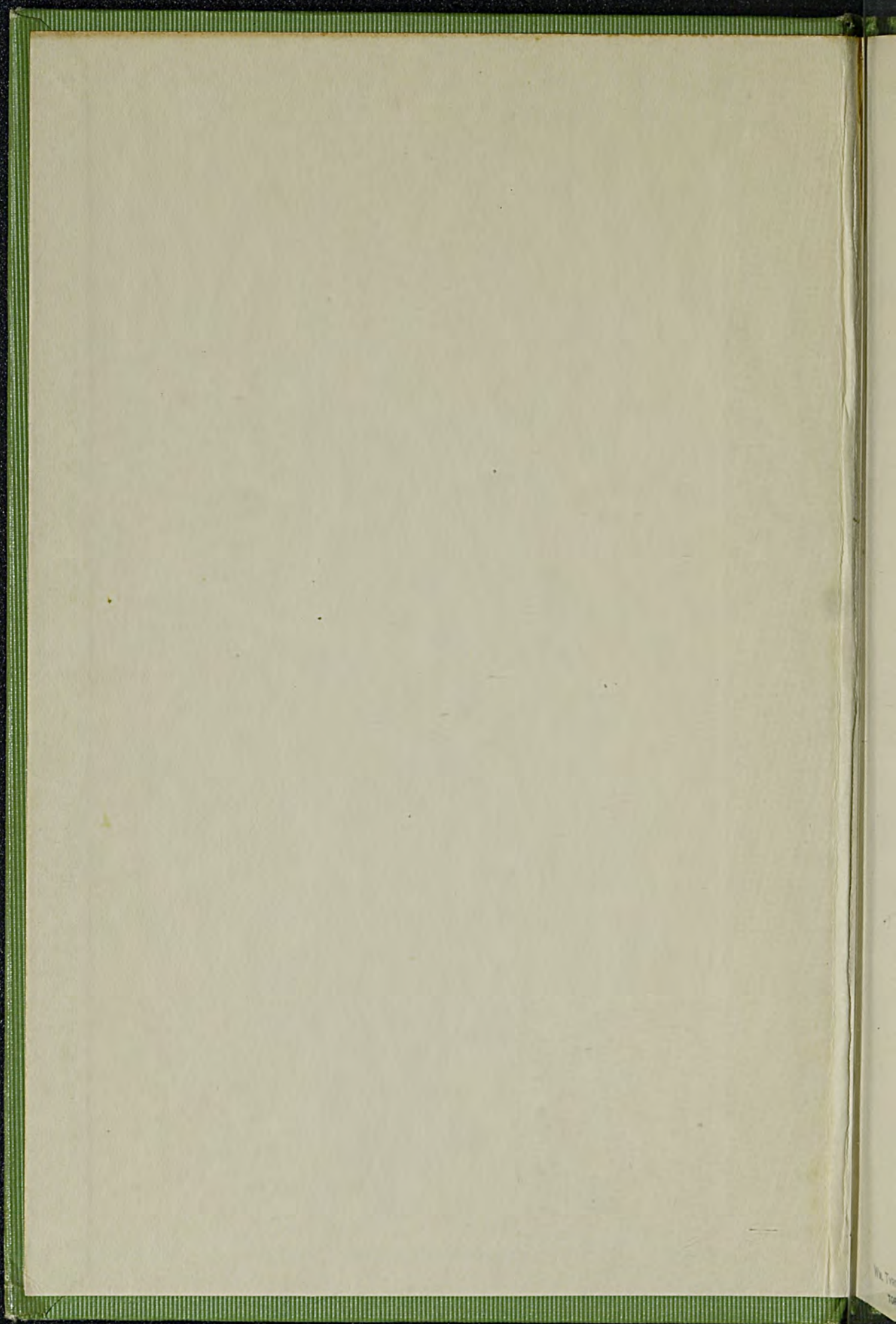


THE TREE OF HEAVEN

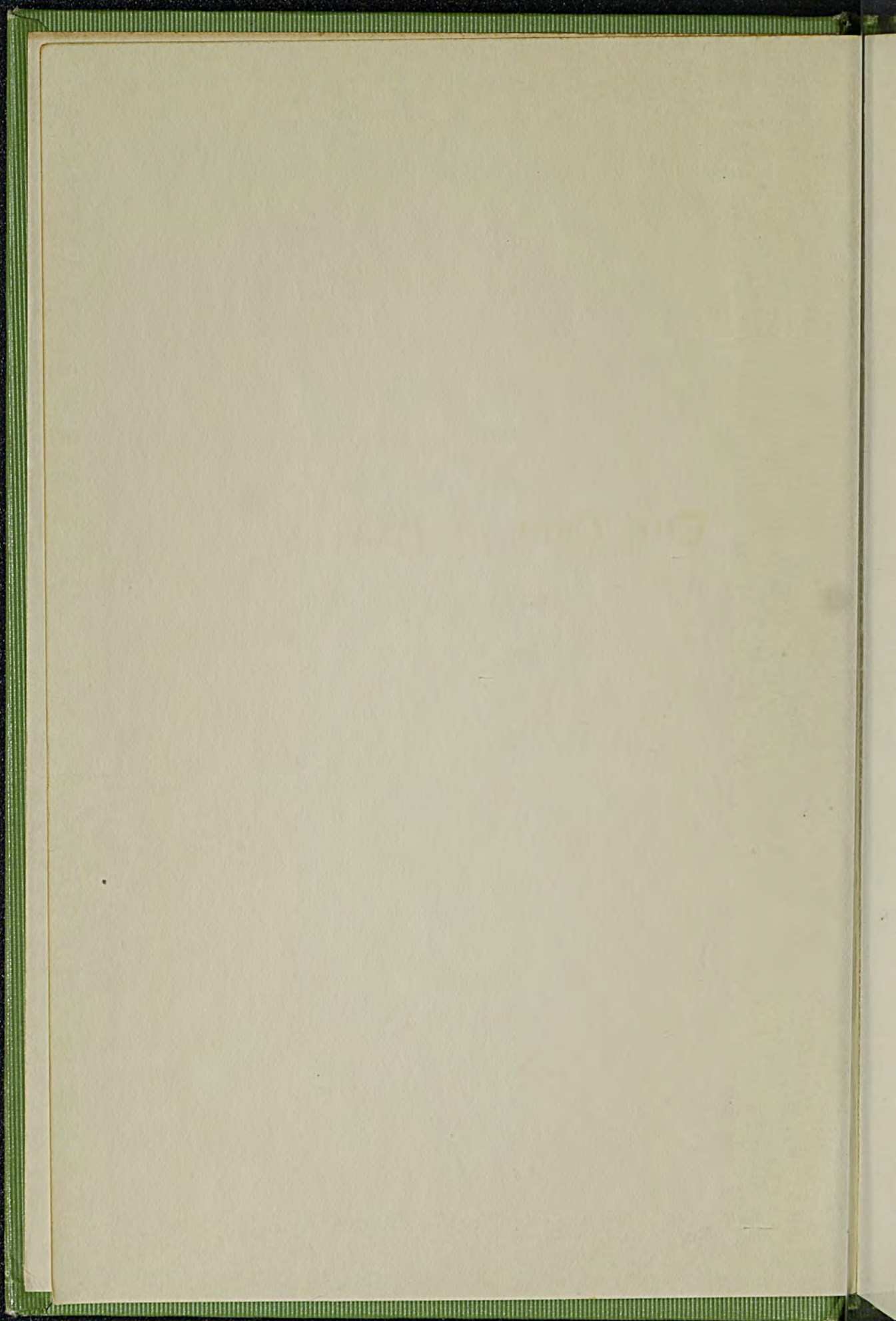


ROBERT W. CHAMBERS



M. G. Boulton

Aug. 1907



THE TREE OF HEAVEN

WORKS OF ROBERT W. CHAMBERS

THE FIGHTING CHANCE
THE TRACER OF LOST PERSONS
THE RECKONING

I O L E

Cardigan	The Conspirators
The Maid at Arms	The Cambric Mask
Lorraine	The Haunts of Men
Maids of Paradise	Outsiders
Ashes of Empire	A Young Man in a Hurry
The Red Republic	The Mystery of Choice
The King in Yellow	In Search of the Un-
A Maker of Moons	known
A King and a Few Dukes	In the Quarter

FOR CHILDREN

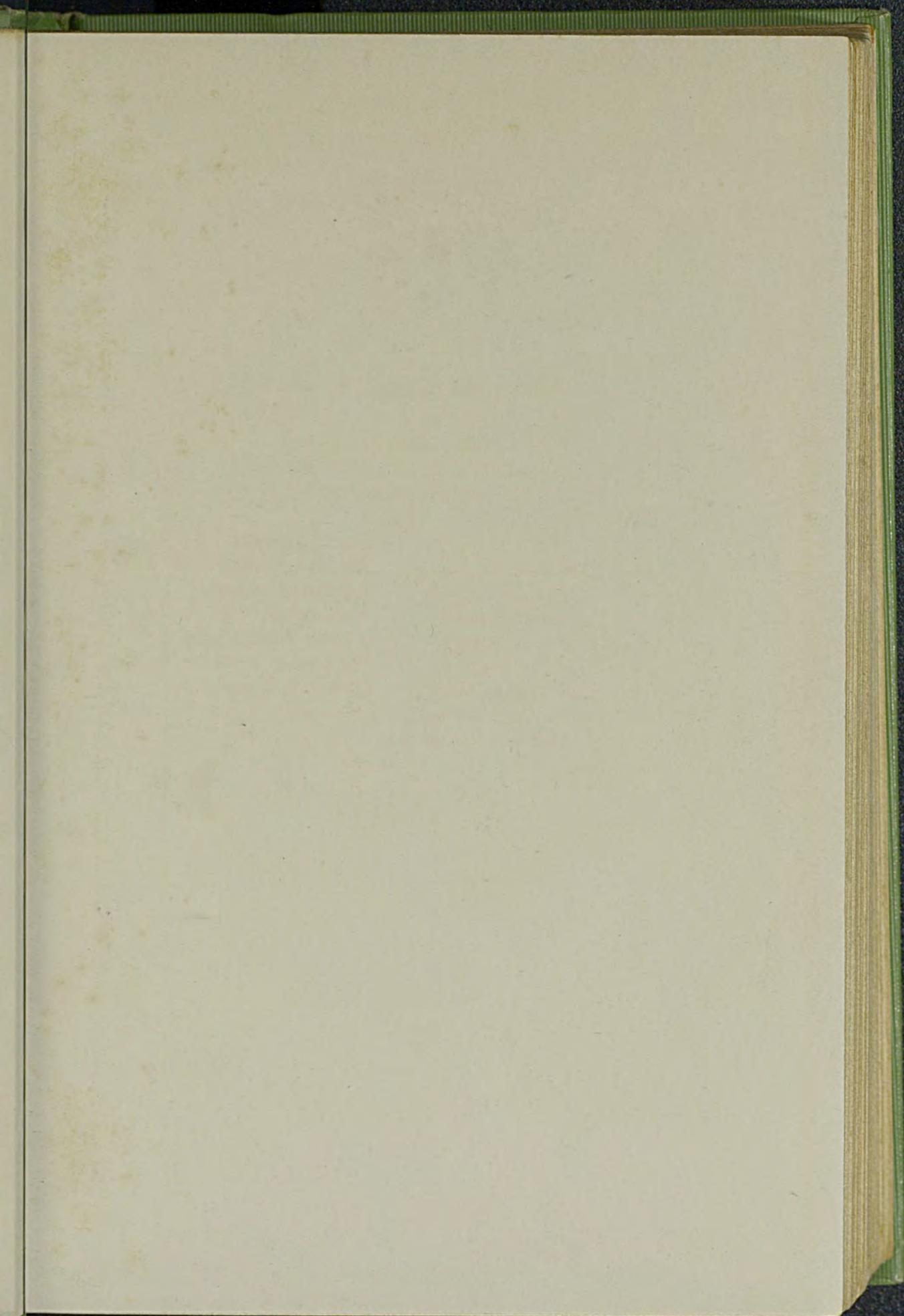
Mountain-Land

Forest-Land

Orchard-Land

River-Land

Outdoorland





“‘What’s the use,’ she said, ‘of kissing a girl who is engaged?’”

[Page 308.]

THE TREE OF HEAVEN

Robert W. Chambers

AUTHOR OF "THE FIGHTING CHANCE,"
"IOLE," "THE TRACER OF LOST
PERSONS," ETC.

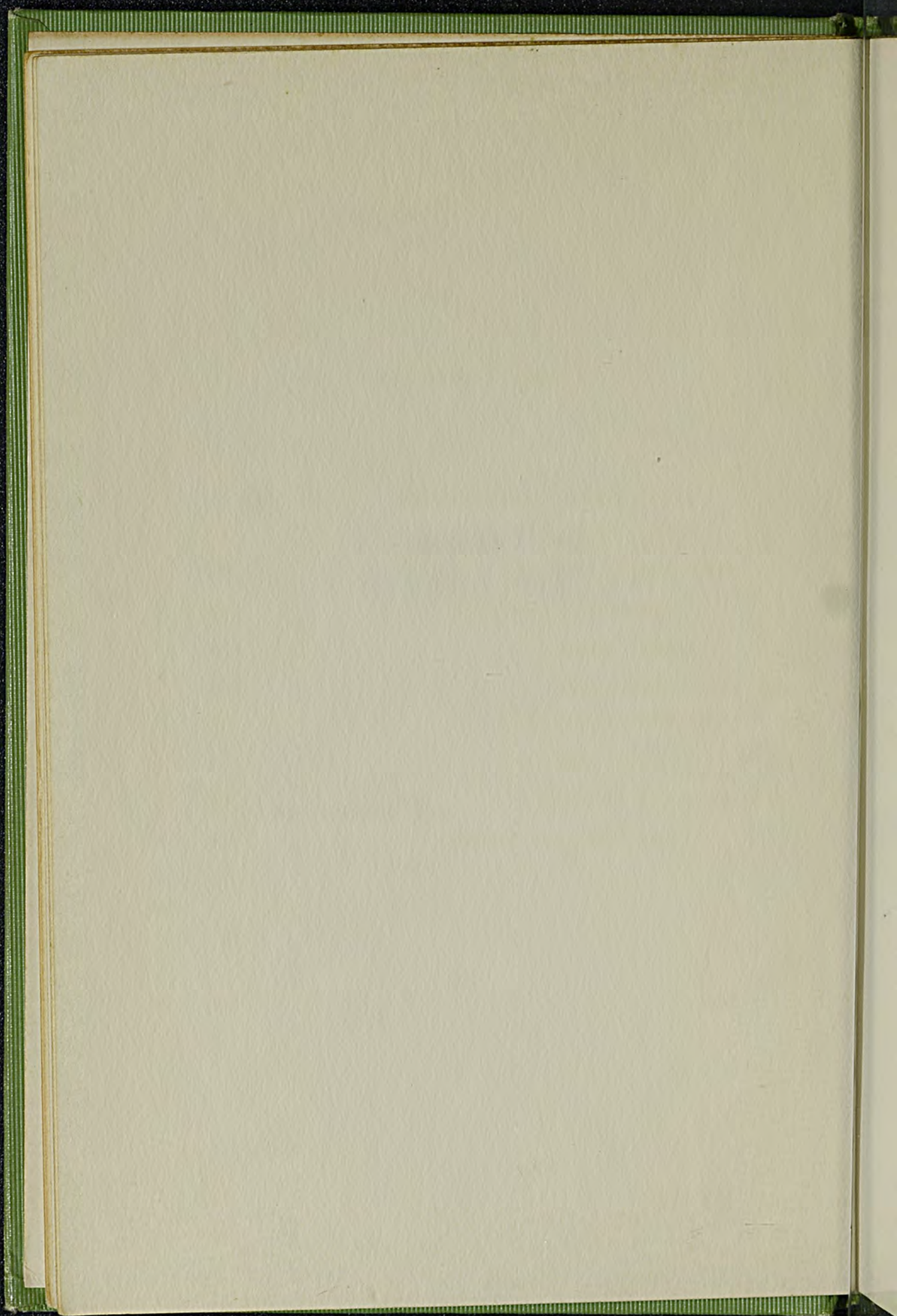


D. APPLETON AND COMPANY
NEW YORK MCMVII

COPYRIGHT, 1907, BY
ROBERT W. CHAMBERS

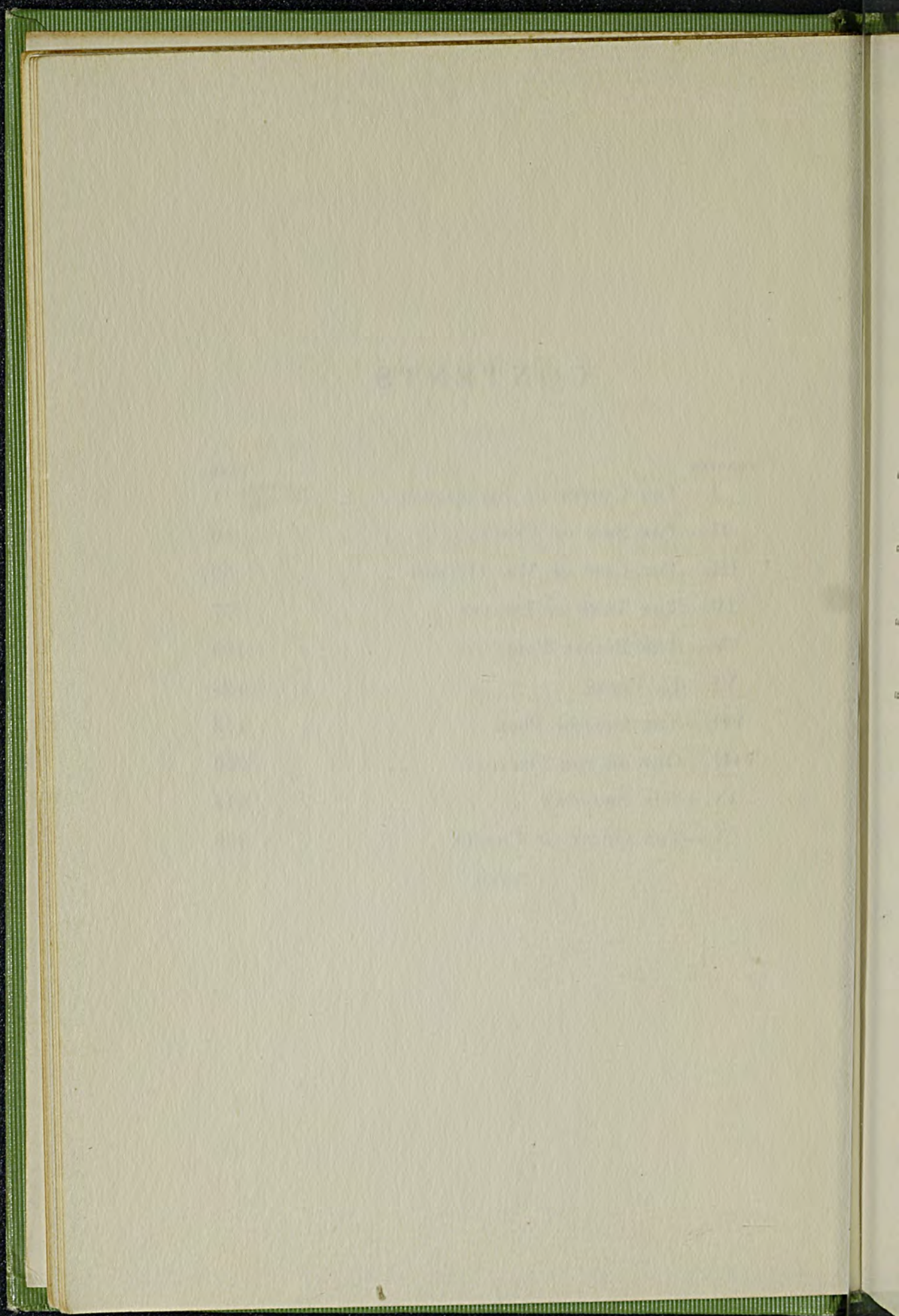
Published May, 1907

TO MY FRIEND
AUSTIN CORBIN



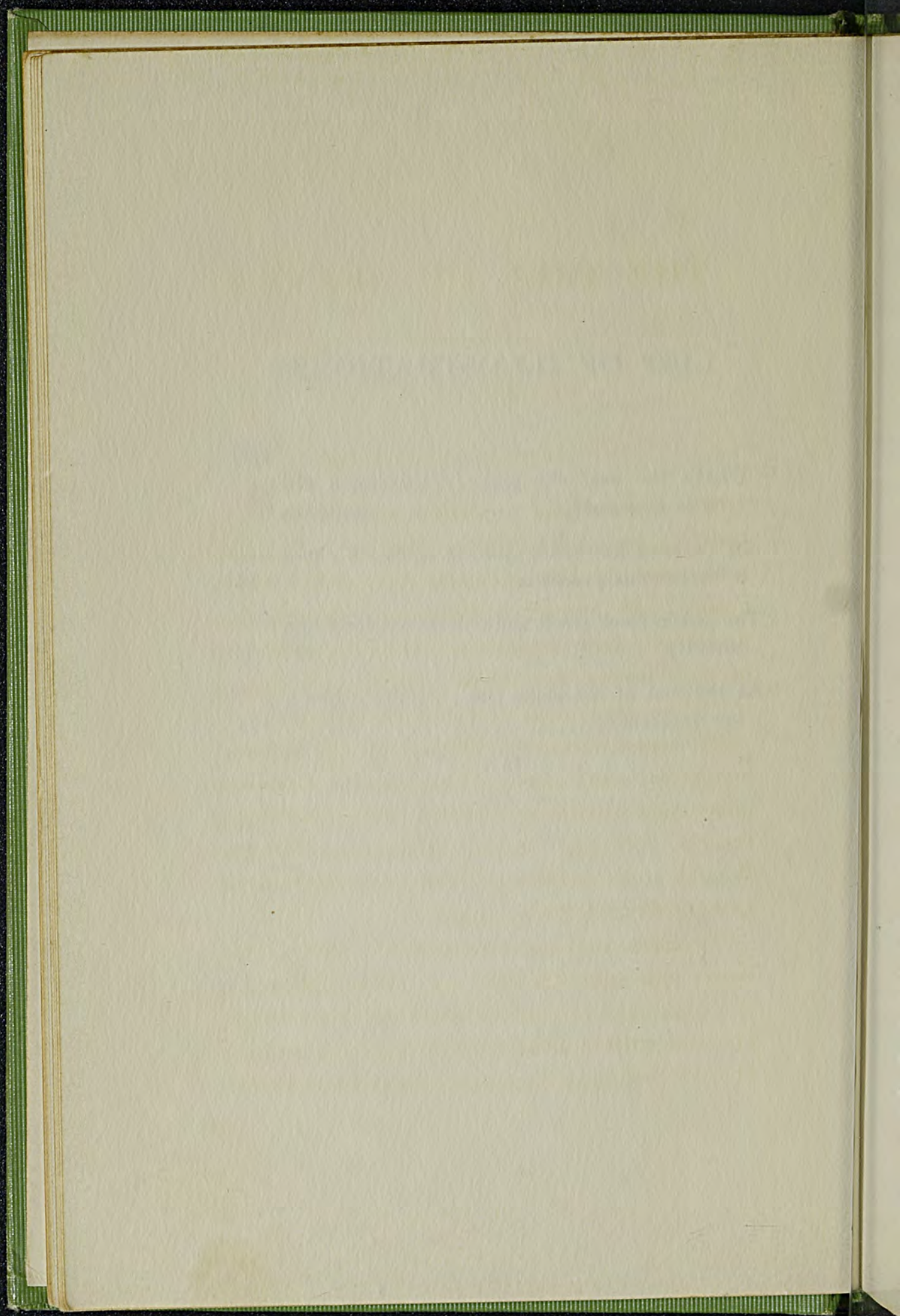
CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
I.—THE CARPET OF BELSHAZZAR	1
II.—THE SIGN OF VENUS	40
III.—THE CASE OF MR. HELMER	60
IV.—THE TREE OF DREAMS	77
V.—THE BRIDAL PAIR	128
VI.—EX CURIA	153
VII.—THE GOLDEN POOL	176
VIII.—OUT OF THE DEPTHS	200
IX.—THE SWASTIKA	218
X.—THE GHOST OF CHANCE	258



LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

	FACING PAGE
“‘What’s the use,’ she said, ‘of kissing a girl who is engaged?’” <i>Frontispiece.</i>	
“She dropped her head, striking chord on chord with nervous precision”	14
“The girl in black stood motionless, watching him intently”	66
“At the foot of the stairs she . . . made him a low reverence”	174



THE TREE OF HEAVEN

CHAPTER I

THE CARPET OF BELSHAZZAR

WE all were glad to see him; on his return he had found us all his friends. Nobody had spoken to him about his abrupt departure from New York; nobody had mentioned Westover; nothing connected with that episode was even hinted at by any of us, I believe, during his short sojourn among us. It was he himself who spoke of it first.

Of course during his absence we had followed his career; many among us had read and tried to understand what he had written in his three world-famous volumes, "Occult Philosophy," "The Weight of Human Souls," and "The Interstellar Laws of Psychic Phenomena."

It seemed, at times, here to us in America, that it was impossible that the man we had known so well could have become the great Psychic Scientist who had written these three astounding works—who now occupied the Chair of Psychical Philos-

THE TREE OF HEAVEN

ophy in the great University of Trebizond—the man who was the confidential adviser of the Shah of Persia, the mentor of the Ameer of Afghanistan, the inspirer of the greatest diplomat of all the East—the late Akhound of Swat.

As he sat there in his immaculate evening dress, bronzed, youthful looking, presiding so quietly at the little dinner which he had given to us as a half-formal, half-intimate leave-taking before he sailed, it seemed to us incredible that this man, now on his return journey to Trebizond *via* Lhassa, could be the beloved and dreaded arbiter of Asiatic politics—the one white man in all the Orient who had ever been wholly respected, and absolutely feared by the temporal and spiritual heads of nations, religions, clans, and sects.

That, of course, he was what is popularly known as an adept, we supposed. What his wisdom, his insight, his amazing knowledge of the occult might include, we preferred, rather uncomfortably, not to conjecture.

There is, naturally, in all of us a childlike desire to hear of marvels; there is also a stronger and more childish desire to see miracles performed.

I am quite sure that we all hoped he might perhaps care to do something for us—merely to convince us. And at first, I know that many among

THE CARPET OF BELSHAZZAR

us, seated there in the private room at the Lenox Club, felt a trifle ill at ease and a little in awe of this man with whom we were at such close quarters.

There was nothing particularly remarkable about the dinner; it was the usual excellent affair one might expect at the Lenox; the wines perfect, the service flawless.

And now, smoking our cigars, lounging in groups over the flower-laden table, we fell into the old, intimate, easy channels of conversation, chatting of past days, of our hopes and ambitions.

And our host, quiet, self-contained, pushed back his chair, looking somewhat curiously, I thought, from one to the other. And I thought, too, as his pleasant bronzed features changed from a faint smile to a graver expression, and then reverted to the smile for a moment, that he seemed to see something in each of us that was perhaps hidden from ourselves—that, as his eyes swept us, he was not only capable of reading much of what was not understood by us, but also something in the hidden future which awaited each of us.

So strongly did this idea begin to take hold of me that it began to make me uneasy. I felt, too, that others among us harbored that same idea—for the conversation was less accented now, and in-

THE TREE OF HEAVEN

termittent; voices had fallen to a lower, quieter pitch; and after a little nobody spoke.

Then I saw that we all were looking straight at our host, as though under some subtle and fascinated compulsion.

He sat very still; his composure appeared a trifle forced, as though he had voicelessly summoned us to concentrate upon him our attention, and was now searching for the exact words for some statement which he had meant to make to us all.

After a moment a slight flush crept over his handsome face. He said:

"You fellows are very good to come here and let me take leave of you so pleasantly. You have been very kind to me since I have come again among you. The sort of friendship that asks nothing but takes a man for granted is a good sort. Helmer,"—he looked at the sculptor Helmer—"I shall see you soon again." We all turned in surprise to Helmer, who seemed as surprised as we were. "I shall see you sooner than you expect. . . . Smith!"—he smiled at J. Abingdon Smith, 3d—"some day you will uproot a Tree of Dreams, but not the dream, Smith; that will become very real when you awake—as true"—and he turned to the man on his left—"as true as a dream which you shall dream under the Sign of Venus."

THE CARPET OF BELSHAZZAR

We sat there breathless, expectant. He was doing something after all; he was prophesying, in a curious sort of manner, probably speaking in symbols. And though we could not understand, we listened while the little shivers fluttered our pulses.

Then he looked at Edgerton, smiling; and Edgerton flushed up and looked back at him, almost defiantly.

"Edgerton," he said, "don't worry too much. What is not to be settled in court can sometimes be settled—*ex curia*." And to the young man on his right: "Doctor, don't overwork. If you do you will learn a stranger truth than is locked up among the molecules and atoms in your laboratory!"

Then he leaned across the table and laid one hand on Leeds's shoulder. "I congratulate you," he said, smiling; "you've got a good-natured ghost following you about. But he'll leave you if you turn idle. And don't be afraid, my boy."

"I'm not afraid," said young Leeds, rather pallid, but straightening up in his chair.

Our host laughed; then his face changed, and he raised his eyes to Shannon:

"Where is Harrod?" he asked slowly.

"At Bar Harbor," replied Shannon, "I believe."

THE TREE OF HEAVEN

"I thought so. And—remember one thing—there is a certain law which governs the validity of a check drawn to a man's order when that check has been signed by a man no longer living. But, Shannon, the intention is the important thing in such a matter."

"What, exactly, do you mean?" asked Shannon, astonished.

But our host had already turned to Escourt:

"Captain," he said, "you sail—when?"

"I have no sailing orders," laughed Escourt.

"Not yet?" Our host looked quietly at the young officer. "Well, it isn't the length of a voyage that counts, Escourt—nor the size of the troopship. No; you will anchor, some day, in a smaller craft than you started in, in the Port of the Golden Pool."

Escourt, still smiling, waited; but our host sat silent, head bent, one hand on the edge of the tablecloth.

"Not one of you," he said, without raising his eyes, "not one among you but who shall come face to face with what you still consider miracles. . . . Even Hildreth, yonder"—Hildreth jumped—"even Hildreth shall learn from the Swastika."

"Swa—swat? What—what?" stammered Hildreth.

THE CARPET OF BELSHAZZAR

"Nothing to alarm you," smiled the other; then again the swift shadow fell across his face.

"Not one man among you who has not proven his friendship for me," he said, looking up and around. And to me he added: "You must prove it still further by telling fearlessly to the world what there will be to tell after I have gone, and after my words have been proven—the words I have spoken here to-night—and which no one among you understands. . . . But you all will understand them. And when the last man among you has understood"—turning again to me—"you must bear witness to the world, bear witness in printed page and over your own signature. Do you promise?"

"Yes," I said.

Then very quietly he looked around the table, and leaned forward, regarding each man in turn.

"I think," he said, "that it is time you understood exactly the facts about which you have forbore to question me. And I mean to tell you before we part; I mean to tell you the truth concerning Westover and—all that happened. . . . And when you know these facts, then you may begin to surmise why I went to Trebizond, why I remain, and—and—*what miracle of happiness I have found there—for the third time reincarnated.*"

THE TREE OF HEAVEN.

He leaned back in his chair; his clear eyes became fixed and dreamy. Then he began to speak, in a low voice, as though to himself:

* * * * *

Time, and the funeral of Time, alas!—and the Old Year's passing-bell! Whistles from city and river, deep horns sounding from the foggy docks; and under my window a voice and a song—ah! that young voice in the street below calling me through the falling snow!

If it be true that Time makes all hurts well, I do not know; and “a thousand years in Thy sight is but as yesterday when it is passed, and as a watch in the night”; a thousand years! And this also is true; the flames of love make hot the furnace of Abaddon.

We were in the gallery as usual, Geraldine and I—the gallery where the carpets of the East were hung along the shadowy walls. For lately it was my pleasure to acquire rare rugs, and it was my profession to furnish expert opinion upon the age and origin of Oriental carpets, and to read and interpret the histories of forgotten emperors and the mysteries of long-forgotten gods from the colors and intricate flowery labyrinths tied in silk or

THE CARPET OF BELSHAZZAR

wool to the warps of some dead sultan's lustrous tapestry.

Here in the long sky gallery hung my own rugs against the arabesque incrustated-ivory panels—Tabriz, Shiraz, Sehna, and Saruk—a somber blaze of color shot with fire—all rare, some priceless; Turkish Kulah, softly silky as a golden lion's hide, Persian Sehna, shimmering with rose and violet lights, fiercely brilliant rugs from Samarkand, superbly flowered, secreting deep in every floral thicket tracteries of the ancient Mongol conqueror; Feraghans glowing like jewel-sewn velvets set with the Herati and the lotus—symbols of Egypt or of China, as you please to interpret the oldest pattern in the world.

Far in the gallery's amber-tinted gloom the red of Ispahan dominated, subduing fiery vistas to smoldering harmony through which, like a vast sapphire set in opals, glimmered the superb lost Persian blue.

There was one other rug, an Eighur, the famous so-called "Babilu," or "Carpet of Belshazzar"; but it hung alone in imperial magnificence behind the locked doors of a marble room, which it seemed to fill with a soft luster of its own, radiating from the mystic "Tree of Heaven" woven in its center.

THE TREE OF HEAVEN

We were, as I say, in this gallery; Geraldine poring over an illuminated volume on cuneiform inscriptions, I, with pad and pencil, idly shifting and reshifting the Kufic key to the ancient cipher, which always left me stranded where I had begun with the stately repetition:

“King of Kings—
King of Kings—
King of Kings—”

As for Westover, my cousin, he was, as usual, in the laboratory fussing with his venomous extracts—an occupation which, to my dismay, he had taken up within the year, working, as he explained, on the theory that every poison has its antidote. Yet it seemed to me that he was more anxious to invent some new and subtle toxic than to devise the remedy.

From where I sat I could not see him, but the crystalline tinkle of his glass retorts and bottles distracted my attention from the penciled calculations. Without moving my head, I glanced across the room at Geraldine. She looked up immediately, raising her level eyebrows in mute inquiry as though I had moved or spoken; then, realizing that I had not, she bent above the book once more, the warm color stealing to her cheeks.

THE CARPET OF BELSHAZZAR

Within the year a wordless intimacy had grown up between us; we never understood it, never acknowledged it, and at times it disconcerted us.

I sat silent, tracing with my pencil series after series of futile Kufic combinations with the cuneiforms, but ever the first turn of the ancient key creaked in my ears,

“King of Kings—
King of Kings—”

until the triverbal reiteration wore on my nerves.

Geraldine leaned back abruptly, closing her book.

“I’m tired and nervous,” she said. “You may wear out your eyes and temper if you choose—and you’re doing the latter, for I’m as restless as an eel. Besides, I’m lonely, and I’m going back to the East—if you’ll come, too.”

I laughed, understanding what she meant by the “East.”

“Will you come with me?” she insisted.

“Yes,” I said, “whenever you are ready.”

She sprang to her feet, scattering the illuminated pages over the floor, and stood an instant facing me, tall, dark-eyed, smiling, brushing back the lustrous hair from her cheeks.

“Where is Jim?” she asked—although we both knew.

THE TREE OF HEAVEN

"In the laboratory," I replied mechanically.

Still busy with her hair, she regarded me dreamily out of those dark, sweet eyes of hers.

"It would be wonderful," she mused, "if Jim should find an antidote to death; but I wish it were not necessary to kill so many little helpless creatures. Did you hear that pitiful sound in there yesterday? Was it something he was killing?"

"I don't know," I said. And after a silence: "What are you going to do?"

She shook her head vaguely and leaned against the window, looking out into the rain.

"Shall we go back to our inscriptions?" I suggested.

She shook her head again. After a while she turned away from the window, stifling a dainty yawn, and stretched out, languidly straightening up to the full height of her young body.

"I feel stupid," she said; "I'm tired of cryptograms and the pages of dusty books. I'm tired of the rain, too. The languor of April is in me. I'm homesick for lands I never knew. So come back to the East with me, Dick."

She held out her hand to me with a confident little smile; and knowing what she meant, I acquiesced in her caprice, and conducted her solemnly to the piano, leaving her before it.

THE CARPET OF BELSHAZZAR

She stood there for a space, musing, her lovely head bent; then, still standing, she struck a sequence of chords—chords pulsating with color; and through them flashed strange little trills like threads of tinsel.

“This is an Eighur carpet I am dreaming of,” she murmured, as the music swelled, glowing as tints and hues glow in the old dyes of the East.

Wave on wave of color seemed to spread from the keys under her fingers; she looked back at me over her shoulder with a warning nod.

“I shall begin to weave very soon. Khiounnou horsemen may appear and frighten me for a moment—but I shall finish. Listen! I am at the loom.”

Seating herself, she developed out of the flowing, somber harmony a monotonous minor theme, suddenly checked by a distant rattle like the clatter of nomad lances on painted stirrups; then she picked up the thread of the melody again, dropped it, breathless for a moment's quivering silence, resumed it, twisting it into delicate arabesques, threading it across the dull, rich harmonies, at first slowly, then faster, faster, swift as the flying fingers of a nomad maid tying fretted silver in a Ghiordes knot. The whirring tempo was the cadence of the loom; soft feathery notes flew like

THE TREE OF HEAVEN

carded wool; thicker, duller, softer grew the fabric, dense, silky, heavily lustrous.

Suddenly she broke the thread off short, the whole fabric falling with a muffled shock.

"Why did you do that?" I demanded wrathfully.

"The rug is woven; the weaver is dead," she said.

"Oh, go on, Geraldine," I insisted; "don't stop half way in a thing like that. It's the East—it's the real East, I tell you. How you do it—you who have never seen the East—Heaven only knows!"

"U Allah Aalem," she murmured; "it's in me." Then she looked back at me, laughing. "Centuries ago you and I heard that music along the Arax—or I sang it among the Tcherkess roses for you, perhaps—perhaps in the gardens of Trebizond."

"That might explain it," I said gravely. Later she had found pleasure in a fancy that she and I had lived together in the East, centuries since, and that we were soon to return forever.

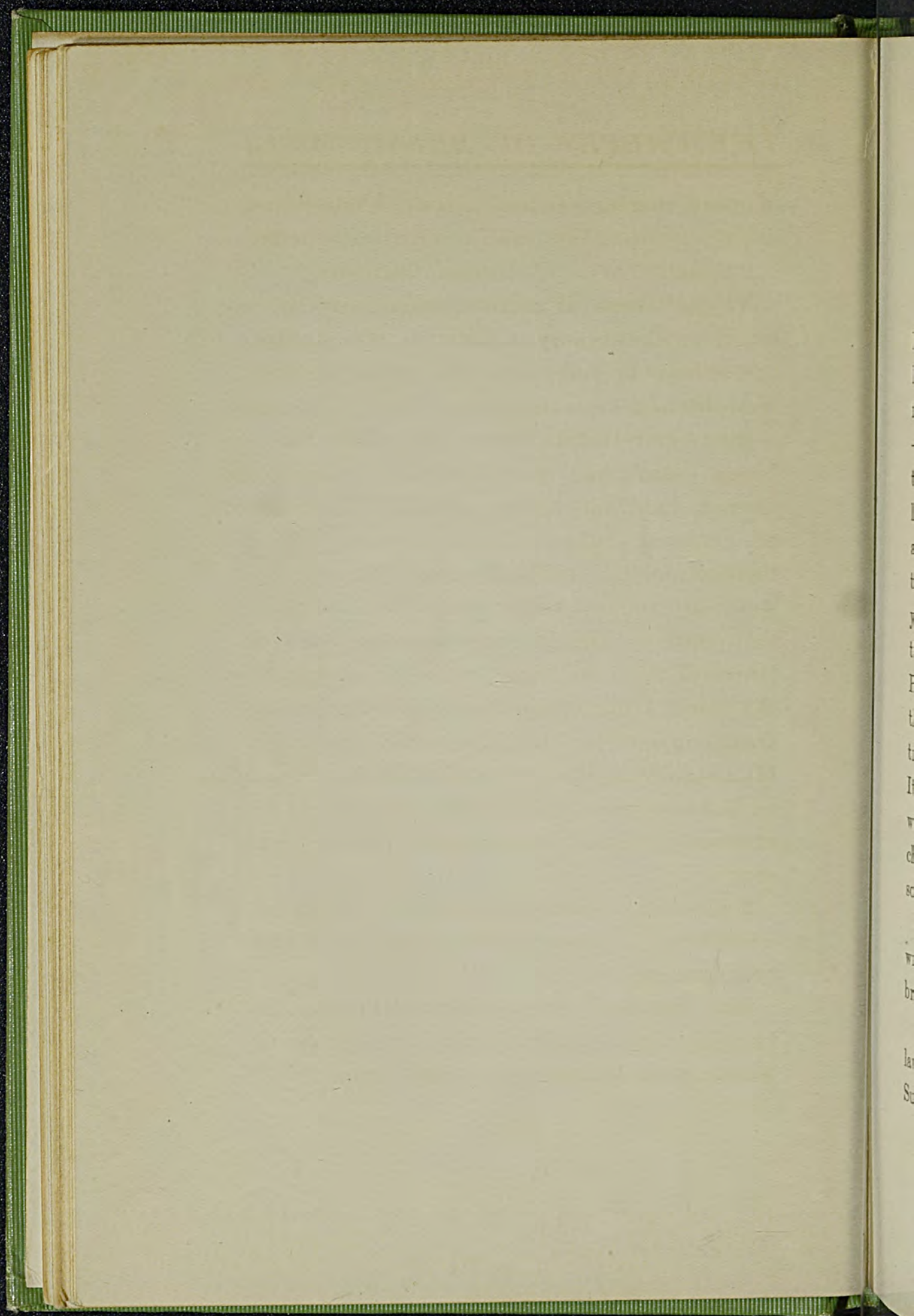
"You and I," she mused, touching the keys lightly—"and Jim, of course," she added.

"Of course," I said.

She dropped her head, striking chord on chord with nervous precision; and hanging in the wake



"She dropped her head, striking chord on chord with nervous precision."



THE CARPET OF BELSHAZZAR

of every ringing harmony a frail melody floated like the Chinese cloud band in a Kirman tapestry.

"What's that air?" I asked, fascinated.

"I don't know; it sounds pagan, doesn't it?—like the wicked beauty of Babylon. Do you hear how it beats on and on like the rhythm of naked feet—little, delicate, naked feet ablaze with gems—the feet of Herodiade perhaps—thud—thud—tching!—don't you hear them, Dick? And now listen to those silky, flowery trills! They're Asiatic; ancient Cathay is awaking—camel bells in the hazar of the Golden Emperor! Hark!—now you hear trumpets, don't you? Well, of course that must be the Mongols marching with the Prince of the Vanguard. Hark! How savagely the brutal Afghan theme breaks in with its fierce trampling and the staccato echo of Tekke drums! It's frightening me out of the East. I think we had better come home, Dick," she added, mischievously running into the latest popular street song.

"How on earth could you do that!" I exclaimed wrathfully. "You're a futile mixture of feather brain and genius!"

But where was the genius hidden under that laughing and exquisite mask confronting me? Suddenly the delicate mask became grave.

THE TREE OF HEAVEN

"Let me laugh when I can, Dick," she said. "It is not often I laugh."

I was silent.

"Of course you may be horrid if you choose," she observed with a shrug, running a brilliantly inane series of trills from end to end of the keyboard. "But it's no use scolding, for I won't study, I won't compose, I won't 'try to do something,' and I won't be serious. I'm shallow, I'm frivolous, I've the soul of a Trebizond dancing girl, and I like it. Now what are you going to do?"

"I'm going out," I said ungraciously.

"Oh—alone?"

"Not if you'll come. It's stopped raining. Will you come? Oh, get your hat, Geraldine, and stop that torment of idiotic trills!"

"If Jim doesn't mind, I think I'll go and sit in the laboratory with him," she observed carelessly.

I looked at her without comment.

"I have a curious idea," she continued, "that he might like to have me around to-day while he is working."

I stared at her, but there was no bitterness in her tranquil smile as she leaned forward, resting her elbows on the polished rosewood case.

"So I won't go with you, Dick," she said slowly.

One of those intervals of restless silence, which

THE CARPET OF BELSHAZZAR

within the year we had learned to dread, menaced us now. Mute, motionless, I watched the soft color deepening in her face, then, impatient, roused myself and walked over to the laboratory. Westover looked up as I pushed aside the screen.

"Will you drive with us?" I asked. "The sun's out."

He declined, peering at me through his glass mask.

"Come on, Jim," I urged. "You've inhaled enough poison for one day. Take off your mask and wash your hands and drive us out to High Bridge. I'll telephone to the stable if you say the word, and they'll hook up the new four. Is it a go?"

"No," he said coldly, and turned on his heel, lifting a test tube to the light.

He was more taciturn and a trifle uglier than usual. I watched him for a moment warming the test tube over a burner, then without further parley replaced the screen, closed the double glass doors, and walked back to Geraldine.

"Doesn't Jim care to come?" she asked.

I said that her husband appeared to be absorbed in his work.

"Very well," she said, with airy composure; "trot along, Dicky—and if you see a bunch of jon-

THE TREE OF HEAVEN

quils growing on Fifth Avenue, you may pick them for me—or for that pretty girl you met at Lakewood——”

“I’ll send you a bunch as big as a bushel.”

“A bushel of flowers is as compromising as a declaration,” she said. “Send them to her.”

“There’s only one way to settle it,” I said; “I’ll send them to the loveliest girl in the world—shall I?”

She assented, laughing uncertainly.

“I think I’ll pay Jim a little call,” she said, rising from the piano and walking slowly toward the laboratory.

A few moments later as I passed down the broad stairway I heard Westover’s penetrating voice: “Let that glass tube alone, Geraldine! Why the devil can’t you keep your hands off things when you come in here?”

I lingered for a while in the hallway, thinking that she might change her mind and come down, for she had left the laboratory to her husband, and I heard her moving about in her own apartment. She did not come, and after a little while I left the house, a sense of apprehension depressing me.

The asphalt of Fifth Avenue was still wet with the first warm rain of April, but the sun glittered

THE CARPET OF BELSHAZZAR

on window and pavement and flashed along the polished panels of carriages crowding the avenue from curb to curb. A breath of spring had set the sparrows chattering and chirping; the movement of the throng, the bright gowns, the fresh faces of young girls, and the endless façades of glass reflecting it—all were pleasant to me, a man sensitive to impressions.

And so in the pale sunshine I sauntered on through the throng, now idling curiously by some shop window whither a display of jewels or curios attracted me, now strolling on again content with the soft color in sky and sunlight.

I found a florist whose shop windows were filled with thickets of fragrant, fragile spring flowers; and every little scented blossom that I touched, choosing the freshest, nodded to the voiceless cadence of a name repeated—and: “Geraldine! Geraldine!” they nodded, so confidently, so sweetly, that what was I to do but send them to her?

And so I sauntered on again, threading the throng, half-minded to turn back, yet ever tempted on by idleness, until above me the twin spires of the cathedral glimmered, all silvered in the shimmering blue.

Halting, undecided, I presently became aware of an old man, his withered hands crossed before him,

THE TREE OF HEAVEN

standing quite patiently under the cathedral terrace. Before him on the sidewalk rested a basket draped with a brilliant rug or two and heaped with tawdry rubbish—scarlet fezzes, slippers of spangled leather, tasseled charms of gilt, flimsy striped fabrics—all the worthless flummery known as “Oriental” to the good peoples of the West.

Few stopped to look; no one bought. As I passed him his dimmed gaze met mine; all the wistfulness of the very poor, all the mystery of the very, very old, was in his eyes. Moved by impulse, perhaps, I spoke to him in a low voice, using the Turkish language.

A dull animation came into his misty eyes.

“Allahou Ekber,” he muttered, in a trembling voice; “it is sweet to hear your words, my son.”

“Mussulman,” I said, “who are you who recite the Tekbir here under the spires of a Roman church?”

“Is there harm in bearing witness to the glory of God here under the minarets of your cathedral?” he asked humbly.

“Spire and minaret are one to Him,” I said. “Who are you, Mussulman?”

“My name is Khassar,” he said; “my nation Eighur; my Iort is the Issig-Kul; Baïon-Aoul my clan. I am an Eighur Turk, a Khodja; and I am

THE CARPET OF BELSHAZZAR

able to write the Turkish language in Arabic and in Eighur-Mongol characters."

"Reverend father," I said, full of astonishment and pity, "how should a Khodja of the Baïon-Aoul come to this? Even the Tekrin horseman halts at the sea."

"It is written," he said feebly, "that we belong to God and we return to Him."

Troubled, I stood there on the sidewalk, oblivious of the knot of idlers around us, curious to hear two men so different conversing in a common tongue.

I wished to give him something, yet did not venture to humiliate him without pretense of buying.

"Here is my card," I said, "on which is written my name and where I live. Bring me these rugs to-night, ata. I wish to buy."

"You do not desire them," he said, shaking his head. "You know the East; you understand these rugs; you know they are worthless, acid-washed, singed, rubbed with pumice, smoked—every vile Armenian practice used! You know the dyes are aniline; that they are loosely tied, hastily and flimsily woven by Armenian dogs and sons of dogs. You mean kindness; you have done me enough by speaking to me."

THE TREE OF HEAVEN

He passed his trembling hand over his ragged beard.

"You who know carpets and love them," he quavered; "listen attentively. I have a strip to show—not here—but I could bring it."

"Bring it," I said gently.

He fumbled in the pocket of his tattered coat and presently brought to light a scrap of paper on which was scrawled some Persian characters.

"It is such a carpet as I have never seen," he said; "there is nothing in our history or our traditions to teach us the meaning of this carpet—nothing save that it is an Eighur rug inscribed in Persian and in an unknown script. I have traced the characters in a single cartouche. Read, my son."

And I read, translating freely:

*"Ten thousand thousand stars shine down on Babylon.
The desert well reflects but one."*

"I will bring the carpet," he said, after a silence. "I do not know its value; it has no beauty any longer; only the ghost of ancient splendor remains in the thin knots clinging to warp and weft. And it is old, my son, older than tradition. Upon it there is not one sign to teach us the mystery of its meaning."

THE CARPET OF BELSHAZZAR

He peered at me with his old, sad eyes, earnestly.

"I will bring it," he said. "Go with Ali, thou fair comrade of Hassan."

"May the Blessed Companions intervene for you," I said.

And so we parted, gravely and with circumstance, I to stroll homeward, touched, musing curiously upon this carpet of which a nomad Mussulman could make nothing. The Persian verse from the cartouche interested me, too, the refrain lingering persistently in my memory:

*"Ten thousand thousand stars shine down on Babylon.
The desert well reflects but one."*

Never before, save on the imperial carpet known as Belshazzar's Rug, had I encountered any inscription mentioning Babylon. So, at the first glance, the nomad's rug should have some value. But speculation was futile—surely I ought to have learned that if unnumbered disappointments could teach me anything.

Thinking of these things, I passed along the noble avenue, retracing my steps to the big dusky house standing alone, with two old trees to guard it—relics, like the mansion, of the great city's infancy—the last old dwelling left marooned amid the arid wastes of commerce. Here my cousin and

THE TREE OF HEAVEN

his wife lived with me in winter; I with them at their Lenox home in summer.

A brougham or two at the curb before the house warned me of clients waiting or of visitors for Geraldine—doubtless the latter, for it was now past five.

Under the circumstances I went in to second Geraldine—for Westover never troubled himself to be civil to her friends.

There were people there, and tea—and a pretty, wordless welcome from Geraldine.

The violet-tinted April dusk brought candle-light; people went away and others came; then, one by one, they left, and we were alone, Geraldine and I—and the new moon shining through the frail curtains. For a long time we talked together, aimlessly, of this and that which mattered nothing to anybody. A maid entered to draw the curtains. When she left, Geraldine laughed and picked up a cluster of yellow jonquils.

“Your courage failed you, after all,” she said; “the loveliest woman in the world must go without my flowers to-night.”

“She has them,” I retorted.

“Do you mean me, Dick?” she said under her breath.

“Did you doubt it?”

THE CARPET OF BELSHAZZAR

She bowed her head. Silence, ever waiting to ensnare us, crept like a shadow in between us. And I would not have it.

"An old man is to bring a rug to-night," I said abruptly.

Geraldine stirred in her armchair, repeating in a low voice:

"Ten thousand thousand stars shine down on Babylon. The desert well reflects but one. Abaddon none."

Bolt upright in my chair I listened, incredulous of my own ears.

"Where on earth did you hear that?" I demanded.

"I read it on Belshazzar's Rug in cuneiform with the Kufic key," she answered, watching me.

"You—all alone—interpreted that?" I asked, astounded.

"Yes. It is the cuneiform inscription in the gold cartouche."

Profound astonishment left me silent. She lay back in her chair with a little laugh of pure excitement.

"After you went out," she said, "I was horribly lonely, and I thought of you, and then I thought about the work you loved—the cuneiforms—and—as Jim did not seem to need me in

THE TREE OF HEAVEN

the laboratory—I thought to myself: ‘Suppose—suppose by luck I could unravel the inscription on the gold cartouche! Dick would be the happiest man in the world.’ And then—your—your flowers came, and I sat for a while alone with them. Then, on impulse, I jumped up and took the Kufic tables and all the combinations that you and I had tried together, and I slipped upstairs to the marble room and knelt down before Belshazzar’s Rug. O Dick! the Tree of Heaven seemed to quiver in every jeweled branch and leaf!—it was only the draught from the closing door that moved the rug, but the mystic tree swayed there as the folds of the carpet moved, and I seemed to feel the mystery of the Prophet’s Paradise stealing into me, penetrating me like the incense of forbidden wine—and I—I felt very Eastern and very pagan, kneeling there.

“It was strange, too; the intricate Kufic key seemed to be falling into place of its own impulse, symbol after symbol promising a linked symmetry of sense, until, almost before I was conscious of the miracle, it had been wrought there in the marble room; and my eyes were opened; and I, kneeling before the Tree of Heaven, read quite clearly what is written in the gold cartouche on the great carpet of Belshazzar. Dick! I prayed so hard that I might read it. And I have read it—for *you*!”

THE CARPET OF BELSHAZZAR

In the eloquence of her emotion she had risen, holding out both hands to me; I caught them, crushing them to my lips.

Ominous pulsating silence grew between us; her fingers relaxed and her hands fell from my lips. The stillness, intense, absolute, became a tension, a growing resistless force pressing us apart, slowly, inexorably driving me back step by step against the silk-hung wall, which I reached for, groping, steadying myself.

Never before had we been so swayed, so thrilled; never before had we been so reckless of the peril. Over us a magic snare had fallen, and we had evaded it—an unseen and delicate web, enmeshing us, drawing us together limb to limb, body to body, soul to soul, there on the kindling edges of destruction.

She sank back into the deep seat by the window, her white hands tightening on the gilded foliation of the chair's carved arms. And I saw how pale her face was and how her dark eyes were fixed steadily upon the floor as though destruction was a pit whose edge lay at her feet.

Presently I became aware that the world outside the curtained windows was moving still—had perhaps never halted on its way to wait upon our

THE TREE OF HEAVEN

fate. And, crossing the room, I raised the shade and saw the new moon, low in the sky, kneeling amid the watching stars. Yellow rays from a street lamp illuminated the old trees' foliage, edging with palest fire the tracery of newborn leaves, tufting each stem and twig, exquisite, delicately formal as the leafy labyrinths of the Tree of Heaven spreading above the flowery field of Belshazzar's Rug.

Khassar the nomad had come and gone, and his rug hung in the marble room, pale as the tinted shadow cast by the great carpet of Belshazzar.

The nomad's rug was clean but very ancient, and so worn, so time-eaten to the very warp, that the Kherdeh was all but obliterated in the metnih. But outside of that, between the outside band and the ara, or central line, there were traces of ancient glory and dimmed outlines of design; and I saw the twelve cartouches inscribed alternately in Persian and in cuneiform characters. There, too, were the worn remains of floral thickets haunted of beast and bird, intricate allegories, chronicles in color and symbol, every leaf, every blossom, every creature fraught with mystic meaning; and there also, still faintly to be made out, the shadowy foliage of the Tree of Heaven.

"How much did you pay for that ghost of a

THE CARPET OF BELSHAZZAR

rug?" demanded Westover, who had followed me upstairs after dressing for dinner.

When I told him he shrugged his shoulders, but made no comment. A moment later Geraldine entered, and his small eyes, no longer furtive, became fixed and dull.

"They say in the East," I remarked, "that when all color is gone from an Eighur rug a lost soul takes it for its abode. Eighur women are supposed to have souls occasionally, and to lose them now and then."

"There are plenty of lost souls in town," observed Westover; "no doubt you'll have your choice of tenants for your carpet—or," he added, staring at space, "if you like I'll provide you."

I did not understand his remark, but it left a vaguely sinister impression. Geraldine, standing between us, her white fingers linked behind her, looked up at me very gravely.

"Do you know," she said, "that I am convinced that I wove that rug some centuries ago?"

"I have no doubt of it," I replied, smiling.

"Do you doubt it, Jim?" she asked gayly.

He did not reply.

"As a matter of fact," I said, "it was always believed that a young girl who dared to weave the Tree of Heaven into an Eighur carpet died when

THE TREE OF HEAVEN

her task was ended—her entire physical and spiritual vitality entering into the sacred tree and infusing it with mystic splendor.”

“Oh, I died as you say,” observed Geraldine gravely.

“I don’t see that you infused much physical or spiritual splendor into that rug,” observed Westover.

“I must die again, you know, Jim, and bring its vanished beauty back,” she said gayly. “Shall I, Dick?—and leave you a priceless carpet as my bequest and monument?”

Westover turned on his heel, fidgeting with his collar. Recently his neck had grown fat behind the ears.

A few moments later dinner was announced.

We lingered late over dinner, I remember. Jim drank heavily—a habit which both Geraldine and I had long since left unnoticed, she shrinking from the sullen rebuff certain to follow even a playful protest, I understanding the utter hopelessness of interference. His mind, already shaken, would one day shatter, and the dreadful price be paid.

As he sat there sousing walnuts in port, in his altered features and swollen hands I seemed to divine something malicious and patient and pow-

THE CARPET OF BELSHAZZAR

erful—that indescribable physical menace one feels in the inert brooding eye of the mentally and spiritually crippled.

When Geraldine rose he stood up unsteadily. After she had gone he lighted a cigar and turned his bloodshot eyes on me.

“Is that wine expensive?” he demanded, pointing to Geraldine’s half-empty glass.

“Rather,” I said.

He picked up the glass, examined it, sniffing at the contents.

“It’s poor claret,” he said. “Taste it. It’s pure poison, I tell you.”

“I’m sorry,” I said indifferently.

Again he sniffed it. “Faugh!” he sneered, and threw it into the fireplace behind him. Then he got on his feet, heavily, muttering to himself, and stumbled off through the drawing-room.

For a while I sat there amid the shaded candles, staring at space. But I could not read the future pictured there amid the empty chairs and the flowers, already drooping in each crystal vase.

When at length I roused myself and went upstairs, passing her apartment I heard her singing to herself, and I wondered that she could.

I paused on the gallery stairway to listen; and she could not have heard my footsteps on the thick

THE TREE OF HEAVEN

deep carpeting, yet she came to the door and opened it, looking up at me where I stood.

"You are going to the marble room. May I come and help you?" she asked sweetly. And as I was silent, she said again: "Let me be happy, won't you, Dick? Let me be where you are."

"Have I ever avoided you, Geraldine?"

I descended the steps, she laid her hand lightly on my arm, and together we mounted the stairway toward the gallery.

"I was singing a Hillah tent song when you passed," she said, "partly because I was lonely, and partly"—she hesitated, looking around at me—"partly because I've come to the conclusion, Dick, that I was once at Belshazzar's feast in Cadimirra—for there's a great deal of wickedness in me—you'd never believe it, would you?"

She smiled at me so innocently, so adorably, that I laughed outright.

"I've heard that the maids of Babilu-Ki had a bowing acquaintance with the devil," I said. "Even an Eighur girl nodded pleasantly to Erlik now and then—according to the chronicles of the Tekrins."

"Oh, they surely did," she said. And, "Thank you, Dick," she added, as we reached the gallery;

THE CARPET OF BELSHAZZAR

"when I am an old woman you must help me up the steep places."

"It is you who help me," I said lightly.

She stood, resting her arm on the table while I gathered up the mass of papers containing our cuneiform combinations and the Kufic key.

"All that is useless," she said suddenly. Her manner and smile had altered.

I looked up in surprise, and at the same instant she pushed the papers from beneath my hands.

"The memory of things forgotten centuries ago has returned to me," she said feverishly. "I am a pagan again. It was Istar who first taught my hands to weave and my fingers to tie the Sehna knot. I wove that carpet; what I have woven there I can read. Why do you laugh? Will you believe me if I translate the mystery of each inscription as easily as I read the gold cartouche? Come; we shall never need those papers again."

What new caprice was this? She was smiling, almost fixedly, and I thought that there was something in her overflushed face and in the starlike brilliancy of her eyes not quite normal. At the same moment the electric lights in the laboratory went out. Westover was evidently in there. I waited, expecting him to appear, but he did not.

THE TREE OF HEAVEN

Again I reached for the papers, but Geraldine scattered them with a quick sweep of her hand.

"Won't you believe me? Won't you let me try?" she repeated almost impatiently.

With a quick movement she bent forward past me and shut off the lights in the gallery where we stood. Another second, and the lights in the marble room broke out fiercely; and there, full in the dazzling glory, I saw the great carpet of Belshazzar hanging, and beside it the Eighur rug—a pallid shadow on the wall.

Geraldine, hands clasped to her scarlet mouth, dark eyes fixed, moved forward slowly, opalescent tints flashing on her smooth bare arms and shoulders, her head a delicate silhouette against the glare.

I followed, pausing at her side, and we stood silently before the miracle, the great folds gently stirring in some unfelt current; and I saw the upper branches of the Tree of Heaven sway, and a thousand leaves, all glistening, quiver and subside.

"One can almost hear the rustling of the leaves," I whispered.

"I hear more than that," she murmured. "I hear my soul bidding me good-by."

She smiled dreamily, turning to the faded

THE CARPET OF BELSHAZZAR

Eighur carpet, and stepping back one pace, dropped her left arm, clasping my hand in hers.

"It was I who wove that carpet—I, maid of the Issig-Kul—and it was you, beloved of Hassan, who inspired it."

"What are you saying, Geraldine?" I began uneasily; "where did you ever hear my name linked with the name of Hassan?"

Her palm was burning hot, her eyes too bright. The fever of caprice possessed her, and her imagination was running riot.

There was a silence, through which a distant sound penetrated—the faint ring of glass somewhere in the laboratory. Westover was tying on his crystal mask.

She heard it, too, and she turned, looking me full in the eyes.

"Dick," she said, "he has slain my body. My soul is bidding me good-by."

"It is my own that he is dragging to destruction, not yours," I muttered.

But she only clasped my hand tighter, the fixed smile stamped on her lips.

"Listen," she whispered, raising her arm. "This is what is written in the rose cartouche on the Eighur carpet that I made:

'Roses of Babylon : Ashes of roses in Abaddon.'

THE TREE OF HEAVEN

Love and its awful penalty, Dick—and the warning I wove, confined in cryptogram! Listen again. The cartouche below was once topaz—for I wove it—I!

*‘All Paradise the cost :
Warp and weft for souls so lost.’*

—Mine, Dick, mine!—lost in loving as I loved, centuries since. I have no soul; I have never had any since I lost it then. It is there, tenanting the phantom of an Eighur carpet. Do you not understand? There is my faded monument and refuge—that magic-woven sanctuary—that hiding place from hell!”

Her little feverish fingers tightened convulsively in mine; the color flamed in her cheeks. Suddenly she crushed our clasped hands to her heart, and I felt it leaping madly.

“Geraldine,” I stammered, “what is all this ghastly nonsense? Are you ill?”

“Listen! Listen!” she whispered; “the next cartouche was blue—the lost Persian blue! I know; why should I not know—I who wove it centuries ago? And thus it reads, O thou whom I loved to my destruction—thou whom I love!

*‘Time and the Guest
Shall meet me twice—once East, once West.’*

THE CARPET OF BELSHAZZAR

"Ah, prophetess was I by Istar's favor—seeing I died for love. Do you not understand, Dick? Time and the Guest!—the Guest is Death—the Guest we all must entertain one day—and I twice—once in the East, once here in the West—here, now!"

"Geraldine, are you mad?" I whispered; "look at me!—turn and look at me, I say!"

But she shivered in my arms, whispering that she was ransoming her soul and mine. A distant sound broke from the laboratory, and we listened.

"Hush, beloved," she said breathlessly; "the last cartouche is black! And this is written there:

*'Soul, lotus-sealed,
Receive—thy—Paradise—'*

Her voice died out; a terrible pallor struck her face; she swayed where she stood, the smile frozen on her bloodless lips.

As I caught her to me, her head fell straight back and her body sank a dead weight in my arms. Then a dreadful thing occurred; the faded ancient tapestry glowed out like a live ember, kindling from end to end, brighter, fiercer, flaming into living fire; and the phantom Tree of Heaven, flashing, superbly jeweled, burst into magnificent florescence.

THE TREE OF HEAVEN

Blinded, almost stupefied, I staggered back, but the straining cry died in my throat as a voice is strangled in dreadful dreams. Again I strove to shout. The rug, glowing like a living ember, slowly faded before my eyes. Suddenly the last spark went out in a shower of whitening ashes.

Again I strove to cry out: "Jim! Jim!" but my lips stiffened with horror as I listened. For he was somewhere there in the darkness, laughing.

"It was in her wine," he chuckled—"and I saw her kiss the glass and look at you!—and you, there, staring at nothing! Stare at it now!"

And again: "Do you think I have never watched her?—and you? Now she's in hell, and we'll race for her on even terms once more."

Silence: a low, insane laugh, cut by a report and the crash of glass as he fell, shattering his masked face upon the floor.

After a long while I spoke, listening intently. Then I took up my burden.

And there was no sound save the soft stirring of her silken gown as I bore her through the darkness, my cold lips pressed to hers.

* * * * *

He has never returned to America, but now that the time has come for me to fulfill my part, I do so, setting down what I know and what occult in-

THE CARPET OF BELSHAZZAR

formation I have received in letters from him, of the strange fate which overtook, separately, each and every man present at that farewell dinner at the Lenox Club.

My own fate is stranger still—to record these facts and take my position as his historian and his disciple.

CHAPTER II

THE SIGN OF VENUS

IN the card room the game, which had started from a chance suggestion, bid fair to develop into an all-night *séance*: the young foreign diplomat had shed his coat and lighted a fresh cigar; somebody threw a handkerchief over the face of the clock, and a sleepy club servant took reserve orders for two dozen siphons and other details.

"That lets me out," said Hetherford, rising from his chair with a nod at the dealer. He tossed his cards on the table, settled side obligations with the man on his left, yawned, and put on his hat.

Somebody remonstrated: "It's only two o'clock, Hetherford; you have no white man's burden sitting up for you at home."

But Hetherford shook his head, smiling.

So a servant removed his chair, another man cut in, the dealer dealt cards all around. Presently from somewhere in the smoke haze came a

THE SIGN OF VENUS

voice, "Hearts." And a quiet voice retorted, "I double it."

Hetherford lingered a moment, then turned on his heel, sauntered out across the hallway and down the stairs into the court, refusing with a sign the offered cab.

Breathing deeply, yawning once or twice, he looked up at the stars. The night air refreshed him; he stood a moment, thoughtfully contemplating his half-smoked cigar, then tossed it away and stepped out into the street.

The street was quiet and deserted; darkened brownstone mansions stared at him through somber windows as he passed; his footsteps echoed across the pavement like the sound of footsteps following.

His progress was leisurely; the dreary monotony of the house fronts soothed him. He whistled a few bars of a commonplace tune, crossed the deserted avenue under the electric lamps, and entered the dimly lighted street beyond.

Here all was silence; the doors of many houses were boarded up—sign that their tenants had migrated to the country. No shadowy cat fled along the iron railings at his approach; no night watchman prowled in deserted dooryards or peered at him from obscurity.

THE TREE OF HEAVEN

Strolling at ease, thoughts nowhere, he had traversed half the block, when an opening door and a glimmer of light across the sidewalk attracted his attention.

As he approached the house from whence the light came, a figure suddenly appeared on the stoop—a girl in a white ball gown—hastily descending the stone steps. Gaslight from the doorway tinted her bared arms and shoulders. She bent her graceful head and gazed earnestly at Hetherford.

“I beg your pardon,” she almost whispered; “might I ask you to help me?”

Hetherford stopped and wheeled short.

“I—I really beg your pardon,” she said, “but I am in such distress. Could I ask you to find me a cab?”

“A cab!” he repeated uncertainly; “why, yes—I will with pleasure—” He turned and looked up and down the deserted street, slowly lifting his hand to his short mustache. “If you are in a hurry,” he said, “I had better go to the nearest stables——”

“But there is something more,” she said, in a tremulous voice; “could you get me a wrap—a cloak—anything to throw over my gown?”

He looked up at her, bewildered. “Why, I

THE SIGN OF VENUS

don't believe I—" he began, then fell silent before her troubled gaze. "I'll do anything I can for you," he said abruptly. "I have a raincoat at the club—if your need is urgent——"

"It is urgent; but there is something else—something more urgent, more difficult for me to ask you. I must go to Willow Brook—I must go now, to-night! And I—I have no money."

"Do you mean Willow Brook in Westchester?" he asked, astonished. "There is no train at this hour of the morning!"

"Then—then what am I to do?" she faltered. "I cannot stay another moment in that house."

After a silence he said: "Are you afraid of anybody in that house?"

"There is nobody in the house," she said with a shudder; "my mother is in Westchester; all the household are there. I—I came back—a few moments ago—unexpectedly—" She stammered and winced under his keen scrutiny; then the pallor of utter despair came into her cheeks, and she hid her white face in her hands.

Hetherford watched her for a moment.

"I don't exactly understand," he said gently, "but I'll do anything I can for you. I'll go to the club and get my raincoat; I'll go to the stables and get a cab; I haven't any money with me, but

THE TREE OF HEAVEN

it would take only a few minutes for me to drive to the club and get some. . . . Please don't be distressed; I'll do anything you desire."

She dropped her arms with a hopeless gesture.

"But you say there is no train!"

"You could drive to the house of some of your friends——"

"No, no! Oh, my friends must never know of this!"

"I see," he said gravely.

"No, you don't see," she said unsteadily. "The truth is that I am almost frightened to death."

"Can you not tell me what has frightened you so?"

"If I tried to tell you, you would think me mad—you would indeed——"

"Try," he said soothingly.

"Why—why, it startled me to find myself in this house," she began. "You see, I didn't expect to come here; I didn't really want to come here," she added piteously. "Oh, it is simply dreadful to come—like this!" She glanced fearfully over her shoulder at the lighted doorway above, then turned to Hetherford as though dazed.

"Tell me," he said in a quiet voice.

"Yes—I'll tell you. At first it was all dark—but I must have known I was in my own room,

THE SIGN OF VENUS

for I felt around on the dresser for the matches and lighted a candle. And when I saw that it was truly my own room, and when I caught sight of my own face in the mirror, it terrified me—" She pressed her fingers to her cheeks with a shudder. "Then I ran downstairs and lighted the gas in the hall and peered into the mirror; and I saw a face there—a face like my own——"

Pale, voiceless, she leaned on the bronze balustrade, fair head drooping, lids closed.

Presently, eyes still closed, she said: "You will not leave me alone here—will you—" Her voice died to a whisper.

"No—of course not," he replied slowly.

There was an interval of silence; she passed her hand across her eyes and raised her head, looking up at the stars.

"You see," she murmured, "I dare not be alone; I *dare* not lose touch with the living. I suppose you think me mad, but I am not; I am only stunned. Please stay with me."

"Of course," he said in a soothing voice. "Everything will come out all right——"

"Are you sure?"

"Perfectly. I don't quite know what to say — how to reassure you and offer you any help——"

THE TREE OF HEAVEN

He fell silent, standing there on the sidewalk, worrying his short mustache. The situation was a new one to him.

"Suppose," he suggested, "that you try to take a little rest. I'll sit down on the steps——"

She looked at him in wide-eyed alarm. "Do you mean that I should go into that house——alone!"

"Well—you oughtn't to stand on the steps all night. It is nearly three o'clock. You are frightened and nervous. Really you must go in and——"

"Then you must come, too," she said desperately. "This nightmare is more than I can endure alone. I'm not a coward; none of my race is. But I need a living being near me. Will you come?"

He bowed. She turned, hastily gathering her filmy gown, and mounted the shadowy steps without a sound; and he followed leisurely, even perhaps warily, every sense alert.

He was prepared to see the end of this encounter—see it through to an explanation if it took all summer. Of the situation, however, and of her, he had so far ventured no theory. The type of woman and the situation were perfectly new to him. He was aware that anything might happen

THE SIGN OF VENUS

in New York, and, closing the heavy front door, he was ready for it.

The hall gas jets were burning brightly, and in the darkened drawing-room he could distinguish the heavy outlines of furniture cased in dust coverings.

She asked him to strike a match and light the sconces in the drawing-room, and he did so, curiosity now thoroughly aroused.

As the gas flared up, shrouded pictures and furniture sprang into view surrounding him, and in the dusk of the room beyond he saw a ray of light glimmering on the foliated carving of a gilded harp.

Slowly he turned to the girl beside him. A warm shadow dimmed her delicate features, yet they were the loveliest he had ever looked upon.

Suddenly he understood the mute message of her eyes: "My imprudence places me at your mercy."

"Your helplessness places me at yours," he said aloud, scarcely conscious that he had spoken.

At that a bright flush transfigured her. "I trusted you the moment I saw you," she said impulsively. "Do you mind sitting there opposite me? I shall take this chair—rather near you——"

THE TREE OF HEAVEN

She sank into an armchair; and, touched and a trifle amused, he seated himself, at a little nod from her, awaiting her further pleasure.

She lay there for a minute or two without speaking, rounded arms resting on the gilt arms of the chair, eyes thoughtfully studying him.

"I've simply got to tell you everything," she said at length.

"It can do no harm, I think," he replied pleasantly.

"No; no harm. The harm has been done. Yet, with you sitting there so near me, I am not frightened now. It is curious," she mused, "that I should feel no apprehension now. And yet—and yet——"

She leaned toward him, dropping her linked fingers in her lap.

"Tell me, did you ever hear of the Sign of Venus?—the *Signum Veneris*?" she asked.

"I've heard of it—yes," he replied, surprised. And as she said nothing, he went on: "The distinguished gentleman who occupies the chair of Applied Psychics at the university lectures on the Sign of Venus, I believe."

"Did you attend the lectures?" she asked calmly.

He said he had not, smiling a trifle.

THE SIGN OF VENUS

"I did."

"They were probably amusing," he ventured.

"Not very. Psychic phenomena bored me; I went during Lent. Psychic phenomena—" She hesitated, embarrassed at his amusement. "I suppose you laugh at that sort of thing."

"No, I don't laugh at it. Queer things occur, they say. All I know is that I myself have never seen anything happen that could not be explained by natural laws."

"I have," she said.

He bent his head in polite acquiescence.

"I went to the lectures," she said. "I am not very intellectual; nothing he said interested me very much—which was, of course, suitable for a Lenten amusement."

She leaned a little nearer, small hands tightly interlaced on her knee.

"His lecture on the Sign of Venus was the last." She lifted a white finger, drawing the imaginary *Signum Veneris* in the air. Hetherford nodded gravely.

"The lecture," she continued, "ended with an explanation of the Sign of Venus—how, contemplating it by starlight, one might pass into that physical unconsciousness which leaves the mind free to control the soul."

THE TREE OF HEAVEN

She held out her left hand toward him. On a stretched finger a ring glistened, mounted with the Sign of Venus blazing in brilliants.

"I had this made specially," she said; "not that I had any particular desire to test it—no curiosity. It never occurred to me that here in New York one could—could——"

"What?" asked Hetherford dryly.

"—could leave one's own body at will."

"I don't believe it could be accomplished in New York," he said with great gravity. "And that's a pretty safe conclusion to come to, is it not?"

She dropped her eyes, silent for a moment, resting her delicate chin on the palm of her hand. Then she lifted her eyes to him calmly, and the direct beauty of her gaze disturbed him.

"No, it is not a safe conclusion to come to. Listen to me. Last night they gave a dance at the Willow Brook Hunt. It was nearly two o'clock this morning when I left the club house and started home across the lawn with my mother and the maid——"

"But how on earth could——" he began, then begged her pardon and waited.

She continued serenely: "The night was warm and lovely, and it was clear starlight. When I

THE SIGN OF VENUS

entered my room I sent the maid away and sat down by the open window. The scent of the flowers and the beauty of the night made me restless; I went downstairs, unbolted the door, and slipped out through the garden to the pergola. My hammock hung there, and I lay down in it, looking out at the stars."

She drew the ring from her finger, holding it out for him to see.

"The starlight caught the gems on the Sign of Venus," she said under her breath; "that was the beginning. And then—I don't know why—as I lay there idly turning the ring on my finger, I found myself saying, 'I must go to New York: I must leave my body here asleep in the hammock and go to my own room in Fifty-eighth Street.'"

A curious little chill passed over Hetherford.

"I said it again and again—I don't know why. I remember the ring glittered; I remember it grew brighter and brighter. And then—and then! I found myself upstairs in the dark, groping over the dresser for the matches."

Again that faint chill touched Hetherford.

"I was stupefied for a moment," she said tremulously; "then I suspected what I had done, and it frightened me. And when I lighted the candle,

THE TREE OF HEAVEN

and saw it was truly my own room—and when I caught sight of my own face in the mirror—terror seized me; it was like a glimpse of something taken unawares. For, do you know that although in the glass I saw my own face, the face was not looking back at me.” She dropped her head, crushing the ring in both hands. “The reflected face was far lovelier than mine; and it was mine, I think, yet it was not looking at me, and it moved when I did not move. I wonder—I wonder——”

The tension was too much. “If that be so,” he said, steadying his voice—“if you saw a face in your mirror, the face was your own.” He made an impatient gesture, rising to his feet at the same moment. “All that you have told me can be explained,” he said.

“How can it? At this very moment I am asleep in my hammock.”

“We will deal with that later,” he said, smiling down at her. “Where is there a looking-glass?”

“There is one in the hallway.” She rose, slipping the ring on her finger, and led the way to where an oval gilt mirror hung partly covered with dust cloths.

He cast aside the coverings. “Now look into the glass,” he said gayly.

THE SIGN OF VENUS

She raised her head and faced the mirror for an instant.

"Come here," she whispered; and he stepped behind her, looking over her shoulder.

In the glass, as though reflected, he saw her face, but *the face was in profile!*

A shiver passed over him from head to foot.

"Did I not tell you?" she whispered. "Look! See, the other face is moving, while I am still!"

"There's something wrong about the glass, of course," he muttered; "it's defective."

"But who is that in the glass?"

"It is you—your profile. I don't exactly understand. Good Lord! It's turning away from us!"

She shrank against the wall, wide-eyed, breathing rapidly.

"There is no use in our being frightened," he said, scarcely knowing what he uttered. "This is Fifty-eighth Street, New York, 1903." He shook his shoulders, squaring them, and forced a smile. "Don't be frightened; there's an explanation for all this. You are not asleep in Westchester; you are here in your own house. You mustn't tremble so. Give me your hand a moment."

She laid her hand in his obediently; it shook

THE TREE OF HEAVEN

like a leaf. He held it firmly, touching the fluttering pulse.

"You are certainly no spirit," he said, smiling; "your hand is warm and yielding. Ghosts don't have hands like that, you know."

Her fingers lay in his, quite passive now, but the pulse quickened.

"The explanation of it all is this," he said: "You have had a temporary suspension of consciousness, during which time you, without being aware of what you were doing, came to town from Willow Brook. You believe you went to the dance at the Hunt Club, but probably you did not. Instead, during a lapse of consciousness, you went to the station, took a train to town, came straight to your own house—" He hesitated.

"Yes," she said, "I have a key to the door. Here it is." She drew it from the bosom of her gown; he took it triumphantly.

"You simply awoke to consciousness while you were groping for the matches. That is all there is to it; and you need not be frightened at all!" he announced.

"No, not frightened," she said, shaking her head; "only—only I wonder how I can get back. I've tried to fix my mind on my ring—on the Sign of Venus—I cannot seem to——"

THE SIGN OF VENUS

"But that's nonsense!" he protested cheerfully. "That ring has nothing to do with the matter."

"But it brought me here! Truly I am asleep in my hammock. Won't you believe it?"

"No; and you mustn't, either," he said impatiently. "Why, just now I explained to you——"

"I know," she said, looking down at the ring on her hand; "but you are wrong—truly you are."

"I am not wrong," he said, laughing. "It was only a dream—the dance, the return, the hammock—all these were parts of a dream so intensely real that you cannot shake it off at once."

"Then—then *who* was that we saw in the mirror?"

"Let us try it again," he said confidently. She suffered him to lead her again to the mirror; again they peered into its glimmering depths, heads close together.

A second's breathless silence, then she caught his hand in both of hers with a low cry; for the strange profile was slowly turning toward them a face of amazing beauty—her own face transfigured, radiantly glorified.

"My soul!" she gasped, and would have fallen at his feet had he not held her and supported her

THE TREE OF HEAVEN

to the stairs, where she sank down, hiding her face in her arms.

As for him, he was terribly shaken; he strove to speak, to reason with her, with himself, but a stupor chained body and mind, and he only leaned there on the newel post, vaguely aware of his own helplessness.

Far away in the night the bells of a church began striking the hour—one, two, three, four. Presently the distant rattle of a wagon sounded. The city stirred in its slumbers.

He found himself bending beside her, her passive hands in his once more, and he was saying: "As a matter of fact, all this is quite capable of an explanation. Don't be distressed—please don't be frightened or sad. We've both had some sort of hallucination, that's all—really that is all."

"I am not frightened now," she said dreamily. "I am quite sure that—that I am not dead. I am only asleep in my hammock. When I awake——"

Again, in spite of himself, he shivered.

"Will you do one more thing for me?" she asked.

"Yes—a million."

"Only one. It is unreasonable, it is perhaps silly—and I have no right to ask——"

THE SIGN OF VENUS

"Ask it," he begged.

"Then—then, will you go to Willow Brook? Now?"

"Now?" he repeated blankly.

"Yes." She looked down at him with the shadow of a smile touching lips and eyes. "I am asleep in the hammock; I sleep very, very soundly—and very, very late into the morning. They may not find me there for a long while. So would you mind going to Willow Brook to awaken me?"

"I—I—but you do not expect me to leave you here and find you in Westchester!" he stammered.

"You need not go," she said quietly. "If you will telephone to the house and ask somebody to go out to the pergola——"

"No," he said, "I will go; I will go anywhere on earth for you."

He stood up, his senses in a whirl. She rose, too, leaning lightly on the balustrade.

"Thank you," she said sweetly. "When you awake me, give me this." She held out the *Signum Veneris*; and he took it, and bending his head slowly, raised it to his lips.

It was almost morning when he entered his own house. In a dull trance he dressed, turned again

THE TREE OF HEAVEN

to the stairs, and crept out into the shadowy street.

People began to pass him; an early electric tram whizzed up Forty-second Street as he entered the railway station. Presently he found himself in a car, clutching his ticket in one hand, her ring in the other.

"It is I who am mad, not she," he muttered as the train glided from the station, through the long yard, dim in morning mist, where green and crimson lanterns still sparkled faintly.

Again he pressed the *Signum Veneris* to his lips. "It is I who am mad—love mad!" he whispered as the far treble warning of the whistle aroused him and sent him stumbling out into the soft fresh morning air.

The rising sun smote him full in the eyes as he came in sight of the club house among the still green trees, and the dew on the lawn flashed like the gems of the *Signum Veneris* on the ring he held so tightly.

Across the club house lawn stood another house, circled with gardens in full bloom; and to the left, among young trees, the white columns of a pergola glistened, tinted with rose from the early sun.

There was not a soul astir as he crossed the

THE SIGN OF VENUS

lawn and entered the garden, brushing the dew from overweighted blossoms as he passed.

Suddenly, at a turn in the path, he came upon the pergola, and saw a brilliant hammock hanging in the shadow.

Over the hammock's fringe something light and fluffy fell in folds like the billowy frills of a ball gown. He stumbled forward, dazed, incredulous, and stood trembling for an instant.

Then, speechless, he sank down beside her, and dropped the ring into the palm of her half-closed and unconscious hand.

A ray of sunlight fell across her hair; slowly her blue eyes unclosed, smiling divinely.

And in her partly open palm the Sign of Venus glimmered like dew silvering a budding rose.

CHAPTER III

THE CASE OF MR. HELMER

HE had really been too ill to go; the penetrating dampness of the studio, the nervous strain, the tireless application, all had told on him heavily. But the feverish discomfort in his head and lungs gave him no rest; it was impossible to lie there in bed and do nothing; besides, he did not care to disappoint his hostess. So he managed to crawl into his clothes, summon a cab, and depart. The raw night air cooled his head and throat; he opened the cab window and let the snow blow in on him.

When he arrived he did not feel much better, although Catharine was glad to see him. Somebody's wife was allotted to him to take in to dinner, and he executed the commission with that distinction of manner peculiar to men of his temperament.

When the women had withdrawn and the men had lighted cigars and cigarettes, and the con-

THE CASE OF MR. HELMER

versation wavered between municipal reform and *contes drolatiques*, and the Boznovian *attaché* had begun an interminable story, and Count Fantozzi was emphasizing his opinion of women by joining the tips of his overmanicured thumb and forefinger and wafting spectral kisses at an annoyed Englishman opposite, Helmer laid down his unlighted cigar and, leaning over, touched his host on the sleeve.

"Hello! what's up, Philip?" said his host cordially; and Helmer, dropping his voice a tone below the sustained pitch of conversation, asked him the question that had been burning his feverish lips since dinner began.

To which his host replied, "What girl do you mean?" and bent nearer to listen.

"I mean the girl in the fluffy black gown, with shoulders and arms of ivory, and the eyes of Aphrodite."

His host smiled. "Where did she sit, this human wonder?"

"Beside Colonel Farrar."

"Farrar? Let's see" — he knit his brows thoughtfully, then shook his head. "I can't recollect; we're going in now and you can find her and I'll——"

His words were lost in the laughter and hum

THE TREE OF HEAVEN

around them; he nodded an abstracted assurance at Helmer; others claimed his attention, and by the time he rose to signal departure he had forgotten the girl in black.

As the men drifted toward the drawing-rooms, Helmer moved with the throng. There were a number of people there whom he knew and spoke to, although through the increasing feverishness he could scarce hear himself speak. He was too ill to stay; he would find his hostess and ask the name of that girl in black, and go.

The white drawing-rooms were hot and overthronged. Attempting to find his hostess, he encountered Colonel Farrar, and together they threaded their way aimlessly forward.

"Who is the girl in black, Colonel?" he asked; "I mean the one that you took in to dinner."

"A girl in black? I don't think I saw her."

"She sat beside you!"

"Beside *me*?" The Colonel halted, and his inquiring gaze rested for a moment on the younger man, then swept the crowded rooms.

"Do you see her now?" he asked.

"No," said Helmer, after a moment.

They stood silent for a little while, then parted to allow the Chinese minister thoroughfare—a suave gentleman, all antique silks, and a smile

THE CASE OF MR. HELMER

"thousands of years old." The minister passed, leaning on the arm of the general commanding at Governor's Island, who signaled Colonel Farrar to join them; and Helmer drifted again, until a voice repeated his name insistently, and his hostess leaned forward from the brilliant group surrounding her, saying: "What in the world is the matter, Philip? You look wretchedly ill."

"It's a trifle close here—nothing's the matter."

He stepped nearer, dropping his voice: "Catharine, who was that girl in black?"

"What girl?"

"She sat beside Colonel Farrar at dinner—or I thought she did——"

"Do you mean Mrs. Van Siclen? She is in white, silly!"

"No—the girl in black."

His hostess bent her pretty head in perplexed silence, frowning a trifle with the effort to remember.

"There were so many," she murmured; "let me see—it is certainly strange that I cannot recollect. Wait a moment! Are you sure she wore black? Are you *sure* she sat next to Colonel Farrar?"

"A moment ago I was certain—" he said, hesi-

THE TREE OF HEAVEN

tating. "Never mind, Catharine; I'll prow! about until I find her."

His hostess, already partly occupied with the animated stir around her, nodded brightly; Helmer turned his fevered eyes and then his steps toward the cool darkness of the conservatories. But he found there a dozen people who greeted him by name, demanding not only his company but his immediate and undivided attention.

"Mr. Helmer might be able to explain to us what his own work means," said a young girl, laughing.

They had evidently been discussing his sculptured group, just completed for the new façade of the National Museum. Press and public had commented very freely on the work since the unveiling a week since; critics quarreled concerning the significance of the strange composition in marble. The group was at the same time repellent and singularly beautiful; but nobody denied its technical perfection. This was the sculptured group: A vaquero, evidently dying, lay in a loose heap among some desert rocks. Beside him, chin on palm, sat an exquisite winged figure, calm eyes fixed on the dying man. It was plain that death was near; it was stamped on the ravaged visage, on the collapsed frame. And yet, in the dying

THE CASE OF MR. HELMER

boy's eyes there was nothing of agony, no fear, only an intense curiosity as the lovely winged figure gazed straight into the glazing eyes.

"It may be," observed an attractive girl, "that Mr. Helmer will say with Mr. Gilbert,

" 'It is really very clever,
But I don't know what it means.' "

Helmer laughed and started to move away. "I think I'd better admit that at once," he said, passing his hand over his aching eyes; but the tumult of protest blocked his retreat, and he was forced to find a chair under the palms and tree ferns. "It was merely an idea of mine," he protested, good-humoredly, "an idea that has haunted me so persistently that, to save myself further annoyance, I locked it up in marble."

"Demoniac obsession?" suggested a very young man, with a taste for morbid literature.

"Not at all," protested Helmer, smiling; "the idea annoyed me until I gave it expression. It doesn't bother me any more."

"You said," observed the attractive girl, "that you were going to tell us all about it."

"About the idea? Oh, no, I didn't promise that——"

"Please, Mr. Helmer!"

THE TREE OF HEAVEN

A number of people had joined the circle; he could see others standing here and there among the palms, evidently pausing to listen.

"There is no logic in the idea," he said, uneasily—"nothing to attract your attention. I have only laid a ghost——"

He stopped short. The girl in black stood there among the others, intently watching him. When she caught his eye, she nodded with the friendliest little smile; and as he started to rise she shook her head and stepped back with a gesture for him to continue.

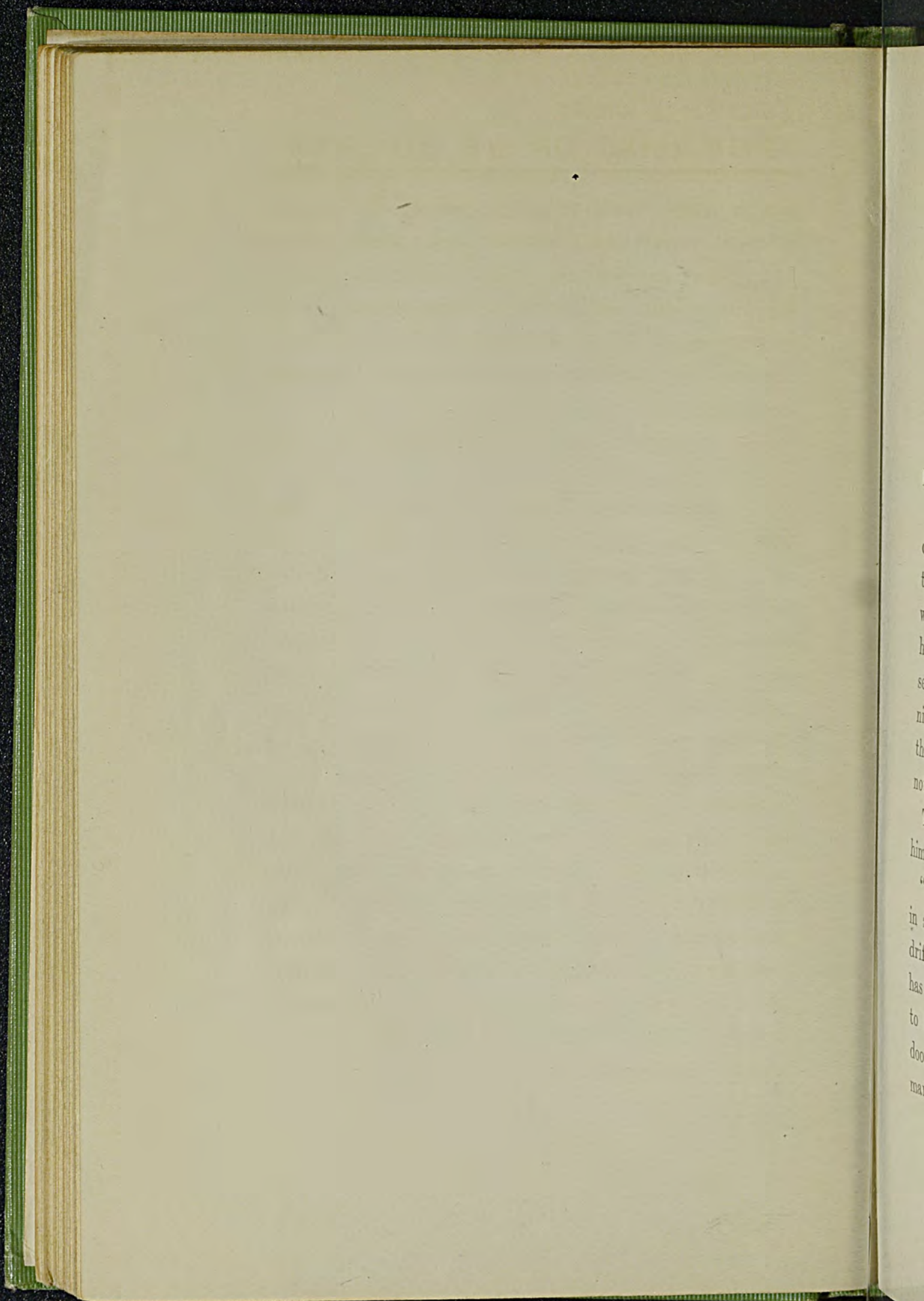
They looked steadily at one another for a moment.

"The idea that has always attracted me," he began slowly, "is purely instinctive and emotional, not logical. It is this: As long as I can remember I have taken it for granted that a person who is doomed to die, never dies utterly alone. We who die in our beds—or expect to—die surrounded by the living. So fall soldiers on the firing line; so end the great majority—never absolutely alone. Even in a murder, the murderer at least must be present. If not, something else is there.

"But how is it with those solitary souls isolated in the world—the lone herder who is found life-



“The girl in black stood motionless, watching him intently.”



THE CASE OF MR. HELMER

less in some vast, waterless desert, the pioneer whose bones are stumbled over by the tardy pickets of civilization—and even those nearer us—here in our city—who are found in silent houses, in deserted streets, in the solitude of salt meadows, in the miserable desolation of vacant lands beyond the suburbs? ”

The girl in black stood motionless, watching him intently.

“ I like to believe,” he went on, “ that no living creature dies absolutely and utterly alone. I have thought that, perhaps in the desert, for instance, when a man is doomed, and there is no chance that he could live to relate the miracle, some winged sentinel from the uttermost outpost of Eternity, putting off the armor of invisibility, drops through space to watch beside him so that he may not die alone.”

There was absolute quiet in the circle around him. Looking always at the girl in black, he said:

“ Perhaps those doomed on dark mountains or in solitary deserts, or the last survivor at sea, drifting to certain destruction after the wreck has foundered, finds death no terror, being guided to it by those invisible to all save the surely doomed. That is really all that suggested the marble—quite illogical, you see.”

THE TREE OF HEAVEN

In the stillness, somebody drew a long, deep breath; the easy reaction followed; people moved, spoke together in low voices; a laugh rippled up out of the darkness. But Helmer had gone, making his way through the half light toward a figure that moved beyond through the deeper shadows of the foliage—moved slowly and more slowly. Once she looked back, and he followed, pushing forward and parting the heavy fronds of fern and palm and masses of moist blossoms. Suddenly he came upon her, standing there as though waiting for him.

“There is not a soul in this house charitable enough to present me,” he began.

“Then,” she answered laughingly, “charity should begin at home. Take pity on yourself—and on me. I have waited for you.”

“Did you really care to know me?” he stammered.

“Why am I here alone with you?” she asked, bending above a scented mass of flowers. “Indiscretion may be a part of valor, but it is the best part of—something else.”

That blue radiance which a starless sky sheds lighted her white shoulders; transparent shadow veiled the contour of neck and cheeks.

“At dinner,” he said, “I did not mean to stare

THE CASE OF MR. HELMER

so—but I simply could not keep my eyes from yours——”

“A hint that mine were on yours, too?”

She laughed a little laugh so sweet that the sound seemed part of the twilight and the floating fragrance. She turned gracefully, holding out her hand.

“Let us be friends,” she said, “after all these years.”

Her hand lay in his for an instant; then she withdrew it and dropped it caressingly upon a cluster of massed flowers.

“Forced bloom,” she said, looking down at them, where her fingers, white as the blossoms, lay half buried. Then, raising her head, “You do not know me, do you?”

“Know you?” he faltered; “how could I know you? Do you think for a moment that I could have forgotten you?”

“Ah, you have not forgotten me!” she said, still with her wide smiling eyes on his; “you have not forgotten. There is a trace of me in the winged figure you cut in marble—not the features, not the massed hair, nor the rounded neck and limbs—but in the eyes. Who living, save yourself, can read those eyes?”

“Are you laughing at me?”

THE TREE OF HEAVEN

"Answer me; who alone in all the world can read the message in those sculptured eyes?"

"Can you?" he asked, curiously troubled.

"Yes; I, and the dying man in marble."

"What do you read there?"

"Pardon for guilt. You have foreshadowed it unconsciously—the resurrection of the soul. That is what you have left in marble for the mercilessly just to ponder on; that alone is the meaning of your work."

Through the throbbing silence he stood thinking, searching his clouded mind.

"The eyes of the dying man are your own," she said. "Is it not true?"

And still he stood there, groping, probing through dim and forgotten corridors of thought toward a faint memory scarcely perceptible in the wavering mirage of the past.

"Let us talk of your career," she said, leaning back against the thick foliage—"your success, and all that it means to you," she added gayly.

He stood staring at the darkness. "You have set the phantoms of forgotten things stirring and whispering together somewhere within me. Now tell me more; tell me the truth."

"You are slowly reading it in my eyes," she said, laughing sweetly. "Read and remember."

THE CASE OF MR. HELMER

The fever in him seared his sight as he stood there, his confused gaze on hers.

"Is it a threat of hell you read in the marble?" he asked.

"No, nothing of destruction, only resurrection and hope of Paradise. Look at me closely."

"Who are you?" he whispered, closing his eyes to steady his swimming senses. "When have we met?"

"You were very young," she said under her breath—"and I was younger—and the rains had swollen the Canadian river so that it boiled amber at the fords; and I could not cross—alas!"

A moment of stunning silence, then her voice again: "I said nothing, not a word even of thanks when you offered aid. . . . I—was not too heavy in your arms, and the ford was soon passed—soon passed. That was very long ago." Watching him from shadowy sweet eyes, she said:

"For a day you knew the language of my mouth and my arms around you, there in the white sun glare of the river. For every kiss taken and retaken, given and forgiven, we must account—for every one, even to the last.

"But you have set a monument for us both, preaching the resurrection of the soul. Love is such a little thing—and ours endured a whole day

THE TREE OF HEAVEN

long! Do you remember? Yet He who created love, designed that it should last a lifetime. Only the lost outlive it."

She leaned nearer:

"Tell me, you who have proclaimed the resurrection of dead souls, are you afraid to die?"

Her low voice ceased; lights broke out like stars through the foliage around them; the great glass doors of the ballroom were opening; the illuminated fountain flashed, a falling shower of silver. Through the outrush of music and laughter swelling around them, a clear far voice called "Françoise!"

Again, close by, the voice rang faintly, "Françoise! Françoise!"

She slowly turned, staring into the brilliant glare beyond.

"Who called?" he asked hoarsely.

"My mother," she said, listening intently. "Will you wait for me?"

His ashen face glowed again like a dull ember. She bent nearer, and caught his fingers in hers.

"By the memory of our last kiss, wait for me!" she pleaded, her little hand tightening on his.

"Where?" he said, with dry lips. "We cannot talk here!—we cannot say here the things that must be said."

THE CASE OF MR. HELMER

"In your studio," she whispered. "Wait for me."

"Do you know the way?"

"I tell you I will come; truly I will! Only a moment with my mother—then I will be there!"

Their hands clung together an instant, then she slipped away into the crowded rooms; and after a moment Helmer followed, head bent, blinded by the glare.

"You are ill, Philip," said his host, as he took his leave. "Your face is as ghastly as that dying vaquero's—by Heaven, man, you *look* like him!"

"Did you find your girl in black?" asked his hostess curiously.

"Yes," he said; "good night."

The air was bitter as he stepped out—bitter as death. Scores of carriage lamps twinkled as he descended the snowy steps, and a faint gust of music swept out of the darkness, silenced as the heavy doors closed behind him.

He turned west, shivering. A long smear of light bounded his horizon as he pressed toward it and entered the sordid avenue beneath the iron arcade which was even now trembling under the shock of an oncoming train. It passed overhead with a roar; he raised his hot eyes and saw, through the tangled girders above, the illuminated

THE TREE OF HEAVEN

disk of the clock tower—all distorted—for the fever in him was disturbing everything—even the cramped and twisted street into which he turned, fighting for breath like a man stabbed through and through.

“What folly!” he said aloud, stopping short in the darkness. “This is fever—all this. She could not know where to come——”

Where two blind alleys cut the shabby block, worming their way inward from the avenue and from Tenth Street, he stopped again, his hands working at his coat.

“It is fever, fever!” he muttered. “She was not there.”

There was no light in the street save for the red fire lamp burning on the corner, and a glimmer from the Old Grapevine Tavern across the way. Yet all around him the darkness was illuminated with pale unsteady flames, lighting him as he groped through the shadows of the street to the blind alley. Dark old silent houses peered across the paved lane at their aged counterparts, waiting for him.

And at last he found a door that yielded, and he stumbled into the black passageway, always lighted on by the unsteady pallid flames which seemed to burn in infinite depths of night.

THE CASE OF MR. HELMER

"She was not there—she was never there," he gasped, bolting the door and sinking down upon the floor. And, as his mind wandered, he raised his eyes and saw the great bare room growing whiter and whiter under the uneasy flames.

"It will burn as I burn," he said aloud—for the phantom flames had crept into his body. Suddenly he laughed, and the vast studio rang again.

"Hark!" he whispered, listening intently. "Who knocked?"

There was some one at the door; he managed to raise himself and drag back the bolt.

"You!" he breathed, as she entered hastily, her hair disordered and her black skirts powdered with snow.

"Who but I?" she whispered, breathless. "Listen! do you hear my mother calling me? It is too late; but she was with me to the end."

Through the silence, from an infinite distance, came a desolate cry of grief—"Françoise!"

He had fallen back into his chair again, and the little busy flames enveloped him so that the room began to whiten again into a restless glare. Through it he watched her.

The hour struck, passed, struck and passed again. Other hours grew, lengthening into night. She sat beside him with never a word or sigh or

THE TREE OF HEAVEN

whisper of breathing; and dream after dream swept him, like burning winds. Then sleep immersed him so that he lay senseless, sightless eyes still fixed on her. Hour after hour—and the white glare died out, fading to a glimmer. In densest darkness, he stirred, awoke, his mind quite clear, and spoke her name in a low voice.

“Yes, I am here,” she answered gently.

“Is it death?” he asked, closing his eyes.

“Yes. Look at me, Philip.”

His eyes unclosed; into his altered face there crept an intense curiosity. For he beheld a glimmering shape, wide-winged and deep-eyed, kneeling beside him, and looking him through and through.

CHAPTER IV

THE TREE OF DREAMS

It was a slim, well-groomed, top-hatted, frock-coated Smith who entered his private office that morning; it was a very different species of Smith who left stealthily by a back corridor an hour later, a shabby-genteel Smith whose cravatless collar was fastened with a democratic bone collar button—whose clean but shapeless trousers bagged and flapped in the June breeze—who gazed out at Broadway from under the faded brim of a cheap felt hat—who, as he forced his pace from a Fifth Avenue saunter into a Third Avenue hustle, thrust both thin, clean hands into his trousers pockets and satisfied himself that every cent which he meant to spend for a week was there in the shape of ten one-dollar bills.

At Wall Street he adjusted his glasses and peered about with pleasant, near-sighted eyes to discover the policeman at the crossing in order to avoid him. Once beyond the financial zone

THE TREE OF HEAVEN

downtown he had no fear of being recognized by anybody; his features, he was modestly persuaded, resembled the typical features of about fifty per cent of the male inhabitants of Manhattan, although those same features had been public and newspaper property for three years now—ever since his father, J. Abingdon Smith, 2d, had faded heavenward, leaving the enormous fortune in Manhattan real estate to his only son, J. Abingdon Smith, 3d.

He was still a young man, thin of hair, near-sighted, endowed with sufficient intelligence to enable him to turn over his inherited fortune, legitimately increased, to any heir he might have if he should ever marry. Had he resembled Smith the first, or Smith the second, he would have done this as a matter of family routine—married the sort of girl that generations of Smiths found inoffensive enough to marry; produced one heir, and, when the proper time arrived, would have in his turn decorously and formally faded heavenward—leaving a J. Abingdon Smith, 4th, to follow his example.

But Smith had inherited from his mother a thin but deep streak of romantic sentiment. This vein ran clean through him, and might have manifested itself in almost any form along the line of

THE TREE OF DREAMS

least resistance, had it not been half imbedded in a stratum of negative platitudes inherited from his emotionless father.

As he stood in his shabby clothes, near the new Hall of Records, waiting for a Fourth Avenue car, a slender, blue-eyed girl, passing, looked up at him with such a frank, sweet gaze that he missed his next breath and then made up for it by breathing twice too quickly. He had an idea that he had seen her before, but finally decided he hadn't.

To be loved for himself alone was one of his impractical ideas, born of the maternal sentimental streak; but, for years, the famous Smith fortune, its enormous holdings in realty, the doings of the Smiths, their shrewd sales, purchases, leases, improvements, their movements, their personal affairs, their photographed features had been common property and an unfailing source of news for the press; and he knew perfectly well that, however honest and theoretically disinterested a girl might be, the courtship of a J. Abingdon Smith, of whatever vintage, could not help representing a bunch of figures that no human being in shape of a female biped could avoid seeing, no matter how tightly she closed her innocent eyes. Thinking of these things, he calmly encountered

THE TREE OF HEAVEN

the curious eyes of the conductor as he boarded a crowded car.

The blue-eyed girl also got in, but Smith, on the back platform, did not see her.

"That fellow," said the conductor to the gripman, as he swung off the front platform after collecting a fare, "is a ringer for J. Abingdon Smith, the millionaire."

And the conductor was not the only one; several passengers were amused by the resemblance this near-sighted, shabby young man bore to the features that every newspaper had made familiar to the submerged tenth, the frantically swimming twentieth, and the marooned remainder of the great unwashed.

Half an hour later Smith said to the conductor: "Would you be kind enough to stop here?"

"Certainly, Mr. Smith," said the conductor, meaning a joke.

Smith ambled along, intent upon his own business. The blue-eyed girl had preceded him in the same direction; but as he entered the main doorway of the Smith model tenement houses, which formed almost a complete quadrangle around the block, he was not aware that she was on the iron and concrete stairway, three stories above him, and was still climbing heavenward.

THE TREE OF DREAMS

When he reached his room, which he had paid for in advance, he found that his trunk and furniture had arrived. The air in the room was close; he opened the window.

For a while he bustled busily about, arranging the meager furniture. The narrow iron bed he dragged into a corner by the window, pushed the washstand against the opposite wall and hung a ninety-eight-cent mirror over it. He laid a strip of carpet in the center of the floor, placed a pine table upon it, and then, picking up the only chair, distractedly began traveling about with it, trying the effect, first in one corner, then in another.

At this juncture Kerns, his agent, general estate manager, and boyhood friend, slipped into the room on tiptoe, carefully closing the door behind him.

"I don't know where to put it," Smith said, pausing to settle his refractory glasses and glance suspiciously at Kerns out of pleasant, near-sighted eyes. "When they have only one chair where do they usually put it, Tommy?"

"When they get down to one chair they usually put it in the stove," said Kerns.

"What? They do? That's another point, Kerns; we've got to give them free furniture somehow; I mean for the same rent. You figure it up;

THE TREE OF HEAVEN

cut out something or other—" He gazed vaguely about the bare walls as though contemplating their possible economic elimination. Then, he looked at the floor; but his tenants, being wingless, required something to stand on. "Could we give them bed, tables, and chair, and cut out that gas range?" he suggested.

"Not unless you throw in a stove," said Kerns, trying to look serious. "And if you do that, they'll keep their coal in the bath tubs, as before."

Smith began to remove the contents of a shabby little trunk. First, there were shaving utensils, which he placed in a row on the unpainted washstand, then a tin pitcher and wash basin, a cake of soap, and last, some cheap towels.

"I've a notion that I've too much crockery," he said, gazing about. "Do you think I've overdone it? I don't need two plates—do I? And all that tinware—do I? What the deuce are you grinning at?" he added, diving into his battered trunk again and emerging with both arms full of tinware. These utensils he hung upon nails above the sink in the corner, arranging them with care.

"That's the place for pots and pans, isn't it, Kerns?" he said, backing off to observe the effect. Then, by chance, he caught sight of himself in the

THE TREE OF DREAMS

ninety-eight-cent mirror, and a slight flush of embarrassment rose to his cheeks.

"Do I look like a respectable man out of work?" he asked. "Tell me the truth."

"Exactly," replied Kerns; "you look like what you are—a well-meaning gentleman, permanently unemployed—and likely to remain so. In other words, dear friend, you resemble a Lulu bird of leisure."

"Do you mean to say I look like myself?" demanded Smith innocently. "Do I seem to be made up for a part? There was an impudent conductor who called me Smith. Don't you suppose he did it in joke? And—a—a girl—who looked at me—er——"

"Because you're a winner. Because a Smith ill dressed is half confessed; because a Smith in any other clothes would look as neat; because a Sm——"

Smith's brows contracted, but lifelong endurance of Kerns's raillery had habituated him to disregard such gibes.

"John Abingdon," continued Kerns, "I've inspected these barracks of yours to-day because you insisted; I've met you here because you told me me to; but it's all portentous and top-heavy nonsense on your part, and it's my business to say

THE TREE OF HEAVEN

so whether it makes you fidgety and sulky or not."

"We won't start that line of discussion again," said Smith, "because, Kerns, outside of your own harmless routine, you're so densely ignorant that I am continually ashamed of you. What do you know about humanity?"

"I thought you weren't going to start that thing going," yawned Kerns.

"You started it yourself," said Smith.

"All right, then; I'll go on. Haven't I told you a thousand times that, if you are anxious to know how your tenants live, I can tell you, or any of your collectors or your brokers, or even your janitors. Every time you do a thing without my advice you mess matters. You insisted on giving them bath tubs, and they used them for coal, and I had to straighten that out by taking away their cook stoves and substituting gas ranges and ovens. You insisted on inserting rotary ventilators in every window, and the noise of the wheels kept your tenants awake at night; and, when they don't sleep, they fight. Besides, they all caught cold, and there are a dozen enraged Hibernians suing you now. If you could only know what I know and see what I've seen——"

"I've told you a hundred times, Tom, that I

THE TREE OF DREAMS

don't intend to slop over and bestow charity; but I do want to know what are my just obligations to my tenants, and how I can place them in a better position."

He was somewhat heated when he finished, and stood touching his forehead with his handkerchief.

"Toot! Toot!" said Kerns plaintively, backing toward the door. "The next stop is Chautauqua. Go it your own way, Smithy; I'm about due at the club for luncheon."

The door slammed as the wash basin struck it; Smith glared at the dent in the woodwork, prepared to hurl the coffeepot. But Kerns did not come back; and, after a while, he replaced the coffeepot, searched his trunk for a collar, buttoned it to his flannel shirt, and, picking up his hat, went out into the hallway.

And there he encountered the slender girl with the blue eyes.

There was something very innocent in her confident, fearless gaze; as he passed her, lifting his hat, he bade her good day in his pleasant voice. Her quaintly impersonal nod in acknowledgment pleased him.

"Just what I thought," he reflected, as he descended the stairs: "the poor are always nice to

THE TREE OF HEAVEN

each other; they're frank and human, unspoiled by our asinine code of conventions. If I'd worn a top hat that girl would have looked the other way; if I'd noticed her she'd have been defiant or sullen or saucy."

And while he trudged about, purchasing groceries for his luncheon, he looked out upon the world through optimistic glasses, smiling, warm-hearted, pleased with himself and everybody he encountered.

He was hungry—it being long past his regular luncheon time—an hour from which he had not varied half a dozen times in a dozen years.

As he ascended the iron stairs of his lodging house once more he counted over the little packages of groceries piled up in his arms—butter, salt, sugar, a bottle of milk, tea, coffee, rolls, and eggs. "Probably too much," he reflected; "I'll have to go about among these people and find out what they eat— Good Heavens! that is awful!"

In his own hallway a khamsin gust of cabbage smote him with its answer to his question, and he shuddered. He forced his door in with the point of his knee, made his way to the table, and dropped the packages. Then, producing a match box, he advanced blithely toward the gas range.

"The first thing to do is to start that exceed-

THE TREE OF DREAMS

ingly convenient machine and get action at once," he continued, turning on the gas and lighting a match. "Cooking coffee and eggs is nothing to any man who has ever camped out in the woods——"

Flash!—bang! went the gas range; and Smith executed what his office boys might have characterized as a "quick get-away."

"W-what a perfectly ghastly species of range," he stammered, "g-going off in a man's face like a t-t-ten-inch shell!" He sat down in the only chair, breathed hard, and stared at the range; then, suddenly afraid that gas might be pouring into the room, he crept toward it, lighted another match, and extended his arm like the hero touching off a magazine in the ship's hold.

Bang! repeated the gas range emphatically.

"W-well, this is a pleasant situation!" he breathed, wringing his slightly scorched fingers. "Am I expected to fry my eggs over a volcano?"

Hesitating, he wiped his glasses, affixed them, and gazed earnestly at the range. Very gingerly he tiptoed toward it and, with a sudden dash, turned off the gas.

For a while he alternately stood in front of it and walked all around it. He looked at his coffee and eggs—he could not eat them raw. It was now

THE TREE OF HEAVEN

long after his usual luncheon hour, and he began to feel famished.

"The trouble is that I don't know how to get the proper spark," he reflected; but, driven by necessity, he turned on the gas once more, and, lighting a match, applied it. There was no explosion this time; a bluish flame played all over the machine for a few seconds, sank, rose, subsided, and went out. In vain he lighted match after match. He got no more flame.

"This is a disgracefully run house!" he exclaimed aloud. "It's high time I heard something about it! Here I am two hours late and can't get enough heat to cook an egg!"

Very angry, he marched out on a hunt for the janitor; but, after climbing up and down stairs and making inquiries on every landing, he had come no nearer to discovering the janitor. A gentleman named Dugan thought that the janitor might be engaged in tenpins at Bauer's popular corner resort. Smith repaired thither, but could not discover him. Another gentleman, named Clancy, emerging from the two-room apartment adjoining Smith's, came in at Smith's invitation and rubbed a flat, rough thumb up and down the range. Then he departed, scratching his head and advising further search for the jaintor.

THE TREE OF DREAMS

"Ye cud cook a bit an' a sup on our own range," he said, "but th' ould woman do be bilin' shirrts."

When Mr. Clancy had departed Smith spent ten more minutes tinkering with the range, growing hungrier and hungrier every second. But, hungry, angry and discouraged as he was, he obstinately refused to consider a restaurant as even a temporary solution. Once more he set off down the endless iron and concrete stairway to hunt up the janitor; and, returning unsuccessful, encountered the janitor on his own landing. The janitor was talking to the girl with the blue eyes.

"Please don't let me interrupt you," said Smith; "it's only that I can't work my range."

"You are not interrupting," said the girl with the blue eyes. "My ceiling is beginning to fall, that is all."

"I'll have that attended to at once!" exclaimed Smith, forgetting his rôle of tenant—"that is," he added, in confusion, "the janitor will notify M——, the agent. You will, won't you?" he continued, turning to the janitor, whose face had been growing redder and redder as he grew madder and madder.

"Where do you think you are?" he demanded. "In the Waldorf? An' who do you think you are, young man? John D.? or the Dutch Emp'ror?"

THE TREE OF HEAVEN

Or do you think you're J. Abingdon Smith, the owner of this here plant, because you look like his grandfather's hired man?"

"Not at all," said Smith, turning red. "I had no intention of interfering."

"Well, you go and sit on your range and keep it warm till I get a gasfitter, see!" growled the janitor; "an' mebbe he'll fix it to-night," he said, looking back malevolently over his shoulder as he descended the stairs, "an' mebbe he'll fix it next month. You mind your business, young man, an' I'll mind yours."

Smith, tingling all over, looked after him, but his anger passed with a shrug and a short laugh as he realized that the rebuke had been in a fashion his own fault.

He had made a step across the hallway toward his own room, when he remembered the girl with the blue eyes.

"I'm sorry I caused any unpleasantness," he said. "I hope the janitor won't visit his petty tyranny on you."

"I don't think he will; I— Can't you make your range burn properly?"

"No," he said, smiling. "It blew up three times, and now it has retired from active business. I believe it has become permanently extinct."

THE TREE OF DREAMS

"Perhaps," she ventured, "you are not accustomed to gas ranges. Are you?"

"No, but I've got to learn to manage them if I'm to do any cooking." He thought she meant to speak again, but, as she said no more, he turned to his own door. Behind him a hesitating voice began:

"You may use my range to cook on—until your own is repaired, if you wish——"

"That's awfully nice of you," he said, gratefully surprised. "I've only a couple of eggs to fry—or boil—and a little coffee, but I didn't like to ask you——"

"You didn't. *I* asked *you*," she said. "You are quite welcome." And, as he still hesitated: "I really don't mind," she said. "I can take my work somewhere else while you are cooking."

"No, no," he protested, beginning to realize the inconvenience he was causing her; but she nodded impatiently and, stepping back into her room, began to gather up into a writing portfolio a mass of scattered papers.

A few moments later he appeared in the open doorway, his arms piled high with the paper packages containing groceries. She looked up at him, her hands full of inky papers. Unbidden laughter was sparkling in her blue eyes.

THE TREE OF HEAVEN

"The range is ready," she said, schooling her voice. "You may begin at once. I shall be gone in a second." And she began to rummage furiously among the papers.

Sidelong glances she could not help casting at his culinary preparations. She saw him ruin two eggs, and hid her face in the table drawer where she was searching for that elusive something.

"No use trying to fry those eggs," he observed, gazing at the disintegrating yolks.

"You could scramble them," she suggested, raising her pretty head. Her face was delicately flushed; a bright strand of hair, loosened, fell like a tendril across one pink cheek.

"To scramble an egg," he said slowly, as though attempting to recall some intricate evolution in cookery—"To *scramble* an egg, you stir it round and round, I believe."

"And to scramble two eggs," she said almost hysterically, "you stir them both round and round."

"But," he added thoughtfully, "*how* to get them into the pan. I suppose one pours them in——"

"Don't! Please don't! You have put no butter in yet," she said; but he had already poured a

THE TREE OF DREAMS

spoonful into the pan, where it began to char and sputter and smoke.

She laid aside her portfolio and papers, removed the smoking pan, scraped it, tinkered with it, and then, preparing it properly, poured in the remainder of the eggs.

"It's awfully good of you. I'm ashamed of myself," he muttered; "but, please—*please* don't mind about the coffee. I can do that, I'm sure."

"It will take only a moment," she said. "You are not accustomed to—to—gas ranges, I see."

Before he knew it his modest luncheon was ready. She swept the papers from the table, threw over it a white square of linen, and placed his luncheon under his mortified eyes.

"It will get cold if you attempt to carry it back to your room. You are quite welcome to eat it here, believe me. My range may fail me some day and I may have to beg a little fire at your door."

"You shall have oceans of it!" he cried gratefully.

"Thank you; and, please, begin. I am on my way out."

"Am I driving you away? I know I am——"

"No, really you are not. I work out of doors

THE TREE OF HEAVEN

all I can. I was going out as soon as the janitor came to examine my ceiling." She raised her pretty eyes; he looked aloft.

"It's a leak," he said. "I'll have it fi—I mean I'll tell the jan— What I do mean," he said, "is that somebody ought to have it fixed."

"I think so, too," she said demurely, gathering up her portfolio and papers. At the doorsill she halted:

"But—but how—but who is going to lock my door?" she asked.

"Oh, I'd better take my luncheon into my own room!"

"No, no. Please sit down again. Please do so now! I can leave my key with you if you are going to be here."

He thought to himself, charmed, what touching confidence the poor have in each other's honesty.

She drew from her purse the door key and laid it beside his plate.

"If I don't hear you in the hallway, will you please knock?" he asked.

"I think you had better leave the key with the janitor," she said; then, thinking further along the same line: "or perhaps you had better hide it."

THE TREE OF DREAMS

She stepped back into the hallway and looked all around; but no plausible hiding place presented itself. Then she gazed at him.

"I might leave it with my neighbor, Mrs. Clancy," he said with rare intelligence.

"No," she said with her pretty, fearless smile, "I will knock at your door and ask for it."

She was gone before he could rise again.

When he had finished he washed the dishes and did it thoroughly, restoring each to its shelf. His remaining groceries and his own tinware he carried into his own habitation, came back and locked her door, and then, lighting his pipe, began to prowling about the corridors.

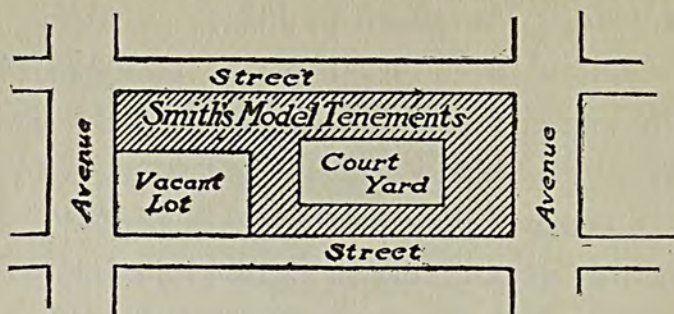
Presently he fished out a pad and pencil, and, squatting down on the stairway, made some notes concerning the use of steel for doorsills and frames, and tiles or tassellated floors to replace the already worn and dirty planks of Southern pine.

"First of all, plenty of ventilation," he murmured. "Next, cleanliness; next, light. . . . I—I've a mind to complete the entire block—put up a big, square tower on that vacant lot—a big, clean, airy tower, ten stories—sixteen—twenty, by jingo!"

He seized his pad with enthusiasm and drew a

THE TREE OF HEAVEN

plan of the block which he owned with the present model tenements on it and showing the vacant lot:



There were no windows giving on the vacant lot—nothing but blank brick walls.

“That’s what I’ll do,” he thought. “I’ll have my own way for once. I’ll plan and design and build an absolutely beautiful and sanitary tower with a hundred rooms and two elevators in it, and Kerns can laugh if he wants to. What these people need is light and air—cheap light and cheap air. I’ll just go down and take a look at that lot.”

He pocketed pad and pencil, seized his hat, and, locking his door on the outside, ran down the stairs.

“You can’t go into that lot,” said the janitor. “No tenants ain’t allowed in there by orders of Mr. Kerns.”

“Well, can’t I just look at it?”

“No,” said the janitor. “An’ lemme tell you

THE TREE OF DREAMS

something else. If you an' me is goin' to gee you'd better do less buttin' in an' less runnin' up an' downstairs. You butt in an' you run around like you was the Dutch Emp'ror. Say, what are you lookin' for, anyhow? If you're a spotter, say so; I ain't worryin'. If you're just loony you're in the wrong hotel."

"But, my good fellow——"

"Forget it!" retorted the janitor wrathfully. "Your good fellow! Look here, Percy, I ain't your good fellow, nor I ain't your dear old college chum, an' no buttin' in goes. See?"

"I'm not attempting to offend you!" exclaimed Smith desperately.

"That's all right, too," said the janitor unconvinced. "You seen me talkin' to Miss Stevens an' you make a play like you owned the buildin'. 'Here, me good man,' sez you, 'fix this an' fix that, an' be d——d quick about it, too,' sez you——"

"I didn't," retorted Smith indignantly; "at least I didn't mean to say——"

"What *you* are," interrupted the janitor deliberately, "God knows an' I don't. You may be makin' phony stuff up there fur all I know."

"What's phony stuff?" demanded Smith, getting hotter.

THE TREE OF HEAVEN

"Look into the dictionary, Clarence," retorted the janitor, and slammed the door of his office in Smith's face.

"That man," thought Smith to himself, as he started up the stairs, "is a singularly impudent man, but he's probably faithful enough. I shall not do anything about it. But I wish I could get into my vacant lot."

The remainder of the afternoon he spent drawing magnificently unbuildable plans for his tower.

Then he pulled his chair out into the fire escape and sat there through the sunset hour and into the smoky June twilight.

Suddenly, as he sat there, dreaming, a faint sound at his door brought him to his feet and into the room.

"I *beg* your pardon," he said. "I was out on the fire escape. *Did* you knock more than once?"

"It doesn't matter," she said, smiling under the shadow of her big straw hat and taking her key from him.

"I'm terribly sorry," he repeated, "and I really am very grateful for letting me cook on your range——"

"Is yours fixed yet?" she asked diffidently.

"By George!" he said. "I'd forgotten that! But it doesn't matter," he added, determined to dine

THE TREE OF DREAMS

on the remainder of his rolls and milk, for he simply would not begin by running to a restaurant at the first mishap.

She hesitated, not knowing whether again to offer her salt and fire; then, finding it too difficult, she said "Good night" in a low voice, and crossed the hallway to her own abode. And there she sat down, fair face tense, gaze concentrated on space, her big straw hat still on her head, her portfolio and papers in her lap.

Minutes ticked away on the little nickel alarm clock. She pondered on, and, sometimes, her straight, delicate brows contracted, and, sometimes, her teeth worried the edge of her lower lip; and once she smiled and lifted her eyes as though she could see through her closed door into his room across the hall.

After that she rose, made her toilet, cooked her own supper; and when, at length, the dishes had been laid away and her pretty hands rinsed, carefully examined, and soothed with glycerine and cream of almonds—luxuries she preferred to a varied menu—she laid a pile of yellow manuscript paper on her table, and, dipping her pen into the ink, began to scribble like mad. For, at last, her chance in life had come.

Meanwhile, Smith, doggedly munching his but-

THE TREE OF HEAVEN

tered rolls, drank his milk and considered plans for doing good to his tenants without either injuring their self-respect or bankrupting himself.

"Buy up block after block, cover 'em with handsome sanitary tenements, with a big, grassy court and a fountain in the middle—that's the decent and self-respecting way to invest one's surplus! That's the only way a rich man can keep his own respect and administer his stewardship. I'd be ashamed to make any more money! I won't! I'd be ashamed to keep what I have if I didn't use the income to help somebody. Clean, airy, sunny homes—within the means of the poorest working people! It can be done without making it a charity. It's got to be done. I'm going to build that tower—if my janitor ever lets me into the lot——"

After he had completed his ablutions and was ready for bed he stood a moment at the open window looking out over the city.

"That girl—she was *very* nice to me. . . . I've the oddest notion that I've seen her before . . . somewhere. Wonderfully—ah—decorative—her eyes—a graceful way of—er—moving."

He lay down on his bed and pulled up the sheet.

A few minutes later he murmured drowsily: "Build handsome tower—spite of Kerns. . . . Nobody pay rent. . . . 'Strordinary eyes that girl

THE TREE OF DREAMS

. . . pretty blue—very blue for—a—a girl. . . .
'Strordinary rot I'm talking. . . . G'night, Smith;
. . . night!"

The next morning a pessimistic gasfitter repaired Smith's range. That night it blew up again. Two days later it was again in commission, then remained quiescent for a week. After that the range worked fitfully, intimidating Smith until it had him so thoroughly cowed that he never attempted to light it except with the match inserted in the end of a broom handle. Between the range and the cookery he was almost famished.

However, it was a matter of too little importance to disturb him in his purpose; the days were full days indeed, no matter how empty he went. Hour after hour he sat cramped over the table, drawing impossible plans and elevations for the completion of his model tenements. Hour after hour he tramped the hot streets in search of likely sites for further philanthropic operations.

Almost every morning and evening he was sure to encounter his blue-eyed neighbor on the landing or stairs; and, after a while, he began to spend a few minutes of the day in looking forward to these brief meetings.

Matters were not going very well with his blue-

THE TREE OF HEAVEN

eyed neighbor; but he didn't know it. Her work, always precarious and dependent on the whims of several underpaid people, was not sufficient to keep her very well nourished during the hot months of midsummer. She defaulted on the July payment for her small piano, and they took it away. The little desk went later; an armchair followed.

Alone in her room, palely considering the why and wherefore of the disagreeable, she invariably almost fell a prey to temptation; but, so far, the victory had remained with her. Temptation came when somebody refused her work or when somebody removed an article of furniture for nonpayment of the installment due, and the temptation confronted her in the shape of a packet of yellow manuscript.

She was the author of the manuscript; it lay in a drawer of her table.

Sometimes, when they frightened her by giving her no work or by lugging off a chair, she would sit down, white and desperate, and take out her manuscript and read it through.

She knew where she could place it in an hour. She had been promised a permanent position on the strength of just such work. It was well done, of its sort. It fairly bristled with double-leaded headlines; it was yellow enough for the yellowest—a

THE TREE OF DREAMS

"beat," a "scoop," a story that would be copied in every newspaper of the country. The title of it was "A Millionaire in Disguise." The subject, Smith. She had only to show it to the city editor who had promised to take her on the first time she displayed any ability. All she had to do was to tuck the yellow sheets under her arm and start downtown, and that would end all this removing of furniture and scarcity of foodstuffs—all this sleeplessness, this perplexed dismay—all these heavy-hearted journeys to the offices of the fashion papers where sometimes she was paid for her articles on domestic affairs and sometimes not.

After these experiences she usually returned to the temptation of her yellow manuscript, read it through, wept a little, cast it from her into the table drawer once more, and buried her face in her slim hands. Later, she usually dried her eyes, hurriedly gathered up her papers and portfolio, and, locking the door on the outside, descended to the cellar.

In this profound crypt a small iron door and a few stone steps ascending permitted her access to the vacant lot which the janitor had forbidden Smith to enter. And here she was accustomed to sit in the long, rank grass under a big ailantus tree, writing for the fashion papers, to which she

THE TREE OF HEAVEN

contributed such predigested pabulum as the weak-minded might assimilate. In this manner she paid for lodging, board, and almond cream.

Meanwhile, she was growing shyer and more formal with Smith when they chanced to meet on stairs or landing. Beginning with the politely pleasant exchange of a few words concerning the initial episode which had excused their acquaintance, they had ventured on a little laughter at his expense—a shade less of the impersonal. But, little by little, the pretty, fearless gaze which he found so attractive changed to something more reserved and far less expressive. Her laughter, always edging lips and eyes, her untroubled voice, with its winningly careless sweetness, changed, too. He noticed this. Sometimes he wondered whether she was quite well. He had been aware from the first that she did not belong in her surroundings any more than did he, and at times he speculated on the subject, wondering what crumbling of her social and financial fabric had landed her here on her own resources, stranded along the outer edges of things.

One scorching day he had been drawing an elevation for his tower, which partook impartially of the worst in both Manhattan, Gothic, and Chinese architecture—a new crinkle in his theory

THE TREE OF DREAMS

being that the poor had a right to the best in art, and that they should have it in spite of Kerns. For an hour he had been trying to estimate the cost of such a masterpiece, and had grown cross and discouraged in the effort.

July was fast going. August already had been discounted by the monthly magazines; he had purchased one which contained an article on concrete construction, and, tired of his sweltering room, he put on his hat, pocketed the magazine, and went out to seek a bit of shade in Central Park.

As he passed his neighbor's door he glanced at it a trifle wistfully. He had not seen her now for nearly a week. He actually missed her, even though now she seldom seemed to have the leisure or inclination to chat with him.

The last time, he reflected, that they had exchanged a dozen words, he had, lured by her receptively intelligent attitude, drifted into an almost enthusiastic dissertation upon model lodgings for the poor. He had kept her standing before her door for almost half an hour while he, forgetting everything except the subject and the acquiescence of his audience, had aired his theories with a warmth and brilliancy which, later, it slightly astonished him to remember.

THE TREE OF HEAVEN

Since that they had exchanged scarcely a word. And now, as he passed her door, he looked wistfully at it, thinking of his slender neighbor.

And, thinking of her, he descended the stairs, and, still immersed in this agreeable reverie, he did not notice that he had passed the ground floor and was descending the cellar stairs, until he came to in front of an iron door. This seemed unfamiliar. He took out his handkerchief to rub his glasses, looked around at the furnaces and coal bins, passed his hand over his eyes, replaced the glasses, gazed at the iron door which was partly ajar, and caught a glimpse of green grass outside.

"I'll bet that's my vacant lot," he said aloud, and, opening the door, he ascended the stone steps into his own property.

There was green grass everywhere; south and west a high board fence; north and east the brick, windowless, rearward cliffs of the tenements; in the middle of the lot an ailantus tree in full foliage.

And, under it, a young girl lying in the grass, her wide straw hat hanging from a leafy branch above. Even before he stirred in his tracks she sat up, instinctively looking across the grass at him. It was his duty to make his excuses and go. But, for almost the first time in his life, he deliberately neglected duty.

THE TREE OF DREAMS

"So *this* is where you come every day to work out of doors!" he exclaimed, smiling, as he halted beside her where she remained, seated in the grass, looking up at him.

There was color in her face and in his, too. He had had absolutely no idea how pleasant it could be to meet his neighbor again after so many days—seven in number—but a great many all the same.

Then he told her, laughingly, how he came to discover the cellar door that led to Paradise. "Paradise," he repeated; "for, you see, the Tree of Ten Thousand Dreams is here. Did you know that the ailantus tree is the Chinese Tree of Paradise—the fabled Tree of Dreams? Have you never heard of the Feng-Shui? Dragons live deep in the earth among the tree roots. You didn't know that, did you?"

"No," he said, smiling, "I didn't know that."

He looked at her. Her manner was not very cordial, and he decided not to ask permission to seat himself just yet. But he had nothing in particular to say to her and he was very anxious to say it.

"The Fung-Hwang also perches in the branches of the Dream Tree," he continued, for lack of a

THE TREE OF HEAVEN

better topic; "it's an imperial as well as a celestial tree. Are you interested in Chinese mythology? If you are not, it's all right, because I am interested in anything you like."

She looked up at the foliage above her. "It is a curious tree," she said. "In early June these branches were full of great olive and rose-colored moths, enormous ones, flopping about at sunset like big, soft bats. In the daytime they hang to the leaves and bark, wings wide—such beautiful, such miraculous wings—set with silvery quarter-moons!"

She raised both hands to the nape of her neck to smooth and secure her hair—a most fascinating gesture, he thought, watching her seated there in the grass, slim and graceful as the lovely lotus-bearing goddess, Kwan-Yin.

"Silvery quarter-moons," she repeated, "and now, look! The silver has changed into metal pendants!" She pointed upward where, among the foliage, shining, white cocoons swung from silk-wound stems, each wrapped in its single green leaf.

"Wonderful fairy fruit your Tree of Dreams bears!" he said. "And how thickly it hangs! I don't know much about such things. I was inclined to be fond of all that until I read some

THE TREE OF DREAMS

modern nature books. So I fell back on real myths again."

She began to laugh and, meeting in her eyes all the old-time friendliness, he ventured to ask if he might seat himself.

"Yes," she said gravely, "but I must be going."

"Then I don't care to stay here," he said, unprepared to hear himself utter any such sentiment. His astonishment at himself overcame even the reaction which turned his face red. She, too, surprised, looked at him unconvinced.

"What have I to do with it?" she inquired.

"The fact is," he said impressively, as though the intelligence were well worth sharing with her, "I have been rather lonely."

"Have you?" she asked, wide-eyed. "So have I. But I usually am."

"I wish you had said so!"

"How could I? And to whom?"

They said nothing more for a while. The sunlight, filtering through the Tree of Dreams, glimmered on her hair. Her eyes, darker in the shadow, dwelt tranquilly upon the waste of thick, tall grass which the languid breezes furrowed now and then.

"Do you mind my offering you my friend-

THE TREE OF HEAVEN

ship?" he asked at length; "for that's what I'm doing."

"No, I don't mind," she replied listlessly. "Other men have done that."

"Will you accept—this time?"

"Shall I?" she asked, raising her clear eyes. "Shall I? I have been here two years—and I have made no friends."

She folded her unringed hands on her knees, examined them with calm inattention, and said: "After a while, I suppose, a girl becomes partly stupefied under the strain of it all—the tension of self-respecting silence. Two years of self-suppression! Even pickpockets receive a sentence more humane. Shall I try your remedy?"

"It would be very jolly to see each other, now and then," he said, so pleasantly that she smiled at his simplicity.

"What about the conventions?" she inquired, amused. "Still, after all, what has a girl to do with conventions who lives as I live? Her problem is a great deal simpler than to bother with usages." There was a defiant smile hovering about eyes and lips—a hint of recklessness in the bright color rising under his gaze: "A girl can't live and flourish on silence."

THE TREE OF DREAMS

"You always hurry past me when we meet——"

"But surely you didn't expect me to invite you to a seat on the stairs, did you?"

"I wish you had."

"Then why didn't *you* invite *me*?" she asked with a gay audacity new to him. For, in the summer sunshine of the moment, she was forgetting all except the pleasure of the moment and its pretense that the old order of things had returned. Sunshine and green grass and the sophisticated city breeze in the leaves above — youth, and ardent health, and one of her own kind to speak to after the arid silence of these sad months — what wonder that she willfully forgot? What wonder that she dared to breathe and laugh again, drifting and relaxing in the moment's merciful relief from a tension that had benumbed her to the verge of actual stupidity?

Afterwards, in her room, the relaxed strain tightened again. She realized their acquaintance was only an episode—she knew his advent here was but a caprice. But it was an interim that gave her a chance—a brief vacation in which she might breathe for a moment before the inevitable returned again to submerge her. And she meant to enjoy it with all her heart—every moment, every

THE TREE OF HEAVEN

atom of sunshine, every bright second of respite from what she actually dared look forward to no longer.

That first meeting under the ailantus tree was only one of a sequence.

At first, when he came sauntering across the grass, she politely laid aside her work—dissertation on flounces and napkins and old mahogany and the care of infants, and what Heppelwhite knew about table legs, and why Sheraton is usually saluted as Chippendale.

Later, she continued her work unembarrassed as long as she was able to concentrate her mind under the agreeable little shock of pleasure which his advent always brought to her.

“How did you find out all about such things?” he asked curiously, looking over her manuscripts with her shrugged permission.

“All about what things?”

“These—ah—crooked-legged tables and squat-ty chairs?”

“I had them—once.”

“I see,” he said gravely. Then, with embarrassed hesitation, but very nicely: “There must have been a pretty bad smash-up?”

She nodded.

THE TREE OF DREAMS

"Ah—I'm awfully sorry! Hope it's going to come out all right—some day."

"Thank you." But she continued to be brief and uncommunicative, never volunteering anything.

In the days when she became accustomed to his coming to find her under the tree, she ventured to continue her writing, merely greeting him with a nod of confidence and pleasure. And so he fell into the habit of bringing his own impossible plans and elevations to the vacant lot. And often, biting her pencil reflectively, she would cast side glances at him where he lay, flat in the grassy shade, drawing board under his nose, patiently constructing lines and angles and Corinthian capitals and Romanesque back doors. He was a very, very poor draughtsman; even she could see that.

"I'm doing this for a man who means to build a big tower on this lot," he explained cheerfully. "I've a notion he will be delighted with this plan of mine."

"Oh, is he going to cut down your Tree of Dreams!" she exclaimed, raising her eyes in dismay.

He looked up at the tree, then at her. "By Jove! It is a pity, isn't it?" he said, "after the jolly hours we have spent out here."

THE TREE OF HEAVEN

"Perhaps he won't build his tower until after—after——"

"After what?"

"After we—you and I have forgotten all about this tree—" She hesitated. Then calmly—"and each other. Which, of course," she laughed, "means no tower at all."

He sat so long silent, preoccupied with his drawing, looking at it half dreamily, that she thought he had forgotten her rather foolish observations.

But he hadn't; for he said in a troubled voice: "There's a way—a way of taking up big trees. I'll ask him to do it. I don't want it chopped down."

"You're afraid of angering the dragon!" she said, laughing. "What use could such a man have for an old ailantus tree? Besides, where could he plant it?"

"There's a place I know of," he said. "I'll speak to him. . . . No; it wouldn't do to have our Tree of Dreams cut down——"

"It's not *my* tree," she said, looking down at her pencil; "it's yours."

"It *is* yours," he insisted. "You found it, and I found you under it."

"Oh, it's mine because I found it?" she mocked

THE TREE OF DREAMS

gayly, "and, I suppose, I'm yours because you found me under it."

Her tongue had run away that time. She checked her badinage, picked up her pencil with an admirable self-possession that admitted nothing, and scribbled away in calm insouciance. Only the heightened brilliancy of her cheeks could have undeceived the adept. Smith was no adept; besides, he was thinking of other matters.

"Do you know," he said solemnly, "that I am going away for about a week?"

She congratulated him without raising her head from her writing pad. That was pure instinct, for the emotion she had detected in Smith's voice was perfectly apparent in his features.

Smith gazed at her for a long time, during which she grew busier and busier with her pencil, and more oblivious of him.

The intellectual processes of Smith were, at times, childlike in their circuitous simplicity.

"Do you think I'm a good draughtsman?" he asked.

"I don't know; are you?" she asked, numbering a fresh sheet of her pad.

"Why, you've seen my drawing!" he reminded her, a little hurt. "I think I am a good draughts-

THE TREE OF HEAVEN

man. I could probably earn about a hundred and twenty dollars a month."

"You are very fortunate," she murmured, rubbing out a sentence.

"A hundred and twenty dollars a month is enough for anybody to marry on," he continued. "Don't—you think so?"

"It is probably sufficient," she said carelessly.

"Do *you* think it is?"

"I haven't considered such matters very seriously," she said. "It will be time when I am earning a hundred and twenty dollars a month. And I'm not likely to earn it if you continue to interrupt me."

Smith turned red; presently he tucked his drawing board under his arm and stood up.

"I'm going," he said. "Good-by."

She nodded her adieux pleasantly, scarcely raising her head from her work.

But when Smith had disappeared she straightened up with a quick, indrawn breath and stared across the grass at the blank, brick walls. After a long while she dropped her tired shoulders back against the trunk of the Tree of Dreams, reclining there inert, blue eyes brooding in vacancy.

Meanwhile, Smith had locked up his room, gone

THE TREE OF DREAMS

home for the first time in two months, telephoned for a stateroom on the Western Limited, and sent for Kerns, who presently arrived in an electric cab.

"I'm going to Illinois," said Smith, "to-night."

"The nation must know of this," insisted Kerns; "let me telegraph for fireworks."

"There'll be fireworks," observed Smith—"fireworks to burn, presently. I'm going to get married to a working girl."

"Oh, piffle!" said Kerns faintly; "let's go and sit on the third rail and talk it over."

"Not with *you*, idiot. Did you ever hear of Stanley Stevens, who tried to corner wheat? I think it's his daughter I'm going to marry. I'm going to Chicago to find out. Good heavens, Kerns! It's the most pitiful case, whoever she is! It's a case to stir the manhood in any man. I tell you it's got to be righted. I am thoroughly stirred up, and I won't stand any nonsense from you."

Kerns looked at him. "Smith," he pleaded in sepulchral tones; "Smithy! For the sake of decency and of common sense——"

"Exactly," nodded Smith, picking up his hat and gloves; "for the sake of decency and of common sense. Good-by, Tommy. And—ah!"—

THE TREE OF HEAVEN

indicating a parcel of papers on the desk—"just have an architect look over these sketches with a view to estimating the—ah—cost of construction. And find some good landscape gardener to figure up what it will cost to remove a big ailantus tree from New York to the Berkshires. You can tell him I'll sue him if he injures the tree, but that I don't care what it costs to move it."

"Smith!" faltered Kerns, appalled, "you're as mad as Hamlet!"

"It's one of my ambitions to be madder," retorted Smith, going out and running nimbly downstairs.

"Help!" observed Kerns feebly as the front door slammed. And, as nobody responded, he sat down in the bachelor quarters of J. Abingdon Smith, a prey to melancholy amazement.

When Smith had been gone a week Kerns wrote him, when he had been gone two weeks he telegraphed him, when the third week ended he telephoned him, and when the month was up he prepared to leave for darkest Chicago; in fact he was actually leaving his house, suit case in hand, when Smith drove up in a hansom and gleefully waved his hand.

Smith beckoned him to enter the cab. "I'm going home to put on my old clothes," he said.

THE TREE OF DREAMS

"It's all right, Tom. I've been collecting old furniture, tons of antique chairs and things. They were pretty widely scattered at the sale two years ago——"

"What sale, in the name of sanity?" shouted Kerns.

"Why, when Stanley Stevens failed to corner wheat he shot his head off before they pounced on his effects. I managed to find most of the things. I've sent them to my place, Abingdon, and now I'm going to ask her to marry me."

"Oh, are you?"

"Certainly. And, Kerns, if she will have me it will be for my own sake. Do you know what she thinks? She thinks I'm a draughtsman at thirty dollars a week. Isn't it delightful? Isn't it perfectly splendid?"

"Dazzling," whispered Kerns, unable to utter another word.

Smith's progress was certainly rapid. When he arrived at the door of his tenement lodgings he fairly soared up the stairs, flight on flight, until he came to the top.

The door of his neighbor's room stood open and he impulsively crossed the hallway, but there were only two men there moving out a table, and his slender blue-eyed neighbor was nowhere visible.

THE TREE OF HEAVEN

"What's that for?" he inquired. "Is Miss Stevens moving?"

"No, but her table is," said one of the men.

Something about the proceeding kept Smith silent. He saw one of the men drop his end of the table, close the door, lock it, and hang the key on a nail outside.

"That isn't safe," said Smith. "I'll take charge of the key until Miss Stevens returns."

He unhooked it, and, turning, let himself into his own room, but left the door ajar.

Two flights down the table drawer dropped out, dumping a pile of yellow manuscript on the stairs.

"Glory!" panted one of the movers; "that's hers. Take it up and leave it with the guy in the glasses, Bill."

And so it happened that Smith, standing outside on his fire escape for a breath of air, returned to find a mass of yellow manuscript littering his bed.

Wondering, he picked up the first sheet, saw his own name in her handwriting, stared, and sat down in astonishment to read. Suddenly his face burned fiery red, and, as long as he sat there, the deep color remained throbbing, scorching him anew with every page he turned.

After a long while he dropped the sheets and

THE TREE OF DREAMS

returned to the first page. It was dated in June, the day after his arrival.

He was slowly beginning to understand the matter now. He was beginning to realize that this manuscript had been placed in his room by mistake; that it had never been intended for him to read; that, if it had been written with a purpose, it had never been used for any purpose.

Then he remembered the moving of her table. Clearly the men had found it and, as he had assumed possession of her key, no doubt they had returned and flung the papers on his bed.

"In that case," said Smith thoughtfully, "I think I'll go down to the ailantus tree, and see if, by any chance, she is there."

.
She was there, seated in a chair, very intent on her writing pad. He was quite near her before she noticed him, and then she seemed dazed for a moment, rising and holding out her hand mechanically, looking at him in silence as he held her fingers imprisoned.

"I did not think you would return," she said.
"It is a month—at least——"

"Are you glad to see me?"

"Of course," she said simply, reseating herself.
"Have you been well?"

THE TREE OF HEAVEN

"Yes; and you?"

"Perfectly, thank you."

He looked around at the long grass withered in patches; at the leafless tree. "Do you remember our first encounter here?" he said.

"Perfectly. You told me that there was a dragon under the tree, and a Chinese bird sat in its branches. That was in August, I think. This is November. Look up at the branches. All the leaves are gone. Only the silvery cocoons are hanging in clusters everywhere." And, bending slowly above her work again, "When are you going to turn our Tree of Dreams into a tower of bricks?"

But he only sat silent, smiling, watching her white fingers flying over the pad on her knees.

"I wonder," she said carelessly, "how long you are going to stay here this time."

"I wonder, too," he said.

"Don't you know?" she asked, raising her eyes and laughing faintly.

"No, I don't. Besides, why should I leave this lodging house? I like it."

"Can't you afford to leave—after all that lucrative tower designing?"

He said, looking at her deliberately: "You know perfectly well that I can afford to."

THE TREE OF DREAMS

Something in the quiet voice and gaze of the man startled her, but only a delicate glow of rising color in her cheeks betrayed any lack of self-possession. "I don't think I understand you," she said.

"I think you do," he insisted, seating himself at her feet in the grass.

She wrote a word or two on her pad, then looked down to meet his changed smile. A moment more, and she resumed her work in flushed confusion.

"You know who I am," he said calmly. "I didn't think you did until an hour ago. Shall I tell you what happened an hour ago?"

She managed to meet his gaze without expression, but she did not answer.

"Then I will tell you what happened," he continued.

"Some men carried out a table from your room. A few moments later one of the men deposited a lot of loose manuscript which he had, I suppose, found in the table drawer. This all occurred while I was out on the balcony. When I returned to the room I found the papers on my bed. I could not avoid seeing my own name at the head of this breezy newspaper article. It is very cleverly written."

Wave after wave of scarlet flooded her face.

THE TREE OF HEAVEN

"So you have known who I am all this time?" he nodded slowly.

"Y-yes."

"It was a good chance—a legitimate chance for an article. You thought so, and you wrote it. The papers would have given it three columns and double leads. . . . Why didn't you use it?"

The tears flashed in her eyes. "I did not use it for the same reason that I am here with you now! Some things can be done, and some cannot. Good-by."

Good-by?" he repeated slowly.

He stepped back; she passed before him, halted, turned, and spoke again, steadying her voice which broke deliciously in spite of her: "I did not mean to ridicule you. When I wrote that article I had known you only a day or two—and I was desperate—frightened—half-starved. The chance came, and I took it—or tried to. But I couldn't. I never could have. So—that is all."

"I knew all that, too," he said. "I only thought I'd speak of it. I wanted to ask you something else——"

She had halted.

"Ask it," she said, exercising every atom of self-command.

"Won't you turn around?"

THE TREE OF DREAMS

"No. I—I cannot. What is it you wish, Mr. Smith?"

"Ah—about this tree. It's to be taken up, I believe. They've a method of doing it, you know. I—ah—have considered arrangements."

She made no movement.

"Fact is," he ventured, "I've a sort of a country place in the Berkshires. Do you think that our tree would do well in the Berkshires?"

"I don't know, Mr. Smith."

"Oh, I thought, perhaps, you'd be likely to know!"

There was a pause of a full minute. "Is that all?" she asked, turning toward him with tear-flushed self-possession—but she had no idea that he was so close to her—no idea of what he was doing with her hands so suddenly imprisoned in his.

"Can you stand such a-a m-man as I am?" he stammered, the ancestral sentimental streak in the ascendancy. "Would yo—ah—mind marrying me?"

Her face was pale enough now.

"Do you mean you love me?" she said, dazed. And the next moment she had released her hands, stepping toward the tree.

"Yes, I mean that," he repeated; "I love you."

"But—but I do not love you, Mr. Smith——"

THE TREE OF HEAVEN

"I—I know it. P-perhaps you could try. D-do you mind trying—a little——"

He had followed her to the ailanthus. She retreated, facing him, and now stood backed up against the tree, her hands flat against the trunk behind her.

"Couldn't you try?" he asked. "I love you—I love you dearly. I know you're younger—I know you think me m-more or less of a——"

"I don't!"

"I suppose I really haven't many brains," he said; "but yours are still intact."

Her blue eyes filled and grew starry.

"Did you read that entire article?" she asked unsteadily—"did you?"

"Yes—in bits—before I knew you had not meant me to. . . . I guess I am the sort of a man you make fun of——"

Her eyes met his fairly for a moment, were lowered, then again raised. Something within them gave him courage, or perhaps the splendid rising color in her face, or perhaps the provocation of her mouth. And he kissed her. She did not stir; her lips were stiffly unresponsive.

But when, once more, he bent above her, she caught both his hands with a sob and met his lips with heart and soul, closing her wet eyes.

THE TREE OF DREAMS

"D-darling," said J. Abingdon Smith, bending his head over hers where it lay buried in his shoulder, "I don't mind being an ass—really I don't——"

Her hands crushed his, signaling silence.

"It isn't the funny things you wrote about me," he persisted; "but I really am that sort of a man. And likely to continue. You don't care, do you, dear?"

"W-when I love you!" she sobbed; "how can you say such things! D-do you think I'd love an idiot?"

He was discreetly silent for a while, then: "Anyway, I've found all your furniture—the bandy-legged chairs and things," he whispered cheerfully. "They are waiting for you at—a—Abingdon—a place I have in the country. Are you pleased?"

She lifted her face and made an effort to speak.

"Never mind," he said, dizzy with happiness, "we'll talk it over to-morrow. I think," he added, "that I'll have the men here to-morrow to remove our tree. There's a splendid place for it on the lawn."

She turned, her hands clasped in his, and looked up at the Tree of Dreams. Then, very gently, she bent and laid her lips against the bark.

CHAPTER V

THE BRIDAL PAIR

"If I were you," said the elder man, "I should take three months' solid rest."

"A month is enough," said the younger man. "Ozone will do it; the first brace of grouse I bag will do it—" He broke off abruptly, staring at the line of dimly lighted cars, where negro porters stood by the vestibuled sleepers, directing passengers to staterooms and berths.

"Dog all right, doctor?" inquired the elder man pleasantly.

"All right, doctor," replied the younger; "I spoke to the baggage master."

There was a silence; the elder man chewed an unlighted cigar reflectively, watching his companion with keen narrowing eyes.

The younger physician stood full in the white electric light, lean head lowered, apparently preoccupied with a study of his own shadow swimming and quivering on the asphalt at his feet.

THE BRIDAL PAIR

"So you fear I may break down?" he observed, without raising his head.

"I think you're tired out," said the other.

"That's a more agreeable way of expressing it," said the young fellow. "I hear" — he hesitated, with a faint trace of irritation—"I understand that Forbes Stanly thinks me mentally unsound."

"He probably suspects what you're up to," said the elder man soberly.

"Well, what will he do when I announce my germ theory? Put me in a strait-jacket?"

"He'll say you're mad, until you prove it; every physician will agree with him—until your radium test shows us the microbe of insanity."

"Doctor," said the young man abruptly, "I'm going to admit something—to *you*."

"All right; go ahead and admit it."

"Well, I *am* a bit worried about my own condition."

"It's time you were," observed the other.

"Yes—it's about time. Doctor, I am seriously affected."

The elder man looked up sharply.

"Yes, I'm—in love."

"Ah!" muttered the elder physician, amused and a trifle disgusted; "so that's your malady, is it?"

THE TREE OF HEAVEN

"A malady—yes; not explainable by our germ theory—not affected by radio-activity. Doctor, I'm speaking lightly enough, but there's no happiness in it."

"Never is," commented the other, striking a match and lighting his ragged cigar. After a puff or two the cigar went out. "All I have to say," he added, "is, don't do it just now. Show me a scale of pure radium and I'll give you leave to marry every spinster in New York. In the mean time go and shoot a few dozen harmless, happy grouse; they can't shoot back. But let love alone. . . . By the way, who is she?"

"I don't know."

"You know her name, I suppose?"

The young fellow shook his head. "I don't even know where she lives," he said finally.

After a pause the elder man took him gently by the arm: "Are you subject to this sort of thing? Are you susceptible?"

"No, not at all."

"Ever before in love?"

"Yes—once."

"When?"

"When I was about ten years old. Her name was Rosamund—aged eight. I never had the

THE BRIDAL PAIR

courage to speak to her. She died recently, I believe."

The reply was so quietly serious, so destitute of any suspicion of humor, that the elder man's smile faded; and again he cast one of his swift, keen glances at his companion.

"Won't you stay away three months?" he asked patiently.

But the other only shook his head, tracing with the point of his walking stick the outline of his own shadow on the asphalt.

A moment later he glanced at his watch, closed it with a snap, silently shook hands with his equally silent friend, and stepped aboard the sleeping car.

Neither had noticed the name of the sleeping car.

It happened to be the *Rosamund*.

Loungers and passengers on Wildwood station drew back from the platform's edge as the towering locomotive shot by them, stunning their ears with the clangor of its melancholy bell.

Slower, slower glided the dusty train, then stopped, jolting; eddying circles of humanity closed around the cars, through which descending passengers pushed.

THE TREE OF HEAVEN

"Wildwood! Wildwood!" cried the trainmen; trunks tumbling out of the forward car descended with a bang!—a yelping, wagging setter dog landed on the platform, hysterically grateful to be free; and at the same moment a young fellow in tweed shooting clothes, carrying gripsack and gun case, made his way forward toward the baggage master, who was being jerked all over the platform by the frantic dog.

"Much obliged; I'll take the dog," he said, slipping a bit of silver into the official's hand, and receiving the dog's chain in return.

"Hope you'll have good sport," replied the baggage master. "There's a lot o' birds in this country, they tell me. You've got a good dog there."

The young man smiled and nodded, released the chain from his dog's collar, and started off up the dusty village street, followed by an urchin carrying his luggage.

The landlord of the Wildwood Inn stood on the veranda, prepared to receive guests. When a young man, a white setter dog, and a small boy loomed up, his speculative eyes became suffused with benevolence.

"How-de-do, sir?" he said cordially. "Guess

THE BRIDAL PAIR

you was with us three year since—stayed to supper. Ain't that so?"

"It certainly is," said his guest cheerfully.

"I am surprised that you remember me."

"Be ye?" rejoined the landlord, gratified.

"Say! I can tell the name of every man, woman, an' child that has ever set down to eat with us. You was here with a pair o' red bird dawgs; shot a mess o' birds before dark, come back pegged out, an' took the ten-thirty to Noo York. Hey? Yaas, an' you was cussin' round because you couldn't stay an' shoot for a month."

"I had to work hard in those days," laughed the young man. "You are right; it was three years ago this month."

"Time's a flyer; it's fitted with triple screws these days," said the landlord. "Come right in an' make yourself to home. Ed! O Ed! Take this bag to 13! We're all full, sir. You ain't scared at No. 13, be ye? Say! if I ain't a liar you had 13 three years ago! Waal, now!—ain't that the dumbdest— But you can have what you want Monday. How long was you calkerlatin' to stay?"

"A month—if the shooting is good."

"It's all right. Orrin Plummer come in last night with a mess o' pa'tridges. He says the

THE TREE OF HEAVEN

woodcock is droppin' in to the birches south o' Sweetbrier Hill."

The young man nodded, and began to remove his gun from the service-worn case of sole leather.

"Ain't startin' right off, be ye?" inquired his host, laughing.

"I can't begin too quickly," said the young man, busy locking barrels to stock, while the dog looked on, thumping the veranda floor with his plummy tail.

The landlord admired the slim, polished weapon. "That's the instrooment!" he observed. "That there's a slick bird dawg, too. Guess I'd better fill my ice box. Your limit's thirty of each—cock an' pa'tridge. After that there's ducks."

"It's a good, sane law," said the young man, dropping his gun under one arm.

The landlord scratched his ear reflectively. "Lemme see," he mused; "wasn't you a doctor? I heard tell that you made up pieces for the papers about the idjits an' loonyticks of Rome an' Roosia an' furrin climes."

"I have written a little on European and Asiatic insanity," replied the doctor good-humoredly.

"Was you over to them parts?"

"For three years." He whistled the dog in from the road, where several yellow curs were

THE BRIDAL PAIR

walking round and round him, every hair on end.

The landlord said: "You look a little peakèd yourself. Take it easy the fust, is my advice."

His guest nodded abstractedly, lingering on the veranda, preoccupied with the beauty of the village street, which stretched away westward under tall elms. Autumn-tinted hills closed the vista; beyond them spread the blue sky.

"The cemetery lies that way, does it not?" inquired the young man.

"Straight ahead," said the landlord. "Take the road to the Holler."

"Do you"—the doctor hesitated—"do you recall a funeral there three years ago?"

"Whose?" asked his host bluntly.

"I don't know."

"I'll ask my woman; she saves them funeral pieces an' makes a album. . . . Friend o' yours buried there?"

"No."

The landlord sauntered toward the barroom, where two fellow taxpayers stood shuffling their feet impatiently.

"Waal, good luck, Doc," he said, without intentional offense; "supper's at six. We'll try an' make you comfortable."

THE TREE OF HEAVEN

"Thank you," replied the doctor, stepping out into the road, and motioning the white setter to heel.

"I remember now," he muttered, as he turned northward, where the road forked; "the cemetery lies to the westward; there should be a lane at the next turning——"

He hesitated and stopped, then resumed his course, mumbling to himself: "I can pass the cemetery later; she would not be there; I don't think I shall ever see her again. . . . I—I wonder whether I am—perfectly—well——"

The words were suddenly lost in a sharp in-drawn breath; his heart ceased beating, fluttered, then throbbed on violently; and he shook from head to foot.

There was a glimmer of a summer gown under the trees; a figure passed from shadow to sunshine, and again into the cool dusk of a leafy lane.

The pallor of the young fellow's face changed; a heavy flush spread from forehead to neck; he strode forward, dazed, deafened by the tumult of his drumming pulses. The dog, alert, suspicious, led the way, wheeling into the bramble-bordered lane, only to halt, turn back, and fall in behind his master again.

In the lane ahead the light summer gown fluttered under the foliage, bright in the sunlight,

THE BRIDAL PAIR

almost lost in the shadows. Then he saw her on the hill's breezy crest, poised for a moment against the sky.

When at length he reached the hill, he found her seated in the shade of a pine. She looked up serenely, as though she had expected him, and they faced each other. A moment later his dog left him, sneaking away without a sound.

When he strove to speak, his voice had an unknown tone to him. Her upturned face was his only answer. The breeze in the pinetops, which had been stirring lazily and monotonously, ceased.

Her delicate face was like a blossom lifted in the still air; her upward glance chained him to silence. The first breeze broke the spell: he spoke a word, then speech died on his lips; he stood twisting his shooting cap, confused, not daring to continue.

The girl leaned back, supporting her weight on one arm, fingers almost buried in the deep green moss.

"It is three years to-day," he said, in the dull voice of one who dreams; "three years to-day. May I not speak?"

In her lowered head and eyes he read acquiescence; in her silence, consent.

THE TREE OF HEAVEN

"Three years ago to-day," he repeated; "the anniversary has given me courage to speak to you. Surely you will not take offense; we have traveled so far together!—from the end of the world to the end of it, and back again, here—to this place of all places in the world! And now to find you here on this day of all days—here within a step of our first meeting place—three years ago to-day! And all the world we have traveled over since, never speaking, yet ever passing on paths parallel—paths which for thousands of miles ran almost within arm's distance——"

She raised her head slowly, looking out from the shadows of the pines into the sunshine. Her dreamy eyes rested on acres of golden-rod and hillside brambles quivering in the September heat; on fern-choked gullies edged with alder; on brown and purple grasses; on pine thickets where slim silver birches glimmered.

"Will you speak to me?" he asked. "I have never even heard the sound of your voice."

She turned and looked at him, touching with idle fingers the soft hair curling on her temples. Then she bent her head once more, the faintest shadow of a smile in her eyes.

"Because," he said humbly, "these long years of silent recognition count for something! And

THE BRIDAL PAIR

then the strangeness of it!—the fate of it—the quiet destiny that ruled our lives—that rules them now—now as I am speaking, weighting every second with its tiny burden of fate.”

She straightened up, lifting her half-buried hand from the moss; and he saw the imprint there where the palm and fingers had rested.

“Three years that end to-day—end with the new moon,” he said. “Do you remember?”

“Yes,” she said.

He quivered at the sound of her voice. “You were there, just beyond those oaks,” he said eagerly; “we can see them from here. The road turns there——”

“Turns by the cemetery,” she murmured.

“Yes, yes, by the cemetery! You had been there, I think.”

“Do you remember that?” she asked.

“I have never forgotten—never!” he repeated, striving to hold her eyes to his own; “it was not twilight; there was a glimmer of day in the west, but the woods were darkening, and the new moon lay in the sky, and the evening was very clear and still.”

Impulsively he dropped on one knee beside her to see her face; and as he spoke, curbing his emotion and impatience with the subtle deference

THE TREE OF HEAVEN

which is inbred in men or never acquired, she stole a glance at him; and his worn visage brightened as though touched with sunlight.

"The second time I saw you was in New York," he said—"only a glimpse of your face in the crowd—but I knew you."

"I saw you," she mused.

"Did you?" he cried, enchanted. "I dared not believe that you recognized me."

"Yes, I knew you. . . . Tell me more."

The thrilling voice set him aflame; faint danger signals tinted her face and neck.

"In December," he went on unsteadily, "I saw you in Paris—I saw only you amid the thousand faces in the candlelight of Notre Dame."

"And I saw you. . . . And then?"

"And then two months of darkness. . . . And at last a light—moonlight—and you on the terrace at Amara."

"There was only a flower bed—a few spikes of white hyacinths between us," she said dreamily.

He strove to speak coolly. "Day and night have built many a wall between us; was that you who passed me in the starlight, so close that our shoulders touched, in that narrow street in Samarcand? And the dark figure with you——"

"Yes, it was I and my attendant."

THE BRIDAL PAIR

"And . . . you, there in the fog——"

"At Archangel? Yes, it was I."

"On the Goryn?"

"It was I. . . . And I am here at last—with you. It is our destiny."

So, kneeling there beside her in the shadow of the pines, she absolved him in their dim confessional, holding him guiltless under the destiny that awaits us all.

Again that illumination touched his haggard face as though brightened by a sun ray stealing through the still foliage above. He grew younger under the level beauty of her gaze; care fell from him like a mask; the shadows that had haunted his eyes faded; youth awoke, transfiguring him and all his eyes beheld.

Made prisoner by love, adoring her, fearing her, he knelt beside her, knowing already that she had surrendered, though fearful yet by word or gesture or a glance to claim what destiny was holding for him—holding securely, inexorably, for him alone.

He spoke of her kindness in understanding him, and of his gratitude; of her generosity, of his wonder that she had ever noticed him on his way through the world.

THE TREE OF HEAVEN

"I cannot believe that we have never before spoken to each other," he said; "that I do not even know your name. Surely there was once a corner in the land of childhood where we sat together when the world was younger."

She said, dreamily: "Have you forgotten?"

"Forgotten?"

"That sunny corner in the land of childhood."

"Had you been there, I should not have forgotten," he replied, troubled.

"Look at me," she said. Her lovely eyes met his; under the penetrating sweetness of her gaze his heart quickened and grew restless and his uneasy soul stirred, awaking memories.

"There was a child," she said, "years ago; a child at school. You sometimes looked at her; you never spoke. Do you remember?"

He rose to his feet, staring down at her.

"Do you remember?" she asked again.

"Rosamund! Do you mean Rosamund? How should you know that?" he faltered.

The struggle for memory focused all his groping senses; his eyes seemed to look her through and through.

"How can you know?" he repeated unsteadily.

"You are not Rosamund. . . . Are you? . . .

THE BRIDAL PAIR

She is dead. I heard that she was dead. . . . *Are you Rosamund?* ”

“ Do you not know? ”

“ Yes; you are not Rosamund. . . . What do you know of her? ”

“ I think she loved you.”

“ Is she dead? ”

The girl looked up at him, smiling, following with delicate perception the sequence of his thoughts; and already his thoughts were far from the child Rosamund, a sweetheart of a day long since immortal; already he had forgotten his question, though the question was of life or death.

Sadness and unrest and the passing of souls concerned not him; she knew that all his thoughts were centered on her; that he was already living over once more the last three years, with all their mystery and charm, savoring their fragrance anew in the exquisite enchantment of her presence.

Through the autumn silence the pines began to sway in a wind unfelt below. She raised her eyes and saw their green crests shimmering and swimming in a cool current; a thrilling sound stole out, and with it floated the pine perfume, exhaling in the sunshine. He heard the dreamy harmony above, looked up; then, troubled, somber, moved

THE TREE OF HEAVEN

by he knew not what, he knelt once more in the shadow beside her—close beside her.

She did not stir. Their destiny was close upon them. It came in the guise of love.

He bent nearer. "I love you," he said. "I loved you from the first. And shall forever. You knew it long ago."

She did not move.

"You knew I loved you?"

"Yes, I knew it."

The emotion in her voice, in every delicate contour of her face, pleaded for mercy. He gave her none, and she bent her head in silence, clasped hands tightening.

And when at last he had had his say, the burning words still rang in her ears through the silence. A curious faintness stole upon her, coming stealthily like a hateful thing. She strove to put it from her, to listen, to remember and understand the words he had spoken, but the dull confusion grew with the sound of the pines.

"Will you love me? Will you try to love me?"

"I love you," she said; "I have loved you so many, many years; I—I am Rosamund——"

She bowed her head and covered her face with both hands.

THE BRIDAL PAIR

"Rosamund! Rosamund!" he breathed, enraptured.

She dropped her hands with a little cry; the frightened sweetness of her eyes held back his outstretched arms. "Do not touch me," she whispered; "you will not touch me, will you?—not yet—not now. Wait till I understand!" She pressed her hands to her eyes, then again let them fall, staring straight at him. "I loved you so!" she whispered. "Why did you wait?"

"Rosamund! Rosamund!" he cried sorrowfully, "what are you saying? I do not understand; I can understand nothing save that I worship you. May I not touch you?—touch your hand, Rosamund? I love you so."

"And I love you. I beg you not to touch me—not yet. There is something—some reason why——"

"Tell me, sweetheart."

"Do you not know?"

"By Heaven, I do not!" he said, troubled and amazed.

She cast one desperate, unhappy glance at him, then rose to her full height, gazing out over the hazy valleys to where the mountains began, piled up like dim sun-tipped clouds in the north.

The hill wind stirred her hair and fluttered the

THE TREE OF HEAVEN

white ribbons at waist and shoulder. The golden-rod swayed in the sunshine. Below, amid yellow treetops, the roofs and chimneys of the village glimmered.

"Dear, do you not understand?" she said. "How can I make you understand that I love you—too late?"

"Give yourself to me, Rosamund; let me touch you—let me take you——"

"Will you love me always?"

"In life, in death, which cannot part us. Will you marry me, Rosamund?"

She looked straight into his eyes. "Dear, do you not understand? Have you forgotten? I died three years ago to-day."

The unearthly sweetness of her white face startled him. A terrible light broke in on him; his heart stood still.

In his dull brain words were sounding—his own words, written years ago: "When God takes the mind and leaves the body alive, there grows in it, sometimes, a beauty almost supernatural."

He had seen it in his practice. A thrill of fright penetrated him, piercing every vein with its chill. He strove to speak; his lips seemed frozen; he stood there before her, a ghastly smile stamped on his face, and in his heart, terror.

THE BRIDAL PAIR

"What do you mean, Rosamund?" he said at last.

"That I am dead, dear. Did you not understand that? I—I thought you knew it—when you first saw me at the cemetery, after all those years since childhood. . . . Did you not know it?" she asked wistfully. "I must wait for my bridal."

Misery whitened his face as he raised his head and looked out across the sunlit world. Something had smeared and marred the fair earth; the sun grew gray as he stared.

Stupefied by the crash, the ruins of life around him, he stood mute, erect, facing the west.

She whispered, "Do you understand?"

"Yes," he said; "we will wed later. You have been ill, dear; but it is all right now—and will always be—God help us! Love is stronger than all—stronger than death."

"I know it is stronger than death," she said, looking out dreamily over the misty valley.

He followed her gaze, calmly, serenely reviewing all that he must renounce, the happiness of wedlock, children—all that a man desires.

Suddenly instinct stirred, awaking man's only friend—hope. A lifetime for the battle!—for a cure! Hopeless? He laughed in his excitement.

THE TREE OF HEAVEN

Despair?—when the cure lay almost within his grasp!—the work he had given his life to! A month more in the laboratory—two months—three—perhaps a year. What of it? It must surely come—how could he fail when the work of his life meant all in life for her?

The light of exaltation slowly faded from his face; ominous, foreboding thoughts crept in; fear laid a shaky hand on his head which fell heavily forward on his breast.

Science and man's cunning and the wisdom of the world!

"O God," he groaned, "for Him who cured by laying on His hands!"

Now that he had learned her name, and that her father was alive, he stood mutely beside her, staring steadily at the chimneys and stately dormered roof almost hidden behind the crimson maple foliage across the valley—her home.

She had seated herself once more upon the moss, hands clasped upon one knee, looking out into the west with dreamy eyes.

"I shall not be long," he said gently. "Will you wait here for me? I will bring your father with me."

"I will wait for you. But you must come be-

THE BRIDAL PAIR

fore the new moon. Will you? I must go when the new moon lies in the west."

"Go, dearest? Where?"

"I may not tell you," she sighed, "but you will know very soon—very soon now. And there will be no more sorrow, I think," she added timidly.

"There will be no more sorrow," he repeated quietly.

"For the former things are passing away," she said.

He broke a heavy spray of golden-rod and laid it across her knees; she held out a blossom to him—a blind gentian, blue as her eyes. He kissed it.

"Be with me when the new moon comes," she whispered. "It will be so sweet. I will teach you how divine is death, if you will come."

"You shall teach me the sweetness of life," he said tremulously.

"Yes—life. I did not know you called it by its truest name."

So he went away, trudging sturdily down the lane, gun glistening on his shoulder.

Where the lane joins the shadowy village street his dog skulked up to him, sniffing at his heels.

THE TREE OF HEAVEN

A mill whistle was sounding; through the red rays of the setting sun people were passing. Along the row of village shops loungers followed him with vacant eyes. He saw nothing, heard nothing, though a kindly voice called after him, and a young girl smiled at him on her short journey through the world.

The landlord of the Wildwood Inn sat sunning himself in the red evening glow.

"Well, doctor," he said, "you look tired to death. Eh? What's that you say?"

The young man repeated his question in a low voice. The landlord shook his head.

"No, sir. The big house on the hill is empty—been empty these three years. No, sir, there ain't no family there now. The old gentleman moved away three years ago."

"You are mistaken," said the doctor; "his daughter tells me he lives there."

"His—his daughter?" repeated the landlord. "Why, doctor, she's dead." He turned to his wife, who sat sewing by the open window: "Ain't it three years, Marthy?"

"Three years to-day," said the woman, biting off her thread. "She's buried in the family vault over the hill. She was a right pretty little thing, too."

THE BRIDAL PAIR

"Turned nineteen," mused the landlord, folding his newspaper reflectively.

The great gray house on the hill was closed, windows and doors boarded over, lawn, shrubbery, and hedges tangled with weeds. A few scarlet poppies glimmered above the brown grass. Save for these, and clumps of tall wild phlox, there were no blossoms among the weeds.

His dog, which had sneaked after him, cowered as he turned northward across the fields. Swifter and swifter he strode; and as he stumbled on, the long sunset clouds faded, the golden light in the west died out, leaving a calm, clear sky tinged with faintest green.

Pines hid the west as he crept toward the hill where she awaited him. As he climbed through dusky purple grasses, higher, higher, he saw the new moon's crescent tipping above the hills; and he crushed back the deathly fright that clutched at him and staggered on.

"Rosamund!"

The pines answered him.

"Rosamund!"

The pines replied, answering together. Then the wind died away, and there was no answer when he called.

THE TREE OF HEAVEN

East and south the darkening thickets, swaying, grew still. He saw the slim silver birches glimmering like the ghosts of young trees dead; he saw on the moss at his feet a broken stalk of golden-rod.

The new moon had drawn a veil across her face; sky and earth were very still.

While the moon lasted he lay, eyes open, listening, his face pillowed on the moss. It was long after sunrise when his dog came to him; later still when men came.

And at first they thought he was asleep.

CHAPTER VI

EX CURIA

AND now, at his attorney's request, and before his report was made, they decided to run through the documents in the case once more, reviewing everything from the very beginning. So young Courtlandt, his attorney, lighted a cigar and unwrapped the pink tape from the bundle of papers.

There was enough daylight left to read by, for wall and ceiling still bore the faded imprint of the red winter sunset. Edgerton sat before the fire, his well-shaped head buried in his hands; Courtlandt, lounging on a sofa by the window, unfolded the first paper, puffed thoughtfully at his cigar, and presently began to read without inflection or apparent interest:

PARIS, December 24, 1902.

JOHN EDGERTON, Esq.

Sir: My client, Michael Innis, is seriously ill, and I am writing you on his behalf and at his urgent solicitation.

It would appear that, during the panic of 1884, my

THE TREE OF HEAVEN

client came to your father's assistance, at a time when your father's financial ruin, involving also, I believe, the ruin of many of his friends, was apparently only a question of hours.

It would also appear that, upon your father's death, you wrote Mr. Innis, voluntarily assuming your father's unpaid obligations. (Copy of your letter herewith inclosed.)

It further appears that Mr. Innis, accepting the assurance of your personal gratitude, generously offered to wait for the sums due him, permitting you to pay at your own convenience. (Copy of Mr. Innis's letter inclosed herewith.)

In the conclusion of this last letter (No. 2 on file) Mr. Innis mentions his lifelong respect for your father and his family, humorously drawing the social distinction between the late Winthrop Edgerton, Esq., and Michael Innis, the Tammany contractor; and rather wistfully contrasting the future prospects of Mr. Edgerton's son, yourself, and the chances of the child of Michael Innis.

To this letter you replied (copy herewith), repeating in a manly fashion your assurance of gratitude, holding yourself at the service of Mr. Innis.

Now, sir, if your assurances meant more than mere civility, you have an opportunity to erase the deep obligations that your father assumed.

Mr. Innis is a man broken in mind and body. His fortune was invested, against my advice, in Madagascar Railways. To-day he could not realize a thousand dollars from the investment.

For twenty years his one absorbing passion has been

EX CURIA

the education and fitting of his only child for a position in the world which he himself could never hope to attain. Wealth and education, linked with an agreeable personality, may go anywhere in this century. And his daughter has had the best that Europe can afford.

Within a month all is changed. Sir, it is sad to see the stricken man lying here, watching his daughter.

And now, knowing that impending dissolution is near, terror of the future for her has wrung an appeal from him to you—a strange appeal, Mr. Edgerton. Money alone is little; he asks more; he asks your protection for her—not the perfunctory protection of a guardian for a ward, but the guidance of a father, the companionship of a brother, the loyalty of a husband.

The man is blinded by worship of his own child; your father's son represents to him all that is noblest, most honorable, most desirable in the world.

Sir, this is a strange request, an overdrawn draft upon your gratitude, I fear. Yet I write you as I am bidden. An answer should be returned by cable with as little delay as possible. He will live until he receives it. Marriage by proxy is legal. Special dispensation is certain.

I am, sir, with great respect,

Your very humble servant,

WILLIAM CAMPBELL.

Att'y and Counselor at Law,
7 rue d'Issy.

When Courtlandt finished reading he folded the letter, glancing across at Edgerton: "That was

THE TREE OF HEAVEN

written two years ago to-day, you remember?—this foreclosure of his mortgage upon your gratitude!”

“I remember,” said Edgerton.

“From the gratitude of the conscientious, good Lord deliver us!” murmured Courtlandt, unfolding another paper. “This is a copy of the asinine cablegram you sent, without consulting me.” And he read:

INNIS,
23 rue d’Abdul Hamid, Paris.

I assume all responsibility for your daughter’s future. Utterly impossible for me to leave New York. If you believe marriage advisable, arrange for special dispensation and ceremony by proxy.

JOHN EDGERTON.

Courtlandt rose and walked over to the fire where Edgerton was sitting. His client raised his head, eyes a trifle dazed from the pressure of his fingers on the closed lids.

“What the merry deuce did you send that cable for?” muttered Courtlandt under his breath.

“I don’t know—a debt of gratitude—and he did not want it paid in money. I—an appeal like that had to be honored, you see. I was ashamed to haggle at the day of reckoning. A man cannot appraise his own gratitude.”

EX CURIA

"Such things cannot be asked of gratitude," growled the attorney. "The business of the world is not run on impulse! What is gratitude?"

"It is not gratitude if it asks that question," returned Edgerton; "and I fear that after all it was not exactly gratitude. Gratitude gives; a debt of honor exacts. There is no profit in following this line further, is there, Billy?"

"No," assented Courtlandt, "unless it's going to help us disentangle the unfortunate affair." He unfolded another paper. "It's too dark to read," he observed, leaning forward into the firelight. The red reflection of the coals played over his face and the black-edged notepaper he was scanning. And he read, slowly:

January 3, 1903.

DEAR MR. EDGERTON: For your very gentle letter to me I beg to thank you; I deeply appreciate your delicacy at a time when kindness is most needed. Had you not written as you have, I should have found it difficult to discuss a situation which I am only just beginning to realize must be as embarrassing to you as it is to me.

In the grief and distress which overwhelmed me when I was so suddenly summoned from the convent to find my father so ill, I did not, could not realize the step I was asked to take. All I knew was that he de-

THE TREE OF HEAVEN

sired it, begged for it, and it meant to me nothing—this ceremony which made you my husband—nothing except a little happiness for the father I loved.

He made the responses for you, I kneeling at his bedside, scarce able to speak in my grief. There were two brief ceremonies, the civil and religious. He died very quietly that night.

Pray believe me that I understand how impossible it is for you to leave affairs of importance to come to Paris at this time. My aunt, who is with the Ursulines, has received me. It is very quiet, very peaceful; I have opportunity for meditation, and for studies which I left uncompleted. Mr. Campbell, whom you have so considerably retained for my legal guidance, is kind and tactful. He has, I believe, communicated with you in regard to the most generous provision you have made for me. Pray believe that I require very, very little. I regret the loss of my father's fortune only because it should have perhaps compensated you a trifle for your kindness to my father in his last hours.

I hesitate—I feel the greatest reluctance and delicacy in addressing you upon a matter that troubles me. It is this, Mr. Edgerton: if, through gratitude to my father for service done your father, you offered to become responsible for me, perhaps—I do not know—perhaps, as you have done me the honor of protecting me with your name, it is all that could be expected—and I hasten to assure you that I am content. Indeed, had I realized, had I even begun to comprehend what I was doing— Yet what could I do but obey him at such a time?

EX CURIA

So, if you think it well that we remain apart for a while, I am content and happy to obey your wishes. Your name, which I now bear, I honor; your wishes, monsieur, are my commands.

With gratitude, confidence, and respect, I remain,

Faithfully yours,

KATHLEEN INNIS EDGERTON.

Convent of the Ursulines,
rue Daumont.

Courtlandt refolded the letter, and sat rubbing his eyes. "For Heaven's sake let's have a light!" he grumbled, leaning over and pushing the electric button.

The light broke out overhead, flooding the library, glistening among gay evergreen wreaths tied with bunches of Christmas holly which hung against the library windows.

Edgerton raised his pale face, then his head sank on his breast; he folded his arms, gazing absently into the fire. "Go on," he said.

So Courtlandt read other letters from Mrs. Edgerton, brief notes, perfunctory, reserved, and naïve; and he read letters from Campbell, the attorney, acknowledging provisions made for his young client.

When he finished he refolded all the papers, retied them with pink tape, and laid them on the

THE TREE OF HEAVEN

table at Edgerton's elbow. "Now," he said, "comes the question. You have arrived at the conclusion that Mrs. Edgerton desires and deserves her freedom. And you want to know what I think."

"Yes," said Edgerton.

"You gave me a month to look up the matter."

"Yes, a month."

"And now you want me to report, don't you, Jack?"

Edgerton glanced up. "If you're ready," he said.

"I'm ready. First I want to ask you a question. Is there any woman you have met, before or since your marriage, whom you might fall in love with if you were free to do so?"

"No, I believe not—I don't know. I am—I was not actuated by selfishness."

"All right. Still, you are capable of loving somebody, are you not?"

"I fancy so. I should like to have a chance to marry—for love."

"But you never met the right one?"

"There is—I have caught a glimpse—once—one woman——"

"Is that all?" laughed Courtlandt. "That's not enough to bowl you over."

EX CURIA

"It was almost enough!" retorted Edgerton. Through his voice rang an undertone of impatience. His attorney looked up quickly.

"Oh, is it as serious as that? No wonder you want your freedom! Who is the woman?"

"I don't know what you mean," retorted the younger man sullenly. "I told you that I saw a woman once, whom I should like to have had a chance to see again. What of it? I never shall."

"When was this, Jack?"

"Yesterday—if you want to know."

"Where?"

"Driving in the park."

"Who is she?"

"You could answer that question," said Edgerton, wheeling around on his friend. "You were driving with her."

Courtlandt stared, slowly turning redder and redder.

"You wanted to know," observed Edgerton, eying him. "It means nothing, of course—I was riding along the bridle path and I caught a glimpse of you, and I saw her face. I thought her beautiful, that's all. Drop the subject."

"Certainly," answered Courtlandt. He opened his match box and relighted his cigar; then he fell

THE TREE OF HEAVEN

to musing, breaking the burnt match up into little pieces and tossing the morsels, one by one, into the fire.

"Jack," he drawled, still busy with the match, "you gave me a month to report upon this matter concerning the dissolution of your marriage. It might interest you to learn the first step I took."

"What was it?" inquired Edgerton, raising his troubled eyes.

"I went to Paris."

"To—to see——"

"Certainly, to see Mrs. Edgerton."

The men's eyes met; the lawyer shrugged his shoulders.

"Mrs. Edgerton is very inexperienced, very young," he said. "She is, of course, a Catholic. But if she desired her freedom a thousand times as fervently as you might desire yours, the law of her religion bars her way. You knew that of course."

"I thought—sometimes—" began the other.

"You are wrong."

Edgerton stared into the glowing coals.

"So you left it to me to see what could be done," added the attorney dryly.

Edgerton assented.

EX CURIA

"Well," said Courtlandt, "I shouldn't have accepted such a commission had I not known it was quite unselfish on your part. You told me that her letters to you were pitifully loyal and conscientious; that you felt like a jailer watching an innocent life prisoner; that if you only knew how to do it you would give her the liberty God meant her to enjoy—liberty to love and be loved. And you allowed me a month to find the way to settle this wretched affair."

"Yes. Is there a way?"

"Only one," replied Courtlandt gravely. He rose, offering his hand.

Edgerton also rose, tall, clean cut, closely cropped hair just tinged with gray at the temples.

"Only one way," repeated Courtlandt deliberately, "and that is for you to discuss the situation with Mrs. Edgerton.

"What!" exclaimed Edgerton sharply, dropping his friend's hand. "You know I can't leave town to go to Paris."

Courtlandt coolly consulted his watch. "I neglected to say that Mrs. Edgerton is in town. I believe"—he glanced at his watch again, then closed it with a snap—"I suggested that she waive ceremony and meet us here."

"Here!" muttered Edgerton. "Wait a mo-

THE TREE OF HEAVEN

ment, will you? Do you mean to say that she is coming here *to-night*?"

"Why not?" said Courtlandt, his gray eyes narrowing. "If she chooses to accept my advice, if she is woman enough to overlook what is due her from her husband, why should she not come here as freely as you come?"

"Are you my attorney or hers?" demanded the other in astonishment.

"Yours, Jack — acting for your interest — which is hers, too—which must be hers. Where is your sense of honor? Where is your sense of justice? Has the glimpse of a woman's face in the park seared your eyes? Is it true that an indifferent man can be just, but a man in love is a partisan? You could be coldly considerate and deal out passionless justice until yesterday. Now for the first time the fetters gall you. Is this the crisis where you flinch?"

He stood, jerking on his gloves, scanning Edgerton's face.

"I told her that the proper place to discuss the situation was under her own roof; and I am right. Do you consider a public hotel the suitable environment for such a conference? Her pride and intelligence comprehended me. That's all I have to say."

EX CURIA

"Why did you not tell me before this that she was in town? I understand the requirements of civilization, do I not?"

"I did not tell you, because we landed only yesterday morning."

"She came over with *you*?"

"On my advice and at my earnest solicitation."

Edgerton stared at him, tugging at his short mustache.

"What are we to discuss?" he demanded sullenly. "As she is Catholic we cannot discuss divorce. We could, of course, come to some conclusion concerning a *modus vivendi*."

"I expect you to come to some such conclusion. Two years ago you were twenty-eight—an oversensitive young man, impulsive, illogical, and morbid concerning personal obligations. Without consulting your legal adviser you perpetrated a crime—for it is criminal to parody the highest safeguard to civilization—marriage. It was a crime; your wife is your accomplice—*particeps criminis*, my friend. Neither you nor she deserves mercy."

He turned away, buttoning his gloves.

"It's touched your temples with gray," he observed. "You have learned something at thirty,

THE TREE OF HEAVEN

Jack, even if it's cost you what you think a *mésalliance*."

As he stepped to the door a maid appeared with a card on a salver. Edgerton glanced at it, then looked straight into Courtlandt's eyes.

"I'm sorry I needed this lesson in decency," he said. "It was all right for you to administer it. You need not worry; I understand that I am at my wife's disposal, not she at mine. I've kept my medicine waiting for two years, that's all."

"Oh, you're getting on," observed Courtlandt carelessly. "Good night—I've a word to say to Mrs. Edgerton before I go."

"You mean to stay, don't you?" began the other, flushing up. "It would be less trying for her——"

But Courtlandt hurried off down the stairs, muttering vaguely of engagements for Christmas Eve, leaving Edgerton staring after him through the dimly lighted hallway.

He heard Courtlandt enter the drawing-room; he could distinguish the quick, low exchange of greeting; then he went down slowly, steadying himself by the banisters.

A young girl in furs turned toward him as he entered; he caught a glimpse of blue eyes, a glint of bright hair framed in fluffy fur; he heard

EX CURIA

Courtlandt's cool, easy voice presenting him to his wife; he took the slim gloved hand outstretched, held it stupidly until it was withdrawn; then Courtlandt's voice again, promising to return, and exacting her promise to wait here for him if he should be detained.

"I'm sorry I can't remain and dine with you and Mr. Edgerton on this night before Christmas," added Courtlandt blandly, making for the door.

"Oh!" she said, surprised, "I did not understand that Mr. Edgerton invited us."

The color stung Edgerton's face, and he said in a low voice: "You are at home, madam; it is for you to invite us. Perhaps Mr. Courtlandt will stay if you ask him; I will if you ask me."

She gave him a confused, brilliant little smile, a delicate tint mounting to her cheeks.

"Thank you," she said; "you—everybody is so delightful to me. Will you stay, Mr. Courtlandt? I—we beg of you! No? Then, until I—until we have the pleasure—at nine, I believe?"

From force of habit she turned to the dazed maid, who also instinctively recognized authority, and opened the door which a second later closed upon the most profoundly excited young attorney in Manhattan.

THE TREE OF HEAVEN

Mrs. Edgerton raised her blue eyes to her husband as a maid relieved her of her furs and little gilt-edged tricorne.

"I—I wonder if you are as embarrassed as I am?" she said, laughing and touching her golden hair with a frank side glance at the mirror.

"Dreadfully embarrassed," admitted Edgerton, scarcely conscious of what he uttered; oblivious, too, of the usages of civilization until she sank into an armchair with a shy "May I?"

"It is for me to ask the privilege," he said, biting his lip.

"Oh, if you please?"—she smiled, with a gesture toward the chair beside her.

Seated there with him under the crystal chandelier, she fell silent, meeting his gaze at moments with a questioning smile, partly confident, partly uncertain.

"I saw you in the park yesterday," he said under his breath, never taking his eyes from her.

"I saw you, too," she replied quickly. "You rode a bay. I never imagined—" she bent her head, thoughtfully studying the arabesques on the rug. "You ride very well," she added. Then, after a moment's silence: "And you remembered me?"

"I recognized you at once," he said, "the in-

EX CURIA

stant I entered this room. It was that which startled me—made me appear stupid——”

“You did not appear stupid——”

“I was awkward, dumb——”

“I chattered sufficiently for two. Indeed, I was not at all composed.”

“Did—did you recognize me at once?”

She looked at him, she glanced at the rug, her blue eyes grew vague, lost in retrospective reverie.

He did not repeat the question, but asked her how long it was since she had been in America.

“Oh, many years—I was only three when my father went to France.” Then the warm color came into her face and she clasped her hands impulsively. “I do not believe,” she said, “that I have conveyed to you in letters my deep appreciation of your loyalty to me. I—I did not know how to express it—I do not now. Believe me, monsieur, it does exist!”

“What have you to thank me for?” he asked almost brusquely. Then, in a rush of bitterness: “Your sentiments honor yourself, not me, madam. For two years I have been responsible for your happiness. What have I done to secure it?”

She turned a trifle pale, unprepared for such a question. But she answered very sweetly: “You

THE TREE OF HEAVEN

left me guarded by the honor of your own name. I have never wanted for anything; I have had the quiet and seclusion I desired. What more is there, Mr. Edgerton?"

And as he remained silent, she raised her head with a gay little smile: "You could not leave your affairs to come to France; you did not suggest that I come to New York. How could I know that I should——"

"What?" he urged.

But she closed her red lips, sitting mute, suddenly shy again.

After a moment she said: "*Mais*—he is absent a long while, Mr. Courtlandt."

"He isn't coming until nine o'clock," said Edgerton. He glanced across at the clock. It was half-past seven.

"So, in the meanwhile, we are to discuss matters of importance," she suggested seriously. "Mr. Courtlandt said so. What, monsieur, are we to discuss?"

"There is absolutely nothing that I know of to discuss," replied Edgerton slowly.

"Nothing?" she inquired, wide-eyed and innocent.

"Nothing, except your wishes, and they admit of no discussion. You are at home now."

EX CURIA

"But I—but I am staying at the Holland—" Edgerton touched a button; a servant appeared.

"Mrs. Edgerton's luggage is at the Holland," he said quietly. "Telephone for it."

Mrs. Edgerton half rose from her chair; then, meeting her husband's grave eyes, she sank back, crimson to the temples.

"We are merely about to exchange quarters," he said pleasantly. "I shall be most comfortable at the Holland."

"Oh, you shall not!—no, it is all wrong!" she pleaded, the color fading in her face. "I cannot come into your house—into your life——"

"It is your house," he said gently. "Still, if—if you don't mind—there is a better way still of arranging matters. I have a whole floor on the third story; and perhaps you might not mind if I retain it. I promise," he added, laughing, "to be a model tenant and not keep coal in my bath tub!"

She laughed, too, a little uncertainly.

"You are so generous—so kindly," she said. "How can you endure to have a perfectly silly girl march into your house——"

"*Your* house!"

"*Your* house! Carry it by assault, capture the nicest suite, and drive you to the roof among the

THE TREE OF HEAVEN

sparrows! No, it is shameful! More than that, it is absurd!"

"I never have occupied the rooms on the second floor," he protested. "They have been vacant since I took this house."

"Truly?"

"Truly. They are too pretty for a man who smokes a pipe—all rococo, and furniture with beagle legs, you know."

"For whom were they intended?" she asked innocently.

He reddened. "I bought the house after our wedding," he hesitated; "then, afterwards, from your letters, I fancied that you might prefer to remain abroad. So I said nothing."

She bent her head. "I—I thought it fairer—to you," she said in a low voice. "I would have come had you asked me. I—how was I to know, Mr. Edgerton?"

They sat silent, eyes bent on the floor. Presently he went on: "So I had that suite fixed up for you. And I moved upstairs. I am very happy that you are to occupy it."

"Do you *really* desire it?"

"You have no idea how pretty it is," he urged.

"Is it so pretty?"

"Come up and look at it!"

EX CURIA

She sprang to her feet on the impulse, smiling, confident of his kindness. And they mounted the stairs together, *sans façon*, arriving on the second floor breathless.

"Oh," she cried softly, as she entered, "it is perfectly charming!" She stood a moment, gazing around, then with a delightful gesture bade him enter.

"Is this really mine?" she repeated. "How delicious!" She passed from room to room, pausing before bits of furniture that attracted her, touching and lifting the silver on dresser and table. "My own initials!" she said under her breath. "And what is this?" laying her white fingers on a jewel case. "Am I to open it? Really! Oh, the beauty of it all! I—I am perfectly overwhelmed, *mons*—Mr. Edgerton!" And she sat down on the edge of the bed, pressing her hands to her eyes.

A maid came to the door; the luggage from the Holland had arrived. Presently two burly expressmen entered, staggering under the first of a series of trunks. Her maid directed the men; Mrs. Edgerton sat, hands folded, smiling, blue eyes a trifle dim, while her husband, standing beside her, watched the operations.

The silvery chime of a clock sounded, striking

THE TREE OF HEAVEN

eight times, and on either side of the dial gilt cupids fluttered their burnished wings.

"Impossible!" exclaimed Edgerton. Then with a laugh almost boyish, he said: "We're supposed to dine at eight."

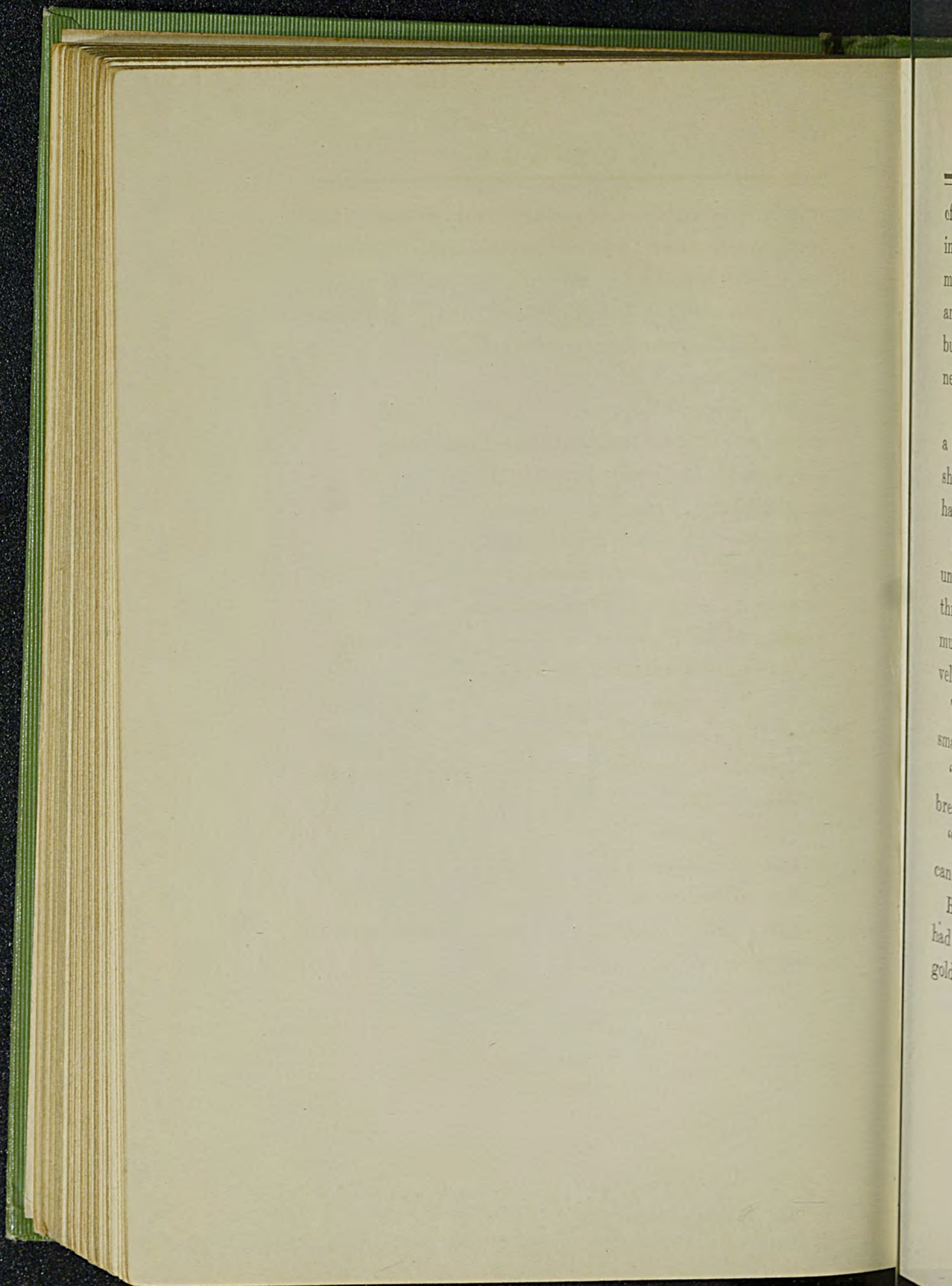
She looked vacantly at her husband. "Dinner already! Can it be possible time has flown like that? And I—behold me! Have I time to dress?"

"Time is yours to dispose of," he said, smiling back into her eyes; "all here are yours to dispose of as you see fit."

"Even you, monsieur?" She laughed in her excitement and happiness, not weighing words and their meaning until their echo returned again to appall her—while her maid aided her to dress—and the echo of his answer, too, rang persistently in her ears: "Yes, to pardon, to dispose of, to command, always, as long as I have life to serve you."

And now she was ready, smiling nervously back at her own flushed reflection in the mirror—a young girl stirred to the soul by kindness, almost intoxicated at a glimpse of her own undreamed-of beauty, surprised there in the depths of the mirror.

The banisters were decorated with twisted ropes



of
in
m
an
bu
ne

a
sh
ha

un
th
mu
vel

sm
“

bre
“

can

B

had

gold

EX CURIA

of evergreens; she descended slowly, cheeks burning, eyes fixed steadily on her husband, who stood motionless below to receive her. A tiny light here and there caught the thick tendrils of her heavy burnished hair and glimmered on her smooth, full neck and arms.

At the foot of the stairs she paused, made him a low reverence, then, gathering her silken train, she looked fearlessly into his face and laid her hand lightly in his.

So, moving serenely side by side, they passed under holly and mistletoe and ropes of evergreen, through the long drawing-room, through the music room, slowly, more slowly, until the great velvet hangings barred their way.

There they paused, turning face to face, her small hand scarcely touching his.

"Can you forgive me?" he asked under his breath.

"Forgive you?" she repeated tremulously; "I can do—more than that. . . . Ask me."

But there was no time, for the butler, bowing, had drawn the portières to the full length of the golden cords.

CHAPTER VII

THE GOLDEN POOL

So the doctor, finding his patient's quarters untenanted for the first time in many months, hastened downstairs and out to the veranda, where he discovered a lean, soldierly looking young fellow clad in fishing coat fussing with rod and reel.

"Oho, my enterprising friend!" he said. "What mischief are you hatching now?"

"I'm going to try for your big trout in the Golden Pool," said his patient calmly.

This unlooked-for energy appeared to embarrass the doctor. His grim mouth tightened.

"Don't go now," he said; "it's too late in the morning."

"I'm going anyhow," retorted his patient.

"Don't be obstinate; that fish won't rise till evening."

"I know it, but I'm going."

"Against my orders!" demanded the exasperated doctor.

"With pleasure," replied the young man gayly.

THE GOLDEN POOL

"And it's your own doing, too. Do you remember what you said last night?"

"I said I saw a big fish rising in that pool," growled the doctor.

"Exactly; and that has done more to brace me up than all your purple pills for peculiar people."

"Don't go to the Golden Pool *now*!" said the doctor with emphasis. "I have a particular reason for making this request."

"What reason?"

"I won't tell you."

"You're after that fish yourself! No, you don't!"

"That's idiotic."

"Well, anyhow, good-by."

"You shan't!" exclaimed the doctor wrathfully. "Give me that rod!"

But his patient clung to the rod, laughing.

"Now what the devil possesses you to make for the Golden Pool at this particular minute?" demanded the vexed doctor. "You've been an invalid for a year and more, and up to this moment you've done what I told you."

His patient continued to laugh — that same light-hearted, infectious laugh which the doctor had not heard in many a month, and he looked at him keenly.

THE TREE OF HEAVEN

"All the same, you're not well yet, and you know it," he said.

"My aversion to women?"

"Partly."

"You mean my memory still fails me? Well, then, what do you think happened this morning?"

"What?" inquired the doctor sulkily.

"This: I went out to the stables and recognized Phelan and Riley! How's that for a start? Then"—he glanced across the lawn where an old gardener pottered about among the petunias—"there's Dawson, isn't it? And this is my own place—Gleniris! Isn't it? Besides," he added, "my aversion to women is disappearing; I saw a girl on the lawn from my window this morning. Who is she?"

"Was she dressed in white?" asked the doctor.

"Don't remember."

"You never before saw her?"

"No—I don't know. I didn't see her face."

"So it seems you can't recollect the back of a relative or a neighbor! Now what do you think of yourself?"

"Relative? Nonsense," he laughed; "I haven't any. As for the neighbors, give me time, for Heaven's sake! I'm doing beautifully. There are millions of things that set me thinking and worry-

THE GOLDEN POOL

ing now—funny flashes of memory—hints of the past, vague glimpses that excite me to effort; but nothing—absolutely nothing—yet of that blank year. Was it a year?”

“More; never mind that!”

“How long was it?” asked his patient wistfully.

“Sixteen months.”

“You said I was shot, I think.”

“No, I didn’t. You think you were, but it was done with a Malay kris. Now, what can you remember about it?”

The young man stood silent, fumbling with his rod.

“And you tell me you’re cured!” observed the doctor sarcastically, “and you can’t even recollect how you got swiped with a Malay kris!”

“I might if I could see the Malay—or the kris.”

The doctor, who had begun to pace the veranda, halted and glanced sharply at his patient.

“The best way to remember things is to see ’em? Is that your idea?”

“I think so. It’s true I’ve seen Phelan many times without remembering him, but to-day I recognized him. Isn’t that good medicine?”

The doctor thought a moment, fished out his watch from the fob pocket, regarded it absently,

THE TREE OF HEAVEN

and came down the steps to the lawn, where his patient stood making practice casts with his light bamboo rod.

"I'll tell you why I didn't want you to go to the Golden Pool," he said.

"Well, why?"

"Poachers," replied the doctor, watching him. "They fish in the pools, and they use your canoe, and they even have the impudence to go bathing in the Golden Pool. . . . I didn't want you to worry."

"I think the poacher I catch will do the worrying," said the young man, laughing. "Is that all?"

"That is all. Go ahead if you want to. If you run across that girl invite her to dinner. She's a friend of mine." And the doctor walked off, shoving his hands deep into his capacious pockets.

His patient reeled in the line, smiling to himself, and started off across the meadow at a good swinging pace. He entered the forest by the meadow bridge, where a lank yokel was mowing grass.

"Mornin'!" ventured the native, with a doubtful grin of recognition.

"Look here," said the young man, halting in

THE GOLDEN POOL

the path of the scythe, "ought I to know your name? Tell me the truth."

"I cal'late yew orter," replied the yokel. "I've been chorin' for yew close tew ten year."

A shadow fell over the master's lean face, and he went on through the underbrush, muttering to himself, passing his thin hand again and again across his forehead.

"Oh, well, I'll stick to it," he said aloud; "a man can't dance on a broken leg nor think with a broken head; they've got to be mended first—well mended."

Walking on through the fragrant forest, the shadow of care slipped from his face again, leaving it placid once more. The scent of the June woods, the far, dull throbbing of a partridge drumming in leafy depths, the happy sighing of a woodland world astir, all these were gentle stimulants to that sanity toward the shadowy borders of which he had so long been struggling from the region of dreadful night.

Spreading branches, dew-spangled, slapped his face as he passed; the moist rich odor of clean earth filled throat and lungs; a subdued, almost breathless expectancy brooded in the wake of the south wind.

When he emerged from the forest and entered

THE TREE OF HEAVEN

the long glade, mountain and thicket were swimming in crystalline light; ferns hung weighted with dew; the outrush of bird music was incessant.

Far in the wet woods he could hear the river flowing—or was it the breeze freshening in the pines?

Listening, enraptured, boyish recollections awoke, and he instinctively took his bearings from the blue peak in the east. So the Ousel Pool lay to the west. He would fish that uncertain water later; but first the Golden Pool, where the great trout had been seen, rising as recklessly as a minnow in a meadow brook.

Now, all excitement and expectancy, he waded on, knee-deep in drenched grasses, watching the soft mothlike flutter of the bluebirds among the iris. They had always hovered over this spot in June, he remembered now. Truly summer skies were healing him of his hurt; he recognized the belt of blue-beech saplings all crossbarred with sunlight, and he heard the familiar rush of waters below.

Suddenly, beyond the sprayed undergrowth, he caught a glow of color, a glimpse of that rich sunny foliage which gave the Golden Pool its name; and now the familiar water lay glimmering before him through the trees, and he began the

THE GOLDEN POOL

descent, stepping quietly as a deer entering a strange covert.

At the water's edge he paused, cautiously; but there was no canoe lying under the alders. Memory halted short, then began groping backward through the years.

Where was the canoe? There had always been one here—in his boyhood and ever since—up to that obscured and cloudy space of time——

He dropped to his knees and parted the leafy thicket with his hands. There was no canoe there, nothing except a book lying on a luncheon basket; and—what was this?—and this?

He stared stupidly for a moment, then rose and stepped through the thicket to the edge of the water. A canoe glittered out there, pulled up on a flat, sunny rock in midstream, and upon the rock lay a girl in a dripping bathing dress drying her hair in the sun.

Instantly an odd sense of it all having happened before seized him—the sun on the water, the canoe, the slim figure lying there. And when she indolently raised her hand, stifling a dainty yawn, and stretched her arms luxuriously, it seemed to him the repetition of a forgotten scene too familiar to surprise him.

Then, as she sat up, leisurely twisting her sun-

THE TREE OF HEAVEN

bronzed hair, a chance turn of her head brought him into direct line of vision. They stared at one another across the sunny water.

For one second the thought flashed on him that he knew her; then in the same moment all that had seemed familiar in the situation faded into strangeness and apprehension, and he was aware that he had never before looked upon her face.

Yet, curiously enough, his long and melancholy aversion to women had not returned at sight of her. She had risen in surprise, wide dark eyes on him; and he spoke immediately, saying he had not meant to disturb her, and that she was quite welcome to use the canoe.

Her first stammered words annoyed him. "Did the doctor—come with you? Are you—are you alone?"

"I suppose the entire countryside knows I have been ill," he said; "but I'm perfectly able to be about without a doctor." He began to laugh. "But those are not the questions. The questions are what are people doing in these woods with luncheon baskets and summer novels, and how am I to fish this pool if people swim in it; and how am I to fish at all if an attractive stranger takes possession of my canoe?"

"I—I had no idea you were coming here," she

THE GOLDEN POOL

faltered. "I bathe here every morning, and then I lunch here and read."

He laughed outright at her innocent acknowledgment of the trespass.

"I have a clear case against you," he said. "Haven't you read all my notices nailed up on trees? '*Warning! All trespassers will be dealt with to the full extent of the law*'—and much more to similar effect? And do you know what a very dreadful thing it is to be dealt with to the full extent of the law?"

"But—I am not—not trespassing," she said. "Can you not remember?"

"I'm afraid I can't," he replied, smiling; "I'm afraid I have a clear case against you. The doctor warned me that trespassers were about."

"Did he know you were coming *here*?" she asked incredulously.

"He did. And I'm afraid somebody has been caught *in flagrant délit*! What do you think?"

He stood there, amused, curiously noting the play of emotions over her delicate features. Consternation, dismay, had given place to quick resentment; that in turn died out, leaving something of comprehension in her perplexed face.

"So he sent you to catch a trespasser?" she said.

THE TREE OF HEAVEN

"I was coming to fish. Well, yes; he said I might find one."

"A trespasser? A stranger?" She hesitated; there was hurt astonishment in her voice. Suddenly her face took a deeper flush, as though she had come to an unexpected decision; her entire manner changed to serene self-possession. "What are you going to do with me?" she asked curiously.

"I'm afraid I can't put you in jail," he admitted. "You see, there's no punishment for swimming in favorite trout pools and spoiling a man's morning sport. Now, if you had only thought of catching one of my trout I could arrange to have you imprisoned."

"Please arrange it immediately, then," she said, lifting an enormous trout from the canoe and holding it up by the gills with both hands.

"Good Lord," he gasped, "it's the big one!" And he sat down suddenly on a log.

Her smiling defiance softened a trifle. "Did you really wish to catch this fish very much?" she asked. "I—I never supposed you would come here—to-day."

"The enormity of your crime stuns me," he said. "First you invade my domain, then you abstract my canoe, then you swim in my favorite

THE GOLDEN POOL

pool, then you catch the biggest fish that ever came out of it."

"No," she said, "I was not such a goose as to swim first. I caught the fish first."

"Recount to me the battle," he said with a groan. "Fish like that only rise once in a lifetime. Tell me how you—but that's useless. It was the usual case of a twig and a bent pin, I suppose?"

She smiled uncertainly, and lifted a rod from the canoe.

"By Jove, that looks like one of my rods!" he exclaimed. "Where did you get it?"

Her eyes were bright with excitement; she shook her head, laughing.

"Are you in league with my doctor? Who are you?" he insisted.

"Only a poacher," she admitted. "I creep about and lurk outside windows where doctors talk in loud voices about big trout they have seen. Then—I go and catch them."

They were both laughing now; she standing beside the canoe, rod in hand, he balanced on a rock opposite.

Yet, even while laughing, his thin face sobered, darkening as though a gray shadow had crept across it.

THE TREE OF HEAVEN

"Are you a neighbor of mine?" he asked. "If you are, you will know why I ask it. If you are not, never mind," he added wearily.

She shook her head. His face cleared.

"I thought you were not a neighbor; I was certain that I had never seen you—as certain as a man can be awakening from—from illness, with his mind—his memory—shaky—almost blank." He bent his head, gazing into the water. Then he looked up. "You know the doctor? I think I saw you on the lawn this morning."

"Are you sure you have never before seen me?" she asked, with a ghost of a smile.

"I thought at first—for an instant—the canoe on the rock, and the sunshine, and you—" He fell silent, groping through the darkened corridors of thought for the key to memory.

In the sunlit hush a rippling noise sounded far out across the pool; then up out of the glassy water shot a sinuous shape, dark against the sun—a fish in silhouette, curving over with a flapping splash. Widening circles spread from a center where a few bubbles floated; the pool became placid once more—a mirror for the tapestry of golden thickets set with the heavenly hue above.

The long-dormant passion which sleeps but never dies awoke in him; the flush on his lean

THE GOLDEN POOL

cheeks deepened as he turned and looked across the pool where the pretty intruder stood watching him, an eager question dancing in her eyes.

"I'd like to try," he said. "Do you mind?"

"Tell me what to do."

"Paddle very quietly over here—very carefully and without a splash. Can you do it?"

She loosened the canoe noiselessly, a lithe figure in her wet brown skirt and stockings. The mellow glow enveloped her as she moved into the shadows; and she seemed, in the soft forest light, part of the woodland harmony, blending with it as tawny-tinted shadows blend.

The canoe slipped into the pool; she knelt in the stern; then, with one silent push, sent it like an arrow across the water. He caught and steadied the frail craft; she stepped from it and sprang without a sound into the green shadows beside him.

He was muttering to himself: "I've forgotten some things—but not how to throw a fly, I think. Let us see—let us see."

She stood motionless as he embarked, watching him raise his rod and send the tiny brightly colored flies out over the water. The delicate accuracy seemed to fascinate her; her dark eyes followed the long upward loop of the back cast, the whistling flight of the silken line, the instant's

THE TREE OF HEAVEN

suspense as the leader curved, straightened out, and fell, dropping three flies softly on the still surface of the pool.

As the canoe drifted nearer, nearer to the spot where the trout had leaped, the sharp dry click of the reel, the windlike whistle of the line, grew fainter. Suddenly, far ahead of the floating flies, a dark lump broke the water; there came a spatter of spray, a flash of pink and silver, and that was all—all, though for two hours the silken line darted out across the water, and many feathered flies of many hues fell vainly across the glassy mirror of the Golden Pool.

She was still standing in the same place when he returned. He drew a long deep breath of disappointment as he stepped ashore, and she echoed his sigh. The tension had ended.

"Showed color, but wouldn't fight," he said in a low voice. "Biggest trout I ever saw."

"Can't you possibly do something?" she asked tremulously.

"Not now; I must rest him. You can't force a fish like that by persistent worry. There's a chance he may come again; he's not serious yet. I dare not bother him for an hour or two."

He looked into her sensitive face; then, sud-

THE GOLDEN POOL

denly conscious of its youthful beauty, he fell silent, reeling in his wet line inch by inch.

Through the heated stillness dragon flies darted; the mounting perfume of brake and fern, the almost imperceptible odor of earth and water, seemed to envelop him in a delicate spell, soothing, healing, while pulseless moments drifted away in the smooth flow of a summer hour.

The rod slipped from his hand; his musing eyes rested on her. She was seated on a mossy log, head bent, slender stockinged feet trailing in the pool.

"All this has happened before," he said quietly. But there was no conviction in his voice.

She raised her dreamy eyes, the color came and went in throat and cheeks; through her half-parted lips the breath scarcely stirred.

He rose with a restless laugh, and stood a moment, his thin hand pressed across his forehead. Her eyes fell, were lifted to his, then fell again.

"Can't you help me?" he said wistfully.

"Can you not remember?" she breathed.

"Then we—we have known one another. Have we?"

"I once knew a friend of yours—a close friend—named Escourt."

"Escourt," he repeated blankly.

THE TREE OF HEAVEN

And after a long silence he turned away with a gesture that seemed to frighten her. But into her face came a flash of determination, reddening her cheeks again.

"It does not matter," she said; "nothing matters on a summer day like this. . . . I did not mean to trouble you."

He turned in his steps and stood looking at her.

"You say my friend's name *was* Escourt? Is my friend dead?"

"Please don't let it matter."

"It does matter. I—it is a fancy, perhaps, but the name of Escourt was once familiar—and pleasant. It is not your name, is it?"

"Yes," she said.

At last he began fretfully: "That is the strangest thing in the world. I have never before seen you, and yet I am perfectly conscious that your name has haunted me for years. Escourt—*Escourt!*—for years, I tell you," he went on in a sort of impatient astonishment; "ever since I can remember anything I can remember that name."

"And my first name?" Flushed, voice scarcely steady, she avoided his troubled gaze.

And as he did not answer, she said: "You once knew my husband. Can you not remember?"

THE GOLDEN POOL

He shook his head, studying her intently.

"No," he said in a dull voice, "I have forgotten; I have been very ill. The name troubles me; it is strange how the name troubles me."

"If it troubles you, let us talk of other things, will you?" she asked, almost timidly. "I did not think to awaken the memory of anything sad."

"It is not sad," resting his sunken, perplexed eyes on her; "it is something intimate—almost part of my life that I seem to have forgotten—" His hand sought the same spot over his right eye. "What were we doing when you interrupted everything?" His wandering glance fell on the canoe and the rod lying in the bottom, and his face cleared.

"I ought to be worrying that trout again," he said. "You won't go away, will you?"

"No; but I wish you would go," she said, laughing; "I'd dress if you would give me half an hour."

"You won't go—you will wait?" he repeated almost childishly.

"Yes, I will wait."

She shook her head, watching him embark; standing there looking out across the water where the paddle bubbles marked his course long after

THE TREE OF HEAVEN

the canoe had vanished around the curved shore of the Golden Pool.

Suddenly her eyes filled; but she set her lips resolutely, groping with white hands for her knotted hair; the heavy shining twist, loosened, fell, veiling face and shoulders—a golden mask for sorrow and falling tears.

It was high noon when his far hail brought her to the water's edge, and she answered with a clear, prettily modulated call.

"Do you observe?" she asked, as he climbed the bank; and she made a little gesture of invitation toward a white napkin spread upon the moss.

A jug of milk, lettuce, bread, and a great bunch of hothouse grapes—and a hostess in a summer gown, smiling an invitation; what wonder that the haggard lines in his visage softened till something of the afterglow of youth lay like a ray of sun across his face.

"This is perfectly charming," he said, dropping to his knees beside her. "I—I am very happy that you waited for me."

She sat silent for a moment, with lowered eyes, then raised them shyly. "Let us eat bread and salt together, will you?—that nothing break our friendship."

THE GOLDEN POOL

"From your hands," he said.

She leaned over, took a tiny pinch of salt between her thumb and forefinger, and offered it to him on a bit of bread. He gravely broke the bread, returned half to her, and they ate, watching one another in silence.

"By the bread and salt I have shared with you," he said, half seriously, half smiling, "I promise to cherish this forest friendship. Let this day begin it."

"Let it," she said.

"Let pleasant years continue it."

"Yes—the coming years. So be it."

"Let nothing end it—nothing—not even——"

"Nothing—and, amen," she said faintly.

Again, unbidden, the ghosts of the past stirred, whispering together within him; echoes of unquiet days awoke, blind consciousness of that somber year where darkness dwelt, where memory lay slain forever.

She sat watching him there on the moss, supporting her weight on one arm.

"I am striving," he said, "to trace my thoughts." There was dull apology in his voice. "All this is not accident—you and I here together. I am haunted by something long forgotten, something that I am almost conscious of.

THE TREE OF HEAVEN

When your voice sounds I seem to be quivering on the verge of memory. . . . Do you know what it is I have forgotten?"

She trembled to her lips. "Have you forgotten?"

"Yes—a great deal. Is it you I have forgotten?"

"Try to remember," she said under her breath.

"Remember? God knows I am trying. Begin with me, will you?"

"Yes; let us begin together. You were hurt."

"Yes, I was hurt."

"In a battle."

"I was hurt in a skirmish."

"Where?" she whispered.

"Why, on the Subig," he answered, surprised; "I was in the Philippine scouts."

He sat bolt upright, electrified, and struck his knee sharply with the flat of his wasted hand.

"Do you know," he said excitedly, "that until this very instant I have not thought of the Philippine scouts. Isn't that extraordinary?"

She strove to speak; her breast rose and fell, and she closed her lips convulsively.

He sat there, head drooping, passing his hand repeatedly across the scar over his right temple.

She waited, whitening under the tension. His

THE GOLDEN POOL

face became placid; he looked up at her; and a smile touched her wet lashes in response.

The contentment of convalescence seemed to banish his restlessness; her voice broke the silence, and its low, even tones satisfied the half-aroused longing for dead echoes.

So the ghost of happiness arose and sat between them; and she lay back, resting against a tree, smiling replies to his lazy badinage. And after a long while her laughter awoke to echo his, laughter as delicate as the breeze stirring her bright hair.

And afterward, long afterward, when the sunshine painted orange patches on the westward tree trunks and a haze veiled the taller spires, she reminded him of the great trout; but he would not go without her; so together they descended to the stream's edge.

Floating in the canoe there through the mellow light, he remembered that he had left his rod ashore, but would not go back, and she laughed outright, through the thread of the song she had been humming:

"Fate is a dragon,
Faith the slim shape that braves it:
Hope holds the stirrup-cup—
Drain it who craves it!"

THE TREE OF HEAVEN

She smiled, singing carelessly:

“Who art thou, young and brave?”

La vie est un sommeil ; l'amour en est le rêve !”

“There is more,” he said, watching her intently.

“How do you know?”

“I know that song. *I remember it, and there is more to it!*”

“Is it this, then?” and she sang again:

“Life is but slumber,

Love the sad dream that haunts it,

Death is thy waking gift ;

Take it who wants it !

“Who art thou, young and brave?”

La vie est un sommeil ; l'amour en est le rêve !”

He sat for a long while, very still, head buried in his hands. A violet mist veiled water and trees ; through it the setting sun sent fiery shafts through the mountain cleft. And when the last crimson shaft was sped and tree and water faded into darker harmony, the canoe had drifted far downstream, and now lay still in the shoreward sands ; and they stood together on the water's edge.

Her fingers had become interlocked with his ; she half withdrew them, eyes lowered.

THE GOLDEN POOL

"It is strange that our names should be the same," he said.

"Is your name Escourt, too?" she faltered.

"Yes; I know it now. . . . I have been ill—very ill. God alone knows what my hurt has done to me. There is a doctor at the house; he's been with me for a long time—a long time. I—I wonder why? I wonder if it was because I had forgotten—even my own name. . . . Who are you who bear my name?"

She swayed almost imperceptibly where she stood; he lifted both her hands and laid them against his lips, looking deep into her eyes.

"Who are you, bearing my name?" he whispered. "Unclose your eyes."

In the twilight her dark eyes opened; she was in his arms now, her head fallen a little backward, yielding to his embrace crushing her.

"Try—try to remember—before you kiss me," she breathed. "I wish you to love me—I desire it—but not like this. Oh, try to remember before—before it is too late!"

"I do remember!—Helen! Helen!"

Her lips on his stifled the cry; a long sigh, a sob, and she lay quivering in her husband's arms.

CHAPTER VIII

OUT OF THE DEPTHS

DUST and wind had subsided; there seemed to be a hint of rain in the starless west.

Because the August evening had become oppressive, the club windows stood wide open as though gaping for the outer air. Rugs and curtains had been removed; an incandescent light or two accentuated the emptiness of the rooms; here and there shadowy servants prowled, gilt buttons sparkling through the obscurity, their footsteps on the bare floor intensifying the heavy quiet.

Into this week's-end void wandered young Shannon, drifting aimlessly from library to corridor, finally entering the long room where the portraits of dead governors smirked through the windows at the deserted avenue.

As his steps echoed on the rugless floor, a shadowy something detached itself from the depths of a padded armchair by the corner window, and a voice he recognized greeted him by name.

OUT OF THE DEPTHS

"You here, Harrod!" he exclaimed. "Thought you were at Bar Harbor."

"I was. I had business in town."

"Do you stay here long?"

"Not long," said Harrod slowly.

Shannon dropped into a chair with a yawn which ended in a groan.

"Of all God-forsaken places," he began, "a New York club in August."

Harrod touched an electric button, but no servant answered the call; and presently Shannon, sprawling in his chair, jabbed the button with the ferrule of his walking stick, and a servant took the order, repeating as though he had not understood: "Did you say two, sir?"

"With olives, dry," nodded Shannon irritably. They sat there in silence until the tinkle of ice aroused them, and——

"Double luck to you," muttered Shannon; then, with a scarcely audible sigh: "Bring two more and bring a dinner card." And, turning to the older man: "You're dining, Harrod?"

"If you like."

A servant came and turned on an electric jet; Shannon scanned the card under the pale radiance, scribbled on the pad, and handed it to the servant.

THE TREE OF HEAVEN

"Did you put down my name?" asked Harrod curiously.

"No; you'll dine with me—if you don't mind."

"I don't mind—for this last time."

"Going away again?"

"Yes."

Shannon signed the blank and glanced up at his friend. "Are you well?" he asked abruptly.

Harrod, lying deep in his leather chair, nodded.

"Oh, you're rather white around the gills! We'll have another."

"I thought you had cut that out, Shannon."

"Cut what out?"

"Drinking."

"Well, I haven't," said Shannon sulkily, lifting his glass and throwing one knee over the other.

"The last time I saw you, you said you would cut it," observed Harrod.

"Well, what of it?"

"But you haven't?"

"No, my friend."

"Can't you stop?"

"I could—now. To-morrow—I don't know; but I know well enough I couldn't day after to-morrow. And day after to-morrow I shall not care."

OUT OF THE DEPTHS

A short silence and Harrod said: "That's why I came back here."

"What?"

"To stop you."

Shannon regarded him in sullen amazement.

A servant announcing dinner brought them to their feet; together they walked out into the empty dining room and seated themselves by an open window.

Presently Shannon looked up with an impatient laugh.

"For Heaven's sake let's be cheerful, Harrod. If you knew how the damned town had got on my nerves."

"*That's* what I came back for, too," said Harrod with his strange white smile. "I knew the world was fighting you to the ropes."

"It is; here I stay on, day after day, on the faint chance of something doing." He shrugged his shoulders. "Business is worse than dead; I can't hold on much longer. You're right; the world has hammered me to the ropes, and it will be down and out for me unless——"

"Unless you can borrow on your own terms?"

"Yes, but I can't."

"You are mistaken."

"Mistaken? Who will——"

THE TREE OF HEAVEN

"I will."

"You! Why, man, do you know how much I need? Do you know for how long I shall need it? Do you know what the chances are of my making good? *You!* Why, Harrod, I'd swamp you! You can't afford——"

"I can afford anything—now."

Shannon stared. "You have struck something?"

"Something that puts me beyond want." He fumbled in his breast pocket, drew out a portfolio, and from the flat leather case he produced a numbered check bearing his signature, but not filled out.

"Tell them to bring pen and ink," he said.

Shannon, perplexed, signed to a waiter. When the ink was brought, Harrod motioned Shannon to take the pen. "Before I went to Bar Harbor," he said, "I had a certain sum—" He hesitated, mentioned the sum in a low voice, and asked Shannon to fill in the check for that amount. "Now blot it, pocket it, and use it," he added listlessly, looking out into the lamp-lighted street.

Shannon, whiter than his friend, stared at the bit of perforated yellow paper.

"I can't take it," he stammered; "my security is rotten, I tell you——"

OUT OF THE DEPTHS

"I want no security; I—I am beyond want," said Harrod. "Take it; I came back here for this—partly for this."

"Came back here to—to—help *me*!"

"To help you. Shannon, I had been a lonely man in life; I think you never realized how much your friendship has been to me. I had nobody—no intimacies. You never understood—you with all your friends—that I cared more for our casual companionship than for anything in the world."

Shannon bent his head. "I did not know it," he said.

Harrod raised his eyes and looked up at the starless sky; Shannon ate in silence; into his young face, already marred by dissipation, a strange light had come. And little by little order began to emerge from his whirling senses; he saw across an abyss a bridge glittering, and beyond that, beckoning to him through a white glory, all that his heart desired.

"I was at the ropes," he muttered; "how *could* you know it, Harrod? I—I never whined——"

"I know more than I did—yesterday," said Harrod, resting his pale face on one thin hand.

Shannon, nerves on edge, all aquiver, the blood racing through every vein, began to speak ex-

THE TREE OF HEAVEN

citedly: "It's like a dream—one of the blessed sort—Harrod! Harrod!—the dreams I've had this last year! And I try—I try to understand what has happened—what you have done for me. I can't—I'm shaking all over, and I suppose I'm sitting here eating and drinking, but——"

He touched his glass blindly; it tipped and crashed to the floor, the breaking froth of the wine hissing on the cloth.

"Harrod! Harrod! What sort of a man am I to deserve this of you? What can I do——"

"Keep your nerve—for one thing."

"I will!—you mean *that*!" touching the stem of the new glass, which the waiter had brought and was filling. He struck the glass till it rang out a clear, thrilling, crystalline note, then struck it more sharply. It splintered with a soft splashing crash. "Is *that* all?" he laughed.

"No, not all."

"What more will you let me do?"

"One thing more. Tell them to serve coffee below."

So they passed out of the dining room, through the deserted corridors, and descended the stairway to the lounging room. It was unlighted and empty; Shannon stepped back and the elder man passed him and took the corner chair by the win-

OUT OF THE DEPTHS

dow—the same seat where Shannon had first seen him sitting ten years before, and where he always looked to find him after the ending of a business day. And continuing his thoughts, the younger man spoke aloud impulsively: “I remember perfectly well how we met. Do you? You had just come back to town from Bar Harbor, and I saw you stroll in and seat yourself in that corner, and, because I was sitting next you, you asked if you might include me in your order—do you remember?”

“Yes, I remember.”

“And I told you I was a new member here, and you pointed out the portraits of all those dead governors of the club, and told me what good fellows they had been. I found out later that you yourself were a governor of the club.”

“Yes—I was.”

Harrod's shadowy face swerved toward the window, his eyes resting on the familiar avenue, empty now save for the policeman opposite, and the ragged children of the poor. In August the high tide from the slums washes Fifth Avenue, stranding a gasping flotsam at the thresholds of the absent.

“And I remember, too, what you told me,” continued Shannon.

THE TREE OF HEAVEN

"What?" said Harrod, turning noiselessly to confront his friend.

"About that child. Do you remember? That beautiful child you saw? Don't you remember that you told me how she used to leave her governess and talk to you on the rocks——"

"Yes," said Harrod. "*That*, too, is why I came back here to tell you the rest. For the evil days have come to her, Shannon, and the years draw nigh. Listen to me."

There was a silence; Shannon, mute and perplexed, set his coffee on the window sill and leaned back, flicking the ashes from his cigar; Harrod passed his hands slowly over his hollow temples: "Her parents are dead; she is not yet twenty; she is not equipped to support herself in life; and—she is beautiful. What chance has she, Shannon?"

The other was silent.

"What chance?" repeated Harrod. "And, when I tell you that she is unsuspecting, and that she reasons only with her heart, answer me—what chance has she with a man? For you know men, and so do I, Shannon, so do I."

"Who is she, Harrod?"

"The victim of divorced parents—awarded to her mother. Let her parents answer; they are answering now, Shannon. But their plea is no

OUT OF THE DEPTHS

concern of yours. What concerns you is the living. The child, grown to womanhood, is here, advertising for employment—here in New York, asking for a chance. What chance has she?”

“When did you learn this?” asked Shannon soberly.

“I learned it to-night—everything concerning her—to-night—an hour before I—I met you. *That* is why I returned. Shannon, listen to me attentively; listen to every word I say. Do you remember a passing fancy you had this spring for a blue-eyed girl you met every morning on your way downtown? Do you remember that, as the days went on, little by little she came to return your glance?—then your smile?—then, at last, your greeting? And do you remember, once, that you told me about it in a moment of depression—told me that you were close to infatuation, that you believed her to be everything sweet and innocent, that you dared not drift any farther, knowing the chances and knowing the end—bitter unhappiness either way, whether in guilt or innocence——”

“I remember,” said Shannon hoarsely. “But that is not—cannot be——”

“That is the girl.”

“Not the child you told me of——”

THE TREE OF HEAVEN

"Yes."

"How—when did you know——"

"To-night. I know more than that, Shannon. You will learn it later. Now ask me again, what it is that you may do."

"I ask it," said Shannon under his breath. "What am I to do?"

For a long while Harrod sat silent, staring out of the dark window; then, "It is time for us to go."

"You wish to go out?"

"Yes; we will walk together for a little while—as we did in the old days, Shannon—only a little while, for I must be going back."

"Where are you going, Harrod?"

But the elder man had already risen and moved toward the door; and Shannon picked up his hat and followed him out across the dusky lamp-lighted street.

Into the avenue they passed under the white, unsteady radiance of arc lights which drooped like huge lilies from stalks of bronze; here and there the front of some hotel lifted like a cliff, its window-pierced façade pulsating with yellow light, or a white marble mass, cold and burned out, spread a sea of shadow over the glimmering asphalt. At times the lighted lamps of cabs flashed in their

OUT OF THE DEPTHS

faces; at times figures passed like spectres; but into the street where they were now turning were neither lamps nor people nor sound, nor any light, save, far in the obscure vista, a dull hint of lightning edging the west.

Twice Shannon had stopped, peering at Harrod, who neither halted nor slackened his steady, noiseless pace; and the younger man, hesitating, moved on again, quickening his steps to his friend's side.

"Where are—are you going?"

"Do you not know?"

The color died out of Shannon's face; he spoke again, forming his words slowly with dry lips:

"Harrod, why—why do you come into this street—to-night? What do you know? *How* do you know? I tell you I—I cannot endure this—this tension——"

"*She* is enduring it."

"Good God!"

"Yes, God is good," said Harrod, turning his haggard face as they halted. "Answer me, Shannon, where are we going?"

"To—her. You know it! Harrod! Harrod! How did you know? I—I did not know myself until an hour before I met you; I had not seen her in weeks—I had not dared to—for all trust in self

THE TREE OF HEAVEN

was dead. To-day, downtown, I faced the crash and saw across to-morrow the end of all. Then, in my journey hellward to-night, just at dusk, we passed each other, and before I understood what I had done we were side by side. And almost instantly—I don't know how—she seemed to sense the ruin before us both—for mine was heavy on my soul, Harrod, as I stood, measuring damnation with smiling eyes—at the brink of it, there. And she knew I was adrift at last."

He looked up at the house before him. "I said I would come. She neither assented nor denied me, nor asked a question. But in her eyes, Harrod, I saw what one sees in the eyes of children, and it stunned me. . . . What shall I do?"

"Go to her and look again," said Harrod. "*That* is what I have come back to ask of you. Good-by."

He turned, his shadowy face drooping, and Shannon followed to the avenue. There, in the white outbreak of electric lamps, he saw Harrod again as he had always known him, a hint of a smile in his worn eyes, the well-shaped mouth edged with laughter, and he was saying: "It's all in a lifetime, Shannon—and more than you suspect—much more. You have not told me her name yet?"

OUT OF THE DEPTHS

"I do not know it."

"Ah, she will tell you if you ask! Say to her that I remember her there on the sea rocks. Say to her that I have searched for her always, but that it was only to-night I knew what to-morrow she shall know—and you, Shannon, you, too, shall know. Good-by."

"Harrod! wait. Don't—don't go——"

He turned and looked back at the younger man with that familiar gesture he knew so well.

It was final, and Shannon swung blindly on his heel and entered the street again, eyes raised to the high lighted window under which he had halted a moment before. Then he mounted the steps, groped in the vestibule for the illuminated number, and touched the electric knob. The door swung open noiselessly as he entered, closing behind him with a soft click.

Up he sped, mounting stair on stair, threading the narrow hallways, then upward again, until of a sudden she stood confronting him, bent forward, white hands tightening on the banisters.

Neither spoke. She straightened slowly, fingers relaxing from the polished rail. Over her shoulders he saw a lamplighted room, and she turned and looked backward at the threshold and covered her face with both hands.

THE TREE OF HEAVEN

"What is it?" he whispered, bending close to her. "Why do you tremble? You need not. There is nothing in all the world you need fear. Look into my eyes. Even a child may read them now."

Her hands fell from her face and their eyes met, and what she read in his, and he in hers, God knows, for she swayed where she stood, lids closing; yielding hands and lips and throat and hair. She cried, too, later, her hands on his shoulders where he knelt beside her, holding him at arm's length from her fresh young face to search his for the menace she once had read there. But it was gone—that menace she had read and vaguely understood, and she cried a little more, one arm around his head pressed close to her side.

"From the very first—the first moment I saw you," he said under his breath, answering the question aquiver on her lips—lips divinely merciful, repeating the lovers' creed and the confession of faith for which, perhaps, all souls in love are shriven in the end.

"Naida! Naida!"—for he had learned her name and could not have enough of it—"all that the world holds for me of good is here, circled by my arms. Not mine the manhood to win

OUT OF THE DEPTHS

out, alone—but there is a man who came to me to-night and stood sponsor for the falling soul within me.

“How he knew my peril and yours, God knows. But he came like Fate and held his buckler before me, and he led me here and set a flaming sword before your door—the door of the child he loved—there on the sea rocks ten years ago. Do you remember? He said you would. And he is no archangel—this man among men, this friend with whom, unknowing, I have this night wrestled face to face. His name is Harrod.”

“*My name!*” She stood up straight and pale, within the circle of his arms; he rose, too, speechless, uncertain—then faced her, white and appalled.

She said: “He—he followed us to Bar Harbor. I was a child, I remember. I hid from my governess and talked with him on the rocks. Then we went away. I—I lost my father.” Staring at her, his stiffening lips formed a word, but no sound came.

“Bring him to me!” she whispered. “How can he know I am here and stay away! Does he think I have forgotten? Does he think shame of me? Bring him to me!”

She caught his hands in hers and kissed them

THE TREE OF HEAVEN

passionately; she framed his face in her small hands of a child and looked deep, deep into his eyes: "Oh, the happiness you have brought! I love you! You with whom I am to enter Paradise! Now bring him to me!"

Shaking, amazed, stunned in a whirl of happiness and doubt, he crept down the black stairway, feeling his way. The doors swung noiselessly; he was almost running when he turned into the avenue. The trail of white lights starred his path; the solitary street echoed his haste, and now he sprang into the wide doorway of the club, and as he passed, the desk clerk leaned forward, handing him a telegram. He took it, halted, breathing heavily, and asked for his friend.

"Mr. Harrod?" repeated the clerk. "Mr. Harrod has not been here in a month, sir."

"What? I dined with Mr. Harrod here at eight o'clock!" he laughed.

"Sir? I—I beg your pardon, sir, but you dined here alone to-night——"

"Send for the steward!" broke in Shannon impatiently, slapping his open palm with the yellow envelope. The steward came, followed by the butler, and to a quick question from the desk clerk, replied: "Mr. Harrod has not been in the club for six weeks."

OUT OF THE DEPTHS

"But I dined with Mr. Harrod at eight! Wilkins, did you not serve us?"

"I served you, sir; you dined alone—" The butler hesitated, coughed discreetly; and the steward added: "You ordered for two, sir——"

Something in the steward's troubled face silenced Shannon; the butler ventured: "Beg pardon, sir, but we—the waiters thought you might be—ill, seeing how you talked to yourself and called for ink to write upon the cloth and broke two glasses, laughing like——"

Shannon staggered, turning a ghastly visage from one to another. Then his dazed gaze centered upon the telegram crushed in his hand, and shaking from head to foot, he smoothed it out and opened the envelope.

But it was purely a matter of business; he was requested to come to Bar Harbor and identify a useless check, drawn to his order, and perhaps aid to identify the body of a drowned man in the morgue.

CHAPTER IX

THE SWASTIKA

THIS is rather a curious story—not nearly as artistic as if it were fiction. Fact seldom is artistic.

One thing is certain: Hildreth had never before heard of a swastika; he had heard of Judge Grey, one of the Mixed Tribunal, and he knew that the Sarna came from that magistrate as a wedding gift to his father; but he never for one moment connected anything that ever happened in the Orient with his stenographer and private secretary. Nor did he suspect—but this story is running away from me backward.

Reclining in his uncle's emblazoned armchair, the tips of his fingers joined, young Hildreth gazed meditatively at the ceiling through the drifting haze of his cigar. On the ceiling several delicately tinted Cupids were attempting to asphyxiate one another with piles of roses. The room and its furniture also were gayly ornamental

THE SWASTIKA

after the style popularly imputed to Louis XIV, that monarch being in no condition to deny the accusation. There was a view through one door into a rococo library, through another into a breakfast room, and through the windows into a snow-storm at Thirtieth Street and Fifth Avenue. However, the ensemble did not appear illogical if you turned your back to the window; besides, there was the stenographer to look at. But Hildreth was gazing fixedly at the ceiling through the stratified mist from his cigar.

The youthful stenographer, dimpled chin on hand, drummed softly with her pencil tip and watched him sidewise out of two very beautiful eyes. Her cuffs were as immaculate as her cool, white skin; her head, with its thick, bright hair, harmonized with other pretty things; and I do not think that Louis XIV would have repudiated her, at any rate.

Hildreth blew ring after ring of smoke at the ceiling, passing his hand, at intervals, through his hair, which was rather short and inclined to curl.

"Miss Grey," he said, "can't you think of anything else that rhymes with 'tin'?"

"Gin, din, thin," suggested the stenographer, referring to a rhyming dictionary.

"We've used 'din' and 'thin' already in the

THE TREE OF HEAVEN

second verse; don't you remember? And we can't use 'gin' in any combination whatever; I've tried it. Isn't there anything else you can think of?"

"Sin?" she inquired demurely.

"'Sin,'" he repeated. "'Sin' sounds interesting. We need something to flavor the poem. Do you believe that you and I could make any proper use of 'sin'?"

She appeared doubtful.

"Let us see, anyway. Read what you've taken," he said, composing himself to listen to his own lines with the modest resignation of the true poet.

And the girl sorted her notes and read softly:

"Behold them packed so snug within
Their air-tight box of shining tin—
Hildreth's Honey Wafers!

"Ready for breakfast, lunch or dinner;
Crisp and fresh and sweet and thin—
Hildreth's Honey Wafers!"

She raised her blue eyes, looking at him inquiringly over the penciled sheets of manuscript.

"There ought to be another verse," he mused.

"Don't you think so?"

"I think two verses of this kind are sufficient, Mr. Hildreth."

"You are mistaken; the poem is still incomplete.

THE SWASTIKA

The first verse, you see, is an impression—a sort of word-picture of the tin box—a kind of prologue to prepare people for what is inside the box in the second verse. In the second I explain that Hildreth's Honey Wafers are all ready to eat, and I excite people's appetites. Now, the third verse must gratify them. Don't you see?"

"Is it not good advertising to break off abruptly and leave the public hungry?"

"No; that's only good literature; but in advertising you must not leave your public discontented. People like to look at pictures of other people who are enjoying something to repletion—pitching into a generous trough of breakfast food, or pausing to savor the delicious after-effects of a nerve tonic. Besides," he added moodily, puffing his cigar, "my uncle requires three verses, and that settles it. What was that rhyme you suggested?"

"I—I ventured to suggest 'sin.'"

"'Sin,'" he repeated thoughtfully, pinching his chin and staring at the snowy roofs across Thirtieth Street. "Well, how would this do for the third verse?"

"They invigorate the hair and clear the skin,
And promote happiness in this world of sin—
Hildreth's Honey Wa——"

THE TREE OF HEAVEN

"But you have the meter all wrong again," she expostulated. "You never pay any attention to the meter."

"Oh, you can fix that as you fixed the other verses!"

"Besides, is it really true that Hildreth's Honey Wafers do all those things?"

He began an elaborate argument to prove that falling hair and poor complexion were caused by improper nourishment, and that the wafers were proper nourishment; but presently his voice dwindled to a grumble. He relighted his cigar, looking at her askance.

"We might say," he resumed, "using poetic license:

"Into this world of crime and sin
Like an angel above was wafted the box of tin;
Hildreth's Ho——"

She shook her head.

"Why not?" he asked.

"You can't compare a tin box to an angel above — and you can't waft a tin box, you know——"

"Yes, I can. Poets' license——"

"That is one of the troubles with your verses, Mr. Hildreth—there is so much license and so little —so—little——"

THE SWASTIKA

"You are rather rough on me," he said, coloring up.

"I don't mean to be; I only try to help you."

"I know it; you are very kind—very amiable. I am perfectly aware that a stenographer's duties do not include literary criticism. I ought to be ashamed to ask your aid, but if I don't have it I'm done for."

"But I give it most freely, Mr. Hildreth."

"I know you do, and I'm also aware that I am imposing on you most shamefully. After this week we'll let my verses go as I compose them. It will probably put me out of business, but I can't help that."

"Mr. Hildreth, we simply cannot let your verses go unedited."

He looked at her for a moment in silence. "Can't you stand my verses?" he inquired. And, as she made no reply: "If you can't—if they are really as bad as that, why, the public is going to recoil, too, and I'll doubtless ruin the business for my uncle. He has no more idea of good poetry than I have. I'll ruin him; and our rivals, The Bunsen's Baby Biscuit Company, will call me blessed!"

"Your uncle writes you that he likes the advertising verses you send him," she interrupted cheer-

THE TREE OF HEAVEN

ily. "He tells you that the verses have made the wafers worth a fortune."

"Yes, but you always have revised my verses, and he doesn't know that. Every poem I've done for the Honey Wafers Company you've revised. It is you who have made them sell all over this continent."

"What of it?" she answered, amused, "as long as your uncle is satisfied. I don't mind the trouble of editing your verses—truly I don't." She rested her cheek on her wrist, playing the while with her pencil. "I am very happy to do what I can, Mr. Hildreth. Shall we try once more?"

She seemed to grow more disturbingly pretty every day; he permitted himself to look at her long enough to remember that he had something else to do. "Din, pin, gin, sin," he repeated sullenly. "What the mischief am I to write, anyway?"

"I don't think we can use 'sin,' do you?" she asked, lifting her blue eyes.

Perhaps he found inspiration in them; he looked at them hard; an inward struggle set his mouth in an uncompromising line. And this is what he evolved:

"Bright as blue eyes that are innocent of sin
Is the box of tin they're packed in—
Hildreth's Honey W——"

THE SWASTIKA

"You *can't* compare a tin box to blue eyes, Mr. Hildreth! You surely must admit that."

"Tin is bright, isn't it? Blue eyes are bright, aren't they? Well, if one's bright and the others are——"

She shook her head slowly; her eyes had softened to a violet tint. He noticed that phenomenon, but he did not know that he had noticed it. His brows met in a frown of intense intellectual concentration; for five full minutes he remained rigid in the agony of composition, then, with a long breath, he delivered himself of another verse:

"Soft as the color of blue violets that grow in
The woods, is perfume from the box of tin!
Hil——"

"Oh, dear!" said the stenographer with a sudden little indrawing of her breath.

"If you want to laugh," he said, flushing, "go ahead. I'm not sensitive."

"I had no desire to laugh, Mr. Hildreth; it's far beyond a laughing matter."

He regarded her gloomily, relighted his cigar, and gazed out of the frosty window. After a moment a smile twitched his mouth.

"I suppose it's not good—that last idea about ingrowing violets——"

THE TREE OF HEAVEN

She laughed: she could not help it; he laughed, too.

"How long have we been working together?" he asked, leaning back in his chair. He knew, but he wanted to know whether *she* knew.

She knew, but she pretended to think very hard before answering, laying her pencil thoughtfully across her lips, immersed in calculation.

"It must be nearly a month, Mr. Hildreth."

"Impossible!" he exclaimed, pretending surprise.

"Almost," she insisted. "Let me see; I came to you on the fifth——"

"The ninth," he said quickly. He was easily beguiled.

"*Was* it the ninth?" she asked wonderingly—though what there was to wonder at is not clear, the date signaling nothing in particular except the day they first laid eyes on one another. "I believe it was the ninth, after all. That would make it almost a month——"

"Exactly a month," he said triumphantly. "This is our first anniversary—and *you* didn't know it!"

He stopped; he hadn't meant to use words of that sort. People employ such expressions for

THE SWASTIKA

other matters, not to commemorate the date of a purely business engagement.

"What you mean to say, Mr. Hildreth, is that I have been in your employment exactly a month," she said with amiable indifference.

"Exactly," he repeated, opening the inlaid cover of a rococo desk and bringing forth a package. Then he rose to his feet and made her a bow, full of the charm of good breeding: "May I venture to offer a little gift in memory of the fortunate event?"

She stood up, surprised, quiet, a trifle perplexed.

"What fortunate event, Mr. Hildreth?"

"The annivers—the—pleasant occasion—" He floundered, and she let him. It irritated him to flounder, for his intentions were above reproach.

"What I mean to say is simple enough," he snapped. "You've practically written my poems for me, and you didn't have to, but if you hadn't I either should have ruined my uncle's business or lost my job, and I'm grateful, and I wanted to give you something to show it—these books——"

She took them, a trifle uncertain, but guided by inherited instinct. She looked at the beautifully bound and dreadfully expensive volumes.

THE TREE OF HEAVEN

The constraint lasted only a second; she thanked him, glanced at the title-page, where he had written the date and her name, but not his own. His good taste appealing to her, she smiled at him in a delightfully friendly fashion; and the charm of the transfiguration so occupied him that, finding himself staring, he neutralized the rudeness by closing his eyes with a wise look as though intent on pursuing elusive rhymes for commercial purposes.

She seated herself at her little flyaway gilded desk once more; he relapsed into his chair and sat there drumming with his fingers on the golden foliations of the carved arms.

She had, instinctively, picked up her pencil and pad, ready for dictation when the sacred fire should blaze up in him. The fire, however, appeared to be out. There was not a sputter.

"And in all this time," he mused, continuing his cogitations aloud, "you have never asked me why, in the name of common decency, I insisted on trying to be a poet!"

As she made no reply:

"Have you?" he repeated.

"Of *course* I haven't——"

"Is it because you are too civil to hurt a man's feelings?"

THE SWASTIKA

"It is because I am employed by you, Mr. Hildreth——"

"Because you are employed by me? Nonsense! That's no reason why I should torture a cultivated ear with unspeakable rhymes. I wonder, Miss Grey, what you really think of me?"

She could have told him that she didn't think of him at all except in a business sense, which would have been an untruth, but the proper answer for him. She thought of several answers, all reserved, indifferent, discouraging the faintest hint of intimacy, and therefore suitable. Then she said: "Would it interest you to know what your stenographer thinks about you?"

He said it would interest him excessively, and he desired information.

"I think," she said, not looking at him but at her pencil, with which she was tracing arabesques on the pad, "I think that you could do some things much better than—others. Oh, dear! that sounds like Tupper—but it's true."

"You mean I'd make a better bandit, for example, than I do a poet?"

"I don't know what qualification you have for the career you suggest," she replied demurely.

"I understand you," he said; "it's as simple as those profound lines:

THE TREE OF HEAVEN

“‘A fool is bent upon a twig, but wise men shun a bandit;

Which is really very clever if you only understand it.’”

That’s what you intended to say, wasn’t it?”

They were both laughing, she with more reserve than he.

“If a bandit’s life is not a happy one, what must a poet’s life resemble?” he demanded. “Why, it’s a perfect—but the word is inadequate, Miss Grey. Did you ever for one mad moment suppose that I wrote rhymes for the pleasure it gave me?”

“No,” she said, “I didn’t.”

“Or did you imagine I was infatuated with the notion that my rhymes gave pleasure to others?”

She laughed such a care-free laugh—so sweet, so entirely gay and innocent—that he said impulsively: “I wish you’d let me tell you how it is. I do so hate to appear a fool to you.”

Something checked her mirth, yet it scarcely could be what he said, for his speech and manner were quite free from offense.

“May I tell you?” he asked, conscious of the shadow of constraint between them.

There was something in her silent acquiescence which hinted: “My time is yours, Mr. Hildreth; but, considering the strictly business footing of

THE SWASTIKA

our relations, hadn't you better begin to make your third verse?" And no doubt the slight impatient movement of his shoulders meant: "No, I won't begin my third verse; I desire to unburden to you a soul too long misunderstood." But the interpretation of her silence and his shrug are purely speculative on my part.

"I'd quit this verse making in a moment if I could," he said; "but it's my livelihood. I always loathed poetry, even my own; but I've simply got to earn my living."

"Surely," she said, with an instinctive glance around the exceedingly ornate apartment, "it would be silly for you to give up making advertising verses for your uncle as long as—as——"

"As long as it permits me to live like this? Do you suppose that this is *my* apartment?—that anything in it belongs to me?—that my income from my wafer poetry would even pay for a single week's rent here? There's the ghastly mockery of it. Why, my salary is just twice what yours is: in other words, I divide with you every week."

She regarded him with amazement.

"Apartment, servants—everything belongs to my uncle. My uncle has views," he said, waving his hand. "Unfortunately, one of his views is how to bring up his only nephew. Just fancy a

THE TREE OF HEAVEN

man fresh from Harvard flung neck and heels into his uncle's wafer business on thirty dollars a week!"

"Dreadful," she motioned with her lips.

"Neck and heels! He said I was to find no favors, no privileges; that I must begin at the lowest rung of the ladder, and, as he knew of nothing lower than poetry, he set me to work writing Honey Wafer ads. I'm to be promoted next year to be the artist that draws pictures for the ads. After that I shall advance through the baking, packing, and truck departments until I become a traveling salesman. Meanwhile, I've emerged from my cheap boarding house to keep his servants busy till he returns."

She sat very still, watching him with her beautiful, serious young eyes.

"Then, some day, I'm to be taken into the concern and become a partner if——"

"If?"

"If I don't marry."

"Oh!" she said faintly.

"But if I *do*——"

There was an ominous pause; then she repeated calmly:

"If you *do*?"

"I'm down and out, and he leaves about five

THE SWASTIKA

millions to the Society for Psychical Research. A nice position for me if I should ever fall in love, isn't it?"

The pause was longer this time.

"The Society for Psychical Research," she repeated under her breath.

"Yes. You know—they investigate spooks, and tip tables, and go into trances, and see blond gentlemen coming over the ocean to marry you, and dark ladies hiding around the corner."

"Is he interested in such things—your uncle?"

"Mad about them. He's up at his country place now with a bunch of Columbia professors and Sixth Avenue clairvoyants, engaged in crystal-gazing experiments. Later he's going to lecture about 'em at Columbia University."

"What is crystal gazing?" she asked innocently.

"To tell you the truth, I don't know exactly. My uncle and a fat clairvoyant in a pink teagown sit at a table and squint into a big globe made of rock crystal; and he tells me that he can sit in his chair up there at Adrintha Lodge and see, in the crystal, everything that he wants to see—including how I'm behaving myself down here in town. He told me that if I ever—ever kissed anybody he'd see it and discharge me."

THE TREE OF HEAVEN

"Does he say he can see *you*?"

"He does."

"And everything you are doing?"

"Every blessed thing."

"Do you believe it?" she asked anxiously.

"No, of course not. But I let him think he has me scared to death."

She leaned forward on the table, clasping both hands under her chin.

"Is that what keeps you on your best behavior?"

It was rather a curious thing to say.

"Suppose," she added, "that your uncle was looking into his crystal at this very minute. I think, if you please, we'd better stop talking and begin our work. . . . Don't you? I think we ought at least to *look* as though we were busy."

"*You* don't believe that he could see us, do you?" demanded Hildreth.

"No; . . . but suppose he could? Don't you think I'd better copy your verses—or be doing something——"

She hastily placed a sheet of paper in the machine, slid it into place, and struck several keys. It was quite unconscious on her part, but when, a moment later, she turned the sheet over she found

THE SWASTIKA

that she had written his name about sixty times. The portent of this, however, did not then strike her.

Somewhere in the room little silvery chimes sounded the hour.

"Can it be two o'clock already?" she exclaimed.

He examined his watch in assumed surprise.

"Why, we are just in time!" he said hazily.

"Yes, Mr. Hildreth—in time for what?"

"You—you won't be offended—where anything but offense is meant—will you?"

She had risen to face him; he, rather red about the ears, began by making a mess of what he was saying; and when she had grasped the import of it she let him go on making a mess until his irritation straightened out matters.

"It's only that you've been so kind to help me do all that advertising poetry, and I'm so tremendously grateful, and it's our first annivers—our—er—the occasion— You know what I mean. So please stay to luncheon. Will you?"

"Please don't ask me, Mr. Hildreth——"

"Yes, I will! You simply can't be offended; you simply cannot mistake my attitude, my meaning——"

"I am not offended. You are very thoughtful—amiable—but I think I ought to go——"

THE TREE OF HEAVEN

"Our anni—the date, you know—just to celebrate a purely business arrangement which has been so delight—so profitable to me, I mean——"

"No, I could not stay, Mr. Hildreth——"

"But it's partly for business purposes," he explained anxiously. "Why, you must know, Miss Grey, that more business is transacted at luncheon than before or after. That's what great financiers do; they say to the head of a department: 'Lunch with me, Mr. So-and-so.' And Mr. So-and-so understands at once."

"Does that great financier ever say: 'Lunch with me, *Miss* So-and-so'?"

"Yes, often and often. And *she* understands!"

"Are you sure she does?"

"I am. Please let me be sure."

"Mr. Hildreth, I should—should like to—there, I admit it! But it is not *convenable*. I know it; you know it; it is *not* the thing for us to do. I have no business here except as your stenographer. I could not accept."

"Because you are a stenographer?"

"If I were not in your employment I should not be here with you. You know that."

"But I should perhaps be at your house if——"

"You are speculating in impossibilities." She bent her head, smiling across the table at him, and

THE SWASTIKA

dropping her hand on the books he had given her. "Your kindness must have some bounds; let it end in these bindings; I—I shall remember it with each leaf I turn." And as he said nothing, but looked rather miserable, she added: "Won't you?"

There was another interval of silence; she considered his face anew. The unhappiness in it was evident.

"Do you really want me . . . to talk business?"

"I want you to stay. Will you?"

She did not answer, though a little tremor touched her lips.

"That's jolly!" he said gayly, and touched an electric button behind him. And a moment later a maid in cap and apron respectfully piloted her out of sight.

About half past two a Japanese butler served them in the colonial breakfast room, and she laughed at the little silver trifle she found beside her plate—a tiny type-machine made to hold scents in microscopic crystal vials. Her initials were engraved upon it.

"You see," he said, "*I* do not regard our poetical partnership lightly, even if you do. What you have done for me is going to enable me to

THE TREE OF HEAVEN

enter the firm one day—aided by your editing my verses.”

“I never before understood,” she admitted, “why you advertised for a stenographer who was a graduate of Barnard College. And—when I applied to you I was perfectly astonished when you asked me so anxiously whether I could rhyme and draw pictures.”

He examined his grape fruit and extracted a minted cherry with great care. Presently he swallowed it.

“I knew from the first instant I saw you that my chance in life had come,” he observed.

“You didn’t know it before you questioned me.”

“Yes, I did.”

“How?”

He looked up at her: “I don’t know *how* I knew it.” She was apparently interested in the aroma of her wine. “But I knew it,” he ended.

The vintage was doubtless worthy of the serious attention she gave it.

“Do you know what wine that is?” he asked, amused.

“Yes; it is Sarna,” she said simply.

“How did you know?” he exclaimed in amazement.

She lifted the glass with a pretty gesture: “Are

THE SWASTIKA

you so astonished that your stenographer knows the rarest wine in the world—and the legend concerning it? A most inappropriate wine for such a luncheon, Mr. Hildreth——”

“You are a constant series of endless astonishments to me,” he said. “Where on earth you ever heard of Sarna—and how you should have known it when you saw it—this wine so rare that but one in ten thousand experts ever heard of it——”

“Why did you have it served?” she asked directly. “Do you know what this wine of Sarna signifies? Do you know every drop is worth ten times its weight in gold? Do you know there are not three other bottles of it known in the world?”

“I knew all that. I believed that Sarna alone was worthy of—of”—he met her level gaze—“of our first anniversary.”

“No; it is inappropriate,” she replied steadily. “Do you not know the legend?”

“It is the only wine not forbidden by the Koran. Is that what you mean? Or do you mean—” He hesitated.

“Yes, that. The last Khedive emptied the last glass of the last but three bottles remaining in all the world while his bride’s lips were still wet with the dew of Sarna. It is the custom of Emperors

THE TREE OF HEAVEN

and Sultans—ask me for how long, and my answer is: as long as the saros; compute it, oh, Heaven-born!” She crossed her pretty hands below her throat, a smile, half gay, half tender, parting her lips.

“How did *you* know such things?” he asked.

“My father was a judge of the Mixed Tribunal,” she answered gravely. “My mother was married there; I was born in Cairo.”

“Fate!” he said excitedly—“sheer Fate! My father was the ex-Confederate, Hildreth Pasha, of the Khedival Court! The Sarna—that bottle cradled there—came from a judge of the Mixed Tribunal! Shall not their children touch the same glass?”

They both were excited, flushed, a little bewildered.

“Do you know the custom?” he asked recklessly.

“Y-es.” She held up one slender finger; her mother’s betrothal ring, set with the diamond scarab, sparkled on the white skin; and she drew the thin circlet from her finger and held it suspended over the glass of golden Sarna. The single brilliant flashed and flashed as though the sacred beetle were struggling to be free.

“Shall I?”

THE SWASTIKA

"Try it," he laughed. "Who knows what sign of fortune the dead Sultans may send?"

"They — they only send a sign to — to brides——"

"I know it. Try!"

"But the mechanism is unknown to me; it is not possible that a bath of this scented wine could start it——"

"Try!"

There was a glimmer, a little clinking splash in the slim wineglass. They inspected the ring lying in the amber wine; they glanced at one another rather foolishly. Then, looking at him, she raised the glass, tasted, passed it to him. He tasted, his eyes on her, and set the half-empty glass before her.

"I—I believe there's something happening to that ring," said Hildreth suddenly, rising and passing around the table to her side.

Breathless, they bent over the glass, heads close together.

"Doesn't it look to you as though that diamond scarab were moving?" he said in a low voice.

"Yes; but it can't be—*how* can it——"

"Look!"

"Oh—h!" she whispered—"see! It—it's alive! It is unfolding arms and legs like a crab."

THE TREE OF HEAVEN

"What on earth—" he stammered, but got no further, for the girl caught him by the arm: "Look! Look! *The swastika!* It means fortune! It means—it means——"

His hand shook as he lifted the glass and reversed it. A shower of perfumed wine sprinkled the lace centerpiece; the mystic swastika, glittering, magnificent, fell heavily upon the mahogany—a dull, gem-incrusted lump of purest gold.

"What is it?" he gasped. "I thought it was alive, like one of those jeweled Egyptian beetles! I thought those things were legs!"

"It is the swastika," she whispered, laying it in her pink palm. "Who wears it shall always—" She stopped short, hesitated, then the color in her face deepened, and she looked up over her shoulder at him. "Will you do something for me?" she asked.

"Yes."

"Wear this. Will you?" She drew her tiny handkerchief from her sleeve, tore a shred of cambric from it, passed it through the swastika, and, before he knew what she meant to do, had tied it to his lapel.

"Just to see what happens," she said, laughing almost hysterically. If there was the slightest

THE SWASTIKA

chance of any luck in the world she wished it to be his. It was all she had to give.

"You resign your chance of fortune to me?" he asked curiously—and, as she only nodded: "There is but one happiness Fortune can bring me. Are you willing to trust it to me?"

Before she could reply a maid appeared with a telegram; he asked her pardon, and opened it. Twice he read it, read it again, nodded a dazed dismissal to the maid, read it again very carefully, and finally, with a smile that was somewhat sickly, handed it across the table to her.

What she read was this:

ADRINTHA LODGE,
MOHAWK COUNTY, NEW YORK.

JOHN HILDRETH: I know what you're up to, and
you had better stop.

PETER HILDRETH.

"Peter Hildreth," she repeated blankly.

"My uncle."

"But—but what does he mean?"

"That's what I'd like to know," said the young fellow uneasily.

"Is he in the habit of telegraphing you?"

"No, he isn't; he never did such a thing."

She turned the yellow leaf of paper over and over thoughtfully. Then he suddenly encountered her disturbed gaze.

THE TREE OF HEAVEN

"He says that he knows what you're up to, and you'd better stop," she said. "What *are* you up to, Mr. Hildreth?"

"Up to? Absolutely nothing! I'm fairly tingling with the consciousness of innocence, righteousness, and good intentions. *I* don't know what that old crank means—any more than you know."

"I—I am dreadfully afraid that *I* know what he means."

"What?"

"I think he means me."

"You! Why?"

"Because I'm here—here lunching with you. He might draw—dreadful conclusions."

"What on earth do you mean, Miss Grey? He never even heard of you. How can he know you are here?"

"Suppose—suppose he is—is looking into his crystal!"

A sudden silence fell, lasting until the coffee was served.

"It is nonsense to suppose that people can do such things," said Hildreth abruptly.

"What things?" she asked, watching him set fire to a cigarette.

"Such things as looking into crystals and see-

THE SWASTIKA

ing nephews. Anyway, what is there to see?" He waved his hands as though scattering suspicion to the four winds. "What is there to see except a future financier and his principal chief of department at a purely business luncheon——"

With silver souvenirs and Sarna," she murmured.

They laughed, feeling the constraint subsiding once more.

"Please let us talk a little business—for form's sake, if nothing else," she said.

"All right; your salary is to be increased——"

"Mr. Hildreth, you cannot afford any extravagances, and you know it."

"I am not going to let you write my verses, and profit by it to your exclusion! Besides, this swastika is going to enable me to afford anything, I understand."

"But you already divide your salary with me. You can't do more!"

"Yes, I can."

"No, no, no! Wait until you are promoted to be the advertising artist. Wait until the swastika begins to help us—you."

"No; because then you'll have to draw all my pictures for me, and your salary must be increased again."

THE TREE OF HEAVEN

"At that rate," she said, laughing, "I'll be half partner when you are."

"Full partner—if the swastika knows its business. I—I—wish he didn't have that crystal up there at Adrintha. I've a mind to buy a rabbit's foot. With a rabbit's foot and a swastika we ought to checkmate any crystal-gazing, pink-eyed clairvoyants."

"But—what have they to do with us?" she asked gently.

What he was about to say he only half divined—for she was bewilderingly pretty—and perhaps she dimly foresaw it, too, for they both flushed with a sudden constraint that was abruptly broken by the entrance of the maid with another telegram.

"What the deuce—" stammered Hildreth, tearing open the yellow envelope; and he read:

ADRINTHA LODGE.

JOHN HILDRETH: I'm watching you in my crystal. If you want the Society for Psychical Research to become my heirs, do exactly what you're doing with that girl.

PETER HILDRETH.

"Is—is it anything alarming?" asked the pretty stenographer as he crumpled the paper.

"Alarming? I don't know—no! What the mischief has got into that uncle of mine?"

THE SWASTIKA

"Is it from *him*?" she asked, turning pale.

"Yes—it *is*. But if he thinks he can make me believe that he sees me in his dinky little crystal——"

"Oh, don't talk that way," she pleaded; "there *may* be things that we don't understand happening all the while——"

"There can't be!"

For a while she was dumb, mutely refusing to be reassured, and presently, rising from the table, they passed into the gay little room where her desk stood.

The fire was glowing very brightly in the carved fireplace of golden and pearl-tinted onyx. He drew up his uncle's great chair for her; she shook her head and looked meaningly at her pad and pencil, but after a silent struggle with indecision and inclination she seated herself by the gilt fender, pretty hands folded in acquiescence.

"Now," he said, "let us speak of those things that *have* come true."

"What has come true, Mr. Hildreth?"

"You."

The slightest of rose tints touched her cheeks.

"Did you believe me unreal?" she asked.

He was leaning forward, looking up into her face, which reflected the pink light of the fire.

THE TREE OF HEAVEN

know it. If I am not here officially I ought not to be here at all."

"Can't I talk to you except on business?"

"Why should you?"

"Because I want to—because it is pleasant—because it's the pleasantest thing that has ever come into my life!"

"That cannot be," she said, paling. "You know many people, you go everywhere—everywhere that I do not——"

"If I were not an advertising poet at thirty dollars a week," he said, "I'd not care where my uncle left his millions. I'd do what I pleased—what I ought to do—what any man with a grain of sense would do."

"What would you do, Mr. Hildreth?"

"Make love to the girl I love, and not be scared away like a rabbit!"

She was still paler when she said: "Are you—in love, then?"

"Yes; but I can't tell her."

She was silent, staring into the fire.

"I can't tell her, can I? I have nothing to offer—nothing except a prospect of losing my expectations. A man can't tell a girl that he loves her under such circumstances, can he?"

"I—don't know."

THE SWASTIKA

"Do you suppose a—a girl like that would wait for him—until he got into the firm?"

"If she loved him," said Miss Grey in a low voice, "there is absolutely no telling what that girl might do."

"Suppose," he said carelessly, "for the sake of illustration, that I was, at this moment, with that girl. For example"—he waved his hand airily—"for example, suppose you were that girl. Now, suppose that I told her I loved her; do you imagine that uncle of mine could see what I was about—if I worked the swastika on him vigorously?"

"I don't know," she said, staring at the fire, "how to work the swastika."

"If you—if you would consent to aid me—just a little," he ventured, "I could soon prove whether it was safe to speak to the—the other girl."

"How, Mr. Hildreth?"

"By just—just pretending that you were that other girl."

"You mean that you might practice a declaration—test it—on me? Just to see how it might affect your uncle?"

"Yes," he said eagerly, "and if my uncle doesn't telegraph again that he disowns me, why, I'll know that his other telegrams were merely coincidences!"

THE TREE OF HEAVEN

"And if he *does* telegraph that he has seen—everything—in his crystal?"

"Why—we'll have to wait——"

"The *other* girl and you? I see. You and I can truthfully deny our apparent guilt, can't we? . . . I will do what I can, Mr. Hildreth."

She stood up, one little hand on the back of the chair. He hesitated, then picked up the last telegram, opened it, and handed it to her, reading it again over her shoulder:

"If you kiss that girl you're talking to I'll disinherit you."

A bright blush stained her skin.

"It is only—only to test his power," he managed to say, but the thumping of his heart jarred his speech and scared him into silence.

"You—is it necessary to kiss me?"

"Yes—absolutely.

She met his gaze, standing erect, one hand on the chair. Then she drew a long breath as he lifted her hand; her eyes closed. He said: "I love you—I loved you the moment I saw you—a month ago!" This was no doubt a mistake; he was mixing the two girls. "What do I care for a crystal-squinting uncle, or for those accursed Honey Wafer verses? If he's looking at us now let us convince him; shall we—sweetheart?"

THE SWASTIKA

She unclosed her eyes. "Am I to play my part when you speak to me like that? I don't know how——"

"Do what I do," he stammered; and he encircled her slender waist and kissed her until, cheeks aflame, she swayed a moment in his arms, freed herself, and sank breathless into the chair, covering her face. And he knelt beside her by the gilt fender, his lips to her fingers, stammering words that almost stunned her and left her faint with their passion and sweetness:

"You must have known that it was you I loved—that *you* were that *other* girl. You must have seen it a thousand times!"

She was crying silently; she could not speak, but one arm tightened around his neck in tremulous assent.

The telephone bell had been ringing for some time in their ears, deaf to all sounds except each other's whispers; but at length he stumbled to his feet, cleared his eyes of enchantment, and made his way across the room to the receiver.

"What the deuce is the matter?"

.
"Who?"

THE TREE OF HEAVEN

"Oh, is that you, Uncle Peter?"

"Yes, I did get your telegrams, but I thought——"

"You mean to say you can *see us now*?"

"No, I don't deny it; I did kiss her."

"Because I love her!"

"I can't help it; you can do as you please. And I may as well tell you that I'm not afraid of your professors, or clairvoyants, or your crystals, because I've got a swastika——"

"Yes, a swastika!"

"You don't know what a swastika is? Well, let me tell you it's about five thousand times more powerful than a rabbit's foot. . . . What? . . . Yes, I'll hold the wire till you look it up in the dictionary."

A throbbing silence. Then:

"Yes, Uncle Peter, I'm here."

"Very well; I'm sorry you're angry, and I regret that you're not afraid of the swastika. I

THE SWASTIKA

am quite willing to trust to it; the swastika gave me the girl I love. And, by the way, Uncle Peter, didn't you write me that my advertising poems made a fortune for you out of your wafers? . . . All right; I only wanted to confess that she, not I, wrote them."

"Don't believe it? Why, I could no more write those charming verses than *you* could!"

"You may imagine that with her talent and mine, and the swastika working away for us, we are not going to starve——"

"That's just what we intend to do. Bunsen's Baby Biscuit Company will appreciate our talents. Besides, she can draw——"

"You can call it blackmail if you choose. But what do you offer us to refuse advances from Bunsen?"

"No, I won't consider it. My price is full partnership in the Hildreth's Honey Wafer Company, a cordial blessing from you, use of your apartments for a year, and the same old cozy place in your testament."

THE TREE OF HEAVEN

"Yes, in return we will write your poetry and draw your pictures for you. And, besides, we'll name after you our first——"

"Jack!" she exclaimed, aghast.

"Dearest, for Heaven's sake let me deal with him!" whispered Hildreth; then he shouted through the transmitter:

"Is it all right, Uncle Peter?"

"I promise you—we promise you that we will name him Peter! If you don't, by Heaven, I'll name him Bunsen——"

"That's all right, but we're desperate. Peter or Bunsen; take your choice!"

"Yes; and I'll have his photograph taken for Bunsen, and under it I'll print: 'A Bunsen's Baby Biscuit Boy!'"

"Don't use such language; they'll cut us off!"

"What?"

"Good! All right, Uncle Peter, you're a brick. But—just one thing more; please put that crystal away for an hour or two——"

THE SWASTIKA

"Because we'd like a little privacy!"

"Of course I shall. Long engagements are foolish——"

"Jack!"

"Dearest, you know they are," he said, turning toward her. "Shall I tell him in a week?"

Her blue eyes filled; again the little tremor of acquiescence set her red mouth quivering.

"In a week, Uncle Peter!" he shouted.

"What? I'll ask her. Hold the wire."

And to her he said: "Sweetheart, our kind Uncle Peter desires to say something civil to you. I—I think it may be something about a check. Will you speak to him?"

She rose and came toward him; he handed her the receiver; she raised her head, and he bent his. They kissed—while his uncle waited.

Then she raised the receiver to her pretty ear, and said, very softly:

"Hello! Hello, Uncle Peter!"

CHAPTER X

THE GHOST OF CHANCE

As young Leeds entered the imposing bronze and marble portico of the Algonquin Trust Building, where he had a studio on the top floor, the elevator boy handed him a telegram and he opened it with instinctive foreboding of trouble. Meanwhile, the Ghost of Chance, which had followed him into the building, looked over his shoulder at the telegram.

There was evidently trouble enough in it; he had turned rather white as he stood there, eyes riveted on the yellow paper. Minute after minute sped; the elevators whizzed up and down in their gilded cages; people passed and repassed; the ornamental marble pavement of the rotunda echoed the clatter of footsteps. Several people he knew nodded to him as they entered or left the elevators: an architect domiciled on the top floor in the east wing, McManus, of the Belden Building and Construction Company; young Farren, pri-

THE GHOST OF CHANCE

vate Secretary to De Peyster Thorne, president of the great Algonquin Trust Company, and director of about everything worth directing in the five boroughs.

"Mr. Farren!" called out Leeds; and, as that suave man checked his speed, wheeled, and came back, "Mr. Farren, could I see Mr. Thorne for half a second?"

Farren's eyes narrowed thoughtfully. "If it's a favor you want to ask, don't ask it now——"

"It is, and I've got to——"

"Better not; he's in a devilish humor; he'd foreclose on his own grandmother to-day."

"But I can't wait! I'll use your telephone while you're taking my card."

Farren shrugged, turned, and led the way across the rotunda, ushered Leeds into the outer office, and took his card. Leeds went to a desk and used the telephone vigorously until Farren reappeared, nodding; and Leeds walked into the president's private room. De Peyster Thorne, handsome, rather too elaborately groomed, and ruddier of face and neck than usual, looked up to return the young man's greeting with an expressionless word and nod. He did not see the Ghost of Chance standing at Leeds's elbow.

"I'm awfully sorry," said Leeds, "but I don't

THE TREE OF HEAVEN

see how I can finish the key panel on time, Mr. Thorne."

"Why not?" said Thorne, a darker flush mounting his heavy face and neck.

"I've a telegram this moment from my model; she's ill. I telephoned for another, but there's scarcely a chance I can get one I want. Something went wrong with the colors yesterday and I scraped out all I had done, expecting to finish to-day with a drier, dry to-morrow, and have Mr. McManus set the key panel in the ballroom Thursday morning. Now, I've probably got to spend to-day chasing up a red-haired model; and if I do, I cannot finish by Thursday. Couldn't you give me one day more?"

"Mr. Leeds," said Thorne, biting off his words unpleasantly, "a contract is a contract. Can you fulfill yours?"

"I've told you," began Leeds, astonished—for never before had Thorne looked or spoken in that way—"I told you that my model——"

"Can you keep your contract?" repeated Thorne sharply.

"There's a ghost of a chance if I can get a proper model," replied Leeds, keeping his temper.

"Then you'd better take that ghost of a chance, Mr. Leeds. On reflection it will occur to you that

THE GHOST OF CHANCE

my housewarming can scarcely be postponed to suit your rather erratic convenience. If the key panel is not in place, the room will be as attractive as a man in evening clothes without a collar. I'd rather tear out the entire frieze, and call the contract void!—and I'll do it, too, if the contract is not fulfilled."

"Is that the language you employ in all your commercial transactions?" asked Leeds without a trace of the passion that clutched at him.

"It is. An artist is as amenable to the commercial code of responsibility as any man I deal with—I don't care a damn who he is or how he likes it. . . . Is there anything more I can do for you, Mr. Leeds?"

"No," said Leeds thoughtfully, "unless you choose to take a kindergarten course in the elements of decency."

Leaving the door ajar as he went out, and far too amazed and furious to notice Mr. Farren, the amused secretary, he crossed the corridor, followed by the Ghost of Chance, entered an elevator, and shot up to the top floor. Black rage and astonishment still possessed him when he met McManus in the hall, and he would have passed on with a nod and a scowl had that genial Irishman permitted.

THE TREE OF HEAVEN

"Phwat the divil's up now, Misther Leeds?" inquired the big contractor and builder. "I'll lay twinty to wan ye've joost come from Thorne."

Leeds laid his hand on the door knob of his studio.

"I have; I—I'm not in very good humor, Mr. McManus—" He jerked open the door and started to enter.

"Hould on!—don't be runnin' away. Sure haven't I come from him meself—an' kept me temper, too, Irish that I am! Phwat's wrong betchune you an' Misther Thorne an' the hydrant?"

"Nothing much; my model is ill and I can't promise to give you that key panel to set. Thorne said—one or two things—oh, I can't talk about it; he said one or two things——"

"Bedad, thin, he said a dozen things to me; an' me as cool as a Waldorf julep, an' he dammin' the gildin' whin I asked f'r the sivinth installment due this day. 'It's an expert I'll have f'r to examine it,' sez he. 'Projooce the wad,' sez I, 'an' afther that I'll talk talks to anny expert ye name.' An' he had to."

Leeds's heart turned heavy. "I don't know what Thorne means to do," he said. "I'm not much on contracts; I've done my best. I suppose

THE GHOST OF CHANCE

he will rip it out if he wants to. If he does, and if he cancels the contract, it will about ruin me. I never had but four other commissions; it cost me more to execute them than I was paid."

The big Irishman studied the younger man with keen, kindly eyes. He knew what Leeds's frieze really was—a piece of work that for sheer inspired beauty had not its equal in modern mural art. He knew—even his artisans knew. And he knew, also, that in this fifth essay, a young man, of whom the public had already heard, was stepping half unconsciously into the highest place in the Western world of art. All this McManus was shrewdly aware of, and he was aware, too, that Leeds was more or less conscious of it, and that Thorne was utterly unconscious that, in his new house, the golden ballroom already contained the mural masterpiece of the twentieth century—an exquisite, gay riot of color and design, so lovely, so fresh, that, concealed under the miracle of its simplicity, the marvelous technical perfections of color, drawing, and composition were almost unnoticed in the blinding brilliancy of the *ensemble*.

"Did that red-necked madman say he'd rip it out?" inquired McManus, his fiery blue eyes aglitter.

"That's what he said. I don't know whether

THE TREE OF HEAVEN

the work is good or bad; I'm two years stale on it. I could paint a better one now. But if he holds me to the letter of the contract and throws back two years' work on my hands, what can I do? I—I never imagined he was that sort of a man; I knew he didn't care much for painting—his architects got him to give me the work—my first commission that promised any profit——”

Something tightened in his throat, and he turned his head sharply to the window of the corridor.

“Arrah, thin,” said McManus hastily, “don't be frettin'. G'wan, now, an' paint like the divil. Give him anny ould thing f'r to ploog the key. Sure, 'tis his fri'nds will tell him fasht enough the bargain he's got in a frieze—a frieze, begob! that no man twixt the two poles can paint like you!—an' that's the truth, Misther Leeds, though ye don't know it, bein' modestlike an' mistrustin' av the powers God sinds ye. Ploog him up with a key panel—anny ould daub, I tell ye!—f'r to clinch the contract come pay-day! An' I'll set it accordin' to conthract Thursday comin'; an' afther he's opened his big gilt house to the millionaires he consorts with, an' afther the bunch has christened their muddy wits with the j'yful juice, go to him quietlike, yer foot in yer hand

THE GHOST OF CHANCE

an' the tongue in the cheek o' ye, an' say modestlike: 'Wisha, sorr, me mastherpiece is not quite to me likin'; an' I'm thinkin' to add a few millions to its value wid a stroke av a badger brush.' "

The big Irishman laughed heartily and laid an enormous paw on Leeds's shoulder—a gesture so kindly that the familiarity seemed without offense.

"Phwat does the like o' youse care for Mr. Thorne an' his big red neck an' the pants o' him wid the creases, an' his collar buttoned by his valley? F'r all his scarf pin an' his shiny shoes an' his Thrust Company an' his millions, I seen a bit of a lass give him the frozen face an hour ago."

Leeds looked up curiously.

"Arrah, thin, that's what crazed him. I was there in his office discoorsin' on conthraacts, pwhen the dure opened an' a young lady sthepped in—not seein' me pwhere I sat behind the dure.

"'Naida!' sez he, joompin' up, the Burrigundy flush on the face an' neck av him.

"'I came to tell you that I can't do it,' sez she, her purty face like a rose in blush. 'I'm sorry,' she sez, 'but I thought you ought to be told, an' I drove downtown in a hurry,' sez she, 'f'r to tell you,' she sez, 'that I was not in me right mind when you asked me to marry you,' sez she. 'So I'm sorry—I'm so sorry,' she sez, 'an' good-by!'

THE TREE OF HEAVEN

an' wid that the breath stopped in her an' she gulped, scairtlike.

"‘*Phwat!*’ sez he, bitin’ the worrud in two halves. An’ she gulped an’ shook her head.

"Wid that he began in a wild way, clane forgettin’ me in the corner, me hat on me two knees; an’ the young lady was a bit wild, too, bein’ very young an’ excited; an’ there they had it like John Drew an’ his leadin’ lady — quietlike an’ soft-spoken, but turrible as a dress-shirt drama, till she said: ‘No! No! No!’ wid a little sob, an’ out o’ the dure an’ off, he afther her. Sorra the sight av her he got, with Farren hunting her, an’ himself ridin’ up an’ down in the cages when the porther tould him she’d dodged an’ gone up to the top floor."

"So that was why he was so ugly," said Leeds curiously.

"It was. He was smooth enough till the lass came in an’ left him her sweet little mitten. But whin he came back, red as a bottle o’ Frinch wine, an’ the two eyes o’ him like black holes burnt in a blanket—save us! All that was close an’ hard an’ mean an’ sly an’ bitter an’ miserly came out in the man, an’ the way he talked to me av honest work done wud stir the neck hair on a fightin’ pup. I was wild; but I sez to meself, lave him talk

THE GHOST OF CHANCE

his talk; it's all wan on pay-day. An' so it is, Misther Leeds; it is so. G'wan into ye're workshop, an' shpit on ye're hands, an' we'll ploog that key space by 5 P.M., come Thursday, bad cess to the bad, an' luck to the likes of us, glory be!"

Leeds stood half inside his threshold, the edge of the open door grasped in his hand, gazing thoughtfully at the floor.

"All right, McManus," he said quietly; "I'll do what I can to save my bread, but"—he looked straight at the Irishman—"it's bitter bread we learn to eat sometimes—we who are employed."

"Troth, I've swallyed worse nor that; I have so, Misther Leeds. Bide the time, sorr. An' phwin it comes!—paste him wan."

"Oh, I'll have forgotten him by that time," said Leeds, laughing, as McManus, with a significant and powerful gesture, turned on his broad heel and strode off toward his own rooms, where Kenna, his partner, had been making frantic signals to him for the last five minutes.

Leeds entered his studio, the Ghost of Chance at his heels, closing the door behind him. Through the golden gloom of the room his huge picture loomed up, somber in the subdued light; an aromatic odor of wet colors and siccatif hung in the air.

THE TREE OF HEAVEN

First, he laid aside his overcoat and hat, unhooked from a door peg a short painting blouse and pulled it over his head; then he moved about briskly, opening ventilators to air the place, manipulating the curtains for top and side lights, dragging the carved mahogany model stand into the position marked by the chalk crosses on the polished floor. Presently he touched a spring; the top shade rolled up with a click; a flood of pure north light fell upon the gorgeous colors of the canvas. He began to adjust the delicate machinery of the complex easel, turning a silver screw to regulate the pitch of the heavy canvas, twisting a cogwheel here, a lever there, until he had brought that part of the canvas within reach whereon he expected to work.

He was one of those modest, dissatisfied young men who can never be content with the work done, perfectly aware of possibilities not yet attained, willing to try for them, vaguely confident of attaining them; a young man who would go far—*had* gone far—farther than he realized. Yet, although the critics were joyously bellowing his praises as *the* coming man, his work so far had barely given him a living.

He required great surfaces to cover, and the beauty of the results was apparent in the new

THE GHOST OF CHANCE

marble library, the Hotel Oneida, the Theater Regent, and the new Brooklyn Academy of Music. Superb color, faultless taste, vigor, delicacy—all were his. The technique that sticks out like dry bones, the spineless lack of construction, fads, pitiful eccentricities to cover inability—nothing of these had ever, even in his student days, threatened him with the pitfall of common disaster. Nor was there in his work the faintest hint of physical weakness—nothing unwholesome, smug, suggestive—nothing sugary, nothing insincerely brutal; perhaps because he was a very normal young man, inclined to normal pleasures, and worldly enough to conform to the civilized code outside the barriers of which genius is popularly supposed to pasture.

And still, with all this, he had been paid so little for his work heretofore, and to produce his work had cost him so much in materials and in model and studio hire, that he scarcely knew how to make both ends meet in the most cruelly expensive metropolis of all the world.

For the first time, when approached by Thorne, he had dared name a price for his work which might give him a decent profit when the last brush stroke was laid on; and, while Thorne's big new house slowly rose, stone on stone, overlooking the

THE TREE OF HEAVEN

Park, he had worked on the frieze of life-size figures—two hundred in all—which was to complete the golden ballroom with an exquisite, springlike garland of youth and loveliness.

He had accepted Thorne's cut-throat, cast-iron contract with the deadly time clause; he had used up every second of time, shirking nothing, sparing no expense; making life-size study after study, scintillating with a cleverness that would not only have satisfied but turned the heads of ninety-nine painters in a hundred. But he was the hundredth.

He had given himself just time to complete his work and say: "I can do no better. I have done all that was in me." But, though he had foreseen trouble and delay from models, and the dozens of vexations artists fall heir to, he could not have foreseen that a young girl he never heard of should, at a critical moment, bring out a side of Thorne's character he did not suspect existed in him—the sharp, ugly brutality of wounded arrogance, which vents itself where opportunity offers; the fiercely sullen desire to hurt, to stamp its power upon those who have no defense.

And now, with the entire frieze all but completed, the man had suddenly snarled at him—for no reason on earth save a willingness to crush and

THE GHOST OF CHANCE

dominate. There was not a day of grace named in the contract; there was no grace to be expected from Thorne, who cared no more for the frieze that hid part of his golden-lacquered paneling than for the gilded sconces below. If one or the other did not suit him, he'd tear them out without a word and cover the raw space with ten thousand dollars' worth of hothouse roses for his housewarming. Leeds understood that. He was beginning to appreciate the man. He must try to beat him.

He stood there confronting his defaced picture, examining it as keenly as a physician might inspect an interesting phase of human misfortune, pondering the remedy. And, as he stood, silent, preoccupied, his telephone bell rang, and he stepped to the receiver.

"Hello! Is this the Models' League?"

.

"Yes, James Leeds. Yes, I wanted a model with red hair, if possible, and good limbs."

.

"Well, that can't be helped. Send any model as close to Miss Clancey's type as you can. Send her now. She's to take a cab. I'm in a desperate hurry."

.

THE TREE OF HEAVEN

"Yes, Miss Clancey is ill. I want a girl of her type, but don't waste time hunting. Send me somebody at once."

.

"All right. . . . Good-by!"

He hung up the receiver, walked back to his canvas, and began to set a huge ivory-faced palette table, squeezing out tube after tube of color, rainbow fashion, ending in a curly mass of silver white. Then he uncorked a jar of turpentine, filled a bowl with it, and began searching among twisted tubes and scrapers for an ivory palette knife, whistling thoughtfully the while.

A slight sound behind one of the great screens attracted his attention, and he glanced up. Nothing stirred. He sorted some paint rags, and picked up a bottle of drying medium. As he held it to the light, again a sudden sound came from the screen; he turned squarely, surprised, and the same instant a girl stepped out and raised a pair of very lovely and frightened eyes to his.

"Do you want a model?" she asked sweetly, but unsteadily. "Because, if you do——"

"Good Heavens!" he said, exasperated. "Have you been behind that screen all this time while I've been telephoning for a model?"

"Ye-s. I—I came in. I heard you."

THE GHOST OF CHANCE

"But why didn't you come out? Why on earth——"

"I think I was a trifle frightened."

"Oh! . . . I see . . . you have never before posed?"

"Never. I—I really have not made up my mind to pose now. I suppose I had better do—do something. I've—the fact is, I've *got* to do something to earn my living."

She was red-haired, white-skinned, blue-eyed, shod and gloved to perfection, and plainly scared. He looked at her from head to foot.

"As a matter of fact," he said, delighted, "you are a sort of God-sent miracle. Whether you mean to pose or not for a living, I want you to pose for me to-day. Don't be frightened; sit down here in this chair. I'm in desperate need of somebody. Won't you help me?"

She looked at him in breathless silence.

"Won't you please sit here—just a moment?" he said.

She bent her head a trifle, and moved forward to the offered chair with a grace that claimed his instant and serious attention. But he had no time to wonder or speculate on the reasons for such a woman with such a presence being in his studio to seek employment; he took a chair opposite,

THE TREE OF HEAVEN

scrutinizing her fresh young beauty with frank approval. Indeed, he heartily approved of everything about her—the masses of red-gold hair, the lovely azure-tinted eyes, the wonderfully paintable white skin.

“Your coloring—your figure—your hands are beautiful,” he said slowly. “I can give you all day to-day, and I’ll take all the time you can give me to-morrow. You see, that canvas must be finished to-day, be dry by to-morrow, and be delivered Thursday. Tell me, is it only head and shoulders and costume, or will you pose without drapery for——”

A bright flush stained her face. “I—I am not a model!” she stammered.

“Not a model,” he repeated blankly. “Oh, no, of course not—I forgot.”

“Did you—do I look like——” Words failed her; she glanced appalled at the canvas, then straight at him, self-possessed again, but paler.

“I can’t help what you think of me,” she said. “I am perfectly aware of my indiscretion—but your door was open and this—this is my hour of need.”

“Certainly,” he said, soothingly, “I see——”

“No, you don’t see! I came in here to—to hide! By and by I shall go out.” She sat up

THE GHOST OF CHANCE

very straight. "I am determined," she said, "to remain concealed here until I can leave this building without annoyance. May I?" She ended so sweetly, so piteously, that Leeds caught his breath in astonishment.

"So—may I stay here for a while?"

"Well, there's a model coming to pose for that figure—if you refuse to pose——"

"Which figure?" demanded the girl.

"That one on the left—the one that is scraped down."

"You mean that I couldn't stay here while you painted?"

"I don't believe you would care to. You wouldn't bother me, but I don't think you'd care to."

"Why?" The blue eyes met his so purely, so fearlessly, that he gave her a frank and gentle answer.

"Oh! Then—then hadn't you better dismiss your model for the day?" she said, "because I've got to stay."

"But I can't. The paint on that canvas is exactly in the right condition, neither too wet nor too dry. I've simply got to use a drier, and paint on it now. That picture must be dry to-morrow."

"Must it—truly?"

THE TREE OF HEAVEN

"It certainly must!"

The girl rose, stood for a moment nervously twisting her veil up over her hat; then: "But I can't go! You don't understand. I've—I've run away!"

"Run away! From whom?"

"Somebody," she said vaguely, looking about the room. Suddenly he remembered the story McManus told. And he spoke of it, watching her curiously.

"Exactly," she said, nodding her pretty head, while the tint of excitement deepened on her cheeks, "I ran away from him! You know who I am, don't you? You know my sister, anyhow."

She hesitated, searching his face; then impulsively: "I usually decide all matters very quickly!" She made an impatient little gesture and seated herself, looking up at him with bright eyes and heightened color: "For three months I've stood it——"

"Stood what?"

"Being engaged. I had not really thought much about it—we're usually indifferent and obedient in my family—and no doubt I'd have gone on and married just as my sisters have—if something had not happened." She dropped her head,

THE GHOST OF CHANCE

looking thoughtfully at the floor. Then: "I simply could not stand him, Mr. Leeds; I woke up this morning, understanding that I couldn't marry him. I was so excited—and dreadfully afraid of telling him—and I was so sorry for my mother, but I couldn't do it; I knew that, and it was time he knew, too.

"So I told my mother, and there was trouble, and I went out and found a cab and drove here as fast as I could, and I said: 'Mr. Thorne, I cannot do it!' You know what I said. That Irishman told you

Leeds nodded.

"So that's all; I simply ran away from him; and I won't go home and live on my mother, because we are as poor as mice and rabbits, and if I don't marry Mr. Thorne my mother will probably expire of mortification, and if I don't marry *at all* by Monday next, I'll lose what my grandfather left me in a horrid will, which forces me to marry before I'm twenty-one—and *that's* next Monday. All my sisters did it—Mrs. Egerton, and Mrs. Clay-Dwyning, and another you don't know. But I won't, I won't, *I won't!* And my mother will probably starve unless I earn our living, so I'd better begin at once."

"I think you had, too," said Leeds gravely.

THE TREE OF HEAVEN

"Oh, I thought of that when I was running away from Mr. Thorne; and when he came up in one elevator, I came down; and when he came down I went up, and I turned into the first corridor I saw, and entered somebody's office and shut the door.

"A man came to ask me what I wanted. And I asked him if he required a stenographer, and he said he did—very offensively—so I marched out and walked about the hallways trying to find my way out. Then I heard Mr. Thorne's voice on the stairs, and I opened your door and hid. And before I had courage to leave, you came and talked and talked with that Irishman. And now what am I to do? You know who I am, and you know my sisters—or you did once, before you went abroad to study—for they've told me they knew you at Narragansett when you were a boy of twelve."

"Are *you* their little sister, Naida?" he asked curiously, when she stopped, clean out of breath, flushed and fascinating in her consternation.

"Yes; I'm Naida. Do you really remember me? I wish I could be civil and say the same to you, but I don't, Mr. Leeds, though since everybody says you are a very great artist, I pretend I do know you, and I say: 'Oh, yes, James Leeds;

THE GHOST OF CHANCE

he was such a jolly fellow when he was a boy at Narragansett!’

“But I’m careful not to tell them that I was so little that you never even looked at me, or that I was so young I couldn’t remember you. Oh, dear, what frauds we all are! And here I am, compromising myself and not caring, after having driven my mother distracted, jilted my fiancé, and beggared myself. I think I’d better pose for you.”

“Will you?”

“Why, coward that I am, I don’t want to face the consequences of my own deeds. But I won’t go back after smashing the finances so dreadfully.”

“Suppose you help me a little, then. And while you’re helping me to avert financial ruin we’ll talk of your future,” he said laughingly.

She looked up quickly. “I heard what you and that Irishman were saying. Are you truly in trouble about your picture?”

“All kinds of trouble,” he assented.

“Could I really help you?”

“Indeed you could.”

“Of course, I would compromise myself, wouldn’t I?” she asked innocently. “I’ve been doing it all day, haven’t I?”

He sat there perplexed, fascinated, watching her in silence.

THE TREE OF HEAVEN

She shrugged her pretty shoulders. A rather valuable fur stole slipped down to the floor, and he picked it up and sat smoothing it and watching the exquisite color wane and deepen in her cheeks.

The telephone rang. He rose and set the receiver to his ear.

"No, that model won't do. You need not send anybody now; I have exactly the model I require. Good-by."

Turning to her he said: "You heard me say that I needed no model. Will you help me now? This is an hour of direst need with me."

"I—I don't know——"

"Will you? If you will, I will promise to help you—not to become an artist's model; that is silly. But I promise you, on my honor, that you shall have an offer which no woman need refuse; an offer suitable and honorable, where you may enjoy absolute independence and freedom from all annoyance, live your own life freely, without taxing your mother's resources, and without care or dread of importunities from anybody attempting to marry you. Will you?"

"If—if you could do *that* for me I'd be grateful enough to do anything for you," she said slowly.

THE GHOST OF CHANCE

The Ghost of Chance sat watching them. His job was nearly ended.

A curious exhilaration, a gayety rather foreign to Leeds's nature, took possession of him. He lifted a beautiful garment, all stiff with turquoise and gold, and held it toward her. He laid two jeweled sandals at her feet, pulled a table to the screen, and opened a box full of glittering gilded articles.

There was color enough in her face now, flooding it from brow to throat.

"Won't you help me?" he asked. "It is ruin for me if you don't."

She searched his face. There was nothing in the eyes that a woman might not look upon, might not meet with a smile, might not respond to. She measured him in breathless silence, red lips parted. He was her own kind.

"Will you?"

"Yes."

Then excitement transfigured him. She scarcely knew his face, lighted into quick enthusiasm.

"Never, never, have I had such a model!" he cried, delighted as a boy. "Never have I seen such color, such exquisite loveliness. Good Heavens! A man might really paint with you before him! Don't — don't look at me that way — don't be

THE TREE OF HEAVEN

frightened. I'm simply astonished at my fortune—I don't mean to be rude—you know I don't!"

"Yes, I know it," she said tremulously.

"May I suggest how you should tie the sandals?"

"Am I to—to be barefooted?"

"With sandals, you know, and that gorgeous gold and blue Byzantine robe hung straight from the shoulders! Everything is here. I'll step out and smoke a cigarette. Will you knock when you are ready?"

She nodded, looking down at the crumpled heaps of gold and turquoise stuff.

Enchanted he saw her raise her pretty arms and begin to unpin her hat, with its floating veil. Then he went out.

For half an hour he walked the resounding corridor, smoking madly. Once or twice he doubted her—half convinced that she meant to lock him out—and the idea scared him. But at last a low knocking on the inside of the door summoned him; he entered, blinking in the flood of light after the darkness of the hallway, and the vision was revealed slowly to his dazzled eyes.

White—a trifle too pale; her eyes burned like azure stars under the gold-red glory of her hair, which fell in two loose, heavy braids

THE GHOST OF CHANCE

straight down, framing her body from shoulders to hips. The rounded throat, the white arms glimmering along the seams of the blue and golden robe, the sandals accenting the snowy feet—and in her eyes the straight, fearless gaze of a child—left him mute, stunned, utterly spellbound, overwhelmed by a magic that sometimes wears another name.

She did not need to ask his criticism. The faint rose color came into her face again slowly.

She turned and mounted the model stand without a word, seating herself in the carved marble chair; and, glancing at the painted figure, let her arms fall in harmony with the drawing. Then she placed one little sandal-shod foot upon the silken cushion at her feet. When she looked up, with a pale smile, he had already begun to paint.

His hand, not steady at first—for a new emotion had given him new eyes—became steadier. Magnificent tints and hues grew upon the canvas, stiff gold folds and creases shimmered, framing the snowy contours of perfect arms.

The glory of hair, the wonder of wide azure-tinted eyes, the lips full scarlet, all took color and loveliness as his brushes flew. And into the picture came something else—a joyousness, a tint

THE TREE OF HEAVEN

of youth and freshness, and something subtle, indefinable.

And now he seemed to hold the whole power of the world in his grasp. The color-wet point of every brush hovered, then left its message of beauty on an enchanted canvas. Power was his; he dominated; he could do anything, achieve anything—with her before him. Difficulties? There were none. He had but to wet a brush with purest tints, look her in the eyes, and the thing was wrought.

Twice she rested. He said nothing, nor did she, and, when she was ready, he went on. But already the work was done—finished! He lingered over it, thrilled, touching it here and there fearlessly, with the silent certainty of mastery.

At last he lay back on his chair, and the arm supporting his palette dropped to his side.

“Won’t you have mercy?” she asked in a low voice.

“Are you tired? Oh, I am so sorry!” he cried, springing to his feet.

She rose. He held out his hand. She laid hers on his arm and descended.

“You are terribly tired!” he said anxiously, almost tenderly.

“No—but—I am a little—hungry.”

THE GHOST OF CHANCE

He dragged out his watch. "Good Lord! It's four — almost dark!" he cried. "What a — a beast I am! I must be crazy!"

She stood smiling beside him, looking curiously at the picture in the fading light.

"Am I as—as glorious as that!" she said under her breath. It was not a question, besides he scarcely dared answer, for the magic was thick about him.

"Do you know," she said slowly, "there is something in that canvas that I have never before seen?"

"What is it?"

"The—the eyes you have given me—as though I had just opened them on paradise."

"They are like yours."

"But I—I never saw paradise. What a heavenly beauty you have given me. My soul was never as untroubled as is hers—the lovely, snowy, golden saint you have raised up on my shadow. What eyes do you see with to work such miracles?"

"You are the miracle. I never painted like that until you came."

She turned to look at him. And, perhaps, the magic light was strong enough to dazzle her, too, for she thought there was something in his eyes that he had painted into hers upon the canvas.

THE TREE OF HEAVEN

For a little while they stood silent. Then she raised her head. "And now?" she questioned.

"Now?"

"Yes. What am I to do?"

He gazed at her blankly. "You are not going away?"

"Your picture is finished."

"Yes, but where are you going?"

"Where?" She pressed her white hand over her brow. "I—I don't exactly know. I—I thought you had a plan——"

"As long as you have run away," he began slowly——"

"Yes? And as long as I have done all the dreadful things I have done. Go on!"

"All those dreadful things——"

"Yes; all those common horrid things. Go on."

"I—I think——"

"Yes——"

"That we—that we might further degrade ourselves by——"

"Yes—go on!"

"By taking tea together."

"Do you think so?"

"I do," he said solemnly.

She reflected for a moment. "But what after that?"

THE GHOST OF CHANCE

"We must consider the situation at the tea table," he said gravely. "We'll go out as soon as you can change your gown. And—is there any likelihood of our jumping any of your family if we go to Sherry's?"

"I'll risk it," she said slowly.

"Then," and he smiled at her through a rosy light which really didn't exist, "then I'll go out and smoke until you are ready."

And he did, no longer tormented with the fears of being locked out, and presently she opened the door and stood a moment on the threshold, looking at him.

"I wonder," she said, "if ever a girl has done as mad a thing as I have to-day?"

She stepped out and closed the door behind her.

"Listen," she said; "a thousand dreadful questions are on my lips—tortured pride refuses to ask for mercy—but—oh, I *do* care to know what you think of me!"

He told her as much as he dared tell, haltingly, stammering under the enchantment thickening always around them.

"You—you think—that?"

"More. May—shall I say——"

"Not—not now."

THE TREE OF HEAVEN

Dazed, their young heads turned, they descended the marble steps together.

Elevator boys, hall servants, the gorgeous porter in his green and gilt livery, stared at the runaway. She passed them, head high.

"There is going to be a great deal of trouble about nothing, I fear," she said softly, as they walked out into Fifth Avenue.

"I fear so," he mused.

"You—you will probably be evicted by Mr. Thorne when the porter tells him where I've been."

"Probably," he smiled.

"Where will you go when you are evicted?"

"Where are you going?"

She glanced at him sweetly. "To tea—with you."

"And after that?" he asked unsteadily.

But she pretended not to hear him, repeating, "To tea with the great artist, Mr. Leeds. Oh, you are surprised that I know how great you are? Did you think I didn't know? Dear me, don't my sisters talk of you as though our family discovered you?"

"That settles it then," he said, enchanted.

"What settles what, if you please?"

"My status. I'm one of your family and entitled to advise you."

THE GHOST OF CHANCE

A moment later two flushed young people entered Sherry's, utterly oblivious of cloak rooms, bellboys, and butlers, and instinctively chose a remote table secluded in a corner, banked high with verdure.

They may have had tea. They were so absorbed in talking to each other that they not only paid no attention to what they ordered, but did not notice whether they had eaten anything or not, when the early winter night found them on Fifth Avenue once more, strolling slowly uptown, absorbed in one another to the exclusion of time and similar unimportant trifles.

She was saying in that full-throated sweet voice, pitched a trifle lower than the roar of traffic, "Yes, I do trust you. I have been horrid and common and silly to go dashing around that trust company, but you are perfectly lovely to understand, and I'll do exactly what you tell me to do—except——"

"What?"

"Oh—you wouldn't ask me that!"

"What?"

"To—to marry *him*——"

"Good God," he breathed.

After a silence he said: "I have promised you an offer. But first you must go back as though nothing had happened."

THE TREE OF HEAVEN

"Yes, I will. There's no use in my going to a hotel like a silly, romantic creature, and starting out to look for work in the morning. Besides, my mother would be frantic and call up the police. Besides, I haven't enough money to really run away; I have only a dollar and some pennies."

"Home is the place for you," he said, laughing under his breath. "When am I to come to tell you about my plan for you?"

"You'd better hurry," she said sincerely. "I'll probably lose courage and be bullied into something or other if you don't."

"May I come to-morrow?"

"No; there's a luncheon I don't dare cut out, and in the evening there's a dance at the Carringtons'. Do you—do you ever go about? I go to the Lanarks' dance to-night——"

"I was asked to that dance, too——"

"Oh!" she cried enraptured, "*will* you come? Please—please! If you don't, I won't go. Mr. Thorne will be there, and between mamma and him I'll be driven into something before I know it. Will you?"

"Yes, I will. And I'll do more," he added under his breath; "I'll lay that offer before you."

"That will be perfectly delightful! You won't fail, will you? And"—she paused at the door of

THE GHOST OF CHANCE

her own house and gave him a small gloved hand—"and I want to tell you how happy I am to have helped *you*, and how glad I am that you are able to keep to that wicked contract, and that I have had a perfectly lovely time, and I shall never—*never* forget how nice you have been even if I have behaved like a brainless ninny. And I am so glad you don't think me as horrid as I seemed to be. I was reckless for the first time in my life, and did all those desperate things because I've been—I've been a trifle unhappy."

And so he left her, the door opening to engulf her, she turning her pretty head to nod to him as it closed. And he went away soberly, walking up the dark avenue under the flaring electric lights, absorbed, almost stunned, by what had come so suddenly into a life that, but a few hours since, had seemed to him too full, too complete, to hold anything except the love he bore for his profession.

He dined at the club where he lived, read the evening papers, scarcely conscious of what he was reading, then went upstairs to his room, sat a long while on the bed's edge, staring at vacancy, and finally lay down, closing his eyes. The Ghost of Chance stood by the bed a moment, considering his victim.

Hour after hour he lay there, thinking as clearly

THE TREE OF HEAVEN

as the tumult in his breast permitted. Later he bathed, dressed very carefully, and, descending, climbed into a hansom.

"I've a ghost of a chance," he muttered. "Thorne told me to take it once, and his advice was good. Now, I'll try it again—for I *have* got a ghost of a chance again, and I'll take that chance to-night!"

And so he came to the great house of the Larkses, overlooking the wintry park, and he climbed out of his humble hansom amid the clustering clatter of the rich and great and agreeable, and entered the house which he might not have troubled himself to enter, had a young girl with red hair and wonderful blue eyes not asked him.

After drifting about in the scented crush for half an hour, he caught a glimpse of her surrounded by a dozen men, among them a diplomat or two, and several attachés; and now, with the intention of claiming her, he marked her down in the glittering throng as carefully as he might have marked a flushed quail in a thicket of golden willow.

But when, pressing his way through barriers of black coats and threading half an acre of rustling silk and lace, he found the spot where he

THE GHOST OF CHANCE

had expected to find her, she was no longer there; only the red fez of the Turkish Ambassador, nodding affably above the press, indicated that he had reached the spot upon the floor that he had aimed at.

Glancing up at the gilded musicians' gallery to verify his bearings, he struck a circle, as he would have done in the woods, and presently came across young Terriss, who was also in love with her—but Leeds did not know that.

"Thorne took her off," said Terriss sullenly. "They're in the conservatory. By the way, I didn't know you knew her."

"I do," growled Leeds.

"That pasty-white Russian prince, the fellow with a fat face and a thin nose splitting a brace of eyes too close together"—Terriss shrugged his shoulders—"he's hanging about, looking for her, too. Her mother steered him off. I suppose it will be announced to-night."

Leeds saw her mother and recalled himself to her memory, and her mother's cordiality surprised and flattered him until he found he could not get past her to the conservatory.

Meanwhile the musicians were playing away madly. He attempted to dodge her, affably explaining that it was his dance with her daughter.

THE TREE OF HEAVEN

"But Naida is not in here," said her mother, carefully riding him off.

"Terriss said——"

"Doubtless," continued her mother cheerfully, "Naida is waiting for you with Constance. Do you remember my daughter Constance? If you take me across, Mr. Leeds, we can find Naida."

Steered off, vaguely aware of too much sweetness in the matron's guileless smile, he looked back and beheld the girl he was seeking emerging from the thicket of palms with Thorne, followed by a heavy and very white young man, with rings on his fingers and under his eyes.

The girl looked at Leeds as though she had never before seen him. For a moment, as he instinctively stepped forward, they faced one another in silence. Then a faint recognition animated her eyes. She looked at Thorne, at the Russian, at her mother, then, as Leeds said a conventional but decisive word or two, she smiled, laid one hand on his shoulder as he encircled her waist with his right arm, nodded at her mother, and glided off into the glitter with a man who danced well enough to leave her indifferent and occupied with her own reflections.

How long she had been dancing with him she did not know, nor care, when his voice roused her

THE GHOST OF CHANCE

from a meditation that had left her red mouth sullen and her eyebrows bent.

"What did you say?" she asked. "I beg your pardon——"

"Nothing. I wondered whether you were bored? I dance pretty well, you know."

"You dance very well. Do I look bored?"

"You certainly do."

"I am."

They swung out through the center of the perfumed crush a little recklessly, but with sufficient skill.

"I wish you would look at me—once," he said.

"What has happened since we parted?"

She raised her eyes, amused. "The inevitable. I couldn't escape."

"I can't give you up yet to your own reflections," he said. "You dance too perfectly. What do you mean by the 'inevitable'?"

"Oh, it is not you or the dancing that I meant! You must not mind me; I am likely to say anything to-night."

"Anything?"

"Absolutely anything to anybody." She raised her eyes again to his face. It was a cleanly modeled countenance, rather lean—not at all like Thorne's or Prince Minsky's.

THE TREE OF HEAVEN

A vague feeling of being at home again after a foreign tour came over her, a comfortable sensation, lasting for a second—time enough to contrast his amiable features with the features of the man she had been with in the conservatory.

Constantly passing dancers nodded to them, exchanged a word or two or a brief smile—Terriss with a pretty girl who called her Naida, the British third secretary, very gay in his greeting, dozens and dozens, all whirling by; and through the brilliant glare, the scented breezy wavering scene, Leeds guided the girl with the ruddy gold hair and the sulky mouth—sulky, for she was preoccupied again, oblivious of all in her perfect grace and poise, swinging where he led, as easily, as unconsciously as a wind-blown bird floating half asleep in the flow of the upper air.

“If you are really too much bored,” he breathed——

She looked up disturbed. “I told you it was not you. You don’t bore me. You don’t know me well enough.”

“Is there no chance that I might know you better?”

“No, no chance.”

“May I try it?”

THE GHOST OF CHANCE

Her beautiful brows unbent. "Why, yes, try it; but I am not worth the effort."

"Very well. For this evening you and I will speak the absolute and unvarnished truth; shall we? You may ask me whatever you care to; I will ask you. Dare you?"

She had shaken her head first, but at the word "dare" her indifference changed to a slight amusement.

"Oh, I dare anything to-night," she said. "What question am I to answer?"

"Is it a bargain that we tell the truth?" he persisted.

"Certainly, if it amuses you. It won't amuse me."

"And I may venture to be cheerfully impertinent?"

She nodded, smiling.

"Then tell me why you asked me to come to this dance?"

She hesitated. A little more color crept into her face.

"Am I to answer truthfully?"

"You promised."

Then her entire personality changed with an impulse as illogical, as sudden as any caprice that ever swept over a heart too young to bear bitterness.

THE TREE OF HEAVEN

"I asked you," she said, "to come because—because I was happy with you to-day. But now—now it is too late. I am for sale once more. . . . Will you buy me?"

"Willingly," he returned, amazed but smiling.

"Too late," she said, looking up; "I have sold myself."

They were on the outer edge of the whirl now. Her hand slid from his shoulder, and she stepped back, flushed, brilliant-eyed, perfectly self-possessed.

"Thank you for offering to purchase," she laughed, looking him straight in the face. "Shall we finish the dance? I am ready."

"Let me see your card," he said coolly. She held out the cluster of ivory and gold filigree for his inspection.

"I thought you had undertaken to amuse me," she observed. "I didn't bargain to amuse you." Her blue eyes were too brilliant, her color almost feverish now.

"I am going to," he said. "But I warn you, you may not like it."

"Try. Perhaps I may."

"I'm going to rub out these names," he said, watching her.

THE GHOST OF CHANCE

"That will be deliciously rude and impertinent. Do it. Can you think of anything else?"

"Oh, yes!" he said, filling in the card with his own name.

"Let me see," she breathed, looking over his shoulder. "Delightful! Why, what you have done is exquisitely indecent, and will certainly involve us both in everything unpleasant. Now, what else are you going to do?"

"That sale," he reflected—"you remember?"

"Oh, yes!"

"It's canceled."

"No, it isn't," she said with a laugh ending in a little check. "But you may compromise me if you—if you can manage it. I'll flirt with you if you can keep the others off."

"I'll do my best," he said, looking at her, scarcely knowing what he was saying. "You danced too well for me to let you go when I bored you; now that I don't, do you think I shall let you go?"

She was on the verge of something—laughter or tears. He felt it, yet knew that she would not pass the verge.

"Now I have amused you a little," he said, "will you sit out the rest of this dance with me?"

THE TREE OF HEAVEN

"How can I help it? Your name has replaced the others."

He erased his name, and, from memory, filled in the other names in sequence. Then pocketing the tablets, he said airily: "Technically, I recover my self-respect — but, there's a second conservatory beyond this one where I may lose yours."

"I hope it is dark," she said calmly.

"It is. We'll go to the farthest corner."

Passing through palms and tree ferns, they heard the music behind them cease; and they moved a trifle more quickly.

"It's locked," he said.

"I don't care. Unlock it."

He turned the key. They entered. A few electric bulbs glimmered here and there, gilding thickets of blossoms. There were no chairs to be found, and he had started to return for them, when she called his attention to a green bench under a mass of flowering vines, and, seating herself, looked up at him expectantly.

"Now," he said, as he took his place beside her, "you may tell me anything or nothing, as you please. You are terribly excited—I'm rather excited, too. Every normal man is always reckless; every normal woman is, once in a lifetime. It's a crisis; you've reached it. I'm a decent sort of fel-

THE GHOST OF CHANCE

low—safer than the next man, maybe. And now I'm keyed up, ready to listen, ready to talk, seriously or frivolously—ready to make love—either way."

"Make love to me, *seriously*?" she said gayly. "Ah, but you are safe to say so—knowing that I am sold!" After a moment she looked up: "Why don't you ask me who bought me?"

"Oh, I know," he nodded.

"How do you know?"

"I saw your face—after the bargain."

The smile on her mouth remained, but he looked away, unable to meet her haunted eyes.

"Rub out these names," she said suddenly, offering to take the card again. And, as he made no movement, she suddenly tore it to pieces in her gloved hands and held the fragments toward him with a miserable little laugh. He took them, retaining her hand in his.

"You are the prettiest girl in the world," he said lightly. "Shall I tell you more?"

"Do you know that I am engaged to Mr. Thorne again?"

"But I am going to make love to you."

"But—I am really going to marry him—on Monday."

He laughed, looking her in the eyes.

THE TREE OF HEAVEN

"Do you not believe me?" she asked.

"No," he said, laughing.

"But it is true. I have put it off—I have waited until the last moment—you know what I said to-day——"

Incredulous, smiling, he recovered the hand she had withdrawn. She suffered it to lie in his, looking at him almost frightened.

"It is stupid not to believe me," she said. "Can't a man tell when a girl is speaking the truth? I tell you I must marry him on Monday, if I'm to get anything from my grandfather——"

His hand, holding hers, relaxed; he looked at her uneasily.

"All my sisters did the same thing," she went on—"all hung back until the last moment. Then, like me, deadly tired of the pressure, they gave in in a hurry. I'm the youngest and last—thank Heaven!"

"What is all this?" he demanded.

"Nothing—indolence—an idea that I might fall in love, perhaps—kept me from marrying.

Her voice trailed, vaguely reminiscent; she gazed at him with dimmed, speculative eyes, resting her chin on one curved wrist, elbow denting her silken knee.

"If a girl has a fool for a grandfather,

THE GHOST OF CHANCE

what can she do? And I'm tired of the home pressure."

She bent her head, idly lifting finger after finger of the white gloved hand that lay passively in his palm.

"So there you are," she added; and, as he said nothing, she went on: "Tuesday, I'm twenty-one. Isn't it absurd and dreadful? But there you are; I put it off and put it off, vowing and declaring I wouldn't marry just to inherit my part. Mother has wept most of this year; but I said 'No! no! no!' and I refused to be the victim of any grandfather, and I declined to consider his wishes, or Mr. Thorne's."

She shrugged her shoulders: "But—you see? Cupidity at the last moment!"

"Whose cupidity?" he asked coolly.

"Mine," she said, but he knew she was not truthful.

"That's all right," he observed cheerfully—"as long as it was not your family's." And, still smiling, he thought of her mother adroitly blocking his way until the daughter and the merchant had concluded the bargain and patched up a broken truce.

"It will be one of those 'married-while-you-wait' affairs," she said, watching him; "travel-

THE TREE OF HEAVEN

ing clothes and a few of the family. Don't you want to come? You must come!" she added; "will you?"

"I have an idea," he said, with a curious stare, "that I may be present at your wedding."

"Good! Come with Jack Terriss and Prince Minskysky."

"Oh, do you already number me with the Jack Terrisses?" he drawled.

"Certainly. Am I not pretty? Wouldn't you kiss me if you—could? He always wants to; others have wanted to. Then I number you with the others; they were no more serious than you are."

"Is it they or you who are not serious?" he asked. "I think if you gave any of them the chance you have given Thorne——"

"Yes, but I don't love any of them. And Mr. Thorne is inevitable."

"I see," said Leeds carelessly. "So I am to say to-night: 'Much happiness!' and other stupidities. Am I not to say all these things?"

"Yes, if you like."

"But I won't."

"That would be rude, wouldn't it?" She looked up at him smiling, yet with something of concern, for he had both her hands now.

THE GHOST OF CHANCE

"Do you know what I am going to do?" he asked.

"No."

"I am going to make love to you at once."

"You may; I'm engaged."

He listened a moment; the music rang distantly; somebody was missing a dance with the woman whose gloved hands lay in his.

"If you are going to marry for pure cupidity, why not take me?" he asked. "Any man would do for your amiable grandfather—and it seems to be all the same to you."

"I did not know you well enough to ask you," she said audaciously.

"Would I have done as well as anybody?" he demanded.

"Yes, as well—for me. Mother prefers the inevitable one."

"Would I have done better than anybody—for *you*?" he persisted.

"Must I answer?"

"Yes; you have only fibbed once to-night."

"Then — I'd rather — not answer. Don't — don't pretend to be serious. Be as frivolous as you will; make love to me if you wish—only don't pretend."

"No, I won't pretend," he said. She looked at

THE TREE OF HEAVEN

him; his face caught fire though he strove to speak gayly: "I never believed I should fall in love—like this—not even when I first met you. You are faultlessly beautiful, with your thick, ruddy-gold hair—the hair I painted into my picture—and I painted your splendid, innocent eyes, and that scarlet, sulky mouth—not sullen then, Naida. Had I known such things were bought and sold I should have bid——"

"Stop," she breathed.

"But all I should have offered was an ordinary heart—and you say that counts nothing against—other considerations."

"Nothing," she said, setting her lips.

"It counts nothing," he repeated, watching her.

"Nothing—absolutely nothing. Is this how you amuse me? Is this what you call making love?"

"Partly this," he said, "partly"—and he deliberately and unskillfully kissed her—"partly this."

She rose, blushing scarlet, whisking her hands from his. He stood up to confront her, rather white.

"You are too—" she began unsteadily.

"What?"

"Brutal. I have been kissed before—but not

THE GHOST OF CHANCE

stupidly—as you did. It was almost an affront—if such a woman as I can be affronted.” Cheeks and eyes were ablaze.

“I told you,” he said between lips almost colorless, “that I should speak the truth. I do; I love you. Can you give me a ghost of a chance?”

“You are clumsy and silly,” she said. “I—I was ready for almost anything—supposing you were clever enough to carry it all off lightly——”

“I can; I’ve kissed plenty of girls, but only one I’ve cared for—that’s why I was so awkward; I was scared to death. Why on earth did I awake at the eleventh hour to find that I loved you!”

“You are imposing on us both,” she said calmly. “Besides, I don’t believe you’ve kissed very many girls. Jack Terriss says you have no use for them except as models.”

“Jack’s crazy. Girls? Why, the girls I’ve kissed,” he explained blandly, “would fill that ball-room——”

“And overflow into this conservatory,” she added, quietly curious, yet perfectly convinced now that his experience had been as limited as her own. For she had never before been kissed.

“If you’ll let me show you——” he suggested.

“Show me what?”

THE TREE OF HEAVEN

"That I do know how to kiss a girl——"

She looked at him, then sat up straight, stripping off her gloves. Her face was hot; she used her fan.

He picked up one of her hands and she demurred, but he held to it with a fascinated determination that made a struggle unreasonable.

"What is the use," she said, "of kissing a girl who is engaged? No, I will *not*! I forbid you! I—*please* don't do——"

"Do what?" he asked.

"That! You have done it twice—when I asked you not to."

"Was I clumsy this time?"

"Yes!"

"Then——"

"No—no—no!" Hands locked, she bent backward, evading him breathlessly, yet looking into his eyes with a curiosity, a fear, and something else that no man had ever seen in her gaze—something that he saw, and which the scarlet mouth, no longer sulky, tremblingly confirmed.

"There is a chance—a ghost of a chance!" he said, steadying his voice.

"No—no! There is no chance—even if you did——"

THE GHOST OF CHANCE

“What?”

“Love me! No chance, no ghost of a chance. Release me—please—I beg you. Oh, won’t you listen? You—you must not put your arm around me——”

The struggle was brief; she strained away from him desperately; and when he had her closer, she avoided his lips, hiding her face—and, as the hiding place happened to be, by some dreadful mistake, his shoulder, he drew her face upward and kissed her mouth again and again, until her head lay there quietly, eyes closed, wet lashes on her burning cheeks.

Then he used what voice he could command in a very manly and earnest fashion; and whether she heeded or whether even she heard was uncertain, for the tears kept her lashes wet, and her hands covered her face.

This was all very well, particularly when he drew one hand away, and her slim fingers closed convulsively over his. Between them they wrecked her delicate ivory fan, but neither seemed conscious of any loss.

“Now will you give me a ghost of a chance?” he whispered.

“I—I can’t——”

“Look at me, Naida——”

THE TREE OF HEAVEN

"No."

"You must. I love you."

"How can you—a girl bought—sold——"

"I bid higher, dear."

"I know—my—my first kiss. You will not believe it—of a girl you kissed so easily. But it is—I have never before been kissed. But I can't take the price; I'm sold— You had better kiss me for all the years to come."

He bent his head; her eyes unclosed, and, looking up at him, she put both arms around his neck.

"You do love me," he breathed.

She only looked at him.

"You must!"

"I might—if there was time. How can I have time to love you?"

"Marry me; and you shall have years of time."

"But suppose I found I did not love you, silly?"

"You would be no worse off than if you married the inevitable."

Her head lay on his shoulder; she looked at him reflectively. "Suppose," she said, "suppose I marry neither of you—for a while—and let that wretched inheritance go!"

"For God's sake, let it go!" he said fiercely.

THE GHOST OF CHANCE

"Give me a ghost of a chance; that is all I ask—more than I dare hope."

"And—if I loved you—in the remote future, would you marry a penniless girl?"

"Will that penniless girl promise me?" he asked under his breath.

"No!" said her mother from the glass doorway. And they both stood up.

"The dishonorable part you have played," continued the quivering matron, "matches your lack of the elemental decencies, and your ignorance of the ordinary observances of conventional—" Fury choked her.

"I only desire to marry your daughter, madam."

"Naida!"

"Yes, mamma."

She hesitated, turned to the man beside her, and looked up at him.

"Good-by," she said; "don't forget."

Forget what, silly child? A flirt whom he had so easily kissed in a conservatory? Why, men find them everywhere—and not too difficult. Her first? Why, some man must be a coquette's first—and in her case it happened to be Leeds.

So she walked slowly to the door, and her mother took her arm, and she looked back at the man

THE TREE OF HEAVEN

standing there, his hands fumbling the shreds of her broken fan.

"Good night!" she said; and to her mother:
"You hurt my arm, dear."

"Are you mad?" hissed that horrified matron.

"Quite. I told him I was likely to do anything to-night."

"You have done it!"

"I hope so, mother."

"Hope what?"

"That I've made him love me."

"Merciful Heaven! What has—" She halted, turning her tall daughter to face her. "Is it champagne?" she demanded.

"No; do I look dreadfully mussed? Oh, well—it was my first kiss, you know. One doesn't understand how to take it coolly; I was very awkward—and fool enough to cry. My head aches. I fancy I look perfectly disreputable. Mother, will you—there he is now!—will you please keep off your Thornes and your Russians until I can escape? I will be in the dressing room—quite ready to go, mother dear."

"Naida," she said, her voice trembling, "I tell you now that if you are actually in love——"

"Yes, dear?"

"If you *are*, don't consider my—my wishes——"

THE GHOST OF CHANCE

"About Mr. Thorne?"

"About anybody—even a man disreputable enough to kiss you——"

"Any man—to save my inheritance, mother?"

"Any *eligible* man, we decided."

"Then it's got to be *somebody*?"

"It has, little daughter—unless we're a pair of fools!"

"Well, then—if it's to be a *man*, I think—I think——" She turned and looked back into the long conservatories. But what she thought she did not utter, for at that moment the Russian spied her and came up palled and speechlessly fierce. And she took his arm very sweetly.

"Now we'll dance until daylight if you desire," she said, heading him off in the midst of an astonished inquiry concerning her disappearance. "I think we had better have the jolliest time we can—while it lasts. Because," she added pensively, "I may run away from everybody some day. I'm quite likely to do anything, you know; am I not, mother?"

His alarm was so genuine that she threw back her head and laughed the most delicious and care-free laugh he had ever heard from her.

"Ah! It iss a pleasantry!" he said, inexpressibly relieved.

THE TREE OF HEAVEN

"Of course," she said gayly. "I shall keep my legacy and marry somebody—you or Thorne or somebody. Therefore, monsieur, I require sleep; therefore"—she dropped his arm and a courtesy at the same time—"adieu, monsieur."

"So soon, mademoiselle!"

"None too soon, monsieur. Mother! If you are ready? The prince is waiting to make his adieus."

An hour later her mother kissed her good night with the humble and modest conviction that she had done well by every daughter, and had garnered every penny with which that miserable will had tantalized her so long.

"Good night, Naida," she said affectionately. "De Peyster is a lovable fellow. If you can't love him you can't love anybody."

"I don't know; I'll see how I sleep, mother."

"What do you mean, Naida?" she asked anxiously.

"That's just it—I don't know exactly what I do mean. But I'll know if I don't sleep. Good night, mother. If I am not in my room in the morning you will know I have married—somebody."

"You—you wouldn't do——"

"Oh, you know I am likely to do anything! I

THE GHOST OF CHANCE

wish I could guess what it is to be—the next thing I am destined to do.”

She turned over in her great white bed, burying her hot cheeks in the pillow. She heard her mother leave the room; then her maid tiptoeing about, and presently the click of the electric button. She opened her eyes in darkness, and lying there fell a-thinking of the ghost of a chance a man had lost forever—or was it the man who had lost it? Was it not the maid after all?

“Men kiss pretty women when they can,” she reasoned, raising her hands to her heated cheeks. “He meant nothing that he will not forget this time next month. . . . So *that* is how it feels to be kissed! And I sniveled. . . . dear me!

“Still—if I had only had time—I could have made him love me—I think. . . . But artists are notoriously inconstant. . . . and usually very poor. If I—I could have married him, I should have felt morally obliged to bring him something. So there you are; I didn’t know he was like that or I might have hunted him up and given him a chance a year ago. . . . Why didn’t he take it? He—it is impossible he could suddenly love me—now—at the last moment, when it’s too late. . . . And I suppose it was abominable of him to have kissed me. . . . And he did it so frequently. . . .

THE TREE OF HEAVEN

As a matter of fact, I, lying here, am a thoroughly kissed girl. . . . And I'm shamelessly indifferent to his guilt and mine. So—I think I'll sleep a little. . . ."

But she couldn't.

"If I really find that I can't sleep," she said softly to herself, "I'm likely to do almost anything. I wonder whether *he* is asleep."

He was not; he was seated in a rather small, dark, and chilly room not half a mile uptown. Jaws set, chin on his clenched fist, looking into the hollow eyes of a ghost—the Ghost of Chance. But the ghost as yet had made no sign.

For a while she lay there, wide-eyed, restless, face and arms flushed, her heart quickening to the rapid rush of disordered thought hurrying her onward—whither, she scarcely knew, until she found herself standing before her mirror, the electric light flooding the room once more.

"I can't lie there," she said to herself; "I can't sleep; it seems to me as if I could never sleep again."

The small gilt clock struck the hour—five! She considered it, turned and went to the window, and, raising the shade, looked out. The shadows of the electric lamps played quivering over the snow; nothing else stirred. She crossed the room and

THE GHOST OF CHANCE

opened her door, listening there in the darkness. Then, treading softly, the tips of her fingers on the mahogany rail to guide her, she felt her way down the stairs, her small bare feet brushing the velvet carpet.

There was an electric jet in the lower hall; she turned it on, groped about on the telephone shelf for the directory, and turned the leaves noiselessly until she came to the letter, L. Very carefully she traced the column of names, eyes following her moving finger, until she found what she wanted. Then she turned, unhooked the receiver, and pressed it to her ear:

"Hello!" she almost whispered. "Please give me nine—O—three—Lenox Hill."

And after a throbbing wait:

"Is this the Lenox Club?"

.

"Has Mr. Leeds come in yet?"

.

"Perhaps he isn't asleep. Please find out. . . .
No, I can't give my name."

.

"Yes; it is of great importance. If he is asleep, please wake him."

.

"Yes, I'll hold the wire."

THE TREE OF HEAVEN

The receiver against her ear was trembling, but she could not control her hand.

"Yes! . . . Is that you, Mr. Leeds?"

"Can't you guess who it is?"

"You *can't*! Do you mean to intimate that other gir—other people call you *up* at five o'clock in the morning!"

"Of *course* it is I!"

"Yes, Naida."

"I am at home. I could not sleep, so I thought I would find out whether you could. Besides, I wanted to know whether you stayed for the co-tillon."

"But *why* didn't you?"

"Oh! that is very nice of you—to say that I—And haven't you really been asleep?"

"Doing what?"

"Thinking of *me*!"

THE GHOST OF CHANCE

"All alone in your room at this ghastly hour of the morning, thinking about *me*? Do you expect me to believe——"

.

"I won't tell you—now."

.

"Haven't I enough to keep me awake thinking?"

.

"No, I *don't* mean that. You know perfectly well that *you* gave me sufficient to think about—for the rest of my days."

.

"Don't say that over the 'phone! Yes, it was the first—the very first time it had ever been—been done to me."

.

"No, I don't forget *anything*; I never shall. What do you mean by a ghost of a chance?"

.

"Oh! Do you truly mean that? I am so—so dreadfully happy to hear you say that——"

.

"Yes."

.

"Yes."

.

THE TREE OF HEAVEN

"Yes."

.

"Ye-s——"

.

"Oh-h!"

.

"What! *Now!!*"

.

"Do you mean now?—at five o'clock in the——"

.

"I *do!* I *am* in love with you! But I'm not insane——"

.

"Oh, this is dreadful!—Yes, I'll hold the wire. Yes, the other name for it is the Church of the Transfiguration, but——"

.

"*Nobody* will do it for us at *this* hour!"

.

"Well, I'll wait——"

She leaned against the telephone shelf, the receiver pressed convulsively to her ear, blue eyes closed. Years seemed to drag Time in endless chains across her vision; her knees fell trembling; thought, run riot, raced through her brain, and every little pulse clamored to the heart's hard beating.

THE GHOST OF CHANCE

"Yes!" she gasped with a start; "I'm still here."

.
"No, I am not dressed for—for the street——"

.
"Yes—if you wish it. . . . It will take only a few minutes. But, oh—do you think——?"

.
"Truly I will; I *do* love you."

.
"Yes, I will hurry. Good-by——"

.
"I do! I do! You will see!"

Up the dark stairway once more in velvet-footed haste, giving herself no moment for considering what she was about to do; masses of heavy, glowing hair in a tangle, with comb and brush flying; the soft, intimate perfume of lace and delicate linen, silk, and the flutter of ribbon; then gown and hat and furs—a stare at the unknown face in the mirror—her last adieu to the girl she had known so long. But, in the dark outside her door, she heard the summons—the voiceless call of the Ghost of Chance, waiting attendance; and her heart responded passionately. Down through the darkness again—fumbling at chain and bolt—the keen night air in her throat; and, through the

THE TREE OF HEAVEN

wintry silence veiled in darkness, the yellow lamps of a brougham gilding her face, dazzling her as she laid her groping hand on the arm of the man who sprang forward to guide her.

"You mustn't shiver so—you must not tremble that way," he whispered. "It is all right, dear; I've got McManus and Kenna for witnesses; they're at the church; I've made arrangements. Naida! Naida! The inevitable was never inevitable while there was the ghost of a chance that you loved me."

She caught his hands in hers, staring into his face, which was as white as her own. "Oh!" she breathed. "I love you so. As maid—as wife, you have taken all there is to me—all of good, of evil—with my first kiss! I am yours—no matter what an outward fate might hold for me. . . . Listen; look at me! Am I to go with you? Shall you repent it? Wait—hush, dear; it is not too late yet. I am not thinking of myself—for the first time in my life I am not thinking of self; nor of my mother; she is easily reconciled. I am thinking of you—of you and all that splendor your spirit lives in—all the heavenly world into which you set me—into which you painted me, transfigured, with eyes that seemed just opening in paradise!

THE GHOST OF CHANCE

"Tell me, dear; your life is important; it is really not your own to throw away. Shall I go with you? Shall I stay here, quiet with your memory—my life already fulfilled?"

His answer was so low that she bent her head close to his to listen. And, after a long while, unclosing her eyes, she saw through the carriage window the dim gas lamps shining and the stained light of a church window tracing across the snow a celestial pathway tinted with crimson, azure, and gold. The horses halted with a snowy thud of dancing hoofs; the wintry air rushed into her face as the carriage door was opened by two tall Irishmen wearing very shiny silk hats.

"Naida, Mr. McManus—Mr. Kenna——"

The tall hats of the tall Irishmen swept the snow; to each in turn she offered an unsteady little hand; then leaning on Leeds's arm she entered the iron gateway, the two contractors following.

"The purty lady," purred Kenna; "d'ye mind the little hand of her, McManus?"

"I did so; an' I seen the mitten to fit it. Shquare yer chist, man; we're walkin' on shtocks and bonds; we're walkin' on the red neck o' pride and power, Kenna. Whisht; cock yer hat, an' thread majestic!"

And so through the snowy darkness of dawn

THE TREE OF HEAVEN

they passed across the frozen gardens to that little church around the corner where no sweeter bride shall ever kneel than knelt there then at prayer among the tinted shadows. And behind them knelt the Ghost of Chance.

The sun rose at seven; and a little later the bride left the church, her pale, enraptured face uplifted to the rosy zenith. She returned to earth presently: "Jim, shall we stop and breakfast with—our mother?"

He pressed her hand in agonized acquiescence; he was too scared to speak. At the same time he seemed to be conscious of something at his elbow, laughing in silence. It was the Ghost of Chance bidding them *au revoir*. Then the brougham drove up at a signal from Kenna; the bride entered, and Leeds turned to McManus: "At five o'clock this morning I wired Thorne that the key panel was finished and ready to deliver. We leave for Florida this afternoon. Will you see that the contract is carried out?"

"Arrah, leave it to Kenna, Misther Leeds. Is that all, sorr?"

"All—I think——"

"There is wan little item I'm thinkin' yer sweet lady has forgotten—but mayhap she has no need av it—now——"

THE GHOST OF CHANCE

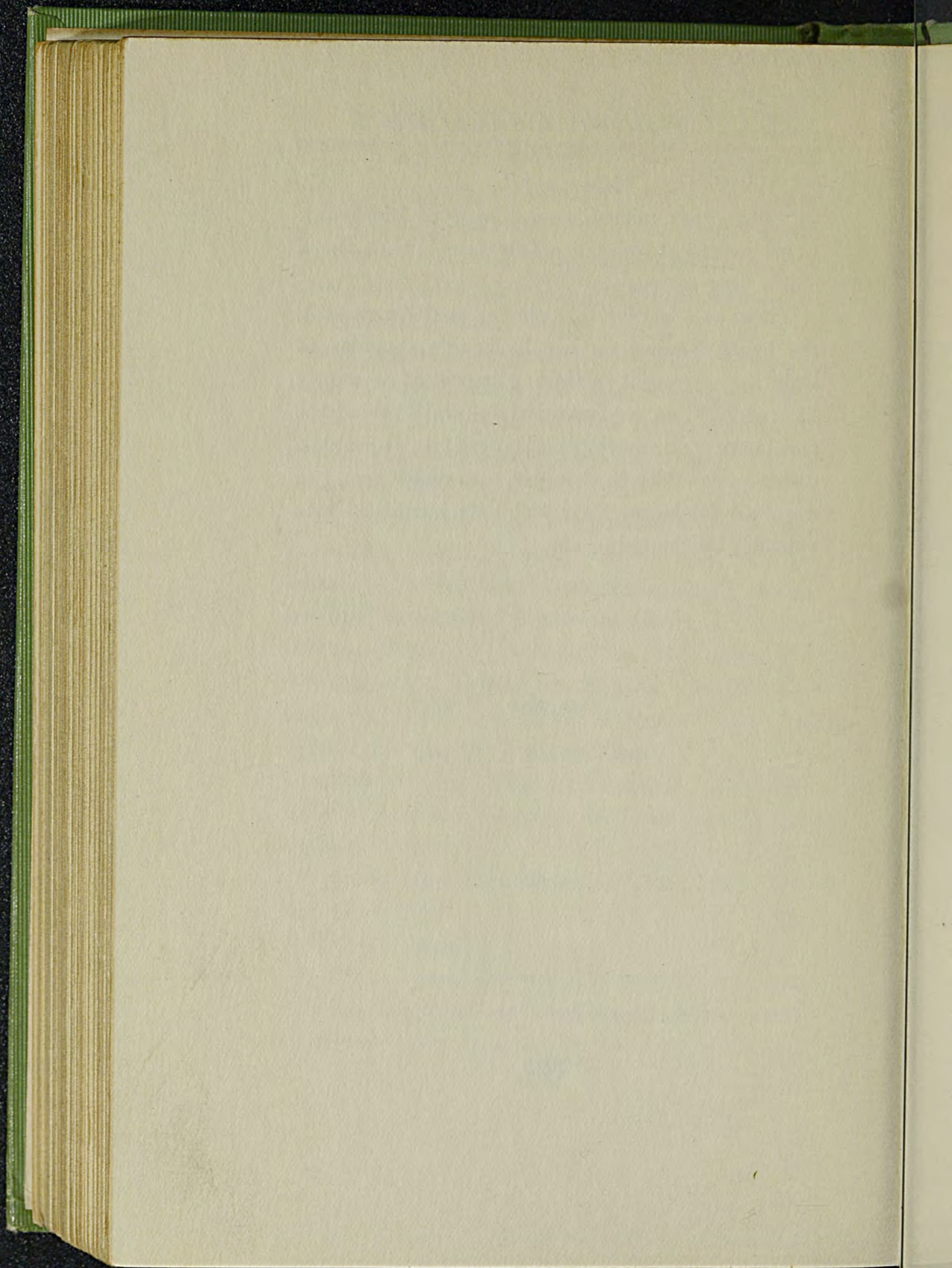
“What’s that, McManus?”

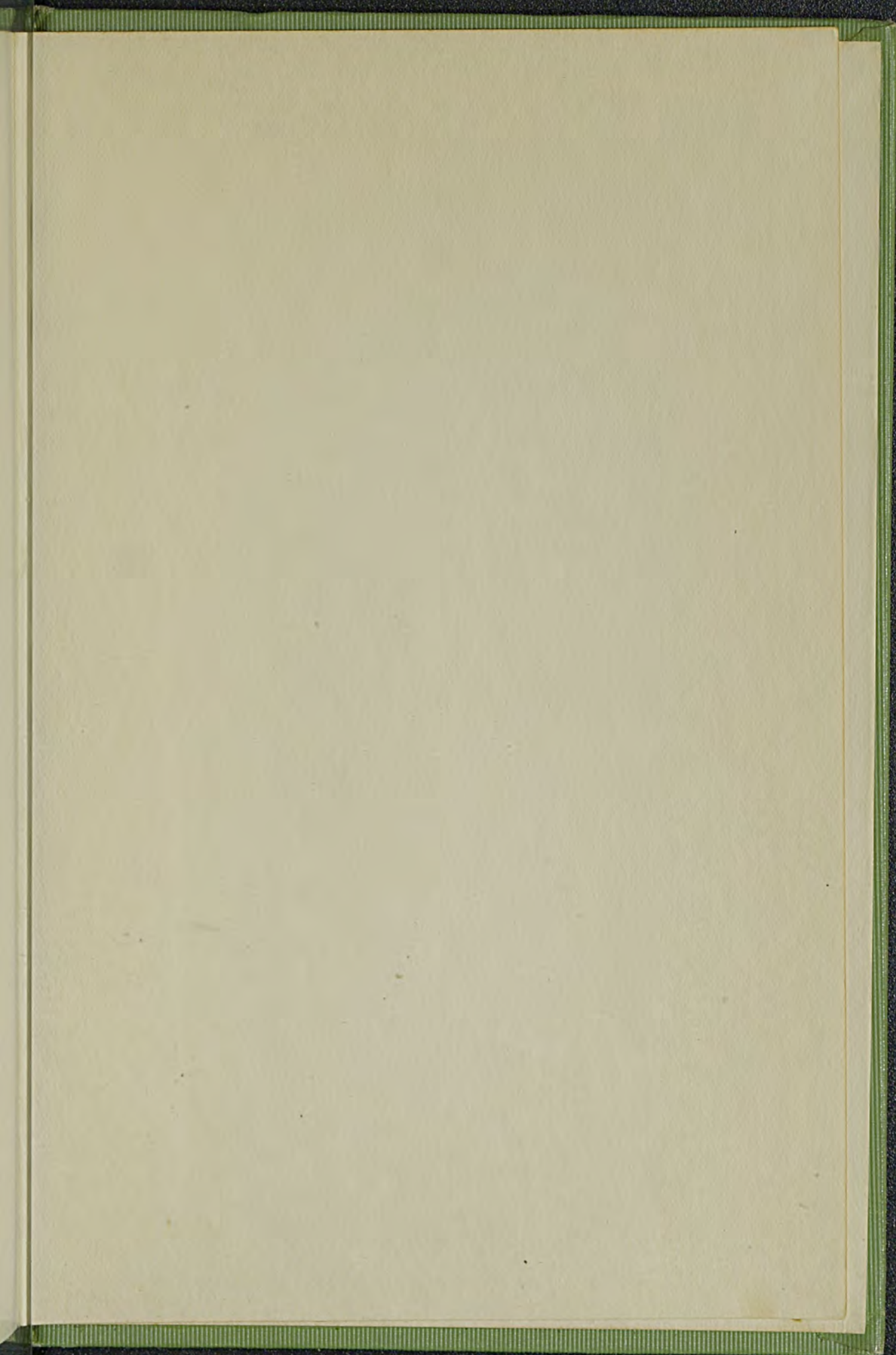
“The other mitten, sorr,” giggled McManus. Leeds looked at him for a full second; they shook hands very seriously.

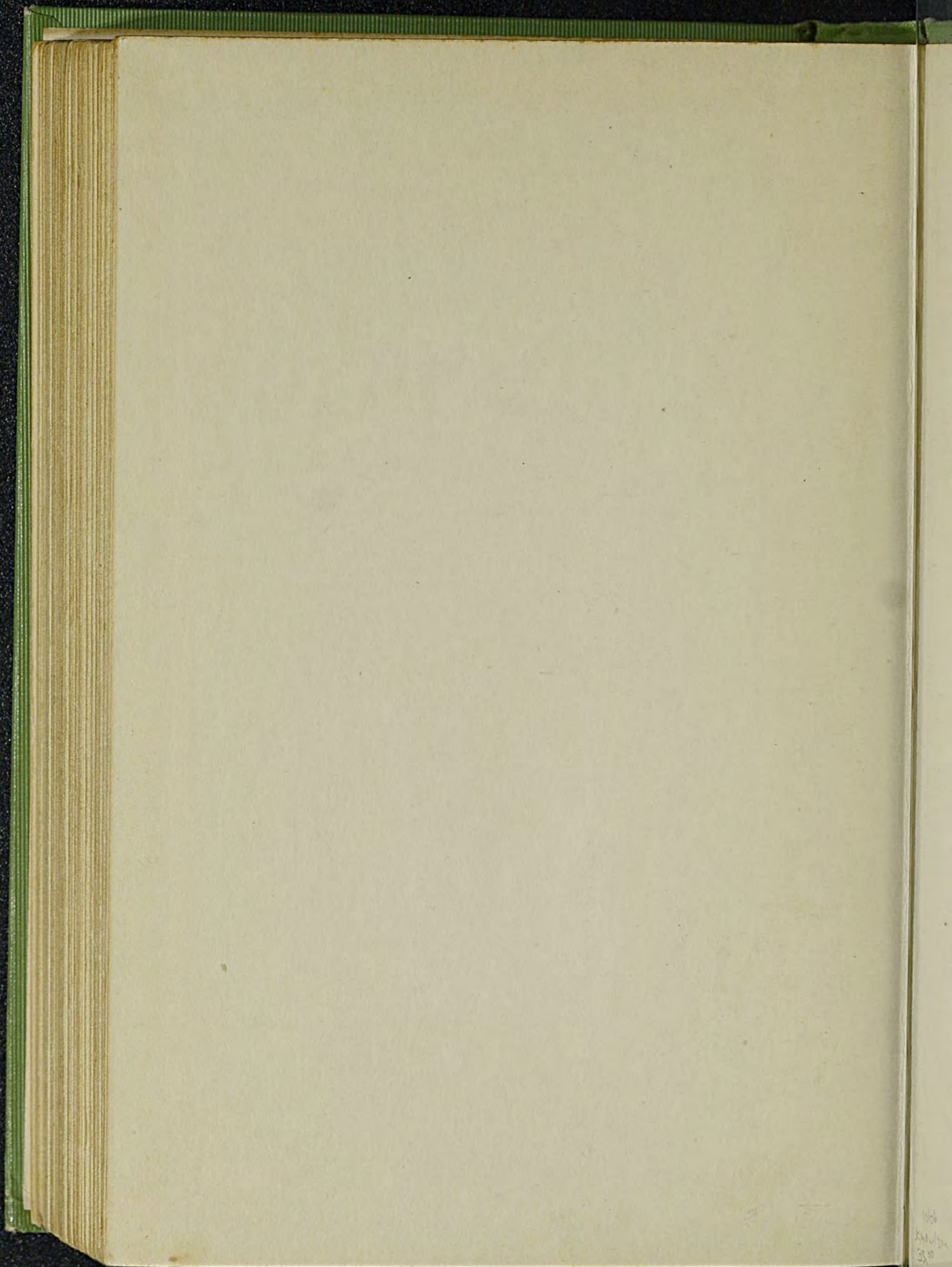
Then, as the carriage wheeled and drove west, the bride, leaning on her husband’s shoulder to look back, caught a last glimpse of a snowy little church, an ice-festooned fountain behind the shrubbery, and, moving majestically in the middle distance, shoulder to shoulder, arm under arm, two dignified Irishmen, their tall hats burnished into splendor by the rising sun.

(1)

THE END







10/10
20/10/10
33/10

1066
Kneulton
35.00

