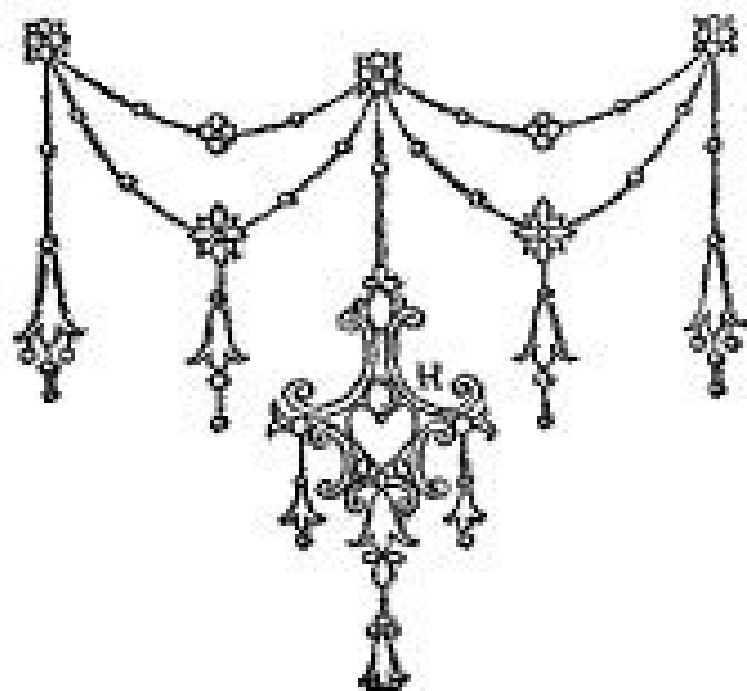


The Alternative



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THE ALTERNATIVE

By GEORGE BARR McCUTCHEON

Author of "The Husbands of Edith," "The Purple Parasol," "The Flyers," "The Butterfly Man," Etc.

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS
BY HARRISON FISHER

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"Agrippa! Come here, sir!"

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"Agrippa! Come here, sir!" (*Frontispiece*)

"I am Mrs. De Foe's secretary,' she said quietly"

"He was there. In fact he opened the door and assisted her to alight"

"Her eyes were closed. He kissed the lids"



The Alternative



CHAPTER I

THE VAN PYCKES

A shrieking wind, thick with the sleety snow that knows no mercy nor feels remorse, beat vainly and with savage insolence against the staid windows in the lounging room of one of New York's most desirable clubs—one of those characteristic homes for college men who were up for membership on the day they were born, if one may speak so broadly of the virtue that links the early eighteenth-century graduate with his great-grandson of the class of 1908. Not to say, of course, that the eighteenth-century graduate was so carefully preserved from the biting snowstorm as the fellow of to-day, but that he got his learning in the ancient halls that now grind out his descendants by the hundred, one way or another. It is going much too far to assert that every member of this autocratic club had a colonial ancestor in college, but you'd think so if you didn't pin him down to an actual confession to the contrary. It is likely to be the way with college men who do not owe their degrees to certain mushroom institutions in the West, where electricity and mechanics are considered to be quite as necessary to a young man's equipment as the acquaintance, by tradition, with somebody's great-granddaddy, no matter how eminent he may have been in his primogenial day.

All of which is neither here nor there. Ancestors for the future are in the club this night, enjoying the luxury, the coziness, the warmth, and the present good cheer of a great and glorious achievement: they are inside of solid walls on this bitter night, eating or tippling, smoking or toasting, reading or chatting with small regard for the ancient gentlemen who gave their *Alma Mater* its name, but who, if suddenly come to life, would pass away again in a jiffy, not so much through the shock of opulence as at the sight of the wicked high-ball.

At one of the windows, overlooking a broad street, stood two elderly gentlemen, conversing in no mild tones about the blizzard. Straight-backed, dignified gentlemen, they. They kept their hands clasped behind their backs, smoked very good cigars instead of cigarettes, and spoke not of the chorus that gamboled just around a certain corner, but of the blizzard that did the same thing—in a less exalted manner—around *all* corners.

A thin, arrogant figure crossed from the hallway doors, his watery green eyes sweeping the group of young men at the lower end of the room. Evidently the person for whom he was looking was not among them. As he was turning toward the two elderly gentlemen in the window, one of the joyous spirits of 1908 saw him, and called out:

"Hello, Mr. Van Pycke! Lookin' for Buzzy?"

The thin old gentleman paused. He lifted his nose-glasses and deliberately set them upon the bridge of his long, aristocratic,—and we must say it,—somewhat rose-tinted nose. Then his slim fingers dropped to the end of his neat gray mustache. A coolly impersonal stare sought out the speaker.

"Good evening," he said, in the most suave manner possible. No one would have suspected that he was unable to recall the name of the youth who put the question. "Yes, I rather expected to find Bosworth here. He said something about dining here."

"He's upstairs in Peter Palmer's room."

"Thank you. I sha'n't disturb him. Disagreeable night, gentlemen."

The back of his spike-tailed coat confronted the group an instant later; he was crossing the room, headed for the gray-heads in the window.

"Good evening, Billings. How are you, Knapp? A beastly night."

The three did not shake hands. They had passed that stage long ago. They did nothing that they didn't have to do.

"I was just telling Knapp that it reminds me of the blizzard in—"

"Stop right there, Billings," interrupted Mr. Van Pycke. "It reminds me of every blizzard that has happened within my recollection. They're all alike—theoretically. A lot of wind, snow, and talk about the poor. Sit down here and have your liqueurs with me."

"I'm glad I don't have to go in all this to-night," said little Mr. Billings, '59, unconsciously pressing his knees together as he sat down at the small table.

"You're getting old, Billings."

"So are you, Van Pycke. Demmit, I'm not more than two years older than you."

What's more, you have a grown son."

"My dear fellow, Bosworth is only twenty-five. A man doesn't have to be a Methuselah to have a grown son. They grow up like weeds. And some of them amount to about as much as—ahem! Ahem! Please press that button for me, will you, Knapp? I don't see why the devil they always have the button on the other side of the table. No, no! I'll sign for them, old chap. Don't think of it! Here, boy, let me have the ticket. Mr. Knapp rang, but he did it to oblige me. Now, see here, Knapp, I don't like that sort of—"

"My dear Van Pycke, permit me! Billings is having his coffee with me. It's coming now. I insist on adding the cordial."

"Very well, if you insist. Napoleon brandy with a single drop of Curaçao. Mind you,—a single drop, waiter. Ever try that fine old brandy, Knapp?"

"I can't afford it," said Knapp, bluntly.

"It's the only kind that I can drink," was all that Van Pycke said, lifting his thin eyebrows ever so slightly.

"Yes, it's a rotten night," put in Mr. Billings with excellent haste.

Knapp's face had gone a trifle red.

Down at the other end of the room the "young bucks" were discussing the seared trio under the smileless portrait of a college founder. They spoke in rather subdued tones, with frequent glances toward the door at their left.

"Old Van Pycke is the darndest sponge in the club. He never buys a drink, and yet he's always drinking," said one young man.

"His nose shows that all right. I hate a pink nose."

"You'd think he owned the club, the way he treats it," said another.

"Tell me about him," said a new member—from the West. "He's the most elegant, the most fastidious gentleman I've ever seen. An old family?"

"Rather! The Van Pyckes are as old as Bowling Green. Some of 'em came over in the Ark—or was it the 'Mayflower'?"

"Buzzy came over in the 'Lusitania' last year," ventured one of them.

The self-appointed historian, a drawler with ancestors in Trinity churchyard, went on: "Buckets of blue blood in 'em. The old man there is the last of his type. His son, Buzzy,—Bosworth Van Pycke,—he's the chap who gave the much-talked of supper for Carmen the other night—he's really a different sort. Or would be, I should have said, if he had half a chance. Buzzy's a good fellow—a regular—"

"You bet he is!" exclaimed two or three approvingly.

"The old man's got queer ideas about Buzzy. He insists on his being a regular gentleman."

"Nothing queer in that," interrupted the Westerner.

"Except that he thinks a fellow can't be a gentleman unless he's a loafer. He brought Buzzy up with the understanding that it wasn't necessary for him to be anything but a Van Pycke. The Van Pycke name, and all that sort of rot. It wouldn't be so bad if the old man had anything to back it up with. He hasn't a sou markee. That's the situation. For the last twenty years he's lived in the clubs, owing everybody and always being a gentleman about it. He has a small interest in the business of Rubenstein, Rosenthal & Meyer,—logical but not lineal descendants of the Van Pyckes who were gentlemen in dread of a rainy day,—but he doesn't get much out of it. Five or six thousand a year, I'd say. When Buzzy's maternal grandfather died, he left something in trust for the boy. Fixed it in such a way that he isn't to have the principal until he's fifty. By that time the old man over there will have passed in his checks. Catch the point? It was done to keep the amiable son-in-law from getting his fingers on the pile and squandering it as he squandered two or three other paternal and grand-paternal fortunes. Buzzy has about ten thousand a year from the trust fund. I know that he pays some of his father's debts—not all of 'em, of course; just the embarrassing kind that he hears about from creditors who really want their money. In a way, the old man has spoiled Buzzy. He has always pounded it into the boy's head that it isn't necessary to work—in fact, it's vulgar. When Buzzy first came into the club, two years ago, he was insufferable. At college, every one liked him. He was himself when out from under the old man's influence. After he left college, he set himself up as Van Pycke, gentleman. The old man told him the name was worth five millions at least. All he had to do was to wait around a bit and he'd have no trouble in marrying that amount or more. Marriage is the best business in the world for a gentleman, he argues. I've heard him say so myself.

"Well, Buzzy's pretty much of a frivoler, but he isn't a cad. He'd like to do right, I'm sure. He didn't get started right, that's all. He goes about drinking tea and making love and spending all he has—like a gentleman. Just sleeps, eats, and frivols, that's all. He'll never amount to a hang. It's a shame, too. He's a darned good sort."

At the little table down the room Van Pycke, senior, was holding forth in his most suave, convincing manner.

"Gentlemen, I don't know what New York is coming to. There are not ten real gentlemen between the Battery and Central Park. Nothing but money grabbers. They don't know how to live. They eat like the devil and drink as though they lived in an aquarium; and they say they're New Yorkers."

Mr. Van Pycke's patrician nose was a shade redder than usual. Billings, paying no heed to his remarks, was trying to remember how Van Pycke looked before his nose was thoroughly pickled. It was a long way back, thought Mr. Billings, vaguely.

"I think I'll have a high-ball," said Mr. Van Pycke. "Have something, Knapp? Billings? Oh, I remember: you don't drink immediately after dinner. Splendid idea, too. I think I'll follow your example, to-night at least. I have a rather important—er—engagement, later on." He twirled his mustache fondly.

"You'll pursue the fair sex up to the very brink of the grave, Van Pycke," grumbled Knapp.

"If you mean my own grave, yes," said the other, calmly. "If you mean that I'll pursue any fair sexton to the brink of *her* grave, you're mistaken. I don't like old women. By the way, Knapp, do you happen to know Jim Scoville's widow?"

"You mean *young* Jim Scoville?"

"Certainly. I don't discuss dowagers. Everybody knows the old one. I mean the pretty Mrs. Scoville."

"More or less scandal about her, isn't there?" ventured Billings, pricking up his ears.

"Not a grain of truth in it, not a grain," retorted Mr. Van Pycke in such a way that you had the feeling he wanted you to believe there *was* scandal and that he was more or less connected with it. He studied the chandelier in a most evasive

manner. "Ahem! Do you know her?"

"Only by reputation," said Knapp, with gentle irony.

"I've seen her," said Billings. "At the horse show. Or was it the automobile—"

"I was in her box at one and in her tonneau at the other," said Mr. Van Pycke, taking the cigar Knapp extended. He glanced at his watch with sudden interest. "Yes, I see quite a bit of her. Charming girl—ahem! Of course" (punctuating his opinion with deliberate care) "she has been talked about, in a way. Lot of demmed old tabbies around town rippin' her up the back whenever she turns to look the other way. Old Mrs. Scoville is the queen tabby. She hates the young Mrs. Jim like poison. And, come to think of it, I don't blame the dowager. Charlotte is one of the most attract—"

"Charlotte!" exclaimed Knapp. "Do you call her Charlotte?"

"Certainly!" said Mr. Van Pycke, with a chilly uplifting of his eyebrows.

"I thought her name was Laura," said Billings, who read all the gossip in the weekly periodicals.

Mr. Van Pycke coughed. There seemed some likelihood of his bursting, the fit lasted so long.

"Charlotte is a pet name we have for her," he explained, somewhat huskily, when it was over. "Demmed stupid of me!" he was saying to himself. "As I said before, I don't blame the old lady. Young Mrs. Jim has got five or six of the Scoville millions, and she's showing the family how to spend it. Her husband's been dead over two years. She's got a perfect right to take notice of other men and to have a bit of fun if she takes the notion. Hasn't she? I—I—it wouldn't surprise me at all if she were to take a new husband unto herself before long." He uttered a very conscious cackle and looked at his watch quite suddenly—or past it, rather, for he forgot to open the virtuously chased hunting case.

Billings waited a moment. "I hear she is quite devoted to Chauncey De Foe,—or is it the other way?"

Mr. Van Pycke took five puffs at his cigar before responding, all the while staring at Billings in a perfectly unseeing way.

"I beg pardon? Oh, yes, I see. Not at all, my dear Billings. De Foe is—er—you

might say, a part of her past. He's out of it, quite. I don't mind telling you, he's a—ahem! a damned nuisance, though." This time he looked at his watch with considerable asperity. "Half-past eight! Where the devil is Bos—I say, Knapp, can you see the length of the room? Is he in that crowd over there?"

"No, he isn't," said Knapp, shortly.

"I shall have to telephone up to Palmer's room. I must see him before leaving the club. Beastly night, isn't it?"

"Beastly," remarked the two old gentlemen, unconsciously heaving sighs of relief as Mr. Van Pycke arose and adjusted his immaculate waistcoat. Then he moved away, trimly.

A particularly vicious gust of wind swept up to the windows; the fusillade of gritty snowflakes caused the two old men to lift their gaze to the panes. Billings arose and peered into the swirling, seething street. A phantom-like hansom was passing, a vague, top-heavy thing in shifting whites. Two taxicabs crawled humbly up to the club entrance, and away again, ghostly in their surrender to the noise of the wind.

Mr. Billings shuddered as he resumed his seat.

"I wonder if Van Pycke imagines that she could even *think* of marrying *him*! Sixty-three, if he's a day!" Mr. Billings had not been thinking of the storm while he stood in the window.

"Fine old New York name, Billings," mused Knapp. "You can't tell what these women will do to get a name that means something."

Mr. Billings was silent for a long time. Suddenly he stirred himself, relighted his cigar, and remarked: "By Jove, hear that wind howling, will you! It's really worse than the blizzard of '93." "Billings" was not yet a fine old New York name.

The crowd of young fellows at the other end watched Mr. Van Pycke vanish through the door. He was peering into his nose-glasses in such a lofty manner that one might have believed that he scented something disagreeable in every one who passed. As a matter of fact, his sole object was to discover his son if possible. For a long time he had nourished the conviction that his son would not take the trouble to discover him, if he could help it, no matter how close the propinquity. Mr. Van Pycke attributed this phase of filial indifference to the

sublimity of caste. After all, wasn't Bosworth the son of his father, and wasn't it quite natural that he should be an improvement on all the Van Pyckes who had gone before? What was the sense in having a son if it were not to better the breed?

Sometimes, however, Mr. Van Pycke experienced the sickening fear that Bosworth avoided him because of a foolish prejudice against the lending of money to relatives. There was an admirable counter-irritant, however, in Bosworth's assertion that one never got back the money he lent to relatives; and, as long as Mr. Van Pycke had known him in a pecuniary way, the young man had lived up to this principle by not even suggesting the return of a loan. Mr. Van Pycke was very proud of his son. He sometimes wished he could see more of him.

Bosworth lived in the club. Van Pycke, senior, had lived there, but was now living at one of the other clubs—he would have had some difficulty in remembering just which one if suddenly questioned.

"I hope Buzzy isn't going to turn out like the old man," said one of the loungers, addressing himself to the crowd.

"Oh, he'll marry rich and go the pace, and the old man will die happy," said another.

"He's hanging around that flossy Mrs. Scoville a good bit these days," observed the drawler. "That's not the best thing in the world for him."

"She's not as bad as she's painted," protested some one.

"My mother says she's the limit," said the drawler.

"That's what my mother says also," argued another, "but it's because she's afraid I'll slip up some day and fall a victim to the lady's charms. These mothers are a nifty lot. They've got their eyes peeled and their ears spread, and they don't give a hang what they say about a woman if she's likely to harm sonny-boy."

"Well, say what you please, Mrs. Scoville is as swift as a bullet. She carried on to beat the band with Chauncey De Foe long before Jim Scoville died, and she's still going it. Everybody talked about it then, and people don't forget. My mother says she knows of a dozen of the best houses where she is no longer received. I'm sorry that Buzzy has taken it into his head to flutter about her flame. He's bound to get a good singeing."

"Oh, Buzzy's not such a fool as you think. He's pretty wise to women. He's had nothing else to do but to study 'em since he left college."

"But she's always doing some freakish thing to get into the newspapers. Next thing you know, Buzzy'll have his name in the paper as taking a chimpanzee out to dinner, or being toastmaster at a banquet for French poodles. She delights in it, just because it makes people sit up and gasp. That sliding down the banister party she gave at her coming-out party last spring must have been a ripper. Four or five old ladies who couldn't slide down a haystack got mad and went home. They've cut her since then."

"Coming-out party?" queried the Westerner. "I thought you said she was a widow."

"She is. It was when she came out of mourning."

"I think I'd like to know her," mused the Westerner, his eyes lighting up.

"She's very expensive," murmured the drawler, who also would have enjoyed an acquaintanceship.

For a few minutes they all seemed to be interested in their own thoughts. Finally a youth in a lavender waistcoat and a gray dinner jacket broke the silence.

"Gimme a cigaret, Bob."

"Don't you ever *buy* cigarets, Sticky?" growled the one addressed, reluctantly extending his case.

"Sticky" ignored the question. "I wonder if Buzzy's got it into his head to get married," he said reflectively.

"She's rich enough," remarked the drawler.

"How about De Foe? He's the bell-cow, isn't he?"

"She's in love with him, that's all. The name of Van Pycke would get her into the very heart of the Four Hundred. With Buzzy's patronymic and the lamented Jim's millions, she'd be an establishment in herself. And, besides, Buzzy's a chap any woman might be proud of as a husband. He's good-looking, amusing, popular, and—useless. His habits are unnaturally decent. Drinks less than any fellow in the club—except the spooks who don't drink at all. Gambles moderately and—"

"Fellows, I believe Buzzy'd make something of himself if he didn't have the family name to carry around," burst out "Sticky." "Lemme take a cigaret, Bob. Yes, sir; he's got it in him. If the old man was off the map, Buzzy'd come to realize that there's something for him to do besides marrying for money. The way it is now, he's just got to marry a lot of dough. It's cut out for him. That's all he's ever been taught,—that's all he grew up for. He's—Sh! Here he is!"

A slender young man, immaculately dressed from tip to toe, approached the group. If any feature was out of proportion in this young man's face, it was his nose,—or perhaps it was his mouth. His nose was rather long and fine,—a typically aristocratic Van Pycke nose, but unblooming,—and his mouth was a bit too large for perfect symmetry, you might argue. But the one denoted truly patrician blood; the other signified no small amount of strength as well as the most engaging good nature. That is to say, one could not, by any chance, take him for a snob; the mouth quite offset the nose. Mr. Van Pycke has already said he was twenty-five. He looked what he was set up to be,—a gentleman, bred and born.

More than one of his friends noticed the absence of a certain genial smile that usually illumined his face when he joined a party of acquaintances. There was something almost suggestive of gloom in his eyes. The mobile lips were not spread in the gentle smile they knew so well; they were rather studied in their sedateness. His hands were in his pockets (which was most unusual), and—yes, his tie was rather carelessly knotted.

"Your father's looking for you, Buzzy," said Sticky.

"He is? I thought he was looking for some one when I passed him out there just now. Here, waiter, take the orders." He sat upon the edge of a table and swung one leg aimlessly while the servant took the orders.

"I'll take a Bronx," he said, after the others had spoken.

The drawler took it upon himself to instruct the waiter to find Mr. Van Pycke, senior, and tell him that his son was in the lounge.

"Never mind," countermanded Bosworth, sharply. "I'll look him up directly. Beastly night, isn't it?"

Every one said it was. It dawned upon them that Bosworth was not taking his first cocktail. It was quite plain that already he had taken several. They were

unwilling to believe their senses. Buzzy *never* got tight! He always had said it made him dreadfully ill the next day, and a man who is ill the next day—in that way—suffers tremendously during the period of upheaval in the additional loss of self-respect. Be that as it may, he appeared to have forgotten his squeamishness. Young Mr. Van Pycke—he of the sleek blond hair and dark gray eyes—was quite palpably drunk.

"This is the sixth for me in the last half hour," he remarked, but not proudly, as he took up the cocktail. A spoonful or more leaked over the top of the glass as he raised it to his lips. "Here's how."

"Six!" exclaimed the drawler. "What's got into you, Buzzy? I thought your limit was two."

Buzzy appeared to be thinking. "Two's my limit when I'm perfectly sober," he said sagely. He waited a moment. "Say, did you fellers see that thing in the paper's mor—this morning about the party?"

"What party?" demanded several.

He looked aggrieved. "Why, there was only one. I haven't heard of another. The one at Mrs. Thistlethorpe's. By Jove, that's a—a hard name to pronounce. Didn't you see in the papers that they played a new game between the Bridge and the pantry? Jus' before supper Mrs. This—Thissus Miss—the same one I said before—introduced her new trained dog. It was Willy Buttsford. Willy—the silly ass—came into the room on all fours. She was leadin' him by a leash. Willy's got such a deuced thin neck that her poodle's diamond-studded collar fits'm all right. Then she had him beg for candy, roll over an' play dead, jump over her leg, and—say, he almost broke his nose doin' that! Awful mess he made of himself, slippin' on the rug. He closed the show by tellin' the age of every woman present, barkin' the numbers. I thought I'd die of fatigue when he gave Mrs. Thisum—ahem!—when he gave *her* age. He thought it would be smart to run it up into the hundreds. The dam' fool barked for three quarters of an hour without stoppin'! I never was so disgusted in my life. Thass—that's why I'm gettin' full to-night."

"I don't see why *you* should get full," said Sticky.

"Sticky, you *would* see if you knew the horrible thought that's been botherin' me all day. Mos' dreadful thought."

"What is it?"

"It occurred to me that, next thing I know, I'll be doin' some idiotic trick like that. I've got a feelin'—an awful feelin'—that I won't be able to get out of it. Some woman'll want me to play a cow, or a goat, or a crocodile, sure's your're born, and I'll be *it*. Awful thought!"

Everybody laughed but Bosworth. He flushed and looked very much hurt.

"I'm not foolin', boys," he said quite seriously. "I feel it coming. I haven't money enough to tell 'em to go to the devil, and they know it. That's the trouble in not havin' money. So, I've made up my mind to follow the governor's advice. I'm going to marry it."

"Good boy!" cried the drawler, humoring him.

"Either that or go to work," said Bosworth, slowly, impressively. Again they laughed, and again he flushed. "I mean it. I'm either going to marry some one who can support me in the latest and most approved fashion, or I'm going to chuck the whole business and devote my time to solving the labor problem by trying to hold a job somewhere. Twelve thousand a year is all right if a chap's working part of the time. He's at least earning the interest on what he spends. But twelve thousand isn't even pin money in the crowd I'm trying to keep up with."

"I've always said you'd marry a wad as big as the best of 'em," said Sticky, greatly encouraged.

"If I don't marry pretty soon, the governor will," mused Buzzy. "The Lord knows *he* won't marry for love or experience. No, gentlemen, you can't expect to be much more than a poodle dog on twelve thousand. I had to lick a feller at college once for calling me a pup. I'd hate it like the deuce if I should live to see his statement proved true. No, I won't be a trained dog. I'll get married and pay my debts. And—I say, what time's it getting to be? Eight forty-five? Well, I must be on my way."

He swung his leg down from the table, straightened his slender, elegant figure with a palpable effort, and smiled his most genial farewells to the crowd.

"Rotten night," he said once more.

The drawler took his arm and accompanied him to the door. They were very good friends.

"Better stay in to-night, Buzzy," he said.

Bosworth looked at him in haughty surprise.

"You think I'm tight," he retorted. "There, forgive me, old chap; I didn't mean to snap you off like that. Le' me tell you about those cocktails. I took 'em to brace me up. I'm going to do it to-night." This in a whisper.

"Do it? Do what?"

"Ask her!"

"What the dev—Ask who what?"

"I don't know just who yet, but I certainly know what. I'm going to ask some one to become Mrs. Van Pycke. There are three of 'em who are eligible, according to the governor. He's ding-donged 'em at me for three months. I've got a taxicab waiting for me out there. The chances are that it'll get stuck in the snow somewhere. That's why I can't say which one I'm going to ask. It all depends on which one lives nearest to the snowdrift in which we get stuck. They're all the same to me. And I think they are to the governor. But, see here, George, I'm not going to ask more than one of 'em. If I get turned down to-night, that ends it. I'm going to work!"

"I don't wish you any bad luck, Buzzy, but I hope you'll be turned down," said his friend, earnestly.

Van Pycke was staring straight before him. His brain seemed clearer when he replied. There was a distinctly plaintive note in his voice.

"I wonder if I *could* make good at work of any kind. Do you suppose any one would give me a trial?"

"In a minute, Buzzy! And you would make good. Better stay in to-night. Let the —"

"No," said Buzzy, resolutely. "I'm going to try the other thing first. That's what I've been trained for. Good night, George. Don't tell the fellows, will you? They'll guy me to death. I just wanted you to understand that I can't go on as I'm going on twelve thousand a year."

"I quite understand, old boy."

Buzzy held his hand for a moment, looking quite steadily into his eyes. "You don't think I'm as useless as the rest of 'em think I am, do you, George?"

"God bless you, no! No one thinks that of you!"

"George, I hate a liar," said Buzzy, but his face glowed with a happy smile.

In the lobby he met his father.

"Where the devil have you been?" demanded Van Pycke, senior. "Damitall, I've wasted half an hour waiting for you."

"I didn't know you were waiting, dad. Why didn't you send in your card?"

"Send in my—why, confound you, Bosworth, I'm a member of this club. Why should I send in—"

"Don't lose your temper, dad. I apologize for keeping you waiting. Don't let me keep you any longer."

Mr. Van Pycke looked his son over very carefully. A pained expression came into his face.

"Bosworth, I am sorry to see you in this condition. It grieves me beyond measure. You have never—"

"It's an awful night, isn't it, dad? Can't I give you a lift in my taxicab? I see you've got on your overcoat and hat." Bosworth was moving toward the clubhouse entrance. The old gentleman resolutely kept pace with him.

"That's just what I meant to ask you," said he, with some celerity. "I—I can't get a cab of any sort for love or money. It's generous—"

"You can't get much of anything for love in these days, dad, except love."

Mr. Van Pycke pondered this while Bosworth got into his coat and hat.

"I am very sorry to see you intox—"

"Dad, I 'm celebrating," said his son, halting just inside the door.

"Celebrating what?"

"My approaching marriage, sir."

Mr. Van Pycke dropped the glove he was pulling on. He went very white, except for his nose. That seemed redder by contrast.

"Not—not a chorus girl?" he stammered, his hand shaking as he raised it to his brow.

"No, dad. Not yet. I expect to marry some one else first. I'll save the other for a rainy day."

"Who—who is it, my boy? Who is it?"

"That, sir, is still a matter of conjecture. I haven't quite got down to the point of selecting—"

"You insufferable booby," roared his father. "You gave me a—a dreadful shock, sir! Never do that again."

"I thought you'd like to know, sir," said Bosworth, politely. He winked gravely at a mahogany doorpost, and motioned for his father to precede him through the storm doors.

"By the way," muttered his father, obstructing the way, as if recalling something he had forgotten to attend to inside the club, "would you mind lending me fifty for a couple of days? I meant to speak to you about it in—"

"Will ten do, dad? It's all I have with me, except a tip for the driver. We mustn't forget the driver on a night like this." Bosworth was feeling in his trousers pocket, no sign of resentment in his face.

"I dare say I can borrow forty from Stone," said the other, readily. "No," he went on, after he had pocketed the crumpled bank note and was fastening his baby lamb collar close up to his shrivelled throat; "no, we can't forget the driver on a night like this. You really won't mind dropping me up town, will you, Bosworth? I don't mind walking if you'd rather not."

"Come along, governor," said the other, pushing through the doors. "Ah, that cold air feels good!" The young man drew in a long, deep breath.

"Good? It might feel good to a polar bear, but I don't see how—"

"Sh! Be careful, dad! Don't let the driver hear you call me a polar bear. He wouldn't understand, and it might get into the papers—the very thing I'm trying to avoid."

Mr. Van Pycke attributed this remarkable utterance to the cup that cheers and befuddles. At best he seldom appreciated or understood Bosworth's wit.

The taxicab plowed and sputtered its way through a city block of pelting snow before he gave over trying to analyze this latest example. Then he broke the silence, in the shrill, chattering tones of one who is very cold.

"I don't think I told the driver where he could put me down," he said.

"Eh?" mumbled Bosworth, coming out of a dream. "Oh, I dare say it won't matter. I'll tell him when he puts me down."

"But," expostulated his father, from the recesses of the baby lamb, "you may be going to—to Harlem." He could think of nothing worse. "I've been delayed in keeping my appointment on your account, as it is. It's very annoying, Bosworth, that I should be kept waiting a whole hour there in the club while you puttered your time away at—"

"Where *do* you want to get out, dad?" interrupted the scion of the house of Van Pycke.

Mr. Van Pycke had been thinking. He was not sure that he wanted Bosworth to know just where he was going on this momentous night. It occurred to him that the walk of a block would not only throw the young man off the track, but might also serve to soften the heart of the lady for whom he was risking so much in the shape of health by venturing forth afoot in a storm so relentless. Moreover, he could tell her that he had walked all the way up from the club, cabless because even the hardiest of drivers balked at the prospect. A statement like that, attended by a bushel or more of snow in the vestibule where it had been brushed off by the butler, ought to convince the lady in mind that his devotion was thinly divorced from recklessness. So he told Bosworth that he would get out at Mr. Purdwell's house.

The announcement caused Bosworth mentally to eliminate one of the ladies from his list. He gave a deep sigh of relief at that. The daughter of the shamelessly rich Mr. Purdwell was so homely and so vain that she was almost certain to have said "yes"—with all her millions—if he had asked her. He remembered that Miss Hebbins, almost as rich and quite as eager to get into the Four Hundred, was the next on his list. She lived a few blocks farther up the street.

"All right, dad. Just push the button when we get to Purdwell's corner. I'm going beyond."

Mr. Van Pycke hesitated for a moment. "Would it be too much trouble for you to stop for me on your way down, Bosworth?"

"Not at all, dad." As an afterthought he added: "Something tells me I won't be up here long. Can you be ready at half-past ten?"

"I think so," said his father, who had some misgivings.

The taxi struggled bravely along for a couple of blocks. Bosworth was dozing comfortably. His father, seized by an unwelcome sense of compunction, was turning something over in his mind. In the end, he concluded to break a certain piece of news to his son.

"Your mother has been dead for sixteen years, Bosworth."

Bosworth opened his eyes.

"Yes, sir," he said, trying to guess what was coming.

"She was a noble woman, my boy. I—I shall never forget her."

"I loved her," said Bosworth, vaguely.

"I have always said that a man shouldn't marry a second time," proceeded Mr. Van Pycke. Bosworth sniffed. Mr. Van Pycke went on: "That is, until his first wife has been—er—at rest for fifteen years or more. It's only decent."

"I see," said Bosworth, comprehending.

"You do?" demanded his father, a bit upset.

"Who is she, dad?"

Mr. Van Pycke's chin was so far down in the baby lamb that his reply was barely audible. "I hope to be able to tell you in the morning—perhaps late this evening, my son."

The young man was smiling in his corner of the cab. "Are you quite sure you love her, dad?" he asked, without guile.

Mr. Van Pycke coughed.

"Perhaps you'd better wait till morning to tell me that, too," said his son, coming to the rescue.

CHAPTER II

A YOUNG LADY ENTERS

Mr. Van Pycke got down in front of the Purdwell mansion. It must be admitted that he almost funk'd when he opened the door of the cab and let in a gust of wind and snow that almost took his breath away. But he steeled himself and slipped out into the seething blizzard. He blinked around in all directions as the taxicab chortled off into the white whirlwind. So dense was the flying snow that he could scarcely see the houses on the inner side of the pavement; he was nearly a minute in getting his bearings. Then he shuffled off through the great drifts on the walk, pointed toward a fashionable apartment building whose lights glimmered fantastically against the whistling, shifting screen.

It may be added that Mr. Van Pycke was cursing himself for a fool at every wretched step of the way. Never, in all his life, had he seen snowdrifts so deep and never so stubborn. He said to himself that he'd be d—d if he pay a cent of taxes until civic affairs were administered by an assembly that knew enough to keep the sidewalks clear of snow. He also experienced the doleful fear that his nose was freezing in spite of all that he could do to prevent it.

Bosworth's taxicab floundered heroically on for two blocks. Then it gave out and came to a frantic stop, pulsing and throbbing and jerking its very vitals out in the effort to go ahead.

"She's stuck, sir," said the driver, opening the door.

"Where are we?" demanded young Mr. Van Pycke. "Please come inside and close the door. I hate a draft. That's better. Now we can talk it over. Are we lost?"

"Lost, sir? C'tainly not. I know w'ere we are, all right. Only we can't budge out of this snowdrift. It's the woist ever."

"I suppose we'll have to sleep here," said Bosworth, resignedly. He was comfortably sleepy by this time.

The driver struck a match, the better to inspect his amiable fare. "Not if I know myself," he growled. "If you should happen to lose your watch while you're in

this condition, I'd be juggled for it. I'll take you to the Lackaday Hotel in the next block below and turn you over to the chambermaids. Come along, pardner. I'll see that you get there all right."

Buzzy sat up and glared at him in the darkness. "Strike another match, confound you," he commanded. "How the devil am I to see your number? Never mind; I sha'n't report your impertinence, after all. I dare say you meant well. I am a bit drunk. But I can get along all right by myself. You say the Lackaday is back there in the next block?"

"Yes, sir. The number you wanted is about three blocks further up. If it hadn't a been—"

"Let me out. I'll walk back. You—you've taken me past the number I wanted."

"The ticket says 714, sir, plain as day," began the driver. "You didn't say nothin' about the Lackaday—"

"You're quite right, my man. And you didn't say anything about stopping in the middle of the block for the night, did you? Well, there you are! That squares us."

He clambered out into the snowdrift and unbuttoned his overcoat. The man seemed undecided whether to let him go or to drag him back into the vehicle. Bosworth found what he was looking for in his waistcoat pocket. He pressed it into the driver's hand.

"I'm sorry it isn't more," he said regretfully. "It may be a dollar, or it may be a five, but no matter which it is, it ought to be more. Now I'll tell you what I want you to do. If you can't get this thing going by 'leven o'clock, I want you to go up to Martin's and have 'em send a four-horse sleigh to No. 511. It's the first residence north of the Lackaday, and it's the number I've been compelled to select as a last resort. Understand?"

"Yes, sir. Martin's livery, sir. I'll attend to everything, sir. Thank you, sir."

He stood there in the blinding snow, watching his fare struggle to the sidewalk. Then he decided to follow along behind him until the "young gent" was safely within the doors of No. 511. He had driven Mr. Van Pycke before and he knew that it was not a dollar bill.

Bosworth reached the steps leading up to the rather imposing doorway at No. 511. There was a heavy, stubborn iron gate at the foot, which he had some

difficulty in opening because of the snow. While he was working with it, a man came plump up against him. Together they seized upon the gate and yanked with all their might and main.

"Thanks," said Buzzy, when it was open.

"Don't thank me," snapped the other. "I'm going in myself."

They mounted the six or eight steps to the storm doors, side by side, enveloped in the snow that scuttled around the corner of the big Lackaday hotel next door. With a great stamping of boots they floundered into the shelter of the outer vestibule.

The light in the hall beyond shone through the glass doors, illuminating the box-like coop in which they paused, each selfishly to occupy himself in catching his breath and at the same time shake the snow from his person. In the act of knocking the snow from the tops of their silk hats they glanced up simultaneously, each having arrived at the moment when it was convenient for him to inquire into the identity of his fellow visitor.

They stared hard for a moment.

"Hello, dad! Are you lost?"

Mr. Van Pycke muttered something into the collar of his coat. Fortunately the wind outside was making such a noise that his son did not hear the remark.

"Is that you, Bosworth?" he demanded querulously, almost on the instant.

"Yes, sir,—your long lost son. I—I thought I let you out at Purdwell's?" Bosworth seemed a bit hazy.

Mr. Van Pycke cleared his throat. "I didn't find any one at home." It did not occur to him to ask why Bosworth was there. "So I came up here, unexpectedly, mind you. I thought perhaps the weather being so dreadful, I'd be sure to find Mrs. Scoville at home. No one would think of going out on a night like this."

"Do you suppose the Purdwells went out *without* thinking?" asked Bosworth, innocently.

"Ring the bell," said Mr. Van Pycke, very sharply.

His son found the button with some difficulty, and gave it a violent and

unintentionally prolonged push. In silence they awaited the response of the footman.

"Is your mistress at home, Bellows?" asked Mr. Van Pycke, as the door was opened part way to allow the indignant inspection of one who had certainly expected beggars.

Bellows, smileless and resourceful individual, seemed a bit uncertain, not to say upset. He glanced over his shoulder in a very far from imperious manner, apparently expecting the answer to come from the softly lighted hallway behind him.

"I'll see, Mr. Van Pycke. Will you step inside?"

"Get a broom, Bellows, and brush off some of this snow."

"Yes, sir." The footman appeared a moment later with a whisk broom. "It's a very nawsty night, sir," he informed them jointly as he began scattering the snow in all directions. From tip to toe he whisked the shivering Mr. Van Pycke, and then turned upon his silent companion. The elder slipped into the warm hall, feeling his nose in considerable agitation.

"Bellows, come in here and take my coat. By Gad, I wonder if I am likely to catch pneumonia."

"In a moment, sir."

"You—you think it likely, Bellows? That suddenly?"

Bosworth stepped inside, and Bellows gently closed the door before turning to the distressed Mr. Van Pycke, senior.

"Bellows, is my nose frozen?" demanded that gentleman, in tones faint with dread.

"No, sir. It looks to me to be quite warm, sir."

"Is your mistress engaged, Bellows?" inserted Bosworth, quietly. "If she is, I'll not trouble you to help me off with my coat."

"I—I think she is, sir. I'll see, however."

"Very odd," said Mr. Van Pycke, senior, as the man disappeared down the hall.

"I think there's a dinner going on," said Bosworth, beginning to button up his coat.

"No one would go to a dinner on such a night as this," rasped Mr. Van Pycke, who knew all of the eleventh-hour habits of society. He took up his position over a simmering floor register. "I'm wet to my knees. My feet are like ice. I wish that demmed servant would hurry back here and get me a hot drink of some sort. Ring the bell there, Bosworth. I'm—I'm quite sure I feel something stuffy in my chest. Good God, if it should be pneumonia!" His legs trembled violently.

Bosworth did not ring the bell. He was staring thoughtfully at the floor, and paid no attention to his father's maunderings. The humor of the situation was beginning to sift through his slowly clearing brain.

Bellows returned.

"Mrs. Scoville is at home, and begs the Misters Van Pycke to bear with her for a few minutes. She is at dinner with a few guests. In the drawing-room there are other guests. You will please to make yourselves at home until she leaves the table. The gentlemen are to smoke in the drawing-room to-night."

"A crowd?" muttered Bosworth. Then his eyes lighted up with sudden relief. "Thank the Lord, I won't have to do it."

"Do what?" demanded his father.

Bosworth's wits were keener. "Go out into the storm without something to warm me up," he equivocated.

"Bellows, who is in the drawing-room?" asked Mr. Van Pycke, eyeing the door with some curiosity. "They're deuced quiet, whoever they are."

Bellows grew very red in the face and resolutely pressed his lips together. He took Mr. Bosworth's overcoat and hat and laid them carefully on the Italian hall seat before venturing to reply.

"You can't hear them for the wind, sir," he said.

"Bellows, I'm catching my death," shivered Mr. Van Pycke. "I feel it coming. Get me something to drink. My God, look at my shoes! They're sopping wet. Bosworth, don't stand there like a clothing store model! I must have dry shoes and stockings. I can't—"

"A clothing store model?" murmured the footman, strangely perturbed.

"I can't run the chance of pneumonia at my age," went on Mr. Van Pycke. "Bellows, do you suppose there's a dry pair of trousers in the house? I'm wet to the knees. I must have shoes. Demmit, Bosworth, do something!"

"My dear father, don't look at me. I'm using my trousers. I dare say Bellows has an extra suit of livery."

"If you wouldn't mind wearing brown trousers with a yellow stripe down the leg, sir," began Bellows.

"Anything," interrupted Mr. Van Pycke, irritably. "But I must also have shoes."

Bellows was thoughtful. "I think, sir, that there is an old pair of riding boots under the stairs, sir. They belonged to poor Mr. Scoville, sir."

"I don't like the idea of wearing other men's shoes—" objected Mr. Van Pycke, with an apprehensive glance at his son.

"I don't think it would matter, sir," said Bellows, affably. "Mr. Scoville hasn't worn them in two years and a half."

Mr. Van Pycke's look of horror caused Bellows to realize.

"I beg pardon, sir. It would be rather grewsome getting into dead men's boots, sir. I never thought—"

"That's undoubtedly what Mr. Van Pycke is contemplating, Bellows," said Bosworth, slyly.

"Sir!" snapped Mr. Van Pycke.

Bellows' face lighted with the joy of a great discovery. "I have it, sir. If you will wait out here just a few moments, sir, I can have trousers, shoes, and stockings. Have you a notion, sir, as to the size?" He stood back and looked Mr. Van Pycke over carefully. "I think I can fix it, sir."

He departed hastily, closing the drawing-room door behind him. Bosworth sat down upon a frail Italian chair and watched his father unbutton his shoes while standing on one foot, propped against the wall.

"Dad, he's going to sandbag one of the guests and take off his clothes," the young man said, smiling broadly. His eyes were quite steady now, and merry.

"Why are you here, sir?" demanded his father, irrelevantly, suddenly remembering that Bosworth had not mentioned his intention to stop at Mrs. Scoville's.

The young man was spared the expediency of a reply by the return of Bellows, with a pair of trousers over his arm, shoes and stockings in his hand. He seemed in some haste to close the drawing-room door behind him.

"You can change in the room at the head of the stairs, sir."

Mr. Van Pycke, in his stocking feet, preceded the footman up the stairs, treading very tenderly, as if in mortal fear of tacks.

Buzzy twirled his thumbs impatiently. He yawned time and again, and more than once cast his glance in the direction of his coat and hat. Never before, in any house, had he been required to sit in a reception hall until the hostess was ready to receive him elsewhere. He could not understand it. Above all places, Mrs. Scoville's, where the freedom of the house was usually extended to all who in friendship came.

From behind closed doors—distant closed doors, by the way—came the sound of laughter and joyous conversation, faintly audible to the young man in the hall.

"I feel like an ass," said young Mr. Van Pycke, probably to the newel post, there being nothing else quite so human in sight. Then he leaned back with a comfortable smile. "I've virtually tried the three eligibles to-night," he mused. "It's a satisfaction to feel that they haven't dismissed me in so many words, and it's a relief to feel that they haven't had the actual opportunity to accept me. I've done my best. The blizzard disposes. I'll see Krosson to-morrow about a place in his offices."

Mr. Van Pycke came down stairs even more tenderly than he went up. There was a look of pain in his face, and he walked slack-kneed, with his toes turned in a trifle. He was wearing a pair of trousers that had been constructed for a much larger man, except as to height.

"The shoes are too small and the trousers too big," he groaned. "I'm leaving my own up there to be dried out. Bellows says they'll be dry in half an hour. I had to put these on for a while. One can't go around with—er—nothing on, so to speak."

"I'm trying to think who's in there that wears trousers of that size—and shape," murmured Bosworth, surveying his father critically.

"Bah!" rasped the uncomfortable Mr. Van Pycke. "Announce us, Bellows."

Bellows opened the drawing-room door, took a quick peep within, and then, standing aside, announced in his most impressive tones:

"Mr. Van Pycke! Mr. Bosworth Van Pycke!"

The two gentlemen stepped into the long, dimly lighted room. Bellows disappeared quickly down the hall. Mr. Van Pycke, his sense of dignity increased by the desire to offset the only too apparent lack of it, advanced into the middle of the room, politely smiling for the benefit of a group of ladies and gentlemen congregated at the lower end, near the windows. So far as he could see, they were engaged in the vulgar occupation known as staring.

Bosworth Van Pycke stopped just inside the door, clapping his hand to his forehead. His mouth fell open and his eyes popped wide with amazement—almost horror. He sat down suddenly in the nearest chair and continued to gaze blankly at the figures down the room. He heard his father say "Good evening" twice, but he heard no response from the group. His abrupt, uncontrollable guffaw of understanding and joy caused his now annoyed parent to whirl upon him in surprise.

"Oh, this is rich!" Bosworth was holding his sides, laughing immoderately.

"Bosworth!" hissed his father, with a conscious glance at his feet and legs. "What the devil amuses you?"

For answer his son strode over and clutched him by the arm, turning him around so that he faced the silent, immovable group.

"See that man back there without trousers? The bare-legged, bare-footed chap? Well, dad, you've got on his pants."

"Good God!" gasped Mr. Van Pycke, nervously hunting for the bridge of his nose with his glasses. "Is the poor fellow naked?"

"Half naked, dad, that's all. Look closely!"

"Sh! Demmit all, boy, he'd knock me down! And the ladies! What the devil does he mean, undressing in this bare-faced—"

"Bare-legged, dad." With a fresh laugh he leaned forward and chucked the nearest lady under the chin. As she was standing directly in front of Van Pycke, senior, that gentleman, in some haste, moved back to avoid the retort physical.

"Bosworth! How—how dare you?" he gasped.

"Can't you see, dad? This is the richest thing I've ever known. Don't be afraid of 'em. They're wax figures, every one of them!"

Mr. Van Pycke started. Then he stared.

"Well, upon my soul!" he gasped. He repeated this remark four or five times during a hasty parade in front of the group, in each instance peering rudely and with growing temerity into the pink and white face of a surpassingly beautiful lady.

"It seems to me that I recognize this one," he said, with a cackle of joy. "I've seen her in Altman's window. 'Pon my soul I have, Bosworth."

"I don't know what Laura's game is, but, by Jove, it's ripping, I'll say that for it," said Bosworth, his face beaming. "How many of them are there?" He counted. "Fourteen. Seven spiketails and seven directaires. Great!"

The two gentlemen withdrew to the upper end of the room, to better the effect. From the dining-room, four rooms away, came the more distinct sounds of laughter and conversation.

"There is a *real* party out there," said Bosworth, rubbing his chin contemplatively. "I wonder what's up?"

Mr. Van Pycke sat down and twirled his thin mustache, first one side and then the other, murmuring "By Jove!" over and over again in a most perplexed way. Bosworth stood, with his chin between finger and thumb, thoughtfully viewing the inanimate group. For several minutes his face indicated the most penetrating contemplation of the exhibit down the room. He was still a trifle dizzy, but in no danger of losing his attitude of sober reflection.

There were blond ladies and brunettes, old ladies and young ones, and some who were neither; all beautifully, elaborately gowned in the latest models from Paris. Their starry glass eyes gazed into space with the same innocuous stare that baffles all attempts to divert it through plate-glass windows. Some were sitting, some were standing. Gentlemen in evening clothes, with monocles or opera hats

—mostly plebeian persons, from Eighth Avenue, you'd say—stood vaguely but stanchly in juxtaposition to ladies who paid no heed to them, but who, however, were not unique in their abstraction. Fuzzy-mustached gentlemen were they, with pink cheeks and iron-clad shoulders. They stared intently but not attentively at the chandeliers or the wall-paper, unwinking gallants who seemed only conscious of their clothes.

The effect was startling, even grewsome. For five minutes Bosworth surveyed the waxy, over-dressed group in profound silence, cudgeling his brain for a key to the puzzling exhibition.

"For the life of me," he said at last, "I can't understand it."

"I understand it perfectly," said his father, still somewhat dismayed by the steady gaze of the last pair of blue eyes he had encountered. "Mrs. Scoville is ordering some new gowns, and the—er—modistes have sent up samples. Perfectly clear to me."

"I suppose she's ordering a few suits of men's garments—garments is what they say in the clothing stores—to lend variety to her wardrobe," said Bosworth, dryly.

Mr. Van Pycke coughed indulgently. "Bosworth, you shouldn't take so many cocktails before—"

"Yes, father," interrupted Bosworth, humbly. "I quite agree with you. For a while I thought it might be the cocktails, but now that you see them, too, I am very much relieved."

"I am very sorry to see a son of mine—"

"Hello!" said Bosworth, his gaze suddenly encountering a table near the fireplace on which were piled a number of small boxes. One could see at a glance that they were jeweller's boxes. "Looks like Christmas."

He got up and strode over to the table.

"Christmas is a week off," said Mr. Van Pycke. "What's up? Some one coming down the chimney? It wouldn't surprise me, by Jove!"

His son was gazing, as if thunderstruck, at the contents of more than a dozen boxes of various sizes. He whistled softly, to best express his wonder.

"Great Scott!" he said, after a moment. "There's half a million dollars' worth of dog-collars, pendants, tiaras, rings, and—" He was holding up, for his father's benefit, a rope of pearls that could not have cost less than a hundred thousand dollars. "Take a look at this, dad!"

Mr. Van Pycke made his way painfully to his son's side. "Astounding!" he murmured, touching a tiara with respectful fingers.

"Say!"

The two Van Pyckes jumped. The voice that uttered the raucous monosyllable was masculine, and it seemed to burst from a spot not far removed from their elbows. Bewildered, they stared this way and that in quest of the rude owner of that voice.

"Keep your hands off o' them jewels," said the voice, levelly.

Bosworth's indignant gaze discovered the man in the very centre of the group of "dummies." The young man experienced a queer shiver of dismay. Was he losing his senses?

A pink-cheeked gentleman with a crêpe mustache arose from a chair in the extreme background. He leveled a menacing finger, with Bosworth as the object of its concern.

"Move back from that table, gents," remarked the vivified object near the windows. The Messrs. Van Pycke fell back several paces, still staring blankly at the figure.

Bosworth gulped. "Are you—alive?" he demanded, putting his fingers to his temple.

"Alive? What do you think I am? A corruptse?" exclaimed the figure.

"I meant to say, are you the only live one in—in the crowd?"

The man looked about him, perplexed. Then he understood. "Oh, you mean these freaks? Say, my disguise must be all right. I look like a waxwork, do I? I —"

Mr. Van Pycke had recovered his dignity. "What the devil is the meaning of all this, sir? Explain yourself."

The man picked his way carefully through the group of wax figures. He was a sturdy person whose evening clothes did not fit him, now that one observed him carefully. When he was clear of the group, he calmly turned back the lapel of his coat, revealing a nickel-plated star.

"Does that star signify anything, gents? It says I'm here on this job, that's all. Just to see that nobody walks off with the sparklers. I'm from Wilkerson's Private Detective Agency. See? Now, I'd like to know when and how you got into this room."

He faced them threateningly.

The Van Pyckes started.

"What do you mean?" exclaimed Bosworth, turning quite red.

"Just what I say, young feller. When did you come in here?"

"You say you are a detective!" sneered Bosworth.

The man from Wilkerson's blinked his eyes suddenly. "I—I guess I dropped off to sleep for a couple of minutes. Up for three nights—"

"Do you recognize these trousers?" demanded the young man, pointing to his father's ridiculous legs.

The detective peered rather closely. Mr. Van Pycke drew back and glared at him through his glasses.

"By thunder, they *don't* fit him, do they? Say, there's something wrong with you guys. Where'd you get them pants, you?"

"Me?" murmured Mr. Van Pycke.

"Yes, *you*!"

"I'll have you pitched from this house, you impertinent scoundrel!" roared Mr. Van Pycke, threatened with apoplexy.

"Where'd you get them pants?" repeated the sleuth, steadily. "And them shoes! Say, this has a queer look. I'll have to—here! What's the matter with you? What you laughin' at? It won't be so blamed funny, young feller, let me tell you that. You guys can't—"

"You're a fine detective, you are," laughed Bosworth.

"I'm Doxey, the star man of the agency," retorted the detective, angrily.

"It's a wonder my father isn't wearing your trousers, Mr. Doxey. It would have been quite as easy, and I really think they'd fit him better than they fit you. Don't lose your temper, please. Good detectives never lose their tempers. Please remember that. Now, if you'll be good enough to cast your eyes upon that shameless person near the cabinet over there, you'll—"

"Great Scott!" gasped Mr. Doxey, his eyes bulging.

"That's right! Keep your eye on him. I don't know who your friend is, Mr. Doxey, but my father is temporarily inhabiting his trousers—and shoes. You must have slept soundly not to have been disturbed when Bellows took them off. You'll find—"

"Come off!" growled Doxey. "The old man didn't come here without pants, did he? And if he had his own on, what in thunder was he trading with—"

Bosworth held up his hand imperatively.

"Good detectives don't discuss their deductions with—never mind! I sha'n't say it. Now, it may interest you to know that we are close personal friends of Mrs. Scoville. We—"

"Don't haggle with the demmed scoundrel," protested Mr. Van Pycke, vigorously.

"Now, don't get fresh—don't get fresh!" said Mr. Doxey, his fusty black mustache coming loose on one side and drooping over his lip.

"Don't bite it!" cautioned Bosworth, hastily. Mr. Doxey stuck it back in place with a white kid paw of huge dimensions.

"I am Bosworth Van Pycke, and this is my father, Mr. Van Dieman Van Pycke," said Bosworth, bowing very low.

"Van Pycke? Wait a minute. I got a list of the guests here in my pocket. I'll see if you're among 'em. If you belong here, why ain't you out there eatin' with the rest of 'em?" Mr. Doxey looked up suspiciously from the paper he had taken from his coat pocket. "I don't like this pants gag. It sounds fishy."

"Fishy?" murmured Mr. Van Pycke. "What the devil does he mean by that, Bosworth?"

"It's his way of calling me a liar, dad, that's all."

"Say, there ain't any Van Pyckes on this list. And this is the *correct* list, too. The butler gave it to me himself. I—"

Bosworth suddenly lost his playful manner. He was tired of the game.

"That will do, Mr. Doxey. Be good enough to go back to your corner," he said coldly. "I mean it. Don't stand there glaring. It has no effect on me. I *am* Mr. Bosworth Van Pycke. I don't blame you for protecting the jewels—even from Van Pyckes—but there's nothing more for you to do, so far as we are concerned. We are waiting for Mrs. Scoville and her guests. And, say, on your way back to your chair—or was it a couch?—be good enough to drape a table cover about the limbs of that unfortunate person with the bald head—and bald legs, I might add."

Mr. Doxey looked from one to the other with interest, not to say curiosity. Something in the young man's manner carried conviction.

"Are you the—the Buzzy Van Pycke who gave the supper for Carmen the other —"

"I am," Bosworth interjected. "I didn't see you there, Mr. Doxey."

Mr. Doxey snickered. "My wife wouldn't 'a' stood for me—"

"My good man, there were a number of married men there. All of 'em, no doubt, were being shadowed by detectives. I thought perhaps you might have got in—but, there! I am tattling. Please sit down, Mr. Doxey."

He threw himself into a comfortable chair and crossed his legs. Then he proceeded to light a cigaret.

Mr. Van Pycke, senior, had been sitting for some minutes, a strangely preoccupied look in his eyes, his lips twitching as if with pain.

"I guess I'll just set out here," said the detective, looking from one to the other shrewdly. "The town's full of those Raffles crooks. How do I know—"

"Quite right, Doxey. How could you know? You sleep too soundly."

"If you're what you say you are, why don't you call in the footman to identify you?"

"Bellows has already announced us, Mr. Doxey. I'm hanged if I'll ask him to do it over again. Now that I think of it, he almost burst while doing it. It's not my fault that you did not hear him."

Mr. Doxey looked uncomfortable.

"Well, just keep your hands off from the jewels," he said.

Mr. Van Pycke, senior, spoke for the first time in many minutes. It was easy to see where his thoughts had been directed during the trifling dialogue. His gaze was attached to the patent-leather shoes he wore.

"I don't see how that demmed dummy ever got into these shoes. They're almost killing me. Confound it, Bosworth, don't grin like an ape! You are tight, sir,—disgustingly tight!"

"I'll lay you a fiver I'm not so tight as the shoes, dad."

Mr. Doxey snickered. Van Pycke, père, glared at him in a shocked sort of way for a moment, and then, disdaining the affront, fell to tenderly pressing each of his insteps, very much as if trying to discover a spot that had not yet developed a pain.

The detective took a seat where he could watch the two gentlemen and at the same time keep an eye on the door through to the dining-room far beyond. Bosworth smoked in silence for some time.

"What's the meaning of all this?" he asked, after a while, indicating the group of dummies with a comprehensive sweep of his hand.

"I'm not here to answer questions," said Mr. Doxey, succinctly.

"Oh!" said Bosworth.

Mr. Van Pycke stirred restlessly. "By Jove, I think I'll—I'll have to go upstairs and change these shoes for my own, wet or dry. I can't stand 'em any longer. I dare say my trousers are dry by this time, too." He arose with great deliberateness. He took two delicate steps toward the hall door; then Mr. Doxey's irritatingly brusque voice brought him up with a jerk.

"Hold on, there! None o' that—none o' that! You set right where you are, mister. I guess I'll just keep you in plain view for a while. Fine work, me lettin' you go upstairs, eh? Fine work, I don't think!"

"Confound you, sir, I'll—" began Mr. Van Pycke, drawing himself to his full height with a spasmodic effort that brought its results in pain.

"Sit down, father," advised Bosworth, gently. Mr. Van Pycke sat down. "There's some one coming," added his son a moment later. He arose and turned toward the portières at the upper end of the room, prepared to greet the beautiful Mrs. Scoville.

The portières parted at the bottom. All eyes were lowered. The most unamiable looking bulldog that ever crossed man's path protruded his squat body into the room, pausing just inside the curtains to survey the trio before him in a most disconcertingly pointed manner. His whole body seemed to convert itself into a scowl of disapproval.

Bosworth sat down dismayed. His father swore softly and drew his feet a bit nearer to the legs of the chair. Both of them knew the dog. They knew, moreover,

that the only living creature in the whole world exempt from peril was the beast's mistress, the fair lady to whom they had come to pay coincidental devoirs. All other persons came under the head of prey, so far as Agrippa was concerned—Agrippa being the somewhat ominous name of the pet.

"How—how does he happen to be loose?" murmured Bosworth, with a side glance at the detective.

"Is he dangerous?" asked Mr. Doxey.

"He's a man-eater," said the other, quite uncomfortably.

"Nobody told me about a watchdog."

"Ah, now I understand why he's loose," said Bosworth, promptly. Mr. Doxey looked thoughtful for a moment, and then opened his lips to resent the imputation, half rising from his chair to obtain greater emphasis in his delivery.

Agrippa emitted a prophetic growl. Mr. Doxey resumed his seat in some haste.

"Will he bite?" he demanded instead.

"Bite? Hang it all, man, he'll chew us to ribbons if we move. I—I know that dog. We don't dare to twiddle until Mrs. Scoville comes in to call him off. He's got us treed, that's all there is to it. I wouldn't move my little finger for fifty dollars cash. Look at his eyes! Observe the size of his incisors!"

"I believe you," said Mr. Doxey, with a belated shudder.

"Demmed outrage!" sputtered Mr. Van Pycke. "Now I *can't* take them off."

Mr. Doxey was seized by an inspiration. He smiled. "Why don't you go upstairs and change 'em?" he asked. Mr. Van Pycke moved one foot, evidently agitated by a desire to kick Mr. Doxey. Agrippa growled. "Just to see if he *will* bite," added the detective, with a nervous laugh.

"You go to the devil, sir!" grated Mr. Van Pycke, but entirely without muscular emotion.

Conversation lagged. For five minutes the three men sat immovable, staring with intensely wakeful eyes at the grim figure of Agrippa, who had eyes for all of them. He had moved farther into the room, possibly for the purpose of indulging in a more or less unobstructed scrutiny of the mysterious group of ladies and

gentlemen beyond. Agrippa was puzzled but not disturbed. He was not what you would call an inquisitive dog.

"I have never been so insulted in my life," said Mr. Van Pycke, without raising his voice above a polite monotone.

"Neither have I," said Mr. Doxey.

"You, sir? You are the *insult*, sir. How can you be insulted? It is impossible to insult an insult. I won't put up with—"

"Keep cool, father," warned Bosworth. "You came very near to moving your leg just then. I warn you."

"I'm quite sure a dog couldn't *add* anything to the pain I'm already suffering from these demmed shoes. Come here, doggie! Nice doggie!" The wheedling tones made no impression on Agrippa. "What an unfriendly beast!"

The figures in wax down the room were not more rigid than the four creatures above—three men and a dog. A little French clock on the mantelpiece clicked off the seconds in a more or less sonorous manner; Mr. Van Pycke's sighs and the detective's heavy breathing were quite plainly distinguishable, even though the wind howled with lusty lungs at every window in an effort to monopolize attention.

"I shall have that dog shot the very first thing," mused Mr. Van Pycke aloud.

"I guess not," protested Bosworth. "He's a corker. I wouldn't take a thousand for him."

Then they shot simultaneous glances of apprehension at each other. Each wondered if he had let his cat out of the bag.

Bosworth was quick to say to himself: "I see through the governor's game. Well, I'm a dutiful son. I've tried for three of them to-night and Fate has been against me. It means that I'm intended for something better than matrimony."

Bosworth's father was thinking: "If I don't ask her at once, he'll propose. And she'll take him in a second if he does. I'll not give him the chance. I'll get it over with inside of five minutes. And I *will* kill that demmed dog."

Agrippa pricked up his ears and turned his head ever so slightly in the direction of the portières behind him. A moment later the light, quick tread of some one

was heard in the adjoining room, accompanied by the swish of silky garments.

Three pairs of eyes were lifted to the portières. A young woman appeared between the heavy silk curtains. For a second she held an attitude of polite inquiry. Then a wrinkle of perplexity crept into her smooth, white forehead. She looked in surprise from one to the other of the motionless gentlemen, ignoring the detective as completely as if he had not been there at all.

What surprised her most was the fact that the Messrs. Van Pycke, noted as the most courteous of men, remained rooted to their chairs.

"Good evening," said Bosworth, allowing his gaze to stray from her now indignant face to the commanding jowl of Agrippa. "Pardon me for not arising—pardon all of us, I might say,—but it is quite out of the question. By Jove! Do you happen to know Agrippa? If you don't, please escape while you can. He's—"

"Agrippa? Oh!" She had a very soft, musical voice. It was doubly attractive because of an uncertain quaver that bespoke amazement. "Are you Mr. Van Pycke?" She looked at the young man with unmistakable interest—or was it curiosity?

"I am Mr. Van Pycke's son," said Bosworth, cautiously inclining his head.

The young lady smiled suddenly. "You poor men!" she cried. "Agrippa! Come here, sir!"

Agrippa's dominion was ended. He turned to her, a very humble dog. She leaned over and boxed his ears with a soft, white hand—but so gently that Agrippa would have smiled if he knew how. He did wag his stubby tail by way of acknowledgment. "Please don't stir," she said to the three appalled observers. "I'll take him away. He's a very naughty dog."

She departed, Agrippa's collar in her fingers. A moment later she returned. The three men were standing, but, by curious coincidence, each had taken a position behind the chair he had occupied.

"Mrs. Scoville begs me to say that she is sorry to have kept you waiting so long, and that she will be down as soon as she has changed her gown."

"Her gown?" murmured Bosworth.

"Changing it for what?" muttered Mr. Van Pycke, dreadfully bewildered.

"For a street gown. She's going out, you see."

Mr. Doxey coughed by way of attracting attention. "Do you know these gents, Miss Downing?"

The smile deepened in her face. Bosworth never had seen a smile so ravishing. He smiled in sympathy, without knowing just why he did it.

"It isn't necessary to watch them any longer," she said very sweetly. Mr. Doxey retired to the group near the windows.

"Thanks," said Bosworth, bowing to her.

"Pardon me," said his father, "but I understood Mrs. Scoville was at dinner."

"That was some time ago, Mr. Van Pycke," the girl said quickly. "She just *had* to change her gown, you know."

"Spilled something on it?" he queried. "These confounded servants are so—"

"Won't you sit down?" she interrupted. Bosworth noted a sudden touch of nervousness in her manner. For some reason she bit her lip as she looked in the direction of the dummies.

"If you don't mind," mumbled Mr. Van Pycke, "I think I'll go upstairs and change my shoes and trousers." He started for the door.

Miss Downing stood aghast—petrified.



CHAPTER III

THE AMAZING MARRIAGE

No one opposing him, Mr. Van Pycke carefully made his way to the door and disappeared into the hall. Miss Downing continued to stare after him for many seconds, plainly perplexed. She was not so transfixed, however, that she failed to note the grotesque misfit of his trousers; nor did his manner of locomotion escape her attention. Could this hobbling, ill-dressed person be the fastidious Van Dieman Van Pycke, of whom she had heard so much?

And he was going upstairs to—by the virtue of all the saints, what *did* he mean?

A blush raced into her fair cheek. She turned to young Mr. Van Pycke with parted lips, half inclined to smile, half to protest. She found him smiling, yes, more than that; he had his hand over his mouth. Plainly, he was having a struggle of an inward character.

"I—I don't understand," she murmured, the flush growing.

"And *we* don't understand," he responded after a moment, waving his hand in the direction of the dummies.

She smiled brightly. "You've noticed them?"

"Noticed them?" he repeated. He intended to say more, but a sudden, sickening doubt interfered. However, a quick, rather penetrating glance reassured him. Mr. Doxey had wrapped a rug about the unfortunate gentleman and was now engaged in making room for him behind the Steinway grand. The young lady's glance followed Bosworth's.

"What is he doing?" she demanded, starting forward. "Those wax figures are not to be disturbed."

Bosworth stayed her with a gesture. "You must not interfere with an officer in the discharge of his duty," he said with great gravity.

"But—"

"Please don't pay any attention to him," he pleaded, stepping in front of her. "Sit down and tell me about the dummies."

She looked at the door through which Mr. Van Pycke had passed. "Where *has* your father gone, Mr. Van Pycke?"

"Can you keep a secret?"

Her eyes were expressive.

"You'll have to sit down—over here," he went on. "I don't want the detective to hear me."

They sat down side by side in a Louis Seize divan. He told her of the predicament in which his father had found himself on arrival, and of the expedient footman who came to the rescue. Miss Downing stifled her laughter three times by successful applications of a handkerchief, but the fourth time she failed. If I were not writing of a young lady in a drawing-room, I'd tell the truth and say that she shrieked.

"It is droll, isn't it?" he asked, after watching her convulsed face for a moment.

"Perfectly killing!" she gasped.

He waited until she had dabbed her eyes with the handkerchief a few times and was able to meet his gaze with a certain degree of steadiness. Then he remarked: "It's strange that I've never met you before. Are you an old friend of Mrs. Scoville's?"

"There isn't any Mrs. Scoville," she said quietly. She was watching his face.

He stared. Then he started to his feet in alarm, with a bewildered look around the room.

"Can it be that I am in the wrong house?"

"There used to be a Mrs. Scoville here."

"Used to be?"

"But she's Mrs. De Foe now."

She was smiling into his eyes now, so merrily, so frankly, that somehow he overcame the immediate impulse to express his consternation by leaping a foot

or two into the air. Instead of doing anything so utterly common, he merely gulped and stared the harder.

"She's—she's gone and got married to Chauncey De Foe?" he murmured, his eyes very wide.

"This very night, Mr. Van Pycke," said she, leaning back to see how he would take it. His face grew suddenly radiant.

"Oh," he exclaimed, "you don't know how happy you have made me!"

"Happy? You?" she cried, amazed.

"Yes. I—" he caught himself in time. "I'll tell you all about it, but not now. Some other day, if I may. Oh, I say, this will fetch the governor an awful cropper! Married to-night! Here? In this house? Why—why, it must have been in this very room. And those confounded dummies were—By Jove!" He stood up and surveyed the inanimate group through a seldom used monocle. An intensely thoughtful expression put many wrinkles upon his brow, but a sudden burst of understanding cleared them away in a jiffy. He beamed. "She's had real dummies at the wedding instead of the imitations that society provides. Oh, I say, that's sarcasm simplified. It's pretty rough, though, don't you think, Miss Downing?"

"It doesn't seem to distress you very deeply, Mr. Van Pycke," she said. "But you are wrong in your conclusions. The figures do not represent the blockheads of New York society. They are meant to approximate the more active of the busybodies now at large. Do you see?"

"I'm hanged if I do."

"You are a very good friend of Mrs. Sco—Mrs. De Foe's, are you not?" she demanded.

"A devoted admirer, I swear, or I wouldn't be here to-night."

"Then, I think I may explain the situation to you. Those figures represent the society queens who closed their doors against Mrs. Scoville last season. The masculine examples represent the satellites of those virtuous ladies who profess never to have been found out. Mrs. Scoville made out her list of guests last week. She resolved to return good for evil. She invited the ladies and their satellites—by mental telepathy, I might say. Then she sent the butler over into Eighth Avenue with instructions to fetch them here in a moving van. They

arrived last night, under cover of darkness. They spent the night in this room. Shocking, you'd say? That—"

He interrupted, his eyes gleaming. "You mean to say that she rented these figures for no other purpose than to pose here as people who cut her because—er—because Mrs. Grundy gossiped too fluently? Suffering Mo—I should say, good gracious! What an idea!"

"That's it precisely, Mr. Van Pycke. I fancy you know the ladies and gentlemen quite well. They treated her abominably last winter. She didn't mind it very much, as you know. She's not that sort. People *did* talk about her, but her real friends remained true. She thought it would be splendid to have her enemies here in just this way. With the understanding, of course, that the whole story is to get into the newspapers."

He stared harder than ever. "Into the newspapers? Good heavens, you don't mean to say she's going to let the papers in on this?"

"Certainly," she said very quietly. "Why not? It will make a beautiful story. People invite monkeys to dinner and the papers are not denied the facts, are they? They have banquets for dogs and picnics for cats, don't they? Some one gave a fashionable supper the other night for the three-legged girl in the circus, and some one else followed it up with a tea for the four-legged rooster. The papers were full of details. Mrs. Scooper and many other ladies gave dinners and balls for a woman who had been the favorite of nearly all the masculine crowned heads in Europe, and the richly cultivated Mrs. Rankling once included in the list of invitations to an author's reading the names of J. Fenimore Cooper and Nathaniel Hawthorne. I don't see why Mrs. De Foe's dummies are worse than the freaks I've mentioned. Heaven knows they're respectable."

"I like your enthusiasm," he said, but still a little shaken by the intelligence.

"Mrs. Sco—Mrs. De Foe is the best, the dearest friend I have in the world," said the girl, simply.

Young Mr. Van Pycke was very tactful. He appeared properly impressed. At the same time he looked at her with new interest. She seemed very young to be calling the former Mrs. Scoville her dearest friend. Somehow, her face was vaguely familiar. He wondered where he had seen a photograph of her.

"She's a terribly good sort," he agreed, and he meant it. "But, I say, this is

ripping! Talk about monkey dinners and—why, there's never been anything like this! Dummy guests at one's own wedding! It's rich! It's—"

She held up her hand, gentle reproof in her eyes. "I can't say that I like it, Mr. Van Pycke. I'm only saying I approve of it because she was bound to have her own way in spite of the rest of us. But, to be perfectly honest, I think that a wedding is something beautifully sacred. It should be held sacred in every respect. It seems dreadful—But, there, I won't say any more. It's all right, I know. Besides, it was not my wedding."

"I quite agree with you. Next to a funeral, a wedding is our most sacred ceremony," he said.

"I've never heard you accused of super-sacredness," she said, with a little smile.

"But I have very fine feelings," he protested. As an afterthought he added, "Sometimes."

She turned her head to look at the portières, apparently anticipating sounds from beyond. He had a fine view of her profile. Leaning back in the divan, he made the most of the opportunity. It was a very pure, gentle face, full of strength and character and sweetness. Hardly the face, thought he, of one who had trained for any length of time in the set affected by the new Mrs. De Foe. Her hair was dark and fine and came low about her temples. It was all her own, he was quite sure, and there was an abundance of it. A small ear peeped invitingly out at him—somewhat timidly, he felt, as if he were a very wicked person to be shunned. Her neck was round and slim, her shoulders white and almost velvety in their healthy youthfulness. Somewhat to his amazement, there were no bones in evidence; and yet she was slender. He laid this phenomenon to perfect health, a condition heretofore regarded as perfectly unfeminine. Her cheeks were warm and clear, her lips red and almost tremulous in their sweetness; her eyes were—well, he could not see them, but he quite certainly remembered that they were blue. The nose—a very patrician nose—recalled to his mind one that he had seen in a very famous portrait somewhere, sometime. He had a vague recollection that it was some one's "Portrait of a Lady." Just as he was visually caressing the firm, white chin and throat, she turned upon him with a warning "Sh!" He already had decided that she was twenty-one and that her white satin evening gown was quite new and very exquisite. His intense gaze, caught red-handed, so to speak, confused her. She was not used to it: that was plain. He had the grace to look at the portières expectantly.

"They are coming," she said, arising at once.

"Can't you tell me more about the wedding?" he asked, standing beside her.

"Not now. Later on, perhaps. You *do* know her well enough to wish her happiness, don't you?" She added the last imploringly.

"That's what I came here for—to insure her happiness," he said, smiling to himself.

"You knew then?" she whispered in wonder.

"I can't say that I knew that she was going to be married so soon," he replied evasively. "As a matter of fact, I didn't have De Foe in mind at all."

Men and women, laughing, were approaching through the next room.

"Do I know them?" he asked, nervously adjusting his monocle.

She named a dozen people quickly. He nodded his head after each name. They were old friends, all of them.

"And Mr. Rexford," she concluded.

"Rexford? Who's he?"

"He's from Pittsburg," she said, looking away.

He studied the back of her head for a moment. "Oh, I see," he said, with a dry laugh.

She faced him. "You are very much mistaken," she said.

Bellows threw back the curtains and a group of very lively persons came crowding into the room.

"Hello, Buzzy!" shouted three or four of the men. They had dined beautifully. For that matter, so had the ladies. They surrounded him and assaulted him verbally. You could have heard them laugh as far down as 35th Street, if you had been there. (Of course you were not, it being such a wretched night.)

Bosworth grinned amiably under the volley of chaff they fired at him. He observed that Miss Downing effaced herself. She retired alone to the group of dummies. He was not long in wishing that he could be with her in that region of

peace and rectitude.

"Where's the groom?" he managed to ask, after ten or twelve voices had expended themselves in levity—not any of which appealed to his stricken bump of humor.

"De Foe? He's changing," said one of the men. "They're leaving for Boston to-night."

"Say, Buzzy, what do you think of the waxies?" cried another. "Have you seen 'em yet?"

"Think I'm blind, Stockton? Good evening, Mrs. Runway. How do, Mrs. Clover."

"I'm surprised you weren't asked, Buzzy," said Mrs. Runway, a blondish lady with black eyes and rather darkish skin. "You were such pals."

"Where's your father, Buzzy?" shouted some one.

"He was announced half an hour ago," said another. They all roared. Bosworth flushed painfully. There was a strange, new resentment in his heart.

"He's changing," he announced coldly, and left them to wonder what he meant by the remark.

Mr. Stockton volunteered: "Changing what? His spots or his mind?"

But Bosworth had turned toward the young lady who had effaced herself. Somehow he rather rejoiced in the fact that she had forsaken this group for another and less objectionable one. Mrs. Runway intercepted him.

"They do say, Buzzy, that you were in love with her," she said. "Are you dreadfully cut up about it?"

He stared past her. "Not at all," he announced. "Far from it. Nothing would have afforded me greater pleasure than the privilege of giving the bride away."

"Dear me," she said, as he smiled and walked on. Struck by a sudden impulse he turned to her.

"Who is Miss Downing? Where have I seen her before?"

"How should I know?" said Mrs. Runway, stiffly.

"Oh," he said, turning again. A strange young man, very much the worse for champagne, had now approached the girl, his hands in his pockets, a vacuous smile on his flushed face. Bosworth changed his course and engaged young Mrs. Chanier in conversation, all the while keeping his eye on the girl down the room.

"Terrible night, isn't it, Blanche?" he observed by way of reserving her attention, which seemed inclined to wander.

"Ripping," she said. "Everything went off beautifully. Only one hitch, my dear. I say, who's the girl talking to Tommy Rexford?" She used her lorgnette.

"I was just about to ask who the chap is talking to her. She's a Miss Downing."

"Know her?"

"Oh, yes," he prevaricated nobly, catching an ugly gleam in the young matron's eye. "She's a terribly nice girl."

"I thought as much. Isn't she too nice?"

"Who's this Rexford chap?"

She stared at him. "Oh, he's all right, Mr. Buzzy Van Pycke," she said, resenting his ignorance. "Tommy Rexford is one of the dearest boys in the world. He's from Pittsburg. I met him at Palm Beach last winter. He comes to New York pretty often. I say, Buzzy, are you listening?"

"Sure," said Buzzy, whose attention had drifted to the girl in the white satin. Plainly, she was being annoyed by the attentions of the intoxicated Mr. Rexford. He appeared to be relating a story which shocked her. "He seems very keen about Miss Downing," he volunteered, a queer bitterness in his heart.

Mrs. Chanier bridled. "What? Why, he's been drinking a little too much, that's all." Her tone was nasty. Bosworth was not slow to grasp the true state of affairs.

"How's your husband?" he asked bluntly.

She smiled serenely. "Oh, he's still got his locomotor ataxia, if that's what you mean."

Miss Downing abruptly left Mr. Rexford, who, looking after her for a moment as if dazed, allowed himself a short laugh of derision. Young Mr. Van Pycke's foot itched with the desire to kick young Mr. Rexford.

"I'm sure liquor doesn't affect me in that way," he muttered, overtaken by the sudden recollection that he had imbibed quite freely, and further distressed by the fear that it had not entirely worn off. To himself he was saying: "That fellow's a warning to me. If I thought I looked or acted as he does, I'd—well, anyhow, I don't drink to excess, so I can't make comparisons or resolutions. That girl doesn't belong with this crowd. She's too good for them."

With this sage conclusion he promptly took it upon himself to put her into better company. He joined her as she was about to pass into the library.

"What was that fellow saying to you?" he demanded, quite as if he had always possessed the right to interrogate.

"Was it so plain as all that, Mr. Van Pycke?" she asked, distress in her eyes. "He's been drinking."

"That's no excuse," said he with surpassing severity. "I say, you—you don't really belong in this crowd," he went on earnestly. "Not that there's anything bad—I mean, the set's a bit faster than you're accustomed to. I can see that. I'm not throwing stones, so don't look at me so scornfully. Believe me, it's not the rottenest set in town. It's only the gayest. How do you happen to be here? Are you related to Mrs. Scoville?"

"Birds of a feather," she said, a gleam of anger in her unsmiling eyes.

"You mean that to apply to yourself or to me?" he asked, with a wry smile.

"Do you profess to be any better than the rest of them, Mr. Van Pycke? They call you 'Buzzy' and 'dear,' so they must be your intimates. Why do you set yourself above them?"

"The Lord knows I don't, Miss Downing. But I *do* set you above them. You'll have to admit there's something in that. I—"

She smiled faintly. "Please don't look so dismal. I didn't mean to bite your head off."

"It would be amazingly interesting, I'm sure, if you were to try it," he said, with his finest smile. She was disarmed. "Still, I don't forget how you subdued Agrippa."

"Oh, Agrippa loves me," she announced calmly. He looked into her deep eyes

and realized that she was not an untrained girl from the country. She was very sure of herself.

"Lucky dog," he said.

"He has known me for ages," she explained.

"That doesn't necessarily follow," he said gallantly. "It comes unexpectedly sometimes, even to dogs."

"Do you like dogs, Mr. Van Pycke?" she asked, with disquieting serenity.

"What is all this leading up to?" he demanded suspiciously. "You're not going to invite me to a dog dinner, are you?"

"Dear me, no. How silly!"

"Well, one never knows in these days."

"These are not the dog days." He grinned amiably. "And so you are the wonderful Buzzy Van Pycke," she went on, quite frankly interested. "I've often wondered what you would be like."

"You don't mean it," he said, surprised.

Her only response was a penitent, apologetic smile; but it served better than words. He was dazzled. He afterward recalled that the whole course of his life changed in that instant. He was not quite sure that he didn't hear something snap inside. Still, it might have been his imagination.

At this moment the bride hurried into the room, her arms full of furs. There was a shout of joy from the guests. She smiled for every one, and then sent a quick, searching glance among them. Discovering Bosworth, she uttered a little cry of pleasure, tossed the furs into a chair,—which, it seems, already was occupied,—and rushed over to him, both hands extended.

"Dear old Buzzy, I'm so glad you came without an invitation! I am, truly. I would have sent you one, only I wasn't sure you would fit in under the circumstances. You see, it was a wedding. You'll understand, I'm sure."

"Perfectly," he said. Regardless of Miss Downing's presence, he added without a qualm: "I'm rather glad you've done it, Laura. It's saved me a lot of despair, I'm sure. You see, I came up to-night to propose to you."

She laughed easily, affecting no confusion. "And I might have accepted you. That's what you mean?"

"Well, you might have done worse. But you haven't," he added hastily. "Chauncey's a brick. I've approved of him from the start. Always wanted him to get you, Laura."

"It's nice of you to say that, Buzzy," she said, serious for an instant. Her fine eyes glowed. "I know you mean it, too. Others haven't been so generous." Then her manner changed. "Do you really have to marry some one, Buzzy? Are you so hard up as all that?"

"My dear," he said, "you are alarming Miss Downing."

"Nonsense! Miss Downing knows all about you and all about me. I have no secrets from her. She's not even wondering how you could have contemplated marrying me without loving me. She knows how rich I am."

"Ah," he sighed, "I wonder if she knows how poor I am."

"Every one knows that, Mr. Van Pycke," said Miss Downing. He stared. "You have a paltry twelve thousand a year. Even the street sweepers get more than that." Her sarcasm was veiled by a polite smile.

The bride laughed. He felt a sudden, inexplicable shame.

"Well, Buzzy, I can't stop here talking to you all night. We're leaving, you know, by the 11.30. Thanks, dear boy, for the thought that brought you up to-night, I appreciate the honor." She extended her hand. "Good luck, my friend. Try further up the street."

"Oh, I say, Laura," he protested. She saw the genuine hurt in his eyes. Instead of withdrawing the hand he had clasped, she suddenly gave his a warm pressure. Her mocking eyes grew sober and earnest.

"You're too much of a real man, Buzzy, for that sort of thing," she said. "Don't do it. Marry for love, my dear friend, even if it means getting along on twelve thousand a year. I don't believe, Bosworth Van Pycke, that down in your heart you can see much that is glorious in the spending of a woman's money. You're cut out for better work than that."

"I've just come to the same conclusion, Laura," he said firmly. "Good luck and

God bless you. You'll be happy: De Foe doesn't need your money."

She dashed off to give orders to the butler and the maids who were waiting in the library beyond. De Foe's entrance was the signal for another outburst of joyous badinage. He was a handsome, strong-featured man of rather serious mien.

Bosworth at once shook hands with him, the others looking on curiously. "God bless you and—thank you, old chap," he said. De Foe was never to know why the young man thanked him, but the attentive Miss Downing understood and favored the speaker with a glance of profound concern.

He turned to her as De Foe was claimed by the others. An expression of deep uneasiness had come into his eyes.

"I wonder what keeps father so long," he said, so quaintly that she laughed aloud. Then both of them turned to watch the preparations for departure.

The butler tossed the jewel boxes into a stout black bag; the detective took charge of it. Bellows peered from the front windows in quest of the motor cars; everybody chattered and gabbled while they were being bundled into their outer garments by the nimble attendants. One could only think of the anterooms in the Savoy or the Ritz.

"Now get out, every one of you," cried the bride. "I insist on being the last to leave the house. It's for good luck."

Bellows said something in a low voice to Mr. De Foe. Any one but Bellows would have betrayed concern.

"No motors!" exclaimed Mr. De Foe. There was a sudden silence in the room.

"The blizzard, sir," said Bellows, briefly.

"But, hang it all, we must get to the station," cried the groom. "What the devil's the meaning of all this?"

"Don't blame Bellows, old man," said Bosworth Van Pycke. "He isn't a blizzard. And don't lose your temper, either. Remember it's your wedding night. Now, I have a big sleigh coming for me at 10.30. Taxis can't budge in this weather. You and the bride can take my sleigh—"

He did not finish. Every man in the party had begun to berate the kind of car he owned and every woman was scolding the weather. Then there was a common

demand for four-horse sleighs. Bellows received half a dozen orders to telephone to the garages and to the livery stables, all in the same breath, it seemed.

"Don't worry, Chaunce. My sleigh is sure to come. The bride is safe." So spoke the confident Mr. Van Pycke. "All I ask you to do in return is to send it back here for me as soon as you're safely there."

"You're an angel, Buzzy," cried the bride from the depths of her sables.

Just as the sleigh was announced, half an hour later, a diversion was created by the entrance of Mr. Van Pycke, senior. He was dressed for the street, fur-coated and gloved. The shout which greeted him brought him up just inside the door. He glared at the crowd.

"Where are you, Bosworth?" he called out, his voice husky with emotion.

"Here, father. Are you ready to go?" His son stepped forward rather quickly.

"Do you think I'm going to stay all night?" snapped the old gentleman. "I'm—I'm damned if I do!"

Every one was rushing for the doors. The bride took time for a few words with the latest arrival.

"How late you are, Mr. Van Pycke!" she cried, grasping his hand. "I'm so sorry we must be going. Catching a train, you know. By the way, Buzzy, we're sailing for the Azores day after to-morrow. When you're in Paris, be sure to look us up. Thank God, I'm never coming back to New York. Now you know why I don't care a snap what people say or think about my wedding guests. Good-bye, my dear. Good-bye, Mr. Van Pycke. Thanks, so much, for the roses you sent up to-day. Be sure we get the right sleigh, Bellows. Come, Mary, dear, kiss me. I *know* you'll look me up when you come to Paris."

She enveloped the pretty Miss Downing in her arms, kissed her warmly, and then rushed off into the hall, where the crowd was being shooed out into the storm ahead of her.

Bosworth observed that Miss Downing was not attired for the street.

"You're not going?" he asked quickly.

"Not till to-morrow," she said. "I'm staying overnight."

"Bosworth," put in Mr. Van Pycke, in deadly tones, "where is your cab?"

"Stuck in the snow, dad. My sleigh will be back in half an hour. Take off your coat. Miss Downing won't mind our staying here a while longer. She—"

"Not another minute, sir!" snapped Mr. Van Pycke. "You don't know what I know. You—"

"I don't believe you know what I know, either, dad," said his son, dryly.

Bellows entered. "Your sleigh will return in half an hour, Mr.—Mr. Bosworth. Will you wait, sir?"

"No, he won't wait," said Mr. Van Pycke. "Get his coat and hat, Bellows. I'm—I'm going to take him away."

"You'll be lost in the snow, sir," said Bellows, mildly. "It's worse than the Alps, sir."

"Alps? Confound you, you've never seen the Alps!"

"No, sir," said Bellows. "But Stokes, the butler, has, sir."

"Send Stokes to me, Bellows," said Miss Downing, quietly. "I will give orders for to-night and to-morrow morning. I hope you will forgive me, Mr. Van Pycke, if I retire at once. I am very tired. It has been a busy day and—a rather wearing night."

"Please don't go just yet," he begged. "You promised to tell me about the—" He was going to say wedding, but his father interrupted.

"If you're not coming at once, Bosworth, I'll leave you here. I'll walk. I'll have pneumonia anyhow, so what's the sense of taking care of myself? I've been insulted, outraged, humiliated in this—But, I can't talk about it now, not in the presence of a lady—for I'm sure she is a lady. I can tell 'em by the sound of their voices. What, in God's name, are you doing here? That's the thing that puzzles me. 'Gad, if I did the proper thing, I'd take you away at once, storm or no storm."

"Dad, you don't understand," began Bosworth.

"Are you coming away with me?" roared his father, stamping the floor.

"Do they still hurt you?" asked his son, with a solicitous glance at the old gentleman's feet.

Mr. Van Pycke sputtered. "I have my own on, sir. But I'm crippled for life, just the same. Thank God, I got my trousers in the end." He passed his hand nervously over his brow.

"In the end?" murmured Bosworth. Miss Downing turned to the fireplace.

"I—I can't tell you about it now," said his father in a constrained manner. "Gad, it was—it was awful! Bellows! Where the deuce is the man? Ah, here you are. Bellows, call me a cab or something at—"

"Mr. Stokes will be here directly, Miss," said Bellows. "Very good, Mr. Van Pycke. A four-wheeler?"

"Take the subway, dad," interposed Bosworth, glaring at Bellows. "Next corner below. But, think it over. You'd better wait for me."

Stokes came in, and Miss Downing, with a significant glance at Bosworth, retired to the library with the butler.

"Has everybody departed?" asked Bosworth of Bellows, who was turning off some of the lights in the lower end of the room. The young man dropped into a chair, opened his cigaret case, and then, first looking at the portières obscuring the library, yawned prodigiously.

"Yes, sir," said Bellows, caught in the middle of an illy-suppressed yawn. "The detective, my mistress's maid, and Mr. De Foe's man, with the bags, sir, went away with the 'appy couple in your sleigh. It was a bit crowded, sir, for the driver."

"Bellows," hissed Mr. Van Pycke, "who instructed you to take my trousers out to press 'em?"

"They needed it, sir, badly," explained Bellows.

"And my shoes, sir,—I did not ask to have them polished, did I?"

"No, sir. As I remember it, you did not."

"It wouldn't have been so bad," almost moaned the unhappy gentleman, turning to his son, "but I didn't discover their absence until after I had, in my ungovernable rage, thrown those confounded wax figure's garments from an upstairs window. And then, by Gad, sir, I couldn't find my own trousers. What's

more, I couldn't find the bell button to call for Bellows. There I was, in a strange bedroom without—Oh, I'll never forget it, Bosworth—never! What the devil are you laughing at, sir?"

Miss Downing had quietly reentered the room and was standing just inside the door, a growing smile of appreciation on her lips.

"Wha—what did you do, sir?" asked Bosworth, controlling himself heroically.

"Do? What could I do? Demmit all, trousers don't grow on chandeliers, do they? I couldn't pick off a pair, à la Santa Claus, could I? There was only one thing left to do. That was to shout for Bellows. Just as I was on the point of stealing out to the head of the stairs, I heard voices—a man's and a woman's. I dashed back into the bedroom. 'Gad, sir, what do you think? Those people were in the next room, and the door, which I hadn't noticed before, was partly ajar. At any minute they might come in and find—ahem! I didn't see you, Miss Downing.'"

"Please go on," she said.

"Only to convince you what kind of a house we have all gotten into," he explained, after a moment of indecision. "Well, I quickly entered a clothes closet near by. I don't want to hurt your feelings, Miss Downing, but the lady in the next bedchamber was your friend, Mrs. Scoville. The man was that confounded De Foe chap. I—I can't tell you what they were saying to each other. It was sickening, I'll say that much. No, no—I won't go into details. It seems there was a maid in there, hooking her up, but they didn't mind her. When the maid went out, I distinctly heard five or six kisses—ahem! Hang it all, Bosworth, I couldn't help eavesdropping. There were people in the hall outside. It was the most brazen thing I've ever known. Unfortunately, I had to sneeze."

He stopped to blow his nose. Bellows also blew his, but for a different reason.

"Yes, I sneezed. The exhibition ceased. I had just time to shut the closet door before De Foe came into the room, looking about. He said something about 'confounded servants,' and then went back to her. Then I heard him call her 'sweetheart' and ask her if she wouldn't tie his necktie for him, like a little darling. By Gad, sir, it was worse than I thought. I—"

Bosworth coughed violently, and Miss Downing found it necessary to flick some dust from a bronze bit at her elbow—somewhat to the rear of it, to be perfectly accurate.

"You don't understand, father—" began Buzzy, nervously.

"Confound it sir, I'm not deaf. I'll pass over the next half hour, except to say that they billed and cooed without cessation. I give you my word, that closet was like an ice-chest. I demmed near froze to death. At last they went away. Bellows came back with my trousers and shoes. After he'd gone, I stole out and got into 'em. There's a lot more I could tell, but—what's the use? I want to get out of here. Just to think that I came up here in all this storm to ask that creature to be my wife! 'Gad, I wouldn't ask her now if she was the last woman on earth. Open the door for me, Bellows! I'm going next door to the Lackaday, for the night, Bosworth. Call up by 'phone in the morning to see if I have pneumonia."

He stormed into the hall without saying good night to Miss Downing. They heard him swear roundly as Bellows opened the door to the vestibule. Then there was a slam of the outer door. Together the young man and woman walked to the front window, and, side by side, they saw him fight his way down the steps and across the thirty feet of snowbank that lay between the house and the street entrance to the hotel bar.

Mr. Van Pycke did not know, until he saw it in the papers next day, that there had been a wedding. It may be well to add in this connection that it was a long time before New York heard the last of that wedding and its amazing guests by proxy.

"Good night," said Miss Downing, as they turned away from the window.

"Oh, please, not yet," he cried.

"I am so tired," she pleaded.

"The sleigh will be back in twenty or thirty minutes."

"I'll stay ten minutes," she agreed. "Come and sit before the fire in the library. You may have a cigar or a cigaret—but nothing to drink." He started guiltily.

At the end of ten minutes, despite the fact that he was very amusing, she rose from the deep, comfortable chair before the fender, and said good night once more. "I hear sleigh bells in front," she said.

"When are you leaving?" he asked, looking into her eyes with all of the new interest that had come into his own.

"To-morrow. I'm to have a year's vacation on full pay," she said quite clearly. His

eyes flew very wide open. "Isn't it nice, Mr. Van Pycke?"

She was gone. He stood perfectly still, listening to the rustle of her gown as she sped up the stairs beyond. Something like a soft laugh came back to him from the dome of the hall. His face was a study.

"By thunder!" he murmured, prior to a long, intent contemplation of the blazing coals. At last, shrugging his shoulders in dire perplexity, he turned and slowly made his way to the front windows.

The sleigh was not in sight. He glanced at his watch. Eleven-twenty. With sudden exasperation he jammed his hands into his pockets and said something softly. Kicking a chair to the window, he sat down and glared at the snow-covered glass. Outside, the wind shrieked louder than ever.

When Bellows came in to turn out the lights at a quarter to twelve, Bosworth did not hear him, nor did Bellows observe the limp figure in the chair. Mr. Van Pycke was sound asleep, and the footman did not have far to go to reach the same state.

A sleigh came up, banked with snow, waited awhile in front of the dark house, and then departed.



CHAPTER IV

THE SECRETARY GOES HOME

He was chilled to the bone when he awoke, an hour and a half later. The room was in pitchy darkness. It is only natural to suppose that he did not know where he was. He felt of himself, surprised to find that he was not undressed and not in bed. With more philosophy than is usually exhibited under such puzzling conditions, he fell back in his chair and forced himself into full wakefulness.

A moment later, with a gasp of dismay, he was on his feet, scraping away the frost and peering from the black window into the night, his eyes wide with anxiety. His arms and legs were stiff with the cold; he found himself shivering as with a mighty chill. Turning his back to the window, for many minutes he stared dumbly into the opaqueness before him. The house was as black as the grave and quite as silent. He began to experience, strangely enough, the same dread of darkness he had felt when a boy.

A furnace register, he remembered, was near the door leading to the hall, wherever that might be. His first thought was to seek the comfort of its friendly, warmth-giving drafts. On second thoughts, he ransacked his pockets for a match. A clock in the hall struck once, but how was he to know whether it signified one o'clock or half-past something else? Finding no match, he started for the register, his hands stretched before him.

Of one thing he was reasonably sure; the household was wrapped in slumber. There was not a sound in the house. He was reminded of a childhood poem in which it was said: "Not a creature was stirring, not even a mouse." The memory of this line brought a smile to his lips.

His progress was rather sharply checked by bodily contact with one of the dummies, whose presence he had quite forgotten. Not only was there a hollow protest from the dummy, but a more substantial one from Mr. Van Pycke. Not content with a mild encounter with this particular obstacle, he proceeded, in his confusion, to back into another, which, being less sturdy, toppled over with a crash that must have been heard in the attic.

Panic-stricken, the young man floundered on, now intent upon reaching the hall

and making as dignified an escape as possible before the servants appeared with blunderbusses and tongs. His only desire now was to find his overcoat and hat and the front steps without butting his brains out in the darkness.

He brought up against a chair, creating additional racket and barking his knee into the bargain.

"Good heaven," he muttered, "where am I? Is it a barricade?"

His heart stood still for a second. Distinctly he heard the soft, suppressed cry of a woman—and then the unmistakable sound of scurrying fabrics. The sounds came from some remote corner of the room—or possibly from a room hard by—and were indicative of great alarm on the part of an unseen person.

Bosworth was not a slow thinker. He took the safest way. Without hesitation he called out: "It's all right! I am Bosworth Van Pycke!"

There was dead silence for the next sixty seconds. The French clock ticked them off. He involuntarily counted twenty-five or thirty before a small, hushed voice responded,—from the library, he was sure,—the voice of a woman.

"What did you say?"

"I am Mr. Van Pycke. Don't be alarmed. It's—it's all a mistake. I—"

"Mr. Van Pycke? Why—why—"

He recognized the voice.

"Is that you, Miss Downing?"

"Are you—are you sure that you are Mr. Van Pycke? I have my finger on the call button. Wha—what are you doing here?"

"I am trying to get out," he said, lowering his voice. "Don't you recognize my voice?"

"Ye—yes, I think I do."

"Where are you?"

"Why didn't you go out before?" asked the voice, a bit querulously he thought.

"I am not a sleep walker," he said. Realizing that it was a poor time to jest, he

hastily supplemented: "I went to sleep—waiting. Where are you? What time is it? Is every one in bed?"

The curtains at the opposite end of the room parted very slowly. First, a strong, red glow appeared beyond, mellow and somewhat fitful; then the shadowy figure of the girl was silhouetted against the red, framed on either side by shivering drapery.

She was still wearing the white satin evening gown. He took hope.

"It isn't so late, after all," he cried, starting toward her.

"I hope you will go away at once, Mr. Van Pycke," she said quickly. "It is half-past one—and every one *is* in bed. I don't understand why you are still here."

"I'll tell you all about it," he said, not very confidently. "Don't turn me out until I've got warm, please. I give you my word, I'm paralyzed with the cold."

"Really, Mr. Van Pycke, I—I can't have you here—I mean, it is so terribly late. I—I—"

"Were you horribly frightened?" he asked, somewhat irrelevantly. He had come up to her by this time, and, peering beyond, saw a splendid fire in the library grate. There were no lights in the room. A big chair stood before the fender, invitingly.

His teeth were chattering.

"I was almost petrified," she said rather breathlessly. "If you had not called out, I—I think my heart would have refused to beat again. Oh, I am so glad it is you and not a burglar!"

"May I come in and get warm?" he pleaded. She saw that he was shivering. With a quick glance over her shoulder she stood aside and allowed him to pass.

"You *are* cold," she said. "Sit down by the fire. I'll poke it up a bit. Just for a few minutes, and then you must go. I wonder if the racket alarmed the servants. You see, I am the only person in this part of the house, Mr. Van Pycke."

He looked up from the grate, over which he was holding his hands. "By the way, why are you not in bed? I distinctly remember you said good night—and started."

She hesitated. "I wasn't sleepy," she said.

"On the other hand, I slept very soundly," he said. "Have you been down here all this time?"

"Since twelve o'clock. I love a grate fire."

"Won't you sit down? Do."

"No, thank you. I'll wait till you have gone. If I sit down now, you'll stay, I'm afraid."

He moved the big chair and drew up another for himself beside it. She watched the proceedings without approval or resentment. When the two chairs stood side by side before the fender, he motioned for her to sit down. She was now gazing at him fixedly, a somewhat detached smile on her lips. After a moment she shrugged her shoulders and sat down. He promptly dropped into the other chair and stretched out his feet to the fire.

"You said something that surprised me, just as you left me—two hours ago," he remarked, after a long silence. "A year's vacation on full pay," he repeated.

"I am Mrs. De Foe's secretary," she said quietly. He turned to look at her.



"'I am Mrs. De Foe's secretary,' she said quietly."

"Secretary? I didn't dream of that, Miss Downing."

"Have I fallen in your estimation?" she asked, meeting his gaze steadily.

"I think you've risen," he said slowly.

"You may not remember me, but I crossed on the steamer with you from Liverpool when I was eight years old. You were eleven, I think you said. I was a very pretty little girl. You said that, too. Do you remember?"

He was cudgeling his brain. "I can't say that I do, to be perfectly candid. Still, I've been wondering where I've seen you. I recall the voyage, but as for little girls, I remember but one. Ah, she was a little beauty. I was so desperately in love with her that I dare say I had thoughts or eyes for no one else. I'm sorry."

"Do you remember her name?"

"Perfectly. It wasn't so long ago, you know. I'm twenty-five. She had a perfectly ungovernable nurse. I was obliged to do my worshiping from a distance. By Jove, that reminds me, her father was put down and out a few years ago in Wall Street. I think he had a stroke of paralysis, or something, poor devil, afterwards. Lost everything. I wonder what has become of her. I never saw her after we landed in New York."

"Was her name Pembroke?"

He started. "Yes,—Mary Pembroke! You knew her? Why, I believe—" He stared hard.

"I am Mary Pembroke," said she, leaning back and smiling. His astonishment was unqualified.

"You? Yes! I can see it now. All evening there has been some vague thing about you that has puzzled me. Why, it is wonderful—positively wonderful. I—" He stopped suddenly, a look of concern in his eyes. "I hope I didn't say anything just now to hurt you,—I mean, about your father."

"You spoke of him as the world speaks, Mr. Van Pycke. And you did say 'poor devil.' That was something. He is—still a helpless invalid. Perhaps you did not know that."

"I'm sorry—very sorry." He hesitated for a moment. "Is that why you are Mrs. De Foe's secretary?"

"We are quite poor, Mr. Van Pycke. So poor that I am unwilling to take from the slender annuity that keeps us together—my father, my two little sisters and me. There is enough for him to live on to the end of his poor, desolated life. I am strong, and I love him too well to take from that little store. Mine hasn't been such a trying position, after all. Mrs. Scoville is an old friend. I've known her since I was a little girl. She's been very kind and very generous. I don't mind the work. It's much better than marrying some one for his money, I'm sure. Have you ever read of Lily Bart? She had a very much harder time than I, poor thing, in her house of mirth. She did not deserve it, but she served as a warning to me."

"I dare say you remember that I told Mrs. Scoville I had come up here to-night to propose to her," he said ruefully. She nodded, and her eyes narrowed.

"You are not so brave as I am, Mr. Van Pycke," she said. "I thought you were very brave and very manly as a little boy."

"Well, I didn't ask her, after all," he said, resenting her tone. "I don't believe I could have done it, if it had actually come to the test. I couldn't do it now to save my very soul. I'm going to marry for love or not at all. Money be hanged."

"Oh, don't say that!" she cried. "You forget how rich you are!"

"Rich! I'm a pauper."

"On twelve thousand a year? I consider myself quite well off on the fifteen hundred Mrs. Scoville pays me. You are fabulously rich."

"You are laughing at me," he exclaimed, shamed.

"Who am I to laugh at the wonderful Buzzy Van Pycke, prince of the dandies in —"

"Please don't." He clenched his hands and set his jaw, leaning forward to gaze into the bed of coals. She studied his averted face.

"You have a strong face," she said at last, voicing her thoughts.

"Thanks," he muttered.

"You don't know *how* to work. Is that it, Mr. Van Pycke?" she asked.

"Oh, I fancy I could earn a living," he said, without looking up.

"And then you could save the twelve thousand intact," she observed. He looked up curiously. "In ten years you would have at least one hundred and twenty-five thousand. You could buy a yacht with that much money. Just think what fun it would be to spend it all in an hour."

"It may interest you to know that I *am* going to work," he said, conscious of a burning sensation in his face.

"Are you in earnest?"

"Certainly. I'm tired of this sort of thing."

"Splendid! And what are you going to do? Something gentlemanly, I hope, such as selling bonds on commission. Gentlemen who go to work always do that, don't they, whether they're qualified or not?"

"You're a bit sarcastic, aren't you? I *was* going to sell bonds, having been solicited to do so, but I've changed my mind. I'm going to get a job with an undertaker."

They laughed, at first rather half heartedly, then merrily. For ten minutes they talked of the past, the present, and the future. He gathered that she had assumed the name of Downing for secretarial purposes only; that she kept herself very much in the background in Mrs. Scoville's establishment; that she had watched his social career with unflagging interest; that she was returning to her own home on the following day, with a check for fifteen hundred in her possession; that she expected to marry if the right man came along; that Mrs. Scoville had made her a present of the gown—and so on and so forth. They discussed the wedding and the hullabaloo it was to create. They united in deprecating the impulse which robbed the marriage of its natural sanctity, but they agreed that she was a lovely bride.

"And now you must go home," she said at last. The clock chimed a quarter after two.

"That reminds me," he said. "You said you were going to your own home in the

morning, early enough to avoid the reporters, who are to be managed by Stokes. May I inquire where your own home is, Miss Pembroke?"

"We live in Princeton, Mr. Van Pycke."

"Princeton? Why, I was there four years, you know. Strange I never saw you."

"You forget we were living in Fifth Avenue or Mayfair until two years ago. The house in Princeton is all that is left of the Pembroke millions. It was my mother's."

"By Jove, I remember you came out three years ago. I—I was asked, wasn't I?"

"You were. And you didn't come."

"I'd like to come to Princeton, if it isn't too late."

"If it doesn't interfere with your work, you mean."

"Oh, come now!" he protested.

"We have to consider everything," she said.

"I'll try to get a job in the faculty. I remember distinctly that I knew more than any man in the faculty at one time. That would simplify matters, wouldn't it?"

"Do you really feel the need of that eyeglass, Mr. Van Pycke?" she asked, again veering off, much to his annoyance.

"Not at all." He calmly tossed the monocle upon the coals. She cried out.

"Oh, I didn't mean you to do that. I *love* monocles!"

"The deuce! Why didn't you say so?" he lamented.

"It's too bad," she sighed. "You would have needed it so much, too, looking for work."

"By Jove, I like you!" he cried. "You're a plucky girl and a philosopher. You do something toward the support of a whole family, while I—well, look at me! What good have I done? I have not earned ten dollars in my whole life by honest toil. I'm ashamed. I am—"

"Please, please," she interposed despairingly. "Don't go into that again. It's too late. I am really very sleepy now. I hate to turn you out in the storm, but you

must go. If the servants should—heavens, please go!"

"You're right! I'm off. I'll be as quiet as a mouse, so don't worry. This has been the most gallant night of my life. I'll live it over a hundred times in my dreams. By the way, what train do you take in the morning?" He was shaking hands with her, standing beside her chair. There was a new light in his eyes.

"The ten-fifteen, if it isn't snowbound. Why?"

"Never mind. I just asked," he said. He was thinking of violets and a trip to the ferry.

"Don't do anything so absurd, Mr. Van Pycke," she said severely, trying to read his thoughts. He laughed blithely, full of certain early morning enterprise. "Good-bye. Oh, just listen to the wind!"

She shuddered.

"Don't leave the fire," he said. "And *do go to bed!* Remember, you are to catch the ten-fifteen."

He tiptoed into the hall. There was not a sound in the house. A minute later the outer doors closed behind him, gently. He was out in the cold, bitter night, plowing his way through snowdrifts three and four feet deep, bound for the hotel next door, the nearest place of refuge.

In the office he left a call for seven o'clock. Not in ten years had he done anything so amazing.

"She helps to support a family—a helpless father and two small sisters," he said to himself as he crept into bed. "But, it wouldn't be the same thing supporting my governor. *I should say not!*" Later on, very drowsily: "I was sure I had seen her before. Little Mary Pembroke! How I adored her! But it seems to me her hair was yellow then. It's black now. Still, I dare say that's better than if it had been black then and yellow now. Seven o'clock! What an ungodly hour to get up. But I'll have to get used to it."

Miss Pembroke resisted the desire to look after him from the front window. She couldn't bear the thought of scraping the frost from the window pane with her fingernails, for one thing; for another, he might take it into his head to look back.

So she went to bed, thinking of him—as she had been doing for an hour or more

before his amazing second appearance.

"He was such a shy boy," she reflected. "But he was the best looking thing. Dear me, how long ago it seems! And those silly love letters I wrote to him and never mailed. What funny things children are!"

At nine o'clock the next morning she was called to the telephone. She was at breakfast, and her bag was ready for the train. An early glance from the window had filled her with misgivings. The street was absolutely impassable, it seemed to her.

"I won't talk to the reporters," she said to Stokes.

"It isn't a reporter, Miss. It's a gentleman."

"Don't be a snob, Stokes. Who is it?"

"It's Mr. Van Pycke, Miss."

She started. Then she flushed warmly.

"Say to him, Stokes, that I have gone," she said, after a moment.

"Very good, Miss. Anything else?"

She pondered. "Yes, Stokes. Ask him to hold the wire."

"Hold the wire, Miss?"

"Yes, while you run to the door to call me back."

A moment later she was in the telephone room, quite out of breath.

"Who is it?" she called. She compelled him to repeat the name four times. Eventually he got her serious attention.

"No trains until this afternoon?" she cried despairingly. "Why, the children will be at the station to meet me."

"Trains all snowbound," he announced quite cheerfully. "I've been telephoning."

"It's awfully good of you. I'll call up the Pennsylvania—"

"Don't bother," he called. "I've seen to all that. There's only one thing to do. Go to the ferry at one o'clock and wait. They'll get a train out as soon as possible."

I'm glad it's to be no earlier than one. This is my busy day, you see."

"What has that to do with it?"

"I think I can be at liberty at one o'clock, that's all. I'm at my rooms now, writing letters of resignation to eleven clubs and declining invitations to four Christmas house parties on Long Island. I'm going down to see Thrush and Wrenn, the publishers, at eleven."

"Indeed?"

"Yes. I'm thinking of writing a book exposing New York society. They're all the rage now. This will be the literary remains of a fizzle."

"Are you jesting?"

"It depends," he said. "At ten I am to see George P. Krosson, the capital king. You see I *have* been telephoning. I got him out of bed at seven-thirty. He says he didn't know I had it in me to be so energetic. He's an old friend, however, so it's all right. He—"

"Please tell me what it's all about. I know who he is, so don't enlighten me. He once was an old friend of ours."

"Well, he's always said he'd take me as a secretary, if I'd agree to buckle down to it. I'm going to try it on."

"You—to be a secretary?"

"Don't be so surprised, please! It's only a starter, you know. His last secretary owns a bank now, and the present one is going to Congress. But I'll tell you about it—at the ferry."

She tried not to appear to be looking for him when her fretting taxicab finally struggled up to the ferry building at Twenty-third Street, just before one o'clock. Nearly an hour had been spent in the trip from the Scoville home to the ferry. There were times when she thought the effort would have to be abandoned.

He was there. In fact he opened the door and assisted her to alight from the vehicle. There was a brief discussion with the driver over the register's showing. Then they hurried into the ferry building, pursued by three bags and a "Much obliged, Miss," from the surprised chauffeur.

"He was there. In fact he opened the door and assisted her to alight."

"You were very reckless, giving him a dollar," he criticised severely, but not forgetting that he had given five the night before. He had been wondering all the morning if *she* had noticed the cocktails.

"It is so good of you to come down," she said, a color in her cheeks that was not from the cold. He was marveling. Never, in all his life, had he seen any one so pretty as this trim, proud young person in the Persian lamb coat and ermine stole and muff. She gauged his thoughts. "Presents from Mrs. Scoville—in advance of Christmas," she said dryly. He was properly embarrassed. "Now, I must ask about the trains."

"It's all attended to, Miss Pembroke," he said. "I got here at half-past twelve, lunchless. Boat in ten minutes, train out of Jersey City at two o'clock, positively. We can have luncheon on the train." He seemed a bit embarrassed, as he ought to have been, in truth.

She stood still and looked at him. "On the train?" she murmured.

"Yes, Miss Pembroke. I have an afternoon off. I'm going to Princeton. Oh, by the way, don't bother about the tickets. I have them. Come along, please, or we'll miss the boat."

Of course she protested. She was very much annoyed—or, at least, that is what she meant to be.

He explained, in a burst of confidence meant to cover the unique trepidation he felt, that he was not to assume his duties as secretary to Mr. Krosson until the following Monday. "This is my last free week. Don't begrudge me an excursion. It's to take the place of four house parties."

She held out stubbornly, for appearance's sake; it was not until they were in the middle of the Hudson that she said it would be very nice, and he could catch the five o'clock train back to New York.

It would be difficult to relate all that they said during the tortuous trip to Princeton. Naturally they discussed his prospects.

"I'm not sure that I know what a secretary has to do," he confessed. "But," with a determined gleam in his eyes, "whatever it is, I'm going to do it. I don't expect Mr. Krosson to give me a year's vacation on full pay, and I'm not looking for furs in my stocking at this or any other Christmas, but I do mean to live on what I earn. I'm to have twenty-five hundred a year, in the beginning."

"Goodness, that *is* a lot of money," she said. They were at luncheon in the private dining car.

"I'll retain my membership in two clubs. I'm starting out to-morrow to find a couple of cozy rooms in a genteel apartment hotel."

"Have you broken the news to your father?"

He laughed. "No. I stopped at his room to see if he had pneumonia. He said he was asleep and couldn't tell—and for me to go to the devil."

From the car window they watched the great white sea through which they were gliding. Their hearts were free and their hearts were sparkling. Constantly recurring in their thoughts were the little forgotten things of that memorable voyage across the Atlantic. It was he, however, who presumed to steal surreptitious glances in which wonder was uppermost; she steadfastly declined to be led by her impulses.

"You've never heard anything particularly terrible about me, have you?" he demanded, rather anxiously, once in course of a duet of personalities.

"Only that a great many women are in love with you."

"It's funny I've never heard that," he said dolefully.

"Men say that you are an exceptionally decent chap and it's too bad you'll never amount to anything."

"Oh, they do, do they?" indignantly.

"I think they'll be stunned when they hear of your latest move."

"Well, I'll show 'em what I'm made of."

"Splendid! I like to hear you speak in that way."

"You do?" he asked eagerly. "You *do* think I'll make good, don't you?"

"What station is this?" she asked deliberately.

"Rahway," he said, leaning close to her in order to see the name on the station.

"I think I'll have a holiday on Christmas," he ventured carefully. "That's next week, you know. May I come down to Princeton for the afternoon and evening?"

"To see me?" She seemed surprised.

"Yes," he said simply. She had expected some frivolous reply. Her gaze wavered ever so slightly as it met his.

"It will be a very dull way to spend Christmas," she said.

"Christmas is always a dull day," he said, so imploringly that she laughed. He came very near to adding, irrelevantly, that she was prettier than ever when she smiled.

"When there are no children about," he succeeded in saying, as an amend for his slip.

"There are two in our house, besides myself," she said gayly.

"Splendid!" he cried enthusiastically. "Can't we have a tree?"

On the platform at Princeton he was introduced to two small and very pretty young ladies, six and eight, and to a resentful gallant aged nine, who seemed to look upon him with disfavor. It afterwards developed that he was the characteristic neighbor boy who loves beyond his years. He adored Miss Pembroke.

"Mr. Van Pycke is coming down for Christmas," announced Miss Pembroke, in course of time, drawing her little sisters close to her side and smiling upon the dazzled gallant, aged nine.

"Will you play bear for me?" asked the young lady aged six, after a sly look at her nurse.

"The whole menagerie," said Mr. Van Pycke, most obligingly. Then, having occupied a perilously long time in shaking hands with the girl in the Persian lamb, he rushed off in response to the station master's satirical warning that last

night's train was just pulling out for New York.

"I know just what's going to happen to me," he said to himself, jubilantly, as he waved to her from the window. "I can feel it coming."



CHAPTER V

HIS FIRST HOLIDAY

Two days passed before Mr. Van Pycke, senior, in diligent and somewhat wrathful quest of his son, came to know that the young man had accepted a position as secretary to Mr. Krosson.

"I can't believe it," said Mr. Van Pycke, a sudden pallor almost retrieving the lost complexion at the end of his nose. He then went about the search in earnest, ultimately discovering his son in his room at the club, busily engaged in superintending the packing of cherished Penates.

"Is what I hear true, Bosworth?" demanded the old gentleman, without preliminaries.

"Sit down, dad. Try that trunk. The chairs seem to be occupied by odds and ends." Bosworth was in his shirt sleeves. His hands were dirty, and there was a long dark streak across his brow. "I'm moving."

"Moving? What the devil's the meaning of all this?" sputtered his father, kicking a package of rugs out of the way.

"I can't afford to live here on twenty-five hundred a year," said his son, genially. The perspiring porters retired to the hall.

"But you have twelve thou—"

"And I have decided to save that twelve thousand. My salary will have to do for a few years, dad."

"Your salary? Then it is true?" It was almost a wail.

"It does seem too good to be true, doesn't it? I am like you, dad. I didn't believe any one would hire me. But Mr. Krosson seems to think I've got it in me to—"

"Bosworth," interrupted his father, sternly, "I won't permit you to make an ass of yourself. I forbid you—"

"Hold on, dad," said Bosworth, rather shortly. "We won't discuss it unless we can

do so agreeably. I'm going into this thing with all my heart, and I mean to stick to it. There's an end to that. I'm tired of leading an absolutely useless, butterfly life."

"But, my boy, my boy," groaned the other, "this step will blast every prospect of a suitable marriage. Demmit all, no one will marry you."

"I'm not so sure of that," said his son, sticking his hands into his pockets and breathing deeply. "I think, if I'm careful, I can make a very suitable marriage."

"Rubbish! Who'd marry a secretary?" sniffed Mr. Van Pycke, jabbing a chair-back with his cane.

Bosworth radiated joy. "I would!" he cried so emphatically that Mr. Van Pycke almost rose to his toes.

"That's not the point, sir," said he, a little bewildered. "You can't marry yourself."

Bosworth laughed softly, but ventured no explanation to the odd remark. If, during the next ten minutes, his father noticed a detached, far-away look in the young man's eyes, he attributed it to the force of his own arguments. Just as he was beginning to feel that he had succeeded in turning the thoughtful young man from his suicidal course, Bosworth came to himself with a start.

"Beg pardon, dad; my mind must have been wandering. What were you saying?"

"Do—do you mean to tell me you haven't heard what I've been saying to you?" roared the old gentleman, coming to his feet.

"I'm sorry; but, you see, this new undertaking is on my mind all the time. It's a rather serious step I'm taking and I can't help giving it a good deal of thought. Mr. Krosson says he'll raise my salary at the end of—"

But Mr. Van Pycke was standing over him, his face red with anger.

"I brought you up as a gentleman, sir, and this is what comes of it. What would your poor mother say? She, too, expected you to be a gentleman, sir. Your grandfather expected it. All Van Pyckes are gentlemen. You are the first to forget yourself, sir. By Gad, sir, I suppose you'll marry a shop girl or a stenographer. That's what you'll do! After the way in which I've brought you up and educated you and all that. And with the Van Pycke name and traditions at your command! It's so demmed preposterous that I can't express myself adequately. It's—"

"It's no use, dad," said Bosworth, simply. "I'm lost."

"You could marry that little Hebbins girl next week if you—"

"I'm going to marry for love, dad," said his son.

Mr. Van Pycke opened his lips to say something, thought better of it, and stalked majestically out of the room. In the hall he encountered the two porters.

"Is Mr. Bosworth ready for us now, Mr.—" began one of the men, very deferentially, for Mr. Van Pycke was very well known in the club.

"Get out of my way!" roared Mr. Van Pycke.

The next morning, it being a Sunday at that, Bosworth sustained a blow that shook him mightily. In his box he found a curt letter from his father.

"My dear son," it read, "I neglected to announce my coming marriage to you at our last meeting. I dare say it was because I was so upset. I am to be married to Mrs. Scoville on the third of January. If you can get away from the shop, or the office, or whatever it is, at three o'clock on that day, I will be very much gratified to see you at the ceremony. Your loving father."

Bosworth clapped his hand to his brow, glaring at the note.

"He's gone clean daffy!" he groaned. "Scoville? Why, he must know she's already—Great Scott! He means the old one!—the pelican!—that's who he means. The good Lord deliver us!"

He was genuinely distressed. The dowager Mrs. Scoville, of all women! For a long time he stood in the window, staring out over the housetops, his heart full of pity for his wayward parent.

"Poor old dad!" he said over and over again. "He's paying an awful price for the privilege of remaining a gentleman to the end. Hang it all! I would have taken care of him. I'd have given him half of my income—yes, two thirds of it—sooner than see him sell out to that old tigress. I'll see him at once. I'll make the proposition to him. He may be able to crawl out of it."

He soon discovered that an appeal of any sort was out of the question. The Sunday papers announced the approaching marriage of the venerable society leaders. As a man of honor, Van Dieman Van Pycke could not now retreat.

"Poor dad!" said Bosworth a hundred times that day. He could not banish the calamity from his mind. Thoughts of Mary Pembroke crept in frequently to chasten his ill humor, but even a developing interest in that adorable creature failed to overcome the shock he had received.

He ended by writing a long, boyish letter of congratulation and well wishes to his father, closing with the ingenuous hope that he might live long to enjoy the fruits of his folly.

The next day, bright and early, he was at the office of the great Mr. Krosson, a bit nervous, but withal full of the confidence that will not be gainsaid. Every man in the club, on that momentous Sunday, had congratulated him on the step he was taking. Somehow, he was beginning to feel that he was no longer "Buzzy" Van Pycke. He was almost a stranger to himself.

Christmas came on Friday. By that time he was fairly well acquainted with the inner offices of Mr. Krosson. The novelty was wearing off, but his ambition was being constantly whetted by signs of achievement that met him, no matter which way he looked in contemplation of his new environment. To his surprise and gratification—and also to his consternation—society was not ready to drop him. As a matter of fact, he was more sought after than ever. Most of his time as secretary to Mr. Krosson was spent in declining the invitations that poured in upon him from admiring hostesses who, far from disdaining him, frankly intimated that they liked him the better for the step he had taken. Old Mrs. Beeker, society's leader, halted him in Fifth Avenue the day before Christmas and leaned from her carriage window to tell him that she was proud of him.

"Women despise idlers and dawdlers, my dear boy," she said. "Make something of yourself. If you should happen to get a wife, beat her occasionally."

His personal effects had been removed to less conspicuous rooms in Seventy-seventh Street. He was at home there every evening.

"I wonder if this will last," he said to himself more than once in those first days.

He was off to Princeton on the noon train, more pleasurably excited than he had been in many a day. He had asked Mr. Krosson if his services were necessary at the office on Christmas day.

"If not, I think I will run down to Princeton to spend the holiday with friends."

"I thought you were going to drop out of society, Bosworth," said the capitalist,

putting his hand on the young man's shoulder.

Bosworth flushed. "I expect to, Mr. Krosson, but I'm not going into a monastery," he said.

"I'm glad you were not one of the guests at that ridiculous De Foe-Scoville wedding," said his old friend and new master. "That was the limit in outrages."

"It was very daring," said Bosworth, swallowing hard.

He had seven bundles and a suit case on the seat in front of him when the train pulled out of Jersey City. In his pocket was a great bunch of newspaper clippings, intended for the private eye of the new Mrs. De Foe's one-time secretary. He wondered how she would take the caustic, sometimes scurrilous things the editors were saying about the now historic wedding. Few if any of them left a shred on which the bride could depend for support if she ever presumed to apply to New York society for reestablishment. He was distressed by the fear that Mary Pembroke would take to heart the bitter things that were being said of her benefactress. He discovered, later on, that Mrs. De Foe had quite fully prepared the girl for the avalanche of criticism. And so it was that Mary was able to smile when he showed her the clippings.

"I'm still her private secretary, Mr. Van Pycke," she said, "and therefore I cannot discuss her private affairs with any one. As Mr. Krosson's secretary, you wouldn't think of discussing his affairs, would you?"

But we are getting ahead of the story, or, more properly speaking, ahead of the train. When he got down at Princeton, with his bundles and his bag, he was surprised and not a little mortified by the half-checked shriek of laughter that greeted him from the shelter of the station building. She had come down to meet him. He had not expected it. But it was most unkind of her to laugh at him. The bundles contained Christmas presents for the children, he had lugged them about at great inconvenience, and—He was thinking these things, but not venturing to express them aloud.

"Forgive me," she cried, hurrying over to him. "You *are* so funny with all those packages."

He promptly set them down, regardless, and shook hands with her. His ears were a bit red. On second thoughts, he didn't blame her for laughing. He now recalled that other people had smiled as he crowded through the aisle of the car, but he

had not noticed it at the time on account of a certain abstractedness that had to do with the future and not the present.

"I didn't expect you," he said. "It's awfully good of you to meet me. Merry Christmas!"

"To you the same," she cried, meeting his gaze with one in which happiness shone brightly. "I had a dark purpose in meeting you here, Mr. Van Pycke. It's very mysterious."

"Splendid!" he said. "I've always wanted to be a conspirator."

"Let me take some of the packages—yes, do! I insist! You are ridiculous, carrying all these things. I have a cab around the corner. We'll—"

"A cab!" he exclaimed, dropping a picture puzzle with considerable effect. "My dear Miss Pembroke, we can't afford cabs! They're luxuries."

"You won't say so when you see this one," she said gayly. Together they collected the bundles, large and small, and hurried off to the waiting cab. There was some doubt as to which should go in first, the passengers or the parcels.

"If we get in first, there will be no room for the bundles," said he. "And if we put them in first, there'll be no room for us." The venerable driver scratched his head in perplexity.

"We could make two loads of it, sir," he said. "I c'n take your wife and half the bundles up first and come back—"

"It isn't to be thought off," interrupted Bosworth, quickly. "Don't you remember me, Tobias?"

"It—it ain't Mr. Van Pycke? Well, by gracious! It beats the—"

Bosworth checked him in time. To Miss Pembroke he said: "Tobias drove me all the way from the freshman class to the senior."

"I knew it, Mr. Van Pycke. That's why I engaged him."

Tobias was suddenly confused. "Excuse me, I was thinking of another gentleman when I said wife, sir. My mistake, sir. It sha'n't happen again."

"Don't make rash statements like that, Tobias," said Bosworth, boldly. "You can't tell what will happen."

"Put the bundles in, Tobias," said Miss Pembroke quietly, far from amused. "Mr. Van Pycke must ride on the seat with you. He has done it a great many times, if tradition is to be trusted."

"My dear Miss Pembroke—"

"Drive us into the alley at the rear of Mr. Pembroke's house, please. We're going in through the kitchen, Mr. Van Pycke. There's to be a Christmas tree at three o'clock. You are to be Santa Claus. I'll secrete you in the butler's pantry until it is time for you to appear. Now, please don't object. We have the fur coat and the whiskers and the red cap. All you have to do is to come in and play you're delighted. You will read off the names and—now, *do* be nice! You know it will be great fun."

He could not resist the appeal in her eyes. It seemed to him that to be disagreeable about it—or even reluctant—would be the most dastardly crime imaginable. He caught the spirit.

"Great fun? It will be gorgeous!"

"Oh, lovely," she cried. "Hurry up, please. It's after two, and I still have to put some things on the tree."

She squeezed into the decrepit little hack, laughing joyously. He scrambled up beside Tobias, clinging manfully to less than ten inches of seat, a splendid grin on his face all the way across town, utterly oblivious to the curious stares of Christmas pedestrians who passed them by.

He was thinking only of her smile of delight and of the amazing change it had wrought in him—like a flash, so to speak. Already Christmas was beginning to mean a great deal to him.

The chatty Tobias, reminiscent and more or less paternal, swung into an alley entrance in course of time,—not without a smug uplifting of his left eyebrow,—and trotted his venerable nag onward until a sharp rapping on the window-glass from within brought him to a rather heroic stop between two widely separated back gates.

"Drive on to the next gate," called out the young lady, partly opening the door. Bosworth almost fell off in his valiant attempt to catch a glimpse of her face.

With a great deal of stealth and no small amount of suppressed, eager laughter, they made their way into the kitchen of the quaint old house.

Half an hour later Mr. Bosworth Van Pycke, suffering somewhat from stage fright but buoyed by the promise of unequivocal success in his new rôle, bounded from the pantry into the dining-room, befurred and bewhiskered, with nothing showing but his nose, greatly to the delight and consternation of a dozen small children who shrieked with excitement.

He had appeared with some success in amateur theatricals and had led cotillions under the most nerve-racking conditions, but never before had he come plump against an audience of children. It was rather terrifying. He halted in the middle of the room, to the left of the brilliantly lighted, tinselled tree with its load of presents, and there he stuck, spellbound, until the shrill voice of one less awed than the rest broke the hush that had fallen upon the expectant group in the row of chairs beyond.

"Hello, Santy!" piped up this small, confident voice. Bosworth could not afford to be outdone in politeness. He responded:

"Hello, Mr. What's-your-name!"

"What a pretty voice you have," called out a pink little girl.

Right there Bosworth forgot his lines. He was to say something about Christmas coming but once a year and that Santa Claus loved nice little girls and boys, after which he was to appeal to Miss Pembroke for assistance in distributing the presents. But the ingenuous compliment upset him. He made his appeal to Miss Pembroke first, and it was rather a piteous one at that. She flew at once to his relief. In two minutes he was talking volubly, even brilliantly, shouting back at the children and making himself so generously noisy that he would have been very much shocked if he could have stepped outside and heard himself.

Four or five nurses in the background giggled and simpered; the housemaid and the cook grinned so amiably that Miss Pembroke had real hopes that she could keep them in Princeton for the rest of the winter.

"The Pembroke infants are the only poor man's blessings in the crowd, Mr. Van Pycke," said Mary in a gay aside. "The others have everything. But they are having a good time, aren't they?"

"They're not having half so good a time as I am," he said eagerly. By this time he

was thoroughly imbued with the spirit of the hour. "I never knew Christmas could be so good to grown-ups. Why, it's—it's ripping!"

Once at the top of a stepladder, he burst into uncontrollable laughter, seemingly for no reason on earth. It had just occurred to him to wonder what his friends in New York would say if they could see him now! Miss Pembroke looked up in some surprise.

"What is it?" she called rather anxiously.

"Nothing," he replied hastily. "A hang-over laugh from my youth, that's all. This is the first chance it's had to escape."

At last the tree was completely shorn of its wealth; nothing but the tinsel, the pop-corn, and the tin candlesticks were left. In front of each child stretched a new panorama of possessions. Each little one was a person of vast and suddenly acquired wealth; arrogantly wealthy was each, at that, for no one admitted the superiority of another's acquisitions. We were all wealthy on the Christmas days of long ago.

Bosworth had the satisfaction of knowing that his own presents to the small Pembrokes were received with wild acclaim. He could not help recalling certain presents he had bestowed on former Christmases, upon more mature ladies, who received them as a matter of tribute and with hardly so much as a sigh of pleasure.

Then the children were herded into the library with their toys and their sweetmeats, pursued by anxious, colic-fearing nurses. Bosworth, very hot and very happy, retired to the pantry to remove his great coat, his whiskers, and his cotton wig (the latter the handiwork of Miss Pembroke, who, whatever else she might have been proficient in, was not a successful wig-maker).

She appeared in the swinging door, her face flushed and her eyes glowing.

"Wasn't it fun?" she cried.

He was picking cotton from his hair. He paused in this operation to stare at her, entranced.

"By Jove!" he murmured, his soul leaping to his eyes. As if fascinated, he advanced slowly, his hands extended to clasp hers. She drew back ever so slightly, confused by the look in his eyes. She gave him her hands, however,—

warm, firm little hands that hesitated a long time before responding to the grip he gave them.

"Do you know," he said, irrelevant but serious to the point of perplexing her, "I believe I've never had you out of my mind during all these years? I haven't realized it before, but now I honestly believe it's true. You've been here—in my brain—all this time. That's why no one else ever really got in. Mary Pembroke, you are still the loveliest girl I've ever seen—just as you were fourteen years ago. You are just as wonderful to me now as you were then—even though you were eight and yellow-haired and lived in the cabin *de luxe*. It's—it's marvelous. You've been lying dormant in my memory—in my heart—all these years. Now you are suddenly revived. It's a terribly queer sensation. I—I don't believe I'll get over it."

She withdrew her hands; her lids wavered before his steady gaze. Something ineffably sweet crept into the dark eyes; a quick, almost imperceptible quiver flashed over her chin, and her lips parted in tremulous protest against the possibility of jest.

"I'm—I 'm glad that you do remember me," she said, with a vague little smile.

"I loved you—oh, how I loved you on that long-ago voyage," he said recklessly. "I used to lie awake half the night in my berth, lamenting the fact that I was so ungainly and so homely, and so utterly unfit to be a story-book hero to you. I had a terrible fear that my legs would always be beanpoles and that my chest would never grow to even respectable proportions. I thought my ears were big and—"

"They *were* big," she interposed, the mysterious quaver still in her voice.

"They were like bat's ears, only bigger," he agreed dismally. "And I hated my freckles and despaired of my hair, which would curl up at the back of my neck. All this time you were so lovely, so perfect, so adorable—"

"What a rhapsodist you are!" she cried.

"You didn't possess a single flaw—not one," he announced firmly. "Every boy on the boat was perishing of love for you. By Jove, you knew it, too."

"Oh, you forget how young I was!"

"At any rate, you knew I was sick over you. And for months after we landed in New York—yes, until long after I went away to boarding-school—you were the

princess of my dreams, the treasure of my heart. Then I thought I had forgotten you. You slipped back into my memory and hid yourself completely away. There you stayed snugly, serenely, quite as if I had stored you in a safety deposit box, all the while growing more beautiful, more lovely, more valuable. Last week I opened the box and took you out. I was amazed to find that you had always been there. I had put you there as a little girl, and when I came to take you out, you were a beautiful lady. I'd been treasuring you up through all these years without really knowing it. I never knew I was so rich."

A sudden panic assailed her. She realized, without warning, that she was being made love to, and that underneath his fanciful declarations there was something real, and strong, and earnest. She might have laughed at him and chided him for his gallantry had it not been for one distressing obstacle: he, Bosworth Van Pycke, had been lying just as snugly all these years in the deepest recesses of her heart. Unlike him, however, she had never quite forgotten the flaxen-haired lad of the steamship.

"It's so very nice of you to say—" she began.

"I mean it all, too—every word of it," he said gently. "It's all come back to me —"

"Don't you think we'd better go in where the children are?" she asked nervously, backing toward the door, the light in her eyes very bright. "This—this, Mr. Van Pycke, is the pantry."

He flushed. "I—I dare say it does seem rather like backstairs gallantry," he said, in genuine humility.

"I didn't mean it in that way," she cried instantly. "It was the most beautiful thought I've ever heard expressed." She stopped suddenly. "Are you coming?"

"Not until I've said the rest of it," he said, looking over his shoulder. Then, with fierce eagerness, drawing closer to her: "I adored you when you were eight. You may call it boyish impulse or whatever you like. Be that as it may, I've never loved any one else. A hundred times I've tried to picture the face, the form, the character of the girl I'd really come to love. Always there came to my mind a face—not a child's face, but a child's face grown to a woman's. It was always the same. The face of the little girl who grew up in my brain without being observed—without a sign that she was there. When she was fifteen, she was fifteen to my dreams; when she was twenty, I imagined her as such. She grew up with me.

Every year I saw the change in the girl I pictured as the one I could love. No other came up to that ideal. There could be no other, for there was a real girl there all the time. I loved you years ago, Mary Pembroke, and I must tell you that—"

"Oh, you mustn't say it—you mustn't!" she cried, tremulously, putting out her hand. "It—it doesn't seem real—it wouldn't seem honest. Please, please don't treat it lightly. Don't spoil it all by—"

"I never was so serious," he said. "I—I didn't mean to shock you. It must sound foolish to you. Of course, I've never meant anything to you. It's all on my side. I've been too abrupt. I've been an awful ass to blurt it out to you so soon. Why, you can't help looking upon me as a total stranger. You haven't thought of me in years and years."

"Oh, I haven't forgotten the spindle-shanked boy," she said in a very low voice. "You may not have known it, my friend, but I was very deeply in love with you in the days of the old *Campania*. I was—"

"You were! You really were?" he cried, with difficulty reducing it to a half whisper.

"I was a very impressionable child," she said, regaining all of her lost ground as only a woman can when carried to the last extremity.

"And—and I *may* have a chance even now?" he cried, his eyes gleaming.

She pushed the swing-door open with her elbow and demurely held it ajar for him, a soft smile on her lips that he did not then understand and never was to understand, being a male.

"You are Santa Claus, not Romeo," she said. He also missed the flutter in her voice and entirely overlooked the fact that she was breathing quickly.

He followed her into the dining-room, strangely subdued. They came by the light of a window. There, with an impulsive gesture and a quick laugh, she halted him. Her amused eyes were taking in his tumbled hair.

"Wait," she said. "Do you mind if I pick some of the cotton out of your hair?"

"Not at all," he said with alacrity.

"Lean over," she said. He did so. Very daintily, very deftly she pulled the stray

wisps of cotton from his hair, so deftly, in fact, that he scarcely felt the touch of her fingers, although his whole being thrilled with the delicious sensation of contact. For years he was to remember that infinite minute and a half. He knew how pleased Samson must have been while his strength was being shorn, even though the parable says he slept.

A trifle dazed by exaltation, he followed her into the library. The children who had greeted him vociferously as Santa Claus were now strangely silent and tongue-tied in the presence of a mere human,—but only for a moment.

"Oh, it's Mr. Pycke!" screamed the pinkest one of them all. "I know him!"

Whereupon she announced that he had come down from New York to see her sister Mary and was going to stay for dinner and play bear.

"Do you mind being left alone with them for a few minutes?" asked Mary. "I must go up to father's room. He is quite helpless, you know."

"I'd forgotten to ask how he's feeling to-day," he murmured contritely.

The tears suddenly rushed to her eyes. A very pathetic smile and a shake of her head was the only answer he received. She left him standing there, surrounded by glad, expectant revelers, prey to a most unusual depression—as swift as it was surprising. His heart, overflowing with a new sensation of tenderness and pity, followed the slender figure up the stairs; there was but little of it left below to encourage the gleeful spirits of the care-free lads and lassies.

For some unexplained reason, which he afterward sought to attribute to hysteria, he hugged the pink little Pembroke girl with unnecessary ardor, and would have kissed her older sister if he could have caught her.

When Miss Pembroke came downstairs half an hour later, she found him playing bear, with tiny Miss Florence leading him about the room at the end of a long red ribbon. His hair was rumpled and his face was flushed, and it seemed that he was gasping for breath—whether from exertion or because the ribbon was choking him, she could not tell. She rescued him at once.

"I like it," he cried. "It's fun to be a kiddie once more. As a matter of fact, you know, I never really had a kid's life. I'm having the time of my life."

"Why, they 're wearing you out," she cried. "May I ask what you were representing?"

"A bear!" shouted eleven voices. Bosworth gravely nodded.

"He was going to be a trained seal, only we couldn't get a tub for him to lie on," said Mary's nine-year-old worshiper.

Miss Pembroke laughed gayly. "I understood you to say last week, Mr. Van Pycke, that you were through with menagerie performances for all time." There was a witchery in her eyes that enthralled him.

"This is different," he protested in some confusion. "I draw the line at grown-up tomfoolery. It may interest you to know that I was a horse just before you came in. They've all had a ride on my back. This chap here, when I wasn't looking, took those cavalry spurs from the mantelpiece over there and, by Jove! he *did* get me moving!"

The children shrieked with glee.

"You poor man!" Mary cried, genuinely troubled over his experiences. "You've had a dreadful time. I'll save you before it grows any worse. Come upstairs, won't you, please? Father is very eager to meet you."

"But I've promised to be another horse," he said loyally.

"It wasn't a horse," corrected one of the boys. "You have been that. You said you'd be a jackass. None of us ever saw a jackass."

"You said you could be a jackass without half trying, Mr. Van Pycke," said the little pink Pembroke.

Mr. Van Pycke fled. His charming hostess overtook him in the hall, where, in dire humility, he had paused to wait for her. She was having immense difficulty to keep her face straight and serene.

"I—I wonder if the little beggars think I *am* such an idiot as I seem," was his unhappy lamentation.

"They adore you!" she cried. "You have been too splendid for anything. I am so afraid you have been bored by—"

"If you don't banish that pathetic droop from the corners of your—your adorable mouth, I'll do something positively desperate," he interrupted, folding his arms resolutely so that he couldn't, by any chance, do it.

She smiled at him, quite confidingly,—greatly to his disappointment, for he had rather hoped for consternation,—and said:

"It is banished." Then she started up the stairs. "Come. I'll show you to your room first. You may come into father's room when you have brushed your hair. It looks positively savage."

"My room?" he murmured, coming close behind her.

"Yes. Don't you expect to dress for dinner, sir?"

"Oh, I can't put you to the trouble of—"

"You are to stop here—in this house, Mr. Van Pycke. Your room is all ready for you. I was compelled to turn you out in the cold the other night and I was so sorry. Now you are in my own home, you must stay—to make up for the other time. My father expects you to stay."

"Over night?" he said unbelievably.

"Unless, of course, you've something else you'd rather do," she said quickly.

"Why—why," he stammered, his head swimming with delight, "there's nothing in the world I'd rather do than to stay here. It seems incredible."

"There's a train up at eight in the morning," she announced calmly. "You'll be called at six-thirty. Breakfast at seven. Bacon and eggs and popovers. Is that all right?"

"There's only one thing lacking," he cried, his heart leaping. They were standing quite close to each other at the head of the stairs.

"If our home isn't—"

"If you'll promise to come down to breakfast, I'll never get over the joy of this visit," he said.

"I always have breakfast with the children." He looked askance. "At seven o'clock," she vouchsafed.

"By Jove!" was all he could gasp in his delirium.

"That's father's door at the end of the hall. Come in there when you are ready. I'll be with him. Don't be long. Your room is here."

He watched her until she closed her father's door behind her. Then he went into the sweet little bedroom across the hall, sat down rather heavily upon the edge of a couch, pulled his collar away from his throat as if that act were necessary to let the blood back from his head, and murmured over and over again, in the haziest manner imaginable:

"Who would have thought it could come like this? Who would have dreamed it?"



Eleven o'clock that night. A fire in the library grate; logs crackling and the sap singing; the smell of live wood burning; the musketry of popping sparks; the swirl of smoke into the drafty chimney. New logs had just found their place of duty upon the half-starved fire behind the ancient "dogs." A sturdy poking had put life into the lazy embers. It was high time, indeed. For an hour the fire had gone neglected, unheeded. The chill of a bitter night had come creeping into the room, slowly conquering the warmth that had reigned supreme. Outside the wind had begun to whistle with a wilder glee; the creaking of wagon-wheels on the frozen roadway grew louder and more angrily insistent; a desolate cornet, far off in the Christmas air, sobbed its pathetic song to the fickle ear of the night.

Two sentinels had stood watch over the fire for hours. It died as they watched it, and yet they did not see.

Not unlike another fire, a week old and long since dead, was this one, and not unlike the soft glow of another fire-light was that which played on the serene faces of the two sentinels who sat side by side and watched their charge eke out its life. But on that other night these sentinels were not lovers.

She shivered. He had been telling her of the world that was ahead of them and of all the joys it was to hold for him. He had told her that he would care for her all his life—that he would take care of her to the end of hers.

It was then that she smiled fairly, a dear little pucker coming between her eyes.

"I know, Bosworth, dear," she said quaintly, "but would you mind taking a little care of me now? I am freezing. Please poke up the fire."

It was not until then that the fireplace renewed its roar of gladness, supported by

his tardy but vigorous conscience.

Together they stood before the resulting blaze. Her hands were in his, clasped close to his breast. Her eyes were closed. He kissed the lids.



"Her eyes were closed. He kissed the lids."

"Fourteen years is a long time, Bosworth, dear, for two people to love each other without knowing it," she said, ever so softly, freeing one hand only that it might be slipped up to his cheek and then to his hair.

THE END

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