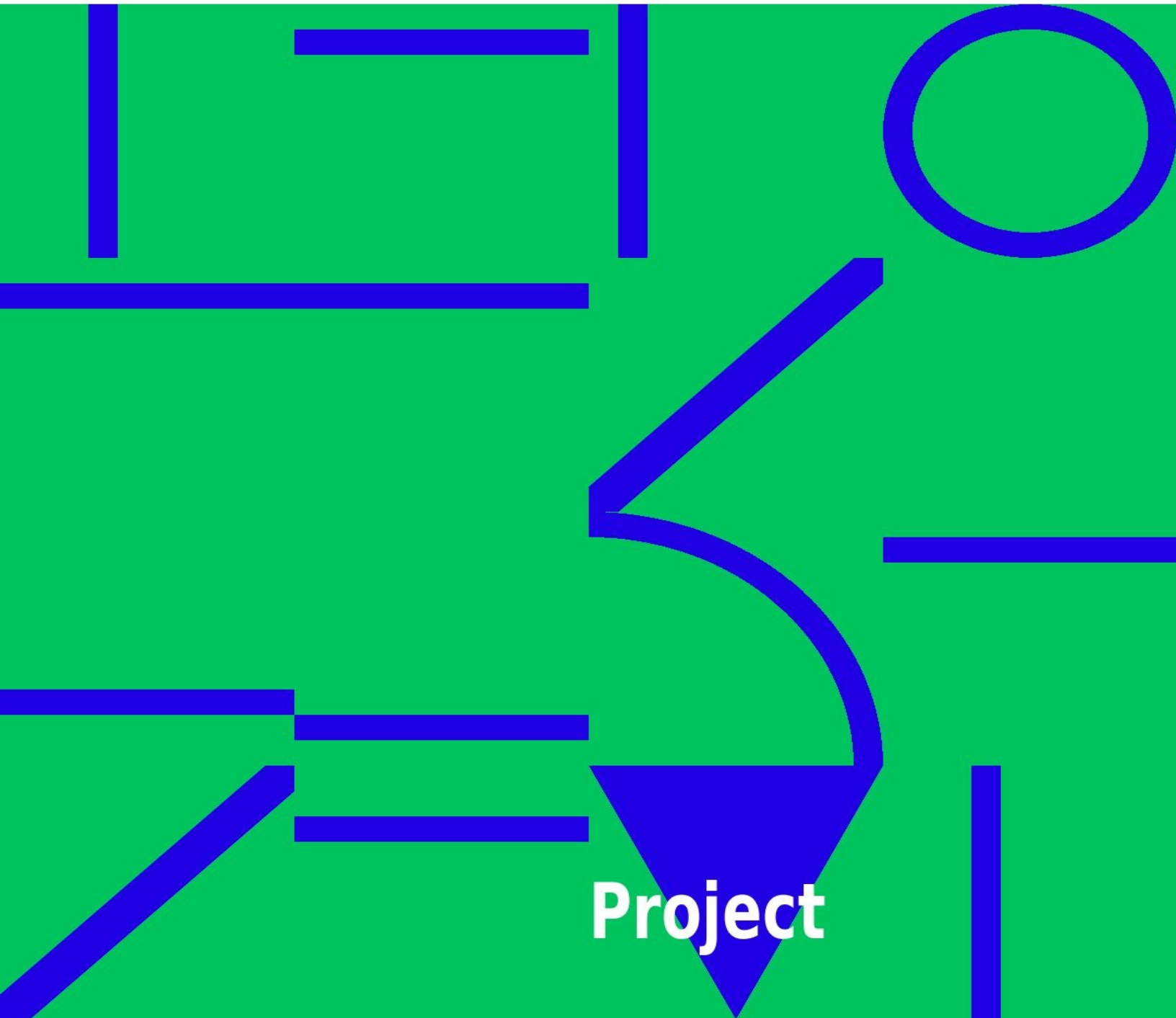
Between Friends

Robert W. Chambers



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BETWEEN FRIENDS

By Robert W. Chambers

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I

Like a man who reenters a closed and darkened house and lies down; lying there, remains conscious of sunlight outside, of bird-calls, and the breeze in the trees, so had Drene entered into the obscurity of himself.

Through the chambers of his brain the twilit corridors where cringed his bruised and disfigured soul, there nothing stirring except the automatic pulses which never cease.

Sometimes, when the sky itself crashes earthward and the world lies in ruins from horizon to horizon, life goes on.

The things that men live through—and live!

But no doubt Death was too busy elsewhere to attend to Drene.

He had become very lean by the time it was all over. Gray glinted on his temples; gray softened his sandy mustache: youth was finished as far as he was concerned.

An odd idea persisted in his mind that it had been winter for many years. And the world thawed out very slowly for him.

But broken trees leaf out, and hewed roots sprout; and what he had so long mistaken for wintry ashes now gleamed warmly like the orange and gold of early autumn. After a while he began to go about more or less—little excursions from the dim privacy of mind and soul—and he found the sun not very gray; and a south wind blowing in the world once more.

Quair and Guilder were in the studio that day on business; Drene continued to modify his composition in accordance with Guilder's suggestions; Quair, always curious concerning Drene, was becoming slyly impudent.

"And listen to me, Guilder. What the devil's a woman between friends?" argued Quair, with a malicious side glance at Drene. "You take my best girl away from me—"

"But I don't," remarked his partner dryly.

"For the sake of argument, you do. What happens? Do I raise hell? No. I merely thank you. Why? Because I don't want her if you can get her away. That," he added, with satisfaction, "is philosophy. Isn't it, Drene?"

Guilder intervened pleasantly:

“I don’t think Drene is particularly interested in philosophy. I’m sure I’m not. Shut up, please.”

Drene, gravely annoyed, continued to pinch bits of modeling wax out of a round tin box, and to stick them all over the sketch he was modifying.

Now and then he gave a twirl to the top of his working table, which revolved with a rusty squeak.

“If you two unusually intelligent gentlemen ask me what good a woman the world—” began Quair.

“But we don’t,” interrupted Guilder, in the temperate voice peculiar to his negative character.

“Anyway,” insisted Quair, “here’s what I think of ‘em—”

“My model, yonder,” said Drene, a slight shrug of contempt, “happens to be feminine, and may also be human. Be decent enough to defer the development of your rather tiresome theory.”

The girl on the model-stand laughed outright at the rebuke, stretched her limbs and body, and relaxed, launching a questioning glance at Drene.

“All right; rest a bit,” said the sculptor, smearing the bit of wax he was pinching over the sketch before him.

He gave another twirl or two to the table, wiped his bony fingers on a handful of cotton waste, picked up his empty pipe, and blew into the stem, reflectively.

Quair, one of the associated architects of the new opera, who had been born a gentleman and looked the perfect bounder, sauntered over to examine the sketch. He was still red from the rebuke he had invited.

Guilder, his senior colleague, got up from the lounge and walked over also. Drene fitted the sketch into the roughly designed group, where it belonged, and stood aside, sucking meditatively on his empty pipe.

After a silence:

“It’s all right,” said Guilder.

Quair remarked that the group seemed to lack flamboyancy. It is true, however, that, except for Guilder’s habitual restraint, the celebrated firm of architects was inclined to express themselves flamboyantly, and to interpret Renaissance in terms of Baroque.

“She’s some girl,” added Quair, looking at the lithe, modeled figure, and then half turning to include the model, who had seated herself on the lounge, and was now gazing with interest at the composition sketched in by Drene for the facade

of the new opera.

“Carpeaux and his eternal group—it’s the murderous but inevitable standard of comparison,” mused Drene, with a whimsical glance at the photograph on the wall.

“Carpeaux has nothing on this young lady,” insisted Quair flippantly; and he pivoted on his heel and sat down beside the model. Once or twice the two others, consulting before the wax group, heard the girl’s light, untroubled laughter behind their backs gaily responsive to Quair’s wit. Perhaps Quair’s inheritance had been humor, but to some it seemed perilously akin to mother-wit.

The pockets of Guilder’s loose, ill-fitting clothes bulged with linen tracings and rolls of blue-prints. He and Drene consulted over these for a while, semi-conscious of Quair’s bantering voice and the girl’s easily provoked laughter behind them. And, finally:

“All right, Guilder,” said Drene briefly. And the firm of celebrated architects prepared to evacuate the studio—Quair exhibiting symptoms of incipient skylarking, in which he was said to be at his best.

“Drop in on me at the office some time,” he suggested to the youthful model, in a gracious tone born of absolute self-satisfaction.

“For luncheon or dinner?” retorted the girl, with smiling audacity.

“You may stay to breakfast also—”

“Oh, come on,” drawled Guilder, taking his colleague’s elbow.

The sculptor yawned as Quair went out: then he closed the door then celebrated firm of architects, and wandered back rather aimlessly.

For a while he stood by the great window, watching the pigeons on neighboring roof. Presently he returned to his table, withdrew the dancing figure with its graceful, wide flung arms, set it upon the squeaky revolving table once more, and studied it, yawning at intervals.

The girl got up from the sofa behind him, went to the model-stand, and mounted it. For a few moments she was busy adjusting her feet to the chalk marks and blocks. Finally she took the pose. She always seemed inclined to be more or less vocal while Drene worked; her voice, if untrained, was untroubled. Her singing had never bothered Drene, nor, until the last few days, had he even particularly noticed her blithe trilling—as a man a field, preoccupied, is scarcely aware of the wild birds’ gay irrelevancy along the way.

He happened to notice it now, and a thought passed through his mind that the country must be very lovely in the mild spring sunshine.

As he worked, the brief visualization of young grass and the faint blue of skies, evoked, perhaps, by the girl's careless singing, made for his dull concentration subtly pleasant environment.

"May I rest?" she asked at length.

"Certainly, if it's necessary."

"I've brought my lunch. It's twelve," she explained.

He glanced at her absently, rolling a morsel of wax; then, with slight irritation which ended in a shrug, he motioned her to descend.

After all, girls, like birds, were eternally eating. Except for that, and incessant preening, existence meant nothing more important to either species.

He had been busy for a few moments with the group when she said something to him, and he looked around from his abstraction. She was holding out toward him a chicken sandwich.

When his mind came back from wool gathering, he curtly declined the offer, and, as an afterthought, bestowed upon her a wholly mechanical smile, in recognition of a generosity not welcome.

"Why don't you ever eat luncheon?" she asked.

"Why should I?" he replied, preoccupied.

"It's bad for you not to. Besides, you are growing thin."

"Is that your final conclusion concerning me, Cecile?" he asked, absently.

"Won't you please take this sandwich?"

Her outstretched arm more than what she said arrested his drifting attention again.

"Why the devil do you want me to eat?" he inquired, fishing out his empty pipe and filling it.

"You smoke too much. It's bad for you. It will do very queer things to the lining of your stomach if you smoke your luncheon instead of eating it."

He yawned.

"Is that so?" he said.

"Certainly it's so. Please take this sandwich."

He stood looking at the outstretched arm, thinking of other things and the girl sprang to her feet, caught his hand, opened the fingers, placed the sandwich on the palm, then, with a short laugh as though slightly disconcerted by her own audacity, she snatched the pipe from his left hand and tossed it upon the table. When she had reseated herself on the lounge beside her pasteboard box of

luncheon, she became even more uncertain concerning the result of what she had done, and began to view with rising alarm the steady gray eyes that were so silently inspecting her.

But after a moment Drene walked over to the sofa, seated himself, curiously scrutinized the sandwich which lay across the palm of his hand, then gravely tasted it.

“This will doubtless give me indigestion,” he remarked. “Why, Cecile, do you squander your wages on nourishment for me?”

“It cost only five cents.”

“But why present five cents to me?” “I gave ten to a beggar this morning.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know.”

“Was he grateful?”

“He seemed to be.”

“This sandwich is excellent; but if I feel the worse for it, I’ll not be very grateful to you.” But he continued eating.

“‘The woman tempted me,’” she quoted, glancing at him sideways.

After a moment’s survey of her:

“You’re one of those bright, saucy, pretty, inexplicable things that throng this town and occasionally flit through this profession—aren’t you?”

“Am I?”

“Yes. Nobody looks for anything except mediocrity; you’re one of the surprises. Nobody expects you; nobody can account for you, but you appear now and then, here and there, anywhere, even everywhere—a pretty sparkle against the gray monotony of life, a momentary flash like a golden moat afloat in sunshine—and what then?”

She laughed.

“What then? What becomes of you? Where do you go? What do you turn into?”

“I don’t know.”

“You go somewhere, don’t you? You change into something, don’t you? What happens to you, petite Cigale?”

“When?”

“When the sunshine is turned off and the snow comes.”

“I don’t know, Mr. Drene.” She broke her chocolate cake into halves and laid one on his knee.

“Thanks for further temptation,” he said grimly.

“You are welcome. It’s good, isn’t it?”

“Excellent. Adam liked the apple, too. But it raised hell with him.”

She laughed, shot a direct glance at him, and began to nibble her cake, with her eyes still fixed on him.

Once or twice he encountered her gaze but his own always wandered absently elsewhere.

“You think a great deal, don’t you?” she remarked.

“Don’t you?”

“I try not to—too much.”

“What?” he asked, swallowing the last morsel of cake.

She shrugged her shoulders:

“What’s the advantage of thinking?”

He considered her reply for a moment, her blue and rather childish eyes, and the very pure oval of her face. Then his attention flagged as usual—was wandering—when she sighed, very lightly, so that he scarcely heard it—merely noticed it sufficiently to conclude that, as usual, there was the inevitable hard luck story afloat in her vicinity, and that he lacked the interest to listen to it.

“Thinking,” she said, “is a luxury to a tranquil mind and a punishment to a troubled one. So I try not to.”

It was a moment or two before it occurred to him that the girl had uttered an unconscious epigram.

“It sounded like somebody—probably Montaigne. Was it?” he inquired.

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“Oh. Then it wasn’t. You’re a funny little girl, aren’t you?”

“Yes, rather.”

“On purpose?”

“Yes, sometimes.”

He looked into her very clear eyes, now brightly blue with intelligent perception of his not too civil badinage.

“And sometimes,” he went on, “you’re funny when you don’t intend to be.”

“You are, too, Mr. Drene.”

“What?”

“Didn’t you know it?”

A dull color tinted his cheek bones.

“No,” he said, “I didn’t know it.”

“But you are. For instance, you don’t walk; you stalk. You do what novelists make their gloomy heroes do—you stride. It’s rather funny.”

“Really. And do you find my movements comic?”

She was a trifle scared, now, but she laughed her breathless, youthful laugh:

“You are really very dramatic—a perfect story-book man. But, you know, sometimes they are funny when the author doesn’t intend them to be.... Please don’t be angry.”

Why the impudence of a model should have irritated him he was at a loss to understand—unless there lurked under that impudence a trace of unflattering truth.

As he sat looking at her, all at once, and in an unexpected flash of self-illumination, he realized that habit had made of him an actor; that for a while—a long while—a space of time he could not at the moment conveniently compute—he had been playing a role merely because he had become accustomed to it.

Disaster had cast him for a part. For a long while he had been that part. Now he was still playing it from sheer force of habit. His tragedy had really become only the shadow of a memory. Already he had emerged from that shadow into the everyday outer world. But he had forgotten that he still wore a somber makeup and costume which in the sunshine might appear grotesque. No wonder the world thought him funny.

Glancing up from a perplexed and chagrined meditation he caught her eye—and found it penitent, troubled, and anxious.

“You’re quite right,” he said, smiling easily and naturally; “I am unintentionally funny. And I really didn’t know it—didn’t suspect it—until this moment.”

“Oh,” she said quickly. “I didn’t mean—I know you are often unhappy—”

“Nonsense!”

“You are! Anybody can see—and you really do not seem to be very old, either—when you smile—”

“I’m not very old,” he said, amused. “I’m not unhappy, either. If I ever was, the truth is that I’ve almost forgotten by this time what it was all about—”

“A woman,” she quoted, “between friends”—and checked herself, frightened that she had dared interpret Quair’s malice.

He changed countenance at that; the dull red of anger clouded his visage.

“Oh,” she faltered, “I was not saucy, only sorry.... I have been sorry for you so long—”

“Who intimated to you that a woman ever played any part in my career?”

“It’s generally supposed. I don’t know anything more than that. But I’ve been —sorry. Love is a very dreadful thing,” she said under her breath.

“Is it?” he asked, controlling a sudden desire to laugh.

“Don’t you think so?”

“I have not thought of it that way, recently.... I haven’t thought about it at all—for some years.... Have you?” he added, trying to speak gravely.

“Oh, yes. I have thought of it,” she admitted.

“And you conclude it to be a rather dreadful business?”

“Yes, it is.”

“How?”

“Oh, I don’t know. A girl usually loves the wrong man. To be poor is always bad enough, but to be in love, too, is really very dreadful. It usually finishes us—you know.”

“Are you in love?” he inquired, managing to repress his amusement.

“I could be. I know that much.” She went to the sink, turned on the water, washed her hands, and stood with dripping fingers looking about for a towel.

“I’ll get you one,” he said. When he brought it, she laughed and held out her hands to be dried.

“Do you think you are a Sultana?” he inquired, draping the towel across her outstretched arms and leaving it there.

“I thought perhaps you’d dry them,” she said sweetly.

“Not in the business,” he remarked; and lighted his pipe.

Her hands were her particular beauty, soft and snowy. She was much in demand among painters, and had posed many times for pictures of the Virgin, her hands usually resting against her breast.

Now she bestowed great care upon them, thoroughly drying each separate, slender finger. Then she pushed back the heavy masses of her hair—“a miracle of silk and sunshine,” as Quair had whispered to her. That same hair, also, was

very popular among painters.

It was her figure that fascinated sculptors.

“Are you ready?” grunted Drene. Work presently recommenced.

She was entirely accustomed to praise from men, for her general attractiveness, for various separate features in what really was an unusually lovely ensemble.

She was also accustomed to flattery, to importunity, to the ordinary variety of masculine solicitation; to the revelation of genuine feeling, too, in its various modes of expression—sentimental, explosive, insinuating—the entire gamut.

She had remained, however, untouched; curious and amused, perhaps, yet quite satisfied, so far, to be amused; and entirely content with her own curiosity.

She coquetted when she thought it safe; learned many things she had not suspected; was more cautious afterwards, but still, at intervals, ventured to use her attractiveness as a natural lure, as an excuse, as a reason, as a weapon, when the probable consequences threatened no embarrassment or unpleasantness for her.

She was much liked, much admired, much attempted, and entirely untempted.

When the Make-up Club gave its annual play depicting the foibles of artists and writers in the public eye, Cecile White was always cast for a role which included singing and dancing.

On and off for the last year or two she had posed for Drene, had dropped into his studio to lounge about when he had no need of her professionally, and when she had half an hour of idleness confronting her.

As she stood there now on the model stand, gazing dreamily from his busy hands to his lean, intent features, it occurred to her that this day had not been a sample of their usual humdrum relations. From the very beginning of their business relations he had remained merely her employer, self-centered, darkly absorbed in his work, or, when not working, bored and often yawning. She had never come to know him any better than when she first laid eyes on him.

Always she had been a little interested in him, a little afraid, sometimes venturing an innocent audacity, out of sheer curiosity concerning the effect on him. But never had she succeeded in stirring him to any expression of personal feeling in regard to herself, one way or the other.

Probably he had no personal feeling concerning her. It seemed odd to her; model and master thrown alone together, day after day, usually became friends in some degree. But there had been nothing at all of camaraderie in their

relationship, only a colorless, professional sans-gene, the informality of intimacy without the kindly essence of personal interest on his part.

He paid her wages promptly; said good morning when she came, and good night when she went; answered her questions when she asked them seriously; relapsed into indifference or into a lazy and not too civil badinage when she provoked him to it; and that was all.

He never complimented her, never praised her; yet he must have thought her a good model, or he would not have continued to send for her.

“Do you think me pretty?” she had asked one day, saucily invading one of his yawning silences.

“I think you’re pretty good,” he replied, “as a model. You’d be quite perfect if you were also deaf and dumb.”

That had been nearly a year ago. She thought of it now, a slight heat in her cheeks as she remembered the snub, and her almost childish amazement, and the hurt and offended silence which lasted all that morning, but which, if he noticed at all, was doubtless entirely gratifying to him.

“May I rest?”

“If it’s necessary.”

She sprang lightly to the floor walked around behind him, and stood looking at his work.

“Do you want to know my opinion?” she asked.

“Yes,” he said, with unexpected urbanity; “if you are clever enough to have an opinion. What is it?”

She said, looking at the wax figure of herself and speaking with deliberation:

“In the last hour you have made out of a rather commonplace study an entirely spontaneous and charming creation.”

“What!” he exclaimed, his face reddening with pleasure at her opinion, and with surprise at her mode of expressing it.

“It’s quite true. That dancing figure is wholly charming. It is no study; it is pure creation.”

He knew it; was a little thrilled that she, representing to him an average and mediocre public, should recognize it so intelligently.

“As though,” she continued, “you had laid aside childish things.”

“What?” he asked, surprised again at the authority of the expression.

“Academic precision and the respectable excellencies of-the-usual;—you have

put away childish things and become a man."

"Where did you hear that?" he said bluntly.

"I heard it when I said it. You know, Mr. Drene, I am not wholly uneducated, although your amiable question insinuates as much."

"I'm not unamiable. Only I didn't suppose—"

"Oh, you never have supposed anything concerning me. So why are you surprised when I express myself with fragmentary intelligence?"

"I'm sorry—"

"Listen to me. I'm not afraid of you any more. I've been afraid for two years. Now, I'm not. Your study is masterly. I know it. You know it. You didn't know I knew it; you didn't know I knew anything. And you didn't care."

She sat down on the sofa, facing him with a breathless smile.

"You don't care what I think, what I am, what interests I may have, what intellect, what of human desire, hope, fear, ambition animates me; do you? You don't care whether I am ignorant or educated, bad or good, ill or well—as long as it does not affect my posing for you; whether I am happy or unhappy, whether I—"

"For Heaven's sake—"

"But you don't care!... Do you?"

He was silent; he stood looking at her in a stupid sort of way.

After a moment or two she rose, picked up her hat, went to the glass and pinned it on, then strolled slowly back, drawing on her gloves.

"It's five o'clock, you know, Drene."

"Yes, certainly."

"Do you want me to-morrow?"

"Yes. Yes, of course."

"You are not offended?"

He did not answer. She came up to him and repeated the question in a childishly anxious voice that was a trifle too humble. And looking down into her eyes he saw a gleam of pure mischief in them.

"You little villain!" he said; and caught her wrists. "A lot you care whether I am offended!"

She looked away from him, turning her profile. Her expression was inscrutable. After a silence he dropped her wrists with a vague laugh.

“You should have let me alone,” he said.

“‘The woman tempted me,’” she repeated, still looking away from him. He said nothing.

“Good night,” she nodded, and turned toward the door.

He went with her, falling into step beside her. One arm slipped around her waist as they entered the hallway. They walked slowly to the door. He unlatched it, hesitated; she moved one foot forward, and he took a step at the same time which brought her across his path so closely that contact was unavoidable. And he kissed her.

“Oh,” she said. “So you are human after all! I often wondered.”

She looked up, trying to laugh, but could not seem to take it as coolly as she might have wished to.

“Not that a kiss is very important in these days,” she continued, “yet it might interest you to hear that a friend of yours rather fancies me. He wouldn’t like you to do it. But—” She lifted her blue eyes with faint malice—“What is a woman between friends?”

“Who is he?”

“Jack Graylock.”

Drene remained motionless.

“I haven’t encouraged him,” she said. “Perhaps that is why.”

“Why he fancies you?”

“Why he asked me to marry him. It was the only thing he had not asked.”

“He asked that?”

“After he realized it was the only way, I suppose,” she said coolly. Drene took her into his arms and kissed her deliberately on the mouth. Looking up at him she said: “After all, he is your friend, isn’t he?”

“A friend of many years. But, as you say, what is a woman between friends?”

“I don’t know,” said the girl. And, still clasped in his arms, she bent her head, thoughtfully, considering the question.

And as though she had come to some final conclusion, she raised her head, lifted her eyes slowly, and her lips, to the man whose arms enfolded her. It was her answer to his question, and her own.

When she had gone, he went back and stood again by the great window, watching the cote on a neighboring roof, where the pigeons were strutting and coquetting in the last rays of the western sun.

II

When she came again to the studio, she was different, subdued, evading, avoiding, smiling a little in her flushed diffidence at his gay ease of manner—or assumption of both ease and gaiety.

He was inclined to rally her, tease her, but her reticence was not all embarrassment. The lightest contact, the slightest caress from him, added a seriousness to her face, making it very lovely under its heightened color, and strangely childlike.

Model and master they would have remained no longer had it been for him to say, he desiring now to make it a favor and concession on her part to aid him professionally, she gravely insisting on professionalism as the basis of whatever entente might develop between them, as well as the only avowed excuse for her presence there alone with him.

“Please. It’s respectable,” she insisted her agreeable, modulated voice. “I had rather the reason for my coming here be business—whatever else happens.”

“What has happened,” he said, balancing a handful of wet clay in one hand and looking laughingly up at her, where she stood on the model-stand, “is that a pretty girl strolled in here one day and held up a mirror to a solemn ass who was stalking theatrically through life. That solemn ass is very grateful for the glimpse he had of himself. He behaved gratefully, didn’t he?”

“Very,” she said with a forced smile.

“Do you object to the manner in which he expressed his gratitude?”

She hung her head.

“No,” she said.

After a while she raised her eyes, her head still lowered. He was working, darkly absorbed as usual in the plastic mass under his fingers.

She watched him curiously, not his hands, now, but his lean, intent face, striving to penetrate that masculine mask, trying to understand. Varying and odd reflections and emotions possessed her in turn, and passed—wonder, bewilderment at herself, at him; a slight sense of fear, then a brief and sudden access of shyness, succeeded by the by glow of an emotion new and strange and deep. And this, in turn, by vague bewilderment again, in which there was both a hint of fear, and a tinge of something exquisite.

Within herself she was dimly conscious that a certain gaiety, an irresponsibility and lightness had died out in her, perhaps permanently, yet leaving no void. What it was that replaced these she could not name—she only was conscious that if these had been subdued by a newer knowledge, with a newer seriousness, this unaccustomed gravity had left her heart no less tender, and had deepened her capacity for emotion to depths as profound and unexplored as the sudden mystery of their discovery by herself.

Always, now, while she posed, she was looking at him with a still intentness, as though he really wore a mask and she, breathlessly vigilant, watched for the moment when he might forget and lift it.

But during the weeks that followed, if the mask were indeed only the steady preoccupation that his visage wore, she seemed to learn nothing more about him when his features lost their dark absorption and he caught her eye and smiled. No, the smile revealed nothing except another mask under the more serious cast of concentration—only another disguise that covered whatever this man might truly be deeper down—this masculine and unknown invader of frontiers surrendered ere she had understood they were even besieged.

And during these weeks in early spring their characteristics, even characters, seemed to have shifted curiously and become reversed; his was now the light, irresponsible, half-mocking badinage—almost boyishly boisterous at times, as, for instance, when he stepped forward after the pose and swung her laughingly from the model-platform to her corner on the sofa.

“You pretty and clever little thing,” he said, “why are you becoming so serious and absent-minded?”

“Am I becoming so?”

“You are. You oughtn’t to: you’ve made a new and completely different man of me.”

As though that were an admirable achievement, or even of any particular importance. And yet she seemed to think it was both of these when, resting against him, within the circle of his arm, still shy and silent under the breathless poignancy of an emotion which ever seemed to sound within her depths unsuspected.

But when he said that she had made a new and completely different man of him, she remembered his low-voiced when that change impended as he held her by her wrists a moment, then dropped them. He had said, half to himself: “You should have let me alone!”

Sometimes at noon she remembered this when they went out for luncheon

realizing they would never have been seated together in a restaurant had she not satisfied her curiosity. She should have let him alone; she knew that. She tried to wish that she had—tried to regret everything, anything; and could not, even when within her the faint sense of alarm awoke amid the softly unchangeable unreality of these last six weeks of spring.

Was this then really love?—this drifting through alternating dreams of shyness, tenderness, suspense, pierced at moments by tiny flashes of fear, as lightning flickers, far buried in softly shrouded depths of cloud?

She had long periods of silent and absorbed dreaming, conscious only that she dreamed, but not of the dream itself.

She was aware, too, of a curious loneliness within her, and dimly understood that it was the companion of a lifetime she was missing—her conscience. Where was it? Had it gone? Had it died? Were the little, inexplicable flashes of fear proof of its disintegration? Or its immortal vitality?

Dead, dormant, departed, she knew not which, she was dully aware of its loss—dimly and childishly troubled that she could remember nothing to be sorry for. And there was so much.

Men in his profession who knew him began to look askance at him and her, amused or otherwise, according to their individual characters.

That Cecile White went about more or less with the sculptor Drene was a nine days' gossip among circles familiar to them both, and was forgotten—as are all wonders—in nine days.

Some of his acquaintances recalled what had been supposed to be the tragedy of his life, mentioning a woman's name, and a man's—Drene's closest friend. But gossip does not last long among the busy—not that the busy are incapable of gossip, but they finish with it quickly, having other matters to think about.

Even Quair, after recovering from his wonder that his own condescending advances had been ignored, bestowed his fatuously inflammable attentions elsewhere.

He had been inclined to complain one day in the studio, when he and Guilder visited Drene professionally; and Guilder looked at his dapper confrere in surprise and slight disgust; and Drene, at first bored, grew irritable.

"What are you talking about?" he said sharply.

"I'm talking about Cecile White," continued Quair, looking rather oddly at the sculptor out of his slightly prominent eyes. "I didn't suppose you could be interested in any woman—not that I mind your interfering with any little affair

between Cecile and me—”

“There wasn’t any.”

“I beg your pardon, Drene—”

“There wasn’t any!” repeated Drene, with curt contempt. “Don’t talk about her, anyway.”

“You mean I’m not to talk about a common artist’s model—”

“Not that way.”

“Oh. Is she yours?”

“She isn’t anybody’s, I fancy. Therefore, let her alone, or I’ll throw you out of doors.”

Quair said to Guilder after they had departed:

“Fancy old Drene playing about with that girl on a strictly pious basis! He’s doubtless dub enough to waste his time. But what’s in it for her?”

“Perhaps a little unaccustomed masculine decency.”

“Everybody is decent enough to her as far as I know.”

“Including yourself?”

“Certainly, including myself,” retorted Quair, adding naively: “Besides, I knew any attempt at philandering would be time wasted.”

“Yet you tried it,” mused Guilder, entering his big touring car and depositing a bundle of blue-prints and linen tracing paper at his own ponderous feet. Quair followed him and spoke briefly to the chauffeur, then:

“Tried nothing,” he said. “A little chaff, that’s all. When it comes to a man like Jack Graylock going so far as to ask her to marry him, good night, nurse! Nothing doing, even for me.”

“Even for you,” repeated Guilder in his moderate and always modulated voice. “Well, if she’s escaped you and Graylock, she’s beyond any danger from Drene, I fancy.”

Quair smiled appreciatively, as though a delicate compliment had been offered him. Several times on the way to call on Graylock he insisted on stopping the car at as many celebrated cafes. Guilder patiently awaited him in the car and each time Quair emerged from the cafe bar a little more flushed and a trifle jauntier than when he had entered.

He was a man so perfectly attired and so scrupulously fastidious about his person that Guilder often speculated as to just why Quair always seemed to him a trifle soiled.

Now, looking him over as he climbed into the car, unusually red in the face, breathing out the aroma of spirits through his little, pinched nostrils, a faint sensation of disgust came over the senior member of the firm as though the junior member were physically unclean.

“That’s about ten drinks since luncheon,” he remarked, as the car rolled on down Fifth Avenue.

Quair, who usually grew disagreeably familiar when mellow, poked his gloved thumb:

“You’re a merry old cock, aren’t you?” he inquired genially, “—like a pig’s wrist! If I hadn’t the drinking of the entire firm to do, who’d ever talk about Guilder and Quair, architects?”

It was common rumor that Quair did his brilliant work only when “soused.” And he never appeared to be perfectly sober, even when he was.

Graylock received them in his office—a big, reckless-eyed, handsome man, with Broad Street written all over him and “danger” etched in every deepened line of his face.

“Well, how about that business of mine?” he inquired. “It’s all right to keep me waiting, of course, while you and Quair here match for highballs at the Ritz.”

“I had to see Drene—that’s why we are late,” explained Guilder. “We’re ready to go ahead and let your contracts for you—”

“Drene?” interrupted Graylock, looking straight at Guilder with a curious and staring intensity. “Why drag Drene into an excuse?”

“Because we went to his studio,” said Guilder. “Now about letting the contracts—”

“Were you at Drene’s studio?”

“Yes. He’s doing the groups for the new opera for us.”

Quair, watching Graylock, was seized with a malicious impulse:

“Neat little skirt he has up there—that White girl,” he remarked, seating himself on Graylock’s polished table.

A dull flush stained Graylock’s cheekbones, and his keen eyes turned on Quair. The latter lighted a cigarette, expelled the smoke in two thin streams from his abnormally narrow nostrils.

“Some skirt,” he repeated. “And it looks as though old Drene had her number __”

Guilder’s level voice interrupted:

“The contracts are ready to be—”

But Graylock, not heeding, and perhaps not hearing, and looking all the time at Quair, said slowly:

“Drene isn’t that kind.... Is he?”

“Our kind, you mean?” inquired Quair, with a malice so buried under flippancy that the deliberate effrontery passed for it with Graylock. Which amused Quair for a moment, but the satisfaction was not sufficient. He desired that Graylock should feel the gaff.

“Drene,” he said, “is one of those fussers who jellify when hurled on their necks—the kind that ask that kind of girl to marry them after she’s turned down everything else they suggest.”

Graylock’s square jaw tightened and his steady eyes seemed to grow even paler; but Quair, as though perfectly unconscious of this man’s record with the wife of his closest friend, and of the rumors which connected him so seriously with Cecile White, swung his leg unconcernedly, where it dangled over the table’s edge, and smiled frankly and knowingly upon Graylock:

“There’s always somebody to marry that sort of girl; all mush isn’t on the breakfast table. When you and I are ready to quit, Graylock, Providence has created a species of man who settles our bills.”

He threw back his head, inhaled the smoke of his cigarette, sent two thin streams through his nose.

“Maybe Drene may marry her himself. But—I don’t believe he’ll have to.... Now, about those contracts—” he affected a yawn, “—go on and tell him, Guilder,” he added, his words distorted by another yawn.

He stepped down to the floor from his perch on the table, stretched his arms, looking affably all the while at Graylock, who had never moved a muscle.

“I believe you had a run-in with that Cecile girl once, didn’t you, Graylock? Like the rest of us, eh? Oh, well—my hat off to old Drene if he wins out. I hold no malice. After all, Graylock, what’s a woman between friends?”

And he nodded gaily at Graylock and sauntered leisurely to the window.

And kept his back turned, fearful of exploding with laughter in the very face of the man who had been staring at him out of pale, unchanging eyes so steadily and so long.

Guilder’s patient, bored, but moderate voice was raised once more:

“In regard to the letting of these contracts—”

But Graylock, staring at Quair's back, neither heeded nor heard him, for his brain was still ringing with the mockery of Quair's words—"What is a woman between friends?" And now, for the first time, he was beginning to understand what the answer might be.

III

She had not posed for Drene during the last two weeks, and he had begun to miss her, after his own fashion—that is, he thought of her when not preoccupied and sometimes desired her companionship when unoccupied.

And one evening he went to his desk, rummaged among note-books, and scribbled sheets of paper, until he found her address, which he could never remember, wrote it down on another slip of paper, pocketed it, and went out to his dinner.

But as he dined, other matters reoccupied his mind, matters professional, schemes little and great, broad and in detail, which gradually, though not excluding her entirely, quenched his desire to see her at that particular time.

Sometimes it was sheer disinclination to make an effort to communicate with her, sometimes, and usually, the self-centering concentration which included himself and his career, as well as his work, seemed to obliterate even any memory of her existence.

Now and then, when alone in his shabby bedroom, reading a dull book, or duly preparing to retire, far in the dim recesses of heart and brain a faint pain became apparent—if it could still be called pain, this vague ghost of anger stirring in the ashes of dead years—and at such moments he thought of Graylock, and of another; and the partly paralyzed emotion, which memory of these two evoked, stirred him finally to think of Cecile.

It was at such times that he always determined to seek her the next day and continue with her what had been begun—an intimacy which depended upon his own will; a destiny for her which instinct whispered was within his own control. But the next day found him at work; models of various types, ages, and degrees of stupidity came, posed, were paid, and departed; his studies for the groups in collaboration with Guilder and Quair were approaching the intensely interesting period—that stage of completion where composition has been determined upon and the excitement of developing the construction and the technical charm of modeling begins.

And evening always found him physically tired and mentally satisfied—or perturbed—to the exclusion of such minor interests as life is made of—dress, amusement, food, women. Between a man and a beloved profession in full shock of embrace there is no real room for these or thought of these.

He ate irregularly and worked with the lack of wisdom characteristic of creative ability, and he grew thinner and grayer at the temples, and grayer of flesh, too, so that within a month, between the torrid New York summer and his own unwisdom, he became again the gaunt, silent, darkly absorbed recluse, never even stirring abroad for air until some half-deadened pang of hunger, or the heavy warning of a headache, set him in reluctant motion.

He heard of Cecile now and then; Cosby had used her for a figure on a fountain destined to embellish the estate of a wealthy young man somewhere or other; Greer employed her for the central figure of Innocence in his lovely and springlike decoration for some Western public edifice. Quair had met her several times at Manhattan Beach with various and assorted wealthy young men.

And one evening Guilder came alone to his studio and found him lying on the lounge, his lank, muscular hands, still clay-stained, hanging inert to the floor above an evening paper fallen there.

“Hello, Guilder,” he said, without rising, as the big architect shambled loosely through the open doorway.

“How are you, Drene?”

“All right. It’s hot.”

“There’s not a breath of air. It looks like a thunder-storm in the west.”

He pulled up a chair and sprawled on it, wiping his grave features with a damp handkerchief.

“Drene,” he said, “a philanthropic guy of sorts wants to add a chapel to the church at Shallow Brook, Long Island. We’ve pinched the job. Can you do an altar piece?”

“What sort?”

“They want a Virgin. It’s to be called the Chapel of the Annunciation. It’s for women to repair to—under certain and natural circumstances.”

“I’ve so much on hand—”

“It’s only a single figure-barring the dove. Why don’t you do it?”

“There are plenty of other men—”

“They want you. There’ll be no difficulty about terms.”

Drene said with a shrug:

“Terms are coming to mean less and less to me, Guilder. It costs very little for me to live.” He turned his gray, tired face. “Look at this barn of a place; and go in there and look at my bedroom. I have no use for what are known as

necessities.”

“Still, terms are terms—”

“Oh, yes. A truck may run over me. Even at that, I’ve enough to live life out as I am living it here—between these empty walls—and that expanse of glass overhead. That’s about all life holds for me—a sheet of glass and four empty walls—and a fistfull of wet clay.”

“Are you a trifle morbid, Drene?”

“I’m not by any means; I merely prefer to live this way. I have sufficient means to live otherwise if I wish. But this is enough of the world to suit me, Guilder—and I can go to a noisy restaurant to eat in when I’m so inclined—” He laughed a rather mirthless laugh and glanced up, catching a peculiar expression in Guilder’s eyes.

“You’re thinking,” said Drene coolly, “what a god I once set up on the altar of domesticity. I used to talk a lot once, didn’t I?—a hell of a clamor I made in eulogy of the domestic virtues. Well, only idiots retain the same opinions longer than twenty-four hours. Fixity is imbecility; the inconstant alone progress; dissatisfaction is only a synonym for intelligence; contentment translated means stagnation..... I have changed my opinion concerning the virtues of domesticity.”

Guilder said, in his even, moderate voice:

“Your logic is weird, Drene: in one breath you say you have changed your opinion; in another that you are content; in another that contentment is the fixedness of imbecility—”

Drene, reddening slightly, half rose on one elbow from his couch:

“What I meant was that I change in my convictions from day to day, without reproaching myself with inconstancy. What I believed with all my heart to be sacred yesterday I find a barrier to-day; and push it aside and go on.”

“Toward what?”

“I go on, that’s all I know—toward sanctuary.”

“You mean professionally.”

“In every way—ethically—spiritually. The gods of yesterday, too, were very real—yesterday.”

“Drene, a man may change and progress on his way toward what never changes. But standards remained fixed. They were there in the beginning; they are immutable. If they shifted, humanity could have no goal.”

“Is there a goal?”

“Where are you going, then?”

“Just on.”

“In your profession there is a goal toward which you sculptors all journey.”

“Perfection?”

Guilder nodded.

“But,” smiled Drene, “no two sculptors ever see it alike.”

“It is still Perfection. It is still the goal to the color-blind and normal alike, whatever they call it, however, they visualize it. That is its only importance; it is The Goal..... In things spiritual the same obtains—whether one’s vision embraces Nirvana, or the Algonquin Ocean of Light, or a pallid Christ half hidden in floating clouds—Drene, it is all one, all one. It is not the Goal that changes; only our intelligence concerning its existence and its immortality.”

Drene lay looking at him:

“You never knew pain—real pain, did you? The world never ended for you, did it?”

“In one manner or another we all must be reborn before we can progress.”

“That is a cant phrase.”

“No; there’s truth under the cant. Under all the sleek, smooth, canty phrases of ecclesiastic proverb, precept, axiom, and lore, there is truth worth the sifting out.”

“You are welcome to think so, Guilder.”

“You also could come to no other conclusion if you took the trouble to investigate.”

Drene smiled:

“Morals are no more than folk-ways—merely mental condition consequent upon custom. Spiritual beliefs are radically dependant upon folkways and the resultant physical and mental condition of the human brain which creates everything that has been and that is to be.”

“Physiology has proven that no idea, no thought, ever originated within the concrete and physical brain.”

“I’ve read of those experiments.”

“Then you can’t ignore a conclusion.”

“I haven’t reached a conclusion. Meanwhile, I have my own beliefs.”

“That’s all that’s necessary,” said Guilder, gravely, “—to entertain some

belief, temporary or final.” He smiled slightly down at Drene’s drawn, gray visage.

“You and I have been friends of many years, Drene, but we have never before talked this way. I did not feel at liberty to assume any intimacy with you, even when I wanted to, even when—when you were in trouble—” He hesitated.

“Go on,” grunted the other. “I’m out of trouble now.”

“I just—it’s a whimsical notion—no, it’s a belief;—I just wanted to tell you one or two things concerning my own beliefs—”

“Temporary?”

“I don’t know. It doesn’t matter; they are beliefs. And this is one: all physical and mental ills are created only by our own minds—”

“Christian Science?” sneered Drene.

“Call it what you like,” said Guilder serenely. “And call this what you like: All who believe worthily will find that particular belief true in every detail after death.”

“What do you call that?” demanded Drene, amused.

“God knows. It seems to be my interpretation of the Goal. I seem to be journeying toward it without more obstacles and more embarrassments to encounter than confront the wayfarer who professes any other creed.”

After a while Drene sat up on his couch:

“How did all this conversation start?” he asked uneasily.

“It was about the Virgin for that chapel we are going to do..... That’s part of my belief: those who pray for her intercession will find her after death, interceding—” he smiled, “—if any intercession be necessary between us and Him who made us.”

“And those unlisted millions who importune Mohammed and Buddha?”

“They shall find Mohammed and Buddha, who importune them worthily.”

“And—Christ?”

“He bears that name also—He!”

“Oh! And so, spiritually as well as artistically, you believe in the Virgin?”

“You also can make a better Virgin if you believe in her otherwise than esthetically.”

Drene gazed at him incredulously, then, with a shrug:

“When do you want this thing started?”

“Now.”

“I can’t take it on now.”

“I want a sketch pretty soon—the composition. You can have a model of the chapel to—morrow. We went on with it as a speculation. Now we’ve clinched the thing. When shall I send it up from the office?”

“I’ll look it over, but—”

“And,” interrupted Guilder, “you had better get that Miss White for the Virgin—before she goes off somewhere out of reach.”

Drene looked up somberly:

“I haven’t kept in touch with her. I don’t know what her engagements may be.”

“One of her engagements just now seems to be to go about with Graylock,” said Guilder.

Drene flushed, but said nothing.

“If he marries her,” added Guilder, “as it’s generally understood he is trying to, the best sculptor’s model in town is out of the question. Better secure her now.”

“He wants to marry her?” repeated Drene, in a curiously still voice.

“He’s mad about her. He’s abject. It’s no secret among his friends. Men like that—and of that age—sometimes arrive at such a terminal—men with Graylock’s record sometimes get theirs. She has given him a run, believe me, and he’s brought up with a crash against a stone wall. He is lying there all doubled up at her feet like a rabbit with a broken back. There was nothing left for him to do but lie there. He’s lying there still, with one of her little feet on his bull neck. All the town knows it.”

“He wants to marry her,” repeated Drene, as though to himself.

“She may not take him at that. They’re queer—some women. I suppose she’d jump at it if she were not straight. But there’s another thing—” Guilder looked curiously at Drene. “Some people think she’s rather crazy about you.”

Drene gazed into space.

“But that wouldn’t hurt her,” added Guilder, in his calm, pleasant voice. “She’s a straight little thing—white and straight. She could come to no harm through a man like you.”

Drene continued to stare at space.

“So,” continued the other, confident, “when she recovers from a natural and

childlike infatuation for you she'll marry somebody... Possibly even such a man as Graylock might make her happy. You can't ever tell about such men at the eleventh hour."

Drene turned his eyes on him. There was no trace of color in his face.

"Aren't you pretty damned charitable?"

"Charitable? Well, I—I'm so inclined, I fancy."

"You'd be content to see that girl marry a dog like that?"

"I did not say so. I am no judge of men. No man knows enough to condemn souls."

Drene looked at him:

"Well, I'll tell you something. I know enough to do it. I had rather damn my soul—and hers, too—than see her marry the man you have named. It would be worth it to me."

After a strained silence, Guilder said:

"There is a mode of dealing with those who have injured you, which is radically different—"

"I deal with such people in my own fashion!"

"But, after all, the infamy is Graylock's. Why oblige him by sharing it with him?"

"Do you know what he did to me and mine?"

"A few of us know," said Guilder, gently, "—your old friends."

There came a pale, infernal flicker into Drene's eyes:

"I'll take your commission for that altar piece," he said.

"What is it? An Annunciation?"

IV

Composition had been determined upon, and the sketch completed by the middle of August; Cecile had sat for him every day from nine until five; every evening they had dined together at the seashore or other suburban and cool resorts. Together they had seen every summer entertainment in town, had spent the cooler, starlit evenings together in his studio, chatting, reading loud sometimes, sometimes discussing he work in hand or other subjects of he moment, even topics covering a wider and more varied range than he had ever before discussed with any woman.

He seemed to have become utterly changed; the dark preoccupation had been absent from his face—the gauntness, the grayness, seemed to have become subdued; the deep lines of pain, imperceptible at times, smoothed out and shadowed in an almost gay resurgence of youth.

If, during the first week or two of her companionship, his gaiety had been not entirely spontaneous, his smile shadowed with something duller, his laughter a trifle forced, she had not perceived it in her surprised and shyly troubled preoccupation with this amazing and delightful transfiguration.

At first she scarcely knew what to look for, what to expect from him, from herself, when she came into the studio after many weeks of absence; and she always halted in the doorway, trembling a little, as always, when in contact with him.

But he was very delightful, smiling, easy, and deferential enough to reassure her with a greeting that became him, as he saluted her pretty hand, held it a moment in possession, laughingly, and released it.

From the moment of their reunion he had never touched her, save for a quick, firm, smiling hand-clasp in the morning and another at the night's parting.

Now, little by little, she was finding herself delightfully at ease with him, emerging by degrees from her charming bewilderment out of isolation to a happy companionship never before shared with any man.

Nor even vaguely had she dreamed that Drene could be such a man, such a friend, never had she imagined there was in him such kindness, such patience, such gentleness, such comprehension, such virile sense and sympathy.

And never, now, was her troubled consciousness aware of anything

disquieting in his attitude, of anything to perturb her.

He seemed to enjoy himself like a boy, with her companionship, wholly, heartily, without any motive other than the pleasure of the moment; and so, little by little, she gave herself up to it too, in the same fashion, unguardedly, frankly, innocently revealing herself to him by degrees as their comradeship became deliciously unembarrassed.

He was making a full length study in clay now. All day long she sat there enthroned, her eyes partly closed, the head lifted a trifle and fallen back, and her lovely hands resting on her heart—and sometimes she strove to imagine something of the divine moment which she was embodying; pondering, dreaming, wondering; and sometimes, in the stillness, through her trance crept a thrill, subtle, exquisite, as though in faint perception of the heavenly moment. And once, into her half-dreaming senses came the soft stirring of wings, and she opened her eyes and looked up, startled and thrilled.

But it was only a pigeon which had come through the great window from the cote on the adjacent roof and which circled above her on whimpering wings for a moment and then sheered out into the sunlight.

They dined together at a roof garden that evening, the music was particularly and surprisingly good, and what surprised him even more was that she knew it and spoke of it. And continued speaking of music, he not interrupting.

Reticent hitherto concerning her antecedents he learned now something of them—and inferred more; nothing unusual—a musical career determined upon, death intervening dragging over her isolation the steel meshes of destitution—the necessity for self-support, a friend who knew a painter who employed models—not anything unusual, not even dramatic.

He nodded as she ended:

“Have you saved anything?”

“A hundred dollars.”

“That’s fine.”

She smiled, then sighed unconsciously.

“You are thinking,” he said, “that youth is flying.”

She smiled wistfully.

“Youth is the time to study. You were thinking that, too.”

She nodded.

“You could have married.”

“Why?” she asked, troubled.

“To obtain the means for a musical education.”

She gazed at him in amazement, then: “I could go out on the street, too, as far as that is concerned. It would be no more disgraceful.”

“Folk-ways sanction self-sale, when guaranteed by the clergy,” he said. She turned her head and he saw the pure, cold profile against the golden table-lamp, and he saw something else under the palms beyond—Graylock’s light eyes riveted upon them both.

“You know,” he said, under his breath, “that I shall not marry you. But—would you care to begin your studies again?”

There was a long silence: She remained with face partly averted until the orchestra ceased. Then she turned and looked at him, and he saw her lip tremble.

“I had not thought you meant to ask me—that. I do not quite understand what you mean.”

“I care enough for you to wish to help you. May I?”

“I was not sure you cared—enough—”

“Do you—for me?”

“Before I say that I do—care for you—” she began, tremulously—“tell me that I have nothing to fear—”

Neither spoke. Over her shoulder Drene stared at the distant man who stared back at him.

Presently his eyes reverted to hers, absently studying the childlike beauty of her.

“I’m going to tell you something,” he said. “Love is no more wonderful than hate, no more perfect, no more eternal. And it is less fierce, and not as strong.”

“What!” she whispered, bewildered at the sinister change in him.

“And I want to tell you another thing. I am alone in the world. What I have, I have devised to you—in case I step out—suddenly—”

He paused, hesitated, then:

“Also I desire you to hear something else,” he went on. “This is the proper time for you to hear it, I think—now—to-night—”

He lifted his blazing eyes and looked at the other man.

“There was a woman,” he said—“She happened to be my wife. Also there was my closest friend: and myself. The comedy was cast. Afterward she died—abroad. I believe he was there at the time—Kept up a semblance—But he never

married her.... And I do not intend to marry—you."

After a moment: "And that," she whispered, "is why you once said to me that I should have let you alone."

"Did I say that to you?"

"Yes." She looked up at him, straight into his eyes: "But if you care for me—I do not regret that I did not let you alone."

"I shall not marry you."

Her lip trembled but she smiled.

"That is nothing new to me," she said. "Only one man has offered that."

"Why didn't you take him?" he asked, with an ugly laugh.

"I couldn't. I cared for you."

"And now," he said, "are you afraid of me?"

"Yes—a little."

He leaned forward suddenly, "You'd better steer clear of me!" Her startled eyes beheld in him a change as swift as his words.

"Fair warning!" he added: "look out for yourself." Everything that was brutal in him; everything ruthless and violent had marred his features so that all in a moment the mouth had grown ugly and a hard, bruised look stamped the pallid muscles of his features and twitched at them.

"You're taking chances from now on," he said. "I told you once to let me alone. You'd better do it now. And—" he stared at the distant man—"I told you that hate is more vital than love. It is. I've waited a long time to strike. Even now it isn't in me to do it as I have meant to do it. And so I tell you to keep away from me; and I'll strike in the old-fashioned way, and end it—to-night."

Stunned by his sudden and dreadful metamorphosis, her ears ringing with his disjointed incoherencies, she rose, scarcely knowing what she was doing, scarcely conscious that he was beside her, moving lightly and in silence out into the brilliant darkness of the streets.

It was only at her own door that he spoke again: standing there on the shabby steps of her boarding-house, the light from the transom yellowing his ghastly face.

"Something snapped"—he passed an unsteady hand across his eyes;—"I care very deeply for you. I—they'll make over to you—what I have. You can study on it—live on it, modestly—"

"W-what is the matter? Are you ill?" she stammered, white and frightened.

But he only muttered that she had her warning and that she should keep away from him, and that it would not be long before she should have an opportunity in life. And he went his way not looking back.

When he reached his studio the hall was dark. As he turned the key he thought he heard something stirring in the shadows, but went in—leaving the door into the hallway open—and straight on across the room to his desk.

He was putting something into his coat pocket, and his back was still turned to the open door when Graylock stepped quietly across the threshold; and Drene heard him, but closed his desk, leisurely, and then, as leisurely, turned, knowing who had entered.

And so they stood alone together after many years.

V

Graylock looked at Drene's heavily sagging pocket and knew what was in it. A sudden sweat chilled his temples, but he said steadily enough:

"I'd like to say a word or two—if you'll give me time." And, as Drene made no reply;—"You're quite right: This business of ours should be finished one way or another. I can't stand it any longer."

"In that case," remarked Drene with an evil stare at him, "I may postpone it—to find out how much you can stand." He dropped his right hand into the sagging pocket, looking intently at Graylock all the while:

"What do you want here anyway?"

"I fancy that you have already guessed."

"Maybe. All the same, what do you want?"—fumbling with his bulging pocket for a moment and then remaining motionless.

Graylock's worn eyes rested on the outline of the shrouded weapon: he stood eyeing it absently for a moment, then seated himself on the sofa, his heavy eyes shifting from one object to another.

But there were few objects to be seen in that silent place;—a star overhead glimmering through the high expanse of glass above;—otherwise gray monotony of wall, a clay shape or two swathed in wet clothes, a narrow ring of lamp light, and formless shadow.

"It's a long time, Drene."

Drene mused in silence, now and then watching the other obliquely.

Presently he withdrew his right hand from his coat pocket, pulled an armchair toward him and seated himself.

"It's many years," repeated Graylock. "I expected you to do something before this."

"Were you uneasy?" sneered Drene. Then he shrugged, knowing that Graylock was no coward, sorry he had intimated as much, like a man who deals a premature and useless blow.

He sat brooding for a while, his lean dangerous head lowered sideways as though listening; his oblique glance always covering Graylock.

"I suppose you'll be surprised when I tell you one reason that I came here,"

said Graylock.

“Do you suppose you can still surprise me by anything you may say or do?”

The man remained silent, sitting with his hands tightly clasped on his knees.

“Drene,” he said, in a low voice, “don’t strike at me through this young girl.”

Drene began to laugh, unpleasantly.

“Are you in love with her?”

“Yes.... You know it.”

Drene said, still laughing: “It’s the common rumor. You may imagine it amuses your friends—if you have any left.”

Graylock spoke in a voice that had a ghostly sound in the great room:

“Don’t harm her, Drene. It is not necessary. I shall never see her again—if that will content you.”

Drene laughed: “I never saw my wife again. Did that help me? I never saw her again, but as long as she lived I knew what she was ... My wife. And when she died, still my wife. There was no relief—no relief.”

Graylock, deathly white, framed his haggard face between his hands and stared at nothing:

“I know,” he said. “I understand now. I am here to-night to pay the reckoning.”

“You can’t pay it.”

“No, not the whole score. There’s another bill, I suppose, waiting for me—somewhere. But I can settle my indebtedness to you—”

“How?”

“That’s up to you, Drene.”

“How?” repeated Drene, violently.

Graylock made a slight gesture with his head toward Drene’s sagging pocket: “That way if you like. Or,” he added, “There is a harder punishment.”

“What is it?”

“To give her up.”

“Yes,” said Drene, “that is harder. But I can make it even harder than that. I can make it as hard for you as you made it for me. I can let you live through it.”

He laughed, fisted in his pocket, drew out the lumpy automatic and leisurely pushed the lever to “safe.”

He said: “To kill you would be like opening the cell door for a lifer. You know

what you are while you're alive; maybe you'd forget if you were dead. I—"

He ceased, fiddling absently with the dull-colored weapon on his knee; and for a while they remained silent, not looking at each other. And when Drene spoke again he was still intent upon the automatic.

"If I knew what happens after a man dies I could act intelligently." He shot an ugly look at Graylock: "I don't know about you, either. You're a rat. But you might fool me at that. You might be repentant. And in that case you'd get away—if it's true that the eleventh hour is not too late.... If it's true that Christ is merciful.... So I'll take no chances of a getaway. You might fool me—one way or another—if you were dead."

Graylock lifted his head from his hands: "I don't know how much of the other debt I've already paid, Drene. But I've paid heavily since I knew her—if that is any satisfaction to you. And since I knew she cared for you, and when I realized that you meant to strike me through her—I have paid, heavily.... Yet, if you were honestly in love with her—"

"Is that any of your damned business?"

"She's only a child—"

"You rat! That's what's coming to you!"

"If you say so. But what is coming to her, Drene?"

"Continue to guess. But I know you. It's yourself you're sorry for and what you'll have to endure—live through. That's what you can't stand, and remain the sleek, self-satisfied rat you are. No, it will make earth a living hell for you; never a second, day or night, will you be able to forget—if you really do love her.... And I believe you do—I don't understand how a thing like you can love—but it seems it can."

After a silence Graylock said: "You don't care if you damn yourself?"

"It's worth it to me."

"Are you willing that I should know you are as great a blackguard as I am?" Drene's gaunt features reddened and he set his jaws in silence.

"Don't you care what you do to her?" asked Graylock, unsteadily. "It's a viler business than that for which you are punishing me."

For a long time Drene sat there looking down at the weapon on his knees. And after a while, the other man spoke huskily: "It's bad enough either way for me, Drene. I'll do what you wish in the matter. I'll leave the country; I'll stay; whichever you say. Or," he said with a ghastly smile, "I'll clean out that automatic for you to-night—if you'll marry her."

Drene looked up, slowly:

“What did you say?”

“I said that I’d clean out your automatic for you—to-night—if you wish.... It can be an accident or not, just as you say.”

“Where?”

“In my own rooms—if it is to be an accident.”

“Do you offer—”

“Yes; if you’ll marry her afterwards. If you say you will I’ll take your word.”

“And then you’ll be out of your misery, you damned coward!”

“God knows.... But I think not,” said Graylock, under his breath.

Drene twisted the automatic, rose and continued to twirl it, considering. Presently he began to pace the floor, no longer noticing the other man. Once his promenade brought him up facing the wall where a calendar hung.

He stood for a while looking at it absently. After a few moments he stepped nearer, detached the sheet for the present month, then one by one tore off the remaining sheets until he came to the month marked December, Graylock watching him all the while.

“I think it happened on Christmas,” remarked Drene turning toward the other and laying a finger on the number 25 printed in red.

Graylock’s head bent slightly.

“Very well. Suppose about eleven o’clock on Christmas night you give your automatic a thorough cleaning.

“If you say so.”

“You have one?”

“I shall buy one.”

“Didn’t you come here armed?”

“No.”

Drene looked at him very intently. But Graylock had never been a liar. After a few moments he went over to his desk, replaced the weapon under the papers, and, still busy, said over his shoulder:

“All right. You can go.”

VI

He wrote to Cecile once:

Hereafter keep clear of men like Graylock and like me. We're both of a stripe—the same sort under our skins. I've known him all my life. It all depends upon the opportunity, the circumstances, and the woman. And, what is a woman between friends—between such friends as Graylock and I once were—or between the sort of friends we have now become? Keep clear of such men as we are. We were boys together.

For a week or two he kept his door locked and lived on what the janitor provided for him, never going out of the studio at all.

He did no work, although there were several unexecuted commissions awaiting his attention and a number of sketches, clay studies, and one marble standing around the studio in various stages of progress. The marble was the Annunciation. The head and throat and slender hands were completed, and one slim naked foot.

Sometimes he wandered from one study to the next, vague-eyed, standing for a long time before each, staring, lost in thought. Sometimes, in the evening he read, choosing a book at random among the motley collection in a corner case—a dusty, soiled assortment of books, ephemeral novels of the moment, ponderous volumes which are in everybody's library but which nobody reads, sets of histories, memoirs, essays, beautifully bound and once cared for, but now dirty from neglect—jetsam from a wrecked home.

There had been a time when law, order and neatness formed the basis of Drene's going forth and coming in. He had been exact, precise, fastidious; he had been sensitive to environment, a lover of beautiful things, a man who deeply appreciated any symbol that suggested home and hearth and family.

But when these three were shattered in the twinkling of an eye, something else broke, too. And he gradually emerged from chaos, indifferent to all that had formerly been a part of him, a silent emotionless, burnt out thing, callous to all that he had once cared for.

Yet something of what he had been must have remained latent within him for with unimpaired precision and logic he constructed his clay and chiseled his

marble; and there must have been in him something to express, for the beauty of his work, spiritual and material, had set him high among the highest in his profession.

Sometimes sorrow changes the dross from the lamp of the spirit so that it burns with a purity almost unearthly; sometimes sorrow sears, rendering the very soul insensible; and sometimes sorrow remains under the ashes, a living coal steadily consuming all that is noble, hardening all that is ignoble; and is extinguished leaving a devil behind it—fully equipped to slay the crippled soul.

Alone in his studio at night, motionless in his chair, Drene was becoming aware of this devil. Reading by lamplight he grew conscious of it; recognized it as a companion of many years, now understanding that although pain had ended, hatred had remained, hiding, biding, and very, very quiet.

And suddenly this hatred had flamed like hell-fire, amazing even himself—that day when, lifted out of his indifference for an instant by a young girl's gaiety—and with a smile, half-responsive, on his own unaccustomed lips, he had learned from her in the same instant, that the man he had almost ceased to remember was honestly in love with her.

And suddenly he knew that he hated and that he should strike, and that there could be no comparison in perfection between hatred and what perhaps was love.

Sometimes, at night, lying on the studio couch, he found himself still hesitating. Could Graylock be reached after death? Was it possible? If he broke his word after Graylock was dead could he still strike and reach him through the woman for whose sake he, Graylock, was going to step out of things?

That occupied his mind continually, now. Was there anybody who could tell him about such matters? Did clergymen really know whether the soul survived? And if it did, and if truly there were a hell, could a living man add anything to its torments for his enemy's benefit?

One day the janitor, lingering, ventured to ask Drene whether he was feeling quite well.

"Yes" said Drene, "I am well."

The janitor spoke of his not eating. And, as Drene said nothing, he mentioned the fact that Drene had not set foot outside his own quarters in many weeks.

Drene nodded: "I expect to go for a walk this evening."

But he did not. He lay on his couch, eyes open in the darkness, wondering what Graylock was doing, how he lived, what occupied his days.

What were the nights of a condemned man like? Did Graylock sleep? Did he suffer? Was the suspense a living death to him? Had he ever suspected him, Drene, of treachery after he, Graylock, had fulfilled his final part of the bargain.

For a long time, now, a fierce curiosity concerning what Graylock was thinking and doing had possessed Drene. What does a man, who is in good physical health, do, when he is at liberty to compute to the very second how many seconds of life remain for him?

Drene's sick brain ached with the problem day and night.

In November the snow fell. Drene had not been out except in imagination.

Day after day, in imagination, he had followed Graylock, night after night, slyly, stealthily, shirking after him through busy avenues at midday, lurking by shadowy houses at midnight, burning to see what expression this man wore, what was imprinted on his features;—obsessed by a desire to learn what he might be thinking—with death drawing nearer.

But Drene, in the body, had never stirred from his own chilly room—a gaunt, fierce-eyed thing, unkempt, half-clothed, huddled all day in his chair brooding above his bitten nails, or flung starkly across his couch at night staring at the stars through the dirty crust of glass above.

One night in December when the stars were all staring steadily back at him, and his thoughts were out somewhere in the darkness following his enemy, he heard somebody laughing in the room.

For a while he lay very still, listening; but when he realized that the laughter was his own he sat up, pressing his temples between hot and trembling fingers.

It seemed to silence the laughter: terror subsided to a tremulous apprehension —as though he had been on the verge of something horrible sinking into it for a moment—but had escaped.

Again he found himself thinking of Graylock, and presently he laughed; then frightened, checked himself. But his fevered brain had been afire too long; he lay fighting with his thoughts to hold them in leash lest they slip out into the night like blood hounds on the trail of the man they had dogged so long.

Trembling, terrified, he set his teeth in his bleeding lip, and clenched his gaunt fists: He could not hold his thoughts in leash; could not control the terrifying laughter; hatred blazed like hell-fire scorching the soul in him, searing his aching brain with flames which destroy.

In the darkness he struggled blindly to his feet; and he saw the stars through the glass roof all ablaze in the midnight sky; saw the infernal flicker of pale

flames in the obscurity around him, heard a voice calling for help—his own voice—

Then something stirred in the darkness; he listened, stared, striving to pierce the obscurity with fevered eyes.

Long since the cloths that swathed the clay figures in the studio had dried out unnoticed by him. He gazed from one to another, holding his breath. Then his eyes rested upon the altar piece, fell on the snowy foot, were lifted inch by inch along the marble folds upward slowly to the slim and child-like hands—

“Oh, God!” he whispered, knowing he had gone mad at last.

For, under the carven fingers, the marble folds of the robe over the heart were faintly glowing from some inward radiance. And, as he reeled forward and dropped at the altar foot, lifting his burning eyes, he saw the child-like head bend toward him from the slender neck—saw that the eyes were faintly blue—

“Mother of God!” he screamed, “my mind is dying—my mind is dying! ... We were boys, he and I.... Let God judge him.... Let him be judged... mercifully.... I am worse than he.... There is no hell. I have striven to fashion one—I have desired to send him thither—Mother of God—Cecile—”

Under his fevered eyes he was confusing them, now, and he sank down close against the pedestal and laid his f ace against her small cold foot.

“I am sick,” he rambled on—“and very tired.... We were boys together, Cecile.... When I am in my right mind I would not harm him.... He was so handsome and daring. There was nothing he dared not do.... So young, and straight, and daring.... I would not harm him. Or you, Cecile.... Only I am sick, burning out, with only a crippled mind left—from being badly hurt—It never got well. ... And now it is dying of its hurt—Cecile!—Mother of God!—before it dies I do forgive him—and ask forgiveness—for Christ’s sake—”

Toward noon the janitor broke in the door.

VII

It was late in December before Drene opened his eyes in his right senses. He unclosed them languidly, gazed at the footboard of his bed, then, around at the four shabby walls of his room.

“Cecile?” he said, distinctly.

The girl who had been watching him laid aside her sewing, rose, and bent over him. Suddenly her pale face flushed and one hand flew to her throat.

“Dearest?” he said, inquiringly.

Then down on her knees fell the girl, and groped for his wasted hand and laid her cheek on it, crying silently.

As for Drene, he lay there, his hollow eyes roaming from wall to wall. At last he turned his head on the pillow and looked down at her.

The next day when he opened his eyes from a light sleep his skin was moist and cool and he managed to move his hand toward hers as she bent over him.

“I want—Graylock,” he whispered. The girl flushed, bent nearer, gazing at him intently.

“Graylock,” he repeated.

“Not now,” she murmured, “not today. Rest for a while.”

“Please,” he said, looking up at her trustfully—“Graylock. Now.”

“When you are well—”

“I am—well. Please, dear.”

For a while she continued sitting there on the side of his bed, his limp hands in hers, her lips pressed against them. But he never took his eyes from her, and in them she saw only the same wistful expression, unchanging, trustful that she would do his bidding.

So at last she went into the studio and wrote a note to Graylock. It was late. She went downstairs to the janitor’s quarters where there was a messenger call. But no messenger came probably Christmas day kept them busy. Perhaps, too,

some portion of the holiday was permitted them, for it was long after dinner and the full tide of gaiety in town was doubtless at its flood.

So she waited until it was plain that no messenger was coming; then she rose from the chair and stood gazing out into the wintry darkness through the dirty basement window. Clocks were striking eleven.

As she turned to go her eye fell upon the telephone. She hesitated. But the memory of Drene's eyes, their wistfulness and trust decided her.

After a little waiting she got Graylock's apartment. A servant asked her to hold the wire.

After an interval she recognized Graylock's voice at the telephone, pleasant, courteous, serenely wishing her the happiness of the season.

"What are you doing this Christmas night?" she asked. "Surely you are not all alone there at home?"

"I am rather too old for anything else," he said.

"But what are you doing? Reading?"

"As a matter of fact," he said, "I happened to be cleaning an automatic revolver when you called up."

"What a gay employment for Christmas night! Is that your idea of celebrating?"

"There happens to be nothing else for me to do tonight."

"But there is. You are requested to make a call."

"On whom?" he asked, quietly.

"On Mr. Drene."

For a full minute he remained silent, although she spoke to him twice, thinking the connection might have been interrupted. Then his voice came, curiously altered:

"Who asked that of me?"

"Mr. Drene."

"Mr. Drene is very ill, I hear."

"He is convalescent."

"Did he ask you to call me?"

"Certainly."

"Then—you are with him?"

"Yes."

“Where?”

“In his apartment. I came downstairs to the janitor’s rooms. I am telephoning from there what he wished me to ask you.”

After a pause Graylock said: “Is his mind perfectly clear?”

“Perfectly, now.”

“He asked for me?”

“Yes. Will you come?”

“He asked for me? Tonight? At eleven o’clock?”

She said: “I don’t think he knows even what month it is. He has only been conscious for a day or two. Had he known it was Christmas night perhaps he might not have disturbed you. But—will you come?”

“I am afraid it is too late—to-night.”

“Tomorrow, then? Shall I tell him?”

There was a silence. She repeated the question. But Graylock’s reply was inaudible and she thought he said good-bye instead of good night.

Somewhere in the rear of the basement the janitor and his family and probably all his relatives were celebrating. A fiddle squeaked in there; there was a steady tumult of voices and laughter.

The girl stood a while listening, a slight smile on her lips. Blessed happiness had come to her in time for Christmas—a strange and heavenly happiness, more wonderful than when a life is spared to one who loves, for it had been more than the mere life of this man she had asked of God: it had been his mind.

He lay asleep when she entered and stood by the shaded lamp, looking down at him.

After a while she seated herself and took up her sewing. But laid it aside again as there came a low knocking at the door.

Drene opened his eyes as Graylock entered all alone and stood still beside the bed looking down at him. In the studio Cecile moved about singing under her breath. They both heard her.

Drene nodded weakly. After a moment he made the effort to speak:

“I am trying to get well—to start again—better—live more—nobly. ... Take your chance, too.”

“If you wish, Drene.”

“Yes. I was not—very—well. I had been ill—very—a long while ... And you are not to clean the automatic.... Only your own-soul.... Ask help.... You’ll get

it..... I did.... And—all that is true—what we believed—as boys.... I know. I've seen. And it's all true—all true—what we believed—as little boys."

He looked up at Graylock, then closed his eyes with the shadow of a smile in them.

"Good-bye—Jack," he whispered.

Graylock's mouth quivered, his lips moved in speech; and perhaps Drene heard and understood, for he opened his eyes and looked once more at his boyhood friend.

"Somewhere—somebody will straighten out—all this," he murmured, closing his eyes again: "We can't; we can only try—to straighten out—ourselves."

Graylock looked down at him in silence, then, tall and heavily erect, he turned away.

Cecile met him from the studio.

"Good night," she said, offering her hand.... "And a happy Christmas.... I hope you will not be lonely."

He took her hand, gravely, thanked her, and went his way forever.

For a few minutes she lingered in the doorway connecting Drene's bedroom with the studio. She held a sprig of holly.

After a little while he opened his eyes and looked at her, and, smiling, she came forward to the bedside.

"It was a terrible dream," he whispered—"all those years. But it was a dream."

"You must dream no more."

"No. Come nearer."

She rested on the bed's edge beside him and laid one hand on his. The other held the holly, but he did not notice it until she offered it.

"Dear," she whispered, "it is Christmas night. And you did not even know it."

Suddenly the tears he had not known for years burned in his eyes, and he closed them, trembling, awed by the mercy of God that had been vouchsafed to him at the eleventh hour, else he had slain his soul.

After a while he felt her lips touching his brow. And now silent in the spell of the dream that invaded her—the exquisite vision of wifehood—she sat motionless with childlike eyes lost in thought.

Once more he turned his head and looked at her. Then her slender neck bent, and he saw that her eyes were divinely blue—

“Cecile!”—he faltered—“Madonna inviolate!... The woman—between—friends—”

THE END

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