the ironical smile hovering ever on his lips.

"Fifty!" she counted excitedly, her hands beating time to the counting; " – fifty-one – two – three – four – m-m-m – sixty!" – and she whirled around to face him with an impulsively triumphant gesture which terminated in a swift curtsy, arms flung wide apart.

"*Voilà!*" she said, breathlessly, "I've paid my bet! Am I not a good sport, Harlequin? Own that I am and I will forgive your outrageous impudence!"

"You are a most excellent sport, madame!" he conceded, grinning.

Relief from the tension cooled her cheeks; she laughed bewitchingly and looked at him, exultant, unafraid.

"I frightened you well with my desperate counting, didn't I? You completely forgot to do – anything, didn't you? Voyons! Admit it!"

"You completely terrorized me," he admitted.

"Besides," she said, "while I was so busily counting the seconds aloud you couldn't very well have kissed me, could you? *That* was strategy. You couldn't have managed it, could you?"

"Not very easily."

"I really *did* nonplus you, didn't I?" she insisted, aware of his amusement.

"Oh, entirely," he said. "I became an abject idiot."

She stood breathing more evenly now, the pretty colour coming and going in her cheeks. Considering him, looking alternately at his masked eyes and at his expressive lips where a kind of silent and infernal mirth still flickered, a sudden doubt assailed her. And presently, with a dainty shrug, she turned and glanced down through the gilt lattice toward the floor below.

"I suppose," she said, tauntingly, "you hope I'll believe that you refrained from kissing me out of some belated consideration for decency. But I know perfectly well that I perplexed you, and confused you and intimidated you."

"This is, of course, the true solution of my motives in not kissing you."

She turned toward him:

"What motive?"

"My motive for not kissing you. My only motive was consideration for you, and for the sacred conventions of Sainte Grundy."

"I believe," she said scornfully, "you are really trying to make me think that you *could* have done it, and didn't!"

"You are too clever to believe me a martyr to principle, madame!"

She looked at him, stamped her foot till the bangles clashed.

"Why *didn't* you kiss me, then? – if you wish to spoil my victory?"

"You yourself have told me why."

"Am I wrong? Could you – didn't I surprise you – in fact, paralyse you – with astonishment?"

He laughed delighted; and she stamped her ringing foot again.

"I see," she said; "I am supposed to be doubly in your debt, now. I'd rather you *had* kissed me and we were quits!"

"It isn't too late you know."

"It *is* too late. It's all over."

"Madame, I have fifty-nine other minutes in which to meet your kindly expressed wishes. Did you forget?"

"What!" she exclaimed, aghast.

"One hour less one minute is still coming to me."

"Am I – have I – is this ridiculous performance going to happen again?" she asked, appalled.

"Fifty-nine times," he laughed, doubling one spangled leg under the other and whirling on his toe till he resembled a kaleidoscopic teetotum. Then he drew his sword, cut right and left, slapped it back into its sheath, and bowed his wriggling bow, one hand over his heart.

"Don't look so troubled, madame," he said. "I release you from your debt. You need never pay me what you owe me."

Up went her small head, fiercely, under its flashing hair:

"Thank you. I pay my debts!" she said crisply.

"You decline to accept your release?"

"Yes, I do! – from *you!*"

"You'll see this thing through! – if it takes all winter?"

"Of course;" trying to smile, and not succeeding.

He touched her arm and pointed out across the hot, perfumed gulf to the gilded clock on high:

"You *have* seen it through! It is now one minute to midnight. We have been here exactly one hour, lacking a minute, since our bet was on... And I've wanted to kiss you all the while."

Confused, she looked at the clock under its elaborate azure and ormolu foliations, then turned toward him, still uncertain of her immunity.

"Do you mean that you have really used the hour as you saw fit?" she asked. "Have I done my part honestly? – Like a good sportsman? Have I really?"

He bowed, laughingly:

"I cheerfully concede it. You are a good sport."

"And – all that time – " she began – "all that time – "

"I had my chances – sixty of them."

"And didn't take them?"

"Only wanted to – but didn't."

"You think that I – "

"A woman never forgets a man who has kissed her. I took the rather hopeless chance that you might remember me without that. But it's a long shot. I expect that you'll forget me."

"Do you *want* me to remember you?" she asked, curiously.

"Yes. But you won't."

"How do you know?"

"I know – from the expression of your mouth, perhaps. You are too pretty, too popular to remember a poor Harlequin."

"But you never have seen my face? Have you?"

"No."

"Then why do you continually say that I am pretty?"

"I can divine what you must be."

"Then – how – why did you refrain from – " She laughed lightly, and looked up at him, mockingly. "Really, Harlequin, you *are* funny. Do you realise it?"

She laughed again and the slight flush came back into her cheeks.

"But you're nice, anyway... Perhaps if you *had* seen my face you might have let me go un-kissed all the quicker... Masks cover horrible surprises... And, then again, if you *had* seen it, *perhaps* you might *never* have let me go at all!" she added, audaciously.

In the gilded balcony opposite, the orchestra had now ceased playing; the whirl and noise of the dancers filled the immense momentary quiet. Then soft chimes from the great clock sounded midnight amid cries of, "Unmask! masks off, everybody!"

The Harlequin turned and drawing the black vizard from his face, bent low and saluted her hand; and she, responding gaily with a curtsey, looked up into the features of an utter stranger.

She stood silent a moment, the surprised smile stamped on her lips; then, in her turn, she slipped the mask from her eyes.

"*Voilà!*" she cried. "*C'est moi!*"

After a moment he said, half to himself;

"I knew well enough that you must be unusual. But I hadn't any idea – any – idea – "

"Then – you are *not* disappointed in me, monsieur?"

"My only regret is that I had my hour, and wasted it. Those hours never sound twice for wandering harlequins."

"Poor Harlequin!" she said saucily – "I'm sorry, but even *your* magic can't recall a vanished hour! Poor, poor Harlequin! You were too generous to me!"

"And now you are going to forget me," he said. "That is to be my reward."

"Why – I don't think – I don't expect to forget you. I suppose I am likely to know you some day... *Who* are you, please? Somebody very grand in New York?"

"My name is Quarren."

There was a silence; she glanced down at the ball-room floor through the lattice screen, then slowly turned around to look at him again.

"Have you ever heard of me?" he asked, smiling.

"Yes."

"Are you disappointed?"

"Y-es. Pleasantly... I supposed you to be – different."

He laughed:

"Has the world been knocking me very dreadfully to you, Mrs. Leeds?"

"No... One's impressions form without any reason – and vaguely – from – nothing in particular. – I thought you were a very different sort of man. – I am glad you are not."

"That is charming of you."

"It's honest. I had no desire to meet the type of man I supposed you to be. Am I too frank?"

"No, indeed," he said, laughing, "but I'm horribly afraid that I really am the kind of man you imagined me."

"You are not."

"How do you know?"

"No," she said, shaking her pretty head, "you can't be."

He said, quoting her own words amiably: "I'm merely one of the necessary incidents of any social environment – like flowers and champagne –"

"Mr. Quarren!"

In her distress she laid an impulsive hand on his sleeve; he lifted it, laid it across the back of his own hand, and bowing, saluted it lightly, gaily.

"I am not offended," he said; " – I am what you supposed me."

"Please don't say it! You are not. I didn't know you; I was – prejudiced –"

"You'll find me out sooner or later," he said laughing, "so I might as well admit that your cap fitted me."

"It doesn't fit!" she retorted; "I was a perfect fool to say that!"

"As long as you like me," he returned, "does it make any difference what I am?"

"Of course it does! I'm not likely to find a man agreeable unless he's worth noticing."

"Am I?"

"Oh, gentle angler, I refuse to nibble. Be content that an hour out of my life has sped very swiftly in your company!"

She turned and laid her hand on the little gilt door. He opened it for her.

"You've been very nice to me," she said. "I won't forget you."

"You'll certainly forget me for that very reason. If I hadn't been nice I'd have been the exception. And you would have remembered."

She said with an odd smile:

"Do you suppose that pleasant things have been so common in my life that only the unpleasant episode makes any impression on my memory?"

"To really remember me as I want you to, you ought to have had something unpardonable to forgive me."

"Perhaps I have!" she said, daringly; and slipped past him and down the narrow stairs, her loup-mask fluttering from her elbow.

At the foot of the stairs she turned, looking back at him over her bare shoulder:

"I've mortally offended at least three important men by hiding up there with you. That is conceding *something* to your attractions, isn't it?"

"Everything. Will you let me find you some supper – and let the mortally offended suitors sit and whistle a bit longer?"

"Poor suitors – they've probably been performing heel-tattoos for an hour... Very well, then – I feel unusually shameless to-night – and I'll go with you. But don't be disagreeable to me if a neglected and glowering young man rushes up and drags me away by the back hair."

"Who for example?"

"Barent Van Dyne, for instance."

"Oh, we'll side-step that youthful Knickerbocker," said Quarren, gaily. "Leave it to me, Mrs. Leeds."

"To behave so outrageously to Mr. Van Dyne is peculiarly horrid and wicked of me," she said. "But you don't realise that – and – the fact remains that you did *not* take your forfeit. And I've a lot to make up for that, haven't I?" she added so naively that they both gave way to laughter unrestrained.

The light touch of her arm on his, now guiding him amid the noisy, rollicking throngs, now yielding to his guidance, ceased as he threaded a way through the crush to a corner, and seated her at a table for two.

In a few moments he came back with all kinds of delectable things; went for more, returned laden, shamelessly pulled several palms between them and the noisy outer world, and seated himself beside her.

With napkin and plate on the low table beside her, she permitted him to serve her. As he filled her champagne glass she lifted it and looked across it at him:

"How did you discover my identity?" she asked. "I'm devoured by curiosity."

"Shall I tell you?"

"Please."

"I'll take a tumble in your estimation if I tell you."

"I don't think you will. Try it anyway."

"Very well then. Somebody told me."

"And you let me bet with you! And *you* bet on a *certainty!*"

"I did."

"Oh!" she exclaimed reproachfully, "is that good sportsmanship, Mr. Quarren?"

"No; very bad. And *that* was why I didn't take the forfeit. Now you understand."

She sat considering him, the champagne breaking in her glass.

"Yes, I do understand now. A good sportsman couldn't take a forfeit which he won betting on a certainty... That wasn't a real wager, was it?"

"No, it wasn't."

"If it had been, I – I don't suppose you'd have let me go."

"Indeed not!"

They laughed, watching each other, curiously.

"Which ought to teach me never again to make any such highly original and sporting wagers," she said. "Anyway, you were perfectly nice about it. Of course you couldn't very well have been otherwise. Tell me, did you really suppose me to be attractive? You couldn't judge. How could you – under that mask?"

"Do you think that your mouth could have possibly belonged to any other kind of a face except your own?" he said coolly.

"Is my mouth unusual?"

"Very."

"How is it unusual?"

"I haven't analysed the matter, but it is somehow so indescribable that I guessed very easily what the other features must be."

"Oh, flattery! Oh, impudence! Do you remember when Falstaff said that the lion could always recognise the true prince? Shame on you, Mr. Quarren. You are not only a very adroit flatterer but a perfectly good sportsman after all – and the most gifted tormentor I ever knew in all my life. And I

like you fine!" She laughed, and made a quick little gesture, partly arrested as he met her more than half way, touching the rim of his glass to hers. "To our friendship," he said.

"Our friendship," she repeated, gaily, "if the gods speed it."

" – And – its consequences," he added. "Don't forget those."

"What are they likely to be?"

"Who knows? That's the gamble! But let us recognise all kinds of possibilities, and drink to them, too. Shall we?"

"What do you mean by the consequences of friendship?" she repeated, hesitating.

"That is the interesting thing about a new friendship," he explained. "Nobody can ever predict what the consequences are to be. Are you afraid to drink to the sporting chances, hazards, accidents, and possibilities of our new friendship, Mrs. Leeds? *That* is a perfectly good sporting proposition."

She considered him, interested, her eyes full of smiling curiosity, perfectly conscious of the swift challenge of his lifted glass.

After a few seconds' hesitation she struck the ringing rim of her glass against his:

"To our new friendship, Monsieur Harlequin!" she said lightly – "with every sporting chance, worldly hazard, and heavenly possibility in it!"

For the first time the smile faded from his face, and something in his altered features arrested her glass at her very lips.

"How suddenly serious you seem," she said. "Have I said anything?"

He drained his glass; after a second she tasted hers, looked at him, finished it, still watching him.

"Really," she said; "you made me feel for a moment as though you and I were performing a solemn rite. That was a new phase of you to me – that exceedingly sudden and youthful gravity."

He remained silent. Into his mind, just for a second, and while in the act of setting the glass to his lips, there had flashed a flicker of pale clairvoyance. It seemed to illumine something within him which he had never believed in – another self.

For that single instant he caught a glimpse of it, then it faded like a spark in a confused dream.

He raised his head and looked gravely across at Strelsa Leeds; and level-eyed, smiling, inquisitive, she returned his gaze.

Could this brief contact with her have evoked in him a far-buried something which had never before given sign of existence? And could it have been anything resembling aspiration that had glimmered so palely out of an ordered and sordid commonplace personality which, with all its talent for frivolity, he had accepted as his own?

Without reason a slight flush came into his cheeks.

"Why do you regard me so owlshly?" she asked, amused. "I repeat that you made me feel as though we were performing a sort of solemn rite when we drank our toast."

"You couldn't feel that way with such a thoroughly frivolous man as I am. Could you?"

"I'm rather frivolous myself," she admitted, laughing. "I really can't imagine why you made me feel so serious – or why you looked as though you were. I've no talent for solemnity. Have you?"

"I don't think so," he said. "What a terrible din everybody is making! How hot and stifling it is here – with all those cloying gardenias... A man said, this evening, that this sort of thing makes for anarchy... It's rather beastly of me to sit here criticising my host's magnificence... Do you know – it's curious, too – but I wish that, for the next hour or two, you and I were somewhere alone under a good wide sky – where there was no noise. It's an odd idea, isn't it, Mrs. Leeds. And probably you don't share it with me."

She remained silent, thoughtful, her violet-gray eyes humorously considering him.

"How do you know I don't?" she said at last. "I'm not enamoured of noise, either."

"There's another thing," he went on, smiling – "it's rather curious, too – but somehow I've a sort of a vague idea that I've a lot of things to talk to you about. It's odd, isn't it?"

"Well you know," she reminded him, "you couldn't very well have a lot of things to talk to me about considering the fact that we've known each other only an hour or so."

"It doesn't seem logical... And yet, there's that inexplicable sensation of being on the verge of fairly bursting into millions of words for your benefit – words which all my life have been bottled up in me, accumulating, waiting for this opportunity."

They both were laughing, yet already a slight tension threatened both – had menaced them, vaguely, from the very first. It seemed to impend ever so slightly, like a margin of faintest shadow edging sunlight; yet it was always there.

"I haven't time for millions of words this evening," she said. "Won't some remain fresh and sparkling and epigrammatic until – until –"

"To-morrow? They'll possibly keep that long."

"I didn't say to-morrow."

"I did."

"I'm perfectly aware of the subtle suggestion and subtler flattery, Mr. Quarren."

"Then, may I see you to-morrow?"

"Utterly impossible – pitifully hopeless. You see I am frank about the heart-rending disappointment it is to me – and must be to you. But after I am awake I am in the hands of Mrs. Lannis. And there's no room for you in that pretty cradle."

"The next day, then?"

"We're going to Florida for three weeks."

"You?"

"Molly and Jim and I."

"Palm Beach?"

"Ultimately."

"And then?"

"Oh! Have you the effrontery to tell me to my face that you'll be in the same mind about me three weeks hence?"

"I have."

"Do you expect me to believe you?"

"I don't know – what to expect – of you, of myself," he said so quietly that she looked up quickly.

"Mr. Quarren! *Are* you a sentimental man? I had mentally absolved you from *that* preconception of mine – among other apparently unmerited ideas concerning you."

"I suppose you'll arise and flee if I tell you that you're different from other women," he said.

"You wouldn't be such an idiot as to tell me that, would you?"

"I might be. I'm just beginning to realise my capacity for imbecility. You're different in this way anyhow; no woman ever before induced me to pull a solemn countenance."

"I *don't* induce you! I ask you not to."

"I *try* not to; but, somehow, there's something so – so real about *you*–"

"Are you accustomed to foregather with the disembodied?"

"I'm beginning to think that my world is rather thickly populated with ghosts – phantoms of a more real world."

He looked at her soberly; she had thought him younger than he now seemed. A slight irritation silenced her for a moment, then, impatiently:

"You speak cynically and I dislike it. What reason have you to express world-weary sentiments? – you who are young, who probably have never known real sorrow, deep unhappiness! I have little patience with a morbid view of anything, Mr. Quarren. I merely warn you – in the event of your ever desiring to obtain my good graces."

"I do desire them."

"Then be yourself."

"I don't know what I am. I thought I knew. Your advent has disorganised both my complacency and my resignation."

"What do you mean?"

"Must I answer?"

"Of course!" she said, laughing.

"Then – the Harlequin who followed you up those stairs, never came down again."

"Oh!" she said, unenlightened.

"I'm wondering who it was who came down out of that balcony in the wake of the golden dancer," he added.

"You and I – you very absurd young man. What are you trying to say?"

"I – wonder," he said, smiling, "what I am trying to say."

CHAPTER III

Sunshine illuminated the rose-silk curtains of Mrs. Leeds's bedroom with parallel slats of light and cast a frail and tremulous net of gold across her bed. The sparrows in the Japanese ivy seemed to be unusually boisterous, and their persistent metallic chatter disturbed Strelsa who presently unclosed her gray eyes upon her own reflected features in the wall-glass opposite.

Face still flushed with slumber, she lay there considering her mirrored features with humorous, sleepy eyes; then she sat up, stretched her arms, yawned, patted her red lips with her palm, pressed her knuckles over her eyelids, and presently slipped out of bed. Her bath was ready; so was her maid.

A little later, cross-legged on the bed once more, she sat sipping her chocolate and studying the morning papers with an interest and satisfaction unjaded.

Coupled with the naïve curiosity of a kitten remained her unspoiled capacity for pleasure, and the interest of a child in a world unfolding daily in a sequence of miracles under her intent and delighted eyes.

Bare of throat and arm and shoulder, the lustrous hair shadowing her face, she now appeared unexpectedly frail, even thin, as though the fuller curves of the mould in which she was being formed had not yet been filled up.

Fully dressed, gown and furs lent to her something of a youthful maturity which was entirely deceptive; for here, in bed, the golden daylight revealed childish contours accented so delicately that they seemed almost sexless. And in her intent gray eyes and in her undeveloped mind was all that completed the bodily and mental harmony – youth unawakened as yet except to a confused memory of pain – and the dreamy and passionless unconsciousness of an unusually late adolescence.

At twenty-four Strelsa still looked upon her morning chocolate with a healthy appetite; and the excitement of seeing her own name and picture in the daily press had as yet lost none of its delightful thrill.

All the morning papers reported the Wycherlys' house-warming with cloying detail. And she adored it. What paragraphs particularly concerned herself, her capable maid had enclosed in inky brackets. These Strelsa read first of all, warm with pleasure at every stereotyped tribute to her loveliness.

The comments she perused were of all sorts, even the ungrammatical sort, but she read them all with profound interest, and loved every one, even the most fulsome. For life, and its kinder experience, was just beginning for her after a shabby childhood, a lonely girlhood, and a marriage unspeakable, the memory of which already had become to her as vaguely poignant as the dull recollection of a nightmare.

So her appetite for kindness, even the newspaper variety, was keen and not at all discriminating; and the reaction from two years' solitude – two years of endurance, of shrinking from public comment – had developed in her a fierce longing for pleasure and for play-fellows. Her fellow-men had responded with an enthusiasm which still surprised her delightfully at moments.

The clever Swedish maid now removed the four-legged tray from her knees; Strelsa, propped on her pillows, was still intent on her newspapers, satisfying a natural curiosity concerning what the world thought about her costume of the night before, her beauty, herself, and the people she knew. At last, agreeably satiated, she lowered the newspaper and lay back, dreamy-eyed, faintly smiling, lost in pleasant retrospection.

Had she really appeared as charming last night as these exceedingly kind New York newspapers pretended? Did this jolly world really consider her so beautiful? She wished to believe it. She tried to. Perhaps it was really true – because all these daily paragraphs, which had begun with her advent into certain New York sets, must really have been founded on something unusual about her.

And it could not be her fortune which continued to inspire such journalistic loyalty and devotion, because she had none – scarcely enough money in fact to manage with, dress with, pay her servants, and maintain her pretty little house in the East Eighties.

It could not be her wit; she had no more than the average American girl. Nor was there anything else in her – neither her cultivation, attainments, nor talents – to entitle her to distinction. So apparently it must be her beauty that evoked paragraphs which had already made her a fashion in the metropolis – was making her a cult – even perhaps a notoriety.

Because those people who had personally known Reginald Leeds, were exceedingly curious concerning this young girl who had been a nobody, as far as New York was concerned, until her name became legally coupled with the name of one of the richest and most dissipated scions of an old and honourable New York family.

The public which had read with characteristic eagerness all about the miserable finish of Reginald Leeds, found its abominable curiosity piqued by his youthful widow's appearance in town.

It is the newspapers' business to give the public what it wants – at least that appears to be the popular impression; and so they gave the public all it wanted about Strelsa Leeds, in daily chunks. And then some. Which, in the beginning, she shrank from, horrified, frightened, astonished – because, in the beginning, every mention of her name was coupled with a glossary in full explanation of who she was, entailing a condensed review of a sordid story which, for two years, she had striven to obliterate from her mind. But these post-mortems lasted only a week or so. Except for a sporadic eruption of the case in a provincial paper now and then, which somebody always thoughtfully sent to her, the press finally let the tragedy alone, contenting its intellectual public with daily chronicles of young Mrs. Leeds's social activities.

A million boarding houses throughout the land, read about her beauty with avidity; and fat old women in soiled pink wrappers began to mention her intimately to each other as "Strelsa Leeds" – the first hall-mark of social fame – and there was loud discussion, in a million humble homes, about the fashionable men who were paying her marked attention; and the chances she had for bagging earls and dukes were maintained and combated, below stairs and above, with an eagerness, envy, and back-stairs knowledge truly and profoundly democratic.

Her morning mail had begun to assume almost fashionable proportions, but she could not yet reconcile herself to the idea of even such a clever maid as her own assuming power of social secretary. So she still read and answered all her letters – or rather neglected to notice the majority, which invested her with a kind of awe to some and made others furious and unwillingly respectful.

Letters, bills, notes, invitations, advertisements were scattered over the bedclothes as she lay there, thinking over the pleasures and excitement of last night's folly – thinking of Quarren, among others, and of the swift intimacy that had sprung up between them – like a witch-flower over night – thinking of her imprudence, and of the cold displeasure of Barent Van Dyne who, toward daylight, had found her almost nose to nose with Quarren, absorbed in exchanging with that young man ideas and perfectly futile notions about everything on top, inside, and underneath the habitable globe.

She blushed as she remembered her flimsy excuses to Van Dyne – she had the grace to blush over that memory – and how any of the dignity incident to the occasion had been all Van Dyne's – and how, as she took his irreproachable arm and parted ceremoniously with Quarren, she had imprudently extended her hand behind her as her escort bore her away – a childish impulse – the innocent coquetry of a village belle – she flushed again at the recollection – and at the memory of Quarren's lips on her finger-tips – and how her hand had closed on the gardenia he pressed into it —

She turned her head on the pillow; the flower she had taken from him lay beside her on her night table, limp, discoloured, malodorous; and she picked it up, daintily, and flung it into the fireplace.

At the same moment the telephone rang downstairs in the library. Presently her maid knocked, announcing Mr. Quarren on the wire.

"I'm not at home," said Strelsa, surprised, or rather trying to feel a certain astonishment. What really surprised her was that she felt none.

Her maid was already closing the door behind her when Strelsa said:

"Wait a moment, Freda." And, after thinking, she smiled to herself and added: "You may set my transmitter on the table beside me, and hang up the receiver in the library... Be sure to hang it up at once."

Then, sitting up in bed, she unhooked the receiver and set it to her ear.

"Mr. Quarren," she began coldly, and without preliminary amenities, "have you any possible excuse for awaking me at such an unearthly hour as mid-day?"

"Good Lord," he exclaimed contritely, "did I do that?"

She had no more passion for the exact truth than the average woman, and she quibbled:

"Do you think I would say so if it were not true?" she demanded.

"No, of course not – "

"Well, then!" An indignant pause. "But," she added honestly, "I was not exactly what you might call asleep, although it practically amounts to the same thing. I was reposing... Are *you* feeling quite fit this morning?" she added demurely.

"I'd be all right if I could see you – "

"You can't! What an idea!"

"Why not? What are you going to do?"

"There's no particular reason why I should detail my daily duties, obligations, and engagements to you; is there? – But I'm an unusually kind-hearted person, and not easily offended by people's inquisitiveness. So I'll overlook your bad manners. First, then, I am lunching at the Province Club, then I am going to a matinée at the Casino, afterward dropping in for tea at the Sprowls, dining at the Calderas, going to the Opera with the Vernons, and afterward, with them, to a dance at the Van Dynes... So, will you kindly inform me where *you* enter the scene?"

She could hear him laugh over the telephone.

"What are you doing just now?" he asked.

"I am seated upon my innocent nocturnal couch, draped in exceedingly intimate attire, conversing over the telephone with the original Paul Pry."

"Could anything induce you to array yourself more conventionally, receive me, and let me take you to your luncheon at the Province Club?"

"But I don't *wish* to see you."

"Is that perfectly true?"

"Perfectly. I've just thrown your gardenia into the fireplace. Doesn't that prove it?"

"Oh, no. Because it's too early, yet, for either of us to treasure such things – "

"What horrid impertinence!"

"Isn't it! But your heavenly gift of humour will transform my impudence into a harmless and diverting sincerity. Please let me see you, Mrs. Leeds – just for a few moments."

"Why?"

"Because you are going South and there are three restless weeks ahead of me – "

This time he could hear her clear, far laughter:

"What has *my* going to Florida to do with *your* restlessness?"

"Your very question irrevocably links cause and effect – "

"Don't be absurd, Mr. Quarren!"

"Absurdity is the badge of all our Guild – "

"What Guild do *you* belong to?"

"The associated order of ardent suitors – "

"Mr. Quarren! You are becoming ridiculous; do you know it?"

"No, *I* don't realise it, but they say all the rest of the world considers suitors ridiculous – "

"Do you expect me to listen to such nonsense at such an hour in the morning?"

"It's half past twelve; and my weak solution of nonsense is suitable to the time of day – "

"Am I to understand that the solution becomes stronger as the day advances?"

"Exactly; the solution becomes so concentrated and powerful that traces of common-sense begin to appear – "

"I didn't notice any last night."

"Van Dyne interfered."

"Poor Mr. Van Dyne. If you'd been civil to him he might have asked you to the dance to-night – if I had suggested it. But you were horridly rude."

"I? Rude?"

"You're not going to be rude enough to say it was I who behaved badly to him, are you? Oh, the shocking vanity of man! No doubt you are thinking that it was I who, serpent-like, whispered temptation into your innocent ear, and drew you away into a corner, and shoved palms in front of us, and brought silver and fine linen, and rare fruits and sparkling wines; and paid shameless court with an intelligent weather-eye always on the watch for a flouted and justly indignant cavalier!"

"Yes," he said, "you did all those things. And now you're trying to evade the results."

"What are the results?"

"A partly demented young man clamouring to see you at high-noon while the cold cruel cause of his lunacy looks on and laughs."

"I'm afraid that young man must continue to clamour," she said, immensely amused at the picture he drew. "How far away is he at this moment?"

"In the Legation, a blithering wreck."

"Why not in his office frantically immersed in vast business enterprises and cataclysmic speculations?"

"I'm rather afraid that if business immerses him too completely he will be found drowned some day."

"You promised —*said* that you were going to begin a vigorous campaign," she reminded him reproachfully. "I asked it of you; and you agreed."

"I am beginning life anew – or trying to – by seeking the perennial source of daily spiritual and mundane inspiration – "

"Why won't you be serious?"

"I am. Were you not the source of my new inspiration? Last night did something or other to me – I am not yet perfectly sure what it was. I want to see you to be sure – if only for a – moment – merely to satisfy myself that you are real – "

"Will one moment be enough?"

"Certainly."

"One second – or half a one?"

"Plenty."

"Very well – if you promise not to expect or ask for more than that – "

"That is terribly nice of you!"

"It is, overwhelmingly. But really I don't know whether I am nice or merely weak-minded. Because I've lingered here gossiping so long with you that I've simply got to fly like a mad creature about my dressing. Good-bye – "

"Shall I come up immediately?"

"Of course not! I expect to be dressing for hours and hours – figuratively speaking... Perhaps you might start in ten minutes if you are coming in a taxi."

"You are an angel – "

"That is not telephone vernacular... And perhaps you had better be prompt, because Mrs. Lannis is coming for me – that is, if you have anything to – to say – that – "

She flushed up, annoyed at her own stupidity, then felt grateful to him as he answered lightly: "Of course; she might misunderstand our informality. Shall I see you in half an hour?"

"If I can manage it," she said.

She managed it, somehow. At first, really indifferent, and not very much amused, the talk with him had gradually aroused in her the same interest and pleasurable curiosity that she had experienced in exchanging badinage with him the night before. Now she really wanted to see him, and she took enough trouble about it to set her deft maid flying about her offices.

First a fragrant precursor of his advent arrived in the shape of a great bunch of winter violets; and her maid fastened them to her black fox muff. Then the distant door-bell sounded; and in an extraordinarily short space of time, wearing her pretty fur hat, her boa, and carrying a muff that matched both, with his violets pinned to it, she entered the dim drawing-room, halting just beyond the threshold.

"Are you not ashamed," she said, severely, "to come battering at my door at this hour of the day?"

"Abjectly."

They exchanged a brief handshake; she seated herself on the arm of a sofa; he stood before the unlighted fireplace, looking at her with a half smiling half curious air which made her laugh outright.

"Bien! C'est moi, monsieur," she said. "Me voici! C'est moi-même!"

"I believe you *are* real after all," he admitted.

"Do I seem different?"

"Yes – and no."

"How am I different?"

"Well, somehow, last night, I got the notion that you were younger, thinner – and not very real – "

"Are you presuming to criticise my appearance last night?" she asked with mock indignation. "Because if you are, I proudly refer you to the enlightened metropolitan morning press."

"I read all about you," he said, smiling.

"I am glad you did. You will doubtless now be inclined to treat me with the respect due to my years and experience."

"I believe," he said, "that your gown and hat and furs make a charming difference – "

"How perfectly horrid of you! I thought you admired my costume last night!"

"Oh, Lord," he said – "you were sufficiently charming last night. But now, in your fluffy furs, you seem rather taller – less slender perhaps – and tremendously fetching – "

"Say that my clothes improve me, and that in reality I'm a horrid, thin little beast!" she exclaimed, laughing. "I know I am, but I haven't finished growing yet. Really that's the truth, Mr. Quarren. Would you believe that I have grown an inch since last spring?"

"I believe it," he said, "but would you mind stopping now? You are exactly right."

"You *know* I'm thin and flat as a board!"

"You're perfect!"

"It's too late to say that to me – "

"It is too early to say more."

"Let's don't talk about myself, please."

"It has become the only subject in the world that interests me – "

"Please, Mr. Quarren! Are you actually attempting to be silly at this hour of the day? The wise inanities of midnight sound perilously flat in the sunshine – flatter than the flattest champagne, which no bread-crumbs can galvanise into a single bubble. Tell me, why did you wish to see me this morning. I mean the real reason? Was it merely to find out whether I was weak-minded enough to receive you?"

He looked at her, smiling:

"I wanted to see whether you were as real and genuine and wholesome and unspoiled and – and friendly as I thought you were last night."

"Am I?"

"More so."

"Are you so sure about my friendliness?"

"I want to believe in it," he said. "It means a lot to me already."

"Believe in it then, you very badly spoiled young man," she said, stretching out her hand to him impulsively. "I do like you... And now I think you had better go – unless you want to see Mrs. Lannis."

Retaining her hand for a second he said:

"Before you leave town will you let me ask you a question?"

"I am leaving to-morrow. You'll have to ask it now."

Their hands fell apart; he seemed doubtful, and she awaited his question, smilingly. And as he made no sign of asking she said:

"You have my permission to ask it. Is it a very impertinent question?"

"Very."

"How impertinent is it?" she inquired curiously.

"Unpardonably personal."

After a silence she laughed.

"Last night," she said, "you told me that I would probably forget you unless I had something unpardonable to forgive you. Isn't this a good opportunity to leave your unpardonable imprint upon my insulted memory?"

"Excellent," he said. "This is my outrageous question: are you engaged to be married?"

For a full minute she remained silent in her intense displeasure. After the first swift glance of surprise her gray eyes had dropped, and she sat on the gilded arm of the sofa, studying the floor covering – an ancient Saraband rug, with the inevitable and monotonous river-loop symbol covering its old-rose ground in uninteresting repetition. After a while she lifted her head and met his gaze, quietly.

"I am trying to believe that you did not mean to be offensive," she said. "And now that I have a shadow of a reason to pardon you, I shall probably do so, ultimately."

"But you won't answer me?" he said, reddening.

"Of course not. Are we on any such footing of intimacy – even of friendship, Mr. Quarren?"

"No. But you are going away – and my reason for speaking – " He checked himself; his reasons were impossible; there was no extenuation to be found in them, no adequate explanation for them, or for his attitude toward this young girl which had crystallised over night – over a sleepless, thrilling night – dazzling him with its wonder and its truth and its purity in the clean rays of the morning sun.

She watched his expression as it changed, troubled, uncertain how to regard him, now.

"It isn't very much like you, to ask me such a question," she said.

"Before I met you, you thought me one kind of a man; after I met you, you thought me another. Have I turned out to be a third kind?"

"N-no."

"Would I turn into the first kind if I ask you again to answer my question?"

She gave him a swift, expressionless glance:

"I want to like you; I'm trying to, Mr. Quarren. Won't you let me?"

"I want to have the right to like *you*, too – perhaps more than you will care to have me – "

"Please don't speak that way – I don't know what you mean, anyway – "

"That is why I asked you the question – to find out whether I had a right to – "

"Right!" she repeated. "What right? What do you mean? What have you misinterpreted in me that has given you any rights as far as I am concerned? Did you misunderstand our few hours of masked acquaintance – a few moments of perfectly innocent imprudence? – my overlooking certain

conventions and listening to you at the telephone this morning – my receiving you here at this silly hour? What has given you any right to say anything to me, Mr. Quarren – to hint of the possibility of anything serious – for the future – or at any time whatever?"

"I have no right," he said, wincing.

"Indeed you have not!" she rejoined warmly, flushed and affronted. "I am glad that is perfectly clear to you."

"No right at all," he repeated – "except the personal privilege of recognising what is cleanest and sweetest and most admirable and most unspoiled in life; the right to care for it without knowing exactly why – the desire to be part of it – as have all men who are awakened out of trivial dreams when such a woman as you crosses their limited and foolish horizon."

She sat staring at him, struggling to comprehend what he was saying, perfectly unable to believe, nor even wishing to, yet painfully attentive to his every word.

"Mr. Quarren," she said, "I was hurt. I imagined presumption where there was none. But I am afraid you are romantic and impulsive to an amazing degree. Yet, both romance and impulse have a place and a reason, not undignified, in human intercourse." – She felt rather superior in turning this phrase, and looked on him a little more kindly —

"If the compliment which you have left me to infer is purely a romantic one, it is nevertheless unwarranted – and, forgive me, unacceptable. The trouble is – "

She paused to recover her wits and her breath; but he took the latter away again as he said:

"I am in love with you; that is the trouble, Mrs. Leeds. And I really have no business to say so until I amount to something."

"You have no business to say so anyway after one single evening's acquaintance!" she retorted hotly.

"Oh, that! If love were a matter of time and convention – like five o'clock tea! – but it isn't, you know. It isn't the brevity of our acquaintance that worries me; it's what *I* am – and what *you* are – and – and the long, long road I have to travel before I am worth your lightest consideration – I never was in love before. Forgive my crudeness. I'm only conscious of the – hopelessness of it all."

Breathless, confused, incredulous, she sat there staring at him – listening to and watching this tall, quiet, cool young fellow who was telling her such incomprehensible things in a manner that began to fascinate her. With an effort she collected herself, shook off the almost eerie interest that was already beginning to obsess her, and stood up, flushed but composed.

"Shall we not say any more about it?" she said quietly. "Because there is nothing more to say, Mr. Quarren – except – thank you for – for feeling so amiably toward me – for believing me more than I really am... And I would like to have your friendship still, if I may – "

"You have it."

"Even yet?"

"Why not?.. It's selfish of me to say it – but I wish you – could have saved me," he said almost carelessly.

"From what, Mr. Quarren? I really do not understand you."

"From being what I am – the sort of man you first divined me to be."

"What do you mean by 'saving' you?" she asked, coldly.

"I don't know! – giving me a glimmer of hope I suppose – something to strive for."

"One saves one's self," she said.

He turned an altered face toward her: and she looked at him intently.

"I guess you are right," he said with a short laugh. "If there is anything worth saving, one saves one's self."

"I think that is true," she said... "And – if my friendship – if you really care for it – "

He met her gaze:

"I honestly don't know. I've been carried off my feet by you, completely. A man, under such conditions, doesn't know anything – not even enough to hold his tongue – as you may have noticed. I am in love with you. As I am to-day, my love for you would do you no good – I don't know whether yours would do me any good – or your friendship, either. It ought to if I amounted to anything; but I don't – and I don't know."

"I wish you would not speak so bitterly – please –"

"All right. It wasn't bitterness; it was just whine. ... I'll go, now. You will comprehend, after you think it over, that there is at least nothing of impertinence in my loving you – only a blind unreason – a deadly fear lest the other man in me, suddenly revealed, vanish before I could understand him. Because when I saw you, life's meaning broke out suddenly – like a star – and that's another stale simile. But one has to climb very far before one can touch even the nearest of the stars... So forgive my one lucid interval... I shall probably never have another... May I take you to your carriage?"

"Mrs. Lannis is calling for me."

"Then – I will take my leave – and the tatters of my reputation – any song can buy it, now –"

"Mr. Quarren!"

"Yes?"

"I don't want you to go – like this. I want you to go away knowing in your heart that you have been very – nice – agreeable – to a young girl who hasn't perhaps had as much experience as you think –"

"Thank God," he said, smiling.

"I want you to like me, always," she said. "Will you?"

"I promise," he replied so blithely that for a moment his light irony deceived her. Then something in his eyes left her silent, concerned, unresponsive – only her heart seemed to repeat persistently in childish reiteration, the endless question, Why? Why? Why? And she heard it but found no answer where love was not, and had never been.

"I – am sorry," she said in a low voice. "I – I try to understand you – but I don't seem to... I am so *very* sorry that you – care for me."

He took her gloved hand, and she let him.

"I guess I'm nothing but a harlequin after all," he said, "and they're legitimate objects for pity. Good-bye, Mrs. Leeds. You've been very patient and sweet with a blithering lunatic... I've committed only another harlequinade of a brand-new sort. But the fall from that balcony would have been less destructive."

She looked at him out of her gray eyes.

"One thing," she said, with a tremulous smile, "you may be certain that I am not going to forget you very easily."

"Another thing," he said, "I shall never forget you as long as I live; and – you have my violets, I see. Are they to follow the gardenia?"

"Only when their time comes," she said, trying to laugh.

So he wished her a happy trip and sojourn in the South, and went away into the city – downtown, by the way to drop into an office chair in an empty office and listen to the click of a typewriter in the outer room, and sit there hour after hour with his chin in his hand staring at nothing out of the clear blue eyes of a boy.

And she went away to her luncheon at the Province Club with Susanne Lannis who wished her to meet some of the governors – very grand ladies – upon whose good will depended Strelsa's election to the most aristocratic, comfortable, wisely managed, and thriftiest of all metropolitan clubs.

After luncheon she, with Mrs. Lannis and Chrysos Lacy – a pretty red-haired edition of her brother – went to see "Sumurun."

And after they had tea at the redoubtable Mrs. Sprowl's, where there were more footmen than guests, more magnificence than comfort, and more wickedness in the gossip than lemon in the tea or Irish in the more popular high-ball.

The old lady, fat, pink, enormous, looked about her out of her little glittering green eyes with a pleased conviction that everybody on earth was mortally afraid of her. And everybody, who happened to be anybody in New York, was exactly that – with a few eccentric exceptions like her nephew, Karl Westguard, and half a dozen heavily upholstered matrons whose social altitude left them nothing to be afraid of except lack of deference and death.

Mrs. Sprowl had a fat, wheezy, and misleading laugh; and it took time for Strelsa to understand that there was anything really venomous in the old lady; but the gossip there that afternoon, and the wheezy delight in driving a last nail into the coffin of some moribund reputation, made plain to her why her hostess was held in such respectful terror.

The talk finally swerved from Molly Wycherly's ball to the Irish Legation, and Mrs. Sprowl leaned toward Strelsa, and panted behind her fan:

"A perfect scandal, child. The suppers those young men give there! Orgies, I understand! No pretty actress in town is kept sighing long for invitations. Even" – she whispered the name of a lovely and respectable prima-donna with a perfectly good husband and progeny – and nodded so violently that it set her coughing.

"Oh," cried Strelsa, distressed, "surely you have been misinformed!"

"Not in the least," wheezed the old lady. "She is no better than the rest of 'em! And I sent for my nephew Karl, and I brought him up roundly. 'Karl!' said I, 'what the devil do you mean! Do you want that husband of hers dragging you all into court?' And, do you know, my dear, he appeared perfectly astounded – said it wasn't so – just as you said a moment ago. But I can put two and two together, yet; I'm not too old and witless to do that! And I warrant you I gave him a tongue trouncing which he won't forget. ... Probably he retailed it to that O'Hara man, and to young Quarren, too. If he did it won't hurt 'em, either."

She was speaking now so generally that everybody heard her, and Cyrille Caldera said:

"Ricky is certainly innocuous, anyway."

"Oh, *is* he!" said Mrs. Sprowl with another wheezy laugh. "I fancy I know that boy. Did you say 'harmless,' Susanne? Well, *you* ought to know, of course – "

Cyrille Caldera blushed brightly although her affair with Quarren had been of the most innocent description.

"There's probably as much ground for indicting Ricky as there is for indicting me," she protested. "He's merely a nice, useful boy – "

"Rather rapid, don't you think?" observed a thin young woman in sables and an abundance of front teeth.

"Who expects anything serious from Ricky? He possesses good manners, and a sweet alacrity," said Chrysos Lacy, "and that's a rare combination."

"He's clever enough to be wicked, anyway," said Mrs. Sprowl. "Don't tell me that every one of his sentimental affairs have been perfectly harmless."

"Has he had many?" asked Strelsa before she meant to.

"Thousands, child. There was Betty Clyde – whose husband must have been an idiot – and Cynthia Challis – she married Prince Sarnoff, you remember – "

"The Sarnoffs are coming in February," observed Chrysos Lacy.

"I wonder if the Prince has had a tub since he left," said Mrs. Sprowl. "How on earth Cynthia can endure that dried up yellow Tartar – "

"Cynthia was in love with Ricky I think," said Susanne Lannis.

"Most girls are when they come out, but their mothers won't let 'em marry him. Poor Ricky."

"Poor Ricky," sighed Chrysos; "he is *so* nice, and nobody is likely to marry him."

"Why?" asked Strelsa.

"Because he's – why he's just Ricky. He has no money, you know. Didn't you know it?"

"No," said Strelsa.

"That's the trouble – partly. Then there's no social advantage for any girl in this set marrying him. He'll have to take a lame duck or go out of his circle for a wife. And that means good-bye Ricky – unless he marries a lame duck."

"Some unattractive person of uncertain age and a million," explained Mrs. Lannis as Strelsa turned to her, perplexed.

"Ricky," said the lady with abundant teeth, "is a lightweight."

"The lightness, I think, is in his heels," said Strelsa. "He's intelligent otherwise I fancy."

"Yes, but not intellectual."

"I think you are possibly mistaken."

The profusely dentate lady looked sharply at Strelsa; Susanne Lannis laughed.

"Are *you* his champion, Strelsa? I thought you had met him last night for the first time."

"Mrs. Leeds is probably going the way of all women when they first meet Dicky Quarren," observed Mrs. Sprowl with malicious satisfaction. "But you must hurry and get over it, child, before Sir Charles Mallison arrives." At which sally everybody laughed.

Strelsa's colour was high, but she merely smiled, not only at the coupling of her name with Quarren's but at the hint of the British officer's arrival.

Major Sir Charles Mallison had been over before, why, nobody knew, because he was one of the wealthiest bachelors in England. Now it was understood that he was coming again; and a great many well-meaning people saw that agreeable gentleman's fate in the new beauty, Strelsa Leeds; and did not hesitate to tell her so with the freedom of fashionable banter.

"Yes," sighed Chrysos Lacy, sentimentally, "when you see Sir Charles you'll forget Ricky."

"Doubtless," said Strelsa, still laughing. "But tell me, Mrs. Sprowl, why does everybody wish to marry me to somebody? I'm very happy."

"It's our feminine sense of fitness and proportion that protests. In the eternal balance of things material you ought to be as wealthy as you are pretty."

"I have enough – almost –"

"Ah! the 'almost' betrays the canker feeding on that damask cheek!" laughed Mrs. Lannis. "No, you must marry millions, Strelsa – you'll need them."

"You are mistaken. I *have* enough. I'd like to be happy for a while."

The naïve inference concerning the incompatibility of marriage and happiness made them laugh again, forgetting perhaps the tragic shadow of the past which had unconsciously evoked it.

After Strelsa and Mrs. Lannis had gone, a pair of old cats dropped in, one in ermine, the other in sea-otter; and the inevitable discussion of Strelsa Leeds began with a brutality and frankness paralleled only in kennel parlance.

To a criticism of the girl's slenderness of physique Mrs. Sprowl laughed loud and long.

"That's what's setting all the men crazy. The world's as full of curves as I am; plumpness to the verge of redundancy is supposed to be popular among men; a well-filled stocking behind the footlights sets the gaby agape. But your man of the world has other tastes."

"Jaded tastes," said somebody.

"Maybe they're jaded and vicious – but they're his. And maybe that girl has a body and limbs which are little more accented than a boy's. But it's the last shriek among people who know."

"Not such a late one, either," said somebody. "Who was the French sculptor who did the Merode?"

"Before that Lippo fixed the type," observed somebody else.

"Personally," remarked a third, "I don't fancy pipe-stems. Mrs. Leeds needs padding – to suit my notions."

"Wait a year," said Mrs. Sprowl, significantly. "The beauty of that girl will be scandalous when she fills out a little more... If she only had the wits to match what she is going to be! – But there's a streak of something silly in her – I suspect latent sentiment – which is likely to finish her if she doesn't look sharp. Fancy her taking up the cudgels for Ricky, now! – a boy whose wits would be of no earthly account except in doing what he is doing. And he's apparently persuaded that little minx that he's intellectual! I'll have to talk to Ricky."

"You'd better talk to your nephew, too," said somebody, laughing.

"Who? Karl!" exclaimed the old lady, her little green eyes mere sparks in the broad expanse of face. "Let me catch him mooning around that girl! Let me catch Ricky philandering in earnest! I've made up my mind about Strelsa Leeds, and" – she glared around her, fanning vigorously – "I *think* nobody is likely to interfere."

That evening, at the opera, Westguard came into her box, and she laid down the law of limits to him so decisively that, taken aback, astonished and chagrined, he found nothing to say for the moment.

When he did recover his voice and temper he informed her very decidedly that he'd follow his own fancy as far as any woman was concerned.

But she only laughed derisively and sent him off to bring Quarren who had entered the Vernons' box and was bending over Strelsa's shoulders.

When Quarren obeyed, which he did not do with the alacrity she had taught him, she informed him with a brevity almost contemptuous that his conduct with Strelsa at the Wycherlys had displeased her.

He said, surprised: "Why does it concern you? Mrs. Wycherly is standing sponsor for Mrs. Leeds – "

"I shall relieve Molly Wycherly of any responsibility," said the old lady. "I like that girl. Can Molly do as much as I can for her?"

He remained silent, disturbed, looking out across the glitter at Strelsa.

Men crowded the Vernons' box, arriving in shoals and departing with very bad grace when it became necessary to give place to new arrivals.

"Do you see?" said the old lady, tendering him her opera glass.

"What?" he asked sullenly.

"A new planet. Use your telescope, Rix – and also amass a little common-sense. Yonder sits a future duchess, or a countess, if I care to start things for her. Which I shan't – in that direction."

"There are no poor duchesses or countesses, of course," he remarked with an unpleasant laugh.

Mrs. Sprowl looked at him, ironically.

"I understand the Earl of Dankmere, perfectly," she said – "also other people, including young, and sulky boys. So if you clearly understand my wishes, and the girl doesn't make a fool of herself over you or any other callow ineligible, her future will give me something agreeable to occupy me."

The blood stung his face as he stood up – a tall graceful figure among the others in the box – a clean-cut, wholesome boy to all appearances, with that easy and amiable presence which is not distinction but which sometimes is even more agreeable.

Lips compressed, the flush still hot on his face, he stood silent, tasting all the bitterness that his career had stored up for him – sick with contempt for a self that could accept and swallow such things. For he had been well schooled, but scarcely to that contemptible point.

"Of course," he said, pleasantly, "you understand that I shall do as I please."

Mrs. Sprowl laughed:

"I'll see to that, too, Ricky."

Chrysos Lacy leaned forward and began to talk to him, and his training reacted mechanically, for he seemed at once to become his gay and engaging self.

He did not return to the Vernons' box nor did he see Strelsa again before she went South.

The next night a note was delivered to him, written from the Wycherlys' car, "Wind-Flower."

"My dear Mr. Quarren:

"Why did you not come back to say good-bye? You spoke of doing so. I'm afraid Chrysos Lacy is responsible.

"The dance at the Van Dynes was very jolly. I am exceedingly sorry you were not there. Thank you for the flowers and bon-bons that were delivered to me in my state-room. My violets are not yet entirely faded, so they have not yet joined your gardenia in the limbo of useless things.

"Mr. Westguard came to the train. He *is* nice.

"Mr. O'Hara and Chrysos and Jack Lacy were there, so in spite of your conspicuous absence the Legation maintained its gay reputation and covered itself with immortal blarney.

"This letter was started as a note to thank you for your gifts, but it is becoming a serial as Molly and Jim and I sit here watching the North Carolina landscape fly past our windows like streaks of brown lightened only by the occasional delicious and sunny green of some long-leafed pine.

"There's nothing to see from horizon to horizon except the monotonous repetition of mules and niggers and evil-looking cypress swamps and a few razor-backs and a buzzard flying very high in the blue.

"Thank you again for my flowers... I wonder if you understand that my instinct is to be friends with you?

"It was from the very beginning.

"And please don't be absurd enough to think that I am going to forget you – or our jolly escapade at the Wycherly ball. You behaved very handsomely once. I know I can count on your kindness to me.

"Good-bye, and many many thanks – as Jack Lacy says – 'f'r the manny booggy-rides, an' th' goom-candy, an' the boonches av malagy grrapes'!

"Sincerely your friend,

"Strelsa Leeds."

That same day Sir Charles Mallison arrived in New York and went directly to Mrs. Sprowl's house. Their interview was rather brief but loudly cordial on the old lady's part:

"How's my sister and Foxy?" she asked – meaning Sir Renard and Lady Spinney.

Sir Charles regretted he had not seen them.

"And you?"

"Quite fit, thanks." And he gravely trusted that her own health was satisfactory.

"You haven't changed your mind?" she asked with a smile which the profane might consider more like a grin.

Sir Charles said he had not, and a healthy colour showed under the tan.

"All these years," commented the old lady, ironically.

"Four," said Sir Charles.

"Was it four years ago when you saw her in Egypt?"

"Four years – last month – the tenth."

"And never saw her again?"

"Never."

Mrs. Sprowl shook with asthmatic mirth:

"Such story-book constancy! Why didn't you ask your friend the late Sirdar to have Leeds pitched into the Nile. It would have saved you those four years' waiting? You know you haven't many years to waste, Sir Charles."

"I'm forty-five," he said, colouring painfully.

"Four years gone to hell," said the old lady with that delicate candour which sometimes characterised her... "And now what do you propose to do with the rest of 'em? Dawdle away your time?"

"Face my fate," he admitted touching his moustache and fearfully embarrassed.

"Well, if you're in a hurry, you'll have to go down South to face it. She's at Palm Beach for the next three weeks."

"Thank you," he said.

She looked up at him, her little opaque green eyes a trifle softened.

"I am trying to get you the prettiest woman in America," she said. "I'm ready to fight off everybody else – beat 'em to death," she added, her eyes snapping, then suddenly kind again – "because, Sir Charles, I like you. And for no other reason on earth!"

Which was not the exact truth. It was for another man's sake she was kind to him. And the other man had been dead many years.

Sir Charles thanked her, awkwardly, and fell silent again, pulling his moustache.

"Is – Mrs. Leeds – well?" he ventured, at length, reddening again.

"Perfectly. She's a bit wiry just now – thin – leggy, y' know. Some fanciers prefer 'em weedy. But she'll plump up. I know the breed."

He shrank from her loud voice and the vulgarity of her comments, and she was aware of it and didn't care a rap. There were plenty of noble ladies as vulgar as she, and more so – and anyway it was not this well-built, sober-faced man of forty-five whom she was serving with all the craft and insolence and brutality and generosity that was in her – it was the son of a dead man who had been much to her. How much nobody in these days gossiped about any longer, for it was a long time ago, a long, long time ago that she had made her curtsy to a young queen and a prince consort. And Sir Charles's father had died at Majuba Hill.

"There's a wretched little knock-kneed peer on the cards," she observed; "Dankmere. He seems to think she has money or something. If he comes over here, as my sister writes, I'll set him straighter than his own legs. And I've written Foxy to tell him so."

"Dankmere is a very good chap," said Sir Charles, terribly embarrassed.

"But not good enough. His level is the Quartier d'Europe. He'll find it; no fear... When do you go South?"

"To-morrow," he said, so honestly that she grinned again.

"Then I'll give you a letter to Molly Wycherly. Her husband is Jim Wycherly – one of your sort – eternally lumbering after something to kill. He has a bungalow on some lagoon where he murders ducks, and no doubt he'll go there. But his wife will be stopping at Palm Beach. I'll send you a letter to her in the morning."

"Many thanks," said Sir Charles, shyly.

CHAPTER IV

Strelsa remained South longer than she had expected to remain, and at the end of the third week Quarren wrote her.

"Dear Mrs. Leeds:

"Will you accept from me a copy of Karl's new book? And are you ever coming back? You are missing an unusually diverting winter; the opera is exceptional, there are some really interesting plays in town and several new and amusing people – Prince and Princess Sarnoff for example; and the Earl of Dankmere, an anxious, and perplexed little man, sadly hard up, and simple-minded enough to say so; which amuses everybody immensely.

"He's pathetically original; plebeian on his mother's side; very good-natured; nothing at all of a sportsman; and painfully short of both intellect and cash – a funny, harmless, distracted little man who runs about asking everybody the best and quickest methods of amassing a comfortable fortune in America. And I must say that people have jollied him rather cruelly.

"The Sarnoffs on the other hand are modest and nice people – the Prince is a yellow, dried-up Asiatic who is making a collection of parasites – a shrewd, kindly, and clever little scientist. His wife is a charming girl, intellectual but deliciously feminine. She was Cynthia Challis before her marriage, and always a most attractive and engaging personality. They dined with us at the Legation on Thursday.

"Afterward there was a dance at Mrs. Sprowl's. I led from one end, Lester Caldera from the other. One or two newspapers criticised the decorations and favours as vulgarly expensive; spoke of a 'monkey figure' – purely imaginary – which they said I introduced into the cotillion, and that the favours were marmosets! – who probably were the intellectual peers of anybody present.

"The old lady is in a terrific temper. I'm afraid some poor scribblers are going to catch it. I thought it very funny.

"Speaking of scribblers and temper reminds me that Karl Westguard's new book is stirring up a toy tempest. He has succeeded in offending a dozen people who pretend to recognise themselves or their relatives among the various characters. I don't know whether the novel is really any good, or not. We, who know Karl so intimately, find it hard to realise that perhaps he may be a writer of some importance.

"There appears to be considerable excitement about this new book. People seem inclined to discuss it at dinners; Karl's publishers are delighted. Karl, on the contrary, is not at all flattered by the kind of a success that menaces him. He is mad all through, but not as mad as his redoubtable aunt, who tells everybody that he's a scribbling lunatic who doesn't know what he's writing, and that she washes her fat and gem-laden hands of him henceforth.

"Poor Karl! He's already thirty-seven; he's written fifteen books, no one of which, he tells me, ever before stirred up anybody's interest. But this newest novel, 'The Real Thing,' has already gone into three editions in two weeks – whatever that actually means – and still the re-orders are pouring in, and his publishers are madly booming it, and several indignant people are threatening Karl with the law of libel, and Karl is partly furious, partly amused, and entirely astonished at the whole affair.

"Because you see, the people who think they recognise portraits of themselves or their friends in several of the unattractive characters in the story – are as

usual, in error. Karl's people are always purely and synthetically composite. Besides everybody who knows Karl Westguard ought to know that he's too decent a fellow, and too good a workman to use models stupidly. Anybody can copy; anybody can reproduce the obvious. Even photographers are artists in these days. Good work is a synthesis founded on truth, and carried logically to a conclusion.

"But it's useless to try to convince the Philistines. Once possessed with the idea that they or their friends are 'meant,' as they say, Archimedes's lever could not pry them loose from their agreeably painful obsession.

"Then there are other sorts of humans who are already bothering Karl. This species recognise in every 'hero' or 'heroine' a minute mental and physical analysis of themselves and their own particular, specific, and petty emotions. Proud, happy, flattered, they permit nobody to mistake the supposed tribute which they are entirely self-persuaded that the novelist has offered to them.

"And these phases of 'The Real Thing' are fretting and mortifying Karl to the verge of distraction. He awakes to find himself not famous but notorious – not criticised for his workmanship, good or bad, but gabbled about because some ludicrous old Uncle Foozle pretends to discover a similarity between Karl's episodes and characters and certain doings of which Uncle F. is personally cognisant.

"The great resource of stupidity is and has always been the anagram; and as stupidity is almost invariably suspicious, the hunt for hidden meanings preoccupies the majority of mankind.

"Because I have ventured to send you Karl's new book is no reason why I also should have presumed to write you a treatise in several volumes.

"But I miss you, oddly enough – miss everything I never had of you – your opinions on what interests us both; the delightful discussions of things important, which have never taken place between us. It's odd, isn't it, Mrs. Leeds, that I miss, long for, and even remember so much that has never been?

"Molly Wycherly wrote to Mrs. Lannis that you were having a gay time in Florida; that Sir Charles Mallison had joined your party; that you'd had luncheons and dinners given you at the Club, at the Inlet, at the Wiers's place, 'Coquina Castle'; and that Jim and Sir Charles had bravely slain many ducks. Which is certainly glory enough to go round. In a friendly little note to me you were good enough to ask what I am doing, and to emphasise your request for an answer by underlining your request.

"Proud and flattered by your generous interest I hasten to inform you that I am leading the same useful, serious, profitable, purposeful, ambitious, and ennobling life which I was leading when I first met you. Such a laudable existence makes for one's self-respect; and, happy in that consciousness, undisturbed by journalistic accusations concerning marmosets and vulgarity, I concentrate my entire intellectual efforts upon keeping my job, which is to remain deaf, dumb, and blind, and at the same time be ornamental, resourceful, good-tempered, and amusing to those who are not invariably all of these things at the same time.

"Is it too much to expect another note from you?

"Sincerely yours,

"Richard Stanley Quarren."

She answered him on the fourth week of her absence.

"My dear Mr. Quarren:

"Your letter interested me, but there was all through it an undertone of cynicism which rang false – almost a dissonance to an ear which has heard you strike a truer chord.

"I do not like what you say of yourself, or of your life. I have talked very seriously with Molly, who adores you; and she evidently thinks you capable of achieving anything you care to undertake. Which is my own opinion – based on twenty-four hours of acquaintance.

"I have read Mr. Westguard's novel. Everybody here is reading it. I'd like to talk to you about it, some day. Mr. Westguard's intense bitterness confuses me a little, and seems almost to paralyse any critical judgment I may possess. A crusade in fiction has always seemed to me but a sterile effort. To do a thing is fine; to talk about it in fiction a far less admirable performance – like the small boy, safe in the window, who defies his enemy with out-thrust tongue.

"When I was young – a somewhat lonely child, with only a very few books to companion me – I pored over Carlyle's 'French Revolution,' and hated Philip Egalité. But that youthful hatred was a little modified because Egalité did actually become personally active. If he had only talked, my hatred would have become contempt for a renegade who did not possess the courage of his convictions. But he voted death to his own caste, facing the tribunal. He talked, but he also acted.

"I do not mean this as a parallel between Mr. Westguard and the sanguinary French iconoclast. Mr. Westguard, also, has the courage of his convictions; he lives, I understand, the life which he considers a proper one. It is the life which he preaches in 'The Real Thing' – a somewhat solemn, self-respecting, self-supporting existence, devoted to self-development; a life of upright thinking, and the fulfilment of duty, civil and religious, incident to dignified citizenship. Such a life may be a blameless one; I don't know.

"Also it might even be admirable within its limits if Mr. Westguard did not also appoint himself critic, disciplinarian, and prophet of that particular section of society into which accident of birth has dumped him.

"Probably there is no section of human society that does not need a wholesome scourging now and then, but somehow, it seems to me, that it could be done less bitterly and with better grace than Mr. Westguard does it in his book. The lash, swung from within, and applied with judgment and discrimination, ought to do a more thorough and convincing piece of work than a knout allied with the clubs of the proletariat, hitting at every head in sight.

"Let the prophets and sybils, the augurs and oracles of the *Hoi polloi* address themselves to them; and let ours talk to us, not *about* us to the world at large.

"A renegade from either side makes an unholy alliance, and, with his first shout from the public pulpit, tightens the master knot which he is trying to untie to the glory of God and for the sake of peace and good will on earth. And the result is Donnybrook Fair.

"I hate to speak this way to you of your friend, and about a man I like and, in a measure, really respect. But this is what I think. And my inclination is to tell you the truth, always.

"Concerning the artistic value of Mr. Westguard's literary performance, I know little. The simplicity of his language recommends the pages to me. The book is easy to read. Perhaps therein lies his art; I do not know.

"Now, as I am in an unaccountably serious mood amid all the frivolity of this semi-tropical place, may I not say to you something about yourself? How are you going to silence me?"

"Well, then; you seem to reason illogically. You make little of yourself, yet you offer me your friendship, by implication, every time you write to me. You seek my society mentally. Do you really believe that my mind is so easily satisfied with intellectual rubbish, or that I am flattered by letters from a nobody?"

"What do you suppose there is attractive about you, Mr. Quarren – if you really do amount to as little as you pretend? I've seen handsomer men, monsieur, wealthier men, more intelligent men; men more experienced, men of far greater talents and attainments.

"Why do you suppose that I sit here in the Southern sunshine writing to you when there are dozens of men perfectly ready to amuse me? – and qualified to do it, too!"

"For the sake of your *beaux-yeux*? *Non pas!*"

"But there is a *something* which the world recognises as a subtle and nameless sympathy. And it stretches an invisible filament between you and the girl who is writing to you.

"That tie is not founded on sentiment; I think you know that. And, of things spiritual, you and I have never yet spoken.

"Therefore I conclude that the tie must be purely intellectual; that mind calls to mind and finds contentment in the far response.

"So, when you pretend to me that you are of no intellectual account, you pay me a scurvy compliment. *Quod erat demonstrandum.*"

"With this gentle reproof I seal my long, long letter, and go where the jasmine twineth and the orchestra playeth; for it is tea-time, my friend, and the Park of Peacocks is all a-glitter with plumage. Soft eyes look wealth to eyes that ask again; and all is brazen as a dinner bell!"

"O friend! do you know that since I have been here I might have attained to fortune, had I cared to select any one of several generous gentlemen who have been good enough to thrust that commodity at me?"

"To be asked to marry a man no longer distresses me. I am all over the romantic idea of being sorry for wealthy amateurs who make me a plain business proposition, offering to invest a fortune in my good looks. To amateurs, connoisseurs, and collectors, there is no such thing as a fixed market value to anything. An object of art is worth what it can be bought for. I don't yet know how much I am worth. I may yet find out.

"There are nice men here, odious men, harmless men, colourless men, worthy men, and the ever-present fool. He is really the happiest, I suppose.

"Then, all in a class by himself, is an Englishman, one Sir Charles Mallison. I don't know what to tell you about him except that I feel exceedingly safe and comfortable when I am with him.

"He says very little; I say even less. But it is agreeable to be with him.

"He is middle-aged, and, I imagine, very wise. Perhaps his reticence makes me think so. He and Mr. Wycherly shoot ducks on the lagoon – and politics into each other.

"I must go. You are not here to persuade me to stay and talk nonsense to you against my better judgment. You're quite helpless, you see. So I'm off."

"Will you write to me again?
"Strelsa Leeds."

A week after Quarren had answered her letter O'Hara called his attention to a paragraph in a morning paper which hinted at an engagement between Sir Charles Mallison and Mrs. Leeds.

Next day's paper denied it on excellent authority; so, naturally, the world at large believed the contrary.

Southern news also revealed the interesting item that the yacht, *Yulan*, belonging to Mrs. Sprowl's hatchet-faced nephew, Langly Sprowl, had sailed from Miami for the West Indies with the owner and Mrs. Leeds and Sir Charles Mallison among the guests.

The *Yulan* had not as fragrant a reputation as its exotic name might signify, respectable parties being in the minority aboard her, but Langly Sprowl was Langly Sprowl, and few people declined any invitation of his.

He was rather a remarkable young man, thin as a blade, with a voracious appetite and no morals. Nor did he care whether anybody else had any. What he wanted he went after with a cold and unsensitive directness that no newspapers had been courageous enough to characterise. He wouldn't have cared if they had.

Among other things that he had wanted, recently, was another man's wife. The other man being of his own caste made no difference to him; he simply forced him to let his wife divorce him; which, it was understood, that pretty young matron was now doing as rapidly as the laws of Nevada allowed.

Meanwhile Langly Sprowl had met Strelsa Leeds.

The sailing of the *Yulan* for the West Indies became the topic of dinner and dance gossip; and Quarren heard every interpretation that curiosity and malice could put upon the episode.

He had been feeling rather cheerful that day; a misguided man from Jersey City had suddenly developed a mania for a country home. Quarren personally conducted him all over Tappan-Zee Park on the Hudson, through mud and slush in a skidding touring car, with the result that the man had become a pioneer and had promised to purchase a building site.

So Quarren came back to the Legation that afternoon feeling almost buoyant, and discovered Westguard in all kinds of temper, smoking a huge faïence pipe which he always did when angry, and which had become known as "The Weather-breeder."

"Jetzt geht das Wetter los!" quoted Quarren, dropping into a seat by the fire. "Where is this particular area of low depression centred, Karl?"

"Over my damn book. The papers insist it's a *livre-à-clef*; and I am certain the thing is selling on that account! I tell you it's humiliating. I've done my best as honestly as I know how, and not one critic even mentions the philosophy of the thing; all they notice is the mere story and the supposed resemblance between my characters and living people! I'm cursed if I ever – "

"Oh, shut up!" said Quarren tranquilly. "If you're a novelist you write to amuse people, and you ought to be thankful that you've succeeded."

"Confound it!" roared Westguard, "I write to *instruct* people! not to keep 'em from yawning!"

"Then you've made a jolly fluke of it, that's all – because you have accidentally written a corking good story – good enough and interesting enough to make people stand for the cold chunks of philosophical admonition with which you've spread your sandwich – thinly, Heaven be praised!"

"I write," said Westguard, furious, "because I've a message to deliver – "

"Help!" moaned Quarren. "You write because it's in you to do it; because you've nothing more interesting to do; and because it enables you to make a decent and honourable living!"

"Do those reasons prevent my having a message to deliver?" roared Westguard.

"No, they exist in spite of it. You'd write anyway, whether or not you believed you had a message to deliver. You've written some fifteen novels, and fifteen times you have smothered your story with your message. This time, by accident, the story got its second breath, and romped home, with 'Message' a bad second, and that selling plater, 'Philosophy,' left at the post – "

"Go on! – you irreverent tout!" growled Westguard; "I want my novels read, of course. Any author does. But I wish to Heaven somebody would try to interpret the important lessons which I – "

"Oh, preciousness and splash! Tell your story as well as you can, and if it's well done there'll be latent lessons enough in it."

"Are you perhaps instructing me in my own profession?" asked the other, smiling.

"Heaven knows I'm not venturing – "

"Heaven knows you *are*! Also there is something in what you say – " He sat smoking, thoughtfully, eyes narrowing in the fire – "if I only *could* manage that! – to arrest the public's attention by the rather cheap medium of the story, and then, cleverly, shoot a few moral pills into 'em... That's one way, of course – "

"Like the drums of the Salvation Army."

Westguard looked around at him, suspiciously, but Quarren seemed to be serious enough.

"I suppose it doesn't matter much how a fellow collects an audience, so that he does collect one."

"Exactly," nodded Quarren. "Get your people, then keep 'em interested and unsuspecting while you inject 'em full of thinks."

Westguard smoked and pondered; but presently his lips became stern and compressed.

"I don't intend to trifle with my convictions or make any truce or any compromise with 'em," he announced. "I'm afraid that this last story of mine ran away with me."

"It sure did, old Ironsides. Heaven protected her own this time. And in 'The Real Thing' you have ridden farther out among the people with your Bible and your Sword than you ever have penetrated by brandishing both from the immemorial but immobile battlements of righteousness. Truth *is* a citadel, old fellow; but its garrison should be raiders, not defenders. And they should ride far afield to carry its message. For few journey to that far citadel; you must go to them. And does it make any difference what vehicle you employ in the cause of Truth – so that the message arrives somewhere before your vehicle breaks down of its own heaviness? Novel or poem, sermon or holy writ – it's all one, Karl, so that they get there with their burden."

Westguard sat silent a moment, then thumped the table, emphatically.

"If I had your wasted talents," he said, "I could write anything!"

"Rot!"

"As you please. You use your ability rottenly – that's true enough."

"My ability," mimicked Quarren.

"Yes, your many, many talents, Rix. God knows why He gave them to you; I don't – for you use them ignobly, when you do not utterly neglect them – "

"I've a light and superficial talent for entertaining people; I've nimble legs, and possess a low order of intelligence known as 'tact.' What more have I?"

"You're the best amateur actor in New York, for example."

"An *amateur*," sneered Quarren. "That is to say, a man who has the inclinations, but neither the courage, the self-respect, nor the ambition of the professional... Well, I admit that. I lack something – courage, I think. I prefer what is easy. And I'm doing it."

"What's your reward?" said Westguard bluntly.

"Reward? Oh, I don't know. The inner temple. I have the run of the premises. People like me, trust me, depend upon me more or less. The intrigues and politics of my little world amuse me; now and then I act as ambassador, as envoy of peace, as herald, as secret diplomatic agent... Reward? Oh, yes – you didn't suppose that my real-estate operations clothed and fed me, did you, Karl?"

"What does?"

"Diplomacy," explained Quarren gaily. "A successful embassy is rewarded. How? Why, now and then a pretty woman's husband makes an investment for me at his own risk; now and then, when my office is successfully accomplished, I have my fee as social attorney or arbiter elegantiarum... There are, perhaps, fewer separations and divorces on account of me; fewer scandals."

"I am sometimes called into consultation, *in extremis*; I listen, I advise – sometimes I plan and execute; even take the initiative and interfere – as when a foolish boy at the Cataract Club, last week, locked himself into the bath-room with an automatic revolver and a case of half-drunken fright. I had to be very careful; I expected to hear that drumming fusillade at any moment.

"But I talked to him, through the keyhole: and at last he opened the door – to take a shot at me, first."

Quarren shrugged and lighted a cigarette.

"Of course," he added, "his father was only too glad to pay his debts. But boys don't always see things in their true proportions. Neither do women."

Westguard, silent, scowling, pulled at his pipe for a while, then:

"Why should you play surgeon and nurse in such a loathsome hospital?"

"Somebody must. I seem better fitted to do it than the next man."

"Yes," said Westguard with a wry face, "I fancy somebody must do unpleasant things – even among the lepers of Molokai. But I'd prefer real lepers."

"The social sort are sometimes sicker," laughed Quarren.

"I don't agree with you... By the way, it's all off between my aunt and me."

"I'm sorry, Karl – "

"I'm not! I don't want her money. She told me to go to the devil, and I said something similar. Do you know what she wants me to do?" he added angrily. "Give up writing, live on an allowance from her, and marry Chrysos Lacy! What do you think of that for a cold-blooded and impertinent proposition! We had a fearful family row," he continued with satisfaction – "my aunt bellowing so that her footmen actually fled, and I doing the cool and haughty, and letting her bellow her bally head off."

"You and she have exchanged civilities before," said Quarren, smiling.

"Yes, but this is really serious. I'm damned if I give up writing."

"Or marry Chrysos Lacy?"

"Or that, either. Do you think I want a red-headed wife? And I've never spoken a dozen words to her, either. And I'll pick out my own wife. What does my aunt think I am? I wish I were in love with somebody's parlour-maid. B'jinks! I'd marry her, just to see my aunt's expression – "

"Oh, stop your fulminations," said Quarren, laughing. "That's the way with you artistic people; you're a passionate pack of pups!"

"I'm not as passionate as my aunt!" retorted Westguard wrathfully. "Do you consider her artistic? She's a meddlesome, malicious, domineering, insolent, evil old woman, and I told her so."

Quarren managed to stifle his laughter for a moment, but his sense of the ludicrous was keen, and the scene his fancy evoked sent him off into mirth uncontrollable.

Westguard eyed him gloomily; ominous clouds poured from "The Weather-breeder."

"Perhaps it's funny," he said, "but she and I cannot stand each other, and this time it's all off for keeps. I told her if she sent me another check I'd send it back. That settles it, doesn't it?"

"You're foolish, Karl – "

"Never mind. If I can't keep myself alive in an untrammelled and self-respecting exercise of my profession – " His voice ended in a gurgling growl. Then, as though the recollections of his injuries at the hands of his aunt still stung him, he reared up in his chair:

"Chrysos Lacy," he roared, "is a sweet, innocent girl – not a bale of fashionable merchandise! Besides," he added in a modified tone, "I was rather taken by – by Mrs. Leeds."

Quarren slowly raised his eyes.

"I was," insisted Westguard sulkily; "and I proved myself an ass by saying so to my aunt. Why in Heaven's name I was idiot enough to go and tell her, I don't know. Perhaps I had a vague idea that she would be so delighted that she'd give me several tons of helpful advice."

"Did she?"

"*Did* she! She came back at me with Chrysos Lacy, I tell you! And when I merely smiled and attempted to waive away the suggestion, she flew into a passion, called me down, cursed me out – you know her language isn't always in good taste – and then she ordered me to keep away from Mrs. Leeds – as though I ever hung around any woman's skirts! I'm no Squire of Dames. I tell you, Rix, I was mad clear through. So I told her that I'd marry Mrs. Leeds the first chance I got – "

"Don't talk about her that way," remonstrated Quarren pleasantly.

"About who? My aunt?"

"I didn't mean your aunt?"

"Oh. About Mrs. Leeds. Why not? She's the most attractive woman I ever met – "

"Very well. But don't talk about marrying her – as though you had merely to suggest it to her. You know, after all, Mrs. Leeds may have ideas of her own."

"Probably she has," admitted Westguard, sulkily. "I don't imagine she'd care for a man of my sort. Why do you suppose she went off on that cruise with Langly Sprowl?"

Quarren said, gravely: "I have no idea what reasons Mrs. Leeds has for doing anything."

"You correspond."

"Who said so?"

"My aunt."

Quarren flushed up, but said nothing.

Westguard, oblivious of his annoyance, and enveloped in a spreading cloud of tobacco, went on:

"Of course if *you* don't know, *I* don't. But, by the same token, my aunt was in a towering rage when she heard that Langly had Mrs. Leeds aboard the *Yulan*."

"What!" said the other, sharply.

"She swore like a trooper, and called Langly all kinds of impolite names. Said she'd trim him if he ever tried any of his tricks around Mrs. Leeds – "

"What tricks? What does she mean by tricks?"

"Oh, I suppose she meant any of his blackguardly philandering. There isn't a woman living on whom he is afraid to try his hatchet-faced blandishments."

Quarren dropped back into the depths of his arm-chair. Presently his rigid muscles relaxed. He said coolly:

"I don't think Langly Sprowl is likely to misunderstand Mrs. Leeds."

"That depends," said Westguard. "He's a rotten specimen, even if he is my cousin. And he knows I think so."

A few minutes later O'Hara sauntered in. He had been riding in the Park and his boots and spurs were shockingly muddy.

"Who is this Sir Charles Mallison, anyway?" he asked, using the decanter and then squirting his glass full of carbonic. "Is it true that he's goin' to marry that charmin' Mrs. Leeds? I'll break his bally Sassenach head for him! I'll – "

"The rumour was contradicted in this morning's paper," said Quarren coldly.

O'Hara drank pensively: "I see that Langly Sprowl is messin' about, too. Mrs. Ledwith had better hurry up out there in Reno – or wherever she's gettin' her divorce. I saw Chet Ledwith ridin' in the Park. Dankmere was with him. Funny he doesn't seem to lose any caste by sellin' his wife to Sprowl."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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