Chambers Robert William

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Содержание

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CHAPTER I

"A lady to see you, sir," said Farris.

Desboro, lying on the sofa, glanced up over his book.

"A *lady*?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, who is she, Farris?"

"She refused her name, Mr. James."

Desboro swung his legs to the carpet and sat up.

"What kind of lady is she?" he asked; "a perfect one, or the real thing?"

"I don't know, sir. It's hard to tell these days; one dresses like t'other."

Desboro laid aside his book and arose leisurely.

"Where is she?"

"In the reception room, sir."

"Did you ever before see her?"

"I don't know, Mr. James – what with her veil and furs – "

"How did she come?"

"In one of Ransom's hacks from the station. There's a trunk outside, too."

"What the devil – "

"Yes, sir. That's what made me go to the door. Nobody rang. I heard the stompin' and the noise; and I went out, and she just kind of walked in. Yes, sir."

"Is the hack out there yet?"

"No, sir. Ransom's man he left the trunk and drove off. I heard her tell him he could go."

Desboro remained silent for a few moments, looking hard at the fireplace; then he tossed his cigarette onto the embers, dropped the amber mouthpiece into the pocket of his dinner jacket, dismissed Farris with a pleasant nod, and walked very slowly along the hall, as though in no haste to meet his visitor before he could come to some conclusion concerning her identity. For among all the women he had known, intimately or otherwise, he could remember very few reckless enough, or brainless enough, or sufficiently self-assured, to pay him an impromptu visit in the country at such an hour of the night.

The reception room, with its early Victorian furniture, appeared to be empty, at first glance; but the next instant he saw somebody in the curtained embrasure of a window – a shadowy figure which did not seem inclined to leave obscurity – the figure of a woman in veil and furs, her face half hidden in her muff.

He hesitated a second, then walked toward her; and she lifted her head.

"Elena!" he said, astonished.

"Are you angry, Jim?"

"What are you doing here?"

"I didn't know what to do," said Mrs. Clydesdale, wearily, "and it came over me all at once that I couldn't stand him any longer."

"What has he done?"

"Nothing. He's just the same – never quite sober – always following me about, always under foot, always grinning – and buying sixteenth century enamels – and – I can't stand it! I – " Her voice broke.

"Come into the library," he said curtly.

She found her handkerchief, held it tightly against her eyes, and reached out toward him to be guided.

In the library fireplace a few embers were still alive. He laid a log across the coals and used the bellows until the flames started. After that he dusted his hands, lighted a cigarette, and stood for a moment watching the mounting blaze.

She had cast aside her furs and was resting on one elbow, twisting her handkerchief to rags between her gloved hands, and staring at the fire. One or two tears gathered and fell.

"He'll divorce me now, won't he?" she asked unsteadily.

"Why?"

"Because nobody would believe the truth – after this."

She rested her pretty cheek against the cushion and gazed at the fire with wide eyes still tearfully brilliant.

"You have me on your hands," she said. "What are you going to do with me?"

"Send you home."

"You can't. I've disgraced myself. Won't you stand by me, Jim?"

"I can't stand by you if I let you stay here."

"Why not?"

"Because that would be destroying you."

"Are you going to send me away?"

"Certainly."

"Where are you going to send me?"

"Home."

"Home!" she repeated, beginning to cry again. "Why do you call his house 'home'? It's no more my home than he is my husband – "

"He *is* your husband! What do you mean by talking this way?"

"He *isn't* my husband. I told him I didn't care for him when he asked me to marry him. He only grinned. It was a perfectly cold-blooded bargain. I didn't sell him *everything*!"

"You married him."

"Partly."

"What!"

She flushed crimson.

"I sold him the right to call me his wife and to – to make me so if I ever came to – care for him. That was the bargain – if you've got to know. The clergy did their part – "

"Do you mean – "

"Yes!" she said, exasperated. "I mean that it is no marriage, in

spite of law and clergy. And it never will be, because I hate him!"

Desboro looked at her in utter contempt.

"Do you know," he said, "what a rotten thing you have done?"

"Rotten!"

"Do you think it admirable?"

"I didn't sell myself wholesale. It might have been worse."

"You are wrong. Nothing worse could have happened."

"Then I don't care what else happens to me," she said, drawing off her gloves and unpinning her hat. "I shall not go back to him."

"You can't stay here."

"I will," she said excitedly. "I'm going to break with him – whether or not I can count on your loyalty to me – " Her voice broke childishly, and she bowed her head.

He caught his lip between his teeth for a moment. Then he said savagely:

"You ought not to have come here. There isn't one single thing to excuse it. Besides, you have just reminded me of my loyalty to you. Can't you understand that that includes your husband? Also, it isn't in me to forget that I once asked you to be my wife. Do you think I'd let you stand for anything less after that? Do you think I'm going to blacken my own face? I never asked any other woman to marry me, and this settles it – I never will! You've finished yourself and your sex for me!"

She was crying now, her head in her hands, and the bronze-red hair dishevelled, sagging between her long, white fingers.

He remained aloof, knowing her, and always afraid of her and

of himself together – a very deadly combination for mischief. And she remained bowed in the attitude of despair, her lithe young body shaken.

His was naturally a lightly irresponsible disposition, and it came very easily for him to console beauty in distress – or out of it, for that matter. Why he was now so fastidious with his conscience in regard to Mrs. Clydesdale he himself scarcely understood, except that he had once asked her to marry him; and that he knew her husband. These two facts seemed to keep him steady. Also, he rather liked her burly husband; and he had almost recovered from the very real pangs which had pierced him when she suddenly flung him over and married Clydesdale's millions.

One of the logs had burned out. He rose to replace it with another. When he returned to the sofa, she looked up at him so pitifully that he bent over and caressed her hair. And she put one arm around his neck, crying, uncomforted.

"It won't do," he said; "it won't do. And you know it won't, don't you? This whole business is dead wrong – dead rotten. But you mustn't cry, do you hear? Don't be frightened. If there's trouble, I'll stand by you, of course. Hush, dear, the house is full of servants. Loosen your arms, Elena! It isn't a square deal to your husband – or to you, or even to me. Unless people have an even chance with me – men or women – there's nothing dangerous about me. I never dealt with any man whose eyes were not wide open – nor with any woman, either. Cary's are shut; yours are blinded."

She sprang up and walked to the fire and stood there, her hands nervously clenching and unclenching.

"When I tell you that my eyes *are* wide open – that I don't care what I do – "

"But your husband's eyes are not open!"

"They ought to be. I left a note saying where I was going – that rather than be his wife I'd prefer to be your – "

"Stop! You don't know what you're talking about – you little idiot!" he broke out, furious. "The very words you use don't mean anything to you – except that you've read them in some fool's novel, or heard them on a degenerate stage – "

"My words will mean something to *him*, if I can make them!" she retorted hysterically, " – and if you really care for me – "

Through the throbbing silence Desboro seemed to see Clydesdale, bulky, partly sober, with his eternal grin and permanently-flushed skin, rambling about among his porcelains and enamels and jades and ivories, like a drugged elephant in a bric-a-brac shop. And yet, there had always been a certain kindly harmlessness and good nature about him that had always appealed to men.

He said, incredulously: "Did you write to him what you have just said to me?"

"Yes."

"You actually left such a note for him?"

"Yes, I did."

The silence lasted long enough for her to become uneasy.

Again and again she lifted her tear-swollen face to look at him, where he stood before the fire, but he did not even glance at her; and at last she murmured his name, and he turned.

"I guess you've done for us both," he said. "You're probably right; nobody would believe the truth after this."

She began to cry again silently.

He said: "You never gave your husband a chance. He was in love with you and you never gave him a chance. And you're giving yourself none, now. And as for me" – he laughed unpleasantly – "well, I'll leave it to you, Elena."

"I – I thought – if I burned my bridges and came to you – "

"What *did* you think?"

"That you'd stand by me, Jim."

"Have I any other choice?" he asked, with a laugh. "We seem to be a properly damned couple."

"Do – do you care for any other woman?"

"No."

"Then – then – "

"Oh, I am quite free to stand the consequences with you."

"Will you?"

"Can we escape them?"

"*You* could."

"I'm not in the habit of leaving a sinking ship," he said curtly.

"Then – you will marry me – when – " She stopped short and turned very white. After a moment the doorbell rang again.

Desboro glanced at the clock, then shrugged.

"Wh – who is it?" she faltered.

"It's probably somebody after you, Elena."

"It *can't* be. He wouldn't come, would he?"

The bell sounded again.

"What are you going to do?" she breathed.

"Do? Let him in."

"Who do you think it is?"

"Your husband, of course."

"Then – why are you going to let him in?"

"To talk it over with him."

"But – but I don't know what he'll do. I don't know him, I tell you. What do I know about him – except that he's big and red? How do I know what might be hidden behind that fixed grin of his?"

"Well, we'll find out in a minute or two," said Desboro coolly.

"Jim! You *must* stand by me now!"

"I've done it so far, haven't I? You needn't worry."

"You won't let him take me back! He can't, can he?"

"Not if you refuse to go. But you won't refuse – if he's man enough to ask you to return."

"But – suppose he won't ask me to go back?"

"In that case I'll stand for what you've done. I'll marry you if he means to disgrace you. Now let's see what he does mean."

She caught his sleeve as he passed her, then let it go. The steady ringing of the bell was confusing and terrifying her, and she glanced about her like a trapped creature, listening to the

distant jingling of chains and the click of bolts as Desboro undid the outer door.

Silence, then a far sound in the hall, footsteps coming nearer, nearer; and she dropped stiffly on the sofa as Desboro entered, followed by Cary Clydesdale in fur motor cap, coat and steaming goggles.

Desboro motioned her husband to a chair, but the man stood looking at his wife through his goggles, with a silly, fixed grin stamped on his features. Then he drew off the goggles and one fur gauntlet, fumbled in his overcoat, produced the crumpled note which she had left for him, laid it on the table between them, and sat down heavily, filling the leather armchair with his bulk. His bare red hand steamed. After a moment's silence, he pointed at the note.

"Well," she said, with an effort, "what of it! It's true – what this letter says."

"It isn't true yet, is it?" asked Clydesdale simply.

"What do you mean?"

But Desboro understood him, and answered for her with a calm shake of his head. Then the wife understood, too, and the deep colour dyed her skin from throat to brow.

"Why do you come here – after reading that?" She pointed at the letter. "Didn't you read it?"

Clydesdale passed his hand slowly over his perplexed eyes.

"I came to take you home. The car is here."

"Didn't you understand what I wrote? Isn't it plain enough?"

she demanded excitedly.

"No. You'd better get ready, Elena."

"Is that as much of a man as you are – when I tell you I'd rather be Mr. Desboro's – "

Something behind the fixed grin on her husband's face made her hesitate and falter. Then he swung heavily around and looked at Desboro.

"How much are you in this, anyway?" he asked, still grinning.

"Do you expect an answer?"

"I think I'll get one."

"I think you won't get one out of me."

"Oh. So you're at the bottom of it all, are you?"

"No doubt. A woman doesn't do such a thing unpersuaded. If you don't know enough to look after your own wife, there are plenty of men who'll apply for the job – as I did."

"You're a very rotten scoundrel, aren't you?" said Clydesdale, grinning.

"Oh, so-so."

Clydesdale sat very still, his grin unchanged, and Desboro looked him over coolly.

"Now, what do you want to do? You and Mrs. Clydesdale can remain here to-night if you wish. There are plenty of bedrooms – "

Clydesdale rose, bulking huge and menacing in his furs; but Desboro, sitting on the edge of the table, continued to swing one foot gently, smiling at danger.

And Clydesdale hesitated, then veered around toward his wife, with the heavy movement of a perplexed and tortured bear.

"Get your furs on," he said, in a dull voice.

"Do you wish me to go home?"

"Get your furs on!"

"Do you wish me to go home, Cary?"

"Yes. Good God! What do you suppose I came here for?"

She walked over to Desboro and held out her hand:

"No wonder women like you. Good-bye – and if I come again – may I remain?"

"Don't come," he said, smiling, and holding her coat for her.

Clydesdale strode forward, took the fur garment from Desboro's hands, and held it open. His wife looked up at him, shrugged her shoulders, and suffered him to invest her with the coat.

After a moment Desboro said:

"Clydesdale, I am not your enemy. I wish you good luck."

"You go to hell," said Clydesdale thickly.

Mrs. Clydesdale moved toward the door, her husband on one side, Desboro on the other, and so, along the hall in silence, and out to the porch, where the glare of the acetylenes lighted up the frozen drive.

"It feels like rain," observed Desboro. "Not a very gay outlook for Christmas. All the same, I wish you a happy one, Elena. And, really, I believe you could have it if you cared to."

"Thank you, Jim. You have been mistakenly kind to me. I

am afraid you will have to be crueller some day. Good-bye – till then."

Clydesdale had descended to the drive and was conferring with the chauffeur. Now he turned and looked up at his wife. She went down the steps beside Desboro, and he nodded good-night. Clydesdale put her into the limousine and then got in after her.

A few moments later the red tail-lamp of the motor disappeared among the trees bordering the drive, and Desboro turned and walked back into the house.

"That," he said aloud to himself, "settles the damned species for me! Let the next one look out for herself!"

He sauntered back into the library. The letter that she had left for her husband still lay on the table, apparently forgotten.

"A fine specimen of logic," he said. "She doesn't get on with him, so she decides to use Jim to jimmy the lock of wedlock! A white man can understand the Orientals better."

He glanced at the clock, and decided that there was no sense in going to bed, so he composed himself on the haircloth sofa once more, lighted a cigarette, and began to read, coolly using the note she had left, as a bookmark.

It was dawn before he closed the book and went away to bathe and change his attire.

While breakfasting he glanced out and saw that it had begun to rain. A green Christmas for day after to-morrow! And, thinking of Christmas, he thought of a girl he knew who usually wore blue, and what sort of a gift he had better send her when he went

to the city that morning.

But he didn't go. He called up a jeweler and gave directions what to send and where to send it.

Then, listless, depressed, he idled about the great house, putting off instinctively the paramount issue – the necessary investigation of his finances. But he had evaded it too long to attempt it lightly now. It was only a question of days before he'd have to take up in deadly earnest the question of how to pay his debts. He knew it; and it made him yawn with disgust.

After luncheon he wrote a letter to one Jean Louis Nevers, a New York dealer in antiques, saying that he would drop in some day after Christmas to consult Mr. Nevers on a matter of private business.

And that is as far as he got with his very vague plan for paying off an accumulation of debts which, at last, were seriously annoying him.

The remainder of the day he spent tramping about the woods of Westchester with a pack of nondescript dogs belonging to him. He liked to walk in the rain; he liked his mongrels.

In the evening he resumed his attitude of unstudied elegance on the sofa, also his book, using Mrs. Clydesdale's note again to mark his place.

Mrs. Quant ventured to knock, bringing some "magic drops," which he smilingly refused. Farris announced dinner, and he dined as usual, surrounded by dogs and cats, all very cordial toward the master of Silverwood, who was unvaryingly so just

and so kind to them.

After dinner he lighted a pipe, thought idly of the girl in blue, hoped she'd like his gift of aquamarines, and picked up his book again, yawning.

He had had about enough of Silverwood, and he was realising it. He had had more than enough of women, too.

The next day, riding one of his weedy hunters over Silverwood estate, he encountered the daughter of a neighbor, an old playmate of his when summer days were half a year long, and yesterdays immediately became embedded in the middle of the middle ages.

She was riding a fretful, handsome Kentucky three-year-old, and sitting nonchalantly to his exasperating and jiggling gait.

The girl was one Daisy Hammerton – the sort men call "square" and "white," and a "good fellow"; but she was softly rounded and dark, and very feminine.

She bade him good morning in a friendly voice; and her voice and manner might well have been different, for Desboro had not behaved very civilly toward her or toward her family, or to any of his Westchester neighbors for that matter; and the rumours of his behaviour in New York were anything but pleasant to a young girl's ears. So her cordiality was the more to her credit.

He made rather shame-faced inquiries about her and her parents, but she lightly put him at his ease, and they turned into the woods together on the old and unembarrassed terms of comradeship.

"Captain Herrendene is back. Did you know it?" she asked.

"Nice old bird," commented Desboro. "I must look him up. Where did he come from – Luzon?"

"Yes. He wrote us. Why don't you ask him up for the skating, Jim?"

"What skating?" said Desboro, with a laugh. "It will be a green Christmas, Daisy – it's going to rain again. Besides," he added, "I shan't be here much longer."

"Oh, I'm sorry."

He reddened. "You always were the sweetest thing in Westchester. Fancy your being sorry that I'm going back to town when I've never once ridden over to see you as long as I've been here!"

She laughed. "We've known each other too long to let such things make any real difference. But you *have* been a trifle negligent."

"Daisy, dear, I'm that way in everything. If anybody asked me to name the one person I would not neglect, I'd name you. But you see what happens – even to you! I don't know – I don't seem to have any character. I don't know what's the matter with me – "

"I'm afraid that you have no beliefs, Jim."

"How can I have any when the world is so rotten after nineteen hundred years of Christianity?"

"I have not found it rotten."

"No, because you live in a clean and wholesome circle."

"Why don't you, too? You can live where you please, can't

you?"

He laughed and waved his hand toward the horizon.

"You know what the Desboros have always been. You needn't pretend you don't. All Westchester has it in for us. But relief is in sight," he added, with mock seriousness. "I'm the last of 'em, and your children, Daisy, won't have to endure the morally painful necessity of tolerating anybody of my name in the county."

She smiled: "Jim, you could be so nice if you only would."

"What! With no beliefs?"

"They're so easily acquired."

"Not in New York town, Daisy."

"Perhaps not among the people you affect. But such people really count for so little – they are only a small but noisy section of a vast and quiet and wholesome community. And the noise and cynicism are both based on idleness, Jim. Nobody who is busy is destitute of beliefs. Nobody who is responsible can avoid ideals. "

"Quite right," he said. "I am idle and irresponsible. But, Daisy, it's as much part of me as are my legs and arms, and head and body. I am not stupid; I have plenty of mental resources; I am never bored; I enjoy my drift through life in an empty tub as much as the man who pulls furiously through it in a rowboat loaded with ambitions, ballasted with brightly moral resolves, and buffeted by the cross seas of duty and conscience. That's rather neat, isn't it?"

"You can't drift safely very long without ballast," said the girl, smiling.

"Watch me."

She did not answer that she had been watching him for the last few years, or tell him how it had hurt her to hear his name linked with the gossip of fashionably vapid doings among idle and vapid people. For his had been an inheritance of ability and culture, and the leisure to develop both. Out of idleness and easy virtue had at last emerged three generations of Desboros full of energy and almost ruthless ability – his great-grandfather, grandfather and father – but he, the fourth generation, was throwing back into the melting pot all that his father and grandfathers had carried from it – even the material part of it. Land and fortune, were beginning to disappear, together with the sturdy mental and moral qualities of a race that had almost overcome its vicious origin under the vicious Stuarts. Only the physical stamina as yet seemed to remain intact; for Desboro was good to look upon.

"An odd thing happened the other night – or, rather, early in the morning," she said. "We were awakened by a hammering at the door and a horn blowing – and guess who it was?"

"Not Gabriel – though you look immortally angelic to-day – "

"Thank you, Jim. No; it was Cary and Elena Clydesdale, saying that their car had broken down. What a ridiculous hour to be motoring! Elena was half dead with the cold, too. It seems they'd been to a party somewhere and were foolish enough to try to motor back to town. They stopped with us and took the noon train to town. Elena told me to give you her love; that's what reminded me."

"Give her mine when you see her," he said pleasantly.

When he returned to his house he sat down with a notion of trying to bring order out of the chaos into which his affairs had tumbled. But the mere sight of his desk, choked with unanswered letters and unpaid bills, sickened him, and he threw himself on the sofa and picked up his book, determined to rid himself of Silverwood House and all its curious, astonishing and costly contents.

"Tell Riley to be on hand Monday," he said to Mrs. Quant that evening. "I want the cases in the wing rooms and the stuff in the armoury cleaned up, because I expect a Mr. Nevers to come here and recatalogue the entire collection next week."

"Will you be at home, Mr. James?" she asked anxiously.

"No. I'm going South, duck-shooting. See that Mr. Nevers is comfortable if he chooses to remain here; for it will take him a week or two to do his work in the armoury, I suppose. So you'll have to start both furnaces to-morrow, and keep open fires going, or the man will freeze solid. You understand, don't you?"

"Yes, sir. And if you are going away, Mr. James, I could pack a little bottle of 'magic drops' – "

"By all means," he said, with good-humoured resignation.

He spent the evening fussing over his guns and ammunition, determined to go to New York in the morning. But he didn't; indecision had become a habit; he knew it, wondered a little at himself for his lack of decision.

He was deadly weary of Silverwood, but too lazy to leave; and

it made him think of the laziest dog on record, who yelped all day because he had sat down on a tack and was too lazy to get up.

So it was not until the middle of Christmas week that Desboro summoned up sufficient energy to start for New York. And when at last he was on the train, he made up his mind that he wouldn't return to Silverwood in a hurry.

But that plan was one of the mice-like plans men make so confidently under the eternal skies.

CHAPTER II

Desboro arrived in town on a late train. It was raining, so he drove to his rooms, exchanged his overcoat for a raincoat, and went out into the downpour again, undisturbed, disdaining an umbrella.

In a quarter of an hour's vigorous walking he came to the celebrated antique shop of Louis Nevers, and entered, letting in a gust of wind and rain at his heels.

Everywhere in the semi-gloom of the place objects loomed mysteriously, their outlines lost in shadow except where, here and there, a gleam of wintry daylight touched a jewel or fell across some gilded god, lotus-throned, brooding alone.

When Desboro's eyes became accustomed to the obscurity, he saw that there was armour there, complete suits, Spanish and Milanese, and an odd Morion or two; and there were jewels in old-time settings, tapestries, silver, ivories, Hispano-Moresque lustre, jades, crystals.

The subdued splendour of Chinese and Japanese armour, lacquered in turquoise, and scarlet and gold, glimmered on lay figures masked by grotesque helmets; an Ispahan rug, softly luminous, trailed across a table beside him, and on it lay a dead Sultan's scimitar, curved like the new moon, its slim blade inset with magic characters, the hilt wrought as delicately as the folded frond of a fern, graceful, exquisite, gem-incrusted.

There were a few people about the shop, customers and clerks, moving shapes in the dull light. Presently a little old salesman wearing a skull cap approached him.

"Rainy weather for Christmas week, sir. Can I be of service?"

"Thanks," said Desboro. "I came here by appointment on a matter of private business."

"Certainly, sir. I think Miss Nevers is not engaged. Kindly give me your card and I will find out."

"But I wish to see Mr. Nevers himself."

"Mr. Nevers is dead, sir."

"Oh! I didn't know – "

"Yes, sir. Mr. Nevers died two years ago." And, as Desboro remained silent and thoughtful: "Perhaps you might wish to see Miss Nevers? She has charge of everything now, including all our confidential affairs."

"No doubt," said Desboro pleasantly, "but this is an affair requiring personal judgment and expert advice – "

"I understand, sir. The gentlemen who came to see Mr. Nevers about matters requiring expert opinions now consult Miss Nevers personally."

"Who is *Miss* Nevers?"

"His daughter, sir." He added, with quaint pride: "The great jewelers of Fifth Avenue consult her; experts in our business often seek her advice. The Museum authorities have been pleased to speak highly of her monograph on Hurtado de Mendoza."

Desboro hesitated for a moment, then gave his card to the old salesman, who trotted away with it down the unlighted vista of the shop.

The young man's pleasantly indifferent glance rested on one object after another, not unintelligently, but without particular interest. Yet there were some very wonderful and very rare and beautiful things to be seen in the celebrated shop of the late Jean Louis Nevers.

So he stood, leaning on his walking stick, the upturned collar of his raincoat framing a face which was too colourless and worn for a man of his age; and presently the little old salesman came trotting back, the tassel on his neat silk cap bobbing with every step.

"Miss Nevers will be very glad to see you in her private office. This way, if you please, sir."

Desboro followed to the rear of the long, dusky shop, turned to the left through two more rooms full of shadowy objects dimly discerned, then traversed a tiled passage to where electric lights burned over a doorway.

The old man opened the door; Desboro entered and found himself in a square picture gallery, lighted from above, and hung all around with dark velvet curtains to protect the pictures on sale. As he closed the door behind him a woman at a distant desk turned her head, but remained seated, pen poised, looking across the room at him as he advanced. Her black gown blended so deceptively with the hangings that at first he could distinguish

only the white face and throat and hands against the shadows behind her.

"Will you kindly announce me to Miss Nevers?" he said, looking around for a chair.

"I am Miss Nevers."

She closed the ledger in which she had been writing, laid aside her pen and rose. As she came forward he found himself looking at a tall girl, slim to thinness, except for the rounded oval of her face under a loose crown of yellow hair, from which a stray lock sagged untidily, curling across her cheek.

He thought: "A blue-stocking prodigy of learning, with her hair in a mess, and painted at that." But he said politely, yet with that hint of idle amusement in his voice which often sounded through his speech with women:

"Are you the Miss Nevers who has taken over this antique business, and who writes monographs on Hurtado de Mendoza?"

"Yes."

"You appear to be very young to succeed such a distinguished authority as your father, Miss Nevers."

His observation did not seem to disturb her, nor did the faintest hint of mockery in his pleasant voice. She waited quietly for him to state his business.

He said: "I came here to ask somebody's advice about engaging an expert to appraise and catalogue my collection."

And even while he was speaking he was conscious that never before had he seen such a white skin and such red lips – if they

were natural. And he began to think that they might be.

He said, noticing the bright lock astray on her cheek once more:

"I suppose that I may speak to you in confidence – just as I would have spoken to your father."

She was still looking at him with the charm of youthful inquiry in her eyes.

"Certainly," she said.

She glanced down at his card which still lay on her blotter, stood a moment with her hand resting on the desk, then indicated a chair at her elbow and seated herself.

He took the chair.

"I wrote you that I'd drop in sometime this week. The note was directed to your father. I did not know he was not living."

"You are the Mr. Desboro who owns the collection of armour?" she asked.

"I am that James Philip Desboro who lives at Silverwood," he said. "Evidently you have heard of the Desboro collection of arms and armour."

"Everybody has, I think."

He said, carelessly: "Museums, amateur collectors, and students know it, and I suppose most dealers in antiques have heard of it."

"Yes, all of them, I believe."

"My house," he went on, "Silverwood, is in darkest Westchester, and my recent grandfather, who made the

collection, built a wing to contain it. It's there as he left it. My father made no additions to it. Nor," he added, "have I. Now I want to ask you whether a lot of those things have not increased in value since my grandfather's day?"

"No doubt."

"And the collection is valuable?"

"I think it must be – very."

"And to determine its value I ought to have an expert go there and catalogue it and appraise it?"

"Certainly."

"Who? That's what I've come here to find out."

"Perhaps you might wish us to do it."

"Is that still part of your business?"

"It is."

"Well," he said, after a moment's thought, "I am going to sell the Desboro collection."

"Oh, I'm sorry!" she exclaimed, under her breath; and looked up to find him surprised and beginning to be amused again.

"Your attitude is not very professional – for a dealer in antiques," he said quizzically.

"I am something else, too, Mr. Desboro." She had flushed a little, not responding to his lighter tone.

"I am very sure you are," he said. "Those who really know about and care for such collections must feel sorry to see them dispersed."

"I had hoped that the Museum might have the Desboro

collection some day," she said, in a low voice.

He said: "I am sorry it is not to be so," and had the grace to redden a trifle.

She played with her pen, waiting for him to continue; and she was so young, and fresh, and pretty that he was in no hurry to finish. Besides, there was something about her face that had been interesting him – an expression which made him think sometimes that she was smiling, or on the verge of it. But the slightly upcurled corners of her mouth had been fashioned so by her Maker, or perhaps had become so from some inborn gaiety of heart, leaving a faint, sweet imprint on her lips.

To watch her was becoming a pleasure. He wondered what her smile might be like – all the while pretending an absent-minded air which cloaked his idle curiosity.

She waited, undisturbed, for him to come to some conclusion. And all the while he was thinking that her lips were perhaps just a trifle too full – that there was more of Aphrodite in her face than of any saint he remembered; but her figure was thin enough for any saint. Perhaps a course of banquets – perhaps a régime under a diet list warranted to improve —

"Did you ever see the Desboro collection, Miss Nevers?" he asked vaguely.

"No."

"What expert will you send to catalogue and appraise it?"

"*I* could go."

"You!" he said, surprised and smiling.

"That is my profession."

"I knew, of course, that it was your father's. But I never supposed that you – "

"Did you wish to have an appraisement made, Mr. Desboro?" she interrupted dryly.

"Why, yes, I suppose so. Otherwise, I wouldn't know what to ask for anything."

"Have you really decided to sell that superb collection?" she demanded.

"What else can I do?" he inquired gayly. "I suppose the Museum ought to have it, but I can't afford to give it away or to keep it. In other words – and brutal ones – I need money."

She said gravely: "I am sorry."

And he knew she didn't mean that she was sorry because he needed money, but because the Museum was not to have the arms, armour, jades, and ivories. Yet, somehow, her "I am sorry" sounded rather sweet to him.

For a while he sat silent, one knee crossed over the other, twisting the silver crook of his stick. From moment to moment she raised her eyes from the blotter to let them rest inquiringly on him, then went on tracing arabesques over her blotter with an inkless pen. One slender hand was bracketed on her hip, and he noticed the fingers, smooth and rounded as a child's. Nor could he keep his eyes from her profile, with its delicate, short nose, ever so slightly arched, and its lips, just a trifle too sensuous – and that soft lock astray again against her cheek. No, her hair was

not dyed, either. And it was as though she divined his thought, for she looked up suddenly from her blotter and he instantly gazed elsewhere, feeling guilty and impertinent – sentiments not often experienced by that young man.

"I'll tell you what I'll do, Miss Nevers," he concluded, "I'll write you a letter to my housekeeper, Mrs. Quant. Shall I? And you'll go up and look over the collection and let me know what you think of it!"

"Do you not expect to be there?"

"Ought I to be?"

"I really can't answer you, but it seems to me rather important that the owner of a collection should be present when the appraiser begins work."

"The fact is," he said, "I'm booked for a silly shooting trip. I'm supposed to start to-morrow."

"Then perhaps you had better write the letter. My full name is Jacqueline Nevers – if you require it. You may use my desk."

She rose; he thanked her, seated himself, and began a letter to Mrs. Quant, charging her to admit, entertain, and otherwise particularly cherish one Miss Jacqueline Nevers, and give her the keys to the armoury.

While he was busy, Jacqueline Nevers paced the room backward and forward, her pretty head thoughtfully bent, hands clasped behind her, moving leisurely, absorbed in her cogitations.

Desboro ended his letter and sat for a moment watching her until, happening to glance at him, she discovered his idleness.

"Have you finished?" she asked.

A trifle out of countenance he rose and explained that he had, and laid the letter on her blotter. Realising that she was expecting him to take his leave, he also realised that he didn't want to. And he began to spar with Destiny for time.

"I suppose this matter will require several visits from you," he inquired.

"Yes, several."

"It takes some time to catalogue and appraise such a collection, doesn't it?"

"Yes."

She answered him very sweetly but impersonally, and there seemed to be in her brief replies no encouragement for him to linger. So he started to pick up his hat, thinking as fast as he could all the while; and his facile wits saved him at the last moment.

"Well, upon my word!" he exclaimed. "Do you know that you and I have not yet discussed terms?"

"We make our usual charges," she said.

"And what are those?"

She explained briefly.

"That is for cataloguing and appraising only?"

"Yes."

"And if you sell the collection?"

"We take our usual commission."

"And you think you *can* sell it for me?"

"I'll have to – won't I?"

He laughed. "But *can* you?"

"Yes."

As the curt affirmative fell from her lips, suddenly, under all her delicate, youthful charm, Desboro divined the note of hidden strength, the self-confidence of capability – oddly at variance with her allure of lovely immaturity. Yet he might have surmised it, for though her figure was that of a girl, her face, for all its soft, fresh beauty, was a woman's, and already firmly moulded in noble lines which even the scarlet fulness of the lips could not deny. For if she had the mouth of Aphrodite, she had her brow, also.

He had not been able to make her smile, although the upcurled corners of her mouth seemed always to promise something. He wondered what her expression might be like when animated – even annoyed. And his idle curiosity led him on to the edges of impertinence.

"May I say something that I have in mind and not offend you?" he asked.

"Yes – if you wish." She lifted her eyes.

"Do you think you are old enough and experienced enough to catalogue and appraise such an important collection as this one? I thought perhaps you might prefer not to take such a responsibility upon yourself, but would rather choose to employ some veteran expert."

She was silent.

"Have I offended you?"

She walked slowly to the end of the room, turned, and, passing him a third time, looked up at him and laughed – a most enchanting little laugh – a revelation as delightful as it was unexpected.

"I believe you really *want* to do it yourself!" he exclaimed.

"*Want* to? I'm dying to! I don't think there is anything in the world I had rather try!" she said, with a sudden flush and sparkle of recklessness that transfigured her. "Do you suppose anybody in my business would willingly miss the chance of personally handling such a transaction? Of *course* I want to. Not only because it would be a most creditable transaction for this house – not only because it would be a profitable business undertaking, but" – and the swift, engaging smile parted her lips once more – "in a way I feel as though my own ability had been questioned – "

"By me?" he protested. "Did I actually dare question your ability?"

"Something very like it. So, naturally, I would seize an opportunity to vindicate myself – if you offer it – "

"I do offer it," he said.

"I accept."

There was a moment's indecisive silence. He picked up his hat and stick, lingering still; then:

"Good-bye, Miss Nevers. When are you going up to Silverwood?"

"To-morrow, if it is quite convenient."

"Entirely. I may be there. Perhaps I can fix it – put off that

shooting party for a day or two."

"I hope so."

"I hope so, too."

He walked reluctantly toward the door, turned and came all the way back.

"Perhaps you had rather I remained away from Silverwood."

"Why?"

"But, of course," he said, "there is a nice old housekeeper there, and a lot of servants – "

She laughed. "Thank you very much, Mr. Desboro. It is very nice of you, but I had not considered that at all. Business women must disregard such conventions, if they're to compete with men. I'd like you to be there, because I may have questions to ask."

"Certainly – it's very good of you. I – I'll try to be there – "

"Because I might have some very important questions to ask you," she repeated.

"Of course. I've got to be there. Haven't I?"

"It might be better for your interests."

"Then I'll be there. Well, good-bye, Miss Nevers."

"Good-bye, Mr. Desboro."

"And thank you for undertaking it," he said cordially.

"Thank *you* for asking me."

"Oh, I'm – I'm really delighted. It's most kind of *you*. *Good*-bye, Miss Nevers."

"*Good*-bye, Mr. Desboro."

He had to go that time; and he went still retaining a confused

vision of blue eyes and vivid lips, and of a single lock of hair astray once more across a smooth, white cheek.

When he had gone, Jacqueline seated herself at her desk and picked up her pen. She remained so for a while, then emerged abruptly from a fit of abstraction and sorted some papers unnecessarily. When she had arranged them to her fancy, she rearranged them. Then the little Louis XVI desk interested her, and she examined the inset placques of flowered Sèvres in detail, as though the little desk of tulip, satinwood and walnut had not stood there since she was a child.

Later she noticed his card on her blotter; and, face framed in her hands, she studied it so long that the card became a glimmering white patch and vanished; and before her remote gaze his phantom grew out of space, seated there in the empty chair beside her – the loosened collar of his raincoat revealing to her the most attractive face of any man she had ever looked upon in her twenty-two years of life.

Toward evening the electric lamps were lighted in the shop; rain fell more heavily outside; few people entered. She was busy with ledgers and files of old catalogues recording auction sales, the name of the purchaser and the prices pencilled on the margins in her father's curious handwriting. Also her card index aided her. Under the head of "Desboro" she was able to note what objects of interest or of art her father had bought for her recent visitor's grandfather, and the prices paid – little, indeed, in those days, compared with what the same objects would now bring. And,

continuing her search, she finally came upon an uncompleted catalogue of the Desboro collection. It was in manuscript – her father's peculiar French chirography – neat and accurate as far as it went.

Everything bearing upon the Desboro collection she bundled together and strapped with rubber bands; then, one by one, the clerks and salesmen came to report to her before closing up. She locked the safe, shut her desk, and went out to the shop, where she remained until the shutters were clamped and the last salesman had bade her a cheery good night. Then, bolting the door and double-locking it, she went back along the passage and up the stairs, where she had the two upper floors to herself, and a cook and chambermaid to keep house for her.

In the gaslight of the upper apartment she seemed even more slender than by daylight – her eyes bluer, her lips more scarlet. She glanced into the mirror of her dresser as she passed, pausing to twist up the unruly lock that had defied her since childhood.

Everywhere in the room Christmas was still in evidence – a tiny tree, with frivolous, glittering things still twisted and suspended among the branches, calendars, sachets, handkerchiefs still gaily tied in ribbons, flowering shrubs swathed in tissue and bows of tulle – these from her salesmen, and she had carefully but pleasantly maintained the line of demarcation by presenting each with a gold piece.

But there were other gifts – gloves and stockings, and bonbons, and books, from the friends who were girls when she too

was a child at school; and a set of volumes from Cary Clydesdale whose collection of jades she was cataloguing. The volumes were very beautiful and expensive. The gift had surprised her.

Among her childhood friends was her social niche; the circumference of their circle the limits of her social environment. They came to her and she went to them; their pastimes and pleasures were hers; and if there was not, perhaps, among them her intellectual equal, she had not yet felt the need of such companionship, but had been satisfied to have them hold her as a good companion who otherwise possessed much strange and perhaps useless knowledge quite beyond their compass. And she was shyly content with her intellectual isolation.

So, amid these people, she had found a place prepared for her when she emerged from childhood. What lay outside of this circle she surmised with the intermittent curiosity of ignorance, or of a bystander who watches a pageant for a moment and hastens on, preoccupied with matters more familiar.

All young girls think of pleasures; she had thought of them always when the day's task was ended, and she had sought them with all the ardour of youth, with a desire unwearied, and a thirst unquenched.

In her, mental and physical pleasure were wholesomely balanced; the keen delight of intellectual experience, the happiness of research and attainment, went hand in hand with a rather fastidious appetite for having the best time that circumstances permitted.

She danced when she had a chance, went to theatres and restaurants with her friends, bathed at Manhattan in summer, when gay parties were organised, and did the thousand innocent things that thousands of young business girls do whose lines are cast in the metropolis.

Since her father's death she had been intensely lonely; only a desperate and steady application to business had pulled her through the first year without a breakdown.

The second year she rejoined her friends and went about again with them. Now, the third year since her father's death was already dawning; and her last prayer as the old year died had been that the new one would bring her friends and happiness.

Seated before the wood fire in her bedroom, leisurely undressing, she thought of Desboro and the business that concerned him. He was so very good looking – in the out-world manner – the manner of those who dwelt outside her orbit.

She had not been very friendly with him at first. She had wanted to be; instinct counselled reserve, and she had listened – until the very last. He had a way of laughing at her in every word – in even an ordinary business conversation. She had been conscious all the while of his half-listless interest in her, of an idle curiosity, which, before it had grown offensive, had become friendly and at times almost boyish in its naïve self-disclosure. And it made her smile to remember how very long it took him to take his leave.

But – a man of that kind – a man of the out-world – with the

something in his face that betrays shadows which she had never seen cast – and never would see —*he* was no boy. For in his face was the faint imprint of that pallid wisdom which warned. Women in his own world might ignore the warning; perhaps it did not menace them. But instinct told her that it might be different outside that world.

She nestled into her fire-warmed bath-robe and sat pensively fitting and refitting her bare feet into her slippers.

Men were odd; alike and unalike. Since her father's death, she had had to be careful. Wealthy gentlemen, old and young, amateurs of armour, ivories, porcelains, jewels, all clients of her father, had sometimes sent for her too many times on too many pretexts; and sometimes their paternal manner toward her had made her uncomfortable. Desboro was of that same caste. Perhaps he was not like them otherwise.

When she had bathed and dressed, she dined alone, not having any invitation for the evening. After dinner she talked on the telephone to her little friend, Cynthia Lessler, whose late father's business had been to set jewels and repair antique watches and clocks. Incidentally, he drank and chased his daughter about with a hatchet until she fled for good one evening, which afforded him an opportunity to drink himself very comfortably to death in six months.

"Hello, Cynthia!" called Jacqueline, softly.

"Hello! Is it you, Jacqueline, dear?"

"Yes. Don't you want to come over and eat chocolates and

gossip?"

"Can't do it. I'm just starting for the hall."

"I thought you'd finished rehearsing."

"I've got to be on hand all the same. How are you, sweetness, anyway?"

"Blooming, my dear. I'm crazy to tell you about my good luck. I have a splendid commission with which to begin the new year."

"Good for you! What is it?"

"I can't tell you yet" – laughingly – "it's confidential business – "

"Oh, I know. Some old, fat man wants you to catalogue his collection."

"No! He isn't fat, either. You *are* the limit, Cynthia!"

"All the same, look out for him," retorted Cynthia. "*I* know man and his kind. Office experience is a liberal education; the theatre a post-graduate course. Are you coming to the dance to-morrow night?"

"Yes. I suppose the usual people will be there?"

"Some new ones. There's an awfully good-looking newspaper man from Yonkers. He has a car in town, too."

Something – some new and unaccustomed impatience – she did not understand exactly what – prompted Jacqueline to say scornfully:

"His name is Eddie, isn't it?"

"No. Why do you ask?"

A sudden vision of Desboro, laughing at her under every word

of an unsmiling and commonplace conversation, annoyed her.

"Oh, Cynthia, dear, every good-looking man we meet is usually named Ed and comes from places like Yonkers."

Cynthia, slightly perplexed, said slangily that she didn't "get" her; and Jacqueline admitted that she herself didn't know what she had meant.

They gossiped for a while, then Cynthia ended:

"I'll see you to-morrow night, won't I? And listen, you little white mouse, I get what you mean by 'Eddie'."

"Do you?"

"Yes. Shall I see you at the dance?"

"Yes, and 'Eddie,' too. Good-bye."

Jacqueline laughed again, then shivered slightly and hung up the receiver.

Back before her bedroom fire once more, Grenville's volume on ancient armour across her knees, she turned the illuminated pages absently, and gazed into the flames. What she saw among them apparently did not amuse her, for after a while she frowned, shrugged her shoulders, and resumed her reading.

But the XV century knights, in their gilded or silvered harness, had Desboro's lithe figure, and the lifted vizors of their helmets always disclosed his face. Shields emblazoned with quarterings, plumed armets, the golden morions, banner, pennon, embroidered surtout, and the brilliant trappings of battle horse and palfry, became only a confused blur of colour under her eyes, framing a face that looked back at her out of youthful

eyes, marred by the shadow of a wisdom she knew about – alas – but did not know.

The man of whom she was thinking had walked back to the club through a driving rain, still under the fascination of the interview, still excited by its novelty and by her unusual beauty. He could not quite account for his exhilaration either, because, in New York, beauty is anything but unusual among the hundreds of thousands of young women who work for a living – for that is one of the seven wonders of the city – and it is the rule rather than the exception that, in this new race which is evolving itself out of an unknown amalgam, there is scarcely a young face in which some trace of it is not apparent at a glance.

Which is why, perhaps, he regarded his present exhilaration humorously, or meant to; perhaps why he chose to think of her as "Stray Lock," instead of Miss Nevers, and why he repeated confidently to himself: "She's thin as a Virgin by the 'Master of the Death of Mary'." And yet that haunting expression of her face – the sweetness of the lips upcurled at the corners – the surprising and lovely revelation of her laughter – these impressions persisted as he swung on through the rain, through the hurrying throngs just released from shops and great department stores, and onward up the wet and glimmering avenue to his destination, which was the Olympian Club.

In the cloak room there were men he knew, being divested of wet hats and coats; in reading room, card room, lounge, billiard hall, squash court, and gymnasium, men greeted him with that

friendly punctiliousness which indicates popularity; from the splashed edge of the great swimming pool men hailed him; clerks and club servants saluted him smilingly as he sauntered about through the place, still driven into motion by an inexplicable and unaccustomed restlessness. Cairns discovered him coming out of the billiard room:

"Have a snifter?" he suggested affably. "I'll find Ledyard and play you 'nigger' or 'rabbit' afterward, if you like."

Desboro laid a hand on his friend's shoulder:

"Jack, I've a business engagement at Silverwood to-morrow, and I believe I'd better go home to-night."

"Heavens! You've just been there! And what about the shooting trip?"

"I can join you day after to-morrow."

"Oh, come, Jim, are you going to spoil our card quartette on the train? Reggie Ledyard will kill you."

"He might, at that," said Desboro pleasantly. "But I've got to be at Silverwood to-morrow. It's a matter of business, Jack."

"*You* and business! Lord! The amazing alliance! What are you going to do – sell a few superannuated Westchester hens at auction? By heck! You're a fake farmer and a pitiable piker, that's what *you* are. And Stuyve Van Alstyne had a wire to-night that the ducks and geese are coming in to the guns by millions – "

"Go ahead and shoot 'em, then! I'll probably be along in time to pick up the game for you."

"You won't go with us?"

"Not to-morrow. A man can't neglect his own business *every* day in the year."

"Then you won't be in Baltimore for the Assembly, and you won't go to Georgia, and you won't do a thing that you expected to. Oh, you're the gay, quick-change artist! And don't tell me it's business, either," he added suspiciously.

"I *do* tell you exactly that."

"You mean to say that nothing except sheer, dry business keeps you here?"

The colour slowly settled under Desboro's cheek bones:

"It's a matter with enough serious business in it to keep me busy to-morrow – "

"Selecting pearls? In which show and which row does she cavort, dear friend – speaking in an exquisitely colloquial metaphor!"

Desboro shrugged: "I'll play you a dozen games of rabbit before we dress for dinner. Come on, you suspicious sport!"

"Which show?" repeated Cairns obstinately. He did not mean it literally, footlight affairs being unfashionable. But Desboro's easy popularity with women originated continual gossip, friendly and otherwise; and his name was often connected harmlessly with that of some attractive woman in his own class – like Mrs. Clydesdale, for instance – and sometimes with some pretty unknown in some class not specified. But the surmise was idle, and the gossip vague, and neither the one nor the other disturbed Desboro, who continued to saunter through life keeping his

personal affairs pleasantly to himself.

He linked his arm in Cairns's and guided him toward the billiard room. But there were no tables vacant for rabbit, which absurd game, being hard on the cloth, was limited to two decrepit pool tables.

So Cairns again suggested his celebrated "snifter," and then the young men separated, Desboro to go across the street to his elaborate rooms and dress, already a little less interested in his business trip to Silverwood, already regretting the gay party bound South for two weeks of pleasure.

And when he had emerged from a cold shower which, with the exception of sleep, is the wisest counsellor in the world, now that he stood in fresh linen and evening dress on the threshold of another night, he began to wonder at his late exhilaration.

To him the approach of every night was always fraught with mysterious possibilities, and with a belief in Chance forever new. Adventure dawned with the electric lights; opportunity awoke with the evening whistles warning all labourers to rest. Opportunity for what? He did not know; he had not even surmised; but perhaps it was that *something*, that subtle, evanescent, volatile *something* for which the world itself waits instinctively, and has been waiting since the first day dawned. Maybe it is happiness for which the world has waited with patient instinct uneradicated; maybe it is death; and after all, the two may be inseparable.

Desboro, looking into the coals of a dying fire, heard the clock

striking the hour. The night was before him – those strange hours in which anything could happen before another sun gilded the sky pinnacles of the earth.

Another hour sounded and found him listless, absent-eyed, still gazing into a dying fire.

CHAPTER III

At eleven o'clock the next morning Miss Nevers had not arrived at Silverwood.

It was still raining hard, the brown Westchester fields, the leafless trees, hedges, paths, roads, were soaked; pools stood in hollows with the dead grass awash; ditches brimmed, river and brook ran amber riot, and alder swamps widened into lakes.

The chances were now that she would not come at all. Desboro had met both morning trains, but she was not visible, and all the passengers had departed leaving him wandering alone along the dripping platform.

For a while he stood moodily on the village bridge beyond, listening to the noisy racket of the swollen brook; and after a little it occurred to him that there was laughter in the noises of the water, like the mirth of the gods mocking him.

"Laugh on, high ones!" he said. "I begin to believe myself the ass that I appear to you."

Presently he wandered back to the station platform, where he idled about, playing with a stray and nondescript dog or two, and caressing the station-master's cat; then, when he had about decided to get into his car and go home, it suddenly occurred to him that he might telephone to New York for information. And he did so, and learned that Miss Nevers had departed that morning on business, for a destination unknown, and would not

return before evening.

Also, the station-master informed him that the morning express now deposited passengers at Silverwood Station, on request – an innovation of which he had not before heard; and this put him into excellent spirits.

"Aha!" he said to himself, considerably elated. "Perhaps I'm not such an ass as I appear. Let the high gods laugh!"

So he lighted a cigarette, played with the wastrel dogs some more, flattered the cat till she nearly rubbed her head off against his legs, took a small and solemn child onto his knee and presented it with a silver dollar, while its overburdened German mother publicly nourished another.

"You are really a remarkable child," he gravely assured the infant on his knee. "You possess a most extraordinary mind!" – the child not having uttered a word or betrayed a vestige of human expression upon its slightly soiled features.

Presently the near whistle of the Connecticut Express brought him to his feet. He lifted the astonishingly gifted infant and walked out; and when the express rolled past and stopped, he set it on the day-coach platform beside its stolid parent, and waved to it an impressive adieu.

At the same moment, descending from the train, a tall young girl, in waterproofs, witnessed the proceedings, recognised Desboro, and smiled at the little ceremony taking place.

"Yours?" she inquired, as, hat off, hand extended, he came forward to welcome her – and the next moment blushed at her

impulsive informality.

"Oh, all kids seem to be mine, somehow or other," he said. "I'm awfully glad you came. I was afraid you wouldn't."

"Why?"

"Because I didn't believe you really existed, for one thing. And then the weather – "

"Do you suppose mere *weather* could keep me from the Desboro collection? You have much to learn about me."

"I'll begin lessons at once," he said gaily, "if you don't mind giving them. Do you?"

She smiled non-committally, and looked around her at the departing vehicles.

"We have a limousine waiting for us behind the station," he said. "It's five muddy miles."

"I had been wondering all the way up in the train just how I was to get to Silverwood – "

"You didn't suppose I'd leave you to find your way, did you?"

"Business people don't expect limousines," she said, with an unmistakable accent that sounded priggish even to herself – so prim, indeed, that he laughed outright; and she finally laughed, too.

"This is very jolly, isn't it?" he remarked, as they sped away through the rain.

She conceded that it was.

"It's going to be a most delightful day," he predicted.

She thought it was likely to be a *busy* day.

"And delightful, too," he insisted politely.

"Why particularly delightful, Mr. Desboro?"

"I thought you were looking forward with keen pleasure to your work in the Desboro collection!"

She caught a latent glimmer of mischief in his eye, and remained silent, not yet quite certain that she liked this constant running fire of words that always seemed to conceal a hint of laughter at her expense.

Had they been longer acquainted, and on a different footing, she knew that whatever he said would have provoked a response in kind from her. But friendship is not usually born from a single business interview; nor is it born perfect, like a fairy ring, over night. And it was only last night, she made herself remember, that she first laid eyes on Desboro. Yet it seemed curious that whatever he said seemed to awaken in her its echo; and, though she knew it was an absurd idea, the idea persisted that she already began to understand this young man better than she had ever understood any other of his sex.

He was talking now at random, idly but agreeably, about nothing in particular. She, muffled in the fur robe, looked out through the limousine windows into the rain, and saw brown fields set with pools in every furrow, and squares of winter wheat, intensely green.

And now the silver birch woods, which had given the house its name, began to appear as outlying clumps across the hills; and in a few moments the car swung into a gateway under groves

of solemnly-dripping Norway spruces, then up a wide avenue, lined with ranks of leafless, hardwood trees and thickets of laurel and rhododendron, and finally stopped before a house made of grayish-brown stone, in the rather inoffensive architecture of early eighteen hundred.

Mrs. Quant, in best bib and tucker, received them in the hallway, having been instructed by Desboro concerning her attitude toward the expected guest. But when she became aware of the slender youth of the girl, she forgot her sniffs and misgivings, and she waddled, and bobbed, and curtsied, overflowing with a desire to fondle, and cherish, and instruct, which only fear of Desboro choked off.

But as soon as Jacqueline had followed her to the room assigned, and had been divested of wet outer-clothing, and served with hot tea, Mrs. Quant became loquacious and confidential concerning her own personal ailments and sorrows, and the history and misfortunes of the Desboro family.

Jacqueline wished to decline the cup of tea, but Mrs. Quant insisted; and the girl yielded.

"Air you sure you feel well, Miss Nevers?" she asked anxiously.

"Why, of course."

"Don't be *too* sure," said Mrs. Quant ominously. "Sometimes them that feels bestest is sickest. I've seen a sight of sickness in my day, dearie – typod, mostly. You ain't never had typod, now, hev you?"

"Typhoid?"

"Yes'm, typod!"

"No, I never did."

"Then you take an old woman's advice, Miss Nevers, and don't you go and git it!"

Jacqueline promised gravely; but Mrs. Quant was now fairly launched on her favourite topic.

"I've been forty-two years in this place – and Quant – my man – he was head farmer here when he was took. Typod, it was, dearie – and you won't never git it if you'll listen to me – and Quant, a man that never quarreled with his vittles, but he was for going off without 'em that morning. Sez he, 'Cassie, I don't feel good this mornin'!' – and a piece of pie and a pork chop layin' there onto his plate. 'My vittles don't set right,' sez he; 'I ain't a mite peckish.' Sez I, 'Quant, you lay right down, and don't you stir a inch! You've gone and got a mild form of typod,' sez I, knowing about sickness as I allus had a gift, my father bein' a natural bone-setter. And those was my very words, dearie, 'a mild form of typod.' And I was right and he was took. And when folks ain't well, it's mostly that they've got a mild form of typod which some call malairy – "

There was no stopping her; Jacqueline tasted her hot tea and listened sympathetically to that woman of many sorrows. And, sipping her tea, she was obliged to assist at the obsequies of Quant, the nativity of young Desboro, the dissolution of his grandparents and parents, and many, many minor details,

such as the freezing of water-pipes in 1907, the menace of the chestnut blight, mysterious maladies which had affected cattle and chickens on the farm – every variety of death, destruction, dissolution, and despondency that had been Mrs. Quant's portion to witness.

And how she gloried in detailing her dismal career; and presently pessimistic prophecies for the future became plainer as her undammed eloquence flowed on:

"And Mr. James, *he* ain't well, neither," she said in a hoarse whisper. "He don't know it, and he won't listen to *me*, dearie, but I *know* he's got a mild form of typod – he's that unwell the mornings when he's been out late in the city. Say what you're a mind to, typod is typod! And if you h'ain't got it you're likely to git it most any minute; but he won't swaller the teas and broths and suffusions I bring him, and he'll be took like everybody else one of these days, dearie – which he wouldn't if he'd listen to me – "

"Mrs. Quant," came Desboro's voice from the landing.

"Y – yes, sir," stammered that guilty and agitated Cassandra.

Jacqueline set aside her teacup and came to the stairs; their glances met in the suppressed amusement of mutual comprehension, and he conducted her to the hallway below, where a big log fire was blazing.

"What was it – death, destruction, and general woe, as usual?" he asked.

"And typod," she whispered. "It appears that *you* have it!"

"Poor old soul! She means all right; but imagine me here with her all day, dodging infusions and broths and red flannel! Warm your hands at the blaze, Miss Nevers, and I'll find the armoury keys. It will be a little colder in there."

She spread her hands to the flames, conscious of his subtle change of manner toward her, now that she was actually under his roof – and liked him for it – not in the least surprised that she was comprehending still another phase of this young man's most interesting personality.

For, without reasoning, her slight misgivings concerning him were vanishing; instinct told her she might even permit herself a friendlier manner, and she looked up smilingly when he came back swinging a bunch of keys.

"These belong to the Quant," he explained, " – honest old soul! Every gem and ivory and lump of jade in the collection is at her mercy, for here are the keys to every case. Now, Miss Nevers, what do you require? Pencil and pad?"

"I have my note-book, thanks – a new one in your honour."

He said he was flattered and led the way through a wide corridor to the eastern wing; unlocked a pair of massive doors, and swung them wide. And, beside him, she walked into the armoury of the famous Desboro collection.

Straight ahead of her, paved with black marble, lay a lane through a double rank of armed and mounted men in complete armour; and she could scarcely suppress a little cry of surprise and admiration.

"This is magnificent!" she exclaimed; and he saw her cheeks brighten, and her breath coming faster.

"It *is* fine," he said soberly.

"It is, indeed, Mr. Desboro! That is a noble array of armour. I feel like some legendary princess of long ago, passing her chivalry in review as I move between these double ranks. What a *wonderful* collection! All Spanish and Milanese mail, isn't it? Your grandfather specialised?"

"I believe he did. I don't know very much about the collection, technically."

"Don't you care for it?"

"Why, yes – more, perhaps, than I realised – now that you are actually here to take it away."

"But I'm not going to put it into a magic pocket and flee to New York with it!"

She spoke gaily, and his face, which had become a little grave, relaxed into its habitual expression of careless good humour.

They had slowly traversed the long lane, and now, turning, came back through groups of men-at-arms, pikemen, billmen, arquebussiers, crossbowmen, archers, halbardiers, slingers – all the multitudinous arms of a polyglot service, each apparently equipped with his proper weapon and properly accoutred for trouble.

Once or twice she glanced at the trophies aloft on the walls, every group bunched behind its shield and radiating from it under the drooping remnants of banners emblazoned with arms, crests,

insignia, devices, and quarterings long since forgotten, except by such people as herself.

She moved gracefully, leisurely, pausing now and then before some panoplied manikin, Desboro sauntering beside her. Now and then she stopped to inspect an ancient piece of ordnance, wonderfully wrought and chased, now and then halted on tip-toe to lift some slitted visor and peer into the dusky cavern of the helmet, where a painted face stared back at her out of painted eyes.

"Who scours all this mail?" she asked.

"Our old armourer. My grandfather trained him. But he's very old and rheumatic now, and I don't let him exert himself. I think he sleeps all winter, like a woodchuck, and fishes all summer."

"You ought to have another armourer."

"I can't turn Michael out to starve, can I?"

She swung around swiftly: "I didn't mean *that*!" and saw he was laughing at her.

"I know you didn't," he said. "But I can't afford two armourers. That's the reason I'm disposing of these tin-clothed tenants of mine – to economise and cut expenses."

She moved on, evidently desiring to obtain a general impression of the task before her, now and then examining the glass-encased labels at the feet of the figures, and occasionally shaking her head. Already the errant lock curled across her cheek.

"What's the trouble?" he inquired. "Aren't these gentlemen

correctly ticketed?"

"Some are not. That suit of gilded mail is not Spanish; it's German. It is not very difficult to make such a mistake sometimes."

Steam heat had been put in, but the vast hall was chilly except close to the long ranks of oxidised pipes lining the walls. They stood a moment, leaning against them and looking out across the place, all glittering with the mail-clad figures.

"I've easily three weeks' work before me among these mounted figures alone, to say nothing of the men on foot and the trophies and artillery," she said. "Do you know it is going to be rather expensive for you, Mr. Desboro?"

This did not appear to disturb him.

"Because," she went on, "a great many mistakes have been made in labelling, and some mistakes in assembling the complete suits of mail and in assigning weapons. For example, that mounted man in front of you is wearing tilting armour and a helmet that doesn't belong to it. That's a childish mistake."

"We'll put the proper lid on *him*," said Desboro. "Show it to me and I'll put it all over him now."

"It's up there aloft with the trophies, I think – the fifth group."

"There's a ladder on wheels for a closer view of the weapons. Shall I trundle it in?"

He went out into the hallway and presently came back pushing a clanking extension ladder with a railed top to it. Then he affixed the crank and began to grind until it rose to the desired height.

"All I ask of you is not to tumble off it," he said. "Do you promise?"

She promised with mock seriousness: "Because I need *all* my brains, you see."

"You've a lot of 'em, haven't you, Miss Nevers?"

"No, not many."

He shrugged: "I wonder, then, what a quantitative analysis of *mine* might produce."

She said: "You are as clever as you take the trouble to be – " and stopped herself short, unwilling to drift into personalities.

"It's the interest that is lacking in me," he said, " – or perhaps the incentive."

She made no comment.

"Don't you think so?"

"I don't know."

" – And don't care," he added.

She flushed, half turned in protest, but remained silent.

"I beg your pardon," he said, "I didn't mean to force your interest in myself. Tell me, is there anything I can do for your comfort before I go? And shall I go and leave you to abstruse and intellectual meditation, or do I disturb you by tagging about at your heels?"

His easy, light tone relieved her. She looked around her at the armed figures:

"You don't disturb me. I was trying to think where to begin. To-morrow I'll bring up some reference books – "

"Perhaps you can find what you want in my grandfather's library. I'll show you where it is when you are ready."

"I wonder if he has Grenville's monograph on Spanish and Milanese mail?"

"I'll see."

He went away and remained for ten minutes. She was minutely examining the sword belonging to a rather battered suit of armour when he returned with the book.

"You see," she said, "you *are* useful. I did well to suggest that you remain here. Now, look, Mr. Desboro. This is German armour, and here is a Spanish sword of a different century along with it! That's all wrong, you know. Antonius was the sword-maker; here is his name on the hexagonal, gilded iron hilt – '*Antonius Me Fecit*'."

"You'll put that all right," he said confidently. "Won't you?"

"That's why you asked me here, isn't it?"

He may have been on the point of an indiscreet rejoinder, for he closed his lips suddenly and began to examine another sword. It belonged to the only female equestrian figure in the collection – a beautifully shaped suit of woman's armour, astride a painted war-horse, the cuirass of Milan plates.

"The Countess of Oroposa," he said. "It was her peculiar privilege, after the Count's death, to ride in full armour and carry a naked sword across her knees when the Spanish Court made a solemn entry into cities. Which will be about all from me," he added with a laugh. "Are you ready for luncheon?"

"Quite, thank you. But you *said* that you didn't know much about this collection. Let me see that sword, please."

He drew it from its scabbard and presented the hilt. She took it, studied it, then read aloud the device in verse:

"'Paz Comigo Nunca Veo Y Siempre Guera Dese.'" ("There is never peace with me; my desire is always war!")

Her clear young voice repeating the old sword's motto seemed to ring a little through the silence – as though it were the clean-cut voice of the blade itself.

"What a fine motto," he said guilelessly. "And you interpret it as though it were your own."

"I like the sound of it. There is no compromise in it."

"Why not assume it for your own? 'There is never peace with me; my desire is always war!' Why not adopt it?"

"Do you mean that such a militant motto suits me?" she asked, amused, and caught the half-laughing, half malicious glimmer in his eyes, and knew in an instant he had divined her attitude toward himself, and toward to her own self, too – war on them both, lest they succumb to the friendship that threatened. Silent, preoccupied, she went back with him through the armoury, through the hallway, into a rather commonplace dining-room, where a table had already been laid for two.

Desboro jingled a small silver bell, and presently luncheon was announced. She ate with the healthy appetite of the young, and he pretended to. Several cats and dogs of unaristocratic degree came purring and wagging about the table, and he indulged them

with an impartiality that interested her, playing no favourites, but allotting to each its portion, and serenely chastising the greedy.

"What wonderful impartiality!" she ventured. "I couldn't do it; I'd be sure to prefer one of them."

"Why entertain preference for anything or anybody?"

"That's nonsense."

"No; it's sense. Because, if anything happens to one, there are the others to console you. It's pleasanter to like impartially."

She was occupied with her fruit cup; presently she glanced up at him:

"Is that your policy?"

"Isn't it a safe one?"

"Yes. Is it yours?"

"Wisdom suggests it to me – has always urged it. I'm not sure that it always works. For example, I prefer champagne to milk, but I try not to."

"You always contrive to twist sense into nonsense."

"You don't mind, do you?"

"No; but don't you ever take anything seriously?"

"Myself."

"I'm afraid you don't."

"Indeed, I do! See how my financial mishaps sent me flying to you for help!"

She said: "You don't even take seriously what you call your financial mishaps."

"But I take the remedy for them most reverently and most

thankfully."

"The remedy?"

"You."

A slight colour stained her cheeks; for she did not see just how to avoid the footing they had almost reached – the understanding which, somehow, had been impending from the moment they met. Intuition had warned her against it. And now here it was.

How could she have avoided it, when it was perfectly evident from the first that he found her interesting – that his voice and intonation and bearing were always subtly offering friendship, no matter what he said to her, whether in jest or earnest, in light-hearted idleness or in all the decorum of the perfunctory and commonplace.

To have made more out of it than was in it would have been no sillier than to priggishly discountenance his harmless good humour. To be prim would have been ridiculous. Besides, everything innocent in her found an instinctive pleasure, even in her own misgivings concerning this man and the unsettled problem of her personal relations with him – unsolved with her, at least; but he appeared to have settled it for himself.

As they walked back to the armoury together, she was trying to think it out; and she concluded that she might dare be toward him as unconcernedly friendly as he would ever think of being toward her. And it gave her a little thrill of pride to feel that she was equipped to carry through her part in a light, gay, ephemeral friendship with one belonging to a world about which she knew

nothing at all.

That ought to be her attitude – friendly, spirited, pretending to a *savoir faire* only surmised by her own good taste – lest he find her stupid and narrow, ignorant and dull. And it occurred to her very forcibly that she would not like that.

So – let him admire her.

His motives, perhaps, were as innocent as hers. Let him say the unexpected and disconcerting things it amused him to say. She knew well enough how to parry them, once her mind was made up not to entirely ignore them; and that would be much better. That, no doubt, was the manner in which women of his own world met the easy badinage of men; and she determined to let him discover that she was interesting if she chose to be.

She had produced her note-book and pencil when they entered the armoury. He carried Grenville's celebrated monograph, and she consulted it from time to time, bending her dainty head beside his shoulder, and turning the pages of the volume with a smooth and narrow hand that fascinated him.

From time to time, too, she made entries in her note-book, such as: "Armet, Spanish, late XV century. Tilting harness probably made by Helmschmid; espaliers, manteau d'armes, coude, left cuisse and colleret missing. War armour, Milanese, XIV century; probably made by the Negrolis; rere-brace, gorget, rondel missing; sword made probably by Martinez, Toledo. Armour made in Germany, middle of XVI century, probably designed by Diego de Arroyo; cuisses laminated."

They stopped before a horseman, clad from head to spurs in superb mail. On a ground of blackened steel the pieces were embossed with gold grotesqueries; the cuirass was formed by overlapping horizontal plates, the three upper ones composing a gorget of solid gold. Nymphs, satyrs, gods, goddesses and cupids in exquisite design and composition framed the "lorica"; cuisses and tassettes carried out the lorica pattern; coudes, arm-guards, and genouillères were dolphin masks, gilded.

"Parade armour," she said under her breath, "not war armour, as it has been labelled. It is armour de luxe, and probably royal, too. Do you see the collar of the Golden Fleece on the gorget? And there hangs the fleece itself, borne by two cupids as a canopy for Venus rising from the sea. That is probably Sigman's XVI century work. Is it not royally magnificent!"

"Lord! What a lot of lore you seem to have acquired!" he said.

"But I was trained to this profession by the ablest teacher in America – " her voice fell charmingly, " – by my father. Do you wonder that I know a little about it?"

They moved on in silence to where a man-at-arms stood leaning both clasped hands over the gilded pommel of a sword.

She said quickly: "That sword belongs to parade armour! How stupid to give it to this pikeman! Don't you see? The blade is diamond sectioned; Horn of Solingen's mark is on the ricasse. And, oh, what a wonderful hilt! It is a miracle!"

The hilt was really a miracle; carved in gold relief, Italian renaissance style, the guard centre was decorated with black

arabesques on a gold ground; quillons curved down, ending in cupid's heads of exquisite beauty.

The guard was engraved with a cartouche enclosing the Three Graces; and from it sprang a beautiful counter-guard formed out of two lovely Caryatids united. The grip was made of heliotrope amethyst inset with gold; the pommel constructed by two volutes which encompassed a tiny naked nymph with emeralds for her eyes.

"What a masterpiece!" she breathed. "It can be matched only in the Royal Armoury of Madrid."

"Have you been abroad, Miss Nevers?"

"Yes, several times with my father. It was part of my education in business."

He said: "Yours is a French name?"

"Father was French."

"He must have been a very cultivated man."

"Self-cultivated."

"Perhaps," he said, "there once was a *de* written before 'Nevers.'"

She laughed: "No. Father's family were always bourgeois shopkeepers – as I am."

He looked at the dainty girl beside him, with her features and slender limbs and bearing of an aristocrat.

"Too bad," he said, pretending disillusion. "I expected you'd tell me how your ancestors died on the scaffold, remarking in laudable chorus, '*Vive le Roi!*'"

She laughed and sparkled deliciously: "Alas, no, monsieur. But, *ma foi!* Some among them may have worked the guillotine for Sanson or drummed for Santerre.

"You seem to me to symbolise all the grace and charm that perished on the Place de Grève."

She laughed: "Look again, and see if it is not their Nemesis I more closely resemble."

And as she said it so gaily, an odd idea struck him that she *did* embody something less obvious, something more vital, than the symbol of an aristocratic régime perishing en masse against the blood-red sky of Paris.

He did not know what it was about her that seemed to symbolise all that is forever young and fresh and imperishable. Perhaps it was only the evolution of the real world he saw in her opening into blossom and disclosing such as she to justify the darkness and woe of the long travail.

She had left him standing alone with Grenville's book open in his hands, and was now examining a figure wearing a coat of fine steel mail, with a black corselet protecting back and breast decorated with *horizontal* bands.

"Do you notice the difference?" she asked. "In German armour the bands are vertical. This is Milanese, and I think the Negrolis made it. See how exquisitely the morion is decorated with these lions' heads in gold for cheek pieces, and these bands of gold damascene over the skull-piece, that meet to form Minerva's face above the brow! I'm sure it's the Negrolis work.

Wait! Ah, here is the inscription! 'P. Iacobi et Fratr Negroli Faciebant MDXXXIX.' Bring me Grenville's book, please."

She took it, ran over the pages rapidly, found what she wanted, and then stepped forward and laid her white hand on the shoulder of another grim, mailed figure.

"This is foot-armour," she said, "and does not belong with that morion. It's neither Milanese nor yet of Augsburg make; it's Italian, but who made it I don't know. You see it's a superb combination of parade armour and war mail, with all the gorgeous design of the former and the smoothness and toughness of the latter. Really, Mr. Desboro, this investigation is becoming exciting. I never before saw such a suit of foot-armour."

"Perhaps it belonged to the catcher of some ancient baseball club," he suggested.

She turned, laughing, but exasperated: "I'm not going to let you remain near me," she said. "You annihilate every atom of romance; you are an anachronism here, anyway."

"I know it; but you fit in delightfully with tournaments and pageants and things – "

"Go up on that ladder and sit!" resolutely pointing.

He went. Perched aloft, he lighted a cigarette and surveyed the prospect.

"Mark Twain killed all this sort of thing for me," he observed.

She said indignantly: "It's the only thing I never have forgiven him."

"He told the truth."

"I know it – I know it. But, oh, how could he write what he did about King Arthur's Court! And what is the use of truth, anyway, unless it leaves us ennobling illusions?"

Ennobling illusions! She did not know it; but except for them she never would have existed, nor others like her that are yet to come in myriads.

Desboro waved his cigarette gracefully and declaimed:

> "The knights are dust,
> Their good swords bust;
> Their souls are up the spout we trust – "

"Mr. Desboro!"

"Mademoiselle?"

"That silly parody on a noble verse is not humorous."

"Truth seldom is. The men who wore those suits of mail were everything that nobody now admires – brutal, selfish, ruthless – "

"Mr. Desboro!"

"Mademoiselle?"

"Are there not a number of such gentlemen still existing on earth?"

"New York's full of them," he admitted cheerfully, "but they conceal what they really are on account of the police."

"Is that all that five hundred years has taught men – concealment?"

"Yes, and five thousand," he muttered; but said aloud: "It hasn't anything to do with admiring the iron hats and clothes they

wore. If you'll let me come down I'll admire 'em – "

"No."

"I want to carry your book for you."

"No."

" – And listen to everything you say about the vertical stripes on their Dutch trousers – "

"Very well," she consented, laughing; "you may descend and examine these gold inlaid and checkered trousers. They were probably made for a fashionable dandy by Alonso Garcia, five hundred years ago; and you will observe that they are still beautifully creased."

So they passed on, side by side, while she sketched out her preliminary work. And sometimes he was idly flippant and irresponsible, and sometimes she thrilled unexpectedly at his quick, warm response to some impulsive appeal that he share her admiration.

Under the careless surface, she divined a sort of perverse intelligence; she was certain that what appealed to her he, also, understood when he chose to; because he understood so much – much that she had not even imagined – much of life, and of the world, and of the men and women in it. But, having lived a life so full, so different from her own, perhaps his interest was less easily aroused; perhaps it might be even a little fatigued by the endless pageant moving with him amid scenes of brightness and happiness which seemed to her as far away from herself and as unreal as scenes in the painted arras hanging on the walls.

They had been speaking of operas in which armour, incorrectly designed and worn, was tolerated by public ignorance; and, thinking of the "horseshoe," where all that is wealthy, and intelligent, and wonderful, and aristocratic in New York is supposed to congregate, she had mentally placed him there among those elegant and distant young men who are to be seen sauntering from one gilded box to another, or, gracefully posed, decorating and further embellishing boxes already replete with jeweled and feminine beauty; or in the curtained depths, mysterious silhouettes motionless against the dull red glow.

And, if those gold-encrusted boxes had been celestial balconies, full of blessed damosels leaning over heaven's edge, they would have seemed no farther away, no more accessible to her, than they seemed from where she sometimes sat or stood, all alone, to listen to Farrar and Caruso.

The light in the armoury was growing a little dim. She bent more closely over her note-book, the printed pages of Mr. Grenville, and the shimmering, inlaid, and embossed armour.

"Shall we have tea?" he suggested.

"Tea? Oh, thank you, Mr. Desboro; but when the light fails, I'll have to go."

It was failing fast. She used the delicate tips of her fingers more often in examining engraved, inlaid, and embossed surfaces.

"I never had electricity put into the armoury," he said. "I'm sorry now – for your sake."

"I'm sorry, too. I could have worked until six."

"There!" he said, laughing. "You have admitted it! What are you going to do for nearly two hours if you don't take tea? Your train doesn't leave until six. Did you propose to go to the station and sit there?"

Her confused laughter was very sweet, and she admitted that she had nothing to do after the light failed except to fold her hands and wait for the train.

"Then won't you have tea?"

"I'd – rather not!"

He said: "You could take it alone in your room if you liked – and rest a little. Mrs. Quant will call you."

She looked up at him after a moment, and her cheeks were very pink and her eyes brilliant.

"I'd rather take it with you, Mr. Desboro. Why shouldn't I say so?"

No words came to him, and not much breath, so totally unexpected was her reply.

Still looking at him, the faint smile fading into seriousness, she repeated:

"Why shouldn't I say so? Is there any reason? You know better than I what a girl alone may do. And I really would like to have some tea – and have it with you."

He didn't smile; he was too clever – perhaps too decent.

"It's quite all right," he said. "We'll have it served in the library where there's a fine fire."

So they slowly crossed the armoury and traversed the hallway, where she left him for a moment and ran up stairs to her room. When she rejoined him in the library, he noticed that the insurgent lock of hair had been deftly tucked in among its lustrous comrades; but the first shake of her head dislodged it again, and there it was, threatening him, as usual, from its soft, warm ambush against her cheek.

"Can't you do anything with it?" he asked, sympathetically, as she seated herself and poured the tea.

"Do anything with what?"

"That lock of hair. It's loose again, and it will do murder some day."

She laughed with scarcely a trace of confusion, and handed him his cup.

"That's the first thing I noticed about you," he added.

"That lock of hair? I can't do anything with it. Isn't it horribly messy?"

"It's dangerous."

"How absurd!"

"Are you ever known as 'Stray Lock' among your intimates?"

"I should think not," she said scornfully. "It sounds like a children's picture-book story."

"But you look like one."

"Mr. Desboro!" she protested. "Haven't you any common sense?"

"You look," he said reflectively, "as though you came from

the same bookshelf as 'Gold Locks,' 'The Robber Kitten,' and 'A Princess Far Away,' and all those immortal volumes of the 'days that are no more.' Would you mind if I label you 'Stray Lock,' and put you on the shelf among the other immortals?"

Her frank laughter rang out sweetly:

"I very *much* object to being labeled and shelved – particularly shelved."

"I'll promise to read you every day – "

"No, thank you!"

"I'll promise to take you everywhere with me – "

"In your pocket? No, thank you. I object to being either shelved or pocketed – to be consulted at pleasure – or when you're bored."

They both had been laughing a good deal, and were slightly excited by their game of harmless *double entendre*. But now, perhaps it was becoming a trifle too obvious, and Jacqueline checked herself to glance back mentally and see how far she had gone along the path of friendship.

She could not determine; for the path has many twists and turnings, and she had sped forward lightly and swiftly, and was still conscious of the exhilaration of the pace in his gay and irresponsible company.

Her smile changed and died out; she leaned back in her leather chair, gazing absently at the fiery reflections crimsoning the andirons on the hearth, and hearing afar, on some distant roof, the steady downpour of the winter rain.

Subtly the quiet and warmth of the room invaded her with a sense of content, not due, perhaps, to them alone. And dreamily conscious that this might be so, she lifted her eyes and looked across the table at him.

"I wonder," she said, "if this *is* all right?"

"What?"

"Our – situation – here."

"Situations are what we make them."

"But," she asked candidly, "could you call this a business situation?"

He laughed unrestrainedly, and finally she ventured to smile, secretly reassured.

"Are business and friendship incompatible?" he inquired.

"I don't know. Are they? I have to be careful in the shop, with younger customers and clerks. To treat them with more than pleasant civility would spoil them for business. My father taught me that. He served in the French Army."

"Do you think," he said gravely, "that you are spoiling me for business purposes?"

She smiled: "I was thinking – wondering whether you did not more accurately represent the corps of officers and I the line. I am only a temporary employee of yours, Mr. Desboro, and some day you may be angry at what I do and you may say, 'Tonnerre de Dieu!' to me – which I wouldn't like if we were friends, but which I'd otherwise endure."

"We're friends already; what are you going to do about it?"

She knew it was so now, for better or worse, and she looked at him shyly, a little troubled by what the end of this day had brought her.

Silent, absent-eyed, she began to wonder what such men as he really thought of a girl of her sort. It could happen that his attitude toward her might become like that of the only men of his kind she had ever encountered – wealthy clients of her father, young and old, and all of them inclined to offer her attentions which instinct warned her to ignore.

As for Desboro, even from the beginning she felt that his attitude toward her depended upon herself; and, warranted or not, this sense of security with him now, left her leisure to study him. And she concluded that probably he was like the other men of his class whom she had known – a receptive opportunist, inevitably her antagonist at heart, but not to be feared except under deliberate provocation from her. And that excuse he would never have.

Aware of his admiration almost from the very first, perplexed, curious, uncertain, and disturbed by turns, she was finally convinced that the matter lay entirely with her; that she might accept a little, venture a little in safety; and, perfectly certain of herself, enjoy as much of what his friendship offered as her own clear wits and common sense permitted. For she had found, so far, no metal in any man unalloyed. Two years' experience alone with men had educated her; and whatever the alloy in Desboro might be that lowered his value, she thought it less objectionable

than the similar amalgam out of which were fashioned the harmless youths in whose noisy company she danced, and dined, and bathed, and witnessed Broadway "shows"; the Eddies and Joes of the metropolis, replicas in mind and body of clothing advertisements in street cars.

Her blue eyes, wandering from the ruddy andirons, were arrested by the clock. What had happened? Was the clock still going? She listened, and heard it ticking.

"Is *that* the right time?" she demanded incredulously.

He said, so low she could scarcely hear him: "Yes, Stray Lock. Must I close the story book and lay it away until another day?"

She rose, brushing the bright strand from her cheek; he stood up, pulled the tassel of an old-time bell rope, and, when the butler came, ordered the car.

She went away to her room, where Mrs. Quant swathed her in rain garments and veils, and secretly pressed into her hand a bottle containing "a suffusion" warranted to discourage any insidious advances of typod.

"A spoonful before meals, dearie," she whispered hoarsely; "and don't tell Mr. James – he'd be that disgusted with me for doin' of a Christian duty. I'll have some of my magic drops ready when you come to-morrow, and you can just lock the door and set and rock and enj'y them onto a lump of sugar."

A little dismayed, but contriving to look serious, Jacqueline thanked her and fled. Desboro put her into the car and climbed in beside her.

"You needn't, you know," she protested. "There are no highwaymen, are there?"

"None more to be dreaded than myself."

"Then why do you go to the station with me?"

He did not answer. She presently settled into her corner, and he wrapped her in the fur robe. Neither spoke; the lamplight flashed ahead through the falling rain; all else was darkness – the widest world of darkness, it seemed to her fancy, that she ever looked out upon, for it seemed to leave this man and herself alone in the centre of things.

Conscious of him beside her, she was curiously content not to look at him or to disturb the silence encompassing them. The sense of speed, the rush through obscurity, seemed part of it – part of a confused and pleasurable irresponsibility.

Later, standing under the dripping eaves of the station platform with him, watching the approaching headlight of the distant locomotive, she said:

"You have made it a very delightful day for me. I wanted to thank you."

He was silent; the distant locomotive whistled, and the vista of wet rails began to glisten red in the swift approach.

"I don't want you to go to town alone on that train," he said abruptly.

"What?" in utter surprise.

"Will you let me go with you, Miss Nevers?"

"Nonsense! I wander about everywhere alone. Please don't

spoil it all. Don't even go aboard to find a seat for me."

The long train thundered by, brakes gripping, slowed, stopped. She sprang aboard, turned on the steps and offered her hand:

"Good-bye, Mr. Desboro."

"To-morrow?" he asked.

"Yes."

They exchanged no further words; she stood a moment on the platform, as the cars glided slowly past him and on into the rainy night. All the way to New York she remained motionless in the corner of the seat, her cheek resting against her gloved palm, thinking of what had happened – closing her blue eyes, sometimes, to bring it nearer and make more real a day of life already ended.

CHAPTER IV

When the doorbell rang the maid of all work pushed the button and stood waiting at the top of the stairs. There was a pause, a moment's whispering, then light footsteps flying through the corridor, and:

"Where on earth have you been for a week?" asked Cynthia Lessler, coming into Jacqueline's little parlour, where the latter sat knitting a white wool skating jacket for herself.

Jacqueline laid aside the knitting and greeted her visitor with a warm, quick embrace.

"Oh, I've been everywhere," she said. "Out in Westchester, mostly. To-day being Sunday, I'm at home."

"What were you doing in the country, sweetness?"

"Business."

"What kind?"

"Oh, cataloguing a collection. Take the armchair and sit near the stove, dear. And here are the chocolates. Put your feet on the fender as I do. It was frightfully cold in Westchester yesterday – everything frozen solid – and we – I skated all over the flooded fields and swamps. It was simply glorious, Cynthia – "

"I thought you were out there on business," remarked Cynthia dryly.

"I was. I merely took an hour at noon for luncheon."

"Did you?"

"Certainly. Even a bricklayer has an hour at noon to himself."

"Whose collection are you cataloguing?"

"It belongs to a Mr. Desboro," said Jacqueline carelessly.

"Where is it?"

"In his house – a big, old house about five miles from the station – "

"How do you get there?"

"They send a car for me – "

"Who?"

"They – Mr. Desboro."

"They? Is he plural?"

"Don't be foolish," said Jacqueline. "It is his car and his collection, and I'm having a perfectly good time with both."

"And with him, too? Yes?"

"If you knew him you wouldn't talk that way."

"I know who he is."

"Do you?" said Jacqueline calmly.

"Yes, I do. He's the 'Jim' Desboro whose name you see in the fashionable columns. I know something about *that* young man," she added emphatically.

Jacqueline looked up at her with dawning displeasure. Cynthia, undisturbed, bit into a chocolate and waved one pretty hand:

"Read the *Tattler*, as I do, and you'll see what sort of a man your young man is."

"I don't care to read such a – "

"I do. It tells you funny things about society. Every week or two there's something about him. You can't exactly understand it – they put it in a funny way – but you can guess. Besides, he's always going around town with Reggie Ledyard, and Stuyve Van Alstyne, and – Jack Cairns – "

"*Don't* speak that way – as though you usually lunched with them. I hate it."

"How do you know I don't lunch with some of them? Besides everybody calls them Reggie, and Stuyve, and Jack – "

"Everybody except their mothers, probably. I don't want to hear about them, anyway."

"Why not, darling?"

"Because you and I don't know them and never will – "

Cynthia said maliciously: "You may meet them through your friend, Jimmy Desboro – "

"*That* is the limit!" exclaimed Jacqueline, flushing; and her pretty companion leaned back in her armchair and laughed until Jacqueline's unwilling smile began to glimmer in her wrath-darkened eyes.

"Don't torment me, Cynthia," she said. "You know quite well that it's a business matter with me entirely."

"Was it a business matter with that Dawley man? You had to get me to go with you into that den of his whenever you went at all."

Jacqueline shrugged and resumed her knitting: "What a horrid thing he was," she murmured.

Cynthia assented philosophically: "But most men bother a girl sooner or later," she concluded. "You don't read about it in novels, but it's true. Go down town and take dictation for a living. It's an education in how to look out for yourself."

"It's a rotten state of things," said Jacqueline under her breath.

"Yes. It's funny, too. So many men *are* that way. What do they care? Do you suppose we'd be that way, too, if we were men?"

"No. There are nice men, too."

"Yes – dead ones."

"Nonsense!"

"With very few exceptions, Jacqueline. There are horrid, *horrid* ones, and *nice*, horrid ones, and dead ones and *dead* ones – but only a few nice, *nice* ones. I've known some. You think your Mr. Desboro is one, don't you?"

"I haven't thought about him – "

"Honestly, Jacqueline?"

"I tell you I haven't! He's nice to *me*. That's all I know."

"Is he *too* nice?"

"No. Besides, he's under his own roof. And it depends on a girl, anyway."

"Not always. If we behave ourselves we're dead ones; if we don't we'd better be. Isn't it a rotten deal, Jacqueline! Just one fresh man after another dropped into the discards because he gets too gay. And being employed by the kind who'd never marry us spoils us for the others. *You* could marry one of your clients, I suppose, but I never could in a million years."

"You and I will never marry such men," said Jacqueline coolly. "Perhaps we wouldn't if they asked us."

"*You* might. You're educated and bright, and – you *look* the part, with all the things you know – and your trips to Europe – and the kind of beauty yours is. Why not? If I were you," she added, "I'd kill a man who thought me good enough to hold hands with, but not good enough to marry."

"I don't hold hands," observed Jacqueline scornfully.

"I do. I've done it when it was all right; and I've done it when I had no business to; and the chances are I'll do it again without getting hurt. And then I'll finally marry the sort of man you call Ed," she added disgustedly.

Jacqueline laughed, and looked intently at her: "You're *so* pretty, Cynthia – and so silly sometimes."

Cynthia stretched her young figure full length in the chair, yawning and crooking both arms back under her curly brown head. Her eyes, too, were brown, and had in them always a half-veiled languor that few men could encounter undisturbed.

"A week ago," she said, "you told me over the telephone that you would be at the dance. *I* never laid eyes on you."

"I came home too tired. It was my first day at Silverwood. I overdid it, I suppose."

"Silverwood?"

"Where I go to business in Westchester," she explained patiently.

"Oh, Mr. Desboro's place!" with laughing malice.

"Yes, Mr. Desboro's place."

The hint of latent impatience in Jacqueline's voice was not lost on Cynthia; and she resumed her tormenting inquisition:

"How long is it going to take you to catalogue Mr. Desboro's collection?"

"I have several weeks' work, I think – I don't know exactly."

"All winter, perhaps?"

"Possibly."

"Is *he* always there, darling?"

Jacqueline was visibly annoyed: "He has happened to be, so far. I believe he is going South very soon – if that interests you."

"'Phone me when he goes," retorted Cynthia, unbelievingly.

"What makes you say such things!" exclaimed Jacqueline. "I tell you he isn't that kind of a man."

"Read the *Tattler*, dearest!"

"I won't."

"Don't you ever read it?"

"No. Why should I?"

"Curiosity."

"I haven't any."

Cynthia laughed incredulously:

"People who have no curiosity are either idiots or they have already found out. Now, you are not an idiot."

Jacqueline smiled: "And I haven't found out, either."

"Then you're just as full of curiosity as the rest of us."

"Not of unworthy curiosity – "

"I never knew a good person who wasn't. I'm good, am I not, Jacqueline?"

"Of course."

"Well, then, I'm full of all kinds of curiosities – worthy and unworthy. I want to know about everything!"

"Everything good."

"Good and bad. God lets both exist. I want to know about them."

"Why be curious about what is bad? It doesn't concern us."

"If you know what concerns you only, you'll never know anything. Now, when I read a newspaper I read about fashionable weddings, millionaires, shows, murders – I read everything – not because I'm going to be fashionably married, or become a millionaire or a murderer, but because all these things exist and happen, and I want to know all about them because I'm not an idiot, and I haven't already found out. And so that's why I buy the *Tattler* whenever I have five cents to spend on it!"

"It's a pity you're not more curious about things worth while," commented Jacqueline serenely.

Cynthia reddened: "Dear, I haven't the education or brain to be interested in the things that occupy you."

"I didn't mean that," protested Jacqueline, embarrassed. "I only – "

"I know, dear. You are too sweet to say it; but it's true. The bunch you play with knows it. We all realise that you are way ahead of us – that you're different – "

"Please don't say that – or think it."

"But it's true. You really belong with the others – " she made a gay little gesture – "over there in the Fifth Avenue district, where art gets gay with fashion; where lady highbrows wear tiaras; where the Jims and Jacks and Reggies float about and hand each other new ones between quarts; where you belong, darling – wherever you finally land!"

Jacqueline was laughing: "But I don't wish to land *there*! I never wanted to."

"All girls do! We all dream about it!"

"Here is one girl who really doesn't. Of course, I'd like to have a few friends of that kind. I'd rather like to visit houses where nobody has to think of money, and where young people are jolly, and educated, and dress well, and talk about interesting things – "

"Dear, we all would like it. That's what I'm saying. Only there's a chance for you because you know something – but none for us. We understand that perfectly well – and we dream on all the same. We'd miss a lot if we didn't dream."

Jacqueline said mockingly: "I'll invite you to my Fifth Avenue residence the minute I marry what you call a Reggie."

"I'll come if you'll stand for me. I'm not afraid of any Reggie in the bench show!"

They laughed; Cynthia stretched out a lazy hand for another chocolate; Jacqueline knitted, the smile still hovering on her scarlet lips.

Bending over her work, she said: "You won't misunderstand

when I tell you how much I enjoy being at Silverwood, and how nice Mr. Desboro has been."

"*Has* been."

"Is, and surely will continue to be," insisted Jacqueline tranquilly. "Shall I tell you about Silverwood?"

Cynthia nodded.

"Well, then, Mr. Desboro has such a funny old housekeeper there, who gives me 'magic drops' on lumps of sugar. The drops are aromatic and harmless, so I take them to please her. And he has an old, old butler, who is too feeble to be very useful; and an old, old armourer, who comes once a week and potters about with a bit of chamois; and a parlour maid who is sixty and wears glasses; and a laundress still older. And a whole troop of dogs and cats come to luncheon with us. Sometimes the butler goes to sleep in the pantry, and Mr. Desboro and I sit and talk. And if he doesn't wake up, Mr. Desboro hunts about for somebody to wait on us. Of course there are other servants there, and farmers and gardeners, too. Mr. Desboro has a great deal of land. And so," she chattered on quite happily and irrelevantly, "we go skating for half an hour after lunch before I resume my cataloguing. He skates very well; we are learning to waltz on skates – "

"Who does the teaching?"

"He does. I don't skate very well; and unless it were for him I'd have *such* tumbles! And once we went sleighing – that is, he drove me to the station – in rather a roundabout way. And the country was *so* beautiful! And the stars – oh, millions and

millions, Cynthia! It was as cold as the North Pole, but I loved it – and I had on his other fur coat and gloves. He is very nice to me. I wanted you to understand the sort of man he is."

"Perhaps he is the original hundredth man," remarked Cynthia skeptically.

"Most men are hundredth men when the nine and ninety girls behave themselves. It's the hundredth girl who makes the nine and ninety men horrid."

"That's what you believe, is it?"

"I do."

"Dream on, dear." She went to a glass, pinned her pretty hat, slipped into the smart fur coat that Jacqueline held for her, and began to draw on her gloves.

"Can't you stay to dinner," asked Jacqueline.

"Thank you, sweetness, but I'm dining at the Beaux Arts."

"With any people I know?"

"You don't know that particular 'people'," said Cynthia, smiling, "but you know a friend of his."

"Who?"

"Mr. Desboro."

"Really!" she said, colouring.

Cynthia frowned at her: "Don't become sentimental over that young man!"

"No, of course not."

"Because I don't think he's very much good."

"He *is*– but I *won't*," explained Jacqueline laughing. "I know

quite well how to take care of myself."

"Do you?"

"Yes; don't you?"

"I – don't – know."

"Cynthia! Of course you know!"

"Do I? Well, perhaps I do. Perhaps all girls know how to take care of themselves. But sometimes – especially when their home life is the limit – " She hesitated, slowly twisting a hairpin through the buttonhole of one glove. Then she buttoned it decisively. "When things got so bad at home two years ago, and I went with that show – you didn't see it – you were in mourning – but it ran on Broadway all winter. And I met one or two Reggies at suppers, and another man – the same sort – only his name happened to be Jack – and I want to tell you it was hard work not to like him."

Jacqueline stood, slim and straight, and silent, listening unsmilingly.

Cynthia went on leisurely:

"He was a friend of Mr. Desboro – the same kind of man, I suppose. *That's* why I read the *Tattler*– to see what they say about him."

"Wh-what do they say?"

"Oh, things – funny sorts of things, about his being attentive to this girl, and being seen frequently with that girl. I don't know what they mean exactly – they always make it sound queer – as though all the men and women in society are fast. And this man, too – perhaps he is."

"But what do you care, dear?"

"Nothing. It was hard work not to like him. You don't understand how it was; you've always lived at home. But home was hell for me; and I was getting fifteen per; and it grew horribly cold that winter. I had no fire. Besides – it was so hard not to like him. I used to come to see you. Do you remember how I used to come here and cry?"

"I – I thought it was because you had been so unhappy at home."

"Partly. The rest was – the other thing."

"You *did* like him, then!"

"Not – too much."

"I understand that. But it's over now, isn't it?"

Cynthia stood idly turning her muff between her white-gloved hands.

"Oh, yes," she said, after a moment, "it's over. But I'm thinking how nearly over it was with me, once or twice that winter. I thought I knew how to take care of myself. But a girl never knows, Jacqueline. Cold, hunger, debt, shabby clothes are bad enough; loneliness is worse. Yet, these are not enough, by themselves. But if we like a man, with all that to worry over – then it's pretty hard on us."

"How *could* you care for a bad man?"

"Bad? Did I say he was? I meant he was like other men. A girl becomes accustomed to men."

"And likes them, notwithstanding?"

"Some of them. It depends. If you like a man you seem to like him anyhow. You may get angry, too, and still like him. There's so much of the child in them. I've learned that. They're bad; but when you like one of them, he seems to belong to you, somehow – badness and all. I must be going, dear."

Still, neither moved; Cynthia idly twirled her muff; Jacqueline, her slender hands clasped behind her, stood gazing silently at the floor.

Cynthia said: "That's the trouble with us all. I'm afraid you like this man, Desboro. I tell you that he isn't much good; but if you already like him, you'll go on liking him, no matter what I say or what he does. For it's that way with us, Jacqueline. And where in the world would men find a living soul to excuse them if it were not for us? That seems to be about all we're for – to forgive men what they are – and what they do."

"*I* don't forgive them," said Jacqueline fiercely; " – or women, either."

"Oh, nobody forgives women! But you will find excuses for some man some day – if you like him. I guess even the best of them require it. But the general run of them have got to have excuses made for them, or no woman would stand for her own honeymoon, and marriages would last about a week. Good-bye, dear."

They kissed.

At the head of the stairs outside, Jacqueline kissed her again.

"How is the play going?" she inquired.

"Oh, it's going."

"Is there any chance for you to get a better part?"

"No chance I care to take. Max Schindler is like all the rest of them."

Jacqueline's features betrayed her wonder and disgust, but she said nothing; and presently Cynthia turned and started down the stairs.

"Good-night, dear," she called back, with a gay little flourish of her muff. "They're all alike – only we always forgive the one we care for!"

CHAPTER V

On Monday, Desboro waited all the morning for her, meeting every train. At noon, she had not arrived. Finally, he called up her office and was informed that Miss Nevers had been detained in town on business, and that their Mr. Kirk had telephoned him that morning to that effect.

He asked to speak to Miss Nevers personally; she had gone out, it appeared, and might not return until the middle of the afternoon.

So Desboro went home in his car and summoned Farris, the aged butler, who was pottering about in the greenhouses, which he much preferred to attending to his own business.

"Did anybody telephone this morning?" asked the master.

Farris had forgotten to mention it – was very sorry – and stood like an aged hound, head partly lowered and averted, already blinking under the awaited reprimand. But all Desboro said was:

"Don't do it again, Farris; there are some things I won't overlook."

He sat for a while in the library where a sheaf of her notes lay on the table beside a pile of books – Grenville, Vanderdyne, Herrara's splendid folios – just as she had left them on Saturday afternoon for the long, happy sleigh-ride that ended just in time for him to swing her aboard her train.

He had plenty to do beside sitting there with keen, gray eyes

fixed on the pile of manuscript she had left unfinished; he always had plenty to do, and seldom did it.

His first impulse had been to go to town. Her absence was making the place irksome. He went to the long windows and stood there, hands in his pockets, smoking and looking out over the familiar landscape – a rolling country, white with snow, naked branches glittering with ice under the gilded blue of a cloudless sky, and to the north and west, low, wooded mountains – really nothing more than hills, but impressively steep and blue in the distance.

A woodpecker, one of the few feathered winter residents, flickered through the trees, flashed past, and clung to an oak, sticking motionless to the bark for a minute or two, bright eyes inspecting Desboro, before beginning a rapid, jerky exploration for sustenance.

The master of Silverwood watched him, then, hands driven deeper into his pockets, strolled away, glancing aimlessly at familiar objects – the stiff and rather picturesque portraits of his grandparents in the dress of 1820; the atrocious portraits of his parents in the awful costume of 1870; his own portrait, life size, mounted on a pony.

He stood looking at the funny little boy, with the half contemptuous, half curious interest which a man in the pride of his strength and youth sometimes feels for the absurdly clothed innocence of what he was. And, as usual when noticing the picture, he made a slight, involuntary effort to comprehend that

he had been once like that; and could not.

At the end of the library, better portraits hung – his great-grandmother, by Gilbert Stuart, still fresh-coloured and clear under the dim yellow varnish which veiled but could not wither the delicate complexion and ardent mouth, and the pink rosebud set where the folds of her white kerchief crossed on her breast.

And there was her husband, too, by an unknown or forgotten painter – the sturdy member of the Provincial Assembly, and major in Colonel Thomas's Westchester Regiment – a fine old fellow in his queue-ribbon and powdered hair standing in the conventional fortress port-hole, framed by it, and looking straight out of the picture with eyes so much like Desboro's that it amused people. His easy attitude, too, the idle grace of the posture, irresistibly recalled Desboro, and at the moment more than ever. But he had been a man of vigour and of wit and action; and he was lying out there in the snow, under an old brown headstone embellished with cherubim; and the last of his name lounged here, in sight, from the windows, of the spot where the first house of Desboro in America had stood, and had collapsed amid the flames started by Tarleton's blood-maddened troopers.

To and fro sauntered Desboro, passing, unnoticed, old-time framed engravings of the Desboros in Charles the Second's time, elegant, idle, handsome men in periwigs and half-armour, and all looking out at the world through port-holes with a hint of the race's bodily grace in their half insolent attitudes.

But office and preferment, peace and war, intrigue and plot,

vigour and idleness, had narrowed down through the generations into a last inheritance for this young man; and the very last of all the Desboros now idled aimlessly among the phantoms of a race that perhaps had better be extinguished.

He could not make up his mind to go to town or to remain in the vague hope that she might come in the afternoon.

He had plenty to do – if he could make up his mind to begin – accounts to go over, household expenses, farm expenses, stable reports, agents' memoranda concerning tenants and leases, endless lists of necessary repairs. And there was business concerning the estate neglected, taxes, loans, improvements to attend to – the thousand and one details which irritated him to consider; but which, although he maintained an agent in town, must ultimately come to himself for the final verdict.

What he wanted was to be rid of it all – sell everything, pension his father's servants, and be rid of the entire complex business which, he pretended to himself, was slowly ruining him. But he knew in his heart where the trouble lay, and that the carelessness, extravagance, the disinclination for self-denial, the impatient and good-humoured aversion to economy, the profound distaste for financial detail, were steadily wrecking one of the best and one of the last of the old-time Westchester estates.

In his heart he knew, too, that all he wanted was to concentrate sufficient capital to give him the income he thought he needed.

No man ever had the income he thought he needed. And why Desboro required it, he himself didn't know exactly; but he

wanted sufficient to keep him comfortable – enough so that he could feel he might do anything he chose, when, how, and where he chose, without fear or care for the future. And no man ever lived to enjoy such a state of mind, or to do these things with impunity.

But Desboro's mind was bent on it; he seated himself at the library table and began to figure it out. Land in Westchester brought high prices – not exactly in that section, but near enough to make his acreage valuable. Then, the house, stable, garage, greenhouses, the three farms, barns, cattle houses, water supply, the timber, power sites, meadow, pasture – all these ought to make a pretty figure. And he jotted it down for the hundredth time in the last two years.

Then there was the Desboro collection. That ought to bring —

He hesitated, his pencil finally fell on the table, rolled to the edge and dropped; and he sat thinking of Jacqueline Nevers, and of the week that had ended as the lights of her train faded far away into the winter night.

He sat so still and so long that old Farris came twice to announce luncheon. After a silent meal in company with the dogs and cats of low degree, he lighted a cigarette and went back into the library to resume his meditations.

Whatever they were, they ceased abruptly whenever the distant telephone rang, and he waited almost breathlessly for somebody to come and say that he was wanted on the wire. But the messages must have been to the cook or butler, from

butcher, baker, and gentlemen of similar professions, for nobody disturbed him, and he was left free to sink back into the leather corner of the lounge and continue his meditations. Once the furtive apparition of Mrs. Quant disturbed him, hovering ominously at the library door, bearing tumbler and spoon.

"I won't take it," he said decisively.

There was a silence, then:

"Isn't the young lady coming, Mr. James?"

"I don't know. No, probably not to-day."

"Is – is the child sick?" she stammered.

"No, of course not. I expect she'll be here in the morning."

She was not there in the morning. Mr. Mirk, the little old salesman in the silk skull-cap, telephoned to Farris that Miss Nevers was again detained in town on business at Mr. Clydesdale's, and that she might employ a Mr. Sissly to continue her work at Silverwood, if Mr. Desboro did not object. Mr. Desboro was to call her up at three o'clock if he desired further information.

Desboro went into the library and sat down. For a while his idle reflections, uncontrolled, wandered around the main issue, errant satellites circling a central thought which was slowly emerging from chaos and taking definite weight and shape. And the thought was of Jacqueline Nevers.

Why was he waiting here until noon to talk to this girl? Why was he here at all? Why had he not gone South with the others? A passing fancy might be enough to arouse his curiosity; but why

did not the fancy pass? What did he want to say to her? What did he want of her? Why was he spending time thinking about her – disarranging his routine and habits to be here when she came? *What* did he want of her? She was agreeable to talk to, interesting to watch, pretty, attractive. Did he want her friendship? To what end? He'd never see her anywhere unless he sought her out; he would never meet her in any circle to which he had been accustomed, respectable or otherwise. Besides, for conversation he preferred men to women.

What did he want with her or her friendship – or her blue eyes and bright hair – or the slim, girlish grace of her? What was there to do? How many more weeks did he intend to idle about at her heels, follow her, look at her, converse with her, make a habit of her until, now, he found that to suddenly break the habit of only a week's indulgence was annoying him!

And suppose the habit were to grow. Into what would it grow? And how unpleasant would it be to break when, in the natural course of events, circumstances made the habit inconvenient?

And, always, the main, central thought was growing, persisting. *What* did he want of her? He was not in love with her any more than he was always lightly in love with feminine beauty. Besides, if he were, what would it mean? Another affair, with all its initial charm and gaiety, its moments of frivolity, its moments of seriousness, its sudden crisis, its combats, perplexities, irresolution, the faint thrill of its deeper significance startling both to clearer vision; and then the end,

whatever it might be, light or solemn, irresponsible or care-ridden, gay or sombre, for one or the other.

What did he want? Did he wish to disturb her tranquility? Was he trying to awaken her to some response? And what did he offer her to respond to? The flattery of his meaningless attentions, or the honour of falling in love with a Desboro, whose left hand only would be offered to support both slim white hands of hers?

He ought to have gone South, and he knew it, now. Last week he had told himself – and her occasionally – that he was going South in a week. And here he was, his head on his hands and his elbows on the table, looking vacantly at the pile of manuscript she had left there, and thinking of the things that should not happen to them both.

And who the devil was this fellow Sissly? Why had she suddenly changed her mind and suggested a creature named Sissly? Why didn't she finish the cataloguing herself? She had been enthusiastic about it. Besides, she had enjoyed the skating and sleighing, and the luncheons and teas, and the cats and dogs – and even Mrs. Quant. She had said so, too. And now she was too busy to come any more.

Had he done anything? Had he been remiss, or had he ventured too many attentions? He couldn't recall having done anything except to show her plainly enough that he enjoyed being with her. Nor had she concealed her bright pleasure in his companionship. And they had become such good comrades, understanding each other's moods so instinctively now – and they

had really found such unfeigned amusement in each other that it seemed a pity – a pity —

"Damn it," he said, "if she cares no more about it than that, she can send Sissly, and I'll go South!"

But the impatience of hurt vanity died away; the desire to see her grew; the habit of a single week was already unpleasant to break. And it would be unpleasant to try to forget her, even among his own friends, even in the South, or in drawing-rooms, or at the opera, or at dances, or in any of his haunts and in any sort of company.

He might forget her if he had only known her better, discovered more of her real self, unveiled a little of her deeper nature. There was so much unexplored – so much that interested him, mainly, perhaps, because he had not discovered it. For theirs had been the lightest and gayest of friendships, with nothing visible to threaten a deeper entente; merely, on her part, a happy enjoyment and a laughing parrying in the eternal combat that never entirely ends, even when it means nothing. And on his side it had been the effortless attentions of a man aware of her young and unspoiled charm – conscious of an unusual situation which always fascinates all men.

He had had no intention, no idea, no policy except to drift as far as the tides of destiny carried him in her company. The situation was agreeable; if it became less so, he could take to the oars and row where he liked.

But the tides had carried him to the edge of waters less clear;

he was vaguely aware of it now, aware, too, that troubled seas lay somewhere behind the veil.

The library clock struck three times. He got up and went to the telephone booth. Miss Nevers was there; would speak to him if he could wait a moment. He waited. Finally, a far voice called, greeting him pleasantly, and explaining that matters which antedated her business at Silverwood had demanded her personal attention in town. To his request for particulars, she said that she had work to do among the jades and Chinese porcelains belonging to a Mr. Clydesdale.

"I know him," said Desboro curtly. "When do you finish?"

"I have finished for the present. Later there is further work to be done at Mr. Clydesdale's. I had to make certain arrangements before I went to you – being already under contract to Mr. Clydesdale, and at his service when he wanted me."

There was a silence. Then he asked her when she was coming to Silverwood.

"Did you not receive my message?" she asked.

"About – what's his name? Sissly? Yes, I did, but I don't want him. I want you or nobody!"

"You are unreasonable, Mr. Desboro. Lionel Sissly is a very celebrated connoisseur."

"Don't you want to come?"

"I have so many matters here – "

"Don't you *want* to?" he persisted.

"Why, of course, I'd like to. It is most interesting work. But

Mr. Sissly – "

"Oh, hang Mr. Sissly! Do you suppose he interests me? You said that this work might take you weeks. You said you loved it. You apparently expected to be busy with it until it was finished. Now, you propose to send a man called Sissly! Why?"

"Don't you know that I have other things – "

"What have I done, Miss Nevers?"

"I don't understand you."

"What have I done to drive you away?"

"How absurd! Nothing! And you've been so kind to me – "

"You've been kind to me. Why are you no longer?"

"I – it's a question – of business – matters which demand – "

"Will you come once more?"

No reply.

"Will you?" he repeated.

"Is there any reason – "

"Yes."

Another pause, then:

"Yes, I'll come – if there's a reason – "

"When?"

"To-morrow?"

"Do you promise?"

"Yes."

"Then I'll meet you as usual."

"Thank you."

He said: "How is your skating jacket coming along?"

"I have – stopped work on it."

"Why?"

"I do not expect to – have time – for skating."

"Didn't you ever expect to come up here again?" he asked with a slight shiver.

"I thought that Mr. Sissly could do what was necessary."

"Didn't it occur to you that you were ending a friendship rather abruptly?"

She was silent.

"Don't you think it was a trifle brusque, Miss Nevers?"

"Does the acquaintanceship of a week count so much with you, Mr. Desboro?"

"You know it does."

"No. I did not know it. If I had supposed so, I would have written a polite letter regretting that I could no longer personally attend to the business in hand."

"Doesn't it count at all with you?" he asked.

"What?"

"Our friendship."

"Our acquaintanceship of a single week? Why, yes. I remember it with pleasure – your kindness, and Mrs. Quant's – "

"How on earth can you talk to me that way?"

"I don't understand you."

"Then I'll say, bluntly, that it meant a lot to me, and that the place is intolerable when you're not here. That is specific, isn't it?"

"Very. You mean that, being accustomed to having somebody to amuse you, your own resources are insufficient."

"Are you serious?"

"Perfectly. That is why you are kind enough to miss my coming and going – because I amuse you."

"Do you think that way about me?"

"I do when I think of you. You know sometimes I'm thinking of other things, too, Mr. Desboro."

He bit his lip, waited for a moment, then:

"If you feel that way, you'll scarcely care to come up to-morrow. Whatever arrangement you make about cataloguing the collection will be all right. If I am not here, communications addressed to the Olympian Club will be forwarded – "

"Mr. Desboro!"

"Yes?"

"Forgive me – won't you?"

There was a moment's interval, fraught heavily with the possibilities of Chance, then the silent currents of Fate flowed on toward her appointed destiny and his – whatever it was to be, wherever it lay, behind the unstirring, inviolable veil.

"Have you forgiven me?"

"And you me?" he asked.

"I have nothing to forgive; truly, I haven't. Why did you think I had? Because I have been talking flippantly? You have been so uniformly considerate and kind to me – you *must* know that it was nothing you said or did that made me think – wonder –

whether – perhaps – "

"What?" he insisted. But she declined further explanation in a voice so different, so much gayer and happier than it had sounded before, that he was content to let matters rest – perhaps dimly surmising something approaching the truth.

She, too, noticed the difference in his voice as he said:

"Then may I have the car there as usual to-morrow morning?"

"Please."

He drew an unconscious sigh of relief. She said something more that he could scarcely hear, so low and distant sounded her voice, and he asked her to repeat it.

"I only said that I would be happy to go back," came the far voice.

Quick, unconsidered words trembled on his lips for utterance; perhaps fear of undoing what had been done restrained him.

"Not as happy as I will be to see you," he said, with an effort.

"Thank you. Good-bye, Mr. Desboro."

"Good-bye."

The sudden accession of high spirits filled him with delightful impatience. He ranged the house restlessly, traversing the hallway and silent rooms. A happy inclination for miscellaneous conversation impelled him to long-deferred interviews with people on the place. He talked business to Mrs. Quant, to Michael, the armourer; he put on snow-shoes and went cross lots to talk to his deaf head-farmer, Vail. Then he came back and set himself resolutely to his accounts; and after dinner he wrote

letters, a yellow pup dozing on his lap, a cat purring on his desk, and occasionally patting with tentative paw the letter-paper when it rustled.

A mania for cleaning up matters which had accumulated took possession of him – and it all seemed to concern, in some occult fashion, the coming of Jacqueline on the morrow – as though he wished to begin again with a clean slate and a conscience undisturbed. But what he was to begin he did not specify to himself.

Bills – heavy ones – he paid lightly, drawing check after check to cover necessities or extravagances, going straight through the long list of liabilities incurred from top to bottom.

Later, the total troubled him, and he made himself do a thing to which he was averse – balance his check-book. The result dismayed him, and he sat for a while eyeing the sheets of carelessly scratched figures, and stroking the yellow pup on his knees.

"What do I want with all these clubs and things?" he said impatiently. "I never use 'em."

On the spur of impulse, he began to write resignations, wholesale, ridding himself of all kinds of incumbrances – shooting clubs in Virginia and Georgia and North Carolina, to which he had paid dues and assessments for years, and to which he had never been; fishing clubs in Maine and Canada and Nova Scotia and California; New York clubs, including the Cataract, the Old Fort, the Palisades, the Cap and Bells, keeping only the

three clubs to which men of his sort are supposed to belong – the Patroons, the Olympian, and his college club. But everything else went – yacht clubs, riding clubs, golf clubs, country clubs of every sort – everything except his membership in those civic, educational, artistic, and charitable associations to which such New York families as his owed a moral and perpetual tribute.

It was nearly midnight when the last envelope was sealed and stamped, and he leaned back with a long, deep breath of relief. To-morrow he would apply the axe again and lop off such extravagances as saddle-horses in town, and the two cars he kept there. They should go to the auction rooms; he'd sell his Long Island bungalow, too, and the schooner and the power boats, and his hunters down at Cedar Valley; and with them would go groom and chauffeur, captain and mechanic, and the thousand maddening expenses that were adding daily to a total debt that had begun secretly to appal him.

In his desk he knew there was an accumulated mass of unpaid bills. He remembered them now and decided he didn't want to think about them. Besides, he'd clear them away pretty soon – settle accounts with tailor, bootmaker, haberdasher – with furrier, modiste and jeweler – and a dull red settled under his cheek bones as he remembered these latter bills, which he would scarcely care to exhibit to the world at large.

"Ass that I've been," he muttered, absently stroking the yellow pup. Which reflection started another train of thought, and he went to a desk, unlocked it, pulled out the large drawer, and

carried it with its contents to the fireplace.

The ashes were still alive and the first packet of letters presently caught fire. On them he laid a silken slipper of Mrs. Clydesdale's and watched it shrivel and burn. Next, he tossed handfuls of unassorted trifles, letters, fans, one or two other slippers, gloves of different sizes, dried remnants of flowers, programmes scribbled over; and when the rubbish burned hotly, he added photographs and more letters without even glancing at them, except where, amid the flames, he caught a momentary glimpse of some familiar signature, or saw some pretty, laughing phantom of the past glow, whiten to ashes, and evaporate.

Fire is a great purifier; he felt as though the flames had washed his hands. Much edified by the moral toilet, and not concerned that all such ablutions are entirely superficial, he watched with satisfaction the last bit of ribbon shrivel, the last envelope flash into flame. Then he replaced the desk drawer, leaving the key in it – because there was now no reason why all the world and its relatives should not rummage if they liked.

He remembered some letters and photographs and odds and ends scattered about his rooms in town, and made a mental note to clear them out of his life, too.

Mentally detached, he stood aloof in spirit and viewed with interest the spectacle of his own regeneration, and calmly admired it.

"I'll cut out all kinds of things," he said to himself. "A devout girl in Lent will have nothing on me. Nix for the bowl! Nix for the

fat pat hand! Throw up the sponge! Drop the asbestos curtain!" He made pretence to open an imaginary door: "Ladies, pass out quietly, please; the show is over."

The cat woke up and regarded him gravely; he said to her:

"You don't even need a pocket-book, do you? And you are quite right; having things is a nuisance. The less one owns the happier one is. Do you think I'll have sense enough to remember this to-morrow, and not be ass enough to acquire more – a responsibility, for example? Do you think I can be trusted to mind my business when *she* comes to-morrow? And not say something that I'll be surely sorry for some day – or something she'll be sorry for? Because she's so pretty, pussy – so disturbingly pretty – and so sweet. And I ought to know by this time that intelligence and beauty are a deadly combination I had better let alone until I find them in the other sort of girl. That's the trouble, pussy." He lifted the sleepy cat and held it at arm's length, where it dangled, purring all the while. "That's the trouble, kitty. I haven't the slightest intentions; and as for friends, men prefer men. And that's the truth, between you and me. It's rather rotten, isn't it, pussy? But I'll be careful, and if I see that she is capable of caring for me, I'll go South before it hurts either of us. That will be the square thing to do, I suppose – and neither of us the worse for another week together."

He placed the cat on the floor, where it marched to and fro with tail erect, inviting further attentions. But Desboro walked about, turning out the electric lights, and presently took himself

off to bed, fixed in a resolution that the coming week should be his last with this unusual girl. For, after all, he concluded she had not moved his facile imagination very much more than had other girls of various sorts, whose souvenirs lay now in cinders on his hearth, and long since had turned to ashes in his heart.

What was the use? Such affairs ended one way or another – but they always ended. All he wanted to find out, all he was curious about, was whether such an unusual girl could be moved to response – he merely wanted to know, and then he would let her alone, and no harm done – nothing to disturb the faint fragrance of a pretty souvenir that he and she might carry for a while – a week or two – perhaps a month – before they both forgot.

And, conscious of his good intentions, feeling tranquil, complacent, and slightly noble, he composed himself to slumber, thinking how much happier this world would be if men invariably behaved with the self-control that occasionally characterised himself.

In the city, Jacqueline lay awake on her pillow, unable to find a refuge in sleep from the doubts, questions, misgivings assailing her.

Wearied, impatient, vexed, by turns, that her impulse and decision should keep her sleepless – that the thought of going back to Silverwood should so excite her, she turned restlessly in her bed, unwilling to understand, humiliated in heart, ashamed, vaguely afraid.

Why should she have responded to an appeal from such a man as Desboro? Her own calm judgment had been that they had seen enough of each other – for the present, anyway. Because she knew, in her scared soul, that she had not meant it to be final – that some obscure idea remained of seeing him again, somewhere.

Yet, something in his voice over the wire – and something more disturbing still when he spoke so coolly about going South – had swayed her in her purpose to remain aloof for a while. But there was no reason, after all, for her to take it so absurdly. She would go once more, and then permit a long interval to elapse before she saw him again. If she actually had, as she began to believe, an inclination for his society, she would show herself that she could control that inclination perfectly.

Why should any man venture to summon her – for it was a virtual summons over the wire – and there had been arrogance in it, too. His curt acquiescence in her decision, and his own arbitrary decision to go South had startled her out of her calmly prepared rôle of business woman. She was trying to recall exactly what she had said to him afterward to make his voice change once more, and her own respond so happily.

Why should seeing him be any unusual happiness to her – knowing who and what he had been and was – a man of the out-world with which she had not one thing in common – a man who could mean nothing to her – could not even remain a friend because their two lives would never even run within sight of each

other.

She would never know anybody he knew. They would never meet anywhere except at Silverwood. How could they, once the business between them was transacted? She couldn't go to Silverwood except on business; he would never think of coming here to see her. Could she ask him – venture, perhaps, to invite him to dinner with some of her friends? Which friends? Cynthia and – who else? The girls she knew would bore him; he'd have only contempt for the men.

Then what did all this perplexity mean that was keeping her awake? And why was she going back to Silverwood? Why! Why! Was it to see with her own eyes the admiration for herself in his? She had seen it more than once. Was it to learn more about this man and his liking for her – to venture a guess, perhaps, as to how far that liking might carry him with a little encouragement – which she would not offer, of course?

She began to wonder how much he really did like her – how greatly he might care if she never were to see him again. Her mind answered her, but her heart appealed wistfully from the clear decision.

Lying there, blue eyes open in the darkness, head cradled on her crossed arms, she ventured to recall his features, summoning them shyly out of space; and she smiled, feeling the tension subtly relaxing.

Then she drifted for a while, watching his expression, a little dreading lest even his phantom laugh at her out of those eyes too

wise.

Visions came to her awake to reassure her; he and she in a sleigh together under the winter stars – he and she in the sunlight, their skates flashing over the frozen meadows – he and she in the armoury, heads together over some wonder of ancient craftsmanship – he and she at luncheon – in the library – always he and she together in happy companionship. Her eyelids fluttered and drooped; and sleep came, and dreams – wonderful, exquisite, past belief – and still of him and of herself together, always together in a magic world that could not be except for such as they.

CHAPTER VI

When the sombre morning broke at last, Jacqueline awoke, sprang from her bed, and fluttered away about her dressing as blithely as an April linnet in a hurry.

She had just time to breakfast and catch her train, with the help of heaven and a taxicab, and she managed to do it about the same moment that Desboro, half a hundred miles away, glanced out of his dressing-room window and saw the tall trees standing like spectres in the winter fog, and the gravel on the drive shining wet and muddy through melting snow. But he turned to the mirror again, whistling a gay air, and twisted his necktie into a smarter knot. Then he went out to the greenhouses and snipped off enough carnations to make a great sheaf of clove-scented blossoms for Jacqueline's room; and after that he proceeded through the other sections of the fragrant glass galleries, cutting, right and left, whatever he considered beautiful enough to do her fresh, young beauty honour.

At the station, he saw her standing on the platform of the drawing-room car as the train thundered in, veil and raincoat blowing, just as he had seen her there the first time she arrived at Silverwood station.

The car steps were sheathed in ice; she had already ventured down a little way when he reached her and offered aid; and she permitted him to swing her to the cinder-strewn ground.

"Are you really here!" he exclaimed, oblivious of interested glances from trainmen and passengers.

They exchanged an impulsive hand-clasp. Both were unusually animated.

"Are you well?" she asked, as though she had been away for months.

"Yes. Are you? It's perfectly fine of you to come" – still retaining her hand – "I wonder if you know how glad I am to see you! I wonder if you really do!"

She started to say something, hesitated, blushed, then their hands parted, and she answered lightly:

"What a very cordial welcome for a business girl on a horrid day! You mustn't spoil me, Mr. Desboro."

"I was afraid you might not come," he said; and indiscreet impulse prompted her to answer, as she had first answered him there on the platform two weeks ago:

"Do you suppose that mere weather could have kept me away from the famous Desboro collection?"

The charming malice in her voice, the delightful impertinence of her reply, so obviously at variance with fact, enchanted him. She was conscious of its effect on him, and, already slightly excited, ventured to laugh at her own thrust as though challenging his self-conceit to believe that she had even grazed herself with the two-edged weapon.

"Do I count for absolutely nothing?" he said.

"Do you flatter yourself that I returned to see *you*?"

"Let me believe it for just one second."

"I don't doubt that you will secretly and triumphantly believe it all the time."

"If I dared – "

"Is that sort of courage lacking in you, Mr. Desboro? I have heard otherwise. And how long are we going to remain here on this foggy platform?"

Here was an entirely new footing; but in the delightful glow of youthful indiscretion she still maintained her balance lightly, mockingly.

"Please tell me," she said, as they entered the car, and he drew the big fur robe around her, "just how easily you believe in your own overpowering attractions. Do women encourage you in such modest faith in yourself? Or are you merely created that way?"

"The house has been a howling wilderness without you," he said. "I admit *my* loneliness, anyway."

"*I* admit nothing. Besides, I wasn't."

"Is that true?"

She laughed tormentingly, eyes and cheeks brilliant, now undisguisedly on guard – her first acknowledgment that in this man she condescended to divine the hereditary adversary.

"I mean to punish," said her eyes.

"What an attack from a clear sky on a harmless young man," he said, at last.

"No, an attack from the fog on an insufferable egoist – an ambush, Mr. Desboro. And I thought a little sword-play might

do your complacent wits a service. Has it?"

"But you begin by a dozen thrusts, then beat down my guard, and cuff me about with blade and pommel – "

"I had to. Now, does your vanity believe that my return to Silverwood was influenced by your piteous appeal over the wire – and your bad temper, too?"

"No," he said solemnly.

"Well, then! I came here partly to put my notes in better shape for Mr. Sissly, partly to clear up odds and ends and leave him a clear field to plow – in your persistent company," she added, with such engaging malice that even the name of Sissly, which he hated, made him laugh.

"You won't do that," he said confidently.

"Do what, Mr. Desboro?"

"Turn me over to anything named Sissly."

"Indeed, I will – you and your celebrated collection! Of course you *could* go South, but, judging from your devotion to the study of ancient armour – "

"You don't mean it, do you?"

"What? About your devotion?"

"No, about Sissly."

"Yes, I do. Listen to me, Mr. Desboro. I made up my mind that sleighing, and skating, and luncheon and tea, and —*you*, are not good for a busy girl's business career. I'm going to be very practical and very frank with you. I don't belong here except on business, and you make it so pleasant and unbusinesslike for me

that my conscience protests. You see, if the time I now take to lunch with you, tea with you, skate, sleigh, talk, listen, in your very engaging company is properly employed, I can attend to yards and yards of business in town. And I'm going to. I mean it, please," as he began to smile.

His smile died out. He said, quietly:

"Doesn't our friendship count for anything?"

She looked at him; shrugged her shoulders:

"Oh, Mr. Desboro," she said pleasantly, "does it, *really*?"

The blue eyes were clear and beautiful, and a little grave; only the upcurled corners of her mouth promised anything.

The car drew up at the house; she sprang out and ran upstairs to her room. He heard her in animated confab with Mrs. Quant for a few minutes, then she came down in her black business gown, with narrow edges of lawn at collar and cuffs, and the bright lock already astray on her cheek. A white carnation was tucked into her waist; the severe black of her dress, as always, made her cheeks and lips and golden hair more brilliant by contrast.

"Now," she said, "for my notes. And what are you going to do while I'm busy?"

"Watch you, if I may. You've heard about the proverbial cat?"

"Care killed it, didn't it?"

"Yes; but it had a good look at the Queen first."

A smile touched her eyes and lips – a little wistfully.

"You know, Mr. Desboro, that I like to waste time with you.

Flatter your vanity with that confession. And even if things were – different – but they couldn't ever be – and I must work very hard if I'm ever going to have any leisure in my old age. But come to the library for this last day, and smoke as usual. And you may talk to amuse me, if you wish. Don't mind if I'm too busy to answer your folly in kind."

They went together to the library; she placed the mass of notes in front of her and began to sort them – turned for a second and looked around at him with adorable malice, then bent again to the task before her.

"Miss Nevers!"

"Yes?"

"You will come to Silverwood again, won't you?"

She wrote busily with a pencil.

"Won't you?"

She made some marginal notes and he looked at the charming profile in troubled silence.

About ten minutes later she turned leisurely, tucking up the errant strand of hair with her pencil:

"Did you say anything recently, Mr. Desboro?"

"Out of the depths, yes. The voice in the wilderness as usual went unheeded. I wished to explain to you how we might give up our skating and sleighing and everything except the bare necessities – and you could still come to Silverwood on business – "

"What are the 'bare necessities'?"

"Your being here is one – "

"Answer me seriously, please."

"Food, then. We must eat."

She conceded that much.

"We've got to motor to and from the station!"

She admitted that, too.

"Those," he pointed out, "are the bare necessities. We can give up everything else."

She sat looking at him, playing absently with her pencil. After a while, she turned to her desk again, and, bending over it, began to make meaningless marks with her pencil on the yellow pad.

"What is the object," she said, "of trying to make me forget that I wouldn't be here at all except on business?"

"Do you think of that every minute?"

"I – must."

"It isn't necessary."

"It is imperative, Mr. Desboro – and you know it."

She wrote steadily for a while, strapped a bundle of notes with an elastic band, laid it aside, and turned around, resting her arm on the back of the chair. Blue eyes level with his, she inspected him curiously. And, if the tension of excitement still remained, all her high spirits and the indiscreet impulses of a gay self-confidence had vanished. But curiosity remained – the eternal, insatiable curiosity of the young.

How much did this man really mean of what he said to her? What did his liking for her signify other than the natural instinct

of an idle young man for any pretty girl? What was he going to do about it? For she seemed to be conscious that, sooner or later, somewhere, sometime, he would do something further about it.

Did he mean to make love to her sometime? Was he doing it now? It resembled the preliminaries; she recognised them – had been aware of them almost from the very first.

Men had made love to her before – men in her own world, men in his world. She had learned something since her father died – not a great deal; perhaps more from hearsay than from experience. But some unpleasant knowledge had been acquired at first hand; two clients of her father's had contributed, and a student, named Harroun, and an amateur of soft paste statuettes, the Rev. Bertie Dawley.

Innocently and wholesomely equipped to encounter evil, cool and clear eyed mistress of herself so far, she had felt, with happy contempt, that her fate was her own to control, and had wondered what the word "temptation" could mean to any woman.

What Cynthia had admitted made her a little wiser, but still incredulous. Cold, hunger, debts, loneliness – these were not enough, as Cynthia herself had said. Nor, after all, was Cynthia's liking for Cairns. Which proved conclusively that woman is the arbiter of her own destiny.

Desboro, one knee crossed over the other, sat looking into the fire, which burned in the same fireplace where he had recently immolated the frivolous souvenirs of the past.

Perhaps some gay ghost of that scented sacrifice took shape

for a moment in the curling smoke, for he suddenly frowned and passed his hand over his eyes in boyish impatience.

Something – the turn of his head and shoulders – the shape of them – she did not know what – seemed to set her heart beating loudly, ridiculously, without any apparent reason on earth. Too much surprised to be disturbed, she laid her slim hand on her breast, then against her throat, till her pulses grew calmer.

Resting her chin on her arm, she gazed over her shoulder into the fire. He had laid another log across the flames; she watched the bark catch fire, dully conscious, now, that her ideas were becoming as irresponsible and as reasonless as the sudden stirring of her heart had been.

For she was thinking how odd it would be if, like Cynthia, she too, ever came to care about a man of Desboro's sort. She'd see to it that she didn't; that was all. There were other men. Better still, there were to be no men; for her mind fastidiously refused to consider the only sort with whom she felt secure – her intellectual inferiors whose moral worthiness bored her to extinction.

Musing there, half turned on her chair, she saw Desboro rise, still looking intently into the fire, and stand so, his well-made, graceful figure, in silhouette, edged with the crimson glow.

"What do you see in it, Mr. Desboro?"

He turned instantly and came over to her:

"A bath of flames would be very popular," he said, "if burning didn't hurt. I was just thinking about it – how to invent – "

She quoted: "'But I was thinking of a plan to dye one's

whiskers green.'"

He said: "I suppose you think me as futile as that old man 'a-settin' on a gate.'"

"Your pursuits seem to be about as useful as his."

"Why should I pursue things? I don't want 'em."

"You are hopeless. There is pleasure even in pursuit of anything, no matter whether you ever attain it or not. I will never attain wisdom, but it's a pleasure to pursue it."

"It's a pleasure even to pursue pleasure – and it's the only pleasure in pleasure," he said, so gravely that for a moment she thought with horror that he was trying to be precious. Then the latent glimmer in his eyes set them laughing, and she rose and went over to the sofa and curled up in one corner, abandoning all pretense of industry.

"Once," she said, "I knew a poet who emitted such precious thoughts. He was the funniest thing; he had the round, pale, ancient eyes of an African parrot, a pasty countenance, and a derby hat resting on top of a great bunch of colourless curly hair. And that's the way *he* talked, Mr. Desboro!"

He seated himself on the other arm of the sofa:

"Did you adore him?"

"At first. He was a celebrity. He did write some pretty things."

"What woke you up?"

She blushed.

"I thought so," observed Desboro.

"Thought what?"

"That he came out of his trance and made love to you."

"How did you know? Wasn't it dreadful! And he'd always told me that he had never experienced an emotion except when adoring the moon. He was a very dreadful young man – perfectly horrid in his ideas – and I sent him about his business very quickly; and I remember being a little frightened and watching him from the window as he walked off down the street in his soiled drab overcoat and the derby hat on his frizzly hair, and his trousers too high on his ankles – "

Desboro was so immensely amused at the picture she drew that her pretty brows unbent and she smiled, too.

"What did he want of you?" he asked.

"I didn't fully understand at the time – " she hesitated, then, with an angry blush: "He asked me to go to Italy with him. And he said he couldn't marry me because he had already espoused the moon!"

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.