CHAMBERS ROBERT WILLIAM

THE GREEN MOUSE

Robert Chambers

The Green Mouse

Chambers R.

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Содержание

Robert W. Chambers
The Green Mouse

TO

MY FRIEND

JOHN CORBIN

Folly and Wisdom, Heavenly twins,
Sons of the god Imagination,
Heirs of the Virtues–which were Sins
Till Transcendental Contemplation
Transmogrified their outer skins–
Friend, do you follow me? For I
Have lost myself, I don't know why.

Resuming, then, this erudite
And decorative Dedication,–
Accept it, John, with all your might
In Cinquecentic resignation.
You may not understand it, quite,
But if you've followed me all through,
You've done far more than I could do.

PREFACE

To the literary, literal, and scientific mind purposeless fiction is abhorrent. Fortunately we all are literally and scientifically inclined; the doom of purposeless fiction is sounded; and it is a great comfort to believe that, in the near future, only literary and scientific works suitable for man, woman, child, and suffragette, are to adorn the lingerie-laden counters in our great department shops.

It is, then, with animation and confidence that the author politely offers to a regenerated nation this modern, moral, literary, and highly scientific work, thinly but ineffectually disguised as fiction, in deference to the prejudices of a few old-fashioned story-readers who still survive among us.

R. W. C.

I
AN IDYL OF THE IDYL

In Which a Young Man Arrives at His Last Ditch and a Young Girl Jumps Over It

Utterly unequipped for anything except to ornament his environment, the crash in Steel stunned him. Dazed but polite, he remained a passive observer of the sale which followed and which apparently realized sufficient to satisfy every creditor, but not enough for an income to continue a harmlessly idle career which he had supposed was to continue indefinitely.

He had never earned a penny; he had not the vaguest idea of how people made money. To do something, however, was absolutely necessary.

He wasted some time in finding out just how much aid he might expect from his late father's friends, but when he understood the attitude of society toward a knocked-out gentleman he wisely ceased to annoy society, and turned to the business world.

Here he wasted some more time. Perhaps the time was not absolutely wasted, for during that period he learned that he could use nobody who could not use him; and as he appeared to be perfectly useless, except for ornament, and as a business house is not a kindergarten, and furthermore, as he had neither time nor money to attend any school where anybody could teach him anything, it occurred to him to take a day off for minute and thorough self-examination concerning his qualifications and even his right to occupy a few feet of space upon the earth's surface.

Four years at Harvard, two more in postgraduate courses, two more in Europe to perfect himself in electrical engineering, and a year at home attempting to invent a wireless apparatus for intercepting and transmitting psychical waves had left him pitifully unfit for wage earning.

There remained his accomplishments; but the market was overstocked with assorted time-killers.

His last asset was a trivial though unusual talent–a natural manual dexterity cultivated since childhood to amuse himself–something he never took seriously. This, and a curious control over animals, had, as the pleasant years flowed by, become an astonishing skill which was much more than sleight of hand; and he, always as good-humored as well-bred, had never refused to amuse the frivolous, of which he was also one, by picking silver dollars out of space and causing the proper card to fall fluttering from the ceiling.

Day by day, as the little money left him melted away, he continued his vigorous mental examination, until the alarming shrinkage in his funds left him staring fixedly at his last asset. Could he use it? Was it an asset, after all? How clever was he? Could he face an audience and perform the usual magician tricks without bungling? A slip by a careless, laughing, fashionable young amateur amusing his social equals at a house party is excusable; a bungle by a hired professional meant an end to hope in that direction.

So he rented a suite of two rooms on Central Park West, furnished them with what remained from better days, bought the necessary paraphernalia of his profession, and immured himself for practice before entering upon his contemplated invasion of Newport, Lenox, and Bar Harbor. And one very lovely afternoon in May, when the Park from his windows looked like a green forest, and puff on puff of perfumed air fluttered the curtains at his opened windows, he picked up his gloves and stick, put on his hat, and went out to walk in the Park; and when he had walked sufficiently he sat down on a bench in a flowery, bushy nook on the edge of a bridle path.

Few people disturbed the leafy privacy; a policeman sauntering southward noted him, perhaps for future identification. The spectacle of a well-built, well-groomed, and fashionable young man

sitting moodily upon a park bench was certainly to be noted. It is not the fashion for fashionable people to sit on park benches unless they contemplate self, as well as social, destruction.

So the policeman lingered for a while in the vicinity, but not hearing any revolver shot, presently sauntered on, buck-skinned fist clasped behind his broad back, squinting at a distant social gathering composed entirely of the most exclusive nursemaids.

The young man looked up into the pleasant blue above, then his preoccupied gaze wandered from woodland to thicket, where the scarlet glow of Japanese quince mocked the colors of the fluttering scarlet tanagers; where orange-tinted orioles flashed amid tangles of golden Forsythia; and past the shrubbery to an azure corner of water, shimmering under the wooded slope below.

That sense of languor and unrest, of despondency threaded by hope which fair skies and sunshine and new leaves bring with the young year to the young, he felt. Yet there was no bitterness in his brooding, for he was a singularly generous young man, and there was no vindictiveness mixed with the memories of his failures among those whose cordial respect for his father had been balanced between that blameless gentleman's wealth and position.

A gray squirrel came crawling and nosing through the fresh grass; he caught its eyes, and, though the little animal was plainly bound elsewhere on important business, the young man soon had it curled up on his knee, asleep.

For a while he amused himself by using his curious power, alternately waking the squirrel and allowing it to bound off, tail twitching, and then calling it back, slowly but inexorably to climb his trousers and curl up on his knee and sleep an uncanny and deep sleep which might end only at the young man's pleasure.

He, too, began to feel the subtle stillness of the drowsing woodland; musing there, caressing his short, crisp mustache, he watched the purple grackle walking about in iridescent solitude, the sun spots waning and glowing on the grass; he heard the soft, garrulous whimper of waterfowl along the water's edge, the stir of leaves above.

He thought of various personal matters: his poverty, the low ebb of his balance at the bank, his present profession, his approaching début as an entertainer, the chances of his failure. He thought, too, of the astounding change in his life, the future, vacant of promise, devoid of meaning, a future so utterly new and blank that he could find in it nothing to speculate upon. He thought also, and perfectly impersonally, of a girl whom he had met now and then upon the stairs of the apartment house which he now inhabited.

Evidently there had been an ebb in her prosperity; the tumble of a New Yorker's fortune leads from the Avenue to the Eighties, from thence through Morristown, Staten Island, to the West Side. Besides, she painted pictures; he knew the aroma of fixitive, siccative, and burnt sienna; and her studio adjoined his sky drawing-room.

He thought of this girl quite impersonally; she resembled a youthful beauty he had known–might still know if he chose; for a man who can pay for his evening clothes need never deny himself the society he was bred to.

She certainly did resemble that girl–she had the same bluish violet eyes, the same white and deeply fringed lids, the same free grace of carriage, a trifle too boyish at times–the same firmly rounded, yet slender, figure.

"Now, as a matter of fact," he mused aloud, stroking the sleeping squirrel on his knee, "I could have fallen in love with either of those girls–before Copper blew up."

Pursuing his innocuous meditation he nodded to himself: "I rather like the poor one better than any girl I ever saw. Doubtless she paints portraits over solar prints. That's all right; she's doing more than I have done yet.... I approve of those eyes of hers; they're like the eyes of that waking Aphrodite in the Luxembourg. If she would only just look at me once instead of looking through me when we pass one another in the hall–"

The deadened gallop of a horse on the bridle path caught his ear. The horse was coming fast– almost too fast. He laid the sleeping squirrel on the bench, listened, then instinctively stood up and walked to the thicket's edge.

What happened was too quick for him to comprehend; he had a vision of a big black horse, mane and tail in the wind, tearing madly, straight at him–a glimpse of a white face, desperate and set, a flutter of loosened hair; then a storm of wind and sand roared in his ears; he was hurled, jerked, and flung forward, dragged, shaken, and left half senseless, hanging to nose and bit of a horse whose rider was picking herself out of a bush covered with white flowers.

Half senseless still, he tightened his grip on the bit, released the grasp on the creature's nose, and, laying his hand full on the forelock, brought it down twice and twice across the eyes, talking to the horse in halting, broken whispers.

When he had the trembling animal under control he looked around; the girl stood on the grass, dusty, dirty, disheveled, bleeding from a cut on the cheek bone; the most bewildered and astonished creature he had ever looked upon.

"It will be all right in a few minutes," he said, motioning her to the bench on the asphalt walk. She nodded, turned, picked up his hat, and, seating herself, began to smooth the furred nap with her sleeve, watching him intently all the while. That he already had the confidence of a horse that he had never before seen was perfectly apparent. Little by little the sweating, quivering limbs were stilled, the tense muscles in the neck relaxed, the head sank, dusty velvet lips nibbled at his hand, his shoulder; the heaving, sunken flanks filled and grew quiet.

Bareheaded, his attire in disorder and covered with slaver and sand, the young man laid the bridle on the horse's neck, held out his hand, and, saying "Come," turned his back and walked down the bridle path. The horse stretched a sweating neck, sniffed, pricked forward both small ears, and slowly followed, turning as the man turned, up and down, crowding at heel like a trained dog, finally stopping on the edge of the walk.

The young man looped the bridle over a low maple limb, and leaving the horse standing sauntered over to the bench.

"That horse," he said pleasantly, "is all right now; but the question is, are you all right?"

She rose, handing him his hat, and began to twist up her bright hair. For a few moments' silence they were frankly occupied in restoring order to raiment, dusting off gravel and examining rents.

"I'm tremendously grateful," she said abruptly.

"I am, too," he said in that attractive manner which sets people of similar caste at ease with one another.

"Thank you; it's a generous compliment, considering your hat and clothing."

He looked up; she stood twisting her hair and doing her best with the few remaining hair pegs.

"I'm a sight for little fishes," she said, coloring. "Did that wretched beast bruise you?"

"Oh, no–"

"You limped!"

"Did I?" he said vaguely. "How do you feel?"

"There is," she said, "a curious, breathless flutter all over me; if that is fright, I suppose I'm frightened, but I don't mind mounting at once– if you would put me up–"

"Better wait a bit," he said; "it would not do to have that horse feel a fluttering pulse, telegraphing along the snaffle. Tell me, are you spurred?"

She lifted the hem of her habit; two small spurs glittered on her polished boot heels.

"That's it, you see," he observed; "you probably have not ridden cross saddle very long. When your mount swerved you spurred, and he bolted, bit in teeth."

"That's exactly it," she admitted, looking ruefully at her spurs. Then she dropped her skirt, glanced interrogatively at him, and, obeying his grave gesture, seated herself again upon the bench.

"Don't stand," she said civilly. He took the other end of the seat, lifting the still slumbering squirrel to his knee.

"I–I haven't said very much," she began; "I'm impulsive enough to be overgrateful and say too much. I hope you understand me; do you?"

"Of course; you're very good. It was nothing; you could have stopped your horse yourself. People do that sort of thing for one another as a matter of course."

"But not at the risk you took–"

"No risk at all," he said hastily.

She thought otherwise, and thought it so fervently that, afraid of emotion, she turned her cold, white profile to him and studied her horse, haughty lids adroop. The same insolent sweetness was in her eyes when they again reverted to him. He knew the look; he had encountered it often enough in the hallway and on the stairs. He knew, too, that she must recognize him; yet, under the circumstances, it was for her to speak first; and she did not, for she was at that age when horror of overdoing anything chokes back the scarcely extinguished childish instinct to say too much. In other words, she was eighteen and had had her first season the winter past–the winter when he had not been visible among the gatherings of his own kind.

"Those squirrels are very tame," she observed calmly.

"Not always," he said. "Try to hold this one, for example."

She raised her pretty eyebrows, then accepted the lump of fluffy fur from his hands. Instantly an electric shock seemed to set the squirrel frantic, there was a struggle, a streak of gray and white, and the squirrel leaped from her lap and fairly flew down the asphalt path.

"Gracious!" she exclaimed faintly; "what was the matter?"

"Some squirrels are very wild," he said innocently.

"I know–but you held him–he was asleep on your knee. Why didn't he stay with me?"

"Oh, perhaps because I have a way with animals."

"With horses, too," she added gayly. And the smile breaking from her violet eyes silenced him in the magic of a beauty he had never dreamed of. At first she mistook his silence for modesty; then–because even as young a maid as she is quick to divine and fine of instinct–she too fell silent and serious, the while the shuttles of her reason flew like lightning, weaving the picture of him she had conceived–a gentleman, a man of her own sort, rather splendid and wise and bewildering. The portrait completed, there was no room for the hint of presumption she had half sensed in the brown eyes' glance that had set her alert; and she looked up at him again, frankly, a trifle curiously.

"I am going to thank you once more," she said, "and ask you to put me up. There is not a flutter of fear in my pulse now."

"Are you quite sure?"

"Perfectly."

They arose; he untied the horse and beckoned it to the walk's edge.

"I forgot," she said, laughing, "that I am riding cross saddle. I can mount without troubling you–" She set her toe to the stirrup which he held, and swung herself up into the saddle with a breezy "Thanks, awfully," and sat there gathering her bridle.

Had she said enough? How coldly her own thanks rang in her ears–for perhaps he had saved her neck–and perhaps not. Busy with curb and snaffle reins, head bent, into her oval face a tint of color crept. Did he think she treated lightly, flippantly, the courage which became him so? Or was he already bored by her acknowledgment of it? Sensitive, dreading to expose youth and inexperience to the amused smile of this attractive young man of the world, she sat fumbling with her bridle, conscious that he stood beside her, hat in hand, looking up at her. She could delay no longer; the bridle had been shifted and reshifted to the last second of procrastination. She must say something or go.

Meeting his eyes, she smiled and leaned a little forward in her saddle as though to speak, but his brown eyes troubled her, and all she could say was "Thank you–good-by," and galloped off down the vista through dim, leafy depths heavy with the incense of lilac and syringa.

II
THE IDLER

Concerning the Young Man in the Ditch and His Attempts to Get Out of It

Although he was not vindictive, he did not care to owe anything to anybody who might be inclined to give him a hearing on account of former obligations or his social position. Everybody knew he had gone to smash; everybody, he very soon discovered, was naturally afraid of being bothered by him. The dread of the overfed that an underfed member of the community may request a seat at the table he now understood perfectly. He was learning.

So he solicited aid from nobody whom he had known in former days; neither from those who had aided him when he needed no aid, nor those who owed their comfortable position to the generosity of his father–a gentleman notorious for making fortunes for his friends.

Therefore he wrote to strangers on a purely business basis–to amazing types lately emerged from the submerged, bulging with coal money, steel money, copper money, wheat money, stockyard money–types that galloped for Fifth Avenue to build town houses; that shook their long cars and frisked into the country and built "cottages." And this was how he put it:

"*Madam:* In case you desire to entertain guests with the professional services of a magician it would give me pleasure to place my very unusual accomplishments at your disposal."

And signed his name.

It was a dreadful drain on his bank account to send several thousand engraved cards about town and fashionable resorts. No replies came. Day after day, exhausted with the practice drill of his profession, he walked to the Park and took his seat on the bench by the bridle path. Sometimes he saw her cantering past; she always acknowledged his salute, but never drew bridle. At times, too, he passed her in the hall; her colorless "Good morning" never varied except when she said "Good evening." And all this time he never inquired her name from the hall servant; he was that sort of man–decent through instinct; for even breeding sometimes permits sentiment to snoop.

For a week he had been airily dispensing with more than one meal a day; to keep clothing and boots immaculate required a sacrifice of breakfast and luncheon–besides, he had various small pensioners to feed, white rabbits with foolish pink eyes, canary birds, cats, albino mice, goldfish, and other collaborateurs in his profession. He was obliged to bribe the janitor, too, because the laws of the house permitted neither animals nor babies within its precincts. This extra honorarium deprived him of tobacco, and he became a pessimist.

Besides, doubts as to his own ability arose within him; it was all very well to practice his magic there alone, but he had not yet tried it on anybody except the janitor; and when he had begun by discovering several red-eyed rabbits in the janitor's pockets that intemperate functionary fled with a despondent yell that brought a policeman to the area gate with a threat to pull the place.

At length, however, a letter came engaging him for one evening. He was quite incredulous at first, then modestly scared, perplexed, exultant and depressed by turns. Here was an opening–the first. And because it was the first its success or failure meant future engagements or consignments to the street, perhaps as a white-wing. There must be no faltering now, no bungling, no mistakes, no amateurish hesitation. It is the empty-headed who most strenuously demand intelligence in others. One yawn from such an audience meant his professional damnation–he knew that; every second must break like froth in a wine glass; an instant's perplexity, a slackening of the tension, and those flaccid intellects would relax into native inertia. Incapable of self-amusement, depending utterly upon superior minds for a respite from ennui, their caprice controlled his fate; and he knew it.

Sitting there by the sunny window with a pair of magnificent white Persian cats purring on either knee, he read and reread the letter summoning him on the morrow to Seabright. He knew who his hostess was–a large lady lately emerged from a corner in lard, dragging with her some assorted relatives of atrophied intellects and a husband whose only mental pleasure depended upon the speed attained by his racing car–the most exacting audience he could dare to confront.

Like the White Knight he had had plenty of practice, but he feared that warrior's fate; and as he sat there he picked up a bunch of silver hoops, tossed them up separately so that they descended linked in a glittering chain, looped them and unlooped them, and, tiring, thoughtfully tossed them toward the ceiling again, where they vanished one by one in mid-air.

The cats purred; he picked up one, molded her carefully in his handsome hands; and presently, under the agreeable massage, her purring increased while she dwindled and dwindled to the size of a small, fluffy kitten, then vanished entirely, leaving in his hand a tiny white mouse. This mouse he tossed into the air, where it became no mouse at all but a white butterfly that fluttered 'round and 'round, alighting at last on the window curtain and hung there, opening and closing its snowy wings.

"That's all very well," he reflected, gloomily, as, at a pass of his hand, the air was filled with canary birds; "that's all very well, but suppose I should slip up? What I need is to rehearse to somebody before I face two or three hundred people."

He thought he heard a knocking on his door, and listened a moment. But as there was an electric bell there he concluded he had been mistaken; and picking up the other white cat, he began a gentle massage that stimulated her purring, apparently at the expense of her color and size, for in a few moments she also dwindled until she became a very small, coal-black kitten, changing in a twinkling to a blackbird, when he cast her carelessly toward the ceiling. It was well done; in all India no magician could have done it more cleverly, more casually.

Leaning forward in his chair he reproduced the two white cats from behind him, put the kittens back in their box, caught the blackbird and caged it, and was carefully winding up the hairspring in the white butterfly, when again he fancied that somebody was knocking.

III
THE GREEN MOUSE

Showing the Value of a Helping Hand When It Is White and Slender

This time he went leisurely to the door and opened it; a girl stood there, saying, "I beg your pardon for disturbing you–" It was high time she admitted it, for her eyes had been disturbing him day and night since the first time he passed her in the hall.

She appeared to be a trifle frightened, too, and, scarcely waiting for his invitation, she stepped inside with a hurried glance behind her, and walked to the center of the room holding her skirts carefully as though stepping through wet grass.

"I–I am annoyed," she said in a voice not perfectly under command. "If you please, would you tell me whether there is such a thing as a pea-green mouse?"

Then he did a mean thing; he could have cleared up that matter with a word, a smile, and–he didn't.

"A green mouse?" he repeated gently, almost pitifully.

She nodded, then paled; he drew a big chair toward her, for her knees trembled a little; and she sat down with an appealing glance that ought to have made him ashamed of himself.

"What has frightened you?" inquired that meanest of men.

"I was in my studio–and I must first explain to you that for weeks and weeks I–I have imagined I heard sounds–" She looked carefully around her; nothing animate was visible. "Sounds," she repeated, swallowing a little lump in her white throat, "like the faint squealing and squeaking and sniffing and scratching of–of live things. I asked the janitor, and he said the house was not very well built and that the beams and wainscoting were shrinking."

"Did he say that?" inquired the young man, thinking of the bribes.

"Yes, and I tried to believe him. And one day I thought I heard about one hundred canaries singing, and I know I did, but that idiot janitor said they were the sparrows under the eaves. Then one day when your door was open, and I was coming up the stairway, and it was dark in the entry, something big and soft flopped across the carpet, and–it being exceedingly common to scream–I didn't, but managed to get past it, and"– her violet eyes widened with horror–"do you know what that soft, floppy thing was? It was an owl!"

He was aware of it; he had managed to secure the escaped bird before her electric summons could arouse the janitor.

"I called the janitor," she said, "and he came and we searched the entry; but there was no owl."

He appeared to be greatly impressed; she recognized the sympathy in his brown eyes.

"That wretched janitor declared I had seen a cat," she resumed; "and I could not persuade him otherwise. For a week I scarcely dared set foot on the stairs, but I had to–you see, I live at home and only come to my studio to paint."

"I thought you lived here," he said, surprised.

"Oh, no. I have my studio–" she hesitated, then smiled. "Everybody makes fun of me, and I suppose they'll laugh me out of it, but I detest conventions, and I did hope I had talent for something besides frivolity."

Her gaze wandered around his room; then suddenly the possible significance of her unconventional situation brought her to her feet, serious but self-possessed.

"I beg your pardon again," she said, "but I was really driven out of my studio–quite frightened, I confess."

"What drove you out?" he asked guiltily.

"Something–you can scarcely credit it–and I dare not tell the janitor for fear he will think me–queer." She raised her distressed and lovely eyes again: "Oh, please believe that I *did* see a bright green mouse!"

"I do believe it," he said, wincing.

"Thank you. I–I know perfectly well how it sounds–and I know that horrid people see things like that, but"–she spoke piteously–"I had only one glass of claret at luncheon, and I am perfectly healthy in body and mind. How could I see such a thing if it was not there?"

"It was there," he declared.

"Do you really think so? A green–bright green mouse?"

"Haven't a doubt of it," he assured her; "saw one myself the other day."

"Where?"

"On the floor–" he made a vague gesture. "There's probably a crack between your studio and my wall, and the little rascal crept into your place."

She stood looking at him uncertainly: "Are there really such things as green mice?"

"Well," he explained, "I fancy this one was originally white. Somebody probably dyed it green."

"But who on earth would be silly enough to do such a thing?"

His ears grew red–he felt them doing it.

After a moment she said: "I am glad you told me that you, too, saw this unspeakable mouse. I have decided to write to the owners of the house and request an immediate investigation. Would–would it be too much to ask you to write also?"

"Are you–you going to write?" he asked, appalled.

"Certainly. Either some dreadful creature here keeps a bird store and brings home things that escape, or the house is infested. I don't care what the janitor says; I did hear squeals and whines and whimpers!"

"Suppose–suppose we wait," he began lamely; but at that moment her blue eyes widened; she caught him convulsively by the arm, pointing, one snowy finger outstretched.

"Oh-h!" she said hysterically, and the next instant was standing upon a chair, pale as a ghost. It was a wonder she had not mounted the dresser, too, for there, issuing in creepy single file from the wainscoting, came mice–mice of various tints. A red one led the grewsome rank, a black and white one came next, then in decorous procession followed the guilty green one, a yellow one, a blue one, and finally–horror of horrors!–a red-white-and-blue mouse, carrying a tiny American flag.

He turned a miserable face toward her; she, eyes dilated, frozen to a statue, saw him advance, hold out a white wand–saw the uncanny procession of mice mount the stick and form into a row, tails hanging down–saw him carry the creatures to a box and dump them in.

He was trying to speak now. She heard him stammer something about the escape of the mice; she heard him asking her pardon. Dazed, she laid her hand in his as he aided her to descend to the floor; nerveless, speechless, she sank into the big chair, horror still dilating her eyes.

"It's all up with me," he said slowly, "if you write to the owners. I've bribed the janitor to say nothing. I'm dreadfully mortified that these things have happened to annoy you."

The color came back into her face; amazement dominated her anger. "But why–why do you keep such creatures?"

"Why shouldn't I?" he asked. "It is my profession." "Your–what?"

"My profession," he repeated doggedly.

"Oh," she said, revolted, "that is not true! You are a gentleman–I know who you are perfectly well!"

"Who am I?"

She called him by name, almost angrily.

"Well," he said sullenly, "what of it? If you have investigated my record you must know I am as poor as these miserable mice."

"I–I know it. But you are a gentleman–"

"I am a mountebank," he said; "I mean a mountebank in its original interpretation. There's neither sense nor necessity for me to deny it."

"I–I don't understand you," she whispered, shocked.

"Why, I do monkey tricks to entertain people," he replied, forcing a laugh, "or rather, I hope to do a few–and be paid for them. I fancy every man finds his own level; I've found mine, apparently."

Her face was inscrutable; she lay back in the great chair, watching him.

"I have a little money left," he said; "enough to last a day or two. Then I am to be paid for entertaining some people at Seabright; and," he added with that very attractive smile of his from which all bitterness had departed, "and that will be the first money I ever earned in all my life."

She was young enough to be fascinated, child enough to feel the little lump in her throat rising. She knew he was poor; her sisters had told her that; but she had supposed it to be only comparative poverty–just as her cousins, for instance, had scarcely enough to keep more than two horses in town and only one motor. But want–actual need–she had never dreamed of in his case–she could scarcely understand it even now–he was so well groomed, so attractive, fairly radiating good breeding and the easy financial atmosphere she was accustomed to.

"So you see," he continued gayly, "if you complain to the owners about green mice, why, I shall have to leave, and, as a matter of fact, I haven't enough money to go anywhere except–" he laughed.

"Where?" she managed to say.

"The Park. I was joking, of course," he hastened to add, for she had turned rather white.

"No," she said, "you were not joking." And as he made no reply: "Of course, I shall not write–now. I had rather my studio were overrun with multicolored mice–" She stopped with something almost like a sob. He smiled, thinking she was laughing.

But oh, the blow for her! In her youthful enthusiasm she had always, from the first time they had encountered one another, been sensitively aware of this tall, clean-cut, attractive young fellow. And by and by she learned his name and asked her sisters about him, and when she heard of his recent ruin and withdrawal from the gatherings of his kind her youth flushed to its romantic roots, warming all within her toward this splendid and radiant young man who lived so nobly, so proudly aloof. And then–miracle of Manhattan!–he had proved his courage before her dazed eyes–rising suddenly out of the very earth to save her from a fate which her eager desire painted blacker every time she embellished the incident. And she decorated the memory of it every day.

And now! Here, beside her, was this prince among men, her champion, beaten to his ornamental knees by Fate, and contemplating a miserable, uncertain career to keep his godlike body from actual starvation. And she–she with more money than even she knew what to do with, powerless to aid him, prevented from flinging open her check book and bidding him to write and write till he could write no more.

A memory–a thought crept in. Where had she heard his name connected with her father's name? In Ophir Steel? Certainly; and was it not this young man's father who had laid the foundation for her father's fortune? She had heard some such thing, somewhere.

He said: "I had no idea of boring anybody–you least of all–with my woes. Indeed, I haven't any sorrows now, because to-day I received my first encouragement; and no doubt I'll be a huge success. Only–I thought it best to make it clear why it would do me considerable damage just now if you should write."

"Tell me," she said tremulously, "is there anything–anything I can do to–to balance the deep debt of gratitude I owe you–"

"What debt?" he asked, astonished. "Oh! that? Why, that is no debt– except that I was happy–perfectly and serenely happy to have had that chance to–to hear your voice–"

"You were brave," she said hastily. "You may make as light of it as you please, but I know."

"So do I," he laughed, enchanted with the rising color in her cheeks.

"No, you don't; you don't know how I felt–how afraid I was to show how deeply–deeply I felt. I felt it so deeply that I did not even tell my sisters," she added naively.

"Your sisters?"

"Yes; you know them." And as he remained silent she said: "Do you not know who I am? Do you not even know my name?"

He shook his head, laughing.

"I'd have given all I had to know; but, of course, I could not ask the servants!"

Surprise, disappointment, hurt pride that he had had no desire to know gave quick place to a comprehension that set a little thrill tingling her from head to foot. His restraint was the nicest homage ever rendered her; she saw that instantly; and the straight look she gave him out of her clear eyes took his breath away for a second.

"Do you remember Sacharissa?" she asked.

"I do–certainly! I always thought–"

"What?" she said, smiling.

He muttered something about eyes and white skin and a trick of the heavy lids.

She was perfectly at ease now; she leaned back in her chair, studying him calmly.

"Suppose," she said, "people could see me here now."

"It would end your artistic career," he replied, laughing; "and fancy! I took you for the sort that painted for a bare existence!"

"And I–I took you for–"

"Something very different than what I am."

"In one way–not in others."

"Oh! I look the mountebank?"

"I shall not explain what I mean," she said with heightened color, and rose from her chair. "As there are no more green mice to peep out at me from behind my easel," she added, "I can have no excuse from abandoning art any longer. Can I?"

The trailing sweetness of the inquiry was scarcely a challenge, yet he dared take it up.

"You asked me," he said, "whether you could do anything for me."

"Can I?" she exclaimed.

"Yes."

"I will–I am glad–tell me what to do?"

"Why, it's only this. I've got to go before an audience of two hundred people and do things. I've had practice here by myself, but–but if you don't mind I should like to try it before somebody–you. Do you mind?"

She stood there, slim, blue-eyed, reflecting; then innocently: "If I've compromised myself the damage was done long ago, wasn't it? They're going to take away my studio anyhow, so I might as well have as much pleasure as I can."

And she sat down, gracefully, linking her white fingers over her knees.

IV
AN IDEAL IDOL

A Chapter Devoted to the Proposition that All Mankind Are Born of Woman

He began by suddenly filling the air with canary birds; they flew and chirped and fluttered about her head, until, bewildered, she shrank back, almost frightened at the golden hurricane.

To reassure her he began doing incredible things with the big silver hoops, forming chains and linked figures under her amazed eyes, although each hoop seemed solid and without a break in its polished circumference. Then, one by one, he tossed the rings up and they vanished in mid-air before her very eyes.

"How did you do that?" she cried, enchanted.

He laughed and produced the big, white Persian cats, changed them into kittens, then into birds and butterflies, and finally into a bowl full of big, staring goldfish. Then he picked up a ladle, dipped out the fish, carefully fried them over an electric lamp, dumped them from the smoking frying pan back into the water, where they quietly swam off again, goggling their eyes in astonishment.

"That," said the girl, excitedly, "is miraculous!"

"Isn't it?" he said, delighted as a boy at her praise. "What card will you choose?"

And he handed her a pack.

"The ace of hearts, if you please."

"Draw it from the pack."

"Any card?" she inquired. "Oh! how on earth did you make me draw the ace of hearts?"

"Hold it tightly," he warned her.

She clutched it in her pretty fingers.

"Are you sure you hold it?" he asked.

"Perfectly."

"Look!"

She looked and found that it was the queen of diamonds she held so tightly; but, looking again to reassure herself, she was astonished to find that the card was the jack of clubs. "Tear it up," he said. She tore it into small pieces.

"Throw them into the air!"

She obeyed, and almost cried out to see them take fire in mid-air and float away in ashy flakes.

Face flushed, eyes brilliant, she turned to him, hanging on his every movement, every expression.

Before her rapt eyes the multicolored mice danced jigs on slack wires, then were carefully rolled up into little balls of paper which immediately began to swell until each was as big as a football. These burst open, and out of each football of white paper came kittens, turtles, snakes, chickens, ducks, and finally two white rabbits with silly pink eyes that began gravely waltzing round and round the room.

"Please stand up and shake your skirts," he said.

She rose hastily and obeyed; a rain of silver coins fell, then gold, then banknotes, littering the floor. Then precious stones began to drop about her; she shook them from her hair, her collar, her neck; she clenched her hands in nervous amazement, but inside each tight little fist she felt something, and opening her fingers she fairly showered the floor with diamonds.

"Can't you save one for me?" he asked. "I really need it." But when again she looked for the glittering heap at her feet, it was gone; and, search as she might, not one coin, not one gem remained.

Glancing up in dismay she found herself in a perfect storm of white butterflies–no, they were red–no, green!

"Is there anything in this world you desire?" he asked her.

"A–a glass of water–"

She was already holding it in her hands, and she cried out in amazement, spilling the brimming glass; but no water fell, only a rain of little crimson flames.

"I can't–can't drink this–can I?" she faltered.

"With perfect safety," he smiled, and she tasted it.

"Taste it again," he said.

She tried it; it was lemonade.

"Again."

It was ginger ale.

"Once more."

She stared at the glass, frothing with ice-cream soda; there was a long silver spoon in it, too.

Enchanted, she lay back, savoring her ice, shyly watching him.

He went on gayly doing uncanny or charming things; her eyes were tired, dazzled, but not too weary to watch him, though she scarcely followed the marvelous objects that appeared and vanished and glittered and flamed under his ceaselessly busy hands.

She did notice with a shudder the appearance of an owl that sat for a while on his shoulder and then turned into a big fur muff which was all right as long as he held it, but walked away on four legs when he tossed it to the floor.

A shower of brilliant things followed like shooting stars; two or three rose trees grew, budded, and bloomed before her eyes; and he laid the fresh, sweet blossoms in her hands. They turned to violets later, but that did not matter; nothing mattered any longer as long as she could lie there and gaze at him–the most splendid man her maiden eyes had ever unclosed upon.

About two thousand yards of brilliant ribbons suddenly fell from the ceiling; she looked at him with something perilously close to a sigh. Out of an old hat he produced a cage full of parrots; every parrot repeated her first name decorously, monotonously, until packed back into the hat and stuffed into a box which was then set on fire.

Her heart was pretty full now; for she was only eighteen and she had been considering his poverty. So when in due time the box burned out and from the black and charred *débris* the parrots stepped triumphantly forth, gravely repeating her name in unison; and when she saw that the entertainment was at an end, she rose, setting her ice-cream soda upon a table, and, although the glass instantly changed into a teapot, she walked straight up to him and held out her hand.

"I've had a perfectly lovely time," she said. "And I want to say to you that I have been thinking of several things, and one is that it is perfectly ridiculous for you to be poor."

"It is rather ridiculous," he admitted, surprised. "Isn't it! And no need of it at all. Your father made a fortune for my father. All you have to do is to let my father make a fortune for you."

"Is that all?" he asked, laughing.

"Of course. Why did you not tell him so? Have you seen him?"

"No," he said gravely.

"Why not?"

"I saw others–I did not care to try–any more–friends."

"Will you–now?"

He shook his head.

"Then I will."

"Please don't," he said quietly. Her hand still lay in his; she looked up at him; her eyes were starry bright and a little moist.

"I simply can't stand this," she said, steadying her voice.

"What?"

"Your–your distress–" She choked; her sensitive mouth trembled.

"Good Heavens!" he breathed; "do you care!"

"Care–care," she stammered. "You saved my life with a laugh! You face st-starvation with a laugh! Your father made mine! Care? Yes, I care!"

But she had bent her head; a bright tear fell, spangling his polished shoes; the pulsating seconds passed; he laid his other hand above both of hers which he held, and stood silent, stunned, scarcely daring to understand.

Nor was it here he could understand or even hope–his instinct held him stupid and silent. Presently he released her hands.

She said "Good-by" calmly enough; he followed her to the door and opened it, watching her pass through the hall to her own door. And there she paused and looked back; and he found himself beside her again.

"Only," she began, "only don't do all those beautiful magic things for any–anybody else–will you? I wish to have–have them all for myself–to share them with no one–"

He held her hands imprisoned again. "I will never do one of those things for anybody but you," he said unsteadily.

"Truly?" Her face caught fire.

"Yes, truly."

"But how–how, then, can you–can–"

"I don't care what happens to me!" he said. To look at him nobody would have thought him young enough to say that sort of thing.

"I care," she said, releasing her hands and stepping back into her studio.

For a moment her lovely, daring face swam before his eyes; then, in the next moment, she was in his arms, crying her eyes out against his shoulder, his lips pressed to her bright hair.

And that was all right in its way, too; madder things have happened in our times; but nothing madder ever happened than a large, bald gentleman who came up the stairs in a series of bounces and planted his legs apart and tightened his pudgy grip upon his malacca walking stick, and confronted them with distended eyes and waistband.

In vigorous but incoherent English he begged to know whether this scene was part of an education in art.

"Papah," she said calmly, "you are just in time. Go into the studio and I'll come in one moment."

Then giving her lover both hands and looking at him with all her soul in her young eyes: "I love you; I'll marry you. And if there's trouble"–she smiled upon her frantic father–"if there is trouble I will follow you about the country exhibiting green mice–"

"What!" thundered her father.

"Green mice," she repeated with an adorable smile at her lover–"unless my father finds a necessity for you in his business–with a view to partnership. And I'm going to let you arrange that together. Good-by."

And she entered her studio, closing the door behind her, leaving the two men confronting one another in the entry.

For one so young she had much wisdom and excellent taste; and listening, she heard her father explode in one lusty Saxon word. He always said it when beaten; it was the beginning of the end, and the end of the sweetest beginning that ever dawned on earth for a maid since the first sunbeam stole into Eden.

So she sat down on her little camp stool before her easel and picked up a hand glass; and, sitting there, carefully removed all traces of tears from her wet and lovely eyes with the cambric hem of her painting apron.

"Damnation!" repeated Mr. Carr, "am I to understand that the only thing you can do for a living is to go about with a troupe of trained mice?"

"I've invented a machine," observed the young man, modestly. "It ought to be worth millions–if you'd care to finance it."

"The idea is utterly repugnant to me!" shouted her father.

The young man reddened. "If you wouldn't mind examining it–" He drew from his pocket a small, delicately contrived bit of clockwork. "This is the machine–"

"I don't want to see it!"

"You *have* seen it. Do you mind sitting down a moment? Be careful of that kitten! Kindly take this chair. Thank you. Now, if you would be good enough to listen for ten minutes–"

"I don't want to be good enough! Do you hear!"

"Yes, I hear," said young Destyn, patiently. "And as I was going to explain, the earth is circumscribed by wireless currents of electricity–"

"I–dammit, sir–"

"But those are not the only invisible currents that are ceaselessly flowing around our globe!" pursued the young man, calmly. "Do you see this machine?"

"No, I don't!" snarled the other.

"Then–" And, leaning closer, William Augustus Destyn whispered into Bushwyck Carr's fat, red ear.

"What!!!"

"Certainly."

"You can't *prove* it!"

"Watch me."

Ethelinda had dried her eyes. Every few minutes she glanced anxiously at the little French clock over her easel.

"What on earth can they be doing?" she murmured. And when the long hour struck she arose with resolution and knocked at the door.

"Come in," said her father, irritably, "but don't interrupt. William and I are engaged in a very important business transaction."

V
SACHARISSA

Treating of Certain Scientific Events Succeeding the Wedding Journey of William and Ethelinda

Sacharissa took the chair. She knew nothing about parliamentary procedure; neither did her younger, married sister, Ethelinda, nor the recently acquired family brother-in-law, William Augustus Destyn.

"The meeting will come to order," said Sacharissa, and her brother-in-law reluctantly relinquished his new wife's hand–all but one finger.

"Miss Chairman," he began, rising to his feet.

The chair recognized him and bit into a chocolate.

"I move that our society be known as The Green Mouse, Limited."

"Why limited?" asked Sacharissa.

"Why not?" replied her sister, warmly.

"Well, what does your young man mean by limited?"

"I suppose," said Linda, "that he means it is to be the limit. Don't you, William?"

"Certainly," said Destyn, gravely; and the motion was put and carried.

"Rissa, dear!"

The chair casually recognized her younger sister.

"I propose that the object of this society be to make its members very, very wealthy."

The motion was carried; Linda picked up a scrap of paper and began to figure up the possibility of a new touring car.

Then Destyn arose; the chair nodded to him and leaned back, playing a tattoo with her pencil tip against her snowy teeth.

He began in his easy, agreeable voice, looking across at his pretty wife:

"You know, dearest–and Sacharissa, over there, is also aware–that, in the course of my economical experiments in connection with your father's Wireless Trust, I have accidentally discovered how to utilize certain brand-new currents of an extraordinary character."

Sacharissa's expression became skeptical; Linda watched her husband in unfeigned admiration.

"These new and hitherto unsuspected currents," continued Destyn modestly, "are not electrical but psychical. Yet, like wireless currents, their flow eternally encircles the earth. These currents, I believe, have their origin in that great unknown force which, for lack of a better name, we call fate, or predestination. And I am convinced that by intercepting one of these currents it is possible to connect the subconscious personalities of two people of opposite sex who, although ultimately destined for one another since the beginning of things, have, through successive incarnations, hitherto missed the final consummation– marriage!–which was the purpose of their creation."

"Bill, dear," sighed Linda, "how exquisitely you explain the infinite."

"Fudge!" said Sacharissa; "go on, William."

"That's all," said Destyn. "We agreed to put in a thousand dollars apiece for me to experiment with. I've perfected the instrument–here it is."

He drew from his waistcoat pocket a small, flat jeweler's case and took out a delicate machine resembling the complicated interior of a watch.

"Now," he said, "with this tiny machine concealed in my waistcoat pocket, I walk up to any man and, by turning a screw like the stem of a watch, open the microscopical receiver. Into the receiver

flow all psychical emanations from that unsuspicious citizen. The machine is charged, positively. Then I saunter up to some man, place the instrument on a table–like that–touch a lever. Do you see that hair wire of Rosium uncoil like a tentacle? It is searching, groping for the invisible, negative, psychical current which will carry its message."

"To whom?" asked Sacharissa.

"To the subconscious personality of the only woman for whom he was created, the only woman on earth whose psychic personality is properly attuned to intercept that wireless greeting and respond to it."

"How can you tell whether she responds?" asked Sacharissa, incredulously. He pointed to the hair wire of Rosium:

"I watch that. The instant that the psychical current reaches and awakens her, crack!–a minute point of blue incandescence tips the tentacle. It's done; psychical communication is established. And that man and that woman, wherever they may be on earth, surely, inexorably, will be drawn together, even from the uttermost corners of the world, to fulfill that for which they were destined since time began."

There was a semirespectful silence; Linda looked at the little jewel-like machine with a slight shudder; Sacharissa shrugged her young shoulders.

"How much of this," said she, "is theory and how much is fact?–for, William, you always were something of a poet."

"I don't know. A month ago I tried it on your father's footman, and in a week he'd married a perfectly strange parlor maid."

"Oh, they do such things, anyway," observed Sacharissa, and added, unconvinced: "Did that tentacle burn blue?"

"It certainly did," said Destyn.

Linda murmured: "I believe in it. Let's issue stock."

"To issue stock is one thing," said Destyn, "to get people to buy it is another. You and I may believe in Green Mouse, Limited, but the rest of the world is always from beyond the Mississippi."

"The thing to do," said Linda, "is to prove your theory by practicing on people. They may not like the idea, but they'll be so grateful, when happily and unexpectedly married, that they'll buy stock."

"Or give us testimonials," added Sacharissa, "that their bliss was entirely due to a single dose of Green Mouse, Limited."

"Don't be flippant," said Linda. "Think what William's invention means to the world! Think of the time it will save young men barking up wrong trees! Think of the trouble saved–no more doubt, no timidity, no hesitation, no speculation, no opposition from parents."

"Any of our clients," added Destyn, "can be instantly switched on to a private psychical current which will clinch the only girl in the world. Engagements will be superfluous; those two simply can't get away from each other."

"If that were true," observed Sacharissa, "it would be most unpleasant. There would be no fun in it. However," she added, smiling, "I don't believe in your theory or your machine, William. It would take more than that combination to make me marry anybody."

"Then we're not going to issue stock?" asked Linda. "I do need so many new and expensive things."

"We've got to experiment a little further, first," said Destyn.

Sacharissa laughed: "You blindfold me, give me a pencil and lay the Social Register before me. Whatever name I mark you are to experiment with."

"Don't mark any of our friends," began Linda.

"How can I tell whom I may choose. It's fair for everybody. Come; do you promise to abide by it–you two?"

They promised doubtfully.

"So do I, then," said Sacharissa. "Hurry up and blindfold me, somebody. The bus will be here in half an hour, and you know how father acts when kept waiting."

Linda tied her eyes with a handkerchief, gave her a pencil and seated herself on an arm of the chair watching the pencil hovering over the pages of the Social Register which her sister was turning at hazard.

"*This* page," announced Sacharissa, "and *this* name!" marking it with a quick stroke.

Linda gave a stifled cry and attempted to arrest the pencil; but the moving finger had written.

"Whom have I selected?" inquired the girl, whisking the handkerchief from her eyes. "What are you having a fit about, Linda?"

And, looking at the page, she saw that she had marked her own name.

"We must try it again," said Destyn, hastily. "That doesn't count. Tie her up, Linda."

"But–that wouldn't be fair," said Sacharissa, hesitating whether to take it seriously or laugh. "We all promised, you know. I ought to abide by what I've done."

"Don't be silly," said Linda, preparing the handkerchief and laying it across her sister's forehead.

Sacharissa pushed it away. "I can't break my word, even to myself," she said, laughing. "I'm not afraid of that machine."

"Do you mean to say you are willing to take silly chances?" asked Linda, uneasily. "I believe in William's machine whether you do or not. And I don't care to have any of the family experimented with."

"If I were willing to try it on others it would be cowardly for me to back out now," said Sacharissa, forcing a smile; for Destyn's and Linda's seriousness was beginning to make her a trifle uncomfortable.

"Unless you want to marry somebody pretty soon you'd better not risk it," said Destyn, gravely.

"You–you don't particularly care to marry anybody, just now, do you, dear?" asked Linda. "No," replied her sister, scornfully.

There was a silence; Sacharissa, uneasy, bit her underlip and sat looking at the uncanny machine.

She was a tall girl, prettily formed, one of those girls with long limbs, narrow, delicate feet and ankles.

That sort of girl, when she also possesses a mass of chestnut hair, a sweet mouth and gray eyes, is calculated to cause trouble.

And there she sat, one knee crossed over the other, slim foot swinging, perplexed brows bent slightly inward.

"I can't see any honorable way out of it," she said resolutely. "I said I'd abide by the blindfolded test."

"When we promised we weren't thinking of ourselves," insisted Ethelinda.

"That doesn't release us," retorted her Puritan sister.

"Why?" demanded Linda. "Suppose, for example, your pencil had marked William's name! That would have been im–immoral!"

"*Would* it?" asked Sacharissa, turning her honest, gray eyes on her brother-in-law.

"I don't believe it would," he said; "I'd only be switched on to Linda's current again." And he smiled at his wife.

Sacharissa sat thoughtful and serious, swinging her foot.

"Well," she said, at length, "I might as well face it at once. If there's anything in this instrument we'll all know it pretty soon. Turn on your receiver, Billy."

"Oh," cried Linda, tearfully, "don't you do it, William!"

"Turn it on," repeated Sacharissa. "I'm not going to be a coward and break faith with myself, and you both know it! If I've got to go through the silliness of love and marriage I might as well know who the bandarlog is to be.... Anyway, I don't really believe in this thing.... I can't believe in it....

Besides, I've a mind and a will of my own, and I fancy it will require more than amateur psychical experiments to change either. Go on, Billy."

"You mean it?" he asked, secretly gratified.

"Certainly," with superb affectation of indifference. And she rose and faced the instrument.

Destyn looked at his wife. He was dying to try it.

"Will!" she exclaimed, "suppose we are not going to like Rissa's possible f–fiance! Suppose father doesn't like him!"

"You'll all probably like him as well as I shall," said her sister defiantly. "Willy, stop making frightened eyes at your wife and start your infernal machine!"

There was a vicious click, a glitter of shifting clockwork, a snap, and it was done.

"Have you now, *theoretically*, got my psychical current bottled up?" she asked disdainfully. But her lip trembled a little.

He nodded, looking very seriously at her.

"And now you are going to switch me on to this unknown gentleman's psychical current?"

"Don't let him!" begged Linda. "Billy, dear, how *can* you when nobody has the faintest idea who the creature may turn out to be!"

"Go ahead!" interrupted her sister, masking misgiving under a careless smile.

Click! Up shot the glittering, quivering tentacle of Rosium, vibrating for a few moments like a thread of silver. Suddenly it was tipped with a blue flash of incandescence.

"Oh, dear! Oh, dear! There he is!" cried Linda, excitedly. "Rissy! Rissy, little sister, *what* have you done?"

"Nothing," she said, catching her breath. "I don't believe that flash means anything. I don't feel a bit different–not the least bit. I feel perfectly well and perfectly calm. I don't love anybody and I'm not going to love anybody–until I want to, and that will probably never happen."

However, she permitted her sister to take her in her arms and pet her. It was rather curious how exceedingly young and inexperienced she felt. She found it agreeable to be fussed over and comforted and cradled, and for a few moments she suffered Linda's solicitude and misgivings in silence. After a while, however, she became ashamed.

"Nothing is going to happen, Linda," she said, looking dreamily up at the ceiling; "don't worry, dear; I shall escape the bandarlog."

"If something doesn't happen," observed Destyn, pocketing his instrument, "the Green Mouse, Limited, will go into liquidation with no liabilities and no assets, and there'll be no billions for you or for me or for anybody."

"William," said his wife, "do you place a low desire for money before your own sister-in-law's spiritual happiness?"

"No, darling, of course not."

"Then you and I had better pray for the immediate bankruptcy of the Green Mouse."

Her husband said, "By all means," without enthusiasm, and looked out of the window. "Still," he added, "I made a happy marriage. I'm for wedding bells every time. Sacharissa will like it, too. I don't know why you and I shouldn't be enthusiastic optimists concerning wedded life; I can't see why we shouldn't pray for Sacharissa's early marriage."

"William!"

"Yes, darling."

"You *are* considering money before my sister's happiness!"

"But in her case I don't see why we can't conscientiously consider both."

Linda cast one tragic glance at her material husband, pushed her sister aside, arose and fled. After her sped the contrite Destyn; a distant door shut noisily; all the elements had gathered for the happy, first quarrel of the newly wedded.

"Fudge," said Sacharissa, walking to the window, slim hands clasped loosely behind her back.

VI
IN WRONG

Wherein Sacharissa Remains In and a Young Man Can't Get Out

The snowstorm had ceased; across Fifth Avenue the Park resembled the mica-incrusted view on an expensive Christmas card. Every limb, branch, and twig was outlined in clinging snow; crystals of it glittered under the morning sun; brilliantly dressed children, with sleds, romped and played over the dazzling expanse. Overhead the characteristic deep blue arch of a New York sky spread untroubled by a cloud. Her family–that is, her father, brother-in-law, married sister, three unmarried sisters and herself–were expecting to leave for Tuxedo about noon. Why? Nobody knows why the wealthy are always going somewhere. However, they do, fortunately for story writers.

"It's quite as beautiful here," thought Sacharissa to herself, "as it is in the country. I'm sorry I'm going."

Idling there by the sunny window and gazing out into the white expanse, she had already dismissed all uneasiness in her mind concerning the psychical experiment upon herself. That is to say, she had not exactly dismissed it, she used no conscious effort, it had gone of itself–or, rather, it had been crowded out, dominated by a sudden and strong disinclination to go to Tuxedo.

As she stood there the feeling grew and persisted, and, presently, she found herself repeating aloud: "I don't want to go, I *don't* want to go. It's stupid to go. Why should I go when it's stupid to go and I'd rather stay here?"

Meanwhile, Ethelinda and Destyn were having a classical reconciliation in a distant section of the house, and the young wife had got as far as:

"Darling, I am *so* worried about Rissa. I *do* wish she were not going to Tuxedo. There are so many attractive men expected at the Courlands'."

"She can't escape men anywhere, can she?"

"N-no; but there will be a concentration of particularly good-looking and undesirable ones at Tuxedo this week. That idle, horrid, cynical crowd is coming from Long Island, and I *don't* want her to marry any of them."

"Well, then, make her stay at home."

"She wants to go."

"What's the good of an older sister if you can't make her mind you?" he asked.

"She won't. She's set her heart on going. All those boisterous winter sports appeal to her. Besides, how can one member of the family be absent on New Year's Day?"

Arm in arm they strolled out into the great living room, where a large, pompous, vividly colored gentleman was laying down the law to the triplets–three very attractive young girls, dressed precisely alike, who said, "Yes, pa-*pah!*" and "No pa-*pah!*" in a grave and silvery-voiced chorus whenever filial obligation required it.

"And another thing," continued the pudgy and vivid old gentleman, whose voice usually ended in a softly mellifluous shout when speaking emphatically: "that worthless Westbury–Cedarhurst–Jericho– Meadowbrook set are going to be in evidence at this housewarming, and I caution you now against paying anything but the slightest, most superficial and most frivolous attention to anything that any of those young whip-snapping, fox-hunting cubs may say to you. Do you hear?" with a mellow shout like a French horn on a touring car.

"Yes, pa-*pah!*"

The old gentleman waved his single eyeglass in token of dismissal, and looked at his watch.

"The bus is here," he said fussily. "Come on, Will; come, Linda, and you, Flavilla, Drusilla, and Sybilla, get your furs on. Don't take the elevator. Go down by the stairs, and hurry! If there's one thing in this world I won't do it is to wait for anybody on earth!"

Flunkies and maids flew distractedly about with fur coats, muffs, and stoles. In solemn assemblage the family expedition filed past the elevator, descended the stairs to the lower hall, and there drew up for final inspection.

A mink-infested footman waited outside; valets, butlers, second-men and maids came to attention.

"Where's Sacharissa?" demanded Mr. Carr, sonorously.

"Here, dad," said his oldest daughter, strolling calmly into the hall, hands still linked loosely behind her.

"Why haven't you got your hat and furs on?" demanded her father.

"Because I'm not going, dad," she said sweetly.

The family eyed her in amazement.

"Not going?" shouted her father, in a mellow bellow. "Yes, you are! Not *going!* And why the dickens not?"

"I really don't know, dad," she said listlessly. "I don't want to go."

Her father waved both pudgy arms furiously. "Don't you feel well? You look well. You *are*

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.