

Quick Action

By

Robert W. Chambers

***Free*editorial** 

Quick Action

I

There was a new crescent moon in the west which, with the star above it, made an agreeable oriental combination.

In the haze over bay and river enough rose and purple remained to veil the awakening glitter of the monstrous city sprawling supine between river, sound, and sea. And its incessant monotone pulsated, groaning, dying, ceaseless, interminable in the light-shot depths of its darkening streets.

The sky-drawing-room windows of the Countess Athalie were all wide open, but the only light in the room came from a crystal sphere poised on a tripod. It had the quality and lustre of moon-light, and we had never been able to find out its source, for no electric wires were visible, and one could move the tripod about the room.

The crystal sphere itself appeared to be luminous, yet it remained perfectly transparent, whatever the source of its silvery phosphorescence.

At any rate, it was the only light in the room except the dulled glimmer of our

cigarettes, and its mild, mysterious light enabled us to see one another as through a glass darkly.

There were a number of men there that evening. I don't remember, now, who they all were. Some had dined early; others, during the evening, strolled away into the city to dine somewhere or other, drifting back afterward for coffee and sweetmeats and cigarettes in the sky-drawing-room of the Countess Athalie.

As usual the girl was curled up by the open window among her silken cushions, one smooth little gem-laden hand playing with the green jade god, her still dark eyes, which slanted a little, fixed dreamily upon infinite distance—or so it always seemed to us.

Through the rusty and corrugated arabesques of the iron balcony she could see, if she chose, the yellow flare where Sixth Avenue crossed the shabby street to the eastward. Beyond that, and parallel, a brighter glow marked Broadway. Further east street lamps stretched away into converging perspective, which vanished to a point in the faint nebular radiance above the East River.

All this the Countess Athalie could see if she chose. Perhaps she did see it. We never seemed to know just what she was looking at even when she turned her dark eyes on us or on her crystal sphere cradled upon its slender tripod.

But the sphere seemed to understand, for sometimes, under her still gaze, it clouded magnificently like a black opal—another thing we never understood, and therefore made light of.

"They have placed policemen before several houses on this street," remarked the Countess Athalie.

Stafford, tall and slim in his evening dress, relieved her of her coffee cup.

"Has anybody bothered you?" he asked.

"Not yet."

Young Duane picked up a pack of cards at his elbow and shuffled them, languidly.

"Where is the Ace of Diamonds, Athalie?" he asked.

"Any card you try to draw will be the Ace of Diamonds," replied the girl indifferently.

"Can't I escape drawing it?"

"No."

We all turned and looked at Duane. He quickly spread the pack, fan-shaped, backs up. After a moment's choosing he drew a card, looked at it, held it up for us to see. It was the Ace of Diamonds.

"Would you mind trying that again, Athalie?" I asked. And Duane replaced the card and shuffled the pack.

"But it's gone, now," said the girl.

"I replaced it in the pack," explained Duane.

"No, you gave it to me," she said.

We all smiled. Duane searched through the pack in his hands, once, twice; then he laughed. The girl held up one empty hand. Then, somehow or other, there was the Ace of Diamonds between her delicate little thumb and forefinger.

She held it a moment or two for our inspection; then, curving her wrist, sent it scaling out into the darkness. It soared away above the street, tipped up, and describing an aerial ellipse, returned straight to the balcony where she caught it in her fingers.

Twice she did this; but the third time, high in the air, the card burst into violet flame and vanished.

"That," remarked Stafford, "is one thing which I wish to learn how to do."

"Two hundred dollars," said the Countess Athalie, "—in two lessons; also, your word of honour."

"Monday," nodded Stafford, taking out a note-book and making a memorandum, "—at five in the afternoon."

"Monday and Wednesday at five," said the girl, lighting a cigarette and gazing dreamily at nothing.

From somewhere in the room came a voice.

"Did they ever catch that crook, Athalie?"

"Which?"

"The Fifty-ninth Street safe-blower?"

"Yes."

"Did you find him?"

She nodded.

"How? In your crystal?" I asked.

"Yes, he was there."

"It's odd," mused Duane, "that you can never do anything of advantage to yourself by gazing into your crystal."

"It's the invariable limit to clairvoyance," she remarked.

"A sort of penalty for being super-gifted," added Stafford.

"Perhaps.... We can't help ourselves."

"It's too bad," I volunteered.

"Oh, I don't care," she said, with a slight shrug of her pretty shoulders.

"Come," said somebody, teasingly, "wouldn't you like to know how soon you are going to fall in love, and with whom?"

She laughed, dropped her cigarette into a silver bowl, stretched her arms above her head, straightened her slender figure, turned her head and looked at us.

"No," she said, "I do not wish to know. Light is swift; Thought is swifter; but Love is the swiftest thing in Life, and if it is now travelling toward me, it will strike me soon enough to suit me."

Stafford leaned forward and arranged the cushions for her; she sank back among them, her dark eyes still on us.

"Hours are slow," she said; "years are slower, but the slowest thing in Life is Love. If it is now travelling toward me, it will reach me soon enough to suit me."

"I," said Duane, "prefer quick action, O Athalie, the Beautiful!"

"Athalie, lovely and incomparable," said Stafford, "I, also, prefer quick action."

"Play Scheherazade for us, Athalie," I said, "else we slay you with our compliments."

A voice or two from distant corners repeated the menace. A match flared and a fresh cigarette glowed faintly.

Somebody brought the tripod with its crystal sphere and set it down in the middle of the room. Its mild rays fell on the marble basin of the tiny fountain, —Duane's offering. The goldfish which I had given her were floating there fast asleep.

When we had placed sweetmeats and cigarettes convenient for her, we all, in turn, with circumstance and ceremony, bent over her left hand where it rested listlessly among the cushions, saluting the emerald on her third finger with our lips.

Then the dim circle closed around her, nearer.

"Of all the visions which have passed before your eyes within the depths of that crystal globe," said Duane, "—of all the histories of men and women which, unsuspected by them, you have witnessed, seated here in this silent, silk-hung place, we desire to hear only those in which Fate has been swiftest, Opportunity a loosened arrow, Destiny a flash of lightning."

"But the victims of quick action must be nameless, except as I choose to mask

them," she said, looking dreamily into her crystal.

After a moment's silence Duane said in a low voice:

"Does anybody notice the odour of orange blossoms?"

We all noticed the fragrance.

"I seem to catch a whiff of the sea, also," ventured Stafford. "Am I right?"

"Yes," she nodded, "you will notice the odour of the semi-tropics, even if you miss the point of everything I tell you."

"In other words," said I, "we are but a material bunch, Athalie, and may be addressed and amused only through our physical senses. Very well: transpose from the spiritual for us if you please a little story of quick action which has happened here in the crystal under your matchless eyes!"

II

With her silver tongs she selected a sweetmeat. When it had melted in her sweeter mouth, she lighted a cigarette, saluted us with a gay little gesture and smilingly began:

"Don't ask me how I know what these people said; that is my concern, not yours. Don't ask me how I know what unspoken thoughts animated these people; that is my affair. Nor how I seem to be perfectly acquainted with their past histories; for that is part of my profession."

"And still the wonder grew," commented the novelist tritely, "that one small head could carry all she knew!"

"Why," asked Stafford, "do you refuse to reveal your secret? Do you no longer trust us, Athalie?"

She answered: "Comment prétendons-nous qu'un autre garde notre secret, si nous n'avons pas pu le garder nous-même?"

Nobody replied.

"Now," she said, laughingly, "I will tell you all that I know about the Orange Puppy."

Plans for her first debut began before her birth. When it became reasonably certain that she was destined to decorate the earth, she was entered on the waiting lists of two schools—The Dingenook School for Boys, and The Idlebrook Institute for Young Ladies—her parents taking no chances, but playing both ends coming and going.

When ultimately she made her first earthly appearance, and it was apparent

that she was destined to embellish the planet in the guise of a girl, the process of grooming her for her second debut, some eighteen years in the future, began. She lived in sanitary and sterilized seclusion, eating by the ounce, sleeping through accurately measured minutes, every atom of her anatomy inspected daily, every pore of her skin explored, every garment she wore weighed, every respiration, pulse beat, and fluctuation of bodily temperature carefully noted and discussed.

When she appeared her hair was black. After she shed this, it came in red; when she was eight her hair was coppery, lashes black, eyes blue, and her skin snow and wild-strawberry tints in agreeably delicate nuances. Several millions were set aside to grow up with her and for her. Also, the list of foreign and aristocratic babyhood was scanned and several dozen possibilities checked off—the list running from the progeny of down-and-out monarchs with a sporting chance for a crown, to the more solid infant aristocracy of Britain.

At the age of nine, the only symptom of intellect that had yet appeared in her was a superbly developed temper. That year she eluded a governess and two trained nurses in the park, and was discovered playing with some unsterilized children near the duck-pond, both hands full of slime and pollywogs.

It was the only crack in the routine through which she ever crawled. Lessons daily in riding, driving, dancing, fencing, gymnastics, squash, tennis, skating, plugged every avenue of escape between morning school and evening sleep, after a mental bath in sterilized literature. Once, out of the window she saw a fire. This event, with several runaways on the bridle-path, included the sensations of her life up to her release from special instructors, and her entry into Idlebrook Institute.

Here she did all she could to misbehave in a blind and instinctive fashion, but opportunities were pitifully few; and by the time she had graduated, honest devilry seemed to have been starved out of her; and a half year's finishing abroad apparently eliminated it, leaving only a half-confused desire to be let alone. But solitude was the luxury always denied her.

Unlike the usual debutante, who is a social veteran two years before her presentation, and who at eighteen lacks no experience except intellectual, Miss Cassillis had become neither a judge of champagne nor an expert in the various cabaret steps popular at country houses and the more exclusive dives.

"Mother," she said calmly, on her eighteenth birthday, "do you know that I am known among my associates as a dead one?" At which that fat and hard-eyed matron laughed, surveying her symmetrical daughter with grim content.

"Let me tell you something," she said. "America, socially, is only one vast cabaret, mostly consisting of performers. The spectators are few. You're one. Conditions are reversed across the water; the audience is in the majority....

How do you like young Willowmere?"

The girl replied that she liked Lord Willowmere. She might have added that she was prepared to like anything in trousers that would give her a few hours off.

"Do you think," said her mother, "you can be trusted to play in the social cabaret all next winter, and then marry Willowmere?"

Said Cecil: "I am perfectly ready to marry anybody before luncheon, if you will let me."

"I do not wish you to feel that way."

"Mother, I do! All I want is to be let alone long enough to learn something for myself."

"What do you not know? What have you not learned? What accomplishment do you lack, little daughter? What is it you wish?"

The girl glanced out of the window. A young and extremely well-built man went striding down the avenue about his business. He looked a little like a man she had seen playing ball on the Harvard team a year ago. She sighed unconsciously.

"I've learned about everything there is to learn, I suppose.... Except—where do men go when they walk so busily about their business?"

"Down town," said her mother, laughing.

"What do they do there?"

"A million things concerning millions."

"But I don't see how there's anything left for them to do after their education is completed. What is there left for me to do, except to marry and have a few children?"

"What do you want to do?"

"Nothing.... I'd like to have something to do which would make me look busy and make me walk rather fast—like that young man who was hurrying down town all by himself. Then I'd like to be let alone while I'm busy with my own affairs."

"When you marry Willowmere you'll be busy enough." She might have added: "And lonely enough."

"I'll be occupied in telling others how to busy themselves with my affairs. But there won't be anything for me to do, will there?"

"Yes, dear child; it will be one steady fight to better a good position. It will afford you constant exercise."

The tall young girl bit her lip and shook her pretty head in silence. She felt instinctively that she knew how to do that. But that was not the exercise she wanted. She looked out into the February sunshine and saw the blue shadows on the snow and the sidewalks dark and wet, and the little gutter arabs throwing snow-balls, and a yellow pup barking blissfully. And, apropos of nothing at all, she suddenly remembered how she had run away when she was nine; and a rush of blind desire surged within her. What it meant she did not know, did not trouble to consider, but it stirred her until the soft fire burned in her cheeks, and left her twisting her white fingers, lips parted, staring across the wintry park into the blue tracery of trees. To Miss Cassillis adolescence came late.

They sang *Le Donne Curiose* at the opera that evening; she sat in her father's box; numbers of youthful, sleek-headed, white-shirted young men came between the acts. She talked to all with the ardor of the young and unsatisfied; and, mentally and spiritually still unsatisfied, buried in fur, she was whirled back through snowy streets to the great grey mansion of her nativity, and the silence of her white-hung chamber.

All through February the preparatory régime continued, with preliminary canters at theatre and opera, informal party practice, and trial dinners. Always she gave herself completely to every moment with a wistful and unquenched faith, eager novice in her quest of what was lacking in her life; ardent enthusiast in her restless searching for the remedy. And, unsatisfied, lingering mentally by the door of Chance, lest she miss somewhere the magic that satisfies and quiets—lest the gates of Opportunity swing open after she had turned away—reluctantly she returned to the companionship of her own solitary mind and undeveloped soul, and sat down to starve with them in spirit, wondering wherein might lie the reason for this new hunger that assailed her, mind and body.

She ran up her private flag the next winter, amid a thousand other gay and flaunting colours breaking out all over town. The newspapers roared a salute to the wealthiest debutante; and an enthusiastic press, not yet housebroken but agile with much exercise in leaping and fawning, leaped now about the debutante's slippers, grinning, slavering and panting. Later, led by instinct and its Celebrated Nose, it bounded toward young Lord Willowmere, jumped and fawned about him, slightly soiling him, until in midwinter the engagement it had announced was corroborated, and a million shop-girls and old women were in a furor.

He was a ruddy-faced young man who wore his bowler hat toward the back of his head, a small, pointed moustache, and who walked always as though he were shod in riding boots.

He would have made a healthy studgroom for any gentleman's stable. Person

and intellect were always thoroughly scrubbed as with saddle-soap. Had he been able to afford it, his stables would have been second to none in England.

Soon he would be able to afford it.

To his intimates, including his fiancée, he was known as "Stirrups." All day long he was in the saddle or on the box, every evening at the Cataract Club or at a cabaret. Between times he called upon Miss Cassillis—usually finding her out. When he found her not at home, he called elsewhere, very casually.

Two continents were deeply stirred over the impending alliance.

III

Young Jones, in wildest Florida, had never heard of it or of her, or of her income. His own fortune amounted to six hundred dollars, and he had been born in Brooklyn, and what his salary might be only he and the Smithsonian Institution knew.

He was an industrious young man, no better than you or I, accepting thankfully every opportunity for mischief which the Dead Lake region afforded. No opportunities of that kind ever presenting themselves in that region, he went once a month to Miami in the Orange Puppy, and drank too many swizzles and so forth, et cetera.

Having accomplished this, he returned to the wharf, put the Orange Puppy into commission, hoisted sail, and squared away for Matanzas Inlet, finding himself too weak-minded to go home by a more direct route.

He had been on his monthly pilgrimage to Miami, and was homeward bound noisily, using his auxiliary power so that silence should not descend upon him too abruptly. He had been, for half an hour now, immersed in a species of solitaire known as The Idiot's Delight, when he caught himself cheating himself, and indignantly scattered the pack to the four winds—three of which, however, were not blowing. One card, the deuce of hearts, fluttered seaward like a white butterfly. Beyond it he caught sight of another white speck, shining like a gull's breast.

It was a big yacht steaming in from the open sea; and her bill of lading included Miss Cassillis and Willowmere. But Jones could not know that. So he merely blinked at the distant Chihuahua, yawned, flipped the last card overboard, and swung the Orange Puppy into the inlet, which brimmed rather peacefully, the tide being nearly at flood.

Far away on the deck of the Chihuahua the quick-fire racket of Jones's auxiliary was amazingly audible. Miss Cassillis, from her deck-chair, could

see the Orange Puppy, a fleck of glimmering white across a sapphire sea. How was she to divine that one Delancy Jones was aboard of her? All she saw when the two boats came near each other was a noisy little craft progressing toward the lagoon, emitting an earsplitting racket; and a tall, lank young man clad in flannels lounging at the tiller and smoking a cigarette.

Around her on the snowy deck were disposed the guests of her parents, mostly corpulent, swizzles at every elbow, gracefully relaxing after a morning devoted to arduous idleness. The Victor on deck, which had furnished the incentive to her turkey-trotting with Lord Willowmere, was still exuding a syncopated melody. Across the water, Jones heard it and stood looking at the great yacht as the Orange Puppy kicked her way through the intensely blue water under an azure sky.

Willowmere lounged over to the rail and gazed wearily at the sand dunes and palmettos. Presently Miss Cassillis slipped from her deck-chair to her white-shod feet, and walked over to where he stood. He said something about the possibilities of "havin' a bit of shootin'," with a vague wave of his highly-coloured hand toward the palmetto forests beyond the lagoon.

If the girl heard him she made no comment. After a while, as the distance between the Chihuahua and the Orange Puppylengthened, she levelled her sea glasses at the latter craft, and found that the young man at the helm was also examining her through his binoculars.

While she inspected him, several unrelated ideas passed through her head; she thought he was very much sunburned and that his hatless head was attractive, with its short yellow hair crisped by the sun. Without any particular reason, apparently, she recollected a young man she had seen the winter before, striding down the wintry avenue about his business. He might have been this young man for all she knew. Like the other, this one wore yellow hair. Then, with no logic in the sequence of her thoughts, suddenly the memory of how she had run away when she was nine years old set her pulses beating, filling her heart with the strange, wistful, thrilling, overwhelming longing which she had supposed would never again assail her, now that she was engaged to be married. And once more the soft fire burned in her cheeks.

"Stirrups," she said, scarcely knowing what she was saying, "I don't think I'll marry you after all. It's just occurred to me."

"Oh, I say!" protested Willowmere languidly, never for a moment mistrusting that the point of her remark was buried in some species of American humour. He always submitted to American humour. There was nothing else to do, except to understand it.

"Stirrups, dear?"

"What?"

"You're very pink and healthy, aren't you?"

He shrugged his accustomed shrug of resignation.

"Oh, I say—come, now——" he murmured, lighting a cigarette.

"What a horrid smash there would be if I didn't make good, wouldn't there, Stirrups?" She mused, her blue eyes resting on him, too coldly.

"Rather," he replied, comfortably settling his arms on the rail.

"It might happen, you know. Suppose I fell overboard?"

"Fish you out, ducky."

"Suppose I—ran away?"

"Ow."

"What would you do, Stirrups? Why, you'd go back to town and try to pick another winner. Wouldn't you?"

He laughed.

"Naturally that is what you would do, isn't it?" She considered him curiously for a moment, then smiled. "How funny!" she said, almost breathlessly.

"Rather," he murmured, and flicked his cigarette overboard.

The Orange Puppy had disappeared beyond the thicket of palmettos across the point. The air was very warm and still.

Her father waddled forward presently, wearing the impressive summer regalia of a commodore in the Siwanois Yacht Club. His daughter's blue eyes rested on the portly waistline of her parent—then on his fluffy chop-whiskers. A vacant, hunted look came into her eyes.

"Father," she said almost listlessly, "I'm going to run away again."

"When do you start?" inquired that facetious man.

"Now, I think. What is there over there?"—turning her face again toward the distant lagoon, with its endless forests of water-oak, cedar, and palmetto.

"Over there," said her father, "reside several species of snakes and alligators. Also other reptiles, a number of birds, and animals, and much microbic mud."

She bit her lip. "I see," she said, nodding.

Willowmere said: "We should find some shootin' along the lagoon. Look at the ducks."

Mr. Cassillis yawned; he had eaten too heavily of duck to be interested. Very thoughtfully he presented himself with a cigar, turned it over and over between his soft fingers, and yawned again. Then, nodding solemnly as though in emphasis of a profound idea of which he had just been happily delivered, he

waddled slowly back along the deck.

His daughter looked after him until he disappeared; gazed around her at the dawdling assortment of guests aboard, then lifted her quiet eyes to Willowmere.

"Ducky," she said, "I can't stand it. I'm going to run away."

"Come on, then," he said, linking his arm in hers.

The Victor still exuded the Tango.

She hesitated. Then freeing herself:

"Oh, not with you, Stirrups! I wish to go away somewhere entirely alone. Could you understand?" she added wistfully.

He stifled a yawn. American humour bored him excessively.

"You'll be back in a day or two?" he inquired. And laughed violently when the subtlety of his own wit struck him.

"In a day or two or not at all. Good-bye, Stirrups."

"Bye."

The sun blazed on her coppery hair and on the white skin that never burned, as she walked slowly across the yacht's deck and disappeared below.

While she was writing in her cabin, the Chihuahua dropped her anchors. Miss Cassillis listened to the piping, the thud of feet on deck, the rattle and distant sound of voices. Then she continued her note:

I merely desire to run away. I don't know why, Mother, dear. But the longing to bolt has been incubating for many years. And now it's too strong to resist. I don't quite understand how it came to a crisis on deck just now, but I looked at Stirrups, whose skin is too pink, and at Father, who had lunched too sumptuously, and at the people on deck, all digesting in a row—and then at the green woods on shore, and the strip of white where a fairy surf was piling up foam into magic castles and snowy battlements, ephemeral, exquisite. And all at once it came over me that I must go.

Don't be alarmed. I shall provision a deck canoe, take a tent, some rugs and books, and paddle into that lagoon. If you will just let me alone for two or three days, I promise I'll return safe and sound, and satisfied. For something has got to be done in regard to that longing of mine. But really, I think that if you and Father won't understand, and if you send snooping people after me, I won't come back at all, and I'll never marry Stirrups. Please understand me, Mother, dear.

CECIL.

This effusion she pinned to her pillow, then rang for the steward and ordered

the canoe to be brought alongside, provisioned for a three days' shooting trip.

So open, frank, and guileless were her orders that nobody who took them suspected anything unusual; and in the full heat and glare of the afternoon siesta, when parents, fiancé, and assorted guests were all asleep and in full process of digestion and the crew of the Chihuahua was drowsing from stem to stern, a brace of sailors innocently connived at her escape, aided her into the canoe, and, doubting nothing, watched her paddle away through the inlet, and into the distant lagoon, which lay sparkling in golden and turquoise tints, set with palms like a stupid picture in a child's geography.

Later, the Chihuahua fired a frantic gun. Later still, two boats left the yacht, commanded respectively by one angry parent and one fiancé, profoundly bored.

IV

When Miss Cassillis heard the gun, it sounded very far away. But it irritated as well as scared her. She pushed the canoe energetically through a screen of foliage overhanging the bank of the lagoon, it being merely her immediate instinct to hide herself.

To her surprise and pleasure, she discovered herself in a narrow, deep lead, which had been entirely concealed by the leaves, and which wound away through an illimitable vista of reeds, widening as she paddled forward, until it seemed like a glassy river bordered by live-oak, water-oak, pine, and palmetto, curving out into a flat and endless land of forests.

Here was liberty at last! No pursuit need now be feared, for the entrance to this paradise which she had forced by a chance impulse could never be suspected by parent or fiancé.

A little breeze blew her hair and loosened it; silently her paddle dipped, swept astern in a swirl of bubbles, flashed dripping, and dipped again.

Ahead of her a snake-bird slipped from a dead branch into the water; a cormorant perched on the whitened skeleton of a mango, made hideous efforts to swallow a mullet before her approach disorganized his manœuvres.

So silently the canoe stole along that the fat alligators, dozing in the saw-grass, dozed on until she stirred them purposely with a low tap of her paddle against the thwarts; then they rose, great lumbering bodies propped high on squatty legs, waddled swiftly to the bank's edge, and slid headlong into the water.

Everywhere dragon-flies glittered over the saw-grass; wild ducks with golden eyes and heads like balls of brown plush swam leisurely out of the way; a few

mallard, pretending to be frightened, splashed and clattered into flight, the sunlight jewelling the emerald heads of the drakes.

"Wonderful, wonderful," her heart was singing to itself, while her enchanted eyes missed nothing—neither the feebly flying and strangely shaped, velvety black butterflies, the narrow wings of which were striped with violent yellow; nor the metallic blue and crestless jays that sat on saplings, watching her; nor the pelicans fishing with nature's orange and iridescent net in the shallows; nor the tall, slate-blue birds that marched in dignified retreat through the sedge, picking up their stilt-like legs with the precision of German foot-soldiers on parade.

These and other phenomena made her drop her paddle at intervals and clap her hands softly in an ecstasy beyond mere exclamation. How restfully green was the world; how limpid the water; how royally blue the heavens! Listening, she could hear the soft stirring of palmetto fronds in the forests; the celestial song of a little bird that sat on a sparkle-berry bush, its delicate long-curved bill tilted skyward. Then the deep note of splendour flashed across the scheme of sound and colour as a crimson cardinal alighted near her, crest erect.

But more wonderful than all was that at last, after eighteen years, she was utterly alone; and liberty was showering its inestimable gifts upon her in breathless prodigality—liberty to see with her own eyes and judge with her own senses; liberty to linger capriciously amid mental fancies, to move on impulsively to others; liberty to reflect unurged and unrestricted; liberty to choose, to reject, to ignore.

"They inspected each other, apparently bereft of the power of speech."

Now and then a brilliant swimming snake filled her with interest and curiosity. Once, on a flat, low bush, she saw a dull, heavy, blunt-bodied serpent lying asleep in the sun like an old and swollen section of rubber hose. But when she ventured to touch the bush with her paddle, the snake reared high and yawned at her with jaws which seemed to be lined in white satin. Which fortunately made her uneasy, and she meddled no more with the Little Death of the southern swamps.

She was now passing very close to the edge of the "hammock," where palmettos overhung the water; and as the cool, dim woodlands seemed to invite her, she looked about her leisurely for an agreeable landing place. There were plenty to choose from; and she selected a little sandy point under a red cedar tree, drove her canoe upon it, and calmly stepped ashore. And found herself looking into the countenance of Jones.

For a full minute they inspected each other, apparently bereft of the power of speech.

She said, finally: "About a year ago last February, did you happen to walk

down Fifth Avenue—very busily? Did you?"

It took him an appreciable time to concentrate for mental retrospection.

"Yes," he said, "I did."

"You were going down town, weren't you?"

"Yes."

"On business?"

"Yes," he said, bewildered.

"I wonder," she said timidly, "if you would tell me what that business was? Do you mind? Because, really, I don't mean to be impertinent."

He made an effort to reflect. It was difficult to reflect and to keep his eyes on her but also it is impolite to converse with anybody and look elsewhere. This he had been taught at his mother's knee—and sometimes over it.

"My business down town," he said very slowly, "was with an officer of the Smithsonian Institution who had come on from Washington to see something which I had brought with me from Florida."

"Would you mind telling me what it was you brought with you from Florida?" she asked wistfully.

"No. It was malaria."

"What!"

"It was malaria," he repeated politely.

"I—I don't see how you could—could show it to him," she murmured, perplexed.

"Well, I'll tell you how I showed it to him. I made a little incision in my skin with a lancet; he made a smear or two——"

"A—what?"

"A smear—he put a few drops of my blood on some glass plates."

"Why?"

"To examine them under the microscope."

"Why?"

"So that he might determine what particular kind of malaria I had brought back with me."

"Did he find out?" she asked, deeply interested.

"Yes," said Jones, displaying mild symptoms of enthusiasm, "he discovered that I was fairly swarming with a perfectly new and undescribed species of bacillus. That bacillus," he added, with modest diffidence, "is now named after

me."

She looked at him very earnestly, dropped her blue eyes, raised them again after a moment:

"It must be—pleasant—to give one's name to a bacillus."

"It is an agreeable and exciting privilege. When I look into the culture tubes I feel an intimate relationship with those bacilli which I have never felt for any human being."

"You—you are a——" she hesitated, with a slight but charming colour in her cheeks, "a naturalist, I presume?" And she added hastily, "No doubt you are a famous one, and my question must sound ignorant and absurd to you. But as I do not know your name——"

"It is Jones," he said gloomily, "—and I am not famous."

"Mine is Cecil Cassillis; and neither am I," she said. "But I thought when naturalists gave their names to butterflies and microbes that everything concerned immediately became celebrated."

Jones smiled; and she thought his expression very attractive.

"No," he said, "fame crowns the man who, celebrated only for his wealth, names hotels, tug-boats, and art galleries after himself. Thus are Immortals made."

She laughed, standing there gracefully as a boy, her hands resting on her narrow hips. She laughed again. A tug-boat, a hotel, and a cigar were named after her father.

"Fame is an extraordinary thing," she said. "But liberty is still more wonderful, isn't it?"

"Liberty is only comparative," he said, smiling. "There is really no such thing as absolute freedom."

"You have all the freedom you desire, haven't you?"

"Well—I enjoy the only approach to absolute liberty I ever heard of."

"What kind of liberty is that?"

"Freedom to think as I please, no matter what I'm obliged to do."

"But you do what you please, too, don't you?"

"Oh, no!" he said smiling. "The man was never born who did what he pleased."

"Why not? You choose your own work, don't you?"

"Yes. But once the liberty of choice is exercised, freedom ends. I choose my profession. There my liberty ends, because instantly I am enslaved by the

conditions which make my choice a profession."

She was deeply interested. A mossy log lay near them; she seated herself to listen, her elbow on her knee, and her chin cupped in her hand. But Jones became silent.

"Were you not in that funny little boat that passed the inlet about three hours ago?" she asked.

"The Orange Puppy? Yes."

"What an odd name for a boat—the Orange Puppy!"

"An orange puppy," he explained, "is the name given in the Florida orange groves to the caterpillar of a large swallow-tail butterfly, which feeds on orange leaves. The butterfly it turns into is known to entomologists as *Papilio cressphontes* and *Papilio thoas*. The latter is a misnomer."

She gazed upon this young man in undisguised admiration.

"Once," she said, "when I was nine years old, I ran away from a governess and two trained nurses. They found me with both hands full of muddy pollywogs. It has nothing to do with what you are saying, but I thought I'd tell you."

He insisted that the episode she recalled was most interesting and unusual, considered purely as a human document.

"Would you tell me what you are doing down here in these forests?" she asked, "—as we are discussing human documents."

"Yes," he said. "I am investigating several thousand small caterpillars which are feeding on the scrub-palmetto."

"Is that your business?"

"Exactly. If you will remain very still for a moment and listen very intently you can hear the noise which these caterpillars make while they are eating."

She thought of the Chihuahua, and it occurred to her that she had rather tired of seeing things eat. However, except in Europe, she had never heard things eat. So she listened.

He said: "These caterpillars are in their third moult—that is, they have changed their skin three times since emerging from the egg—and are now busily chewing the immature fruit of the scrub-palmetto. You can hear them very plainly."

She sat silent, spellbound; and presently in the woodland stillness, all around her she heard the delicate and continuous sound—the steady, sustained noise of thousands of tiny jaws, all crunching, all busily working together. And when she realized what the elfin rustle really meant, she turned her delighted and grateful eyes on Jones. And the beauty of them made him exceedingly

thoughtful.

"Will you explain to me," she whispered, "why you are studying these caterpillars, Mr. Jones?"

"Because they are spreading out over the forests. Until recently this particular species of caterpillar, and the pretty little moth into which it ultimately turns, were entirely confined to a narrow strip of jungle, only a few miles long, lying on the Halifax River. Nowhere else in all the world could these little creatures be found. But recently they have been reported from the Dead Lake country. So the Smithsonian Institution sent me down here to study them, and find out whither they were spreading, and whether any natural parasitic enemies had yet appeared to check them."

She gazed at him, fascinated.

"Have any appeared?" she asked, under her breath.

"I have not yet found a single creature that preys upon them."

"Isn't it a very arduous and difficult task to watch these thousands of little caterpillars all day long?"

"It is quite impossible for me to do it thoroughly all alone."

"Would you like to have me help you?" she asked innocently.

Which rather bowled him over, but he said:

"I'd b-b-be d-d-delighted—only you haven't time, have you?"

"I have three days. I've brought a tent, you see, and everything necessary—rugs, magazines, blankets, toilet articles, bon-bons, books—everything, in fact, to last three days.... I wonder how that tent is put up. Do you know?"

He went over to the canoe and gazed at the tent.

"I think I could pitch it for you," he said.

"Oh, thanks so much! May I help you? I think I'll put it here on this pretty stretch of white sand by the water's edge."

"I'm afraid that wouldn't do," he said, gravely.

"Why?"

"Because the lagoon is tidal. You'd be awash sooner or later."

"I see. Well, then, anywhere in the woods will do——"

"Not anywhere," he said, smiling. "High water leaves few dry places in this forest; in fact—I'm afraid that my shack is perched on the only spot which is absolutely dry at all times. It is a shell mound—the only one in the Dead Lake region."

"Isn't there room for my tent beside yours?" she asked, a trifle anxiously.

"Y-es," he said, in a voice as matter of fact as her own. "How many will there be in your party?"

"In my party! Why, only myself," she said, with smiling animation.

"Oh, I see!" But he didn't.

They lugged the tent back among the trees to the low shell mound, where in the centre of a ring of pines and evergreen oaks his open-faced shack stood, thatched with palmetto fans. She gazed upon the wash drying on the line, upon a brace of dead ducks hanging from the eaves, upon the smoky kettle and the ashes of the fire. Purest delight sparkled in her blue eyes.

Erecting her silk tent with practiced hands, he said carelessly:

"In case you cared to send any word to the yacht——"

"Did I say that I came from the yacht?" she asked; and her straight eyebrows bent a trifle inward.

"Didn't you?"

"Will you promise me something, Mr. Jones?"

The things he was prepared to promise her choked him for a second, but when he regained control of his vocal powers he said, very pleasantly, that he would gladly promise her anything.

"Then don't ask me where I came from. Let me stay three days. Then I'll go very quietly away, and never trouble you again. Is it a promise?"

"Yes," he said, not looking at her. His face had become very serious; she noticed it—and how well his head was set on his shoulders, and how his clipped hair was burned to the color of crisp hay.

"You were Harvard, of course," she said, unthinkingly.

"Yes." He mentioned the year.

"Not crew?"

"No."

"Baseball?"

"Varsity pitcher," he nodded, surprised.

"Then this is the third time I've seen you.... I wonder what it is about you——"
She remained silent, watching him burying her water bottles in the cool marl.

When all was in order, he smiled, made her a little formal bow, and evinced a disposition to retire and leave her in possession.

"I thought we were going to work at once!" she said uneasily. "I am quite ready." And, as he did not seem to comprehend, "I was going to help you to examine the little caterpillars, one by one; and the minute I saw anything

trying to bite them I was going to call you. Didn't you understand?" she added wistfully.

"That will be fine!" he said, with an enthusiasm very poorly controlled.

"You will show me where the little creatures are hiding, won't you?"

"Indeed I will! Here they are, all about us!" He made a sweeping gesture over the low undergrowth of scrub-palmetto; and the next moment:

"I see them!" she exclaimed, delighted. "Oh, what funny, scrubby, busy little creatures! They are everywhere—everywhere! Why, there seem to be thousands and thousands of them! And all are eating the tiny green bunches of fruit!"

They bent together over a group of feeding larvæ; he handed her a pocket microscope like his own; and, enchanted, she studied the tiny things while he briefly described their various stages of development from the little eggs to the pretty, pearl-tinted moth so charmingly striped with delicate, brown lines—a rare prize in the cabinet of any collector.

V

Through the golden forest light of afternoon, they moved from shrub to shrub; and he taught her to be on the watch for any possible foes of the neat and busy little caterpillars, warning her to watch for birds, spiders, beetles, ichneumon flies, possibly squirrels or even hornets. She nodded her comprehension; he went one way, she the other. For nearly ten minutes they remained separated, and it seemed ages to one of them anyway.

But the caterpillars appeared to be immune. Nothing whatever interfered with them; wandering beetles left them unmolested; no birds even noticed them; no gauzy-winged and parasitic flies investigated them.

"Mr. Jones!" she called.

He was at her side in an instant.

"I only wanted to know where you were," she said happily.

The sun hung red over the lagoon when they sauntered back to camp. She went into her tent with a cheerful nod to him, which said:

"I've had a splendid time, and I'll rejoin you in a few moments."

When she emerged in fresh white flannels, she found him writing in a blank-book.

"I wonder if I might see?" she said. "If it's scientific, I mean."

"It is, entirely."

So she seated herself on the ground beside him, and read over his shoulder the entries he was making in his field book concerning the day's doings. When he had finished his entry, she said:

"You have not mentioned my coming to you, and how we looked for ichneumon flies together."

"I——" He was silent.

She added timidly: "I know I count for absolutely nothing in the important experiences of a naturalist, but—I did look very hard for ichneumon flies. Couldn't you write in your field book that I tried very hard to help you?"

He wrote gravely:

"Miss Cassillis most generously volunteered her invaluable aid, and spared no effort to discover any possible foe that might prove to be parasitic upon these larvæ. But so far without success."

"Thank you," she said, in a very low voice. And after a short silence: "It was not mere vanity, Mr. Jones. Do you understand?"

"I know it was not vanity, even if I do not entirely understand."

"Shall I tell you?"

"Please."

"It was the first thing that I have ever been permitted to do all by myself. It meant so much to me.... And I wished to have a little record of it—even if you think it is of no scientific importance."

"It is of more importance than——" But he managed to stop himself, slightly startled. She had lifted her head from the pages of the field book to look at him. When his voice failed, and while the red burned brilliantly in his ears, she resumed her perusal of his journal, gravely. After a while, though she turned the pages as if she were really reading, he concluded that her mind was elsewhere. It was.

Presently he rose, mended the fire, filled the kettle, and unhooked the brace of wild ducks from the eaves where they swung, and marched off with them toward the water.

When he returned, the ducks were plucked and split for broiling. He found her seated as he had left her, dreaming awake, idle hands folded on the pages of his open field book.

For dinner they had broiled mallard, coffee, ash-cakes, and bon-bons. After it she smoked a cigarette with him.

Later she informed him that it was her first, and that she liked it, and requested

another.

"Don't," he said, smiling.

"Why?"

"It spoils a girl's voice, ultimately."

"But it's very agreeable."

"Will you promise not to?" he asked, lightly.

Suddenly her blue eyes became serious.

"Yes," she said, "if you wish."

The woods grew darker. Far across the lagoon a tiger-owl woke up and began to yelp like a half-strangled hobgoblin.

She sat silent for a little while, then very quietly and frankly put her hand on Jones's. It was shaking.

"I am afraid of that sound," she said calmly.

"It is only a big owl," he reassured her, retaining her hand.

"Is that what it is? How very dark the woods are! I had no idea that there could be such utter darkness. I am not sure that I care for it."

"There is nothing to harm you in these woods."

"No bears and wolves and panthers?"

"There are a few—and all very anxious to keep away from anything human."

"Are you sure?"

"Absolutely."

"Do you mind if I leave my hand where it is?"

It appeared that he had no insurmountable objections.

After the seventh tiger-owl had awakened and the inky blackness quivered with the witch-like shouting and hellish tumult, he felt her shoulder pressing against his. And bending to look into her face saw that all the colour in it had fled.

"You mustn't be frightened," he said earnestly.

"But I am. I'm sorry.... I'll try to accustom myself to it.... The darkness is a—a trifle terrifying— isn't it?"

"It's beautiful, too," he said, looking up at the firelit foliage overhead. She looked up also, her slender throat glimmering rosy in the embers' glare. After a moment she nodded:

"It is wonderful.... If I only had a little time to accustom myself to it I am sure

I should love it.... Oh! What was that very loud splash out there in the dark?"

"A big fish playing in the lagoon; or perhaps wild ducks feeding."

After a few minutes he felt her soft hand tighten within his.

"It sounds as though some great creature were prowling around our fire," she whispered. "Do you hear its stealthy tread?"

"Noises in the forest are exaggerated," he said carelessly. "It may be a squirrel or some little furry creature out hunting for his supper. Please don't be afraid."

"Then it isn't a bear?"

"No, dear," he said, so naturally and unthinkingly that for a full second neither realised the awful break of Delancy Jones.

When they did they said nothing about it. But it was some time before speech was resumed. She was the first to recover. Perhaps the demoralisation was largely his. It usually is that way.

She said: "This has been the most perfect day of my entire life. I'm even glad I am a little scared. It is delicious to be a trifle afraid. But I'm not, now—very much.... Is there any established

hour for bedtime in the woods?"

"Inclination sounds the hour."

"Isn't that wonderful!" she sighed, her eyes on the fire. "Inclination rules in the forest.... And here I am."

The firelight on her copper-tinted hair masked her lovely eyes in a soft shadow. Her shoulder stirred rhythmically as she breathed.

"And here you live all alone," she mused, half to herself.... "I once saw you pitch a game against Yale.... And the next time I saw you walking very busily down Fifth Avenue.... And now—you are—here.... That is wonderful.... Everything seems to be wonderful in this place.... Wh-what is that flapping noise, please?"

"Two herons fighting in the sedge."

"You know everything.... That is the most wonderful of all. And yet you say you are not famous?"

"Nobody ever heard of me outside the Smithsonian."

"But—you must become famous. To-morrow I shall look very hard for an ichneumon fly for you——"

"But your discovery will make you famous, Miss Cassillis——"

"Why—why, it's for you that I am going to search so hard! Did you suppose I would dream of claiming any of the glory!"

He said, striving to speak coolly:

"It is very generous and sweet of you.... And, after all, I hardly suppose that you need any added lustre or any additional happiness in a life which must be so full, so complete, and so care-free."

She was silent for a while, then:

"Is your life then so full of care, Mr. Jones?"

"Oh, no," he said; "I get on somehow."

"Tell me," she insisted.

"What am I to tell you?"

"Why it is that your life is care-ridden."

"But it isn't——"

"Tell me!"

He said, gaily enough: "To labour for others is sometimes a little irksome.... I am not discontented.... Only, if I had means—if I had barely sufficient—there are so many fascinating and exciting lines of independent research to follow—to make a name in——" He broke off with a light laugh, leaned forward and laid another log on the fire.

"You can not afford it?" she asked, in a low voice; and for the moment astonishment ruled her to discover that this very perfect specimen of intelligent and gifted manhood was struggling under such an amazingly trifling disadvantage. Only from reading and from hearsay had she been even vaguely acquainted with the existence of poverty.

"No," he said pleasantly, "I can not yet afford myself the happiness of independent research."

"When will you be able to afford it?"

Neither were embarrassed; he looked thoughtfully into the fire; and for a while she watched him in his brown study.

"Will it be soon?" she asked, under her breath.

"No, dear."

That time a full minute intervened before either realised how he had answered. And both remained exceedingly still until she said calmly:

"I thought you were the very ideal embodiment of personal liberty. And now I find that wretched and petty and ignoble circumstances fetter even such a man as you are. It—it is—is heartbreaking."

"It won't last forever," he said, controlling his voice.

"But the years are going—the best years, Mr. Jones. And your life's work

beckons you. And you are equipped for it, and you can not take it!"

"Some day——" But he could say no more then, with her hand tightening in his.

"To—to rise superior to circumstances—that is god-like, isn't it?" she said.

"Yes." He laughed. "But on six hundred dollars a year a man can't rise very high above circumstances."

The shock left her silent. Any gown of hers cost more than that. Then the awfulness of it all rose before her in its true and hideous proportions. And there was nothing for her to do about it, nothing, absolutely nothing, except to endure the degradation of her wealth and remember that the merest tithe of it could have made this man beside her immortally famous—if, perhaps, no more wonderful than he already was in her eyes.

Was there no way to aid him? She could look for ichneumon flies in the morning. And on the morning after that. And the next morning she would say good-bye and go away forever—out of this enchanted forest, out of his life, back to the Chihuahua, and to her guests who ate often and digested all day long—back to her father, her mother—back to Stirrups——

He felt her hand close on his convulsively, and turned to encounter her flushed and determined face.

"You like me, don't you?" she said.

"Yes." After a moment he said: "Yes—absolutely."

"Do you like me enough to—to let me help you in your research work—to be patient enough to teach me a little until I catch up with you?... So we can go on together?... I know I am presumptuous—perhaps importunate—but I thought—somehow—if you did like me well enough—it would be—very agreeable——"

"It would be!... And I—like you enough for—anything. But you could not remain here——"

"I don't mean here."

"Where, then?"

"Where?" She looked vaguely about her in the firelight. "Why, everywhere. Wherever you go to make your researches."

"Dear, I would go to Ceylon if I could."

"I also," she said.

He turned a little pale, looking at her in silence. She said calmly: "What would you do in Ceylon?"

"Study the unknown life-histories of the rarer Ornithoptera."

She knew no more than a kitten what he meant. But she wanted to know, and, moreover, was perfectly capable of comprehending.

"Whatever you desire to study," she said, "would prove delightful to me.... If you want me. Do you?"

"Want you!" Then he bit his lip.

"Don't you? Tell me frankly if you don't. But I think, somehow, you would not make a mistake if you did want me. I really am intelligent. I didn't know it until I talked with you. Now, I know it. But I have never been able to give expression to it or cultivate it.... And, somehow, I know I would not be a drag on you—if you would teach me a little in the beginning."

He said: "What can I teach you, Cecil? Not the heavenly frankness that you already use so sweetly. Not the smiling and serene nobility which carries your head so daintily and so fearlessly. Not the calm purity of thought, nor the serene goodness of mind that has graciously included a poor devil like me in your broad and generous sympathies——"

"Please!" she faltered, flushing. "I am not what you say—though to hear you say such things is a great happiness—a pleasure—very intense—and wonderful—and new. But I am nothing, nothing—unless I should become useful to you. I could amount to something—with—you——" She checked herself; looked at him as though a trifle frightened. "Unless," she added with an effort, "you are in love with somebody else. I didn't think of that. Are you?"

"No," he said. "Are you?"

"No.... I have never been in love.... This is the nearest I have come to it."

"And I."

She smiled faintly.

"If we——"

"Oh, yes," he said, calmly, "if we are to pass the balance of our existence in combined research, it would be rather necessary for us to marry."

"Do you mind?"

"On the contrary. Do you?"

"Not in the least. Do you really mean it? It wouldn't be disagreeable, would it? You are above marrying for mere sentiment, aren't you? Because, somehow, I seem to know you like me.... And it would be death for me—a mental death—to go back now to—to Stirrups——"

"Where?"

"To—why do you ask? Couldn't you take me on faith?"

He said, unsteadily: "If you rose up out of the silvery lagoon, just born from

the starlight and the mist, I would take you."

"You—you are a poet, too," she faltered. "You seem to be about everything desirable."

"I'm only a man very, very deep in—love."

"In love!... I thought——"

"Ah, but you need think no more. You know now, Cecil."

She remained silent, thinking for a long while. Then, very quietly:

"Yes, I know.... It is that way with me also. For I no sooner find my liberty than I lose it—in the same moment—to you. We must never again be separated.... Do you feel as I do?"

"Absolutely.... But it must be so."

"Why?" she asked, troubled.

"For one thing, I shall have to work harder now."

"Why?"

"Don't you know we can not marry on what I have?"

"Oh! Is that the reason?" She laughed, sprang lightly to her feet, stood looking down at him. He got up, slowly.

"I bring you," she said, "six hundred dollars a year. And a little more. Which sweeps away that obstacle. Doesn't it?"

"I could not ask you to live on that——"

"I can live on what you live on! I should wish to. It would make me utterly and supremely happy."

Her flushed, young face confronted his as she took a short, eager step toward him.

"I am not making love to you," she said, "—at least, I don't think I am. All I desire is to help—to give you myself—my youth, energy, ambition, intelligence—and what I have—which is of no use to me unless it is useful to you. Won't you take these things from me?"

"Do you give me your heart, too, Cecil?"

She smiled faintly, knowing now that she had already given it. She did not answer, but her under lip trembled, and she caught it between her teeth as he took her hands and kissed them in silence.

"Miami is not very far, is it?" she asked, as she sprang aboard the Orange Puppy.

"Not very, dear."

"We could get a license immediately, couldn't we?"

"I think so."

"And then it will not take us very long to get married, will it?"

"Not very."

"What a wonderful night!" she murmured, looking up at the stars. She turned toward the shore. "What a wonderful place for a honeymoon!... And we can continue business, too, and watch our caterpillars all day long! Oh, it is all too wonderful, wonderful!" She kissed her hand to the unseen camp. "We will be back to-morrow!" she called softly. Then a sudden thought struck her. "You never can get the Orange Puppy through that narrow lead, can you?"

"Oh, there is an easier way out," he said, taking the tiller as the sail filled.

Her head dropped back against his knees. Now and then her lips moved, murmuring in sheerest happiness the thoughts that drifted through her enchanted mind.

"I wonder when it began," she whispered, "—at the ball-game—or on Fifth Avenue—or when I saw you here? It seems to me as if I always had been in love with you."

Outside in the ocean, the breeze stiffened and the perfume was tinged with salt.

Lying back against his knees, her eyes fixed dreamily on the stars, she murmured:

"Stirrups will be surprised."

"What are you talking about down there all by yourself?" he whispered, bending over her.

She looked up into his eyes. Suddenly her own filled; and she put up both arms, linking them around his neck.

And so the Orange Puppy sailed away into the viewless, formless, starry mystery of all romance.

After a silence the young novelist, who had been poking the goldfish, said slowly: "That's pretty poor fiction, Athalie, but, as a matter of simple fact and inartistic truth, recording sentimental celerity, it stands unequalled."

"Straight facts make poor fiction," remarked Duane.

"It all depends on who makes the fiction out of them," I ventured.

"Not always," said Athalie. "There are facts which when straightly told are far stranger than fiction. I noticed a case of that sort in my crystal last winter." And to the youthful novelist she said: "Don't try to guess who the people were if I tell it, will you?"

"No," he promised.

"Please fix my cushions," she said to nobody in particular. And after the stampede was over she selected another cigarette, thoughtfully, but did not light it.

VII

"You are queer folk, you writers of fiction," she mused aloud. "No monarch ordained of God takes himself more seriously; no actor lives more absolutely in a world made out of his imagination."

She lighted her cigarette: "You often speak of your most 'important' book,—as though any fiction ever written were important. Painters speak of their most important pictures; sculptors, composers, creative creatures of every species employ the adjective. And it is all very silly. Facts only can be characterised as important; figments of the creative imagination are as unimportant——" she blew a dainty ring of smoke toward the crystal globe—"as that! 'Tout ce qu'ont fait les hommes, les hommes peuvent le détruire. Il n'y a de caractères ineffaçables que ceux qu' imprime la nature.' There has never been but one important author."

I said smilingly: "To quote the gentleman you think important enough to quote, Athalie, 'Tout est bien sortant des mains de l'Auteur des choses: tout dégénère entre les mains de l'homme.'"

Said the novelist simply: "Imagination alone makes facts important. 'Cette superbe puissance, ennemie de la raison!'"

"O Athalie," whispered Duane, "night-blooming, exquisite blossom of the arid municipal desert, recount for us these facts which you possess and which, in your delightful opinion, are stranger than fiction, and more important."

And Athalie, choosing another sweetmeat, looked at us until it had dissolved in her fragrant mouth. Then she spoke very gravely, while her dark eyes laughed at us:

When young Lord Willowmere's fiancée ran away from him and married Delancy Jones, that bereaved nobleman experienced a certain portion of the universal shock which this social seismic disturbance spread far and wide over two hemispheres.

That such a girl should marry beneath her naturally disgusted everybody. So both Jones and his wife were properly damned.

England read its morning paper, shrugged its derision, and remarked that nobody ought to be surprised at anything that happened in the States. "The States" swallowed the rebuke and squirmed.

Now, among the sturdy yeomanry, gentry, and nobility of those same British and impressive Isles there was an earnest gentleman whose ample waist and means and scholarly tastes inclined him to a sedentary life of research. The study of human nature in its various native and exotic phases had for forty years obsessed his insular intellect. Philologist, anthropologist, calm philosopher, and benignant observer, this gentleman, who had never visited the United States, determined to do so now. For, he reasoned—and very properly—a country where such a thing could happen to a British nobleman and a Peer of the Realm must be worth exploring, and its curious inhabitants merited, perhaps, the impersonally judicial inspection of an F. R. B. A. whose gigantic work on the folk manners of the world had now reached its twentieth volume, without as yet including the United States. So he determined to devote several chapters in the forthcoming and twenty-first volume to the recent colonies of Great Britain.

Now, when the Duke of Pillchester concluded to do anything, that thing was invariably and thoroughly done. And so, before it entirely realised the honour in store for it, the United States was buttoning its collar, tying its white tie, and rushing down stairs to open its front door to the Duke of Pillchester, the Duchess of Pillchester, and the Lady Alene Innesly, their youthful and ornamental daughter.

For a number of months after its arrival, the Ducal party inspected the Yankee continent through a lens made for purposes of scientific investigation only. The massed wealth of the nation met their Graces in solid divisions of social worth. The shock was mutual.

Then the massed poverty of the continent was exhibited, leaving the poverty indifferent and slightly bored, and the Ducal party taking notes.

It was his Grace's determination to study the folk-ways of Americans; and what the Duke wished the Duchess dutifully desired. The Lady Alene Innesly, however, was dragged most reluctantly from function to function, from palace to purlieu, from theatre to cathedral, from Coney Island to Newport. She was "havin' a rotten time."

All day long she had nothing to look at but an overdressed and alien race whose voices distressed her; day after day she had nothing to say except, "How d'y do," and "Mother, shall we have tea?" Week after week she had nothing to think of except the bare, unkempt ugliness of the cities she saw; the

raw waste and sordid uglification of what once had been matchless natural resources; dirty rivers, ruined woodlands, flimsy buildings, ignorant architecture. The ostentatious and wretched hotels depressed her; the poor railroads and bad manners disgusted her.

Listless, uninterested, Britishly enduring what she could not escape, the little Lady Alene had made not the slightest effort to mitigate the circumstances of her temporary fate. She was civilly incurious concerning the people she met; their social customs, amusements, pastimes, duties, various species of business or of leisure interested her not a whit. All the men looked alike to her; all the women were over-gowned, tiresomely pretty, and might learn one day how to behave themselves after they had found out how to make their voices behave.

Meanwhile, requiring summer clothing—tweeds and shooting boots being not what the climate seemed to require in July—she discovered with languid surprise that for the first time in her limited life she was well gowned. A few moments afterward another surprise faintly thrilled her, for, chancing to glance at herself after a Yankee hairdresser had finished her hair, she discovered to her astonishment that she was pretty.

For several days this fact preyed upon her mind, alternately troubling and fascinating her. There were several men at home who would certainly sit up; Willowmere among others.

As for considering her newly discovered beauty any advantage in America, the idea had not entered her mind. Why should it? All the men looked alike; all wore sleek hair, hats on the backs of their heads, clothing that fitted like a coster's trousers. She had absolutely no use for them, and properly.

However, she continued to cultivate her beauty and to adorn it with Yankee clothing and headgear befitting; which filled up considerable time during the day, leaving her fewer empty hours to fill with tea and three-volumed novels from the British Isles.

Now, it had never occurred to the Lady Alene Innesly to read anything except British fact and fiction. She had never been sufficiently interested even to open an American book. Why should she, as long as the three props of her national literature endured intact—curates, tea, and thoroughbred horses?

But there came a time during the ensuing winter when the last of the three-volumed novels had been assimilated, the last serious tome digested; and there stretched out before her a bookless prospect which presently began to dismay her with the aridness of its perspective.

The catastrophe occurred while the Ducal party was investigating the strange folk-customs of those Americans who gathered during the winter in gigantic Florida hotels and lived there, uncomfortably lodged, vilely fed, and shamelessly robbed, while third-rate orchestras play cabaret music and

enervating breezes stir the cabbage-palmettos till they rustle like bath-room rubber plants.

It was a bad place and a bad time of year for a young and British girl to be deprived of her native and soporific fiction; for the livelier and Frenchier of British novelists were self-denied her, because somebody had said they were not unlike Americans.

Now she was, in the uncouth vernacular of the country, up against it for fair! She didn't know what it was called, but she realised how it felt to be against something.

Three days she endured it, dozing in her room, half awake when the sea-breeze rattled the Venetian blinds, or the niggers were noisy at baseball.

On the fourth day she arose, went to the window, gazed disgustedly out over the tawdry villas of Verbena Inlet, then rang for her maid.

"Bunn," she said, "here are three sovereigns. You will please buy for me one specimen of every book on sale in the corridor of this hotel. And, Bunn!——"

"Yes, my lady."

"What was it you were eating the other day?"

"Chewing-gum, my lady."

"Is it—agreeable?"

"Yes, my lady."

"Is it nourishing?"

"No, my lady. It is not intended to be eaten; it is to be chewed."

"Then one does not swallow it when one supposes it to be sufficiently masticated?"

"No, my lady."

"What does one do with it?"

"Beg pardon, my lady—one spits it out."

"Ow," said the girl.

VIII

She was lying on the bed when a relay of servants staggered in bearing gaudy piles of the most recent and popular novels, and placed them in tottering profusion upon the adjacent furniture.

The Lady Alene turned her head where it lay lazily pillowed on her left arm,

and glanced indifferently at the multi-coloured battlement of books. The majority of the covers were embellished with the heads of young women, all endowed with vaudeville-like beauty—it having been discovered by intelligent publishers that a girl's head on any book sells it.

On some covers were displayed coloured pictures of handsome and athletic American young men, usually kissing beautiful young ladies who wore crowns, ermines, and foreign orders over dinner dresses. Sometimes, however, they were kicking Kings. That seemed rather odd to the Lady Alene, and she sat up on the bed and reached out her hand. It encountered a book on which rested a small, oblong package. She took book and package. On the pink wrapper of the latter she read this verse:

Why are my teeth so white and bright? Because I chew with all my might
The gum that fills me with delight And keeps me healthy day and night. Five cents.

The Lady Alene's unaccustomed fingers became occupied with the pink wrapper. Presently she withdrew from it a thin and brittle object, examined it, and gravely placed it in her mouth.

For a while the perplexed and apprehensive expression remained upon her face, but it faded gradually, and after a few minutes her lovely features settled into an expression resembling contentment. And, delicately, discreetly, at leisurely intervals, her fresh, sweet lips moved as though she were murmuring a prayer.

All that afternoon she perused the first American novel she had ever read. And the cumulative effect of the fiction upon her literal mind was amazing as she turned page after page, and, gradually gathering mental and nervous speed, dashed from one chapter, bang! into another, only to be occultly adjured to "take the car ahead"—which she now did quite naturally, and on the run.

Never, never had she imagined such things could be! Always heretofore, to her, fiction had been a strict reflection of actuality in which a dull imagination was licensed to walk about if it kept off the grass. And it always did in the only novels to which she had been accustomed.

But good heavens! Here was a realism at work in these pages so astonishing yet so convincing, so subtle yet so natural, so matter of fact yet so astoundingly new to her that the book she was reading was already changing the entire complexion of the Yankee continent for her.

It had to do with a young, penniless, and athletic American who went to Europe, tipped a king off his throne, pushed a few dukes, counts, and barons out of the way, reorganized the army, and went home taking with him a beautiful and exclusive princess with honest intentions.

The inhabitants of several villages wept at his departure; the abashed nobility

made unsuccessful attempts to shoot him; otherwise the trip to the Cunard Line pier was uneventful, and diplomatic circles paid no attention to the incident.

When the Lady Alene finished the story her oval face ached; but this was no time to consider aches. So with a charming abandon she relieved her pretty teeth of the morceau, replaced it with another, helped herself to a second novel, settled back on her pillow, and opened the enchanted pages.

And zip! Instantly she became acquainted with another athletic and penniless American who was raising the devil in the Balkans.

Never in her life had she dreamed that any nation contained such fearless, fascinating, resourceful, epigrammatic, and desirable young men! And here she was in the very midst of them, and never had realised it until now.

Where were they? All around her, no doubt. When, a few days later, she had read some baker's dozen novels, and in each one of them had discovered similar athletic, penniless, and omniscient American young men, her opinion was confirmed, and she could no longer doubt that, like the fiction of her own country, the romances of American novelists must have a substantial foundation in solid fact.

There could be no use in quibbling. The situation had become exciting. Her youthful imagination was now fired; her Saxon blood thoroughly stirred. She knew perfectly well that there were in her own country no young men like these she had read about—not a man-jack among them who would ever dream of dashing about the world cuffing the ears of reprehensible monarchs, meting out condign punishment to refractory nobility, reconstructing governments and states and armies, and escaping with a princess every time.

Not that she actually believed that such episodes were of common occurrence. Young as she was she knew better. But somehow it seemed very clear to her that a race of writers who were so unanimous on the subject and a nation which so complacently read of these events without denying their plausibility, must within itself harbour germs and seeds of romance and reckless deeds which no doubt had produced a number of young men thoroughly capable of doing a few of the exciting things she had read about.

Now she regretted she had not noticed the men she had met; now she was indeed sorry she had not at least taken pains to learn to distinguish them one from the other. She wished that she had investigated this reckless, chivalrous, energetic, and distinguishing trait of the American young man.

It seemed odd, too, that Pa-pa had never investigated it; that Ma-ma had never appeared to notice it.

She mentioned it at dinner carelessly, in the midst of a natural and British

silence. Neither parent enlightened her. One said, "Fancy!" And the other said, "Ow."

And so, as both parents departed the following morning to investigate the tarpon fishing at Miami, the little Lady Alene made private preparations to investigate and closely observe the astonishing, reckless, and romantic tendencies of the American young man. Her tour of discovery she scheduled for five o'clock that afternoon.

Just how these investigations were to be accomplished she did not see very clearly. She had carefully refrained from knowing anybody in the hotel. So how to go about it she did not know; but she knew enough after luncheon to have her hair done by somebody besides her maid, selected the most American gown in her repertoire, took a sunshade hitherto disdained, and glanced in the mirror at a picture in white, with gold hair, violet eyes, and a skin of snow and roses.

Further she did not know how to equip herself, except by going out doors at five o'clock. And at five o'clock she went.

From the tennis courts young men and girls looked at her. On the golf links youth turned to observe her slim and dainty progress. She was stared at from porch and veranda, from dock and deck, from garden and walk and orange grove and hedge of scarlet hibiscus.

From every shop window in the village, folk looked out at her; from automobile, wheeled chair, bicycle, and horse-drawn vehicle she was inspected. But she knew nobody; not one bright nod greeted her; not one straw hat was lifted; not one nigger grinned. She knew nobody. And, alas! everybody knew her. A cold wave seemed to have settled over Verbena Inlet.

Yet her father was not unpopular, nor was her mother either; and although they asked too many questions, their perfectly impersonal and scientific mission in Verbena Inlet was understood.

But the Lady Alene Innesly was not understood, although her indifference was noted and her exclusiveness amusedly resented. However, nobody interfered with her or her seclusion. The fact that she desired to know nobody had been very quickly accepted. Youth and the world at Verbena Inlet went on without her; the sun continued to rise and set as usual; and the nigger waiters played baseball.

She stood watching them now for a few minutes, her parasol tilted over her lovely shoulders. Tiring of this, she sauntered on, having not the slightest idea where she was going, but very calmly she made up her mind to speak to the first agreeable looking young man she encountered, as none of them seemed at all inclined to speak to her.

Under her arm she had tucked a novel written by one Smith. She had read it half through. The story concerned a young and athletic and penniless man from Michigan and a Balkan Princess. She had read as far as the first love scene. The young man from Michigan was still kissing the Princess when she left off reading. And her imagination was still on fire.

She had wandered down to the lagoon without finding anybody sufficiently attractive to speak to. The water was blue and pretty and very inviting. So she hired a motor-boat, seated herself in the stern, and dabbled her fingers in the water as the engineer took her whizzing across the lagoon and out into the azure waste, headed straight for the distant silvery inlet.

IX

She read, gazed at the gulls and wild ducks, placed a bit of gum between her rose-leaf lips, read a little, glanced up to mark the majestic flight of eight pelicans, sighed discreetly, savoured the gum, deposited it in a cunning corner adjacent to her left and snowy cheek, and spoke to the boatman.

"Did you ever read this book?" she asked.

"Me! No, ma'am."

"It is very interesting. Do you read much?"

"No, ma'am."

"This is a very extraordinary book," she said. "I strongly advise you to read it."

The boatman glanced ironically at the scarlet bound volume which bore the portrait of a pretty girl on its covers.

"Is it that book by John Smith they're sellin' so many of down to the hotel?" he inquired slowly.

"I believe it was written by one Smith," she said, turning over the volume to look. "Yes, John Smith is the author's name. No doubt he is very famous in America."

"He lives down here in winter."

"Really!" she exclaimed with considerable animation.

"Oh, yes. I take him shooting and fishing. He has a shack on the Inlet Point."

"Where?"

"Over there, where them gulls is flying."

The girl looked earnestly at the point. All she saw were snowy dunes and wild grasses and seabirds whirling.

"He writes them books over there," remarked the boatman.

"How extremely interesting!"

"They say he makes a world o' money by it. He's rich as mud."

"Really!"

"Yaas'm. I often seen him a settin' onto a camp chair out beyond them dunes a-writing pieces like billy-bedam. Yes'm."

"Do you think he is there now?" she asked with a slight catch in her breath.

"Well, we kin soon find out——" He swung the tiller; the little boat rushed in a seething circle toward the point, veered westward, then south.

"Yaas'm," said the boatman presently. "Mr. Smith he's reclinin' out there onto his stummick. I guess he's just a thinkin'. He thinks more'n five million niggers, he does. Gor-a-mighty! I never see such a man for thinkin'! He jest lies onto his stummick an' studies an' ruminates like billy-bedam. Yaas'm. Would you want I should land you so's you can take a peek at him?"

"Might I?"

"Sure, Miss. Go up over them dunes and take a peek at him. He won't mind. Ten to nothin' he won't even see ye."

There was a little dock built of coquina. A power boat, a sloop, several row-boats, and a canoe lay there, riding the little, limpid, azure-tinted wavelets. Under their keels swam gar-pike, their fins and backs also shimmering with blue and turquoise green.

Lady Alene rose; her boatman aided her, and she sprang lightly to the coquina dock and walked straight over the low dune in front of her.

There was nothing whatever in sight except beach-grapes and scrubby tufts of palmetto, and flocks of grey, long-legged, long-billed birds running to avoid her. But they did not run very fast or very far, and she saw them at a little distance loitering, with many a bright and apparently friendly glance at her.

There was another dune in front. She mounted it. Straight ahead of her, perhaps half a mile distant, stood a whitewashed bungalow under a cluster of palms and palmettos.

From where she stood she could see a cove—merely a tiny crescent of sand edged by a thin blade of cobalt water, and curtained by the palmetto forest. And on this little crescent beach, in the shade of the palms, a young man lay at full length, very intent upon his occupation, which was, apparently, to dig holes in the sand with a child's toy shovel.

He was clad in white flannels; beside him she noticed a red tin pail, such as children use for gathering shells. Near this stood two camp-chairs, one of

which was piled with pads of yellow paper and a few books. She thought his legs very eloquent. Sometimes they lay in picturesque repose, crossed behind him; at other moments they waved in the air or sprawled widely, appearing to express the varying emotions which possessed his deep absorption in the occult task under his nose.

"Now, what in the world can he be doing?" thought Lady Alene Innesly, watching him. And she remained motionless on top of the dune for ten minutes to find out. He continued to sprawl and dig holes in the sand.

Learning nothing, and her interest increasing inversely, she began to walk toward him. It was her disposition to investigate whatever interested her. Already she was conscious of a deep interest in his legs.

From time to time low dunes intervened to hide the little cove, but always when she crossed them, pushing her way through fragrant thickets of sweet bay and sparkle-berry shrub, cove and occupant came into view again. And his legs continued to wave. The nearer she drew the less she comprehended the nature of his occupation, and the more she decided to find out what he could be about, lying there flat on his stomach and digging and patting the sand.

Also her naturally calm and British heart was beating irregularly and fast, because she realised the fact that she was approaching the vicinity of one of those American young men who did things in books that she never dreamed could be done anywhere. Nay—under her arm was a novel written by this very man, in which the hero was still kissing a Balkan Princess, page 169. And it occurred to her vaguely that her own good taste and modesty ought to make an end of such a situation; and that she ought to finish the page quickly and turn to the next chapter to relieve the pressure on the Princess.

Confused a trifle by a haunting sense of her own responsibility, by the actual imminence of such an author, and by her intense curiosity concerning what he was now doing, she walked across the dunes down through little valleys all golden with the flowers of a flat, spreading vine. The blossoms were larger and lovelier than the largest golden portulacca, but she scarcely noticed their beauty as she resolutely approached the cove, moving forward under the cool shadow of the border forest.

He did not seem to be aware of her approach, even when she came up and stood by the camp-chairs, parasol tilted, looking down at him with grave, lilac-blue eyes.

But she did not look at him as much as she gazed at what he was doing. And what he was doing appeared perfectly clear to her now.

With the aid of his toy shovel, his little red pail, and several assorted shells, he had constructed out of sand a walled city. Houses, streets, squares, market place, covered ways, curtain, keep, tower, turret, crenelated battlement, all

were there. A driftwood drawbridge bridged the moat, guarded by lead soldiers in Boznovian uniform.

And lead soldiers were everywhere in the miniature city; the keep bristled with their bayonets; squads of them marched through street and square; they sat at dinner in the market place; their cannon winked and blinked in the westering sun on every battlement.

And after a little while she discovered two lead figures which were not military; a civilian wearing a bowler hat; a feminine figure wearing a crown and ermines. The one stood on the edge of the moat outside the drawbridge: the other, in crown and ermines, was apparently observing him of the bowler hat from the top of a soldier-infested tower.

It was plain enough to her now. This amazing young man was working out in concrete detail some incident of an unwritten novel. And the magnificent realism of it fascinated the Lady Alene. Genius only possesses such a capacity for detail.

"The magnificent realism of it fascinated the Lady Alene."

Without even arousing young Smith from his absorbed preoccupation, she seated herself on the unincumbered camp-chair, laid her book on her knees, rested both elbows on it, propped her chin on both clasped hands, and watched the proceedings.

The lead figure in the bowler hat seemed to be in a bad way. Several dozen Boznovian soldiers were aiming an assortment of firearms at him; cavalry were coming at a gallop, too, not to mention a three-gun battery on a dead run.

The problem seemed to be how, in the face of such a situation, was the lead gentleman in the bowler hat to get away, much less penetrate the city?

Flight seemed hopeless, but presently Smith picked him up, marched him along the edge of the moat, and gave him a shove into it.

"He's swimming," said Smith, aloud to himself. "Bang! Bang! But they don't hit him.... Yes, they do; they graze his shoulder. It is the only wound possible to polite fiction. There is consequently a streak of red in the water. Bang—bang—bang! Crack—crack! The cavalry empty their pistols. Boom! A field piece opens—— Where the devil is that battery——"

Smith reached over, drew horses, cannoniers, gun and caisson over the drawbridge, galloped them along the moat, halted, unlimbered, trained the guns on the bowler hatted swimmer, and remarked, "Boom!"

"The shell," he murmured with satisfaction, "missed him and blew up in the casemates. Did it kill anybody? No; that interferes with the action.... He dives, swims under water to an ancient drain." Smith stuck a peg where the supposed drain emptied into the moat.

"That drain," continued Smith thoughtfully, "connects with the royal residence.... Where's that Princess? Can she see him dive into it? Or does she merely suspect he is making for it? Or—or—doesn't she know anything about it?"

"She doesn't know anything about it!" exclaimed Lady Alene Innesly. The tint of excitement glowed in her cheeks. Her lilac-tinted eyes burned with a soft, blue fire.

X

Slowly as a partly paralysed crab, Smith raised himself to a sitting posture and looked over his shoulder into the loveliest face that he had ever beheld, except on the paper wrappers of his own books.

"I'm sorry," said the Lady Alene. "Shouldn't I have spoken?"

The smoke and turmoil of battle still confused Smith's brain; visualisation of wall and tower and crowns and ermines made the Lady Alene's fresh, wholesome beauty very unreal to him for a moment or two.

When his eyes found their focus and his mind returned to actuality, he climbed to his feet, hat in hand, and made his manners to her. Then, tumbling books and pads from the other camp-chair, he reseated himself with a half smiling, half shamed glance at her, and a "May I?" to which she responded, "Please! And might I talk to you for a few moments?"

Smith shot a keen glance at the book on her knees. Resignation and pride altered his features, but when again he looked at the Lady Alene he experienced a pleasure in his resignation which hitherto no curious tourist, no enterprising reporter had ever aroused. Smilingly he composed himself for the impending interview.

"Until now," said the girl earnestly, "I think I have not been entirely convinced by your novels. Somehow or other I could not bring myself to comprehend the amazing realism of your plots. But now I understand the basis of great and fundamental truth on which you build so plausibly your splendid novels of love and life."

"What?" said Smith.

"To see you," she continued, "constructing the scenes of which later you are to write, has been a wonderful revelation to me. It has been a privilege the importance of which I can scarcely estimate. Your devotion to the details of your art, your endless patience, your almost austere absorption in truth and realism, have not only astounded me but have entirely convinced me. The

greatest thing in the world is Truth. Now I realise it!"

She made a pretty gesture of enthusiasm:

"What a wonderful nation of young men is yours, Mr. Smith! What qualities! What fearlessness—initiative—idealism—daring—! What invention, what recklessness, what romance——"

Her voice failed her; she sat with lips parted, a soft glow in her cheeks, gazing upon Smith with fascinated eyes. And Smith gazed back at her without a word.

"I don't believe," she said, "that in all England there exists a single man capable even of conceiving the career for which so many young Americans seem to be equipped."

After a moment Smith said very quietly:

"I am sorry, but do you know I don't quite understand you?"

"I mean," she said, "that you Americans have a capacity for conceiving, understanding, and performing everything you write about."

"Why do you think so?" asked Smith, a trifle red.

"Because if Englishmen could understand and do such things, our novelists would write about them. They never write about them. But you Americans do. You write thousands of most delightful novels about young men who do things unheard of, undreamed of, in England. Therefore, it is very clear to me that you Americans are quite capable of doing what you write about, and what your readers so ardently admire."

"I see," said Smith calmly. His ear-tips still burned.

"No doubt," said the girl, "many of the astonishing things you Americans write about are really done. Many astounding episodes in fiction are of not uncommon occurrence in real life."

"What kind of episodes?" asked Smith gravely.

"Why, any of them you write about. They all are astonishing enough. For example, your young men do not seem to know what fear is."

"No," said Smith, "they don't."

"And when they love," said the girl, "nothing can stop them."

"Nothing."

"Nothing!" she repeated, the soft glow coming into her cheeks again. "—Nothing! Neither rank nor wealth nor political considerations nor family prejudices, nor even the military!"

Smith bit his lip in silence. He had heard of irony; never had he dreamed it

could be so crushing: he had heard of sarcasm; but the quiet sarcasm of this unknown young girl was annihilating him. Critics had carved him in his time; but the fine mincemeat which this pretty stranger was making of him promised to leave nothing more either to carve or to roast.

"Do you mind my talking to you?" she asked, noting the strained expression of his features.

"No," he said, "go ahead."

"Because if I am tiring you——"

He said he was not tired.

"—or if it bores you to discuss your art with a foreigner who so truly admires it——"

He shot a glance at her, then forced a laugh.

"I am not offended," he said. "What paper do you represent?"

"I?" she said, bewildered.

"Yes. You are a newspaper woman, are you not?"

"Do you mean a reporter?"

"Naturally."

"No," she said very seriously, "I am not a reporter. What an odd idea!"

"Do you think it odd?"

"Why, yes. Do not many admirers of your works express their pleasure in them to you?"

He studied her lovely face coolly and in detail—the dainty arch of the questioning eyebrows, the sensitive curve of the mouth, the clear, sweet eyes. Could it be possible that such candour masked irony? Could all this be the very essence of the art of acting, concealing the most murderous sarcasm ever dreamed of by a terrified author?

And suddenly his face went red all over, and he understood that the essence of this young girl was a candour so utterly free of self-consciousness—a frankness so absolutely truthful, that the simplicity of her had been a miracle too exquisite for him to comprehend.

"You do like what I write!" he exclaimed.

Her blue eyes widened: "Of course I do," she said, amazed. "Didn't you understand me?"

"No," he said, cooling his burning face in the rising sea-wind. "I thought you were laughing at me."

"I'm sorry if I was stupid," she said.

"I was stupid."

"You!" She laughed a little.

The sinking sun peered through the palm forest behind them and flung a beam of blinding light at her.

"Am I interrupting your work, Mr. Smith? I mean, I know I am, but——"

"Please don't go away."

"Thank you.... I have noticed what agreeable manners you Americans have in novels. Naturally you are even more kindly and polite in real life."

"Have you met many Americans?"

"No, only you. In the beginning I did not feel interested in Americans."

"Why?"

"The young men all seemed to resemble one another," she said frankly, "like Chinese. But now that I really know an American I am intensely interested."

"You notice no Mongolian monotony in me?" he inquired gravely.

"Oh, no——" She coloured; then discovering that he was laughing, she laughed, too, rather faintly.

"That was a joke, wasn't it?" she said.

"Yes, that was a joke."

"Because," she said, "there is no Mongolian uniformity about you. On the contrary, you remind me in every way of one of your own heroes."

"Oh, really now!" he protested; but she insisted with serious enthusiasm.

"You are the counterpart of the hero in this book," she repeated, resting one hand lightly on the volume under her elbow. "You wear white flannels, you are tall, well built, straight, with very regular features and a fasci—— a smile," she corrected herself calmly, "which one naturally associates with your features."

"Also," she continued, "your voice is cultivated and modulated with just enough of the American accent to make it piquantly agreeable. And what you say is fasci—— is well expressed and interesting. Therefore, as I have said, to me you resemble one of your own heroes."

There was enough hot colour in his face to make it boyishly bashful.

"And you appear to be as modest as one of your own heroes," she added, studying him. "That is truly delightful."

"But really, I am nothing like any of my heroes," he explained, terribly embarrassed.

"Why do you say that, Mr. Smith?"

"Because it's true. I don't even resemble 'em superficially."

She made a quick, graceful gesture: "Why do you say that, when here you are before me, the exact and exciting counterpart of the reckless and fasci—— the reckless and interesting men you write about?"

He said nothing. She closed the parasol and considered him in silence for a moment or two. Then:

"And I have no doubt that you are capable of doing the very things that your heroes do so adroitly and so charmingly."

"What, for example?" he asked, reddening to his temples.

"Reconstructing armies, for instance."

"Filibustering?"

"Is that what it is called?"

"It's called that in the countries south of the United States."

"Well, would you not be capable of overturning a government and of reconstructing the army, Mr. Smith?"

"Capable?"

"Yes."

"Well," he said cautiously, "if it was the thing I wanted to do, perhaps I might have a try at it."

"I knew it," she exclaimed triumphantly.

"But," he explained, "I never desired to overturn any government."

"You probably have never seen any that you thought worth while overturning."

Her confident rejoinder perplexed him and he remained silent.

"Also," she continued, still more confidently, "I am certain that if you were in love, no obstacles would prove too great for you to surmount. Would they?"

"Really," he said, "I don't know. I'm not very enterprising."

"That is the answer of a delightfully modest man. Your own hero would return me such an answer, Mr. Smith. But I—and your heroine also—understand you—I mean your hero."

"Do you?" he asked gravely.

"Certainly. I, as well as your heroine, understand that no obstacles could check you if you loved her—neither political considerations, diplomatic exigencies, family prejudices, nor her own rank, no matter what it might be. Is not that true?"

Eager, enthusiastic, impersonally but warmly interested, she leaned a little toward him, intent on his reply.

He looked into the lovely, flushed face in silence for a while. Then:

"Yes," he said, "it is true. If I loved, nothing could check me except——" he shrugged.

"Death?" She nodded, fascinated.

He nodded. He had meant to say the police.

She said exultantly: "I knew it, Mr. Smith! I was certain that you are the living embodiment of your own heroes! The moment I set eyes on you playing in the sand with your lead soldiers, I was sure of it!"

Thrilled, she considered him, her soft eyes brilliant with undisguised admiration.

"I wish I could actually see it!" she said under her breath.

"See what?"

"See you, in real life, as one of your own heroes—doing some of the things they do so cleverly, so winningly—careless of convention, reckless of consequences, oblivious to all considerations except only the affair in hand. That," she said excitedly, "would be glorious, and well worth a trip to the States!"

"How far," he asked, "have you read in that book of mine?"

"In this book?" She opened it, impulsively, ran over the pages, hesitated, stopped.

"He was—was kissing the Balkan Princess," she said. "I left them—in statu quo."

"I see.... Did he do that well?"

"I—suppose so."

"Have you no opinion?"

"I think he did it—very—thoroughly, Mr. Smith."

"It ought to be done thoroughly if done at all," he said reflectively.

"Otherwise," she nodded, "it would be offensive."

"To the reader?"

"To her, too. Wouldn't it?"

"You know better than I."

"No, I don't know. A nice girl can not imagine herself being kissed—except under very extraordinary circumstances, and by a very extraordinary man....

Such a man as you have drawn in this book."

"Had you been that Balkan Princess, what would you have done?" he asked, rather pale.

"I?" she said, startled.

"Yes, you."

She sat considering, blue eyes lost in candid reverie. Then the faintest smile curved her lips; she looked up at Smith with winning simplicity.

"In your story, Mr. Smith, does the Balkan Princess return his kiss?"

"Not in that chapter."

"I think I would have returned it—in that—chapter." Then, for the first time, she blushed.

The naïve avowal set the heart and intellect of Mr. Smith afire. But he only dropped his well-shaped head and didn't look at her. Which was rather nice of him.

"Romance," he said after a moment or two, "is all well enough. But real life is stranger than fiction."

"Not in the British Isles," she said with decision. "It is tea and curates and kennels and stables—as our writers depict it."

"No, you are mistaken! Everywhere it is stranger than fiction," he insisted—"more surprising, more charming, more wonderful. Even here in America—here in Florida—here on this tiny point of sand jutting into the Atlantic, life is more beautiful, more miraculous than any fiction ever written."

"Why do you say that?" she asked.

"I am afraid I can't tell you why I say it."

"Why can't you tell me?"

"Only in books could what I might have to tell you be logically told—and listened to——"

"Only in books? But books in America reflect actual life," she said. "Therefore, you can tell me what you have to tell. Can't you?"

"Can I?" he asked.

"Yes...." Far in the inmost recesses of her calm and maiden heart something stirred, and her breath ceased for a second.... Innocent, not comprehending why her breath missed, she looked at him with the question still in her blue eyes.

"Shall I tell you why real life is stranger than fiction?" he asked unsteadily.

"Tell me—yes—if——"

"It is stranger," he said, "because it is often more headlong and romantic. Shall we take ourselves, for example?"

"You and me?"

"Yes. To illustrate what I mean."

She inclined her head, her eyes fixed on his.

"Very well," he said. "Even in the most skillfully constructed story—supposing that you and I were hero and heroine—no author would have the impudence to make us avow our love within a few minutes of our first meeting."

"No," she said.

"In the first chapter," he continued, "certain known methods of construction are usually followed. Time is essential—the lapse of time. How to handle it cleverly is a novelist's business. But even the most skillful novelist would scarcely dare make me, for example, tell you that I am in love with you. Would he?"

"No," she said.

"And in real life, even if a man does fall in love so suddenly, he does not usually say so, does he?" he asked.

"No," she said.

"But he does fall in love sometimes more suddenly than in fiction. And occasionally he declares himself. In real life this actually happens. And that is stranger than any fiction. Isn't it?"

"Yes," she said.

"One kind of fiction," he continued very unsteadily, "is that in which, when he falls in love—he doesn't say so—I mean in such a case as ours—supposing I had already fallen in love with you. I could not say so to you. No man could say it to any girl. He remains mute. He observes very formally every convention. He smiles, hat in hand, as the girl passes out of his life forever.... Doesn't he? And that is one kind of fiction—the tragic kind."

She had been looking down at the book in her lap. After a moment she lifted her troubled eyes to his.

"I do—not know what men do—in real life," she said. "What would they do in the—other kind of fiction?"

"In the other kind of fiction there would be another chapter."

"Yes.... You mean that for us there is only this one chapter."

"Only one chapter."

"Or—might it not be called a short story, Mr. Smith?"

"Yes—one kind of short story."

"Which kind?"

"The kind that ends unhappily."

"But this one is not going to end unhappily, is it?"

"You are about to walk out of the story when it ends."

"Yes—but——" She bit her lip, flushed and perplexed, already dreadfully confused between the personal and the impersonal—between fact and fancy.

"You see," he said, "the short story which deals with—love—can end only as ours is going to end—or the contrary."

"How is ours going to end?" she asked with candid curiosity.

"It must be constructed very carefully," he said, "because this is realism."

"You must be very skillful, too," she said. "I do not see how you are to avoid ——"

"What?"

"A—an—unhappy—ending."

He looked gravely at his sand castle. "No," he said, "I don't see how it can be avoided."

After a long silence she murmured, half to herself:

"Still, this is America—after all."

He shrugged, still studying his sand castle.

"I wish I had somebody to help me work it out," he said, half to himself.

"A collaborator?"

"Yes."

"I'm so sorry that I could not be useful."

"Would you try?"

"What is the use? I am utterly unskilled and inexperienced."

"I'd be very glad to have you try," he repeated.

XI

After a moment she rose, went over and knelt down in the sand before the miniature city, studying the situation. All she could see of the lead hero in the

bowler hat were his legs protruding from the drain.

"Is this battery of artillery still shelling him?" she inquired, looking over her shoulder at Smith.

He went over and dropped on his knees beside her.

"You see," he explained, "our hero is still under water."

"All this time!" she exclaimed in consternation. "He'll drown, won't he?"

"He'll drown unless he can crawl into that drain."

"Then he must crawl into it immediately," she said with decision.

So he of the bowler was marched along a series of pegs indicating the subterranean drain, and set down in the court of the castle.

"Good heavens!" exclaimed the Lady Alene. "We can't leave him here! They will know him by his bowler hat!"

"No," said Smith gloomily, "we can't leave him here. But what can we do? If he runs out they'll fire at him by platoons."

"Couldn't they miss him?" pleaded the girl.

"I'm afraid not. He has already lived through several showers of bullets."

"But he can't die here!—here under the very eyes of the Princess!" she insisted.

"Then," said Smith, "the Princess will have to pull him through. It's up to her now."

The girl knelt there in excited silence, studying the problem intently.

It was bad business. The battlements bristled with bayonets; outside, cavalry, infantry, artillery were massed to destroy the gentleman in the bowler hat.

Presently the flush deepened on the girl's cheeks; she took the bowler hat between her gloved fingers and set its owner in the middle of the moat again.

"Doesn't he crawl into the drain?" asked Smith anxiously.

"No. But the soldiers in the castle think he does. So," she continued with animation, "the brutal commander rushes downstairs, seizes a candle, and enters the drain from the castle court with about a thousand soldiers!"

"But——"

"With about ten thousand soldiers!" she repeated firmly. "And no sooner—no sooner—does their brutal and cowardly commander enter that drain with his lighted candle than the Princess runs downstairs, seizes a hatchet, severs the gas main with a single blow, and pokes the end of the pipe into the drain!"

"B-but——" stammered Smith, "I think——"

"Oh, please wait! You don't understand what is coming."

"What is coming?" ventured Smith timidly, instinctively closing both ears with his fingers.

"Bang!" said Lady Alene triumphantly. And struck the city of sand with her small, gloved hand.

After a silence, still kneeling there, they turned and looked at each other through the red sunset light.

"The explosion of gas killed them both," said Smith, in an awed voice.

"No."

"What?"

"No. The explosion killed everybody in the city except those two young lovers," she said.

"But why?"

"Because!"

"By what logic——"

"I desire it to be so, Mr. Smith." And she picked up the bowler hat and the Princess and calmly set them side by side amid the ruins.

After a moment Smith reached over and turned the two lead figures so that they faced each other.

There was a long silence. The red sunset light faded from the sand.

Then, very slowly, the girl reached out, took the bowler hat between her small thumb and forefinger, and gently inclined the gentleman forward at the slightest of perceptible angles.

After a moment Smith inclined him still farther forward. Then, with infinite precaution, he tipped forward the Princess, so that between her lips and the lips of the bowler hat only the width of a grass blade remained.

The Lady Alene looked up at him over her left shoulder, hesitated, looked at bowler hat and at the Princess. Then, supporting her weight on one hand, with the other she merely touched the Princess—delicately—so that not even a blade of grass could have been slipped between their painted lips.

She was a trifle pale as she sank back on her knees in the sand. Smith was paler.

After both her gloved hands had rested across his palm for five full minutes, his fingers closed over them, tightly, and he leaned forward a little. She, too, swayed forward a trifle. Her eyes were closed when he kissed her.

Now, whatever misgivings and afterthoughts the Lady Alene Innesly may

have had, she was nevertheless certain that to resist Smith was to fight against the stars in their courses. For not only was she in the toils of an American, but more hopeless still, an American who chronicled the most daring and headlong idiosyncrasies of the sort of young men of whom he was very certainly an irresistible example.

To her there was something Shakespearean about the relentless sequence of events since the moment when she had first succumbed to the small, oblong pink package, and her first American novel.

And, thinking Shakespeareanly as she stood in the purple evening light, with his arm clasping her waist, she looked up at him from her charming abstraction:

"If 'twere done," she murmured, "when 'tis done, then 'twere well it were done quickly." And then, gazing deep into his eyes, a noble idiom of her adopted country fell from her lips:

"Dearest," she said, "my father won't do a thing to you."

And so she ran away with him to Miami where the authorities, civil and religious, are accustomed to quick action.

It was only fifty miles by train, and preliminary telephoning did the rest.

The big chartered launch that left for Verbena Inlet next morning poked its nose out of the rainbow mist into the full glory of the rising sun. Her golden head lay on his shoulder.

Sideways, with delicious indolence, she glanced at a small boat which they were passing close aboard. A fat gentleman, a fat lady, and a boatman occupied the boat. The fat gentleman was fast to a tarpon.

Up out of the dazzling Atlantic shot three hundred pounds of quivering silver. Splash!

"Why, Dad!" exclaimed the girl.

Her father and mother looked over their shoulders at her in wooden amazement.

"We are married——" called out their pretty daughter across the sunlit water. "I will tell you all about it when you land your fish. Look sharp, Dad! Mind your reel!"

"Who is that damned rascal?" demanded the Duke.

"My husband, Dad! Don't let him get away!—the fish, I mean. Put the drag on! Check!"

Said his Grace of Pillchester in a voice of mellow thunder:

"If I were not fast to my first tarpon——"

"Reel in!" cried Smith sharply, "reel or you lose him!"

The Duke reeled with all the abandon of a squirrel in a wheel.

"Dearest," said Mrs. John Smith to her petrified mother, "we will see you soon at Verbena. And don't let Dad over-play that fish. He always over-plays a salmon, you know."

The Duchess folded her fat hands and watched her departing offspring until the chartered launch was a speck on the horizon. Then she looked at her husband.

"Fancy!" she said.

"Nevertheless," remarked the youthful novelist, coldly, "there is nothing on earth as ignoble as a best-seller."

"I wonder," ventured Duane, "whether you know which books actually do sell the best."

"Or which books of bygone days were the best-sellers?"

"Some among them are still best-sellers," added Athalie.

"A truly important book——" began the novelist, but Athalie interrupted him:

"O solemn child," she said, "write on!—and thank the gods for their important gifts to you of hand and mind! So that you keep tired eyes awake that otherwise would droop to brood on pain or sorrow you have done well; and what you have written to this end will come nearer being important than anything you ever write."

"True, by the nine muses!" exclaimed Stafford with emphasis. Athalie glanced at him out of sweetly humorous eyes.

"There is a tenth muse," she said. "Did you never hear of her?"

"Never! Where did you discover her, Athalie?"

"Where I discover many, many things, my friend."

"In your crystal?" I said. She nodded slowly while the sweetmeat was dissolving in her mouth.

Through the summer silence a bell here and there in the dusky city sounded the hour.

"The tenth muse," she repeated, "and I believe there are other sisters, also. Many a star is suspected before its unseen existence is proven.... Please—a glass of water?"

She sipped the water pensively as we all returned to our places. Then, placing the partly empty glass beside her jar of sweetmeats, she opened her incomparable lips.

It is a fine thing when a young man, born to travel the speedway of luxury, voluntarily leaves it to hew out a pathway for himself through life. Brown thought so, too. And at twenty-four he resolutely graduated from Harvard, stepped out into the world, and looked about him very sternly.

All was not well with the world. Brown knew it. He was there to correct whatever was wrong. And he had chosen Good Literature as the vehicle for self expression.

Now, the nine sister goddesses are born flirts; and every one of them immediately glanced sideways at Brown, who was a nice young man with modesty, principles, and a deep and reverent belief in Good Literature.

The nine daughters of Zeus and Mnemosyne seemed very attractive to him until the tenth and most recent addition to the Olympian family sauntered by with a flirt of her narrow skirt—the jade!

One glance into the starry blue wells of her baby eyes bowled him over. Henceforth she was to be his steady—Thalomene, a casual daughter of Zeus, and muse of all that is sacredly obvious in the literature of modern realism.

From early infancy Brown's had been a career of richest promise. His mother's desk was full of his earlier impressions of life. He had, in course of time, edited his school paper, his college paper; and, as an undergraduate, he had appeared in the contributor's columns of various periodicals.

His was not only a wealthy but a cultivated lineage as well. The love of literature was born in him.

To love literature is all right in its way; to love it too well is to mistake the appreciative for the creative genius. Reverence and devotion are no equipment for creative authorship. It is not enough to have something to say about what other people have said. And the inspiration which comes from what others have done is never the true one. But Brown didn't know these things. They were not revealed unto him at Harvard; no inward instinct made them plain to him.

He began by foregathering with authors. Many, many authors foregather, from various causes—tradition, inclination, general shiftlessness. When they do that they produce a sort of serum called literary atmosphere, which is said to be delightful. And so Brown found it. However, there are authors who seem to be too busy with their profession to foregather and exhale atmosphere. But these are doubtless either literary hacks or the degraded producers of best-sellers.

They are not authors, either; they are merely writers.

Now, in all the world there is only one thing funnier than an author; and that is a number of them. But Brown didn't know that, either.

All authors are reformers. Said one of them to Brown in the Empyrean Club:

"When an author in his own heart ceases to be a reformer he begins to be a menace!"

It was a fine sentiment, and Brown wrote it in his note-book. Afterward, the more he analyzed it the less it seemed to mean.

Another author informed him that the proper study for man is man. He'd heard that before, but the repetition steeled his resolve. And his resolve was to reproduce in literature exactly what he observed about him; nothing more, nothing less.

There was to be no concession to imagination, none to convention, none to that insidious form of human weakness known as good taste. As for art, Brown already knew what Art really was.

There was art enough for anybody in sheer truth, enough in the realism made up of photographic detail, recorded uncompromisingly in ordered processional sequence. After all, there was really no beauty in the world except the beauty of absolute truth. All other alleged beauty was only some form of weakness. Thus Brown, after inhaling literary atmosphere.

Like the majority of young men, Brown realised that only a man, and a perfectly fearless, honest, and unprejudiced one, was properly equipped to study woman and tell the entire truth about her in literature.

So he began his first great novel—"The Unquiet Sex"—and he made heavy weather of it that autumn—what with contributing to the literary atmosphere every afternoon and evening at various clubs and cafés—not to mention the social purlieus into which he ventured with the immortal lustre already phosphorescent on his brow. Which left him little time for mere writing. It is hard to be an author and a writer, too.

The proper study for man being woman, Brown studied her solemnly and earnestly. He studied his mother and his sisters, boring them to the verge of distraction; he attempted to dissect the motives which governed the behaviour of assorted feminine relatives, scaring several of the more aged and timorous, agitating others, and infuriating one or two—until his father ordered him to desist.

House-maids, parlour-maids, ladies'-maids, waitresses, all fought very shy of him; for true to his art, he had cast convention aside and had striven to fathom the souls and discover the hidden motives imbedded in Milesian, Scandinavian and Briton.

"The thing for me to do," said Brown rather bitterly to his father, "is to go out into the world and investigate far and wide."

"Investigate what?" asked his father.

"Woman!" said Brown sturdily.

"There's only one trouble about that."

"What's that?"

"Woman," said his father, "is likely to do the investigating. This household knows more about you than you do about it."

Brown smiled. So did his father.

"Son," said the latter, "what have you learned about women without knowing anything about them?"

"Nothing, naturally," said Brown.

"Then you will never have anything more than that to say about them," remarked Brown senior.

"Why not?"

"Because the only thing possible for a man to say about them is what his imagination dictates. He'll never learn any more concerning women than that."

"Imagination is not literature," said Brown junior, with polite toleration.

"Imagination is often the truer truth," said the old gentleman.

"Father, that is rot."

"Yes, my son—and it is almost Good Literature, too. Go ahead, shake us if you like. But, if you do, you'll come back married."

XIII

So Brown, who was nourishing a theory, shook his family and, requiring mental solitude to develop his idea, he went to Verbena Inlet. Not to the enormous and expensive caravansary swarming with wealth, ennui, envy, and fashion; not even to its sister hotel similarly infested. But to West Verbena, where for a mile along the white shell road modest hotels, boarding houses, and cottages nestled behind mosquito screens under the dingy cabbage-palmettos.

Here was stranded the winter driftwood from the North—that peculiar flotsam and jetsam which summered in similar resorts in the North, rocked in rocking chairs on dreary rural verandas, congregated at the village post-office, awaited

its men folk every week-end from the filthy and sweltering metropolis.

It was at a shabby but pretentious hostelry called the Villa Hibiscus that Brown took up his quarters. Several rusty cabbage-palmettos waved above the whitish, sandy soil surrounding it; one or two discouraged orange trees fruited despondently near the veranda. And the place swarmed with human beings from all over the United States, lured from inclement climes, into the land of the orange and the palm—wistfully seeking in the land of advertised perpetual sunshine what the restless world has never yet discovered anywhere—surcease from care, from longing, from the unkindliness of its fellow seekers.

Dowdiness filled the veranda rocking chairs; unlovely hands were folded; faded eyes gazed vacantly at the white road, at the oranges; enviously at the flashing wheels and fluttering lingerie from the great Hotel Verbena.

Womanhood was there in all its ages and average phases; infancy, youth, middle age, age—all were there in the rusty villas and hotels ranged for a mile along the smooth shell road.

The region, thought Brown to himself, was rich in material. And the reflection helped him somewhat with his dinner, which needed a fillip or two.

In his faultless dinner jacket he sauntered out after the evening meal; and the idea which possessed and even thrilled him aided him to forget what he had eaten.

The lagoon glimmered mysteriously in the starlight; the royal palms bordering it rustled high in the night breeze from the sea. Perfume from oleander hedges smote softly the olfactories of Brown; the southern whip-poor-wills' hurried whisper thrilled the darkness with a deeper mystery.

Here was the place to study woman. There could be no doubt about that. Here, untrammelled, uninterrupted, unvexed by the jarring of the world, he could place his model, turn her loose, and observe her.

To concentrate all his powers of analytical observation upon a single specimen of woman was his plan. Painters and sculptors used models. He meant to use one, too.

It would be simple. First, he must discover what he wanted. This accomplished, he had decided to make a plain business proposition to her. She was to go about her own affairs and her pleasure without embarrassment or self-consciousness—behave naturally; do whatever it pleased her to do. But he was to be permitted to observe her, follow her, make what notes he chose; and, as a resumé of each day, they were to meet in some quiet spot in order that he might question her as he chose, concerning whatever interested him, or whatever in her movements or behaviour had seemed to him involved or inexplicable.

Thus and thus only, he had decided, could light be shed upon the mysterious twilight veiling the inner woman! Thus only might carefully concealed motives be detected, cause and effect co-ordinated, the very source of all feminine logic, reason, and emotion be laid bare and dissected at leisure.

Never had anybody written such a novel as he would be equipped to write. The ultimate word concerning woman was about to be written.

Inwardly excited, outwardly calm, he had seated himself on the coquina wall which ran along the lagoon under the Royal Palms. He was about to study his subject as the great masters studied, coolly, impersonally, with clear and merciless intelligence, setting down with calm simplicity nothing except facts.

All that was worthy and unworthy should be recorded—the good with the evil—nothing should be too ephemeral, too minute, to escape his searching analysis.

And all the while, though Brown was not aware of it, the memory of a face he had seen in the dining-room grew vaguely and faded, waxing and waning alternately, like a phantom illustration accompanying his thoughts.

As for the model he should choose to study, she ought to be thoroughly feminine, he thought; young, probably blonde, well formed, not very deeply experienced, and with every human capacity for good and bad alike.

He would approach her frankly, tell her what he required, offer her the pay of an artist's model, three dollars a day; and, if she accepted, she could have her head and do what she liked. All that concerned him was to make his observations and record them.

In the blue starlight people passed and re-passed like ghosts along the shell-road—the white summer gowns of young girls were constantly appearing in the dusk, taking vague shape, vanishing. On the lagoon, a guitar sounded very far away. The suave scent of oleander grew sweeter.

Spectral groups passed in clinging lingerie; here and there a ghost lingered to lean over the coquina wall, her lost gaze faintly accented by some level star. One of these, a slender young thing, paused near to Brown, resting gracefully against the wall.

All around her the whip-poor-wills were calling breathlessly; the perfume of oleander grew sweeter.

As for the girl herself, she resembled the tenth muse. Brown had never attempted to visualise his mistress; it had been enough for him that she was Thalomene, daughter of Zeus, and divinely fair.

But now, as he recognised the face he had noticed that evening in the dining-room, somehow he thought of his muse for the first time, concretely. Perhaps because the girl by the coquina wall was young, slim, golden haired, and

Greek.

His impulse, without bothering to reason, was to hop from the wall and go over to where she was standing.

She looked around calmly as he approached, gave him a little nod in recognition of his lifted hat.

"I'm John Brown, 4th," he said. "I'm stopping at the Villa Hibiscus. Do you mind my saying so?"

"No, I don't mind," she said.

"There is a vast amount of nonsense in formality and convention," said Brown. "If you don't mind ignoring such details, I have something important to say to you."

She looked at him unsmilingly. Probably it was the starlight in her eyes that made them glimmer as though with hidden laughter.

"I am," said Brown, pleasantly, "an author."

"Really," she said.

"When I say that I am an author," continued Brown seriously, "I mean in the higher sense."

"Oh. What is the higher sense, Mr. Brown?" she asked.

"The higher sense does not necessarily imply authorship. I do not mean that I am a mere writer. I have written very little."

"Oh," she said.

"Very little," repeated Brown combatively. "You will look in vain among the crowded counters piled high with contemporary fiction for anything from my pen."

"Then perhaps I had better not look," she said so simply that Brown was a trifle disappointed in her.

"Some day, however," he said, "you may search, and, perhaps, not wholly in vain."

"Oh, you are writing a book!"

"Yes," he said, "I am, so to speak, at work on a novel."

"Might one, with discretion, make further inquiry concerning your novel, Mr. Brown?"

"You may."

"Thank you," she said, apparently a trifle disconcerted by the privilege so promptly granted.

"You may," repeated Brown. "Shall I explain why?"

"Please."

"You will not mistake me, I am sure. Will you?"

She turned her pretty face toward him.

"I don't think so," she said after a moment. The starlight was meddling with her eyes again.

XIV

So Brown told her about his theory; how he desired to employ a model, how he desired to study her; what were his ideas of the terms suitable.

He talked fluently, earnestly, and agreeably; and his pretty audience listened with so much apparent intelligence and good taste that her very attitude subtly exhilarated Brown, until he became slightly aware that he was expressing himself eloquently.

He had, it seemed, much to say concerning the profession and practice of good literature. It seemed, too, that he knew a great deal about it, both theoretically and practically. His esteem and reverence for it were unmistakable; his enthusiasm worthy of his courage.

He talked for a long while, partly about literature, partly about himself. And he was at intervals a trifle surprised that he had so much to say, and wondered at the valuable accumulations of which he was unburdening himself with such vast content.

The girl had turned her back to the lagoon and stood leaning against the coquina wall, facing him, her slender hands resting on the coping.

Never had he had such a listener. At the clubs and cafés other literary men always wanted to talk. But here under the great southern stars nobody interrupted the limpid flow of his long dammed eloquence. And he ended leisurely, as he had begun, yet auto-intoxicated, thrillingly conscious of the spell which he had laid upon himself, upon his young listener—conscious, too, of the spell that the soft air and the perfume and the stars had spun over a world grown suddenly and incredibly lovely and young.

She said in a low voice: "I need the money very much.... And I don't mind your studying me."

"Do you really mean it?" he exclaimed, enchanted.

"Yes. But there is one trouble."

"What is it?" he asked apprehensively.

"I must have my mornings to myself."

He said: "Under the terms I must be permitted to ask you any questions I choose. You understand that, don't you?"

"Yes," she said.

"Then—why must you have your mornings to yourself?"

"I have work to do."

"What work? What are you?"

She flushed a trifle, then, accepting the rules of the game, smiled at Brown.

"I am a school-teacher," she said. "Ill health from overwork drove me South to convalesce. I am trying to support myself here by working in the mornings."

"I am sorry," he said gently. Then, aware of his concession to a very human weakness, he added with businesslike decision: "What is the nature of your morning's work?"

"I—write," she admitted.

"Stories?"

"Yes."

"Fiction?"

"Anything, Mr. Brown. I send notes to fashion papers, concerning the costumes at the Hotel Verbena; I write for various household papers special articles which would not interest you at all. I write little stories for the women's and children's columns in various newspapers. You see what I do is not literature, and could not interest you."

"If you are to act for me in the capacity of a model," he said firmly, "I am absolutely bound to study every phase of you, every minutest detail."

"Oh."

"Not one minute of the day must pass without my observing you," he said.

"Unless you are broad-minded enough to comprehend me you may think my close and unremitting observation impertinent."

"You don't mean to be impertinent, I am sure," she faltered, already surprised, apprehensive, and abashed by the prospect.

"Of course I don't mean to be impertinent," he said smilingly, "but all great observers pursue their studies unremittingly day and night——"

"You couldn't do that!" she exclaimed.

"No," he admitted, troubled, "that would not be feasible. You require, of

course, a certain amount of slumber."

"Naturally," she said.

"I ought," he said thoughtfully, "to study that phase of you, also."

"What phase, Mr. Brown?"

"When you are sleeping."

"But that is impossible!"

"Convention," he said disdainfully, "makes it so. A literary student is fettered.

"But it is perfectly possible for you to imagine what I look like when I'm asleep, Mr. Brown."

"Imagination is to play no part in my literary work," he said coldly. "What I set down are facts."

"But is that art?"

"There is more art in facts than there are facts in art," he said.

"I don't quite know what you mean."

He didn't, either, when he came to analyse what he had said; and he turned very red and admitted it.

"I mean to be honest and truthful," he said. "What I just said sounded clever, but meant nothing. I admit it. I mean to be perfectly pitiless with myself. Anything tainted with imagination; anything hinting of romance; any weak concession to prejudice, convention, good taste, I refuse to be guilty of. Realism is what I aim at; raw facts, however unpleasant!"

"I don't believe you will find anything very unpleasant about me," she said.

"No, I don't think I shall. But I mean to detect every imperfection, every weakness, every secret vanity, every unworthy impulse. That is why I desire to study you so implacably. Are you willing to submit?"

She bit her lip and looked thoughtfully at the stars.

"You know," she said, "that while it may be all very well for you to say 'anything for art's sake,' I can't say it. I can't do it, either."

"Why not?"

"Because I can't. You know perfectly well that you can't follow me about taking notes every minute of the twenty-four hours."

He said very earnestly: "Sir John Lubbock sat up day and night, never taking his eyes off the little colony of ants which he had under observation in a glass box!"

"Do you propose to sit up day and night to keep me under observation?" she

asked, flushed and astounded.

"Not at first. But as my studies advance, and you become accustomed to the perfectly respectful but coldly impersonal nature of my observations, your mind, I trust, will become so broadened that you will find nothing objectionable in what at first might scare you. An artist's model, for example _____"

"But I am not an artist's model!" she exclaimed, with a slight shiver.

"To be a proper model at all," he said, "you must concede all for art, and remain sublimely unconscious of self. You do not matter. I do not matter. Only my work counts. And that must be honest, truthful, accurate, minute, exact—a perfect record of a woman's mind and personality."

For a few moments they both remained silent. And after a little the starlight began to play tricks with her eyes again, so that they seemed sparkling with hidden laughter. But her face was grave.

She said: "I really do need the money. I will do what I can.... And if in spite of my courage I ever shrink—our contract shall terminate at once."

"And what shall I do then?" inquired Brown.

The starlight glimmered in her eyes. She said very gravely:

"In case the demands of your realism and your art are too much for my courage, Mr. Brown—you will have to find another model to study."

"But another model might prove as conventional as you!"

"In that case," she said, while her sensitive lower lip trembled, and the starlight in her eyes grew softly brilliant, "in that case, Mr. Brown, I am afraid that there would be only one course to pursue with that other model."

"What course is that?" he asked, deeply interested.

"I'm afraid you'd have to marry her."

"Good Lord!" he said. "I can't marry every girl I mean to study!"

"Oh! Do you mean to study very many?"

"I have my entire life and career before me."

"Yes. That is true. But—women are much alike. One model, thoroughly studied, might serve for them all—with a little imagination."

"I have no use for imagination in fiction," said Brown firmly. After a moment's silence, he added: "Is it settled, then?"

"About our—contract?"

"Yes."

She considered for a long while, then, looking up, she nodded.

"That's fine!" exclaimed Brown, with enthusiasm.

They walked back to the Villa Hibiscus together, slowly, through the blue starlight. Brown asked her name, and she told him.

"No," he said gaily, "your name is Thalomene, and you are the tenth muse. For truly I think I have never before been so thoroughly inspired by a talk with anyone."

She laughed. He had done almost all the talking. And he continued it, very happily, as by common consent they seated themselves on the veranda.

XV

The inhabitants of the Villa Hibiscus retired. But Brown talked on, quite unconscious that the low-voiced questions and softly modulated replies were magic which incited him to a perfect ecstasy of self-revelation.

Perhaps he thought he was studying her—for the compact by mutual consent was already in force—and certainly his eyes were constantly upon her, taking, as no doubt he supposed, a cold and impersonal measure of her symmetry. Calmly, and with utter detachment, he measured her slender waist, her soft little hands; noting the fresh, sweet lips, the clear, prettily shaped eyes, the delicate throat, the perfect little Greek head with its thick, golden hair.

And all the while he held forth about literature and its true purpose; about what art really is; about his own art, his own literature, and his own self.

And the girl was really fascinated.

She had seen, at a distance, such men. When Brown had named himself to her, she had recognised the name with awe, as a fashionable and wealthy name known to Gotham.

Yet, had Brown known it, neither his eloquence nor his theories, nor his aims, were what fascinated her. But it was his boyish enthusiasm, his boyish intolerance, his immaturity, his happy certainty of the importance of what concerned himself.

He was so much a boy, so much a man, such a candid, unreasonable, eager, selfish, impulsive, portentous, and delightfully illogical mixture of boy and man that the combination fascinated every atom of womanhood in her—and at moments as the night wore on, she found herself listening perilously close to the very point of sympathy.

He appeared to pay no heed to the flight of time. The big stars frosted Heaven; the lagoon was silvered by them; night winds stirred the orange bloom;

oleanders exhaled a bewitching perfume.

As he lay there in his rocking chair beside her, it seemed to him that he had known her intimately for years—so wonderfully does the charm of self-revelation act upon human reason. For she had said almost nothing about herself. Yet, it was becoming plainer to him every moment that never in all his life had he known any woman as he already knew this young girl.

"It is wonderful," he said, lying back in his chair and looking up at the stars, "how subtle is sympathy, and how I recognise yours. I think I understand you perfectly already."

"Do you?" she said.

"Yes, I feel sure I do. Somehow, I know that secretly and in your own heart you are in full tide of sympathy with me and with my life's work."

"I thought you had no imagination," she said.

"I haven't. Do you mean that I only imagine that you are in sympathy with me?"

"No," she said. "I am."

After a few moments she laughed deliciously. He never knew why. Nor was she ever perfectly sure why she had laughed, though they discussed the matter very gravely.

A new youth seemed to have invaded her, an exquisite sense of lightness, of power. Vaguely she was conscious of ability, of a wonderful and undreamed of capacity. Within her heart she seemed to feel the subtle stir of a new courage, a certainty of the future, of indefinable but splendid things.

The manuscript of the novel which she had sent North two weeks ago seemed to her a winged thing soaring to certain victory in the empyrean. Suddenly, by some magic, doubt, fear, distress, were allayed—and it was like surcease from a steady pain, with all the blessed and heavenly languor relaxing her mind and body.

And all the while Brown talked on.

Lying there in her chair she listened to him while the thoughts in her eased mind moved in delicate accompaniment.

Somehow she understood that never in her life had she been so happy—with this boy babbling beside her, and her own thoughts responding almost tenderly to his youth, his inconsistencies, to the arrogance typical of his sex. He was so wrong!—so far from the track, so utterly astray, so pitifully confident! Who but she should know, who had worked and studied and failed and searched, always writing, however—which is the only way in the world to learn how to write—or to learn that there is no use in writing.

Her hand lay along the flat arm of her rocking-chair; and once, when he had earnestly sustained a perfectly untenable theory concerning success in literature, unconsciously she laid her fresh, smooth hand on his arm in impulsive protest.

"No," she said, "don't think that way. You are quite wrong. That is the road to failure!"

It was her first expression of disagreement, and he looked at her amazed.

"I am afraid you think I don't know anything about real literature and realism," she said, "but I do know a little."

"Every man must work out his salvation in his own way," he insisted, still surprised at her dissent.

"Yes, but one should be equipped by long practice in the art before definitely choosing one's final course."

"I am practiced."

"I don't mean theoretically," she murmured.

He laughed: "Oh, you mean mere writing," he said, gaily confident. "That, according to my theory, is not necessary to real experience. Literature is something loftier."

In her feminine heart every instinct of womanhood was aroused—pity for the youth of him, sympathy for his obtuseness, solicitude for his obstinacy, tenderness for the fascinating combination of boy and man, which might call itself by any name it chose—even "author"—and go blundering along without a helping hand amid shrugs and smiles to a goal marked "Failure."

"I wonder," she said almost timidly, "whether you could ever listen to me."

"Always," he said, bending nearer to see her expression. Which having seen, he perhaps forgot to note in his little booklet, for he continued to look at her.

"I haven't very much to say," she said. "Only—to learn any art or trade or profession it is necessary to work at it unremittingly. But to discuss it never helped anybody."

"My dear child," he said, "I know that what you say was the old idea. But," he shrugged, "I do not agree with it."

"I am so sorry," she said.

"Sorry? Why are you sorry?"

"I don't know.... Perhaps because I like you."

It was not very much to say—not a very significant declaration; but the simplicity and sweetness of it—her voice—the head bent a little in the starlight—all fixed Brown's attention. He sat very still there in the luminous

dusk of the white veranda; the dew dripped steadily like rain; the lagoon glittered.

Then, subtly, taking Brown unawares, his most treacherous enemy crept upon him with a stealth incredible, and, before Brown knew it, was in full possession of his brain. The enemy was Imagination.

Minute after minute slipped away in the scented dusk, and found Brown's position unchanged, where he lay in his chair looking at her.

The girl also was very silent.

With what wonderful attributes his enemy, Imagination, was busily endowing the girl beside him in the starlight, there is no knowing. His muse was Thalomea, slim daughter of Zeus; and whether she was really still on Olympus or here beside him he scarcely knew, so perfectly did this young girl inspire him, so exquisitely did she fill the bill.

"It is odd," he said, after a long while, "that merely a few hours with you should inspire me more than I have ever been inspired in all my life."

"That," she said unsteadily, "is your imagination."

At the hateful word, imagination, Brown seemed to awake from the spell. Then he sat up straight, rather abruptly.

"The thing to do," he said, still confused by his awakening, "is to consider you impersonally and make notes of everything." And he fumbled for pencil and note-book, and, rising, stepped across to the front door, where a light was burning.

Standing under it he resolutely composed his thoughts; but to save his life he could remember nothing of which to make a memorandum.

This worried him, and finally alarmed him. And so long did he stand there, note-book open, pencil poised, and a sickly expression of dismay imprinted upon his otherwise agreeable features, that the girl rose at last from her chair, glanced in through the door at him, and then came forward.

"What is the matter?" she asked.

"The matter is," said Brown, "that I don't seem to have anything to write about."

"You are tired," she said. "I think we both are a little tired."

"I am not. Anyway, I have something to write about now. Wait a moment till I make a note of how you walk—the easy, graceful, flowing motion, so exquisitely light and——"

"But I don't walk like that!" she said, laughing.

"—Graciously as a youthful goddess," muttered Brown, scribbling away

busily in his note-book. "Tell me; what motive had you just now in rising and coming to ask me what was the matter—with such a sweetly apprehensive expression in your eyes?"

"My—my motive?" she repeated, astonished.

"Yes. You had one, hadn't you?"

"Why—I don't know. You looked worried; so I came."

"The motive," said Brown, "was feminine solicitude—an emotion natural to nice women. Thank you." And he made a note of it.

"But motives and emotions are different things," she said timidly. "I had no motive for coming to ask you why you seemed troubled."

"Wasn't your motive to learn why?"

"Y-yes, I suppose so."

He laid his head on one side and inspected her critically.

"And if anything had been amiss with me you would have been sorry, wouldn't you?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Why? Because—one is sorry when a friend—when anyone——"

"I am your friend," he said. "So why not say it?"

"And I am yours—if you wish," she said.

"Yes, I do." He began to write: "It's rather odd how friendship begins. We both seem to want to be friends." And to her he said: "How does it make you feel—the idea of our being friends? What emotions does it arouse in you?"

She looked at him in sorrowful surprise. "I thought it was real friendship you meant," she murmured, "not the sort to make a note about."

"But I've got to make notes of everything. Don't you see? Certainly our friendship is real enough—but I've got to study it minutely and make notes concerning it. It's necessary to make records of everything—how you walk, stand, speak, look, how you go upstairs——"

"I am going now," she said.

He followed, scribbling furiously; and it is difficult to go upstairs, watch a lady go upstairs, and write about the way she does it all at the same time.

"Good-night," she said, opening her door.

"Good-night," he said, absently, and so intent on his scribbling that he followed her through the door into her room.

XVI

"She goes upstairs as though she were floating up," he wrote, with enthusiasm; "her lovely figure, poised on tip-toe, seems to soar upward, ascending as naturally and gracefully as the immortals ascended the golden stairs of Jacob _____"

In full flood of his treacherous imagination he seated himself on a chair beside her bed, rested the note-book on his knees, and scribbled madly, utterly oblivious to her. And it was only when he had finished, for sheer lack of material, that he recollected himself, looked up, saw how she had shrunk away from him against the wall—how the scarlet had dyed her face to her temples.

"Why—why do you come—into my bedroom?" she faltered. "Does our friendship count for no more than that with you?"

"What?" he said, bewildered.

"That you do what you have no right to do. Art—art is not enough to—to—excuse—disrespect——"

Suddenly the tears sprang to her eyes, and she covered her flushed face with both hands.

For a moment Brown stood petrified. Then a deeper flush than hers settled heavily over his features.

"I'm sorry," he said.

She made no response.

"I didn't mean to hurt you. I do respect you," he said.

No response.

Brown gazed at her, gazed at his note-book.

Then he hurled the note-book across the room and walked over to her as she lifted her lovely head, startled and tearful.

"You are right," he said, swallowing nothing very desperately. "You can not be studied this way. Will you—marry me?"

"What!"

"Will you marry me?"

"Why?" she gasped.

"Because I—want to study you."

"No!" she said, looking him straight in the eyes.

Brown thought hard for a full minute.

"Would you marry me because I love you?" he asked timidly.

The question seemed to be more than she could answer. Besides, the tears sprang to her blue eyes again, and her under lip began to tremble, and she covered her face with both hands. Which made it impossible for him to kiss her.

"Isn't it wonderful?" he said earnestly, trembling from head to foot. "Isn't it wonderful, dear?"

"Yes," she whispered. The word, uttered against his shoulder, was stifled. He bent his head nearer, murmuring:

"Thalomene—Thalomene—embodiment of Truth! How wonderful it is to me that at last I find in you that absolute Truth I worship."

"I am—the embodiment—of your—imagination," she said. "But you will never, never believe it—most adorable of boys—dearest—dearest of men."

And, lifting her stately and divine young head, she looked innocently at Brown while he imprinted his first and most chaste kiss upon the fresh, sweet lips of the tenth muse, Thalomene, daughter of Zeus.

"Athalie," said the youthful novelist more in sorrow than in anger, "you are making game of everything I hold most important."

"Provide yourself with newer and truer gods, dear child," said the girl, laughing. "After you've worshipped them long enough somebody will also poke fun at them. Whereupon, if you are fortunate enough to be one of those who continues to mature until he matures himself into the Ewigkeit, you will instantly quit those same over-mauled and worn out gods for newer and truer ones."

"And so on indefinitely," I added.

"In literature," began the novelist, "the great masters must stand as parents for us in our first infantile steps——"

"No," said the girl, "all worthy aspirants enter the field of literature as orphans. Opportunity and Fates alone stand for them in loco parentis. And the child of these is known as Destiny."

"No cubist could beat that, Athalie," remarked Duane. "I'm ashamed of you—or proud—I don't know which."

"Dear child," she said, "you will never know the true inwardness of any sentiment you entertain concerning me until I explain it to you."

"Smitten again hip and thigh," said Stafford. "Fair lady, I am far too wary to tell you what I think of the art of incoherence as practised occasionally by the

prettiest Priestess in the Temple."

Athalie looked at me as the sweetmeat melted on her tongue.

"You promised me a dog," she remarked.

"I've picked him out. He'll be weaned in another week."

"What species of pup is he?" inquired Duane.

"An Iceland terrier," I answered. "They use them for digging out walrus and seals."

"Thank you," said Duane pleasantly.

"After all," observed the girl, lifting her glass of water, "it does not concern Mr. Duane what sort of a dog you have chosen for me."

She sipped it leisurely, looking over the delicate crystal rim at Duane.

"You are young," she said. "'L'enfance est le sommeil de la raison.'"

"How would you like to have an Angora kitten?" he asked, reddening slightly.

"But infancy," she added, "is always adorable.... I think I might like a white one with blue eyes."

"Puppies, kittens, children," remarked Stafford—"they're all tolerable while they're young."

"All of these," said the girl softly, "I should like to have."

And she gazed inquiringly at the crystal. But it could tell her nothing of herself or of her hopes. She turned and looked out into the dark city, a trifle wearily, it seemed to me.

XVII

After a silence, she lay back among her cushions and glanced at us with a faint smile.

"One day last winter," she said, "after the last client had gone and office hours were over, I sat here thinking, wondering what in the world could be worse for a girl than to have no parents.... And I happened to glance into my crystal, and saw there an incident beginning to evolve that cheered me up, because it was a parody on my more morbid train of thought. After all, the same Chance that gives a child to its parents gives the parents to that child. You may think this is Tupper," she added, "but it is Athalie. And that being the case, nobody will laugh."

Nobody did laugh.

"Thank you," she said sweetly. "Now I will tell you what I saw in my crystal when I happened to be feeling unusually alone in the world." And with a pretty nod to us, collectively, she began.

The bulk of the cargo and a few bodies were coming ashore at the eastern end of the island, and that is where the throngs were—people from the Light House, fishermen from the inlet, and hundreds of winter tourists from St. Augustine, in white flannels and summer gowns, all attracted to Ibis Island by the grewsome spectacle of the wreck.

The West Indian hurricane had done its terrific business and had gone, leaving a turquoise sky untroubled by a cloud, and a sea of snow and cobalt.

Nothing living had been washed ashore from the wreck. As for the brig, she had vanished—if there had been anything left of her to disappear except the wreckage, human and otherwise, that had come tumbling ashore through the surf all night long.

So young Gray, seeing that there was nothing for him to do, and not caring for the spectacle at the eastern end of the island, turned on his heel and walked west through thickets of sweet bay, palmetto, and beach-grape.

He wore the lightest weight solaro, with a helmet and close-fitting puttees of the same. Two straps crossed his breast, the one supporting a well filled haversack, the other a water bottle. Except for fire arms he was equipped for darkest Africa, or for anything else on earth—at least he supposed so. He was wrong; he was not equipped for what he was about to encounter on Ibis Island.

It happened in this manner: traversing the seaward dunes, because the beach no longer afforded him even a narrow margin for a footing, shoulder deep in a tangle of beach-grapes, he chanced to glance at the little sandy cove which he was skirting, and saw there an empty fruit crate tumbling in the smother of foam, and a very small setter puppy clinging to it frantically, with every claw clutching, and his drenched tail between his legs.

Even while Gray was forcing his eager way through the tangle, he was aware of somebody else moving forward through the high scrub just west of him; and as he sprang out onto the beach and laid his hand on the stranded fruit crate, another hand, slimmer and whiter than his, fell on the crate as he dragged it out of the foamy shallows and up across the dry sand, just as a tremendous roller smashed into clouds of foam behind it.

"I beg your pardon," said a breathless voice at his elbow, "but I think I saw this little dog first."

Gray already was reaching for the shivering little thing, but two other hands deprived him of the puppy; and he looked up, impatient and annoyed, into the excited brown eyes of a young girl.

She had taken the dripping, clawing little creature to her breast, where it shivered and moaned and whined, shoving its cold nose up under her chin.

"I beg your pardon," said Gray, firmly, "but I am really very certain that I first discovered that dog."

"I am sorry you think so," she said, clasping the creature all the tighter.

"I do think so," insisted Gray. "I know it!"

"I am very sorry," she repeated. Over the puppy's shivering back her brown eyes gazed upon Gray. They were very pretty, but hostile.

"There can be no question about the ownership of this pup," persisted Gray. "Of course, I am sorry if you really think you discovered the dog. Because you didn't."

"I did discover him," she said, calmly.

"I beg your pardon. I was walking through the beach-grapes——"

"I beg yours! I also was crossing the sweet-bay scrub when I happened to glance down at the cove and saw this poor little dog in the water."

"That is exactly what I did! I happened to glance down, and there I saw this little dog. Instantly I sprang——"

"So did I!—I beg your pardon for interrupting you!"

"I was merely explaining that I first saw the dog, and next I noticed you. But first of all I saw the dog."

"That is the exact sequence in my own observations," she rejoined calmly. "First of all I saw the dog in the water, then I heard a crash in the bush, and saw something floundering about in the tangle."

"And," continued Gray, much annoyed by her persistency, "no sooner had I caught hold of the crate than you came up and laid your hand on it, also. You surely must remember that I had my hand on the crate before you did!"

"I am very sorry you think so. The contrary was the case. I took firm hold of the crate, and then you aided me to draw it up out of the water."

"It is extraordinary," he said, "how mistaken you are concerning the actual sequence of events. Not that I doubt for a moment that you really suppose you discovered the dog. Probably you were a little excited——"

"I was perfectly cool. Possibly you were a trifle excited."

"Not in the least," he retorted with calm exasperation. "I never become agitated."

The puppy continued to shiver and drive its nose up under the girl's chin.

"Poor little thing! Poor little shipwrecked baby!" she crooned. And, to Gray: "I

don't know why this puppy should be so cold. The water is warm enough."

"Put it in the hot sand," he said. "We can rub it dry."

She hesitated, flushing perhaps at her own suspicions; but nevertheless she said:

"You would not attempt to take it if I put it down, would you?"

"I don't intend to snatch it," he said with dignity. "Men don't snatch."

So they went inland a few paces where the sand was hot and loose and deep; and there they knelt down and put the puppy on the sand.

"I am in possession of the dog and you merely claim possession."

"Scrub him thoroughly," she suggested, pouring heaping handfuls of hot, silvery sand over the little creature.

Gray did likewise, and together they rubbed and scrubbed and rolled the puppy about until the dog began to roll on his back all by himself, twisting and wriggling and waving his big, padded paws.

"What he wants is water," asserted Gray, unstrapping his haversack and bottle. From the one he produced an aluminum pannikin; from the other he filled it with water. The puppy drank it all while Gray and the brown-eyed girl looked on intently.

Then Gray produced some beef sandwiches, and the famished little creature leaped and whirled and danced as Gray fed him cautiously, bit by bit.

"Do you think that is perfectly fair?" asked the girl gravely.

"Fair?" repeated Gray guiltily.

"Yes. Who first feeds a strange dog is recognised as the reigning authority."

"Very well, you may feed him, too. But that does not alter the facts in the case."

"The facts," said the girl, taking a sandwich from Gray, "are that I am in possession of the dog and you merely claim possession."

They fed him alternately and in silence—until their opinion became unanimous that it was dangerous, for the present, to feed him any more.

The puppy begged and pleaded and cajoled and danced—a most appealing and bewitching little creature, silvery white and blue-ticked, with a tiny tan point over each eye and a black and tan saddle.

"Lavarack," observed Gray.

"English," she nodded.

It wagged not only its little, whippy tail, but in doing so wriggled its entire hind quarters, showing no preference for either of its rescuers, but bestowing

winning and engaging favours impartially.

The girl could endure it no longer, but snatched the puppy to her with a soft little cry, and cuddled it tight. Gray looked on gloomily. Then, when she released it, he took it and caressed it in masculine fashion. There was no discernible difference in its affectionate responses.

After the dog had lavished enthusiasm and affection on its saviours to the point of physical exhaustion, it curled up on the hot sand between them. At first, when they moved or spoke, the little, silky head was quickly lifted, and the brown eyes turned alertly from one to the other of the two beings most beloved on earth. But presently only the whippy tail stirred in recognition of their voices. And finally the little dog slept in the hot sunshine.

XVIII

For a long while, seated on either side of the slumbering puppy, they remained silent, in fascinated contemplation of what they had rescued.

Finally Gray said slowly: "It may seem odd to you that I should be so firm and uncompromising concerning my right to a very small dog which may be duplicated in the North for a few dollars."

She lifted her brown eyes to his, then let them fall again on the dog.

"The reason is this," said Gray. "The native dogs I dislike intensely. Dogs imported from the North soon die in this region. But this little pup was evidently born on shipboard and on tropical seas. I think he's very likely to survive the climate. And as I am obliged to reside here for a while, and as I am to live all alone, this pup is a godsend to me."

The girl, still resting her eyes on the sleeping puppy, said very quietly:

"I do not desire to appear selfish, but a girl is twice as lonely as a man. And as I fortunately first discovered the dog it seems to me absolutely right and just that I should keep him."

Gray sat pouring sand through his fingers and casting an occasional oblique glance at the girl. She was not sunburned, so she must be a recent arrival. She spoke with a northern accent, which determined her origin.

What was she doing down here on this absurd island? Why didn't she go back to St. Augustine where she belonged?

"You know," he said craftily, "I can buy a very nice little dog indeed for you in St. Augustine."

"I am not stopping in St. Augustine. Besides, there are only horrid little lap-

dogs there."

"Don't you like lap-dogs—Pomms, Pekinese, Maltese?" he inquired persuasively.

"No."

"You are unlike the majority of girls then. What sort of dog do you like?"

"Setters," she explained with decision.

And as he bit his lip in annoyed silence she added:

"Setter puppies are what I adore."

"I'm sorry," he said bluntly.

She added, not heeding his observation: "I am mad about setter puppies, particularly English setter puppies. And when I try to realise that I discovered a shipwrecked one all by myself, and rescued it, I can scarcely believe in such an adorable miracle."

It was on the tip of his tongue to offer to purchase the pup, but a quick glance at the girl checked him. She was evidently perfectly sincere, and the quality of her was unmistakable.

Already, within these few minutes, her skin had begun to burn a delicate rose tint from the sun's fierce reflection on the white sands. Her hair was a splendid golden brown, her eyes darker, or perhaps the long, dark lashes made them seem so. She was daintily and prettily made, head, throat, shoulders, and limbs; she wore a summer gown so waistless and limp that it conformed to the corsetless fashions in vogue, making evident here and there the contours of her slim and supple figure.

From the tip of her white shoe to the tip of her hat she was the futile and exquisite essence of Gotham.

Gray realised it because he lived there himself. But he could not understand where all her determination and obstinacy came from, for she seemed so young and inexperienced, and there was about her a childish dewiness of eye and lip that suggested a blossom's fragrance.

She was very lovely; and that was all very well in its way, but Gray had come down there on stern business, and how long his business might last, and how long he was to inhabit a palmetto bungalow above the coquina quarry he did not know. The coquina quarry was as hot as the infernal pit. Also, snakes frequented it.

No black servant—promised him faithfully in St. Augustine the day before—had yet arrived. A few supplies had been sent over from St. Augustine, and he was camping in his little house of logs, along with wood-ticks, blue lizards, white ants, gophers, hornets, and several chestnut-colored scorpions.

"I wouldn't mind yielding the dog to you," he admitted, "if I were not so horribly lonely on this miserable island. When evening comes, you will go back to luxury and comfort somewhere or other, with dinner awaiting you and servants to do everything, and a nice bed to retire to. That's a pleasant picture, isn't it?"

"Very," she replied, with a slight shrug.

"Now," he said, "please gaze mentally upon this other picture. I am obliged to go back to a shack haunted by every species of creature that this wretched island harbours.

"There will be no dinner for me except what I can scoop out of a tin; no servants to do one bally thing for me; no bed.

"Listen attentively," he continued, becoming slightly dramatic as he remembered more clearly the horrors of the preceding night—his first on Ibis Island. "I shall go into that devilish bungalow and look around like a scared dog, standing very carefully in the exact centre of the room. And what will be the first object that my unwilling eyes encounter? A scorpion! Perhaps two, crawling out from the Spanish moss with which the chinks of that miserable abode are stuffed. I shall slay it—or them—as the case may be. Then a blue-tailed lizard will frisk over the ceiling—or perhaps one of those big, heavy ones with blunt, red heads. Doubtless at that same instant I shall discover a wood-tick advancing up one of my trousers' legs. Spiders will begin to move across the walls. Perhaps a snake or two will then develop from some shadowy corner."

He waved his arm impressively and pointed at the sleeping puppy.

"Under such circumstances," he said pathetically, "would you care to deprive me of this little companion sent by Providence for me to rescue out of the sea?"

She, too, had been steadily pouring sand between her white fingers during the moving recital of his woes. Now she looked up, controlling a shudder.

"Your circumstances, with all their attendant horrors, are my own," she began. "I, also, since last night, inhabit a picturesque but most horrid bungalow not very far from here; and every one of the creatures you describe, and several others also, inhabit it with me. Do you wonder I want some companionship? Do you wonder that I am inclined to cling to this little dog—whether or not it may seem ill bred and selfish to you?"

He said: "I suppose all the houses in this latitude harbour tarantulas, centipedes, and similar things, but you must remember that you do not live alone as I do——"

"Yes, I do!"

"What?"

"Certainly. I engaged two black servants in St. Augustine, but they have not arrived, and I was obliged to remain all alone in that frightful place last night."

"That's very odd," he said uneasily. "Where is this bungalow of yours?"

She started to speak, checked herself as at a sudden and unpleasant thought, looked up at him searchingly; and found his steel-grey eyes as searchingly fixed on her.

"Where is your bungalow?" she asked, watching him intently.

"Mine is situated at the west end of a coquina quarry. Where is yours?"

"Mine," she answered unsteadily but defiantly, "is situated on the eastern edge of a coquina quarry."

"Why did you choose a quarry bungalow?"

"Why did you choose one?"

"Because the coquina quarry happens to belong to me."

"The quarry," she retorted, "belongs to me."

He was almost too disgusted to speak, but he contrived to say, quietly and civilly:

"You are Constance Leslie, are you not?"

"Yes.... You are Johnson Gray?"

"Yes, I am," he answered, checking his exasperation and forcing a smile. "It's rather odd, isn't it—rather unfortunate, I'm afraid."

"It is unfortunate for you, Mr. Gray," she returned firmly. "I'm sorry—really sorry that this long journey is in vain."

"So am I," he said, with lips compressed.

For a few moments they sat very still, not looking at each other.

Presently he said: "It was a fool of a will. He was a most disagreeable old man."

"I never saw him."

"Nor I. They say he was a terror. But he had a sense of humour—a grim and acrid one—the cynic's idea of wit. No doubt he enjoyed it. No doubt he is enjoying this very scene between you and me—if he's anywhere within sight or hearing——"

"Don't say that!" she exclaimed, almost violently. "It is horrible enough on this island without hinting of ghosts."

"Ghosts? Of course there are ghosts. But I'd rather have my bungalow full of

'em than full of scorpions."

"We differ," she said coldly.

Silence fell again, and again was broken by Gray.

"Certainly the old fellow had a sense of humour," he insisted; "the will he left was one huge joke on every relative who had expectations. Imagine all that buzzard family of his who got nothing to amount to anything; and all those distant relatives who expected nothing and got almost everything!"

"Do you think that was humourous?"

"Yes; don't you? And I think what he did about you and me was really very funny. Don't you?"

"Why is it funny for a very horrid old man to make a will full of grim jokes and jests, and take that occasion to tell everybody exactly what he thinks of everybody?"

"He said nothing disagreeable about us that I recollect," remarked Gray, laughing.

Pouring sand between her fingers, she said:

"I remember very well how he mentioned us. He said that he had never seen either one of us, and was glad of it. He said that as I was an orphan with no money, and that as you were similarly situated, and that as neither you nor I had brains enough to ever make any, he would leave his coquina quarry to that one of us who had brains enough to get here first and stake the claim. Do you call that an agreeable manner of making a bequest?"

Gray laughed easily: "I don't care what he thought about my intellectual capacity."

"I suppose that I don't either. And anyway the bequest may be valuable."

"There is no doubt about that," said Gray.

She let her brown eyes rest thoughtfully on the ocean.

"I think," she said, "that I shall dispose of it at once."

"The dog?" he asked politely.

Her pretty, hostile eyes met his:

"The quarry," she replied calmly.

"Good Lord!" he exclaimed. "Do you think also that you arrived at the quarry before I arrived?"

"You will find my stake with its written notice sticking in the sand on the eastern edge of the quarry, about a hundred yards south of my bungalow!"

"My notice is very carefully staked on the western edge of the quarry about

the same distance from my bungalow," he said. "I placed it there yesterday evening."

"I also placed my notice there yesterday evening!"

"By what train did you come?"

"By the Verbena Special. It arrived at St. Augustine yesterday at four o'clock in the afternoon."

"I also came on that train."

"I," she said, "waited in St. Augustine only long enough to telephone for servants, and then I jumped into a victoria and drove over the causeway to the eastern end of the quarry."

"I did exactly the same," he insisted, "only I drove to the western end of the quarry. What time did you set your notice?"

"I don't know exactly. It was just about dusk."

"It was just about dusk when I drove in my stake!"

After a moment's idling in the sand with her slim fingers, she looked up at him a trifle pale.

"I suppose this means a lawsuit."

"I'm afraid it does."

"I'm sorry. If I wasn't in such desperate need of money——" But she said no more, and he also remained silent for a while. Then:

"I shall write to my attorney to come down," he said soberly. "You had better do the same this evening."

She nodded.

"It's got to be settled, of course," he continued; "because I'm too poor to concede the quarry to you."

"It is that way with me also. I do not like to appear so selfish to you, but what am I to do, Mr. Gray?"

"What am I to do? I honestly believe that I staked the quarry before you did.... And my financial situation does not permit me to relinquish my claim on the quarry."

"What a horrid will that was!" she exclaimed, the quick tears of vexation springing into her brown eyes. "If you knew how hard I've worked, Mr. Gray—all these years having nothing that other girls have—being obliged to work my way through college, and then take a position as governess—and just as it seemed that relief was in sight—you come into sight!—you!—and you even try to take away my little dog—the only thing I—I ever really cared for since I

have—have been alone in the world——"

Gray sprang up nervously: "I'm sorry—terribly sorry for you! You may keep the dog anyway."

She had turned away her face sharply as the quick tears started. Now she looked around at him in unfeigned surprise.

"But—what will you do?"

"Oh, I can stand being alone. I don't mind. There's no doubt about it; you must have the dog——" He glanced down at the little creature and caught his breath sharply as the puppy opened one eye and wagged its absurd tail feebly.

The girl rose lightly and gracefully from the sand, refusing his assistance, and stood looking down at the puppy. The little thing was on its clumsy feet, wagging and wriggling with happiness, and gazing up adoringly from Gray to Constance Leslie.

The girl looked at the dog, then at Gray.

"It—it seems too cruel," she said. "I can't bear to take him away from you."

"Oh, that's all right. I'll get on very well alone."

"You are generous. You are very generous. But after the way you expressed yourself concerning the dog, I don't feel that I can possibly take him."

"You really must. I don't blame you at all for falling in love with him. Besides, one adores what one rescues, above everything in the world."

"But—but I thought that you thought you had rescued him?" she faltered.

"It was a close call. I think perhaps that you arrived just a fraction of a second sooner than I did."

"Do you really? Or do you say that to be kind? Besides, I am not at all sure. It is perfectly possible—even, perhaps, probable that you saw him before I did."

"No, I don't think so. I think he's your dog, Miss Leslie. I surrender all claim to him——"

"No! I can not permit you to do such a thing! Forgive me. I was excited and a little vexed.... I know you would be very unhappy if I took the little thing ——"

"Please take him. I do love him already, but that is why it gives me a p-p-peculiar pleasure to relinquish all claims in y-your favour."

"Thank you. It is—is charming of you—exceedingly nice of you—but how can I accept such a real sacrifice?... You would be perfectly wretched to-night without him."

"So would you, Miss Leslie."

"I shall be wretched anyway. So it doesn't really matter."

"It does matter! If this little dog can alleviate your unhappiness in the slightest degree, I insist most firmly that you take him!"

The girl stood irresolute, lifted her brown eyes to his, lowered them, and gazed longingly at the puppy.

"Do you suppose he will follow me?"

"Try!"

So she walked one way and Gray started in the opposite direction, and the bewildered puppy, who at first supposed it was all in play, dashed from one back to the other, until the widening distance between them perplexed and finally began to trouble him.

Nevertheless, he continued to run back and forth from Gray to Constance Leslie as long as his rather wavering legs held out. Then, unable to decide, he stood panting midway between them, whining at moments, until, unable to understand or endure the spectacle of his two best beloveds vanishing in opposite directions, he put up his nose and howled.

Then both best beloveds came back running, and Constance snatched him to her breast and covered him with caresses.

"What on earth are we to do?" she said in consternation. "We nearly broke his heart that time."

"I don't know what to do," he admitted, much perplexed. "This pup seems to be impartial in his new-born affections."

"I thought," she said, with an admirable effort at self-denial, "that he rather showed a preference for you!"

"Why?"

"Because when he was sitting there howling his little heart out, he seemed to look toward you a little oftener than he gazed in my direction."

Gray rose nobly to the self-effacing level of his generous adversary:

"No, the balance was, if anything, in your favour. I'm very certain that he will be happier with you. Take him!"

The girl buried her pretty face in the puppy's coat as though it had been a fluffy muff.

"What a pity," she said, in a muffled voice, "that he is compelled to make a choice. It will break his heart; I know it will. He is too young."

"He'll very soon forget me, once he is alone with you in your bungalow."

The girl shook her head and stood caressing the puppy. The soft, white hand,

resting on the dog's head, fascinated Gray.

"Perhaps," he ventured, "I had better walk as far as your bungalow with you.... It may spare the dog a certain amount of superficial anguish."

She nodded, dreamy-eyed there in the sunshine. And of what she might be thinking he could form no idea.

XIX

He fell into step beside her, and they walked up from the little cover through the beach-grapes and out among the scrubby dunes, where in the heated silence the perfume of sweet-bay and pines mingled with the odour of the sea.

Everywhere the great sulphur-coloured butterflies were flying, making gorgeous combinations with the smaller, orange butterflies and the great, velvet-winged Palamedes swallow-tail.

Lizards frisked and raced away before them, emerald tinted, green with sky-blue tails, grey and red; the little gophers scurried into their burrows along the tangled hammock's edges. Over the palm-trees' feathery crests sailed a black vulture, its palmated wing-tips spread like inky fingers against the blue. Somewhere in the saw-grass a bittern boomed and boomed; and the seagulls' clamour rang incessantly above the thunder of the surf.

"I wonder," she murmured, "whether my sunburn makes me drowsy."

"It's the climate. You'll feel sleepy for a week before you are acclimated," he said.... "Why don't you put down the puppy and let him follow?"

She did so; and the little creature frisked and leaped and padded joyously about among the bayberry bushes, already possessed with the canine determination to investigate all the alluring smells in the world, and miss none of them.

After a little while they arrived at the bungalow which Constance had chosen. The girl pushed open the unlocked door; the puppy pranced in like a diminutive hobby-horse, flushed a big lizard, and went into fits of excitement till the solitary cabin rang with his treble barking.

They watched him through the doorway, laughingly; then Gray looked at the claim notice stuck upright in the sand. Presently he walked to the edge of the coquina quarry and looked down into it.

Thousands of dollars' worth of the shell deposit lay already exposed. There were great strata of it; ledges, shelves, vast masses in every direction. The quarry had been worked very little, and that little had been accomplished

stupidly. Either in the rough, or merely as lumps of conglomerate for crushing, the coquina in sight alone was very, very valuable. There could be no doubt of that.

Also, he understood that the strata deposited there continued at least for half a mile to the westward, where his own bungalow marked its probable termination.

He turned after a few minutes' inspection, and walked slowly back to where Constance was standing by the open door. A slight constraint, amounting almost to embarrassment, ensued for a few minutes, but the puppy dissipated it when he leaped at a butterfly, fell on his nose with a thump, and howled dismally until reassured by his anxious foster-parents, who caught him up and generously passed him to each other, petting him vigorously.

Twice Gray said good-bye to Constance Leslie and started to go on toward his own bungalow, but the puppy invariably began a frantic series of circles embracing them both, and he had to come back to keep the dog from the demoralisation of utter exhaustion.

"You know," he said, "this is going to be awkward. I believe that dog thinks we are mar—thinks we are sister and brother. Don't you?"

She replied with a slight flush on her fair face, that the dog undoubtedly cherished some such idea.

"Take him inside," said Gray firmly. "Then I'll beat it."

So she took the puppy inside and closed the door, with a smiling nod of adieu to Gray. But he had not gone very far when he heard her clear, far call; and, turning, saw her beckon frantically.

Back he came at top speed.

"Oh, dear," she exclaimed. "Oh, dear! He's tearing 'round and 'round the room moaning and whining and barking. I'm very certain he will have fits if you don't speak to him."

Gray opened the door cautiously, and the little dog came out, projected like a bolt from a catapult, fairly flinging his quivering little body into Gray's arms.

The reunion was elaborate and mutually satisfying. Constance furtively touched her brown eyes with a corner of her handkerchief.

"What on earth are we to do?" she asked, unfeignedly affected. "I would give him to you in a minute if you think he would be contented without me."

"We can try it."

So Constance started westward, across the dunes, and Gray went into the bungalow with the dog. But it required only a second or two to convince him that it wouldn't do, and he opened the door and called frantically to Constance.

"There is no use in trying that sort of thing," he admitted, when Constance hastened back to a touching reunion with the imprisoned dog. "Strategy is our only hope. I'll sit here on the threshold with you, and as soon as he goes to sleep I'll slink away."

So side by side they seated themselves on the sandy threshold of the bungalow, and the little dog, happy and contented, curled up on the floor of the room, tucked his blunt muzzle into his flank, and took a series of naps with one eye always open. He was young, but suspicion had already done its demoralising work with him, and he intended to keep at least one eye on his best beloveds.

She in her fresh and clinging gown, with the first delicate sunmask tinting her unaccustomed skin, sat silent and distraught, her idle fingers linked in her lap. And, glancing askance at her now and then, the droop of her under lip seemed to him pathetic, like that of a tired child in trouble.

When he was not looking at her he was immersed in perplexed cogitation. The ownership of the dog he had already settled in his mind; the ownership of the quarry he had supposed he had settled.

Therefore, why was he so troubled about it? Why was he so worried about her, wondering what she would do in the matter?

The only solution left seemed to lie in a recourse to the law—unless—unless
——

But he couldn't—he simply couldn't, merely for a sentimental impulse, give up to a stranger what he honestly considered an inheritance. That would be carrying sentimentalism too far.

And yet—and yet! He needed the inheritance desperately. Matters financial had gone all wrong with him. How could he turn his back on offered salvation just because a youthful and pretty girl also required a financial lift in a cold-blooded and calculating world?

And yet—and yet! He would sleep over it, of course. But he honestly saw no prospect of changing his opinion concerning the ownership of the quarry.

As he sat there biting a stem of sweet-bay and listening to the cardinals piping from the forest, he looked down into the heated coquina pit.

A snake was coiled up on one of the ledges, basking.

"Miss Leslie!"

She lifted her head and straightened her drooping shoulders, looking at him from eyes made drowsy and beautiful by the tropic heat.

"I only wanted to say," he began gravely, "that it is not safe for you to go into the quarry alone—in case you had any such intention."

"Why?"

"There are snakes there. Do you see that one? Well, he's harmless, I think—a king-snake, if I am not mistaken. But it's a good place for rattlers."

"Then you should be careful, too."

"Oh, I'm careful enough, but you might not know when to be on your guard. This island is a snaky one. It's famous for its diamond-back rattlers and the size of them. Their fangs are an inch long, and it usually means death to be struck by one of them."

The girl nodded thoughtfully.

He said with a new anxiety: "As a matter of fact, you really ought not to be down here all alone."

"I know it. But it meant a race for ownership, and I had to come at a minute's notice."

"You should have brought a maid."

"My dear Mr. Gray, I have no maid."

"Oh, I forgot," he muttered—"but, somehow, you look as though you had been born to several."

"I am the daughter of a very poor professor."

He fidgetted with his sweet-bay twig, considering the aromatic leaves with a troubled and concentrated scowl.

"You know," he said, "this wretched island is celebrated for its unpleasant fauna. Scorpions and wood-ticks are numerous. The sting of the one is horribly painful, and might be dangerous; the villainous habits of the other might throw you into a fever."

"But what can I do?" she inquired calmly.

"There are other kinds of snakes, too," he went on with increasing solicitude for this girl for whom, suddenly, he began to consider himself responsible. "There's a vicious snake called a moccasin; and he won't get out of your way or warn you. And there's a wicked little serpent with rings of black, scarlet, and yellow around his body. He pretends to be harmless, but if he gets your finger into his mouth he'll chew it full of a venom which is precisely the same sort of venom as that of the deadly East Indian cobra."

"But—what can I do?" she repeated pitifully. "If I go to St. Augustine and leave you here in possession, it might invalidate my claim."

He was silent, knowing no more about the law than did she, and afraid to deny her tentative assertion.

"If it lay with me," he said, "I'd call a truce until you could go to St. Augustine

and return again with the proper people to look out for you."

"Even if you were kind enough to do that, I could not afford even a servant under present—and unexpected—conditions."

"Why?"

"Because it has suddenly developed that I shall be obliged to engage a lawyer. And I had not expected that."

He reddened to his hair but said nothing. After a while the girl looked over her shoulder. The puppy slept, this time with both eyes closed.

When she turned again to Gray, he nodded his comprehension and rose to his feet cautiously.

"I'm going to take a walk on the beach and think this thing all out," he whispered, taking the slim, half-offered hand in adieu. "Don't go out in the scrub after sun-down. Rattlers move then. Don't go near any swamp; moccasins are the colour of sun-baked mud, and you can't see them. Don't touch any pretty little snake marked scarlet, black, and yellow——"

"How absurd!" she whispered. "As though I were likely to fondle snakes!"

"I'm terribly worried about you," he insisted, retaining her hand.

"Please don't be."

"How can I help it—what with these bungalows full of scorpions and——"

"Yours is, too," she said anxiously. "You will be very careful, won't you?"

"Yes, of course.... I'm—I'm uncertain about you. That's what is troubling me _____"

"Please don't bother about me. I've had to look out for myself for years."

"Have you?" he said, almost tenderly. Then he drew a quick, determined breath.

"You'll be careful, won't you?"

"Yes."

"Are you armed?"

"I have a shot-gun inside."

"That's all right. Don't open your door to any stranger.... You know I simply hate to leave you alone this way——"

"But I have the dog," she reminded him, with a pretty flush of gratitude.

He had retained her hand longer than the easiest convention required or permitted. So he released it, hesitated, then with a visible effort he turned on his heel and strode away westward across the scrub.

The sun hung low behind the tall, parti-coloured shaft of the Light House, towering smooth and round high above the forest.

He looked up at Ibis Light, at the circling buzzards above it, then walked on, scarcely knowing where he was going, until he walked into the door of his own bungalow, and several large spiders scattered into flight across the floor.

"There's no use," he said aloud to an audience of lizards clinging to the silvery bark of the log-room. "I can't take that quarry. I can't do it—whether it belongs to me or not. How can a big, strong, lumbering young man do a thing like that? No. No. No!"

He picked up a pencil and a sheet of paper:

"Oh, Lord! I really do need the money, but I can't do it."

And he wrote:

DEAR MISS LESLIE:

You arrived on the scene before I did. I am now convinced of this. I shall not dispute the ownership of the quarry. It is yours. This statement over my signature is your guarantee that I shall never interfere with your title to the coquina quarry on Ibis Island.

So now I've got to return to New York and go to work. I'm going across to Augustine in a few moments; and while I'm there I'll engage a white woman as companion for you, and a white servant, and have them drive over at once so they will reach your bungalow before evening. With undisputed title to the quarry, you can easily afford their wages.

Good-bye. I wish you every happiness and success. Please give my love to the dog.

Yours very truly,

JOHNSON GRAY.

"It's the only way out of it," he muttered. "I'll leave it with her and bolt before she reads it. There is nothing else to do, absolutely nothing."

As he came out of his cabin, the sun hung low and red above the palm forest, and a few bats were already flying like tiny black devils above the scrub.

There was a strip of beach near his cabin, and he went down to it and began to tramp up and down with a vague idea of composing himself so that he might accomplish what he had to do gracefully, gaily, and with no suspicion of striking an attitude for gods and men to admire his moral resignation and his heroic renunciation.

No; he'd do the thing lightly, smilingly, determined that she should not think that it was a sacrifice. No; she must believe that a sense of fairness alone

moved him to an honest recognition of her claims. He must make it plain to her that he really believed she had arrived at the quarry before he had.

And so he meant to leave her the letter, say good-bye, and go.

When this was all settled in his mind he looked at the ocean very soberly, then turned his back on the Atlantic and walked back to his cabin to gather up his effects.

As he approached the closed door a desolate howl from the interior greeted him: he sprang to the door and flung it open; and the puppy rushed into his arms.

Then, pinned to the scorpion-infested wall, he saw a sheet of writing, and he read:

DEAR MR. GRAY:

He woke up and howled for you. It was too tragic for me. I love him but I give him to you. I give the quarry to you, also. Under the circumstances it would be impossible for me to enjoy it, even if the law awarded it to me. Nobody could ever really know which one of us first arrived and staked the claim. No doubt you did.

I am sorry I came into your life and made trouble for you and for the puppy.

So I leave you in peaceful possession. It really is a happiness for me to do it.

I am going North at once. Good-bye; and please give my love to the dog. Poor little darling, he thought we both stood in loco parentis. But he'll get over his grief for me.

Yours truly,

CONSTANCE LESLIE.

The puppy at his feet was howling uncomforted for the best beloved who was so strangely missing from the delightful combination which he had so joyously accepted in loco parentis.

XX

Gray gathered the dog into his arms and strode swiftly out into the sunshot, purple light of early evening.

"What a girl!" he muttered to himself. "What a girl! What a corking specimen of her sex!"

Presently he came in sight of her, and the puppy scrambled violently until set down. Then he bolted for Constance Leslie, and it was only when the little

thing leaped frantically upon her that she turned with a soft, breathless little cry. And saw Gray coming toward her out of the rose and golden sunset.

Neither spoke as he came up and looked into her brown eyes and saw the traces of tears there still. The puppy leaped deliriously about them. And for a long while her slim hands lay limply in his. He looked at the ocean; she at the darkening forest.

And after a little while he drew the note from his pocket.

"I had written this when I found yours," he said. And he held it for her while she read it, bending nearer in the dim, rosy light.

After she read it she took it from him gently, folded it, and slipped it into the bosom of her gown.

Neither said anything. One of her hands still remained in his, listlessly at first—then the fingers crisped as his other arm encircled her.

They were both gazing vaguely at the ocean now. Presently they moved slowly toward it through the fragrant dusk. Her hair, loosened a little, brushed his sunburned cheek.

And around them gambolled the wise little dog, no longer apprehensive, but unutterably content with what the God of all good little doggies had so mercifully sent to him in loco parentis.

"That," said the novelist, "is another slice of fact which would never do for fiction. Besides I once read a story somewhere or other about a dog bringing two people together."

"The theme," I observed, "is thousands of years old."

"That's the trouble with all truth," nodded Duane. "It's old as Time itself, and needs a new suit of clothes every time it is exhibited to instruct people."

"What with new manners, new fashions, new dances, and the moral levelling itself gradually to the level of the unmoral," said Stafford, "nobody on the street would turn around to look at the naked truth in these days."

"Truth must be fashionably gowned to attract," I admitted.

"We of the eccentric nobility understand that," said the little Countess Athalie, glancing out of the window; and to me she added: "Lean over and see whether they have stationed a policeman in front of the Princess Zimbamzim's residence."

I went out on the balcony and glanced down the block. "Yes," I said.

"Poor old Princess," murmured the girl. "She detests moving."

"All frauds do," remarked Duane.

"She isn't a fraud," said Athalie quietly.

Our silence indicated our surprise. After a few moments the girl added:

"Whatever else she may be she is not a fraud in her profession. I think I had better give you an example of her professional probity. It interested me considerably as I followed it in my crystal. She knew all the while that I was watching her as well as the very people she herself was watching; and once or twice she looked up at me out of my crystal and grinned."

"Can she see us now?" I inquired uneasily.

"No."

"Why not?" asked Duane.

"I shall not tell you why."

"Not that I care whether she sees me or not," he added.

"Do you care, Harry, whether I see you occasionally in my crystal?" smiled Athalie.

Duane flushed brightly and reminded her that she was too honourable to follow the movements of her personal friends unless requested to do so by them.

"That is quite true," rejoined the girl, simply. "But once I saw you when I did not mean to."

"Well?" he demanded, redder still.

"You were merely asleep in your own bed," she said, laughing and accepting a lighted match from me. Then as the fragrant thread of smoke twisted in ghostly ringlets across her smooth young cheeks she settled back among her cushions.

XXI

"This," she said, "will acquaint you in a measure with the trustworthiness of the Princess Zimbamzim. And, if the policeman in front of her house could hear what I am going to tell you, he'd never remain there while his legs had power to run away with him."

They met by accident on Madison Square, and shook hands for the first time in many years. High in the Metropolitan Tower the chimes celebrated the occasion by sounding the half hour.

"It seems incredible," exclaimed George Z. Green, "that you could have become so famous! You never displayed any remarkable ability in school."

"I never displayed any ability at all. But you did," said Williams admiringly.

"How beautifully you used to write your name on the blackboard! How neat and scholarly you were in everything."

"I know it," said Green gloomily. "And you flunked in almost everything."

"In everything," admitted Williams, deeply mortified.

"And yet," said Green, "here we are at thirty odd; and I'm merely a broker, and—look what you are! Why, I can't go anywhere but I find one of your novels staring me in the face. I've been in Borneo: they're there! They're in Australia and China and Patagonia. Why the devil do you suppose people buy the stories you write?"

"I'm sure I don't know," said Williams modestly.

"I don't know either, though I read them myself sometimes—I don't know why. They're all very well in their way—if you care for that sort of book—but the things you tell about, Williams, never could have happened. I'm not knocking you; I'm a realist, that's all. And when I read a short story by you in which a young man sees a pretty girl, and begins to talk to her without being introduced to her, and then marries her before luncheon—and finds he's married a Balkan Princess—good-night! I just wonder why people stand for your books; that's all."

"So do I," said Williams, much embarrassed. "I wouldn't stand for them myself."

"Why," continued Green warmly, "I read a story of yours in some magazine the other day, in which a young man sees a pretty girl for the first time in his life and is married to her inside of three quarters of an hour! And I ask you, Williams, how you would feel after spending fifteen cents on such a story?"

"I'm terribly sorry, old man," murmured Williams. "Here's your fifteen—if you like——"

"Dammit," said Green indignantly, "it isn't that they're not readable stories! I had fifteen cents' worth all right. But it makes a man sore to see what happens to the young men in your stories—and all the queens they collect—and then to go about town and never see anything of that sort!"

"There are millions of pretty girls in town," ventured Williams. "I don't think I exaggerate in that respect."

"But they'd call an officer if young men in real life behaved as they do in your stories. As a matter of fact and record, there's no more romance in New York than there is in the annual meeting of the British Academy of Ancient Assyrian Inscriptions. And you know it, Williams!"

"I think it depends on the individual man," said Williams timidly.

"How?"

"If there's any romance in a man himself, he's apt to find the world rather full of it."

"Do you mean to say there isn't any romance in me?" demanded George Z. Green hotly.

"I don't know, George. Is there?"

"Plenty. Pl-en-ty! I'm always looking for romance. I look for it when I go down town to business; I look for it when I go home. Do I find it? No! Nothing ever happens to me. Nothing beautiful and wealthy beyond the dreams of avarice ever tries to pick me up. Explain that!"

Williams, much abashed, ventured no explanation.

"And to think," continued Green, "that you, my old school friend, should become a celebrity merely by writing such stories! Why, you're as celebrated as any brand of breakfast food!"

"You don't have to read my books, you know," protested Williams mildly.

"I don't have to—I know it. But I do. Everybody does. And nobody knows why. So, meeting you again after all these unromantic years, I thought I'd just ask you whether by any chance you happen to know of any particular section of the city where a plain, everyday broker might make a hit with the sort of girl you write about. Do you?"

"Any section of this city is romantic enough—if you only approach it in the proper spirit," asserted Williams.

"You mean if my attitude toward romance is correct I'm likely to encounter it almost anywhere?"

"That is my theory," admitted Williams bashfully.

"Oh! Well, what is the proper attitude? Take me, for example. I've just been to the bank. I carry, at this moment, rather a large sum of money in my inside overcoat pocket. My purpose in drawing it was to blow it. Now, tell me how to blow it romantically."

"How can I tell you such a thing, George——"

"It's your business. You tell people such things in books. Now, tell me, face to face, man to man, how to get thoroughly mixed up in the sort of romance you write—the kind of romance that has made William McWilliam Williams famous!"

"I'm sorry——"

"What! You won't! You admit that what you write is bunk? You confess that you don't know where there are any stray queens with whom I might become happily entangled within the next fifteen minutes?"

"I admit no such thing," said Williams with dignity. "If your attitude is correct, in ten minutes you can be up against anything on earth!"

"Where?"

"Anywhere!"

"Very well! Here we are on Madison Square. There's Admiral Farragut; there's the Marble Tower. Do you mean that if I walk from this spot for ten minutes—no matter in what direction—I'll walk straight into Romance up to my neck?"

"If your attitude is correct, yes. But you've got to know the elements of Romance when you see them."

"What are the elements of Romance? What do they resemble?" demanded George Z. Green.

Williams said, in a low, impressive voice:

"Anything that seems to you unusual is very likely to be an element in a possible romance. If you see anything extraordinary during the next ten minutes, follow it up. And ninety-nine chances in a hundred it will lead you into complications. Interfering with other people's business usually does," he added pleasantly.

"But," said Green, "suppose during the next ten minutes, or twenty minutes, or the next twenty-four hours I don't see anything unusual."

"It will be your own fault if you don't. The Unusual is occurring all about us, every second. A trained eye can always see it."

"But suppose the Unusual doesn't occur for the next ten minutes," insisted Green, exasperated. "Suppose the Unusual is taking a vacation? It would be just my luck."

"Then," said Williams, "you will have to imagine that everything you see is unusual. Or else," he added blandly, "you yourself will have to start something. That is where the creative mind comes in. When there's nothing doing it starts something."

"Does it ever get arrested?" inquired Green ironically. "The creative mind! Sure! That's where all this bally romance is!—in the creative mind. I knew it. Good-bye."

They shook hands; Williams went down town.

XXII

This picture is not concerned with his destination. Or even whether he ever got

there.

But it is very directly concerned with George Z. Green, and the direction he took when he parted from his old school friend.

As he walked up town he said to himself, "Bunk!" several times. After a few moments he fished out his watch.

"I know I'm an ass," he said to himself, "but I'll take a chance. I'll give myself exactly ten minutes to continue making an ass of myself. And if I see the faintest symptom of Romance—if I notice anything at all peculiar and unusual in any person or any thing during the next ten minutes, I won't let it get away—believe me!"

He walked up Broadway instead of Fifth Avenue. After a block or two he turned west at hazard, crossed Sixth Avenue and continued.

He was walking in one of the upper Twenties—he had not particularly noticed which. Commercial houses nearly filled the street, although a few old-time residences of brownstone still remained. Once well-to-do and comfortable homes, they had degenerated into chop sueys, boarding houses, the abodes of music publishers, artificial flower makers, and mediums.

It was now a shabby, unkempt street, and Green already was considering it a hopeless hunting ground, and had even turned to retrace his steps toward Sixth Avenue, when the door of a neighbouring house opened and down the shabby, brownstone stoop came hurrying an exceedingly pretty girl.

Now, the unusual part of the incident lay in the incongruity of the street and the girl. For the street and the house out of which she emerged so hastily were mean and ignoble; but the girl herself fairly radiated upper Fifth Avenue from the perfectly appointed and expensive simplicity of hat and gown to the obviously aristocratic and dainty face and figure.

"Is she a symptom?" thought Green to himself. "Is she an element? That is sure a rotten looking joint she came out of."

Moved by a sudden and unusual impulse of intelligence, he ran up the brownstone stoop and read the dirty white card pasted on the façade above the door bell.

THE PRINCESS ZIMBAMZIM

TRANCE MEDIUM. FORTUNES.

Taken aback, he looked after the pretty girl who was now hurrying up the street as though the devil were at her dainty heels.

Could she be the Princess Zimbamzim? Common sense rejected the idea, as did the sudden jerk of soiled lace curtains at the parlour window, and the apparition of a fat lady in a dingy, pink tea-gown. That must be the Princess

Zimbamzim and the pretty girl had ventured into these purlieus to consult her. Why?

"This is certainly a symptom of romance!" thought the young man excitedly. And he started after the pretty girl at a Fifth Avenue amble.

He overtook and passed her at Sixth Avenue, and managed to glance at her without being offensive. To his consternation, she was touching her tear-stained eyes with her handkerchief. She did not notice him.

What could be the matter? With what mystery was he already in touch?

Tremendously interested he fell back a few paces and lighted a cigarette, allowing her to pass him; then he followed her. Never before in his life had he done such a scandalous thing.

On Broadway she hailed a taxi, got into it, and sped uptown. There was another taxi available; Green took it and gave the driver a five dollar tip to keep the first taxi in view.

Which was very easy, for it soon stopped at a handsome apartment house on Park Avenue; the girl sprang out, and entered the building almost running.

For a moment George Z. Green thought that all was lost. But the taxi she had taken remained, evidently waiting for her; and sure enough, in a few minutes out she came, hurrying, enveloped in a rough tweed travelling coat and carrying a little satchel. Slam! went the door of her taxi; and away she sped, and Green after her in his taxi.

Again the chase proved to be very short. Her taxi stopped at the Pennsylvania Station; out she sprang, paid the driver, and hurried straight for the station restaurant, Green following at a fashionable lope.

She took a small table by a window; Green took the next one. It was not because she noticed him and found his gaze offensive, but because she felt a draught that she rose and took the table behind Green, exactly where he could not see her unless he twisted his neck into attitudes unseemly.

He wouldn't do such things, being really a rather nice young man; and it was too late for him to change his table without attracting her attention, because the waiter already had brought him whatever he had ordered for tea—muffins, buns, crumpets—he neither knew nor cared.

So he ate them with jam, which he detested; and drank his tea and listened with all his ears for the slightest movement behind him which might indicate that she was leaving.

Only once did he permit himself to turn around, under pretense of looking for a waiter; and he saw two blue eyes still brilliant with unshed tears and a very lovely but unhappy mouth all ready to quiver over its toast and marmalade.

What on earth could be the matter with that girl? What terrible tragedy could it be that was still continuing to mar her eyes and twitch her sensitive, red lips?

Green, sipping his tea, trembled pleasantly all over as he realised that at last he was setting his foot upon the very threshold of Romance. And he determined to cross that threshold if neither good manners, good taste, nor the police interfered.

And what a wonderful girl for his leading lady! What eyes! What hair! What lovely little hands, with the gloves hastily rolled up from the wrist! Why should she be unhappy? He'd like to knock the block off any man who——

Green came to himself with a thrill of happiness: her pretty voice was sounding in exquisite modulations behind him as she asked the waiter for m-more m-marmalade.

In a sort of trance, Green demolished bun after bun. Normally, he loathed the indigestible. After what had seemed to him an interminable length of time, he ventured to turn around again in pretense of calling a waiter.

Her chair was empty!

At first he thought she had disappeared past all hope of recovery; but the next instant he caught sight of her hastening out toward the ticket boxes.

Flinging a five-dollar bill on the table, he hastily invited the waiter to keep the change; sprang to his feet, and turned to seize his overcoat. It was gone from the hook where he had hung it just behind him.

Astonished, he glanced at the disappearing girl, and saw his overcoat over her arm. For a moment he supposed that she had mistaken it for her own ulster, but no! She was wearing her own coat, too.

A cold and sickening sensation assailed the pit of Green's stomach. Was it not a mistake, after all? Was this lovely young girl a professional criminal? Had she or some of her band observed Green coming out of the bank and thrusting a fat wallet into the inside pocket of his overcoat?

He was walking now, as fast as he was thinking, keeping the girl in view amid the throngs passing through the vast rotunda.

When she stopped at a ticket booth he entered the brass railed space behind her.

She did not appear to know exactly where she was going, for she seemed by turns distraught and agitated; and he heard her ask the ticket agent when the next train left for the extreme South.

Learning that it left in a few minutes, and finding that she could secure a stateroom, she took it, paid for it, and hastily left without a glance behind her at Green.

Meanwhile Green had very calmly slipped one hand into the breast pocket of his own overcoat, where it trailed loosely over her left arm, meaning to extract his wallet without anybody observing him. The wallet was not there. He was greatly inclined to run after her, but he didn't. He watched her depart, then:

"Is there another stateroom left on the Verbena Special?" he inquired of the ticket agent, coolly enough.

"One. Do you wish it?"

"Yes."

The ticket agent made out the coupons and shoved the loose change under the grille, saying:

"Better hurry, sir. You've less than a minute."

He ran for his train and managed to swing aboard just as the coloured porters were closing the vestibules and the train was in motion.

A trifle bewildered at what he had done, and by the rapidity with which he had done it, he sank down in the vacant observation car to collect his thoughts.

He was on board the Verbena Special—the southern train-de-luxe—bound for Jacksonville, St. Augustine, Palm Beach, Verbena Inlet, or Miami—or for Nassau, Cuba, and the remainder of the West Indies—just as he chose.

He had no other luggage than a walking-stick. Even his overcoat was in possession of somebody else. That was the situation that now faced George Z. Green.

But as the train emerged from the river tube, and he realised all this, he grew calmer; and the calmer he grew the happier he grew.

He was no longer on the threshold of Romance; he had crossed it, and already he was being whirled away blindly into the Unusual and the Unknown!

Exultingly he gazed out of the windows upon the uninspiring scenery of New Jersey. A wonderful sense of physical lightness and mental freedom took delightful possession of him. Opportunity had not beckoned him in vain. Chance had glanced sideways at him, and he had recognised the pretty flirt. His was certainly some brain!

And now, still clinging to the skirts of Chance, he was being whisked away, pell mell, headlong toward Destiny, in the trail of a slender, strange young girl who had swiped his overcoat and who seemed continually inclined to tears.

The incident of the overcoat no longer troubled him. That garment of his was not unlike the rough travelling coat she herself wore. And it might have been natural to her, in her distress of mind and very evident emotion, to have seized it by mistake and made off with it, forgetting that she still wore her own.

Of course it was a mistake pure and simple. He had only to look at the girl and understand that. One glance at her sweet, highbred features was sufficient to exonerate her as a purloiner of gentlemen's garments.

Green crossed his legs, folded his arms, and reflected. The overcoat was another and most important element in this nascent Romance.

The difficulty lay in knowing how to use the overcoat to advantage in furthering and further complicating a situation already delightful.

Of course he could do the obvious: he could approach her and take off his hat and do the well-bred and civil and explain to her the mistake.

But suppose she merely said: "I'm sorry," handed over his coat, and continued to read her magazine. That would end it. And it mustn't end until he found out why she had emerged with tears in her beautiful eyes from the abode of the Princess Zimbamzim.

Besides, he was sure of getting his coat, his wallet, and its contents. His name and address were in the wallet; also both were sewed inside the inner pocket of the overcoat.

What would ultimately happen would be this: sooner or later she'd come to, wake up, dry her pretty eyes, look about, and find that she had two overcoats in her possession.

It would probably distress her dreadfully, particularly when she discovered the wallet and the money. But, wherever she was going, as soon as she reached there she'd send overcoat and money back to his address—doubtless with a pretty and contrite note of regret.

Yes, but that wouldn't do! What good would the overcoat and the money be to him, if he were South and she shipped them North? And yet he was afraid to risk an abrupt ending to his Romance by explaining to her the mistake.

No; he'd merely follow her for the present. He couldn't help it very well, being aboard the same train. So it would not be difficult to keep his eye on her as well as his overcoat, and think out at his leisure how best to tend, guard, cherish, and nourish the delicate and unopened bud of Romance.

Meanwhile, there were other matters he must consider; so he wrote out a telegram to Washington ordering certain necessary articles to be brought aboard the Verbena Special on its arrival there. The porter took charge of it.

That night at dinner he looked for the girl in vain. She did not enter the dining-car while he was there. Haunting the corridors afterward he saw no sign of her anywhere until, having received his necessities in a brand new travelling satchel, and on his way to his stateroom, he caught a glimpse of her, pale and agitated, in conversation with the porter at her partly opened door.

She did not even glance at him as he entered his stateroom, but he could not avoid hearing what she was saying because her enunciation was so exquisitely distinct.

"Porter," she said in her low, sweet voice, "I have, somehow, made a very dreadful mistake somewhere. I have a man's overcoat here which does not belong to me. The cloth is exactly like the cloth of my own travelling ulster, and I must have forgotten that I had mine on when I took this."

"Ain't de gemman abohd de Speshul, Miss?" inquired the porter.

"I'm afraid not. I'm certain that I must have taken it in the station restaurant and brought it aboard the train."

"Ain't nuff'n in de pockets, is dey?" asked the porter.

"Yes; there's a wallet strapped with a rubber band. I didn't feel at liberty to open it. But I suppose I ought to in order to find out the owner's name if possible."

"De gemman's name ain't sewed inside de pocket, is it, Miss?"

"I didn't look," she said.

So the porter took the coat, turned it inside out, explored the inside pocket, found the label, and read:

"Snipps Brothers: December, 1913. George Z. Green."

A stifled exclamation from the girl checked him. Green also protruded his head cautiously from his own doorway.

The girl, standing partly in the aisle, was now leaning limply against the door-sill, her hand pressed convulsively to her breast, her face white and frightened.

"Is you ill, Miss?" asked the porter anxiously.

"I—no. Z—what name was that you read?"

"George Z. Green, Miss——"

"It—it can't be! Look again! It can't be!"

Her face was ashen to the lips; she closed her eyes for a second, swayed; then her hand clutched the door-sill; she straightened up with an effort and opened her eyes, which now seemed dilated by some powerful emotion.

"Let me see that name!" she said, controlling her voice with an obvious effort.

The porter turned the pocket inside out for her inspection. There it was:

"George Z. Green: 1008-1/2 Fifth Avenue, New York."

"If you knows de gemman, Miss," suggested the porter, "you all kin take dishere garmint back yo'se'f when you comes No'th."

"Thank you.... Then—I won't trouble you.... I'll—I'll ta-t-take it back myself—when I go North."

"I kin ship it if you wishes, Miss."

She said excitedly: "If you ship it from somewhere South, he—Mr. Green—would see where it came from by the parcels postmark on the express tag—wouldn't he?"

"Yaas, Miss."

"Then I don't want you to ship it! I'll do it myself.... How can I ship it without giving Mr. Green a clue—" she shuddered, "—a clue to my whereabouts?"

"Does you know de gemman, Miss?"

"No!" she said, with another shudder,— "and I do not wish to. I—I particularly do not wish ever to know him—or even to see him. And above all I do not wish Mr. Green to come South and investigate the circumstances concerning this overcoat. He might take it into his head to do such a thing. It—it's horrible enough that I have—that I actually have in my possession the overcoat of the very man on whose account I left New York at ten minutes' notice——"

Her pretty voice broke and her eyes filled.

"You—you don't understand, porter," she added, almost hysterically, "but my possession of this overcoat—of all the billions and billions of overcoats in all the world—is a t-terrible and astounding b-blow to me!"

"Is—is you afeard o' dishere overcoat, Miss?" inquired the astonished darkey.

"Yes!" she said. "Yes, I am! I'm horribly afraid of that overcoat! I—I'd like to throw it from the train window, but I—I can't do that, of course! It would be stealing——"

Her voice broke again with nervous tears:

"I d-don't want the coat! And I can't throw it away! And if it's shipped to him from the South he may come down here and investigate. He's in New York now. That's why I am on my way South! I—I want him to remain in New York until—until all—d-danger is over. And by the first of April it will be over. And then I'll come North—and bring him his coat——"

The bewildered darkey stared at her and at the coat which she had unconsciously clutched to her breast.

"Do you think," she said, "that M-Mr. Green will need the coat this winter? Do you suppose anything would happen to him if he doesn't have it for a while—pneumonia or anything? Oh!" she exclaimed in a quivering voice, "I wish he and his overcoat were at the South Pole!"

Green withdrew his head and pressed both palms to his temples. Could he trust

his ears? Was he going mad? Holding his dizzy head in both hands he heard the girl say that she herself would attend to shipping the coat; heard the perplexed darkey take his leave and go; heard her stateroom door close.

Seated in his stateroom he gazed vacantly at the couch opposite, so completely bewildered with his first over-dose of Romance that his brain seemed to spin like a frantic squirrel in a wheel, and his thoughts knocked and jumbled against each other until it truly seemed to him that all his senses were fizzling out like wet firecrackers.

What on earth had he ever done to inspire such horror in the mind of this young girl?

What terrible injury had he committed against her or hers that the very sound of his name terrified her—the mere sight of his overcoat left her almost hysterical?

Helplessly, half stupefied, he cast about in his wrecked mind to discover any memory or record of any injury done to anybody during his particularly blameless career on earth.

In school he had punched the noses of several schoolmates, and had been similarly smitten in return. That was the extent of physical injury ever done to anybody.

Of grave moral wrong he knew he was guiltless. True, he had frequently skinned the assembly at convivial poker parties. But also he had often opened jacks only to be mercilessly deprived of them amid the unfeeling and brutal laughter of his companions. No, he was not guilty of criminal gambling.

Had he ever done a wrong to anybody in business? Never. His firm's name was the symbol for probity.

He dashed his hands to his brow distractedly. What in Heaven's name had he done to fill the very soul of this young girl with fear and loathing? What in the name of a merciful Providence had he, George Z. Green, banker and broker, ever done to drive this young and innocent girl out of the City of New York!

To collect and marshal his disordered thoughts was difficult but he accomplished it with the aid of cigarettes. To a commonplace intellect there is no aid like a cigarette.

At first he was inclined to believe that the girl had merely mistaken him for another man with a similar name. George Z. Green was not an unusual name.

But his address in town was also written inside his coat pocket; and she had read it. Therefore, it was painfully evident to him that her detestation and fear was for him.

What on earth had inspired such an attitude of mind toward himself in a girl he

had seen for the first time that afternoon? He could not imagine. And another strange feature of the affair was that she had not particularly noticed him. Therefore, if she entertained such a horror of him, why had she not exhibited some trace of it when he was in her vicinity?

Certainly she had not exhibited it by crying. He exonerated himself on that score, for she had been on the verge of tears when he first beheld her hurrying out of the parlours of the Princess Zimbamzim.

It gradually became plain to him that, although there could be no doubt that this girl was afraid of him, and cordially disliked him, yet strangely enough, she did not know him by sight.

Consequently, her attitude must be inspired by something she had heard concerning him. What?

He puffed his cigarette and groaned. As far as he could remember, he had never harmed a fly.

XXIII

That night he turned in, greatly depressed. Bad dreams assailed his slumbers—menacing ones like the visions that annoyed Eugene Aram.

And every time he awoke and sat up in his bunk, shaken by the swaying car, he realised that Romance had also its tragic phases—a sample of which he was now enduring. And yet, miserable as he was, a horrid sort of joy neutralised the misery when he recollected that it was Romance, after all, and that he, George Z. Green, was in it up to his neck.

A grey morning—a wet and pallid sky lowering over the brown North Carolina fields—this was his waking view from his tumbled bunk.

Neither his toilet nor his breakfast dispelled the gloom; certainly the speeding landscape did not.

He sat grimly in the observation car, reviewing a dispiriting landscape set with swamps, razorbacks, buzzards, and niggers.

Luncheon aided him very little. She had not appeared at all. Either her own misery and fright were starving her to death or she preferred to take her meals in her stateroom. He hoped fervently the latter might be the case; that murder might not be added to whatever else he evidently was suspected of committing.

Like the ticket he had seen her purchase, his own ticket took him as far as Ormond. Of course he could go on if she did. She could go to the West Indies

and ultimately to Brazil. So could he. They were on the main travelled road to almost anywhere.

Nevertheless, he was on the watch at St. Augustine; and when he saw her come forth hastily and get into a bus emblazoned with the name and escutcheon of the Hotel Royal Orchid, he got in also.

The bus was full. Glancing at the other occupants of the bus, she included him in her brief review, and to his great relief he saw her incurious blue eyes pass calmly to the next countenance.

A dreadful, almost hysterical impulse assailed him to suddenly rise and say: "I am George Z. Green!"—merely to observe the cataclysmic effect on her.

But it did not seem so funny to him on after thoughts, for the chances appeared to be that she could not survive the shock. Which scared him; and he looked about nervously for fear somebody who knew him might be among the passengers, and might address him by name.

In due time the contents of the bus trooped into the vast corridors of the Hotel Royal Orchid. One by one they registered; and on the ledger Green read her name with palpitating heart—Miss Marie Wiltz and Maid. And heard her say to the clerk that her maid had been delayed and would arrive on the next train.

It never occurred to this unimaginative man to sign any name but his own to the register that was shoved toward him. Which perfectly proves his guilelessness and goodness.

He went to his room, cleansed from his person the stains of travel, and, having no outer clothes to change to, smoked a cigarette and gazed moodily from the window.

Now, his window gave on the drive-encircled fountain before the front entrance to the hotel; and, as he was standing there immersed in tobacco smoke and gloom, he was astonished to see the girl herself come out hastily, travelling satchel in hand, and spring lightly into a cab. It was one of those victorias which are stationed for hire in front of such southern hotels; he could see her perfectly plainly; saw the darkey coachman flourish his whip; saw the vehicle roll away.

The next instant he seized his new satchel, swept his brand new toilet articles into it, snapped it, picked up hat and cane, and dashed down stairs to the desk.

Here he paid his bill, ran out, and leaped into a waiting victoria.

"Where did that other cab drive?" he demanded breathlessly to his negro coachman. "Didn't you hear what the young lady said to her driver?"

"Yaas, suh. De young lady done say she's in a pow'ful hurry, suh. She 'low she gotta git to Ormond."

"Ormond! There's no train!"

"Milk-train, suh."

"What! Is she going to Ormond on a milk-train?"

"Yaas, suh."

"All right, then. Drive me to the station."

It was not very far. She was standing alone on the deserted platform, her bag at her feet, his overcoat lying across it. Her head was bent, and she did not notice him at first. Never had he seen a youthful figure so exquisitely eloquent of despair.

The milk-train was about an hour overdue, which would make it about due in the South. Green seated himself on a wooden bench and folded his hands over the silver crook of his walking-stick. The situation was now perfectly clear to him. She had come down from her room, and had seen his name on the register, had been seized by a terrible panic, and had fled.

Had he been alone and unobserved, he might have attempted to knock his brains out with his walking-stick. He desired to, earnestly, when he realised what an ass he had been to sign the register.

She had begun to pace the platform, nervously, halting and leaning forward from time to time to scan impatiently the long, glittering perspective of the metals.

It had begun to grow dusk. Lanterns on switches and semaphores flashed out red, green, blue, white, stringing their jewelled sparks far away into the distance.

To and fro she paced the empty platform, passing and repassing him. And he began to notice presently that she looked at him rather intently each time.

He wondered whether she suspected his identity. Guiltless of anything that he could remember having done, nevertheless he shivered guiltily every time she glanced at him.

Then the unexpected happened; and he fairly shook in his shoes as she marched deliberately up to him.

"I beg your pardon," she said in a very sweet and anxious voice, "but might I ask if you happen to be going to Ormond?"

He was on his feet, hat in hand, by this time; his heart and pulses badly stampeded; but he managed to answer calmly that he was going to Ormond.

"There is only a milk-train, I understand," she said.

"So I understand."

"Do you think there will be any difficulty in my obtaining permission to travel

on it? The station-master says that permission is not given to ladies unaccompanied."

She looked at him almost imploringly.

"I really must go on that train," she said in a low voice. "It is desperately necessary. Could you—could you manage to arrange it for me? I would be so grateful!—so deeply grateful!"

"I'll do what I can," said that unimaginative man. "Probably bribery can fix it _____"

"There might be—if—if—you would be willing—if you didn't object—I know it sounds very strange—but my case is so desperate——" She checked herself, flushing a delicate pink. And he waited.

Then, very resolutely she looked up at him:

"Would you—could you p-pretend that I am—am—your sister?"

"Certainly," he said. An immense happiness seized him. He was not only up to his neck in Romance. It was already over his head, and he was out of his depth, and swimming.

"Certainly," he repeated quietly, controlling his joy by a supreme effort. "That would be the simplest way out of it, after all."

She said earnestly, almost solemnly: "If you will do this generous thing for—for a stranger—in very deep perplexity and trouble—that stranger will remain in your debt while life lasts!"

She had not intended to be dramatic; she may not have thought she was; but the tears again glimmered in her lovely eyes, and the situation seemed tense enough to George Z. Green.

Moreover, he felt that complications already were arising—complications which he had often read of and sometimes dreamed of. Because, as he stood there in the southern dusk, looking at this slim, young girl, he began to realise that never before in all his life had he gazed upon anything half as beautiful.

Very far away a locomotive whistled: they both turned, and saw the distant headlight glittering on the horizon like a tiny star.

"W-would it be best for us to t-take your name or mine—in case they ask us?" she stammered, flushing deeply.

"Perhaps," he said pleasantly, "you might be more likely to remember yours in an emergency."

"I think so," she said naïvely; "it is rather difficult for me to deceive anybody. My name is Marie Wiltz."

"Then I am Mr. Wiltz, your brother, for an hour or two."

"If you please," she murmured.

It had been on the tip of his tongue to add, "Mr. George Z. Wiltz," but he managed to check himself.

The great, lumbering train came rolling in; the station agent looked very sharply through his spectacles at Miss Wiltz when he saw her with Green, but being a Southerner, he gallantly assumed that it was all right.

One of the train crew placed two wooden chairs for them in the partly empty baggage car; and there they sat, side by side, while the big, heavy milk cans were loaded aboard, and a few parcels shoved into their car. Then the locomotive tooted leisurely; there came a jolt, a resonant clash; and the train was under way.

XXIV

For a while the baggage master fussed about the car, sorting out packages for Ormond; then, courteously inquiring whether he could do anything for them, and learning that he could not, he went forward into his own den, leaving Marie Wiltz and George Z. Green alone in a baggage car dimly illumined by a small and smoky lamp.

Being well-bred young people, they broke the tension of the situation gracefully and naturally, pretending to find it amusing to travel in a milk train to a fashionable southern resort.

And now that the train was actually under way and speeding southward through the night, her relief from anxiety was very plain to him. He could see her relax; see the frightened and hunted look in her eyes die out, the natural and delicious colour return to her cheeks.

As they conversed with amiable circumspection and pleasant formality, he looked at her whenever he dared without seeming to be impertinent; and he discovered that the face she had worn since he had first seen her was not her natural expression; that her features in repose or in fearless animation were winning and almost gay.

She had a delightful mouth, sweet and humourous; a delicate nose and chin, and two very blue and beautiful eyes that looked at him at moments so confidently, so engagingly, that the knowledge of what her expression would be if she knew who he was smote him at moments, chilling his very marrow.

What an astonishing situation! How he would have scorned a short story with such a situation in it! And he thought of Williams—poor old Williams!—and mentally begged his pardon.

For he understood now that real life was far stranger than fiction. He realised at last that Romance loitered ever around the corner; that Opportunity was always gently nudging one's elbow.

There lay his overcoat on the floor, trailing over her satchel. He looked at it so fixedly that she noticed the direction of his gaze, glanced down, blushed furiously.

"It may seem odd to you that I am travelling with a man's overcoat," she said, "but it will seem odder yet when I tell you that I don't know how I came by it."

"That is odd," he admitted smilingly. "To whom does it belong?"

Her features betrayed the complicated emotions that successively possessed her—perplexity, anxiety, bashfulness.

After a moment she said in a low voice: "You have done so much for me already—you have been so exceedingly nice to me—that I hesitate to ask of you anything more——"

"Please ask!" he urged. "It will be really a happiness for me to serve you."

Surprised at his earnestness and the unembarrassed warmth of his reply, she looked up at him gratefully after a moment.

"Would you," she said, "take charge of that overcoat for me and send it back to its owner?"

He laughed nervously: "Is that all? Why, of course I shall! I'll guarantee that it is restored to its rightful owner if you wish."

"Will you? If you do that——" she drew a long, sighing breath, "it will be a relief to me—such a wonderful relief!" She clasped her gloved hands tightly on her knee, smiled at him breathlessly.

"I don't suppose you will ever know what you have done for me. I could never adequately express my deep, deep gratitude to you——"

"But—I am doing nothing except shipping back an overcoat——"

"Ah—if you only knew what you really are doing for me! You are helping me in the direst hour of need I ever knew. You are aiding me to regain control over my own destiny! You are standing by me in the nick of time, sheltering me, encouraging me, giving me a moment's respite until I can become mistress of my own fate once more."

The girl had ended with a warmth, earnestness and emotion which she seemed to be unable to control. Evidently she had been very much shaken, and in the blessed relief from the strain the reaction was gathering intensity.

They sat in silence for a few moments; then she looked up, nervously twisting her gloved fingers.

"I am sorry," she said in a low voice, "not to exhibit reticence and proper self-control before a—a stranger.... But I—I have been—rather badly—frightened."

"Nothing need frighten you now," he said.

"I thought so, too. I thought that as soon as I left New York it would be all right. But—but the first thing I saw in my stateroom was that overcoat! And the next thing that occurred was—was almost—stupefying. Until I boarded this milk-train, I think I must have been almost irresponsible from sheer fright."

"What frightened you?" he asked, trembling internally.

"I—I can't tell you. It would do no good. You could not help me."

"Yet you say I have already aided you."

"Yes.... That is true.... And you will send that overcoat back, won't you?"

"Yes," he said. "To remember it, I'd better put it on, I think."

The southern night had turned chilly, and he was glad to bundle into his own overcoat again.

"From where will you ship it?" she asked anxiously.

"From Ormond——"

"Please don't!"

"Why?"

"Because," she said desperately, "the owner of that coat might trace it to Ormond and—and come down there."

"Where is he?"

She paled and clasped her hands tighter:

"I—I thought—I had every reason to believe that he was in New York. B-but he isn't. He is in St. Augustine!"

"You evidently don't wish to meet him."

"No—oh, no, I don't wish to meet him—ever!"

"Oh. Am I to understand that this—this fellow," he said fiercely, "is following you?"

"I don't know—oh, I really don't know," she said, her blue eyes wide with apprehension. "All I know is that I do not desire to see him—or to have him see me.... He must not see me; it must not be—it shall not be! I—it's a very terrible thing;—I don't know exactly what I'm—I'm fighting against—because it's—it's simply too dreadful——"

Emotion checked her, and for a moment she covered her eyes with her gloved hands, sitting in silence.

"Can't I help you?" he asked gently.

She dropped her hands and stared at him.

"I don't know. Do you think you could? It all seems so—like a bad dream. I'll have to tell you about it if you are to help me—won't I?"

"If you think it best," he said with an inward quiver.

"That's it. I don't know whether it is best to ask your advice. Yet, I don't know exactly what else to do," she added in a bewildered way, passing one hand slowly over her eyes. "Shall I tell you?"

"Perhaps you'd better."

"I think I will!... I—I left New York in a panic at a few moments' notice. I thought I'd go to Ormond and hide there for a while, and then, if—if matters looked threatening, I could go to Miami and take a steamer for the West Indies, and from there—if necessary—I could go to Brazil——"

"But why?" he demanded, secretly terrified at his own question.

She looked at him blankly a moment: "Oh; I forgot. It—it all began without any warning; and instantly I began to run away."

"From what?"

"From—from the owner of that overcoat!"

"Who is he?"

"His name," she said resolutely, "is George Z. Green. And I am running away from him.... And I am afraid you'll think it very odd when I tell you that although I am running away from him I do not know him, and I have never seen him."

"Wh-what is the matter with him?" inquired Green, with a sickly attempt at smiling.

"He wants to marry me!" she exclaimed indignantly. "That is what is the matter with him."

"Are you sure?" he asked, astounded.

"Perfectly. And the oddest thing of all is that I do not think he has ever seen me—or ever even heard of me."

"But how can——"

"I'll tell you. I must tell you now, anyway. It began the evening before I left New York. I—I live alone—with a companion—having no parents. I gave a dinner dance the evening before I—I ran away;—there was music, too;

professional dancers;—a crystal-gazing fortune teller—and a lot of people—loads of them."

She drew a short, quick breath, and shook her pretty head.

"Everybody's been talking about the Princess Zimbamzim this winter. So I had her there.... She—she is uncanny—positively terrifying. A dozen women were scared almost ill when they came out of her curtained corner.

"And—and then she demanded me.... I had no belief in such things.... I went into that curtained corner, never for one moment dreaming that what she might say would matter anything to me.... In ten minutes she had me scared and trembling like a leaf.... I didn't want to stay; I wanted to go. I—couldn't, somehow. My limbs were stiff—I couldn't control them—I couldn't get up! All my will power—was—was paralysed!"

The girl's colour had fled; she looked at Green with wide eyes dark with the memory of fear.

"She told me to come to her for an hour's crystal gazing the following afternoon. I—I didn't want to go. But I couldn't seem to keep away.

"Then a terrible thing happened. I—I looked into that crystal and I saw there—saw with my own eyes—myself being married to a—a perfectly strange man! I saw myself as clearly as in a looking glass;—but I could see only his back. He—he wore an overcoat—like that one I gave to you to send back. Think of it! Married to a man who was wearing an overcoat!

"And there was a clergyman who looked sleepy, and—and two strangers as witnesses—and there was I—I!—getting married to this man.... And the terrible thing about it was that I looked at him as though I—I loved him _____"

Her emotions overcame her for a moment, but she swallowed desperately, lifted her head, and forced herself to continue:

"Then the Princess Zimbamzim began to laugh, very horridly: and I asked her, furiously, who that man was. And she said: 'His name seems to be George Z. Green; he is a banker and broker; and he lives at 1008-1/2 Fifth Avenue.'

"'Am I marrying him?' I cried. 'Am I marrying a strange broker who wears an overcoat at the ceremony?'

"And she laughed her horrid laugh again and said: 'You certainly are, Miss Wiltz. You can not escape it. It is your destiny.'

"'When am I to do it?' I demanded, trembling with fright and indignation. And she told me that it was certain to occur within either three months or three days.... And—can you imagine my n-natural feelings of horror—and repugnance? Can you not now understand the panic that seized me—when

there, all the time in the crystal, I could actually see myself doing what that dreadful woman prophesied?"

"I don't blame you for running," he said, stunned.

"I do not blame myself. I ran. I fled, distracted, from that terrible house! I left word for my maid to pack and follow me to Ormond. I caught the first train I could catch. For the next three months I propose to continue my flight if—if necessary. And I fear it will be necessary."

"Finding his overcoat in your stateroom must have been a dreadful shock to you," he said, pityingly.

"Imagine! But when, not an hour ago, I saw his name on the register at the Hotel Royal Orchid—directly under my name!—can you—oh, can you imagine my utter terror?"

Her voice broke and she leaned up against the side of the car, so white, so quivering, so utterly demoralised by fear, that, alarmed, he took her trembling hands firmly in his.

"You mustn't give way," he said. "This won't do. You must show courage."

"How can I show courage when I'm f-frightened?"

"You must not be frightened, because—because I am going to stand by you. I am going to stand by you very firmly. I am going to see this matter through."

"Are you? It is so—so kind of you—so good—so generous.... Because it's uncanny enough to frighten even a man. You see we don't know what we're fighting. We're threatened by—by the occult! By unseen f-forces.... How could that man be in St. Augustine?"

He drew a long breath. "I am going to tell you something.... May I?"

She turned in silence to look at him. Something in his eyes disturbed her, and he felt her little, gloved hands tighten spasmodically within his own.

"It isn't anything to frighten you," he said. "It may even relieve you. Shall I tell you?"

Her lips formed a voiceless word of consent.

"Then I'll tell you.... I know George Z. Green."

"W-what?"

"I know him very well. He is—is an exceedingly—er—nice fellow."

"But I don't care! I'm not going to marry him!... Am I? Do you think I am?"

And she fell a-trembling so violently that, alarmed, he drew her to his shoulder, soothing her like a child, explaining that in the twentieth century no girl was going to marry anybody against her will.

Like a child she cowered against him, her hands tightening within his. The car swayed and rattled on its clanging trucks; the feeble lamp glimmered.

"If I thought," she said, "that George Z. Green was destined to marry me under such outrageous and humiliating circumstances, I—I believe I would marry the first decent man I encountered—merely to confound the Princess Zimbamzim—and every wicked crystal-gazer in the world! I—I simply hate them!"

He said: "Then you believe in them."

"How can I help it? Look at me! Look at me here, in full light—asking protection of you!... And I don't care! I—think I am becoming more angry than—than frightened. I think it is your kindness that has given me courage. Somehow, I feel safe with you. I am sure that I can rely on you; can't I?"

"Yes," he said miserably.

"I was very sure I could when I saw you sitting there on the platform before the milk-train came in.... I don't know how it was—I was not afraid to speak to you.... Something about you made me confident.... I said to myself, 'He is good! I knowit!' And so I spoke to you."

Conscience was tearing him inwardly to shreds, as the fox tore the Spartan. How could he pose as the sort of man she believed him to be, and endure the self-contempt now almost overwhelming him?

"I—I'm not good," he blurted out, miserably.

She turned and looked at him seriously for a moment. Then, for the first time aware of his arm encircling her, and her hands in his, she flushed brightly and freed herself, straightening up in her little wooden chair.

"You need not tell me that," she said. "I know you are good."

"As a m-matter of f-fact," he stammered. "I'm a scoundrel!"

"What?"

"I can't bear to have you know it—b-but I am!"

"How can you say that?—when you've been so perfectly sweet to me?" she exclaimed.

And after a moment's silence she laughed deliciously.

"Only to look at you is enough," she said, "for a girl to feel absolute confidence in you."

"Do you feel that?"

"I?... Yes.... Yes, I do. I would trust you without hesitation. I have trusted you, have I not? And after all, it is not so strange. You are the sort of man to whom I am accustomed. We are both of the same sort."

"No," he said gloomily, "I'm really a pariah."

"You! Why do you say such things, after you have been so—perfectly charming to a frightened girl?"

"I'm a pariah," he repeated. "I'm a social outcast! I—I know it, now." And he leaned his head wearily on both palms.

The girl looked at him in consternation.

"Are you unhappy?" she asked.

"Wretched."

"Oh," she said softly, "I didn't know that.... I am so sorry.... And to think that you took all my troubles on your shoulders, too,—burdened with your own! I—I knew you were that kind of man," she added warmly.

He only shook his head, face buried in his hands.

"I am so sorry," she repeated gently. "Would it help you if you told me?"

He did not answer.

"Because," she said sweetly, "it would make me very happy if I could be of even the very slightest use to you!"

No response.

"Because you have been so kind."

No response.

"—And so p-pleasant and c-cordial and——"

No response.

She looked at the young fellow who sat there with head bowed in his hands; and her blue eyes grew wistful.

"Are you in physical pain?"

"Mental," he said in a muffled voice.

"I am sorry. Don't you believe that I am?" she asked pitifully.

"You would not be sorry if you knew why I am suffering," he muttered.

"How can you say that?" she exclaimed warmly. "Do you think I am ungrateful? Do you think I am insensible to delicate and generous emotions? Do you suppose I could ever forget what you have done for me?"

"Suppose," he said in a muffled voice, "I turned out to be a—a villain?"

"You couldn't!"

"Suppose it were true that I am one?"

She said, with the warmth of total inexperience with villains, "What you have

been to me is only what concerns me. You have been good, generous, noble! And I—like you."

"You must not like me."

"I do! I do like you! I shall continue to do so—always——"

"You can not!"

"What? Indeed I can! I like you very much. I defy you to prevent me!"

"I don't want to prevent you—but you mustn't do it."

She sat silent for a moment. Then her lip trembled.

"Why may I not like you?" she asked unsteadily.

"I am not worth it."

He didn't know it, but he had given her the most fascinating answer that a man can give a young girl.

"If you are not worth it," she said tremulously, "you can become so."

"No, I never can."

"Why do you say that? No matter what a man has done—a young man—such as you—he can become worthy again of a girl's friendship—if he wishes to."

"I never could become worthy of yours."

"Why? What have you done? I don't care anyway. If you—if you want my—my friendship you can have it."

"No," he groaned, "I am sunk too low to even dream of it! You don't know—you don't know what you're saying. I am beyond the pale!"

He clutched his temples and shuddered. For a moment she gazed at him piteously, then her timid hand touched his arm.

"I can't bear to see you in despair," she faltered, "—you who have been so good to me. Please don't be unhappy—because—I want you to be happy——"

"I can never be that."

"Why?"

"Because—I am in love!"

"What?"

"With a girl who—hates me."

"Oh," she said faintly. Then the surprise in her eyes faded vaguely into wistfulness, and into something almost tender as she gazed at his bowed head.

"Any girl," she said, scarcely knowing what she was saying, "who could not love such a man as you is an absolutely negligible quantity."

His hands fell from his face and he sat up.

"Could you?"

"What?" she said, not understanding.

"Could you do what—what I—mentioned just now?"

She looked curiously at him for a moment, not comprehending. Suddenly a rose flush stained her face.

"I don't think you mean to say that to me," she said quietly.

"Yes," he said, "I do mean to say it.... Because, since I first saw you, I have—"

have dared to—to be in love with you."

"With me! We—you have not known me an hour!"

"I have known you three days."

"What?"

"I am George Z. Green!"

XXV

Minute after minute throbbed in silence, timed by the loud rhythm of the roaring wheels. He did not dare lift his head to look at her, though her stillness scared him. Awful and grotesque thoughts assailed him. He wondered whether she had survived the blow—and like an assassin he dared not look to see what he had done, but crouched there, overwhelmed with misery such as he never dreamed that a human heart could endure.

A century seemed to have passed before, far ahead, the locomotive whistled warningly for the Ormond station.

He understood what it meant, and clutched his temples, striving to gather courage sufficient to lift his head and face her blazing contempt—or her insensible and inanimate but beautiful young form lying in a merciful faint on the floor of the baggage car.

And at last he lifted his head.

She had risen and was standing by the locked side doors, touching her eyelashes with her handkerchief.

When he rose, the train was slowing down. Presently the baggage master came in, yawning; the side doors were unbolted and flung back as the car glided along a high, wooden platform.

They were standing side by side now; she did not look at him, but when the car stopped she laid her hand lightly on his arm.

Trembling in every fibre, he drew the little, gloved hand through his arm and aided her to descend.

"Are you unhappy?" he whispered tremulously.

"No.... What are we to do?"

"Am I to say?"

"Yes," she said faintly.

"Shall I register as your brother?"

She blushed and looked at him in a lovely and distressed way.

"What are we to do?" she faltered.

They entered the main hall of the great hotel at that moment, and she turned to look around her.

"Oh!" she exclaimed, clutching his arm. "Do you see that man? Do you see him?"

"Which man—dearest?——"

"That one over there! That is the clergyman I saw in the crystal. Oh, dear! Oh, dear! Is it going to come true right away?"

"I think it is," he said. "Are you afraid?"

She drew a deep, shuddering breath, lifted her eyes to his:

"N-no," she said.

Ten minutes later it was being done around the corner of the great veranda, where nobody was. The moon glimmered on the Halifax; the palmettos sighed in the chilly sea-wind; the still, night air was scented with orange bloom and the odour of the sea.

He wore his overcoat, and he used the plain, gold band which had decorated his little finger. The clergyman was brief and businesslike; the two clerks made dignified witnesses.

When it was done, and they were left alone, standing on the moonlit veranda, he said:

"Shall we send a present to the Princess Zimbamzim?"

"Yes.... A beautiful one."

He drew her to him; she laid both hands on his shoulders. When he kissed her, her face was cold and white as marble.

"Are you afraid?" he whispered.

The marble flushed pink.

"No," she said.

"That," said Stafford, "was certainly quick action. Ten minutes is a pretty short time for Fate to begin business."

"Fate," remarked Duane, "once got busy with me inside of ten seconds." He looked at Athalie.

"Ut solent poetae," she rejoined, calmly.

I said: "Verba placent et vox, et quod corrumpere non est; Quoque minor spes est, hoc magis ille cupit."

In a low voice Duane replied to me, looking at her: "Vera incessu patuit Dea."

Slowly the girl blushed, lowering her dark eyes to the green jade god resting in the rosy palm of her left hand.

"Physician, cure thyself," muttered Stafford, slowly twisting a cigarette to shreds in his nervous hands.

I rose, walked over to the small marble fountain and looked down at the sleeping goldfish. Here and there from the dusky magnificence of their colour a single scale glittered like a living spark under water.

"Are you preaching to them?" asked Athalie, raising her eyes from the green god in her palm.

"No matter where a man turns his eyes," said I, "they may not long remain undisturbed by the vision of gold. I was not preaching, Athalie; I was reflecting upon my poverty."

"It is an incurable ailment," said somebody; "the millionaire knows it; the gods themselves suffered from it. From the bleaching carcass of the peon to the mausoleum of the emperor, the world's highway winds through its victims' graves."

"Athalie," said I, "is it possible for you to look into your crystal and discover hidden treasure?"

"Not for my own benefit."

"For others?"

"I have done it."

"Could you locate a few millions for us?" inquired the novelist.

"Yes, widely distributed among you. Your right hand is heavy as gold; your brain jingles with it."

"I do not write for money," he said bluntly.

"That is why," she said, smiling and placing a sweetmeat between her lips.

I had the privilege of lighting a match for her.

XXVI

When the tip of her cigarette glowed rosy in the pearl-tinted gloom, the shadowy circle at her feet drew a little nearer.

"This is the story of Valdez," she said. "Listen attentively, you who hunger!"

On the first day it rained torrents; the light was very dull in the galleries;

fashion kept away. Only a few monomaniacs braved the weather, left dripping mackintoshes and umbrellas in the coat room, and spent the dull March morning in mousing about among the priceless treasures on view to those who had cards of admission. The sale was to take place three days later. Heikem was the auctioneer.

The collection to be disposed of was the celebrated library of Professor Octavo de Folio—a small one; but it was composed almost exclusively of rarities. A million and a half had been refused by the heirs, who preferred to take chances at auction.

And there were Caxtons, first edition Shakespeares, illuminated manuscripts, volumes printed privately for various kings and queens, bound sketch books containing exquisite aquarelles and chalk drawings by Bargue, Fortuny, Drouais, Boucher, John Downman; there were autographed monographs in manuscript; priceless order books of revolutionary generals, private diaries kept by men and women celebrated and notorious the world over.

But the heirs apparently preferred yachts and automobiles.

The library was displayed in locked glass cases, an attendant seated by each case, armed with a key and discretionary powers.

From where James White sat beside his particular case, he had a view of the next case and of the young girl seated beside it.

She was very pretty. No doubt, being out of a job, like himself, she was glad to take this temporary position. She was so pretty she made his head ache. Or it might have been the ventilation.

It rained furiously; a steady roar on the glass roof overhead filled the long and almost empty gallery of Mr. Heikem, the celebrated auctioneer, with a monotone as dull and incessant as the business voice of that great man.

Here and there a spectacled old gentleman nosed his way from case to case, making at intervals cabalistic pencil marks on the margin of his catalogue—which specimen of compiled literature alone cost five dollars.

It was a very dull day for James White, and also, apparently, for the pretty girl in charge of the adjoining case. Nobody even asked either of them to unlock the cases; and it began to appear to young White that the books and manuscripts confided to his charge were not by any means the chefs-d'oeuvre of the collection.

They were a dingy looking lot of books, anyway. He glanced over the private list furnished him, read the titles, histories and pedigrees of the volumes, stifled a yawn, fidgetted in his chair, stared at the rain-battered glass roof overhead, mused lightly upon his misfortunes, shrugged his broad shoulders, and glanced at the girl across the aisle.

She also was reading her private list. It seemed to bore her.

He looked at her as long as decency permitted, then gazed elsewhere. She was exceedingly pretty in her way, red haired, white skinned; and her eyes seemed to be a very lovely Sevres blue. Except in porcelain he thought he had never seen anything as dainty. He knew perfectly well that he could very easily fall in love with her. Also he knew he'd never have the opportunity.

Duller and duller grew the light; louder roared the March rain. Even monomaniacs no longer came into the galleries, and the half dozen who had arrived left by luncheon time.

When it was White's turn to go out to lunch, he went to Childs' and returned in half an hour. Then the girl across the aisle went out—probably to a similar and sumptuous banquet. She came back very shortly, reseated herself, and glanced around the empty galleries.

There seemed to be absolutely nothing for anybody to do, except to sit there and listen to the rain.

White pondered on his late failure in affairs. Recently out of Yale, and more recently still established in business, he had gone down in the general slump, lacking sufficient capital to tide him over. His settlement with his creditors left him with fifteen hundred dollars. He was now waiting for an opportunity to invest it in an enterprise. He believed in enterprises. Also, he was firmly convinced that Opportunity knocked no more than once in a lifetime, and he was always cocking his ear to catch the first timid rap. It was knocking then but he did not hear it, for it was no louder than the gentle beating of his red-haired neighbour's heart.

But Opportunity is a jolly jade. She knocks every little while—but one must possess good hearing.

Having nothing better to do as he sat there, White drifted into mental speculation—that being the only sort available.

He dreamed of buying a lot in New York for fifteen hundred dollars and selling it a few years later for fifty thousand. He had a well developed imagination; wonderful were the lucky strikes he made in these day dreams; marvellous the financial returns. He was a very Napoleon of finance when he was dozing. Many are.

The girl across the aisle also seemed to be immersed in day dreams. Her Sevres blue eyes had become vague; her listless little hands lay in her lap unstirring. She was pleasant to look at.

After an hour or so it was plain to White that she had had enough of her dreams. She sighed very gently, straightened up in her chair, looked at the rain-swept roof, patted a yawn into modest suppression, and gazed about her

with speculative and engaging eyes.

Then, as though driven to desperation, she turned, looked into the glass case beside her for a few minutes, and then, fitting her key to the door, opened it, selected a volume at hazard, and composed herself to read.

For a while White watched her lazily, but presently with more interest, as her features gradually grew more animated and her attention seemed to be concentrated on the book.

As the minutes passed it became plain to White that the girl found the dingy little volume exceedingly interesting. And after a while she appeared to be completely absorbed in it; her blue eyes were rivetted on the pages; her face was flushed, her sensitive lips expressive of the emotion that seemed to be possessing her more and more.

White wondered what this book might be which she found so breathlessly interesting. It was small, dingy, bound in warped covers of old leather, and anything but beautiful. And by and by he caught a glimpse of the title—"The Journal of Pedro Valdez."

The title, somehow, seemed to be familiar to him; he glanced into his own case, and after a few minutes' searching he caught sight of another copy of the same book, dingy, soiled, leather-bound, unlovely.

He looked over his private list until he found it. And this is what he read concerning it:

Valdez, Pedro—Journal of. Translated by Thomas Bangs, of Philadelphia, in 1760. With map. Two copies, much worn and damaged by water. Several pages missing from each book.

Pedro Valdez was a soldier of fortune serving with Cortez in Mexico and with De Soto in Florida. Nothing more is known of him, except that he perished somewhere in the semi-tropical forests of America.

Thomas Bangs, an Englishman, pretended to have discovered and translated the journal kept by Valdez. After the journal had been translated—if, indeed, such a document ever really existed—Bangs pretended that it was accidentally destroyed.

Bangs' translation and map are considered to be works of pure imagination. They were published from manuscript after the death of the author.

Bangs died in St. Augustine of yellow fever, about 1760-61, while preparing for an exploring expedition into the Florida wilderness.

Mildly edified, White glanced again at the girl across the aisle, and was surprised to see how her interest in the volume had altered her features. Tense, breathless, utterly absorbed in the book, she bent over the faded print, leaning

close, for the sickly light that filtered through the glass roof scarcely illuminated the yellow pages at all.

The curiosity of White was now aroused; he opened the glass case beside him, fished out his copy of the book, opened it, and began to read.

For the first few minutes his interest was anything but deep: he read the well-known pages where Bangs recounts how he discovered the journal of Valdez—and it sounded exceedingly fishy—a rather poorly written fairy-tale done by a man with little invention and less imagination, so worn out, hackneyed and trite were the incidents, so obvious the coincidences.

White shrugged his shoulders and turned from the preface to what purported to be the translation.

Almost immediately it struck him that this part of the book was not written by the same man. Here was fluency, elegance of expression, ease, the simplicity of a soldier who had something to say and but a short time in which to say it. Even the apparent clumsiness of the translation had not deformed the work.

Little by little the young man became intensely interested, then absorbed. And after a while the colour came into his face; he glanced nervously around him; suppressed excitement made his hands unsteady as he unfolded the enclosed map.

From time to time he referred to the map as he read; the rain roared on the glass roof; the light grew dimmer and dimmer.

At five o'clock the galleries closed for the day. And that evening, sitting in his hall-bedroom, White made up his mind that he must buy "The Journal of Valdez" if it took every penny that remained to him.

The next day was fair and cold; fashion graced the Octavo de Folio exhibition; White had no time to re-read any passages or to re-examine the map, because people were continually asking to see and handle the books in his case.

Across the aisle he noticed that his pretty neighbour was similarly occupied. And he was rather glad, because he felt, vaguely, that it was just as well she did not occupy her time in reading "The Journal of Valdez." Girls usually have imagination. The book might stir her up as it had stirred him. And to no purpose.

Also, he was glad that nobody asked to look at the Valdez copy in his own case. He didn't want people to look at it. There were reasons—among others, he wanted to buy it himself. He meant to if fifteen hundred dollars would buy it.

White had not the remotest idea what the book might bring at auction. He dared not inquire whether the volume was a rare one, dreading even to call the attention of his fellow employees to it. A word might arouse their curiosity.

All day long he attended to his duties there, and at five he went home, highly excited, determined to arrive at the galleries next morning in time enough to read the book a little before the first of the public came.

And he did get there very early. The only other employee who had arrived before him was the red-haired girl. She sat by her case reading "The Journal of Valdez." Once she looked up at him with calm, clear, intelligent eyes. He did not see her; he hastily unlocked his case and drew out the coveted book. Then he sat down and began to devour it. And so utterly and instantly was he lost amid those yellow, time-faded pages that he did not even glance across the aisle at his ornamental neighbour. If he had looked he would have noticed that she also was buried in "The Journal of Valdez." And it might have made him a trifle uneasy to see her look from her book to him and from him to the volume he was perusing so excitedly.

It being the last day that the library was to be on view before the sale, fashion and monomania rubbed elbows in the Heikem Galleries, crowding the well known salons morning and afternoon. And all day long White and his neighbour across the aisle were busy taking out books and manuscripts for inspection, so that they had no time for luncheon, and less for Valdez.

And that night they were paid off and dismissed; and the auctioneer and his corps of assistants took charge.

The sale took place the following morning and afternoon. White drew from the bank his fifteen hundred dollars, breakfasted on bread and milk, and went to the galleries more excited than he had ever been before in his long life of twenty-three years. And that is some time.

It was a long shot at Fortune he meant to take—a really desperate chance. One throw would settle it—win or lose. And the idea scared him badly, and he was trembling a little when he took his seat amid the perfumed gowns of fashion and the white whiskers of high finance, and the shabby vestments of monomania.

Once or twice he wondered whether he was crazy. Yet, every throb of his fast-beating heart seemed to summon him to do and dare; and he felt, without even attempting to explain the feeling to himself, that now at last Opportunity was loudly rapping at his door, and that if he did not let her in he would regret it as long as he lived.

As he glanced fearfully about him he caught sight of his pretty neighbour who had held sway across the aisle. So she, too, had come to watch the sale! Probably for the excitement of hearing an auctioneer talk in thousands.

He was a little surprised, nevertheless, for she did not look bookish—nor even intellectual enough to mar her prettiness. Yet, wherever she went she would look adorable. He understood that, now.

It was a day of alarms for him, of fears, shocks, and frights innumerable. With terror he heard the auctioneer talking in terms of thousands; with horror he witnessed the bids on certain books advance by thousands at a clip. Five thousand, ten thousand, twenty thousand were bid, seen, raised, called, hiked, until his head spun and despair seized him.

What did he know about Valdez? Either volume might bring fifty thousand dollars for all he knew. Had he fifty thousand he felt, somehow, that he would have bid it to the last penny for the book. And he came to the conclusion that he was really crazy. Yet there he sat, glued to his chair, listening, shuddering, teeth alternately chattering or grimly locked, while the very air seemed to reek of millions, and the incessant gabble of the auctioneer drove him almost out of his wits.

Nearer and nearer approached the catalogued numbers of the two copies of Valdez; pale and desperate he sat there, his heart almost suffocating him as the moment drew near. And now the time had come; now the celebrated Mr. Heikem began his suave preliminary chatter; now he was asking confidently for a bid.

A silence ensued—and whether it was the silence of awe at the priceless treasure or the silence of indifference White did not know. But after the auctioneer had again asked for a bid he found his voice and offered ten dollars. His ears were scarlet when he did it.

"Fifteen," said a sweet but tremulous voice not far from White, and he looked around in astonishment. It was his red-haired vis-a-vis.

"Twenty!" he retorted, still labouring under his astonishment.

"Twenty-five!" came the same sweet voice.

There was a silence. No other voices said anything. Evidently nobody wanted Valdez except himself and his red-haired neighbour.

"Thirty!" he called out at the psychological moment.

The girl turned in her chair and looked at him. She seemed to be unusually pale.

"Thirty-five!" she said, still gazing at White in a frightened sort of way.

"Forty," he said; rose at the same moment and walked over to where the girl was sitting.

She looked up at him as he bent over her chair; both were very serious.

"You and I are the only two people bidding," he said. "There are two copies of the book. Don't bid against me and you can buy in the other one for next to nothing—judging from the course this one is taking."

"Very well," she said quietly.

A moment later the first copy of Valdez was knocked down to James White. An indifferent audience paid little attention to the transaction.

Two minutes later the second copy fell to Miss Jean Sandys for five dollars—there being no other bidder.

White had already left the galleries. Lingered at the entrance he saw Miss Sandys pass him, and he lifted his hat. The slightest inclination of her pretty head acknowledged it. The next moment they were lost to each other's view in the crowded street.

Clutching his battered book to his chest, not even daring to drop it into his overcoat for fear of pickpockets, the young fellow started up Broadway at a swinging pace which presently brought him to the offices of the Florida Spanish Grants Company; and here, at his request, he was ushered into a private room; a map of Seminole County spread on the highly polished table before him, and a suave gentleman placed at his disposal.

"Florida," volunteered the suave gentleman, "is the land of perpetual sunshine—the land of milk and honey, as it were, the land of the orange——"

"One moment, please," said White.

"Sir?"

They looked at each other for a second or two, then White smiled:

"I don't want dope," he said pleasantly, "I merely want a few facts—if your company deals in them."

"Florida," began the suave gentleman, watching the effect of his words, "is the garden of the world." Then he stopped, discouraged, for White was grinning at him.

"It won't do," said White amiably.

"No?" queried the suave gentleman, the ghost of a grin on his own smooth countenance.

"No, it won't do. Now, if you will restrain your very natural enthusiasm and let me ask a few questions——"

"Go ahead," said the suave gentleman, whose name was Munsell. "But I don't believe we have anything to suit you in Seminole County."

"Oh, I don't know," returned White coolly, "is it all under water?"

"There are a few shell mounds. The highest is nearly ten inches above water. We call them hills."

"I might wish to acquire one of those mountain ranges," remarked White seriously.

After a moment they both laughed.

"Are you in the game yourself?" inquired Mr. Munsell.

"Well, my game is a trifle different."

"Oh. Do you care to be more explicit?"

White shook his head:

"No; what's the use? But I'll say this: it isn't the 'Perpetual Sunshine and Orange Grove' game, or how to become a millionaire in three years."

"No?" grinned Munsell, lifting his expressive eyebrows.

White bent over the map for a few moments.

"Here," he said carelessly, "is the Spanish Causeway and the Coakachee River. It's all swamp and jungle, I suppose—although I see you have it plotted into orange groves, truck gardens, pineapple plantations, and villas."

Munsell made a last but hopeless effort. "Some day," he began, with dignity—but White's calm wink discouraged further attempts. Then the young man tapped with his pencil lots numbered from 200 to 210, slowly, going over them again for emphasis.

"Are those what you want?" asked Munsell.

"Those are what I want."

"All right. Only I can't give you 210."

"Why not?"

"Yesterday a party took a strip along the Causeway including half of 210 up to 220."

"Can't I get all of 210?"

"I'll ask the party. Where can I address you?"

White stood up. "Have everything ready Tuesday. I'll be in with the cash."

XXVII

And on Tuesday he kept his word and the land was his for a few hundred dollars—all except the half of Lot No. 210, which it appeared the "party" declined to sell, refusing to consider any profit whatever.

"It's like a woman," remarked Munsell.

"Is your 'party' a woman?"

"Yes. I guess she's into some game or other, too. Say, what is this Seminole County game, Mr. White?—if you don't mind my asking, now that you have

taken title to your—h'm!—orange grove."

"Why do you think there is any particular game afoot?" inquired the young man curiously.

"Oh, come! You know what you're buying. And that young lady knew, too. You've both bought a few acres of cypress swamp and you know it. What do you think is in it?"

"Snakes," said White coolly.

"Oh, I know," said Munsell. "You think there's marl and phosphoric rock."

"And isn't there?" asked White innocently.

"How should I know?" replied Munsell as innocently; the inference being that he knew perfectly well that there was nothing worth purchasing in the Causeway swamp.

But when White went away he was a trifle worried, and he wondered uneasily why anybody else at that particular time should happen to invest in swampy real estate along the Spanish Causeway.

He knew the Spanish Causeway. In youthful and prosperous days, when his parents were alive, they had once wintered at Verbena Inlet.

And on several occasions he had been taken on excursions to the so-called Spanish Causeway—a dike-shaped path, partly ruined, made of marl and shell, which traversed the endless swamps of Seminole County, and was supposed to have been built by De Soto and his Spaniards.

But whoever built it, Spaniard, Seminole, or the prehistoric people antedating both, there it still was, a ruined remnant of highway penetrating the otherwise impassable swamps.

For miles across the wilderness of cypress, palmetto, oak, and depthless mud it stretched—a crumbling but dry runway for deer, panther, bear, black wolf, and Seminole. And excursion parties from the great hotels at Verbena often picnicked at its intersection with the forest road, but ventured no farther along the dismal, forbidding, and snake-infested ridge which ran anywhere between six inches and six feet above the level of the evil-looking marsh flanking it on either side.

In the care-free days of school, of affluence, and of youth, White had been taken to gaze upon this alleged relic of Spanish glory. He now remembered it very clearly.

And that night, aboard the luxurious Verbena Special, he lay in his bunk and dreamed dreams awake, which almost overwhelmed him with their magnificence. But when he slept his dreams were uneasy, interspersed with vague visions of women who came in regiments through flowering jungles to

drive him out of his own property. It was a horrid sort of nightmare, for they pelted him with iron-bound copies of Valdez, knocking him almost senseless into the mud. And it seemed to him that he might have perished there had not his little red-haired neighbour extended a slender, helping hand in the nick of time.

Dreaming of her he awoke, still shaking with the experience. And all that day he read in his book and pored over the map attached to it, until the locomotive whistled for St. Augustine, and he was obliged to disembark for the night.

However, next morning he was on his way to Verbena, the train flying through a steady whirlwind of driving sand. And everywhere in the sunshine stretched the flat-woods, magnificently green—endless miles of pine and oak and palmetto, set with brilliant glades of vast, flat fields of wild phlox over which butterflies hovered.

At Verbena Station he disembarked with his luggage, which consisted of a complete tropical camping outfit, tinned food, shot-gun, rifle, rods, spade, shovel, pick, crow. In his hand he carried an innocent looking satchel, gingerly. It contained dynamite in sticks, and the means to explode it safely.

To a hackman he said: "I'm not going to any hotel. What I want is a wagon, a team of mules, and a driver to take me and my outfit to Coakachee Creek on the Spanish Causeway. Can you fix it for me?"

The hackman said he could. And in half an hour he drove up in his mule wagon to the deserted station, where White sat all alone amid his mountainous paraphernalia.

When the wagon had been loaded, and they had been driving through the woods for nearly half an hour in silence, the driver's curiosity got the better of him, and he ventured to enquire of White why everybody was going to the Spanish Causeway.

Which question startled the young man very disagreeably until he learned that "everybody" merely meant himself and one other person taken thither by the same driver the day before.

Further, he learned that this person was a woman from the North, completely equipped for camping as was he. Which made him more uneasy than ever, for he of course identified her with Mr. Munsell's client, whose land, including half of Lot 210, adjoined his own. Who she might be and why she had come down here to Seminole County he could not imagine, because Munsell had intimated that she knew what she was buying.

No doubt she meant to play a similar game to Munsell's, and had come down to take a look at her villainous property before advertising possibilities of perpetual sunshine.

Yet, why had she brought a camping outfit? Ordinary land swindlers remained comfortably aloof from the worthless property they advertised. What was she intending to do there?

Instead of a swindler was she, perhaps, the swindlee? Had she bought the property in good faith? Didn't she know it was under water? Had she come down here with her pitiful camping equipment prepared to rough it and set out orange trees? Poor thing!

"Was she all alone?" he inquired of his cracker driver.

"Yaas, suh."

"Poor thing. Did she seem young and inexperienced?"

"Yaas, suh—'scusin she all has right smart o' red ha'r."

"What?" exclaimed White excitedly. "You say she is young, and that she seemed inexperienced, except for her red hair!"

"Yaas, suh. She all has a right smart hank of red ha'r on her haid. I ain't never knowed nobody with red ha'r what ain't had a heap mo' 'sperience than the mostest."

"D-d-did you say that you drove her over to the Spanish Causeway yesterday?" stammered the dismayed young man.

"Yaas, suh."

Horried thoughts filled his mind. For there could be scarcely any doubt that this intruder was his red-haired neighbour across the aisle at the library sale.

No doubt at all that he already crossed her trail at Munsell's agency. Also, she had bid in one of the only two copies of Valdez.

First he had seen her reading it with every symptom of profound interest. Then she had gone to the sale and bid in one of the copies. Then he had heard from Munsell about a woman who had bought land along the Causeway the day before he had made his own purchase.

And now once more he had struck her swift, direct trail, only to learn that she was still one day in advance of him!

In his mental panic he remembered that his title was secure. That thought comforted him for a few moments, until he began to wonder whether the land he had acquired was really sufficient to cover a certain section of perhaps half an acre along the Causeway.

According to his calculations he had given himself ample margin in every direction, for the spot he desired to control ought to lie somewhere about midway between Lot 200 and Lot 210.

Had he miscalculated? Had she miscalculated? Why had she purchased that

strip from half of Lot 210 to Lot 220?

There could be only one answer: this clever and astoundingly enterprising young girl had read Valdez, had decided to take a chance, had proved her sporting spirit by backing her judgment, and had started straight as an arrow for the terrifying territory in question.

Hers had been first choice of Mr. Munsell's lots; she had deliberately chosen the numbers from half of 210 to 220. She was perfectly ignorant that he, White, had any serious intentions in Seminole County. Therefore, it had been her judgment, based on calculations from the Valdez map, that half of Lot 210 and the intervening territory including Lot 220, would be ample for her to control a certain spot—the very spot which he himself expected to control.

Either he or she had miscalculated. Which?

Dreadfully worried, he sat in silence beside his taciturn driver, gazing at the flanking forest through which the white road wound.

The only habitation they passed was fruit-drying ranch No. 7, in the wilderness—just this one sunny oasis in the solemn half-light of the woods.

White did not remember the road, although when a child he must have traversed it to the Causeway. Nor when he came in sight of the Causeway did he recognise it, where it ran through a glade of high, silvery grass set sparsely with tall palmettos.

But here it was, and the cracker turned his mules into it, swinging sharply to the left along Coakachee Creek and proceeding for about two miles, where a shell mound enabled him to turn his team.

A wagon could proceed no farther because the crumbling Causeway narrowed to a foot-path beyond. So here they unloaded; the cracker rested his mules for a while, then said a brief good-bye to White and shook the reins.

When he had driven out of sight, White started to drag his tent and tent-poles along the dike top toward his own property, which ought to lie just ahead—somewhere near the curve that the Causeway made a hundred yards beyond. For he had discovered a weather-beaten shingle nailed to a water-oak, where he had disembarked his luggage; and on it were the remains of the painted number 198.

Lugging tent and poles, he started along the Causeway, keeping a respectful eye out for snakes. So intent was he on avoiding the playful attentions of rattler or moccasin that it was only when he almost ran into it that he discovered another tent pitched directly in his path.

Of course he had expected to find her encamped there on the Causeway, but he was surprised, nevertheless, and his tent-poles fell, clattering.

A second later the flap of her tent was pushed aside, and his red-haired neighbour of the galleries stepped out, plainly startled.

XXVIII

She seemed to be still more startled when she saw him: her blue eyes dilated; the colour which had ebbed came back, suffusing her pretty features. But when she recognised him, fear, dismay, astonishment, and anxiety blended in swift confusion, leaving her silent, crimson, rooted to the spot.

White took off his hat and walked up to where she stood.

"I'm sorry, Miss Sandys," he said. "Only a few hours ago did I learn who it was camping here on the Causeway. And—I'm afraid I know why you are here.... Because the same reason that brought you started me the next day."

She had recovered her composure. She said very gravely:

"I wondered when I saw you reading Valdez whether, by any possibility, you might think of coming here. And when you bought the other copy I was still more afraid.... But I had already secured an option on my lots."

"I know it," he said, chagrined.

"Were you," she inquired, "the client of Mr. Munsell who tried to buy from me the other half of Lot 210?"

"Yes."

"I wondered. But of course I would not sell it. What lots have you bought?"

"I took No. 200 to the northern half of No. 210."

"Why?" she asked, surprised.

"Because," he said, reddening, "my calculations tell me that this gives me ample margin."

She looked at him in calm disapproval, shaking her head; but her blue eyes softened.

"I'm sorry," she said. "You have miscalculated, Mr. White. The spot lies somewhere within the plot numbered from half of 210 to 220."

"I am very much afraid that you have miscalculated, Miss Sandys. I did not even attempt to purchase your plot—except half of 210."

"Nor did I even consider your plot, Mr. White," she said sorrowfully, "and I had my choice. Really I am very sorry for you, but you have made a complete miscalculation."

"I don't see how I could. I worked it out from the Valdez map."

"So did I."

She had the volume under her arm; he had his in his pocket.

"Let me show you," he began, drawing it out and opening it. "Would you mind looking at the map for a moment?"

Her dainty head a trifle on one side, she looked over his shoulder as he unfolded the map for her.

"Here," he said, plucking a dead grass stem and tracing the Causeway on the map, "here lie my lots—including, as you see, the spot marked by Valdez with a Maltese cross.... I'm sorry; but how in the world could you have made your mistake?"

He turned to glance at the girl and saw her amazement and misunderstood it.

"It's too bad," he added, feeling profoundly sorry for her.

"Do you know," she said in a voice quivering with emotion, "that a very terrible thing has happened to us?"

"To us?"

"To both of us. I—we—oh, please look at my map! It is—it is different from yours!"

With nervous fingers she opened the book, spread out the map, and held it under his horrified eyes.

"Do you see!" she exclaimed. "According to this map, my lots include the Maltese cross of Valdez! I—I—p-please excuse me——" She turned abruptly and entered her tent; but he had caught the glimmer of sudden tears in her eyes and had seen the pitiful lips trembling.

On his own account he was sufficiently scared; now it flashed upon him that this plucky young thing had probably spent her last penny on the chance that Bangs had told the truth about "The Journal of Pedro Valdez."

That the two maps differed was a staggering blow to him; and his knees seemed rather weak at the moment, so he sat down on his unpacked tent and dropped his face in his palms.

Lord, what a mess! His last cent was invested; hers, too, no doubt. He hadn't even railroad fare North. Probably she hadn't either.

He had gambled and lost. There was scarcely a chance that he had not lost. And the same fearful odds were against her.

"The poor little thing!" he muttered, staring at her tent. And after a moment he sprang to his feet and walked over to it. The flap was open; she sat inside on a camp-chair, her red head in her arms, doubled over in an attitude of tragic

despair.

"Miss Sandys?"

She looked up hastily, the quick colour dyeing her pale cheeks, her long, black lashes glimmering with tears.

"Do you mind talking it over with me?" he asked.

"N-no."

"May I come in?"

"P-please."

He seated himself cross-legged on the threshold.

"There's only one thing to do," he said, "and that is to go ahead. We must go ahead. Of course the hazard is against us. Let us face the chance that Bangs was only a clever romancer. Well, we've already discounted that. Then let us face the discrepancy in our two maps. It's bad, I'll admit. It almost knocks the last atom of confidence out of me. It has floored you. But you must not take the count. You must get up."

He paused, looking around him with troubled eyes; then somehow the sight of her pathetic figure—the soft, helpless youth of her—suddenly seemed to prop up his back-bone.

"Miss Sandys, I am going to stand by you anyway! I suppose, like myself, you have invested your last dollar in this business?"

"Y-yes."

He glanced at the pick, shovel and spade in the corner of her tent, then at her hands.

"Who," he asked politely, "was going to wield these?"

She let her eyes rest on the massive implements of honest toil, then looked confusedly at him.

"I was."

"Did you ever try to dig with any of these things?"

"N-no. But if I had to do it I knew I could."

He said, pleasantly: "You have all kinds of courage. Did you bring a shotgun?"

"Yes."

"Do you know how to load and fire it?"

"The clerk in the shop instructed me."

"You are the pluckiest girl I ever laid eyes on.... You camped here all alone last

night, I suppose?"

"Yes."

"How about it?" he asked, smilingly. "Were you afraid?"

She coloured, cast a swift glance at him, saw that his attitude was perfectly respectful and sympathetic, and said:

"Yes, I was horribly afraid."

"Did anything annoy you?"

"S-something bellowed out there in the swamp——" She shuddered unaffectedly at the recollection.

"A bull-alligator," he remarked.

"What?"

"Yes," he nodded, "it is terrifying, but they let you alone. I once heard one bellow on the Tomoka when I was a boy."

After a while she said with tremulous lips:

"There seem to be snakes here, too."

"Didn't you expect any?"

"Mr. Munsell said there were not any."

"Did he?"

"Not," she explained resolutely, "that the presence of snakes would have deterred me. They frighten me terribly, but—I would have come just the same."

"You are sheer pluck," he said.

"I don't know.... I am very poor.... There seemed to be a chance.... I took it ——" Tears sprang to her eyes again, and she brushed them away impatiently.

"Yes," she said, "the only way is to go on, as you say, Mr. White. Everything in the world that I have is invested here."

"It is the same with me," he admitted dejectedly.

They looked at each other curiously for a moment.

"Isn't it strange?" she murmured.

"Strange as 'The Journal of Valdez.'... I have an idea. I wonder what you might think of it."

She waited; he reflected for another moment, then, smiling:

"This is a perfectly rotten place for you," he said. "You could not do manual labour here in this swamp under a nearly vertical sun and keep your health for

twenty-four hours. I've been in Trinidad. I know a little about the tropics and semi-tropics. Suppose you and I form a company?"

"What?"

"Call it the Valdez Company, or the Association of the Maltese Cross," he continued cheerfully. "You will do the cooking, washing, housekeeping for two tents, and the mending. I will do the digging and the dynamiting. And we'll go ahead doggedly, and face this thing and see it through to the last ditch. What do you think of it? Your claim as plotted out is no more, no less, valuable than mine. Both claims may be worthless. The chances are that they are absolutely valueless. But there is a chance, too, that we might win out. Shall we try it together?"

She did not answer.

"And," he continued, "if the Maltese cross happens to be included within my claim, I share equally with you. If it chances to lie within your claim, perhaps I might ask a third——"

"Mr. White!"

"Yes?"

"You will take two thirds!"

"What?"

"Two thirds," she repeated firmly, "because your heavier labour entitles you to that proportion!"

"My dear Miss Sandys, you are unworldly and inexperienced in your generosity——"

"So are you! The idea of your modestly venturing to ask a third! And offering me a half if the Maltese cross lie inside your own territory! That is not the way to do business, Mr. White!"

She had become so earnest in her admonition, so charmingly emphatic, that he smiled in spite of himself.

She flushed, noticing this, and said: "Altruism is a luxury in business matters; selfishness of the justifiable sort a necessity. Who will look out for your interests if you do not?"

"You seem to be doing it."

Her colour deepened: "I am only suggesting that you do not make a foolish bargain with me."

"Which proves," he said, "that you are not much better at business than am I. Otherwise you'd have taken me up."

"I'm a very good business woman," she insisted, warmly, "but I'm too much of

the other kind of woman to be unfair!"

"Commercially," he said, "we both are sadly behind the times. To-day the world is eliminating its appendix; to-morrow it will be operated on for another obsolete and annoying appendage. I mean its conscience," he added, so seriously that for a moment her own gravity remained unaltered. Then, like a faint ray of sunlight, across her face the smile glimmered. It was a winning smile, fresh and unspoiled as the lips it touched.

"You will take half—won't you?" she asked.

"Yes, I will. Is it a bargain?"

"If you care to make it so, Mr. White."

He said he did, and they shook hands very formally. Then he went out and pitched his tent beside hers, set it in order, lugged up the remainder of his equipment, buried the jars of spring water, and, entering his tent, changed to flannel shirt, sun-helmet, and khaki.

XXIX

A little later he called to her: she emerged from her tent, and together they sat down on the edge of the Causeway, with the two maps spread over their knees.

That both maps very accurately represented the topography of the immediate vicinity there could be no doubt; the only discrepancy seemed to lie in the situation of the Maltese cross. On White's map the cross fell well within his half of Lot 210; in Jean Sandys' map it was situated between her half of 210 and 220.

Plot it out as they might, using Mr. Munsell's diagram, the result was always the same; and after a while they gave up the useless attempt to reconcile the differences in the two maps.

From where they were sitting together on the Causeway's edge, they were facing due west. At their feet rippled the clear, deep waters of the swamp, lapping against the base of the Causeway like transparent little waves in a northern lake. A slight current disclosed the channel where it flowed out of the north western edges of the swamp, which was set with tall cypress trees, their flaring bases like silvery pyramids deep set in the shining ooze.

East of them the Coakachee flowed through thickets of saw-grass and green brier, between a forest of oak, pine, and cedar, bordered on the western side by palm and palmetto—all exactly as drawn in the map of Pedro Valdez.

The afternoon was cloudless and warm; an exquisite scent of blossoms came

from the forest when a light breeze rippled the water. Somewhere in those green and tangled depths jasmine hung its fairy gold from arching branches, and wild oranges were in bloom. At intervals, when the breeze set from the east, the heavenly fragrance of magnolia grew more pronounced.

After a little searching he discovered the huge tree, far towering above oak and pine and palm, set with lustrous clusters, ivory and palest gold, exhaling incense.

"Wonderful," she said under her breath, when he pointed it out to her. "This enchanted land is one endless miracle to me."

"You have never before been in the South?"

"I have been nowhere."

"Oh. I thought perhaps when you were a child——"

"We were too poor. My mother taught piano."

"I see," he said gravely.

"I had no childhood," she said. "After the public school, it was the book section in department stores.... They let me go last week. That is how I came to be in the Heikem galleries."

He clasped his hands around one knee and looked out across the semi-tropical landscape.

Orange-coloured butterflies with wings like lighted lanterns fluttered along the edges of the flowering shrubs; a lovely purplish-black one with four large, white polka dots on his wings flitted persistently about them.

Over the sun-baked Causeway blue-tailed lizards raced and chased each other, frisking up tree trunks, flashing across branches: a snowy heron rose like some winged thing from Heaven, and floated away into the silvery light. And like living jewels the gorgeous wood-ducks glided in and out where the water sparkled among the cypress trees.

"Think," he said, "of those men in armour toiling through these swamps under a vertical sun! Think of them, starved, haggard, fever racked, staggering toward their El Dorado!—their steel mail scorching their bodies, the briars and poison-grass festering their flesh; moccasin, rattler, and copperhead menacing them with death at every step; the poisoned arrows of the Indians whizzing from every glade!"

"Blood and gold," she nodded, "and the deathless bravery of avarice! That was Spain. And it inflamed the sunset of Spanish glory."

He mused for a while: "To think of De Soto being here—here on this very spot!—here on this ancient Causeway, amid these forests!—towering in his armour! His plated mail must have made a burning hell for his body!"

She looked down at the cool, blue water at her feet. He, too, gazed at it, curiously. For a few feet the depths were visible, then a translucent gloom, glimmering with emerald lights, obscured further penetration of his vision. Deep down in that water was what they sought—if it truly existed at all.

After a few moments' silence he rose, drew the hunting-knife at his belt, severed a tall, swamp-maple sapling, trimmed it, and, returning to the water's edge, deliberately sounded the channel. He could not touch bottom there, or even at the base of the Causeway.

"Miss Sandys," he said, "there is plenty of room for such a structure as the Maltese cross is supposed to mark."

"I wonder," she murmured.

"Oh, there's room enough," he repeated, with an uneasy laugh. "Suppose we begin operations!"

"When?"

"Now!"

She looked up at him, flushed and smiling:

"It is going to take weeks and weeks, isn't it?"

"I thought so before I came down here. But—I don't see why we shouldn't blow a hole through this Causeway in a few minutes."

"What!"

She rose to her feet, slightly excited, not understanding.

"I could set off enough dynamite right here," he said, stamping his heel into the white dust, "—enough dynamite to open up that channel into the Coakachee. Why don't I do it?"

Pink with excitement she said breathlessly: "Did you bring dynamite?"

"Didn't you?"

"I—I never even thought of it. F-fire crackers frighten me. I thought it would be all I could do to fire off my shot-gun." And she bit her lip with vexation.

"Why," he said, "it would take a gang of men a week to cut through this Causeway, besides building a coffer-dam." He looked at her curiously. "How did you expect to begin operations all alone?"

"I—I expected to dig."

He looked at her delicate little hands:

"You meant to dig your way through with pick and shovel?"

"Yes—if it took a year."

"And how did you expect to construct your coffer-dam?"

"I didn't know about a coffer-dam," she admitted, blushing. After a moment she lifted her pretty, distressed eyes to his: "I—I had no knowledge—only courage," she said.... "And I needed money."

A responsive flush of sympathy and pity passed over him; she was so plucky, so adorably helpless. Even now he knew she was unconscious of the peril into which her confidence and folly had led her—a peril averted only by the mere accident of his own arrival.

He said lightly: "Shall we try to solve this thing now? Shall we take a chance, set our charges, and blow a hole in this Causeway big enough to drain that water off in an hour?"

"Could you do that?" she exclaimed, delighted.

"I think so."

"Then tell me what to do to help you."

He turned toward her, hesitated, controlling the impulsive reply.

"To help me," he said, smilingly, "please keep away from the dynamite."

"Oh, I will," she nodded seriously. "What else am I to do?"

"Would you mind preparing dinner?"

She looked up at him a little shyly: "No.... And I am very glad that I am not to dine alone."

"So am I," he said. "And I am very glad that it is with you I am to dine."

"You never even looked at me in the galleries," she said.

"Then—how could I know you were reading Valdez if I never looked at you?"

"Oh, you may have looked at the book I was reading."

"I did," he said, "—and at the hands that held it."

"Never dreaming that they meant to wield a pick-axe," she laughed, "and encompass your discomfiture. But after all they did neither the one nor the other; did they?"

He looked at the smooth little hands cupped in the shallow pockets of her white flannel Norfolk. They fascinated him.

"To think," he said, half to himself, "—to think of those hands wielding a pick-axe!"

She smiled, head slightly on one side, and bent, contemplating her right hand.

"You know," she said, "I certainly would have done it."

"You would have been crippled in an hour."

Her head went up, but she was still smiling as she said: "I'd have gone through with it—somehow."

"Yes," he said slowly. "I believe you would."

"Not," she added, blushing, "that I mean to vaunt myself or my courage——"

"No: I understand. You are not that kind.... It's rather extraordinary how well I—I think I know you already."

"Perhaps you do know me—already."

"I really believe I do."

"It's very likely. I am just what I seem to be. There is no mystery about me. I am what I appear to be."

"You are also very direct."

"Yes. It's my nature to be direct. I am not a bit politic or diplomatic or circuitous."

"So I noticed," he said smilingly, "when you discussed finance with me. You were not a bit politic."

She smiled, too, a little embarrassed: "How could I be anything but frank in return for your very unworldly generosity?" she said. "Because what you offered was unworldly. Anyway, I should have been direct with you; I knew what I wanted; I knew what you wanted. All I had to do was to make up my mind. And I did so."

"Did you make up your mind about me, also?"

"Yes, about you, also."

They both smiled.

She was so straight and slender and pretty in her white flannels and white outing hat—her attitude so confident, so charmingly determined, that she seemed to him even younger than she really was—a delightful, illogical, fresh and fearless school-girl, translated by some flash of magic from her school hither, and set down unruffled and unstartled upon her light, white-shod feet.

Even now it amazed him to realise that she really understood nothing of the lonely perils lately confronting her in this desolate place.

For if there were nothing actually to fear from the wild beasts of the region, that which the beasts themselves feared might have confronted her at any moment. He shuddered as he thought of it.

And what would she have done if suddenly clutched by fever? What would she have done if a white-mouthed moccasin had struck her ankle—or if it had been the diamond-set Death himself?

"You don't mind my speaking plainly, do you?" he said bluntly.

"Why, no, of course not." She looked at him inquiringly.

"Don't stray far away from me, will you?"

"What?"

"Don't wander away by yourself, out of sight, while we are engaged in this business."

She looked serious and perplexed for a moment, then turned a delicate pink and began to laugh in a pretty, embarrassed way.

"Are you afraid I'll get into mischief? Do you know it is very kind of you to feel that way?... And rather unexpected—in a man who—sat for three days across the aisle from me—and never even looked in my direction. Tell me, what am I to be afraid of in this place?"

"There are snakes about," he said with emphasis.

"Oh, yes; I've seen some swimming."

"There are four poisonous species among them," he continued. "That's one of the reasons for your keeping near me."

She nodded, a trifle awed.

"So you will, won't you?"

"Yes," she said, taking his words so literally that, when they turned to walk toward the tents, she came up close beside him, naïvely as a child, and laid one hand on his sleeve as they started back across the Causeway.

"Suppose either one of us is bitten?" she asked after a silence.

"I have lancets, tourniquets, and anti-venom in my tent."

Her smooth hand tightened a little on his arm. She had not realised that the danger was more than a vague possibility.

"You have spring water, of course," he said.

"No.... I boiled a little from the swamp before I drank it."

He turned to her sternly and drew her arm through his with an unconscious movement of protection.

"Are you sure that water was properly boiled—thoroughly boiled?" he demanded.

"It bubbled."

"Listen to me! Hereafter when you are thirsty you will use my spring water. Is that understood?"

"Yes.... And thank you."

"You don't want to get break-bone fever, do you?"

"No-o!" she said hastily. "I will do everything you wish."

"I'll hang your hammock for you," he said. "Always look in your shoes for scorpions and spiders before you put them on. Never step over a fallen log before you first look on the other side. Rattlers lie there. Never go near a swamp without looking for moccasins.

"Don't let the direct sunlight fall on your bare head; don't eat fruit for a week; don't ever go to sleep unless you have a blanket on. You won't do any of these things, will you?" he inquired anxiously, almost tenderly.

"I promise. And I never dreamed that there was anything to apprehend except alligators!" she said, tightening her arm around his own.

"Alligators won't bother you—unless you run across a big one in the woods. Then keep clear of him."

"I will!" she said earnestly.

"And don't sit about on old logs or lean against trees."

"Why? Lizards?"

"Oh, they're not harmful. But wood-ticks might give you a miserable week or two."

"Oh, dear, oh, dear," she murmured, "I am so glad you came here!" And quite innocently she pressed his arm. She did it because she was grateful. She had a very direct way with her.

XXX

When they came to their tents he went into hers, slung her hammock properly, shook a scorpion out of her slippers, and set his heel on it; drove a non-poisonous but noisy puff-adder from under her foot-rug, the creature hissing like a boiling kettle and distending its grey and black neck.

Terrified but outwardly calm, she stood beside him, now clutching his arm very closely; and at last her tent was in order, the last spider and lizard hustled out, the oil cook-stove burning, the tinned goods ready, the aluminum batterie-de-cuisine ranged at her elbow.

"I wonder," he said, hesitating, "whether I dare leave you long enough to go and dig some holes with a crow-bar."

"Why, of course!" she said. "You can't have me tagging at your heels every minute, you know."

He laughed: "It's I who do the tagging."

"It isn't disagreeable," she said shyly.

"I don't mean to dog every step you take," he continued, "but now, when you are out of my sight, I—I can't help feeling a trifle anxious."

"But you mustn't feel responsible for me. I came down here on my own initiative. I certainly deserve whatever happens to me. Don't I?"

"What comfort would that be to me if anything unpleasant did happen to you?"

"Why," she asked frankly, "should you feel as responsible for my welfare as that? After all, I am only a stranger, you know."

He said: "Do you really feel like a stranger? Do you really feel that I am one?"

She considered the proposition for a few moments.

"No," she said, "I don't. And perhaps it is natural for us to take a friendly interest in each other."

"It comes perfectly natural to me to take a v-very v-vivid interest in you," he said. "What with snakes and scorpions and wood-ticks and unboiled water and the actinic rays of the sun, I can't very well help worrying about you. After all," he added lucidly, "you're a girl, you know."

She admitted the accusation with a smile so sweet that there could be no doubt of her sex.

"However," she said, "you should entertain no apprehensions concerning me. I have none concerning you. I think you know your business."

"Of course," he said, going into his tent and returning loaded with crow-bar, pick-axe, dynamite, battery, and wires.

She laid aside the aluminum cooking-utensils with which she had been fussing and rose from her knees as he passed her with a pleasant nod of au revoir.

"You'll be careful with that dynamite, won't you?" she said anxiously. "You know it goes off at all sorts of unexpected moments."

"I think I understand how to handle it," he reassured her.

"Are you quite certain?"

"Oh, yes. But perhaps you'd better not come any nearer——"

"Mr. White!"

"What!"

"It is dangerous! I don't like to have you go away alone with that dynamite. You make me very anxious."

"You needn't be. If—in the very remote event of anything going wrong—now don't forget what I say!—but in case of an accident to me, you'll be all right if you start back to Verbena at once—instantly—and take the right-hand road —"

"Mr. White!"

"Yes?"

"I was not thinking of myself! I was concerned about you!"

"Me?—personally?"

"Of course! You say you have me on your mind. Do you think I am devoid of human feeling?"

"Were you—really—thinking about me?" he repeated slowly. "That was very nice of you.... I didn't quite understand.... I'll be careful with the dynamite."

"Perhaps I'd better go with you," she suggested irresolutely.

"Why?"

"I could hold a green umbrella over you while you are digging holes. You yourself say that the sun is dangerous."

"My sun-helmet makes it all right," he said, deeply touched.

"You won't take it off, will you?"

"No."

"And you'll look all around you for snakes before you take the next step, won't you?" she insisted.

He promised, thrilled by her frank solicitude.

A little way up the path he paused, looked around, and saw her standing there looking after him.

"You're sure you'll be all right?" he called back to her.

"Yes. Are you sure you will be?"

"Oh, yes!"

They made two quick gestures of adieu, and he resumed the path. Presently he turned again. She was still standing there looking after him. They made two gestures of farewell and he resumed the path. After a while he looked back. She—but what's the use!

When he came to the spot marked for destruction, he laid down his paraphernalia, seized the crow-bar, and began to dig, scarcely conscious of what he was about because he had become so deeply absorbed in other things—in an-other thing—a human one with red hair and otherwise divinely endowed.

The swift onset of this heavenly emotion was making him giddy—or perhaps it was unaccustomed manual labor under a semi-tropical sun.

Anyway he went about his work blindly but vigorously, seeing nothing of the surrounding landscape or of the immediate ground into which he rammed his crow-bar, so constantly did the charming vision of her piquant features shut out all else.

And all the time he was worrying, too. He thought of snakes biting her distractingly pretty ankles; he thought of wood-ticks and of her snowy neck; of scorpions and of the delicate little hands.

How on earth was he ever going to endure the strain if already, in these few hours, his anxiety about her welfare was assuming such deep and portentous proportions! How was he going to stand the worry until she was safe in the snakeless, tickless North again!

She couldn't remain here! She must go North. His mind seemed already tottering under its new and constantly increasing load of responsibility; and he dug away fiercely with his bar, making twice as many holes as he had meant to.

For he had suddenly determined to be done with the job and get her into some safe place, and he meant to set off a charge of dynamite that would do the business without fail.

Charging and tamping the holes, he used caution, even in spite of his increasing impatience to return and see how she was; arguing very justly with himself that if he blew himself up he couldn't very well learn how she was.

So he attached the wires very carefully, made his connections, picked up the big reel and the remainder of his tools, and walked toward the distant tents, unreeling his wire as he moved along.

She was making soup, but she heard the jangle of his equipment, sprang to her feet, and ran out to meet him.

He let fall everything and held out both hands. In them she laid her own.

"I'm so glad to see you!" he said warmly. "I'm so thankful that you're all right!"

"I'm so glad you came back," she said frankly. "I have been most uneasy about you."

"I've been very anxious, too," he said. Then, drawing an unfeigned sigh of relief: "It does seem good to get back again!" He had been away nearly half an hour.

She examined the wire and the battery gingerly, asking him innumerable questions about it.

"Do you suppose," she ended, "that it will be safe for you to set off the charge from this camp?"

"Oh, perfectly," he nodded.

"Of course," she said, half to herself, "we'll both be blown up if it isn't safe. And that is something!"

And she came up very close when he said he was ready to fire, and laid her hand on his arm. The hand was steady enough. But when he glanced at her he saw how white she had become.

"Why, Jean!" he said gently. "Are you frightened?"

"No.... I won't mind it if I may stand rather near you." And she closed her eyes and placed both hands over her ears.

"Do you think I'd fire this charge," he demanded warmly, "if there was the slightest possible danger to you? Take down your hands and listen."

Her closed eyelids quivered: "We'll both—there won't be anything left of either of us if anything does happen," she said tremulously. "I am not afraid.... Only tell me when to close my ears."

"Do you really think there is danger?"

"I don't know."

He looked at her standing there, pale, plucky, eyes tightly shut, her pretty fingers resting lightly on her ears.

He said: "Would you think me crazy if I tell you something?"

"W-What?"

"Would you think me insane, Jean?"

"I don't think I would."

"You wouldn't consider me utterly mad?"

"N-no."

"No—what?"

"No, I wouldn't consider you mad——"

"No—what?" he persisted.

And after a moment her pallor was tinted with a delicate rose.

"No—what?" he insisted again.

"No—Jim," she answered under breath.

"Then—close your ears, Jean, dear."

She closed them; his arm encircled her waist. She bore it nobly.

"You may fire when you are ready—James!" she said faintly.

A thunder-clap answered her; the Causeway seemed to spring up under their feet; the world reeled.

Presently she heard his voice sounding calmly: "Are you all right, Jean?"

"Yes.... I was thinking of you—as long as I could think at all. I was ready to go—anywhere—with you."

"I have been ready for that," he said unsteadily, "from the moment I heard your voice. But it is—is wonderful of you!"

She opened her blue eyes, dreamily looking up into his. Then the colour surged into her face.

"If—if you had spoken to me across the aisle," she said, "it would have begun even sooner, I think.... Because I can't imagine myself not—caring for you."

He took her into his arms:

"Don't worry," he said, "I'll make a place for you in the world, even if that Maltese cross means nothing."

She looked into his eyes fearlessly: "I know you will," she said.

Then he kissed her and she put both arms around his neck and offered her fresh, young lips again.

XXXI

Toward sunset he came to, partially, passed his hand across his enchanted eyes, and rose from the hammock beside her.

"Dearest," he said, "that swamp ought to be partly drained by this time. Suppose we walk over before dinner and take a look?"

Still confused by the sweetness of her dream, she sat up, and he drew her to her feet, where she stood twisting up her beautiful hair, half smiling, shy, adorable.

Then together they walked slowly out along the Causeway, so absorbed in each other that already they had forgotten the explosion, and even the Maltese cross itself.

It was only when they were halted by the great gap in the Causeway that Jean Sandys glanced to the left, over a vast bed of shining mud, where before blue wavelets had lapped the base of the Causeway.

Then her vaguely smiling eyes flew wide open; she caught her lover's arm in an excited clasp.

"O Jim!" she exclaimed. "Look! Look! It is true! It is true! Look at the bed of the lake!"

They stood trembling and staring at the low, squat, windowless coquina house, reeking with the silt of centuries, crawling with stranded water creatures.

The stones that had blocked the door had fallen before the shock of the dynamite.

"Good God!" he whispered. "Do you see what is inside?"

But Jean Sandys, calmly looking untold wealth in its glittering face, sighed, smiled, and turned her blue gaze on her lover, finding in his eyes the only miracle that now had power to hold her undivided attention.

For it is that way with some girls.

But the novelist, unable to endure a dose of his own technique, could no longer control his impatience:

"What in God's name was there in that stone house!" he burst out.

"Oh, Lord!" muttered Stafford, "it is two hours after midnight."

He rose, bent over the girl's hand, and kissed the emerald on the third finger.

Figure after figure, tall, shadowy, leisurely followed his example, while her little hand lay listlessly on the silken cushions and her dreaming eyes seemed to see nobody.

Duane and I remained for a while seated, then in silence,—which Athalie finally broke for us:

"Patience," she said, "is the art of hoping.... Good-night."

I rose; she looked up at me, lifted her slim arm and placed the palm of her hand against my lips.

And so I took my leave; thinking.



Liked This Book?

For More FREE e-Books visit Freeditorial.com