

Footner Hulbert

The Deaves Affair



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CHAPTER I

A PENNY CHANGE

Evan Weir's pipe was foul; he threw it down with an exclamation of disgust. Its foulness was symbolic; everything was out of kilter. He looked at the picture he had been painting for a week – rotten! It was a still life; a broken jar and three books on a rag of Persian embroidery. Picking up his pen-knife he deliberately cut the canvas out of the stretcher, and setting a match to a corner of it, tossed it in the empty stove. He paced up and down the room wondering what the devil was the matter with him; he couldn't work; he couldn't read; his friends bored him; life was as flat as beer dregs.

His attic studio was lighted by a dormer window at a height convenient to receive his elbows on the sill. He came to a pause in that position morosely staring out on Washington Square basking in the summer morning sunshine. In some occult way the gilding on the green leaves stabbed at his breast and accused him of futility.

"What the deuce am I doing up here in this dusty garret

painting bad pictures while the whole world is alive!" he thought.

He picked up his hat and went slowly down the three flights to the street. At the corner of the square he turned down Macdougall street into the Italian quarter.

This intimate thoroughfare was as crowded as a bee-hive. Happy, dirty, big-eyed children played in the gutters while their obese mothers squatted untidily on the stoops. No lack of the zest of life here. It shamed the pedestrian without cheering him.

"They haven't much to live for," he thought, "and they're not complaining. Why can't I take things as they come, as they do, without searching my soul?"

It was a point of pride with Evan not to look like a denizen of Washington Square. So his hair was cut, and his clothes like anybody's else. He even went so far as to keep his hat brushed, his trousers creased and his shoes polished. For the rest he was a vigorous, deep-chested youth of middle height with rugged features and glowing dark eyes. He had a self-contained, even a dogged look. Like all men susceptible of deep feeling, he did not choose to wear his heart upon his sleeve.

Half an hour later found him in that quaint corner of the island bounded by Liberty street, Greenwich street and the river. It is generally called the Syrian quarter, though shared by the Syrians with immigrants of all nations, whose boarding-houses abound there, convenient to the landing station. A feature of the neighbourhood is the cheap clothing stores where the immigrants buy their first United States suits. These suits hang swinging from

the awnings like wasted gallows birds. A hawk-eyed salesman lurks beneath; in other words the "puller-in."

As Evan approached such a place in darkest Greenwich street a customer issued forth of aspect so comical and strange that Evan was drawn out of himself to regard him. It was a tall, lean old man who moved with a factitious sprightliness. He was clearly no immigrant but a native of these United States. He was wearing a hand-me-down which hung in weird folds on his bones. The trousers lacked a good four inches of the ground, and the sleeves revealed an inch of skinny wrist. The wearer looked like a gawky school-boy with an old, old face. Yet he bore himself with the conscious pride of one who wears a new suit. On his head he wore a brownish straw hat which was a little too small for him, and had seen three summers. As he walked along with his sprightly shuffle, which did not get him over the ground very fast, his head ceaselessly turned from side to side, and he continually looked over his shoulder without seeming to see anything. His mouth was fixed in the lines of a sly smile, which had nothing to do with the expression of his eyes. This was furtive and anxious. His little grey eyes searched in all the corners of the pavement like a rag-picker's eyes. To Evan there was something familiar about the face, but he couldn't quite place it.

The old man turned a corner into one of the little streets leading to the river. Evan, bound nowhere in particular, and full of curiosity, followed. There was something notable about the old figure in its ridiculous habiliments; this was no common

character. Under his arm he carried a bundle wrapped in crumpled paper, which presumably contained his discarded suit.

He stopped at a fruit-stand, and as Evan overtook him, was engaged in scanning a tray of apples as if the fate of nations depended upon his picking the best one at the price. The fruit-vendor regarded him with a disgusted sneer. Evan loitered, and as the little comedy developed, stopped outright to see it out.

The old man after an anxious period of indecision finally made his choice. After having satisfied himself that there was no concealed blemish in his apple he proffered a nickel in payment and extended a trembling hand for the change. The Syrian dropped a penny in it, and turned away with a suspiciously casual manner.

"Where's my other penny?" demanded the old man in a high-pitched, creaking voice.

"What's the matter with you?" demanded the vendor with a wholly disproportionate display of passion. "That's all you get."

The old man pointed an indignant forefinger to the ticket on the tray. "Two for five!" he shrilled.

"That's right. Or four cents a piece," was the rejoinder.

"No you don't! Half of five is two and a half. You make half a cent on the deal anyhow."

"Well, if y'ain't satisfied, gimme the penny and take another!" With an unerring eye the vendor pounced on the smallest and knoggiest apple in the tray and offered that.

The old man would have none of it. "Give me my other

penny!" said he.

"That's all you get!"

"Give me my other penny or I'll call the police!"

"Yah! For a penny would you! You're a big man of business you are! Call a cop, go on, and see what he'll say for a penny!"
The vendor passionately searched under a shelf, and producing a ticket marked "4¢" defiantly stuck that alongside the "2 for 5."

"No you don't!" cried the old man. "You can't raise the price on me after I've bought!"

"One for four, two for five! I guess I charge what I like! I don't have to charge half the price for one!"

"You're a robber!"

The vendor appealed to Heaven to witness that he was maligned. He brandished a fist before the old man's nose. "You lie! You lie!" he cried. "Get out of here. I don't want you by my stand!"

"Give me my penny!"

"Ain't no penny comin' to yeh!"

Evan was not the only grinning on-looker. A crowd collected out of nowhere as crowds do. The anxious vendor had now not only to keep up his end of the argument, but to watch his exposed stock as well. But he showed no signs of giving in.

"Get out of here! I don't want you round me!" he cried.

"Give me my penny!"

"Ain't no penny comin' to yeh!"

They repeated it with incredible passion, over and over.

The crowd at first egged on both parties impartially:

"Go to it, men! A penny's a penny at that!"

"Don't let him jew you, old man. All them dagoes is robbers!"

"Soak him one, Tony, the tight-wad!"

"Sue him for the penny, Grandpa. I'll go witness for you."

"Aw, give him his penny, Mike. He needs a new lid." And so on.

"Gimme my penny!"

"Ain't no penny comin' to yeh!"

Finally the old man threw the apple back on the tray. "I won't deal with you at all!" he cried. "You're a robber! Gimme my money back!"

"You bruised it!" cried the Syrian tragically. "I don't take back no spoiled goods. Leave it lay at your own risk!"

"Gimme back my money!" cried the old man undaunted.

A grimy little hand slid out from the crowd and closed over the disputed apple. In the flick of a whip it was gone, and no man could say where. The crowd rocked with laughter.

The vendor shrugged. "Ain't my loss. It's his apple."

"Gimme my money back!" demanded the old man.

"Ah, what do you want, the apple and the money and the change too?"

The old man snapped the penny down on the glass top of the candy case. "Gimme my nickel," he said like a bird with one note.

The vendor passionately snatched up the penny and cast it at his feet. "Go to Hell with your penny!" he cried.

Someone put a foot on it and that likewise was seen no more.

"Gimme my nickel!" said the old man.

Suddenly a voice in the crowd was heard to say: "Gee! it's Simeon Deaves!"

"Simeon Deaves, of course!" thought Evan. That old face was continually in the newspapers.

Instantly the temper of the crowd changed. There was nobody who could read English that was not acquainted with this man's reputation. A chorus of imprecations was heard:

"Miser! Skinflint! Tight-wad! Robber!"

The sallies of the sidewalk wits were almost drowned in the mere cries of rage:

"Tight-wad, did you say? His wad is ossified to him!"

"He wants to put that penny out at interest!"

"Say, the Jews go to school to him."

"He'd skin the cream offen a baby's bottle, he would."

The old man looked down and back at them snarling. Like a cowed animal's, his gaze was fixed upon their feet. Fearful of blows to follow, he turned around, and edging away from the stand got his back against the wall of the building. His face was ashy, yet oddly the mouth was still fixed in the unvarying lines of the sly smile. The fruit vendor made haste to shut up his stand.

A flushed and burly Irishwoman stepped in advance of the crowd. She looked Deaves up and down insultingly. "What kind of a man do you call yourself?" she cried. "With all your millions locked up in the bank, and dressed in a suit that my old man

wouldn't sweep up manure in! What are you doing down here anyhow? Go back up town where you belong!" She shook a fist like a ham in his face. "Do you see that? That's an honest hand that never filched a penny. For a word I'd plant it in your ugly face, you Shylock! You penny-parer!"

A youth's voice cried out: "Come on, fellows, let him have it!"

The crowd suddenly swayed forward. No one could tell exactly what happened. A raised clenched fist smashed the old man's hat over his eyes. Deaves went down out of sight.

This was too much for Evan. After all the man was old and it was fifty to one against him. His blood boiled, and the megrims were forgotten. He rushed in on the old man's side, swinging his arms and shouting:

"Get back, you cowards! Give the old man a chance!"

The passionately indignant voice was more effective than the blows against so many. The crowd drew back shamefacedly, revealing the old man prone on the sidewalk, but not visibly injured. He was able to scramble to his hands and knees as soon as they gave him room. Evan helped him to his feet.

"Come on, I'll get you out of this," he said peremptorily. With his flashing eyes he searched the faces of the crowd for eyes that dared to withstand his, but none cared to.

He started to march the dazed old man smartly towards West street. It was an uncomfortable moment when they were obliged to turn their backs on the crowd. Evan expected another rush. But it did not come.

They had not taken ten steps when the old man pulled back. "M-my bundle," he stammered. "I've lost my bundle."

Evan could not tell what the crowd might do. There was of course no policeman to be expected in that forgotten little street. "Let your bundle go!" he warned him. "Come on."

But the old man planted himself like a child with immovable obstinacy. "My old clothes!" he said. "They're worth money! I'm not going to give them up!"

Evan with an exasperated laugh went back. The crowd which had started to follow backed off. The bundle lay where the old man had fallen. It had come unwrapped and the deplorable garments were fully revealed. Evan, gritting his teeth, stooped over and rolled them up. He knew what a chance he was providing to the wits of the crowd.

"Old clo'! Old clo'!"

"Rags, bones, bottles! Any rags, bones, bottles!"

"Say, fella, what do you think you'll get out of it?"

"Aw, Simeon Deaves 'll give him his old clothes."

The envious note was clearly audible. Individuals in the crowd were beginning to ask themselves now, why they hadn't had the wit to take the old man's part, and earn his gratitude. Evan held himself in from reply.

"What's the use," he thought. "Scum!"

Rejoining the old man he led him to the West street corner. Deaves had had a bad shock, and he was still trembling all over, and stumbling slightly in his walk. He betrayed no consciousness

of gratitude towards his rescuer. His mind was still running on the lost nickel.

"Robber! Outrage! Thieving scoundrel!" he was muttering.

They waited for a Belt line car. Another man waited alongside of them, a quiet little youth in a grey suit whom Evan had seen as an onlooker in the crowd.

When the car came the old man was still so shaky that it seemed to Evan only the part of common humanity to accompany him. But on the step Deaves turned sharply.

"You needn't come," he said. "I can take care of myself."

"That's all right," said Evan politely. "It's no inconvenience."

"I won't pay your fare," said Deaves.

Evan laughed. "I'll pay the fares," he said. To himself he thought: "It's not often one has a chance of standing treat to a millionaire."

Deaves did allow Evan to pay the fares, and indeed seemed quite pleased as if he had got the better of him in a deal. But something about Evan disconcerted him. He continued to glance at him sideways out of his restless, furtive little grey eyes. Finally he said:

"I'm not going to give you anything for coming with me."

"Don't expect it," said Evan.

"What are you coming for then?" Deaves demanded.

Evan laughed in an annoyed way. "Well, now that you put it to me, I don't exactly know. I suppose I owe it to myself not to let an old man fall down in the street."

Deaves thought over this quite a long while. Along with his shrewdness there was something childish in the old man. "You're a good boy!" he announced at last.

Evan appreciated that this was an immense concession. "Much obliged," he said dryly.

"Just the same, you needn't think you're going to get anything out of me," the old man quickly added.

"I don't."

Having established this point to his satisfaction Deaves seemed disposed to become friendly. "What are you doing out on the street in the middle of the morning?" he asked.

"I might ask the same of you," returned Evan good-naturedly.

"I'm retired. I've a right to take my ease. But all young fellows ought to be at work. Haven't you got any work to do?"

"I'm an artist."

"Pooh! Waste of time!"

Evan laughed. It was useless to get angry at the old boy.

"Why aren't you working at it now?" Deaves demanded to know.

"It wouldn't come to-day," said Evan.

"Stuff and nonsense! You'll never get on that way! Look at me!"

Evan did so, thinking: "I wouldn't be like you for all your millions!"

Deaves went on: "Keep everlastingly at it! That's my motto. That's what's brought me to where I am to-day. I've retired now

– though I still have my irons in the fire – but when I was your age I worked early and late. I didn't waste *my* time fooling round like young men do. No, sir! My only thought was how to turn everything to advantage. I denied myself everything; lived on two bits a day, I did, and put my savings to work. The cents and the dollars are good and willing little servants if you make them work for you. I watched 'em grow and grow. That was my young man's fun."

Evan looking at him thought: "You are an object-lesson all right, old man, but not just the way you think."

The current of Deaves' thoughts changed. "You're a strong boy," he said, with a glance at Evan's stout frame. He felt of his biceps through the thin coat. "Hm!" he said scornfully. "I suppose you're proud of your strength. I suppose you spend the best part of your days exercising. Waste of time! Waste of time! A strong man never comes to anything. They're simple, mostly. It's the head that counts! How many of those ruffians did you knock down?"

"Not any," said Evan carelessly. "They ducked."

"Well, you're a good boy. You stick to me, and I'll show you something better than messing in colours. I'll show you how to make money!"

CHAPTER II

A RICH MAN'S HOUSE

They rode up to Fifty-Ninth street, and transferring to a cross-town car, got off at the Plaza. Evan's subconsciousness registered the fact that the little fellow in grey was still travelling their way, but he took no particular notice of him. Deaves led the way to one of the magnificent mansions that embellish the neighbourhood. He handed his bundle to Evan.

"You carry it," he said. "Maud always makes a fuss when I bring bundles home."

"Who is Maud?" asked Evan.

"My son's wife; a great society woman."

"You want me to come in with you then?" said Evan.

"Yes, you're a good boy. I want to give you something."

Evan was surprised. "A dime, or even a quarter!" he thought, smiling to himself. Nevertheless he went willingly enough, filled with a great curiosity.

The house was a showy affair of grey sandstone built in the style of a French château. But Evan's trained eye perceived many lapses of taste; it was not even well-built; the window-casings were of wood when they should have been of stone; the side of the house, plainly visible from the street, was of common yellow brick. It looked like a jerry-built palace for a parvenu.

Evan wondered how the old money-lender had come to be stuck with it.

"My son's house," said Deaves with a queer mixture of pride and scorn. "I live with them. Sinful waste!"

He avoided the front door with its grand grill of polished steel. The street widening had shorn off the original areaway of the house, and the service entrance was now a mere slit in the sidewalk with a steep stair swallowed up in blackness below. Down this stair old Simeon Deaves made his way. Evan followed, grinning to himself. It was certainly an odd way for a man to enter his own home.

"We won't meet Maud this way," Deaves said over his shoulder.

The remark called up a picture of Maud before Evan's mind's eye.

In the basement of the great house they met many servants passing to and fro, before whom the old man cringed a little. These superior menials turned an indifferent shoulder to him, but stared hard at Evan. Evan flushed. Insolence in servants galled his pride. "If I paid their wages I'd teach them better manners!" he thought.

Somewhere in the bowels of the house, which was full of passages like all ill-planned dwellings, the old man unlocked a door and led Evan into a vaultlike chamber without a window. Carefully closing the door behind them he turned on a light.

"This is where I keep all my things," he said innocently.

"Maud never comes down here."

Evan looked around. A strange collection of objects met his view; old clothes, old newspapers, old hardware, in extraordinary disorder. It was like the junk room in an old farmhouse. The walls were covered with shelves heaped with objects; old clocks, broken china ornaments, empty cans, pieces of rope, bundles of rags. On the floor besides, were boxes and trunks, some with covers, some without; the latter overflowing with rubbish. Evan wondered whimsically if the closed boxes were filled with shining gold eagles. It would be quite in keeping, he thought. But on second thoughts, no. Your modern miser is too sensible of the advantages of safe deposit vaults.

Deaves found a place for his bundle of old clothes, and seeing Evan looking around, he said with his noiseless laugh, which was no more than a facial contortion:

"You never can tell when a thing will be wanted."

Turning his back on Evan he rummaged for a long time among his shelves. Evan was somewhat at a loss, for his host appeared to have forgotten him. He was considering quietly leaving the place when the old man finally turned around. He had a small object in his hand which he made as if to offer Evan, but drew it back suddenly and examined it lovingly. It was a pen-knife out of his collection.

"Almost new," said Deaves. "The little blade is missing, but the big blade is perfectly good if you sharpen it. Here," he said, suddenly thrusting it at Evan as if in fear of repenting of his

generosity. "For you."

Evan resisted the impulse to laugh. After all the value of a gift is its value to the giver. He pocketed it with thanks. It would make an interesting souvenir. To produce it would cap the climax of the funny story he meant to make out of this adventure. He turned to go.

"Don't be in a hurry," said Deaves. "Sit down and let's talk."

He evidently had something on his mind. Evan, curious to learn what it could be, sat down on a trunk.

"You're a good boy, and a strong boy," said the old man. "I'd like to do something for you."

"Don't mention it," said Evan grinning.

"Why don't you come every day and go out with me. I like to walk about. I can't stay cooped up here. I like the streets. But people recognise me."

"And make rude remarks," said Evan to himself.

"But with you I could go anywhere."

"Ah, a body-guard," thought Evan. The idea was not without its attractions. It would be an amusing job. He said:

"If you want to hire me I'm willing. I need the money."

"Hire you!" said the old man in a panic. "I never said anything about hiring you. I just mean a friendly arrangement. You have plenty of time on your hands. I'll give you good advice. Show you how to become a successful man."

"Thanks," said Evan dryly. "But the labels I paint bring in ready money."

"Many a young man would be glad of the chance to go around with Simeon Deaves," he went on cunningly. "It would be a liberal education for you."

Evan got up. It was the best argument he knew.

"You could have your meals here," Deaves said quickly. "They eat well. There's enough wasted in this house to feed an orphanage."

"Sorry," said Evan. "It doesn't appeal to me."

"Well, you could have a room on the top floor. You look pretty good; Maud wouldn't mind you. Your living wouldn't cost you a cent."

Evan thought of the supercilious servants. Not for a bank president's salary would he have lived in that house. He said: "I'm open for an offer as I told you, but only during specified hours. I'd eat and sleep at home."

"You're a fool!" said the old man testily. "Free board and lodging! I haven't any money."

"All right," said Evan moving towards the door. "No harm done."

"Wait a minute. Maybe my son would lend me the money to pay you a small salary. He says I oughtn't to go out alone."

"A small salary doesn't interest me," said Evan boldly. "Fifty dollars a week is my figure."

Simeon Deaves gasped. "You're crazy. It's a fortune. At your age I wasn't making a third of that!"

"Very likely. But times have changed."

The old man now opened the door for Evan. As he did so there was a scuttle in the passage and a figure whisked out of sight. "Snoopers!" thought Evan.

"Will you show me the way up-stairs?" he said. "I don't care to use the servants' entrance."

"Sure, that's right," said Deaves soothingly. "I hope we won't meet Maud. Always picking on me."

As they headed for the stairs he said cajolingly: "Fifteen dollars a week; that's plenty to live on. Youngsters ought to live simply. It's good for their health."

"But how about putting something by?" said Evan slyly.

"Well, I think my son might go as high as seventeen-fifty if I asked him. Because you're a good boy and a strong boy."

"Thanks. Nothing doing."

As Evan resolutely mounted the stairs, the old man hobbling after said: "Well, I'll add two and a half to that myself. But that's my last word! Not another cent!"

"Nothing doing," said Evan again.

At the head of the stairs Deaves said nervously: "Better let me take a look to see if Maud's around." He peeped out. "All right, the coast is clear."

They were now in a square entrance hall of goodly size, very showily finished like a hotel with veneered panels, which already showed signs of wear. Imitation antique chairs stood about, and in front of the fireplace, which was certainly never intended to contain a fire, was spread a somewhat moth-eaten polar bear

skin. Still it was grand after a fashion, and the old man in his hand-me-downs looked oddly out of place.

"Better think it over!" he said. "Twenty dollars a week! It's a splendid salary!"

"Nothing doing," said Evan, grinning. In a way he liked the old scoundrel.

Deaves affected to lose his temper. "Oh, you're too big for your shoes!" he cried. "Your demands are preposterous!"

Evan continued calmly to make his way towards the front door.

Just before they reached it the old man made one last appeal. "Twenty dollars!" he said plaintively.

A door at the back of the hall opened and an old-young man came out; that is to say he was young in years, but he seemed to bear the weight of an empire on his shoulders, and looked very, very sorry for himself. He was dressed as if he had to be a pall-bearer that day, but that was his ordinary attire. He looked sharply from the old man to Evan.

"Who is this, Papa?" he demanded with the air of a school-master catching a boy red-handed.

The old man cringed. "This – this is a young man."

"So I see."

"Well, I – I didn't exactly ask him his name."

"Evan Weir," spoke up the young man for himself.

"He came home with me," said Deaves. "There was a little trouble."

The younger Deaves was horrified. "Another disgraceful street scene!" he cried. Addressing Evan he said: "Please tell me exactly what happened." He glanced nervously over his shoulder. "But not here. Come up to my library."

He led the way up-stairs, across another and a loftier hall with an imitation groined ceiling, and into a large room at the back of the house, which by virtue of a case of morocco bound books, clearly not often disturbed, was the library. The young man flung himself into a chair behind an immense flat-topped desk and waved his hand to Evan with an air that seemed to say: "Now tell me the worst!" Between the two, Evan's sympathies were with the father.

He was not invited to sit. He told his story briefly, making out the best case that he could for the old man. The latter was not insensible to the favour. His little eyes twinkled. The young man became gloomier and gloomier as the story progressed.

"We shall hear more of this!" he said tragically.

The old man pished and pshawed. "I offered him a steady job," he said, "to go round with me. But his notions are too grand."

"Why, that would be a very suitable arrangement," his son said pompously. "How much do you want?" he asked of Evan.

"Fifty dollars a week."

"That's ridiculous!" young Deaves said loftily. "I'll give you twenty-five."

The scene of down-stairs was continued, with this difference that the son was not so naïve as the father. Evan kept up his

end with firmness and good-humour. After all there was some fun in contending with such passionate bargainers, and he saw that for some reason the son was more anxious to get hold of him than the father. They finally compromised on forty dollars a week, provided Evan's references were satisfactory. Simeon Deaves was scandalised.

"It's too much! too much!" he repeated. "It will turn his head completely!"

CHAPTER III

SNOOPING

Young Deaves (his father addressed him as George) passed out through a small door on the left presumably to telephone to Evan's references. His father followed him, still protesting tearfully that the salary he purposed paying Evan would ruin them both. Evan was left standing in the middle of the room. Before he had time to take a further survey of his surroundings the door from the hall was softly opened, and a smug, pale young man in a sober suit sidled into the room, a servant. Evan learned later that "Second man" was his official title. "Spy" was writ large on him. The house seemed to be swarming with them. This fellow had undoubtedly been listening at the door.

"Good God! who would be rich!" thought Evan.

The servant with a sly, meaning look in Evan's direction went to a console at the left of the room, and affected to busy himself in arranging the objects upon it. In reality his long ears were stretched for sounds coming through the little door. Having satisfied himself that the Deaves' were good for several minutes in there, he came towards Evan with an ingratiating leer.

"Nice day," he said.

Evan's impulse was to call the fellow down, but he reflected that if he was to become an inmate of the house, it would be just

as well for his own protection to learn what this snooping and eavesdropping signified.

"Fine," he said non-committally.

"Are you going to be one of us?"

"I don't know yet."

"It's a rummy joint."

"So I gather," said Evan dryly.

"Have you seen the Missus yet?"

"No."

The lackey cast up his eyes and whistled softly. "Oh boy! You've got something to see!"

This was Evan's first experience of the below-stairs point of view. It was a revelation.

"Were you planted here?" the servant asked with a mysterious air.

"What do you mean?" asked Evan.

The other quickly turned it off. "Oh nothing." He glanced towards the little door. "When you work for a bunch like this you don't feel like you owed them anything. It's every man for himself."

"I suppose so," said Evan.

"But there's a square bunch down-stairs. Come down to the butler's room when you can and get acquainted."

"Thanks."

"Take it from me you won't find it such a bad house if you stand in with the crowd down-stairs. There's money to be made

on the side if you're smart enough."

"How?" asked Evan.

The second man winked at him knowingly. "Let's you and I get better acquainted before we get confidential."

"Sure," said Evan. "I see you're a wise guy."

"Wise!" said the other. "Solomon wasn't one two three with me."

"What do they call you?"

"Alfred. I'll make you acquainted with the bunch down-stairs. The women – " He suddenly broke off, and stiffened into the blank-faced, deferential servant.

Young Deaves and old Deaves returned through the little door.

"If you please, sir," said Alfred quickly, "Mr. Hilton sent me to ask what wines you would have for dinner."

"I'm busy!" snapped George Deaves. "Tell Hilton when I want wine I'll let him know."

"Yes, sir, very good, sir." The rubber-shod one wafted out of the room, shutting the door behind him as softly as a flower closes. George Deaves looked sharply to see that it was closed, then looked as sharply at Evan.

"Was he talking to you?" he demanded.

Evan quickly decided that the only safe hand to play in this strange house was a lone hand; he would take no one into his confidence. "Nothing in particular," he said.

"Why don't you fire him, George?" asked his father.

The younger man shrugged wearily. "What's the use? The

next one would be no better." He turned his attention to Evan. "Your references were satisfactory," he said. "You may consider yourself engaged. Thirty-five dollars was the sum we agreed on, I believe."

"No, sir, forty dollars," said Evan firmly.

"Ah, my mistake. It's a great deal of money. I hope you'll be worth it. You will be at my father's call whenever he wants you."

"I will come at nine o'clock every morning and stay until five. Sundays are my own of course."

George Deaves turned to his father. "On your part, if I pay out all this money, you must promise me that you will not go out except with this young man."

The old man gave an ungracious assent.

"I will report at nine to-morrow," Evan said.

"But I want to go out now," the old man said like a child.

"You've had quite enough outing for to-day, Papa," George Deaves said severely.

Simeon Deaves said to Evan spitefully like a balked child: "Well, your wages won't begin until to-morrow, then. To-day doesn't count."

As Evan had his hand on the door he became aware that George Deaves was making signals to him to remain. He lingered, wondering what was in the wind now. George said to his father:

"Lunch is ready. You'd better go down."

Forgetting all about Evan, the old man hastened out of the

room with an expectant air.

When he had gone George Deaves hemmed and hawed, gazed at the ceiling, made scratches on his desk pad and beat all around the bush. The gist of it as finally extracted by Evan was something as follows:

"I am not paying you all this money as a simple attendant for papa. I could get two at the price. The fact is papa has an unfortunate faculty for getting involved in street disputes. On account of his prominence a certain publicity is attached to it. Very distressing to the family. I shall expect you to keep him out of such troubles. You will have to be firm. He is very obstinate. But I authorise you to take any measures, any measures to save him from his own folly."

Evan was tempted to ask: "Even to cracking him on the bean?" But instead he said demurely: "I quite understand."

Evan made his way home down the Avenue ruminating upon what had happened. "In the words of Alfred it's a rummy joint," he said to himself. "Father and son are a pair of birds. What do I care? I'm not going to let them get under my skin. I'll give them their money's worth for a month or so, then bid them ta-ta and hike to the blessed country on my savings. Meanwhile the affair has its humorous side. Mystery, too. Like a play."

If Evan had not recollected when he got to Thirtieth street that he needed certain small articles of apparel to make himself presentable in his new job, he would probably not have discovered that he was being followed. But as he retraced his

steps to the shops his attention was caught by a man's back, a narrow back clad in grey. The owner of the back was looking in a shop window. It was the little youth that Evan had seen before that morning. The inference was that he had stopped merely to give Evan time to pass him.

"By God! another snooper!" thought Evan. "This one dogged our foot-steps all the way up-town from the fruit-stand. Well, I'll give him a little run for his money."

Entering one of the big stores Evan made his purchases. He then hastened up one aisle and down another. It could have been no easy task to follow him through the crowded store, but his little grey shadow never lost the scent. In their gyrations Evan had an opportunity to get a good look at his tracker. He was not like Alfred; he had a decent look, or rather he looked neither decent nor mean, but simply watchful. An impenetrable mask was drawn over his face, out of which his eyes looked quietly, giving nothing away. In years he was no more than a lad.

"Not a very dangerous customer, anyway," thought Evan.

Issuing from the store Evan jumped on a moving bus bound up-town. He took a seat on top; the youth got in below. At Forty-Second street Evan changed to a cross-town car; his pursuer rode on the platform. At Third avenue he changed again – but without shaking the other. Half an hour later making his way through Waverly place towards Washington Square, he was well aware that the grey figure was still behind him, though pride forbade him turning his head to see.

Reaching the Square, Evan dropped on a bench and waited to see what would happen. The slender figure passed him, eyes calmly bent ahead, and sat down on a bench fifty feet farther on. Evan rose again, and retracing his steps, walked down the east side of the Square, and entering from the Fourth street corner, sat down again. Once more the youth passed him and sat down beyond. There were but few people around; it was hardly possible that he thought his movements had not been perceived by the man he was following. "As a sleuth you're an amateur," thought Evan. "You don't care whether I'm on to you or not. But I must say you have your nerve with you. I'm considerably bigger than you."

He got up and approached the other. The stripling looked straight ahead, affecting to be unconscious of his coming. Evan came to a stand before him and said abruptly:

"What's the idea, kid?"

The youth looked up startled, then quickly drew the mask over his face. "I don't understand you," he said.

"Come off," said Evan mockingly. "Do you think I'm a blind man not to notice the particular interest you are taking in my doings? What's the idea?"

The boy's eyes held to Evan's steadily; they were the eyes of a fanatic rather than a crook. "I don't know what you're talking about," he said.

"You've been trailing me for the last two hours."

"You're mistaken. I never saw you before."

Evan laughed in exasperation. "That's childish! Do you mean to say you didn't pick me up in Troy street two hours ago, after that row with the fruit vendor?"

"I don't know where Troy street is," was the answer.

Evan changed his tactics. Dropping into the seat beside the boy he said: "Look here, I'm a regular fellow. Loosen up, kid. Give me the dope. What's it all about?"

The other was silent.

"God knows why anybody should take after me," Evan went on. "I haven't committed any crime that I know of. And I don't own a thing in the world anybody could covet. Who hired you to trail me?"

"Nobody," said the boy. "You're mistaken."

Evan began to get hot under the collar. He got up.

"By God – !" he began, clenching his fist. Then he stopped, because his anger rang false to him. In fact he couldn't work up a genuine anger against the strange-eyed boy who neither cringed before him nor defied him but simply looked.

"It would be a shame to hit you," he went on, "you're too little. But I warn you to keep away from me hereafter. The next time I stumble over you I won't be so gentle, see? You keep out of my way, that's all."

He strode off across the Square in the direction of his own place. He felt exasperated and helpless. He was clearly the injured party, yet he had come off second best in an encounter with a mere child. To make matters worse he was perfectly sure

that the youth was still trotting after him like a little dog that refuses to be sent home. He would not look around to see. As he passed in the door of 45A he did look around, and there sure enough was his little sleuth across the street. Evan slammed the door and went up-stairs swearing.

The next time he had occasion to leave the house, the youth had gone. He saw him no more – that day. "Perhaps his game was to learn where I lived," thought Evan.

CHAPTER IV

THE NEW LODGER

Evan's pal Charley Straiker occupied the adjoining room on the top floor of 45A and the two pooled their household arrangements. It was Evan's week to cook the dinners, consequently when dinner was eaten his was the privilege of occupying the easy chair with the stuffing coming out and cock his feet on the cold stove while Evan washed up.

During the afternoon Evan had painted and delivered a label that had been ordered of him, and had cleaned up generally as if in preparation for a journey. But he had not yet said a word to Charley of the events of the morning. As a matter of fact Evan had a prudent tongue, which Charley most decidedly had not, and it had occurred to Evan that he had better find out where he was at, before entrusting the tale to his garrulous partner.

Evan drew at his pipe and gloomed at the wall. Now that the mild excitement induced by the morning's events was over, a heaviness had returned to his spirit. Meanwhile Charley ran on like a brook.

Charley was a lean and sprawling youth with lank blonde hair, a long nose, and an incorrigible smile that spread to the furthest confines of his face. To quote himself, he was a bum artist and a squarehead. He took people at their own valuation and was

consequently a universal favourite.

"Carmen rented her back parlour this afternoon," he was saying – Carmen being their own moniker for their landlady Miss Carmelita Sisson. "To a female. What do you know about it? Carmen hates 'em round the house. Too nosey, she says. But the room's been vacant since spring, and roomers in summertime are as scarce as snowballs. So she succumbed.

"Haven't seen her yet – I mean the new roomer, but my hope and my prayer is that she's a looker. I think she is because Carmen sniffed. Does our Carmen love the beautiful of her sex? She does – not! She's a singing-teacher, Madame Squallerina, Carmen called her, with the rare wit for which she is famed. Already moved in with her piano and all. I heard her moving round, but the door was closed. I'm afraid she's not going to be sociable. Hell! the parlor floor always looks down on the attic! That's a joke in case you don't know it; parlor floor looking down on the attic!

"Wish I could think of a good excuse to knock on her door. It 'ud be a stunt, wouldn't it, to raise an alarm of fire in this old tinder-box. Say, if there's ever a fire I bags the new roomer to save – that is until I get a look at her. If it's over a hundred and fifty, I'll give the job to you, Strong-arm."

This failed to draw a smile from Evan.

"Say, you're as lively as the dressing-room of a defeated team. Wot th' hell's the matter? Come on out and see a movie. I'll blow."

"I'm off pictures," said Evan. "Go on yourself. Maybe you'll meet Squallerina on the stairs. Take her."

"You've said it," said Charley. "I'm off."

The gas made the room hot, and Evan turned it out. The instant he did so, he became aware of the moonlight outside, and he went and rested his elbows on the sill in his customary attitude.

The moon herself was behind the house, but the Square beneath his window was mantled in a tender bloom of light. As every painter knows, moonlight is most beautiful when the moon herself is out of the picture. By moonlight the dejected old trees of the Square were shapes of perfect beauty, the grass was overlaid with a delicate scarf of light; the very figures on the benches were as strangely still as if the moon had laid a spell on them.

But all this beauty only had the effect of putting an edge on Evan's dissatisfaction. The gnawing inside him was a hundred times worse by moonlight. "What's the matter with me?" he thought querulously. "I wished for something to happen. Well, something did happen, but there's no fun in it. There's no fun in anything any more. Moonlight makes me hate myself. Oh, damn moonlight anyhow! It turns a man inside out!"

He flung away from the window and planted himself in his chair with his back to it.

Presently he became aware of a sound new in that house. His door stood open for ventilation and it came floating up the old stairs. He was aware of a vague pleasure before he localised the

sound. It was music; a piano – but not the usual rooming-house instrument; a piano in tune, softly played. It drew him to the door and to the banisters outside, a poignant, haunting melody rippling in a minor treble, a melody that queerly sharpened the knife that stabbed him, yet drew him on irresistibly.

He stole down the dark stairs, guiding himself with a hand on the rail, his eyes as abstracted as a sleep walker's. The sounds were issuing from the back parlour of course. The door was partly open – so she was not as unsociable as Charley had feared, or perhaps it was only that it was hot. The room was dark inside. Evan leaned against the banisters with bent head, scarcely daring to breathe for fear of breaking the lovely spell.

The music came to an end and his spirit dropped back to earth. He lingered, silently praying for it to resume and give him wings again. Instead, the door was suddenly opened wider and he saw the tenant of the room on the threshold. All he could see of her was that she was a little woman with a lot of hair. The moonlight shimmering through the edges of her hair made a halo around her head. Moonlight made two square patches on the floor of the room.

It was too late for him to escape. "I – I beg your pardon," he stammered. "I couldn't help listening."

"Oh!" she said. "Who are you?"

"Evan Weir. I live up-stairs."

"Oh!" she said again, but with a different inflection.

By her voice Evan knew she was young and adorable. It was

a low-pitched voice for so little a woman, low and thrilling; a mezzo-soprano. His spirit went to meet that voice.

For a moment or two they stood silently facing each other in the dark. Evan was not conscious of any embarrassment; he was too deeply moved. His conscious self was in abeyance. Moonlight, music and woman had bewitched him. He was in the grip of forces that played on him like an instrument. But someone had to speak in the end. It was Evan.

"What was that you were playing?" he asked simply.

"The moonlight sonata," she answered.

"Of course! That's why it sounded so exactly right. Won't you play again – please?"

She could not but have been aware how genuinely moved he was, but however it may have pleased her, womanlike, she sought to pull down the conversation to a safer plane.

"Oh, I can't!" she said. "I have unpacking to do. I was coming out to get a match to light the gas. I can't find any."

"I'll light the gas for you," he said eagerly. She stood aside to let him enter. The simple act thrilled him anew; she was not afraid of him; her spirit greeted his. When she turned around he could see her face etherealised in the moonlight, a lovely pale oval with two dark pools. There was a subtle perfume in the room that made him a little dizzy. In the act of striking a match he paused.

"Oh, it's a shame!" he said involuntarily.

"What is?" she asked.

"To light the gas on such a night."

She laughed. It was a delicious little sound. It seemed to bid him be at home there. "One must!" she said. "What would the landlady say?"

But the tone of the denial encouraged him to insist. "A little more music," he begged. "I never heard anything so lovely."

She went to the piano bench obediently. "Sit down if you can find a place," she said over her shoulder.

Instead he came and leaned his elbows on the edge of the piano case. Once more her fingers rippled over the keys, and another delicate minor air ravished his soul. She did not seem to strike the keys, but to draw out the sounds with the magical waving of her pale hands. She kept her head down, and he could not see into her face. Nor could he be sure of the colour of her hair, but only that it was shining.

In the middle of the piece the flying fingers began to falter. No doubt the intense gaze he was bending on the top of her head confused her. At any rate she broke off abruptly and jumped up.

A cry broke from Evan: "Oh, please go on!"

"I cannot! I cannot!" she said. "Light the gas." As he still hesitated she stamped her foot with delightful imperiousness. "You *must* light the gas!"

With a sigh he struck the match. The gas flared up with a plop. Their curious eyes flew to each other's faces. Evan saw – well, he was not disappointed. His instinct had rightly told him in the dark that she was adorable. Not regularly beautiful; the most charming women are not. There were fascinating contradictions.

The bright hair was gloriously red: the eyes too large for her face and brown, extraordinary eyes revealing a strong soul. They were capable both of melting and of flashing, but especially of flashing; the soul was imperious. As for the rest of her, the dear straight little nose was non-committal, the mouth fresh and childlike, with a slight, appealing droop in the corners. In short, Nature the great experimentalist had in this case endowed a most sweet and kissable little body with the soul of a warrior.

Evan could not have argued this all out, but his inner self perceived it. His feelings as he gazed at her were mixed. The dear little thing! the enchanting playmate; his arms fairly ached to gather her in. At the same time the deeper sight was whispering to him that this was no playmate for a man's idleness, but a soul as strong as his own – or stronger, to whom he must yield all or nothing, and he was afraid.

As for her, she simply looked at him inscrutably. He could not tell if she were pleased with what she saw.

Finally self-consciousness returned to both with a rush. They blushed and turned from each other.

"You must go now," the girl said gently.

He understood from her tone that she did not greatly desire him to go, but that it was up to him to find a reason for staying.

"Let me help you get your things in order," he said eagerly. "You can't shove trunks and furniture around."

She hesitated, thinking perhaps of the censorious landlady.

Evan made haste to follow up his advantage. "This trunk.

Where will you have it put?"

She gave in to him with the ghost of a shrug. "It has nothing in it that I shall want," she said. "Shove it as far back in the closet as it will go."

In the closet her dresses were already hanging. The delicate perfume he had already remarked made his head swim again. As he bent down to shove the trunk back, her skirts brushed his cheek like a caress. They were burning when he came out. Perhaps she guessed; at any rate she quickly turned her head.

"You don't want the sofa in the middle of the room," Evan said to create a diversion.

"Put it with its back against the fireplace, please. I shall not be having a fire for months to come. That will leave the space by the window for my writing-table."

While they discussed such safe matters as the disposal of the furniture they never ceased secretly to take stock of each other. What people say to each other at any time only represents a fraction of the intercourse that is taking place. Under cover of the most trifling conversation there may be exciting reconnaissances going on, scout-work and even pitched battles of the spirit.

Evan could not make her out at all. She seemed to single him out, to encourage him as far as a self-respecting woman might, yet an instinct warned him not to bank on it. There was an unflattering impersonal quality in her encouragement; behind it one glimpsed formidable reserves. She was wrapped in reticence like a mantle. Evan had a feeling that if she had been really drawn

to him she would not have been so nice to him. On the other hand "coquette" did not fit her at all; not with those eyes. Evan thought he knew a coquette when he saw one; their blandishments were not such as hers.

So for a while all went swimmingly, and the moments flew. Evan managed to make the business of arranging the furniture last out the greater part of the evening. To save her face she bade him go at intervals, but he always contrived to find an excuse to delay his departure.

There was no reticence in Evan. He loved her at sight and his instinct was to open his heart. Of course he was not quite guileless; the portrait of himself that he drew for her was not exactly an unflattering one, but it was a pretty honest one under the circumstances. He was careful not to bore her, and to grace his tale with humour.

Oddly enough the more of himself that he offered her, the less pleased she seemed to be. As the evening wore on she developed a tartness that was inexplicable to Evan. He cast back in his mind in vain to discover the cause of his offense. Yet she would not let him stop talking about himself either, but drew him on with many questions, interested in his tale it would seem, merely for the sake of making sarcastic comments. As for talking about herself, nothing would induce her to do so.

It was a more unamiable side of her character that she revealed, but the enamoured Evan, even while she flouted him, forgave her. "Something is the matter," he said to himself. "This

is not her true self." He told her of the black dog that had been on his back all day.

"But now I'm cured," he said, looking at her full.

She chose to ignore the implication.

Evan began leading up to a desire that he had not yet dared to express. "My partner said you were a singer," he said.

"Have you been discussing me?" she said with an affronted air.

"Why, yes. Nothing so exciting as your coming ever happened in this old house."

"I teach singing," she said carelessly.

"Won't you sing me a song?"

She decisively shook her head. "Not to-night."

"But why?"

"Dozens of reasons. One is enough; I don't feel like it."

"To-morrow night, then?"

"Aren't you taking a good deal for granted?"

"But you said not to-night. That suggests another night."

"Oh, one doesn't weigh every word."

"Well, I'll be listening out to-morrow night on the chance."

For some reason this annoyed her excessively. A bright little spot appeared on each cheek-bone. "Then you'll force me to keep silent however I feel."

"Why – what's the matter?" said Evan blankly.

"You imply that if I happen to sing you will regard it as an invitation to come down here."

"Why, I never thought of such a thing," he said in dismay.

His honesty was so unquestionable that she got angry all over again, because she had made the mistake of imputing such a thought to him. Indeed a disinterested observer could not but have seen that some perverse little imp was playing the devil with this charming girl. Angry at him or angry at herself – or both, she had ceased to be mistress of the situation and her forces were thrown into confusion. Whatever she said, it instantly occurred to her that it was the wrong thing to say.

"You're spoiled like all the rest," she said. "A woman cannot be decently civil to you, but you immediately begin to presume upon it." This was said with a smile that was supposed to be tolerant, but she was angry clear through, and of course it showed.

It was all a mystery to Evan. With a hand on the table he had just moved, he was staring down at it as if he had discovered something of absorbing interest in the grain of the wood. He knew she was unreasonable, but he did not blame her; he was merely trying to think how to accommodate himself to her unreasonableness; he was pretty sure that whatever he might say would only make matters worse, so he kept silent.

But no red-haired woman can endure silences either. "If you've nothing further to say you'd better go," she said at last.

"I was wondering what I had done to offend you," said Evan.

She laughed, but it had not a mirthful sound. "How funny you are! Strangers don't quarrel. They've nothing to quarrel about!"

"But you are angry."

"Nonsense!" she said languidly. "I'm very much obliged to you for your help. But there's nothing else you can do."

"Meaning I'd better beat it."

She was magnificently silent.

"I'm going. But it's hard to go, not knowing what's the matter."

She had the air of one dealing with a trying child. "How often must I tell you that there's nothing in the world the matter?"

"You are not the same as you were when I came."

For some reason this flicked her on the raw. She flushed. She stamped her foot. "You're – you're impossible!" she cried. "*Will* you go!"

As Evan backed out she all but shut the door in his face. How astonished would he have been could he have seen through the door how she flung herself face down on the sofa and wept. That was the softer girlish part of her. But not for long. She sat up and digging her chin into her palm thought long and hard. That was the warrior.

"I will not give in to him – and spoil everything," she whispered. "I will not!"

Meanwhile, out in the dark hall Evan was leaning against the banisters trying to puzzle out what had happened. At first only a blank dismay faced him. Women were inexplicable. But presently a slow smile began to spread across his face. He said to himself:

"Well, whatever it is, she's not exactly indifferent to me. I've made an impression. That's something for the first meeting. And

she's in the house. And to-morrow's another night!"

He went up-stairs with a better heart.

He went straight to his window-sill and cooled his hot cheeks in the night air. The old trees still stood sentry duty in the moonlight, the people sat still as dolls left out all night, the noises of the town were reduced to a pleasant murmur.

"God! what a good old world it is!" thought Evan, unconscious of his perfect inconsistency. "How good it is to be young and alive; to see; to feel; to laugh; to love; to know things! I guess I'm a little drunk on it now, but I want more, more! I shall never have my fill!"

As he lay in bed it suddenly occurred to him that he was head over heels in love with a woman whose name he did not know.

CHAPTER V

THE HAPPY LITTLE FAMILY

At the Deaves mansion next morning it was Alfred who opened the massive steel grill to admit Evan. The second man favoured him with a sly wink.

"Cheese it, kid," he murmured out of the corner of his mouth. "They're layin' for you."

This meant nothing to Evan.

In the centre of the house where the hall opened up he found George Deaves walking up and down with his head bowed and his hands clasped behind his back, the very picture of a harassed man of affairs. There was a histrionic quality in all young Deaves' attitudes. The old man in slippers was hunched in a pseudo-mediaeval chair, while a fat servant, Hilton, the butler Evan guessed, was standing at the foot of the stairs. Another man in chauffeur's livery was beside him.

It all had the look of a set scene, and from the way their faces changed at the sight of him, the inference was inescapable that it had been set for Evan. He wondered greatly what it was all about, but felt no particular uneasiness.

George Deaves bent a venomous glance on him. "Follow me," he said hollowly.

The whole procession wended its way up the winding, shallow

stairs; first George Deaves, grasping the hand rail and planting his feet virtuously, then old Deaves, his heels coming out of his slippers at every step, then Evan, then the three servants. Evan heard them sniggering behind him.

At the door of the library George Deaves said: "You come in, Papa. Hilton, Wilson and Alfred, you wait outside in case I call you."

"Does he expect me to assault him?" thought Evan.

In the library young Deaves flung himself back in his chair, and placing the tips of his fingers together said pompously: "Now, my man, I advise you to tell the truth."

Evan began to get hot. "That is my custom," he said quietly.

Notwithstanding his pompous air the younger Deaves was visibly nervous; he had not his father's force of character. "It is useless for you to feign innocence," he said.

"I don't know what you're talking about," said Evan.

Deaves said: "I may as well let you know I have a policeman waiting down-stairs."

There is no man however sure of himself that would not be to some degree disconcerted by this announcement. Evan changed colour. Deaves, quick to notice it, smiled disagreeably, and Evan's cheeks grew hot indeed.

"Have him up-stairs," said Evan. "I don't know what this flummery is all about. Hand me over to the police and maybe I'll find out."

"Give me a specimen of your handwriting," said Deaves,

shoving writing materials towards him.

"Certainly," said Evan. "I have no reason to be ashamed of it."

"Write five thousand dollars, first in figures, then spelled out."

Evan did so, and shoved the paper back. Deaves compared it with a letter which lay in front of him, the old man peering over his shoulder.

"Nothing like," the latter said disappointed.

"That doesn't prove anything!" snapped the son. "I didn't suppose that he worked this single-handed. He has confederates."

Evan's momentary discomfiture had subsided. The situation was becoming too absurd. Was he accused of forgery or blackmail? He began to grin.

"You said you were an artist," said George Deaves with a sapient air. "Can you prove it?"

"Certainly," said Evan. "If you'll come to my studio. There are dozens of my canvases there."

"But how would I know you painted them?"

"Oh, I'll do you one while you wait."

"Facetiousness won't do you any good," said Deaves severely. "This is a serious matter. Please explain how you came to be in that little obscure street where you met Papa yesterday?"

"There is no explanation," said Evan. "I was just walking about."

The young man sneered. He tossed over the letter that lay before him. "Read that," he said.

Evan applied himself to it with no little curiosity. Meanwhile

he was aware that the two were watching him like lynxes. The letter was written in a neatly-formed, highly characteristic hand on a sheet of cheap note-paper without any distinguishing marks. Evan read:

"Mr. George Deaves:

Dear Sir:

We take pleasure in enclosing copy of a humorous little story that has been prepared for the press. None will appreciate it better than you and 'Poppa' we are sure. If you think it is too good to be offered to the public it will cost you five thousand dollars for the exclusive rights, including motion pictures and dramatic. But unless we hear from you before the day is out we will take it that you don't want to buy, and it will be offered to the *Clarion* for to-morrow's edition. The *Clarion* is always delighted to get hold of these human interest tales. Copies will be mailed to everybody in the social register, and especially to Mrs. George Deaves.

But if you want to reserve the fun to yourself bring five one-thousand-dollar bills to the reading-room of the New York Public Library this morning. Call for Lockhart's History of the Crimean War in two folio volumes and insert the bills in volume one at the following pages: 19, 69, 119, 169, 219. Then return the books to the desk.

With kindest regards,

Yours very sincerely,

THE IKUNAHKATSI."

A noiseless whistle escaped from Evan's lips; his eyes were bright. For the moment he forgot that he was the accused. His

sole feeling was one of the keenest curiosity. A fascinating mystery was suggested. The impudent letter was like a challenge.

"May I see the enclosure?" he asked.

"No," said Deaves stiffly.

Evan shrugged. "What's the nature of it?"

"It's a would-be humorous account of the events in that little street down-town."

"Is it a true story?"

Young Deaves turned to his elder. "Is it true, Papa?"

"In a way it's true," was the snarling reply. "From a certain point of view. But it's blackguardly just the same."

Evan stroked his lip to hide a smile. "What makes you think I wrote it?" he asked.

"Nobody else could have known all the circumstances."

"But we were watched and followed every step of the way."

"So you say."

"Why, you're surrounded by spies. I expect every servant in the house is in the pay of this gang. I hadn't been in the house half an hour before they approached me."

"What did I tell you?" the old man snarled to his son. "Why don't you fire them?"

"How many times have I fired them? What good did it do? As fast as we get a new lot they're corrupted from the outside."

"Then it's been going on for some time," said Evan. "I never had any connection with Mr. Deaves until yesterday."

"How do we know that?"

"That's why you were so eager to get a job here," added the old man. "To have a better chance of spying on me."

"Never thought of such a thing. The offer came from you."

"You paid your own fare on the trolley-car, didn't you? Mine, too!"

Evan laughed in exasperation. "Well, if that's an incriminating circumstance I'm guilty!" he said.

"Don't be a fool, Papa," muttered George Deaves.

Evan went on: "If I was a member of the gang would I show my hand so clearly? Would I betray the sources of my information? I tell you Alfred told me yesterday there was good money to be made on the side in this house."

"Why didn't you tell me that yesterday?" demanded Deaves.

"I wanted to find out what was up first. I know now."

George Deaves began to look impressed.

Evan made haste to follow up his advantage. "Have up the policeman. I can tell him no more than I've told you. But the whole affair must be well aired, I suppose."

George Deaves winced. He and his father exchanged a glance. "There's no hurry," he said. "We may have been mistaken. At any rate we don't want any unnecessary publicity."

"You don't mean to say you're going to *pay*!" cried Evan involuntarily.

"Wouldn't you advise it?" asked the old man craftily.

"No! Fight! Call their bluff! The nervy blackguards! Oh, to give up to them would be too tame!"

"I guess he isn't one of them, George," Simeon Deaves said dryly.

George apparently agreed with him, though he made no direct acknowledgment.

Evan struck while the iron was hot. "Look here, here's a proposition for you. This thing interests me a whole lot. That letter was written by a damn clever crook, humorous too. I'd like to match my wits against his. Let me have a try at running them down. Won't cost you a cent more than my salary, and you won't have to let in any outsiders on the affair. Of course I've had no experience, but if I fail you'll be no worse off than you are now. If you go to the police it will be the newspaper sensation of the year."

Father and son looked at each other again. Evan had given them two potent reasons for listening to his proposal. But before they had time to express themselves there was an interruption.

A lady swept into the room like a northwest gale, one whose attire put the rose and the lily to shame; comely in her own person too after a somewhat hard and glassy style. Evan guessed this was Mrs. George Deaves, otherwise Maud. At the sight of her stormy brows father and son looked like two schoolboys caught in the act.

"What's going on?" she peremptorily demanded. "What are all the men servants waiting in the hall for?"

"Nothing, my dear," said George Deaves in a casual tone belied by his anxious eye. "They are merely waiting for their

orders."

"My maid told me there was a policeman sitting in the housekeeper's room."

"Must be a friend of Mrs. Liffey's," her husband said with feeble humour.

"Friend nothing!" was the contemptuous reply. She marched up to her father-in-law, who silently snarled and gave ground like a cat. "You've been up to your old tricks!" she cried. "Another disgraceful street scene! I see it in both your faces. Another blackmailing letter, I suppose!"

Young Deaves unobtrusively sought to turn over the letter on his desk, but she caught the movement out of the tail of her eye, and, whirling round, snatched it up.

"Let me see that!"

Her husband looked as helpless as a sheep. He had lost his pomposity. "Happy little family!" thought Evan.

Having read it, she threw back her head and laughed in bitter chagrin. "I thought so!" she cried. "The third time this summer! When is this going to end? Where's the story?"

"My dear, what's the use?" said her husband tremblingly. "It would only anger you."

"Be quiet!" she cried. "I will see it. Where is it?" Her eye picked it out from among the papers on his desk, and she pounced on it. More harsh and bitter laughter accompanied the reading of it.

"Bought a new suit at an immigrant outfitters! I see he has

it on. Got into a row with a fruit-vendor over a penny change. Rescued by a young man and taken home. Made his rescuer pay the fares on the trolley. Oh, this is rich, rich!" she cried, trembling with anger. "This is the best story yet. This will be meat and drink to the populace! And this is what they're going to send to the *Social Register*, to everybody I know. It's enough to make me wish I'd died before I took the name of Deaves!"

"My dear, we are not alone!" cried George Deaves in a panic.

She threw an indifferent glance at Evan. She thought he was a servant, and she was of that arrogant type which acts as if servants were something less than human. "Do you think anything can be hidden in this house?" she said. "The men-servants are listening at the door."

George Deaves had forgotten about them. He hastened to the door and sent them downstairs.

Mrs. Deaves addressed her father-in-law. "Well, if you can't control your avaricious tendencies you'll have to pay," she said. "Send to the bank and get the money so George can take it to them."

"Pay! Pay! Pay! That's all anybody asks of me!" cried the old man in a passion. "Five thousand dollars! None of you know what that means. Money to you is like the winds of Heaven that come and go. But *I* know what five thousand dollars is. For I have saved it up dollar by dollar at the cost of my sweat and self-denial. And will I give it up to these scoundrels, these sewer rats who threaten me? No! I'd as lief give them my blood!"

Mrs. Deaves' face turned crimson. "You'll pay!" she cried, "or I leave this house!"

"And where will you go?" sneered the old man. "Back to share your father's genteel poverty?"

"Who made him poor?" she cried. "Who robbed him?"

George Deaves, with the tail of his eye on Evan, was sweating with terror. "Maud, I beg of you – !" he whispered.

It did seem to occur to her then that she had gone too far. She glared at Evan as if defying him to judge her, and marching up to him said bluntly: "Who are you?" This woman was magnificent in her insolence if in nothing else.

Evan coolly met her eye. "I'm the young man who paid the fares," he said, smiling.

She scowled at him. Clearly she had no humour.

Evan explained further: "I have been engaged to accompany Mr. Deaves on his walks hereafter."

"Oh, locking the stable door after the horse is stolen," she sneered. "He needs a keeper." She indicated the typewritten sheets. "Then you were present at this affair?"

"I was."

"Is this story true?"

"I have not seen it."

She handed him the pages. Evan skimmed over it hastily. Since the incidents have already been related, the opening paragraph will be sufficient to convey the style of the whole:

"Our esteemed fellow-citizen, Simeon Deaves, is known

as a great dandy among his friends. He has always refused to divulge the identity of the creator of the svelte garments that grace his manly form, but yesterday the secret came out. Not in the fashionable purlieus of Fifth Avenue or Madison does Mr. Deaves' tailor hang out his sign. No; it is in Greenwich Street near the Battery where the unwary immigrant makes his first acquaintance with American business methods, that Mr. Deaves buys his clothes. He was seen to buy an elegant mustard coloured suit there yesterday for \$4.49. Of course not everybody could afford this sum, but the goods were worth it. Take it from us, high-water pants will be all the rage the coming Fall."

And so on. And so on. Evan bit his lip to keep from smiling, and handed the sheets back. It was easy to understand how the story affected these people like salt in a wound.

"Is it true?" Mrs. Deaves again demanded of Evan.

"The facts are true so far as I know," he replied. "Of course, the humour was supplied by the author."

"This young man has offered to help us," began George Deaves.

The remark was unfortunate; Mrs. Deaves exploded again. "I won't have any bungling amateur detective work here!" she cried. "There's too much at stake. If the story is true there's only one thing to be done, pay!" She addressed the old man. "You understand; you have disgraced us, and you shall pay."

But Simeon Deaves' dander was up and he refused to be intimidated. "What for?" he snarled. "I stand by my own acts. I

ain't ashamed of them. If people don't like it they can lump it. What do I care what they say about me? They're only envious. They'd give their eyes to have what I've got. Let them publish their story. Who's hurt by it? Nobody but your feelings. Am I going to pay through the nose to soothe your feelings? Not five thousand dollars' worth! I'll be damned if I'll pay!"

He went out through the smaller door, slamming it behind him.

Mrs. Deaves turned hard inimical eyes on her husband. "Then it's up to you to find the money," she said.

"But, my dear," he whined, "you know my circumstances. How can I? Where? It is out of the question!"

"I don't care where you get it; you get it," she returned callously. "If that story is published I leave this house. You know what that means."

She marched out by the main door.

Evan could not but feel for the poor, crushed, flabby creature at the desk. In Evan's own phrase George got it coming *and* going. He was like a pricked bladder; all his pomposity had escaped like gas.

"What am I to do?" he murmured.

"Get the money together," said Evan, "and pay it over according to their orders. Then let me see if I can't get it back again – and get them, too."

CHAPTER VI

THE LITTLE FELLOW IN GREY

It turned out that George Deaves could lay his hands on the money, though perhaps it was not easy for him to do so. George's principal fortune consisted in being the son of his father; he could get almost unlimited credit on the strength of that connection. When Simeon Deaves saw that he was determined to pay the money to the blackmailers, he urged him to accept Evan's offer to run them down, and in the end, notwithstanding his terror of Maud Deaves, George gave in. Father and son, who had begun the day by accusing Evan of the crime, ended by depending on Evan to run down the criminals.

At ten o'clock George Deaves and Evan set out for the bank. It was not far and they proceeded on foot down the Avenue. Evan kept his eyes open about him, and before they had gone more than a block or two he spotted the well-remembered little figure in the grey suit still dogging their footsteps. Drawing George Deaves up to a shop window as if to show him something inside, he called his attention to the stripling with the pale and watchful face. Deaves shivered.

"Do you suppose he means us personal harm?" he said.

Evan smiled to himself, seeing the size of their enemy. "Well, I hardly think so," he said. "At least not as long as we seem

disposed to pay up."

Deaves was received at the bank with extreme deference. He was not obliged to apply at the teller's window like a common customer, but was shown directly into the manager's office which looked on the pavement of the Avenue. A fine-meshed screen protected the occupants of the room from the vulgar gaze of the populace, but those inside could see out, and as soon as they entered the room Evan discovered the youth in the grey suit hanging about the door of the bank, unaware of the nearness of his victims.

Deaves introduced Evan to the manager as "My father's secretary." "I'm coming up in the world," thought Evan. Five crisp one-thousand-dollar bills were produced, and Evan perceived strong curiosity in the bank manager's eye. It had been agreed between Evan and Deaves that this man was to be taken partly into their confidence, but Deaves now seemed disposed to balk at it, and Evan ventured to take matters into his own hands.

"You were going to tell this gentleman what the money was for."

"Yes, yes, of course," said Deaves nervously. "You will of course appreciate the necessity of absolute secrecy, sir."

"That is part of my business," said the manager.

But Deaves still boggled at the horrid word, and it was Evan who said: "Somebody is trying to blackmail Mr. Deaves."

"Good gracious!" cried the horrified manager. "Mr. Simeon Deaves or Mr. George Deaves?"

"Either," said Evan dryly. "They don't care as long as they get the money."

"Have you notified the police?"

"Not yet. We're going to take a try first at catching them ourselves. There is one of them outside, the thin youth in the grey suit."

The manager half arose from his chair. "What! So close! Perhaps he's armed!"

"He can't see us."

The manager sank back only partly reassured. "Can I be of any assistance?" he asked.

"Yes," said Evan. "I want to mark these bills in your presence." Deaves handed them over, and the manager supplied a blue pencil. "See! A tiny dot following the serial number in each case. In case they get the money, and get away in spite of me, will you please see that all the banks in town are supplied with the numbers of these bills, and are instructed to have anyone arrested who presents them to be changed?"

"I certainly will," said the manager, making a note of the numbers.

They left a much startled banker peering through his window-screen.

The public library was but a few blocks from the bank. George Deaves wished to take a taxicab, but Evan advised against it. Their little grey shadow followed them to the door of the great building but did not enter. Having satisfied themselves of this,

they got in touch with one of the assistant librarians, and put their case up to him.

The magic name of Deaves acted like a talisman. The plan was carefully laid. George Deaves proceeded to the reading-room and, calling for Lockhart's "History of the Crimean War," retired to a corner and placed the bills between the leaves as specified. The books were then returned to the desk, and Deaves with the connivance of the librarian was spirited out of the building by the delivery entrance. This was to prevent the watcher outside from remarking that, whereas two entered, only one came out. When neither returned he would naturally suppose that both had slipped past him.

Meanwhile Evan waited in the librarian's private office, arrangements having been made to notify him by phone when the books were called for again. They would hold up the books at the delivery desk long enough to allow Evan to reach the reading-room. It was a long wait. The librarian offered him books, but he could not apply his mind.

"You're sure there's no chance of a slip-up among so many clerks?" he said anxiously. "One may forget."

"We're not trusting to their memories. The librarian in charge of delivery is a friend of mine. Lockhart's History is in his desk, and in its place on the shelf is pinned a ticket, 'apply to the librarian.'"

At last the message came over the phone: "Lockhart's 'History of the Crimean War' called for from seat 433."

Evan's heart accelerated its pace a little. "Whereabouts in the room is that seat?"

"The last table in the south end on the right-hand side."

"Ha! He wants to get in the corner! Can I get there without marching down the whole length of the room?"

"Yes, you can approach from the other side through the American History room."

Hastening through various corridors of the vast building, they found themselves among the American History collections gathered in the smaller room adjoining the great hall on the south. This room was completely lined with books, and lighted by a skylight. It communicated with the main reading-room by an arched opening.

Taking care not to show themselves in this opening, the librarian described to Evan the exact location of seat 433 outside, and pointed out a spot where Evan could command a view of seat 433 through the archway. Evan proceeded to the spot, and, taking down a book at random, affected to be lost in studying its pages. Then, half turning and letting his eyes rise carelessly, he glanced into the great room.

It took him an instant or two to focus his eyes. The line of tables seemed endless, the hundreds of figures reading, scribbling or snoozing seemed indistinguishable from one another. Then Evan remembered the librarian had said: "433 is the fourth seat from the passageway between the tables; the person sitting there will have his back to you." Evan's eyes found

the spot: he saw a familiar pair of thin, high shoulders under a grey coat.

His first feeling was one of surprise. Somehow he had not expected one so young and insignificant to be given so important a part in the game. For a moment he wondered if the strange-eyed, wary little youth could be their sole antagonist. That would indeed be a humorous situation. But he did not believe it possible. Certainly the letter had been written by one older and more experienced.

Evan remained where he was, making believe to be absorbed in his book, and letting his eyes rise from time to time as if in contemplation. He was about sixty feet from the youth in an oblique line. Once the little fellow looked around, but Evan saw the beginning of the movement and was deep in study in plenty of time. The sober background of filled bookshelves afforded Evan good protective colouring. Across the smaller room the librarian was likewise affecting to be reading, while he nervously watched Evan and awaited the outcome.

Finally Evan perceived the library attendant coming down the long room bearing the two big volumes in their faded purple calf binding. He speculated whimsically on what a sensation would be caused should he drop one and a thousand-dollar bill flutter out. But library attendants know better than to drop books.

He laid the books on the table beside the youth, and went back. The grey-clad one, with another casual, sharp glance around him, took up volume one, the thicker of the two, and, slouching down

in his chair, stood the tall, open book on his lap in such a way that no one either in front or behind him could see exactly what he was doing. "Not badly managed," thought Evan. Evan could only guess that he was turning to the specified pages and slipping out the bills. There was one action that Evan recognised from the movement of the shoulders. He had slipped his hand in his inner breast pocket.

"He's got them now," thought Evan.

Sure enough the youth presently let the book fall on the table and wiped his face with his handkerchief.

"I bet his little heart is beating," thought Evan. Evan's was.

The youth wasted no further time in making believe to read his books. Letting them lie on the table he got up and started to walk out at a leisurely pace. Evan followed him, knowing of course that the first time the youth turned his head he must discover him, but it did not matter much now. Their footsteps fell noiselessly on the thick rubber matting of the reading-room.

Half-way down the great room the youth did turn, and saw Evan behind him. A spasm passed over the thin little face and his teeth showed momentarily. One could fancy how sharply he caught his breath. He increased his pace a little, but by no means ran out of the room. He had his nerves under pretty good control. Evan made no effort to overtake him in the reading-room. He hated to make an uproar there.

The youth went soberly down the two flights of the great stairway with Evan as soberly at his heels. He did not look around

again. To have refrained from doing so indicated no little strength of will. Crossing the entrance hall, they passed out the main entrance and down the sweeping steps to Fifth Avenue.

"He'll make a break to escape in the crowd," thought Evan.

On the little esplanade between the two flights of steps Evan sprang across the space that separated them and laid a heavy hand on the youth's shoulder.

He shrank away with a terrified gasp. "What do you want?" he demanded.

"You come with me," said Evan, sternly.

"I won't! You've no right to lay hands on me!"

"You come along," said Evan, "or I'll call the policeman yonder."

He marched him down the remaining steps. The boy offered no resistance. For that matter he would have stood but a small chance against the muscular Evan. The passers-by began to stop and stare and shove and ask what was the matter.

Evan greatly desired to avoid a street disturbance. Steering his captive across the pavement to the curb, he hailed the first passing taxicab and bundled the unresisting youth inside. In low tones he ordered the chauffeur to drive to the nearest police station. It was all over in half a minute. They left the curiosity seekers goggling from the pavement.

During the drive the two exchanged no word. The youth shrank back in his corner, staring straight ahead of him out of his pale and impenetrable mask. Occasionally he moistened his

lips. Clearly he was terrified, but a determined spirit held him to the line he had chosen.

Evan made no attempt to search him for the money, for he wished to have a witness present when the marked bills were taken from him. But he watched him throughout with lynx eyes, prepared to forestall any attempt to make away with the bills.

Arriving at the station house the chauffeur, full of curiosity, was for helping Evan take his prisoner in. But Evan paid him off and told him he needn't wait. The man lingered, joining the little crowd that always hangs around the station house steps when a prisoner is brought in.

By this time the youth seemed to have recovered from the worst of his fears. He went up the steps quite willingly in front of Evan. Within, a bored and lordly police lieutenant sat enthroned at his high desk. Evan, who had been holding himself in all this time, burst out:

"This man is a blackmailer. I want you to search him. You'll find the money he extorted in the inside breast pocket of his coat. The bills are marked."

The Lieutenant declined to become excited. Such dramatic entrances were part of his daily routine. "Hold on a minute," he said, opening his book. "Proceed in order." He addressed the prisoner: "What is your name?"

"I decline to give it," said the youth – his voice was breathless but determined still. "I have done nothing wrong. This man suddenly seized me on the street. I think he's crazy. Search me."

If you find anything, then let him make a charge."

The Lieutenant spoke to a patrolman across the room:
"Ratigan, search him."

The youth spread his arms wide to facilitate the search. Evan, taken aback by his assurance, waited the result anxiously. The patrolman thrust his hand in his breast pocket.

"Nothing here," he said indifferently.

Evan's heart sank. "Are you sure?" he said.

"Look for yourself if you want."

"Search him thoroughly," commanded the Lieutenant.

But Evan already guessed that he had been tricked.

No money was found except a dollar bill and some change.

"Is this it?" asked the patrolman solemnly.

The youth smiled.

Evan waved it away.

"Well, what are the circumstances?" asked the Lieutenant.

"Will you make a charge?"

"I've been fooled!" Evan said bitterly. Suddenly a light broke on him; he struck his forehead. "I see it now! This man's job was simply to lead me away while another came and got the money!"

"Well, will you make a charge?"

Evan quickly reflected. There was not much use airing the case in court if the principal evidence was gone. "Let him go," he said. "He's not the one I want."

Without more ado Evan hastened out. The youth presumably was allowed to follow. The taxicab was at the curb. Evan flung

himself in.

"Back to the library!" he ordered.

He sought out his friend the librarian. A hasty investigation showed that Lockhart's History had been collected in due course from the table and returned to the shelves. It had not been called for since. The money was gone, of course.

"His confederate was waiting there in the reading-room, perhaps at the same table," Evan said gloomily. "As soon as I was out of the way he got the money. What a fool I was!"

"But how could you have foreseen that?" said the librarian.

Evan then had the pleasant task of returning to the Deaves house and telling them what had happened. Father and son were waiting for him in the library. They instantly saw by his face that things had not gone well, and each snarled according to his nature. When he heard that the money was gone the old man broke into piteous lamentations.

"Five thousand dollars! Five thousand dollars! All that money! Flung to the rats of the city to gnaw!"

"What's the matter with you?" snapped his son. "It was my money."

"I earned it, didn't I? You have nothing but what I gave you!"

"We may get them yet through the banks," suggested Evan.

"Yah! We'll never get them now!"

But however they might quarrel with each other, father and son united in blaming Evan.

"Look at him!" cried the old man, beside himself. "He knows

where the money's gone! Of course he didn't catch them. I believe he engineered the whole thing!"

"Be quiet, Papa," said George Deaves in a panic. He turned to Evan with an anxiety almost obsequious. "Don't mind him," he said. "He's excited. You'd better go now. But I'll see you later."

Evan was not deceived. It was clear that George no less than his father believed that he was a party to the crime, but was afraid to say so outright.

"I live at 45A South Washington Square," he said curtly. "You'll find me there any time you want me."

CHAPTER VII

PLATONIC FRIENDSHIP

Charley Straiker came in to dinner that night in a highly effervescent state. This was not at all unusual.

"Listen, Ev!" he cried. "I've seen her! Oh, a peach! a little queen! Her name is Corinna Playfair. Isn't that mellifluous? Corinna Playfair! Corinna Playfair! Like honey on the tongue! Listen, when I came in a while ago I heard a woman's voice talking to Carmen in her room on the ground floor. So I went back, making out I wanted to see Carmen. And there she was! Bowled me over completely. Red hair, you old misogynist! Piles and piles of it like autumn foliage. It's the colour of a horse chestnut fresh out of the bur – and her skin's like the inside of the bur – you know – creamy! Oh, ye gods!

"Well, she was telling old Carmen this and that; her blinds wouldn't work, and the gas-jet in the dressing-room was out of order, and your Uncle Dudley sees his chance and speaks up. 'I'll fix the gas-jet and the blinds,' says I. There was nothing free and easy about her, though. Made her eyebrows go up like two little crescent moons. Looked at me as much as to say: 'What is this that the cat has brought in?' 'Oh, thank you very much,' says she in a voice as friendly as a marble headstone. 'I couldn't think of troubling you. Miss Sisson will attend to it.'

"But of course old Carmen wasn't going to miss the chance of getting her odd jobs done for nothing. She took my part. 'Mr. Straiker, Miss Playfair,' says she, grinning like the cat who's turned over the goldfish bowl. 'He will fix you up, I'm sure. I wouldn't be able to get a man in before next week.'

"Well, to make a long story short, I fixed the blinds so's they'd roll up, and cleaned out the gas burners. She didn't unbend any. Discouraged all my efforts to make conversation. Thanked me all over the place, and gave me to understand that I needn't build on it, you know. But I swear I'll make her thaw out. I've thought of a scheme. I tried all her burners – to gain time, you understand – and the one she mostly uses whistles like a peanut stand. So I'm going out to get her a swell gas mantle to-night, and say Carmen sent it, see? Trust I'll Charley to find a way!"

Evan, of course, had his own ideas as to entertaining Miss Playfair this evening. "How about the life class at the League?" he suggested casually – too casually.

This was a sore subject with Charley. Evan had him there. "Oh, blow the class!" he said, scowling. "A fellow doesn't get a chance like this once in a lifetime." He boiled over again. "I say, I didn't mention her eyes, did I? Lord! They're like immense brown stars! – Oh, that's rotten! I mean velvety, glowing – oh, words fail me! You'll have to take her eyes on trust!"

Evan refused to be diverted. "You cut the class last time," he said. "What do you expect to get out of it?"

"Lord! One would think you wanted to get me out of the way

so you could make up to her yourself!" said Charley, frowning.

Evan glanced at him sharply. This, however, was a random hit. Charley was quite unsuspecting.

"Only I know you're a hermit-crab, a woman-hater!" he went on.

"It's only last week you were chasing after a blonde," Evan persisted remorselessly. "When she threw you down you swore you'd go to work."

"Oh, well, I'll go to the old class," muttered Charley. "I'll get the gas mantle to-morrow."

Evan breathed freely again.

When Charley was safely out of the way Evan made haste to array himself in the best that their joint wardrobes afforded. They shared everything. His conscience troubled him a little over his treatment of Charley, but he salved it with the thought: "Well, anyway, I saw her first. I quarrelled with her before he even laid eyes on her." Evan gave anxious thought to the matching of ties and socks, and spent many minutes in vigorously brushing out a slight tendency to curl in his hair. He despised curly hair in a man.

But when he was all ready a sudden fit of indecision attacked him, and he flung himself into the old chair, glooming. She had all but driven him out of her room the night before. Well, if he presented himself at her door now, it would be simply inviting her to insult him. Even though she didn't mean it, even though she might want him to come (Evan had that possibility in mind, though his ideas as to the psychology of girls were chaotic), how

could he give her the chance to put it all over him? Surely she would despise him. On the other hand, he could hardly expect her to make the first overtures. Evan sighed in perplexity.

It was not that he liked her any the worse for being so difficult; on the contrary. But he had to think out the best thing to do under the circumstances, and the trouble was he wanted to go down so badly he couldn't think at all.

He made up his mind he wouldn't go down – not that night anyway. He lighted his pipe in defiance of the whole sex. But somehow he couldn't keep it going. He only smoked matches. Nor keep his legs from twitching; nor his brain from suggesting vain pretexts to knock at her door. He might go out and buy her a gas mantle – but that *would* be a low trick on Charley. He flung down the pipe, he walked up and down, he looked out of the window; a score of times he swore to himself that he would not go down, yet his perambulations left him ever nearer the door.

Finally with a great effort of the will he closed it. But almost instantly he flew to open it again, bent his head to listen, then threw it back with a note of deep laughter. He commenced to run downstairs. She was singing, the witch! She *had* made the first overture. Let her make believe as much as she liked, she must have calculated that the song would bring him. Outside her door – it was closed to-night – he pulled himself up short. "Easy! Easy!" he said to himself. "If you're in such a rush to come when you're called she'll have the laugh on you anyhow. Let her sing for a while, the darling! You won't miss anything here."

It was a jolly little song, full of enchanting runs and changes; old English, he guessed:

"Oh, the pretty, pretty creature;
When I next do meet her,
No more like a clown will I face her frown
But gallantly will I treat her."

"A hint for me," thought Evan, smiling delightedly.

When she came to the end of the song, Evan, fearful that she might open the door and find him there, hastened on downstairs. Miss Sisson was in her room at the back with the door open, and Evan stepped in for a chat, flattering the lady not a little thereby, for Mr. Weir was the most stand-offish of her gentleman roomers – and the comeliest.

But it is to be feared she didn't get much profit out of this conversation, for Mr. Weir was strangely absent-minded. His thoughts were in the room overhead where the heart-disquieting mezzo-soprano was now singing a wistfuller song and no less sweet:

"Phyllis has such charming graces
I must love her or I die."

Miss Sisson remarked in her most elegant and acid tones: "It's such an annoyance to have a singer in the house. I already regret that I yielded to her importunities."

"You fool!" thought Evan. "She makes a paradise of your old rookery!"

At the end of the second song he was sure he heard the singer's light footsteps travel to the door overhead, linger there, then return more slowly. The heart in his breast waxed big with gladness. "You blessed little darling!" he thought. "If it's true you want me, God knows you can have me for a gift!"

Yet he let her sing another song before he stirred. He bade Miss Sisson good-night and went deliberately upstairs. She had stopped singing now. He knocked on the door.

She took her time about opening it. "Oh, it's you!" she said.

"Good evening," said Evan.

"Good evening," she returned with a rising inflection that suggested: "Well, what do you want?"

Evan was a bit dashed. His instinct told him, though, that he must put his fate to the test. In other words, he must find out for sure whether she detested him, or was simply being maidenly. She had not thrown the door open to its fullest extent, but Evan, gauging the space, figured that he could just slip in without actually pushing her out of the way. He did so.

She faced about in high indignation. "Well! You might at least wait until you are invited!" she said.

Evan had no wish to anger her too far. "Oh, I'm sorry," he said innocently. "I thought you meant me to come in." He turned towards the door again.

"Oh, well, as long as you're here I'm not going to turn you out,"

she said casually. "But your manners aren't much." She closed the door.

"It's all right!" thought Evan happily.

"I heard you singing," he said, by way of opening the conversation.

"Yes, I have to sing every night for practice," she said quickly. She wished him to understand clearly that she had not been singing to bring him.

She sat on the piano bench, but with her back to the piano and her hands in her lap. Her expression was not encouraging. Evan sat on the sofa.

"Please go on," he said. "Don't mind me."

"No," she said, with her funny little downright way. "I shan't sing any more."

"But why?"

"You have provoked me. I can't sing when I am provoked."

"What have I done?"

"The mere sight of you provokes me," she said with more frankness, probably, than she intended.

"I'm sorry," said Evan. "You're so different, so unusual, I don't know how to handle you."

The first part of this pleased her, the last outraged her afresh. "Handle me!" she cried. "I like that!"

Evan saw his mistake. "That's not the word," he said quickly. "I mean I study how to please you, and only seem to get in wrong."

"Don't 'study'," she said with a superior air. "Just be yourself."

"But I am myself, and it only provokes you."

The brown eyes flashed. "Oh, you're too conceited for words!"

This was a new thought to Evan. He considered it. "No," he said at last, "I don't think I am. At least not offensively conceited. But it seems to me you are so accustomed to having men bow down before you that the mildest independence in a man strikes you as something outrageous."

This was near enough the truth to be an added cause for offense. She received it in an ultra-dignified silence.

"I'd like to bow down before you too," Evan went on smiling. "But something tells me if I did it would be the end of me. You would despise me."

Her mood changed abruptly. "I feel better now," she said. "One really cannot take you seriously. I'll sing."

Her hands drifted over the keys, and she dropped into "Mighty lak' a Rose." The air was admirably suited to the deeper notes of her voice. The listener's heart was drawn right out of his breast; he forgot at once his fear of being mastered, and his great desire to master her.

When she came to the end he murmured, deeply moved: "I can't say anything."

She could have asked no finer tribute. "You needn't," she murmured.

The pleasure she took in his applause was evidenced in the warmth she imparted to the next song. She made it intolerably

plaintive: "Just a Wearyin' for You."

Evan held his breath in delight. "If the words were true!" he thought. But though she sang with abandon, she never looked at him. He was artist enough to know better than to take an artistic performance literally.

Nothing more was said for a long time. She passed from one song to another, singing from memory; dreamily improvising on the piano between. She chose only simple songs in English which pleased Evan well – could she read his heart? – the "Shoogy-Shoo"; "Little Boy Blue"; the "Sands o' Dee."

Evan was incapable of criticising her voice. Some might have objected that it lacked that bell-like clearness so much to be desired; that it had a dusky quality, but Evan was not quarrelling because it was the voice of a woman instead of an angel. One thing she had beyond peradventure, temperament; her heart was in her singing, and so it played on his heartstrings as she willed.

While he listened enraptured, he saw the moon peek over the buildings in the next street. He softly got up and turned off the impertinent gas. Beyond a startled glance over her shoulder she made no objection. He was utterly fascinated by the movements of the bright head, now raised, now lowered, now turned towards the window in the changing moods of the songs.

Moonlight completed the working of the spell that was laid upon him. For the moment he ceased to be a rational being. He was exalted by emotion far out of himself. He experienced the sweetness of losing his own identity. It was as if a great wind

had snatched him up into the universal ether, a region of warmth of colour and perfume. But he was conscious of a pull on him like that of the magnet for the iron, a pull that was neither to be questioned nor resisted.

At the last she turned around on the bench again, and her hands dropped in her lap. "That is all. I'm tired," she said like a child.

With a single movement the rapt youth was at her feet, weaving his arms about her waist. Unpremeditated words poured from him; words out of deeps in him of which up to that moment he was unconscious.

"Oh, you woman! You are the first in the world for me! I know you now! I feel your power! It's too much for me. And I'm glad of it! I have waited for you. I looked for you in so many girls' faces only to find emptiness. I began to doubt. Love was just a poetic fancy, I thought. But I have found it. Let me love you."

She was not surprised, nor angry. She gently tried to detach his arms. "Oh, hush! hush!" she murmured. "It is not me! It is just the music!"

"It is you! It is you!" he protested. "I knew it when I first saw you. You or none!"

"But how silly!" she said in a warm, low voice. "You have seen me twice."

"What difference does that make?" he said impatiently. "One cannot be mistaken about a thing like this. I love you with all my heart. It only takes a second to happen, but it can never be undone

while I live. You have entered into me and taken possession. If you left me I should be no more than a shell of a man!"

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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