CHAMBERS ROBERT WILLIAM

IOLE

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Содержание

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PREFACE

DOES anybody remember the opera of *The Inca*, and that heartbreaking episode where the Court Undertaker, in a morbid desire to increase his professional skill, deliberately accomplishes the destruction of his middle-aged relatives in order to inter them for the sake of practise?

If I recollect, his dismal confession runs something like this:

> "It was in a bleak November
> When I slew them, I remember,
> As I caught them unawares
> Drinking tea in rocking-chairs."

And so he talked them to death, the subject being "What Really is Art?" Afterward he was sorry—

> "The squeak of a door,
> The creak of the floor,
> My horrors and fears enhance;
> And I wake with a scream
> As I hear in my dream

The shrieks of my maiden aunts!"

Now it is a very dreadful thing to suggest that those highly respectable pseudo-spinsters, the Sister Arts, supposedly cozily immune in their polygamous chastity (for every suitor for favor is popularly expected to be wedded to his particular art)—I repeat, it is very dreadful to suggest that these impeccable old ladies are in danger of being talked to death.

But the talkers are talking and Art Nouveau rockers are rocking, and the trousers of the prophet are patched with stained glass, and it is a day of dinkiness and of thumbs.

Let us find comfort in the ancient proverb: "Art talked to death shall rise again." Let us also recollect that "Dinky is as dinky does"; that "All is not Shaw that Bernards"; that "Better Yeates than Clever"; that words are so inexpensive that there is no moral crime in robbing Henry to pay James.

Firmly believing all this, abjuring all atom-pickers, slab furniture, and woodchuck literature—save only the immortal verse:

"And there the wooden-chuck doth tread;
While from the oak trees' tops
The red, red squirrel on thy head
The frequent acorn drops."

Abjuring, as I say, dinkiness in all its forms, we may still hope that those cleanly and respectable spinsters, the Sister Arts,

will continue throughout the ages, rocking and drinking tea unterrified by the million-tongued clamor in the back yard and below stairs, where thumb and forefinger continue the question demanded by intellectual exhaustion: “L’arr! Kesker say l’arr?”

I

I AIN'T never knowed no one like him," continued the station-agent reflectively. "He made us all look like monkeys, but he was good to us. Ever see a ginuine poet, sir?"

"Years ago one was pointed out to me," replied Briggs.

"Was yours smooth shaved, with large, fat, white fingers?" inquired the station-agent.

"If I remember correctly, he was thin," said Briggs, sitting down on his suit-case and gazing apprehensively around at the landscape. There was nothing to see but low, forbidding mountains, and forests, and a railroad track curving into a tunnel.

The station-agent shoved his hairy hands into the pockets of his overalls, jingled an unseen bunch of keys, and chewed a dry grass stem, ruminating the while in an undertone:

"This poet come here five years ago with all them kids, an' the fust thing he done was to dress up his girls in boys' pants. Then he went an' built a humpy sort o' house out of stones and boulders. Then he went to work an' wrote pieces for the papers about jay-birds an' woodchucks an' goddesses. He claimed the woods was full of goddesses. That was his way, sir."

The agent contemplated the railroad track, running his eye along the perspective of polished rails:

"Yes, sir; his name was—and is—Clarence Guilford, an' I fust seen it signed to a piece in the Uticy Star. An' next I knowed, folks

began to stop off here inquirin' for Mr. Guilford. 'Is this here where Guilford, the poet, lives?' sez they; an' they come thicker an' thicker in warm weather. There wasn't no wagon to take 'em up to Guilford's, but they didn't care, an' they called it a lit'r'y shrine, an' they hit the pike, women, children, men—'speshil the women, an' I heard 'em tellin' how Guilford dressed his kids in pants an' how Guilford was a famous new lit'r'y poet, an' they said he was fixin' to lecture in Uticy."

The agent gnawed off the chewed portion of the grass stem, readjusted it, and fixed his eyes on vacancy.

"Three year this went on. Mr. Guilford was makin' his pile, I guess. He set up a shop an' hired art bookbinders from York. Then he set up another shop an' hired some of us 'round here to go an' make them big, slabby art-chairs. All his shops was called "At the sign of" somethin' 'r other. Bales of vellum arrived for to bind little dinky books; art rocking-chairs was shipped out o' here by the carload. Meanwhile Guilford he done poetry on the side an' run a magazine; an' hearin' the boys was makin' big money up in that crank community, an' that the town was boomin', I was plum fool enough to drop my job here an' be a art-worker up to Rose-Cross—that's where the shops was; 'bout three mile back of his house into the woods."

The agent removed his hands from his overalls and folded his arms grimly.

"Well?" inquired Briggs, looking up from his perch on the suit-case.

"Well, sir," continued the agent, "the hull thing bust. I guess the public kinder sickened o' them art-rockers an' dinky books without much printin' into them. Guilford he stuck to it noble, but the shops closed one by one. My wages wasn't paid for three months; the boys that remained got together that autumn an' fixed it up to quit in a bunch.

"The poet was sad; he come out to the shops an' he says, 'Boys,' sez he, 'art is long an' life is dam brief. I ain't got the cash, but,' sez he, 'you can levy onto them art-rockers an' the dinky vellum books in stock, an',' sez he, 'you can take the hand-presses an' the tools an' bales o' vellum, which is very precious, an' all the wagons an' hosses, an' go sell 'em in that proud world that refuses to receive my message. The woodland fellowship is rent,' sez he, wavin' his plump fingers at us with the rings sparklin' on 'em.

"Then the boys looked glum, an' they nudged me an' kinder shoved me front. So, bein' elected, I sez, 'Friend,' sez I, 'art is on the bum. It ain't your fault; the boys is sad an' sorrerful, but they ain't never knocked you to nobody, Mr. Guilford. You was good to us; you done your damdest. You made up pieces for the magazines an' papers an' you advertised how we was all cranks together here at Rose-Cross, a-lovin' Nature an' dicky-birds, an' wanderin' about half nood for art's sake.

"'Mr. Guilford,' sez I, 'that gilt brick went. But it has went as far as it can travel an' is now reposin' into the soup. Git wise or eat hay, sir. Art is on the blink.'"

The agent jingled his keys with a melancholy wink at Briggs.

"So I come back here, an' thankful to hold down this job. An' five mile up the pike is that there noble poet an' his kids a-makin' up pieces for to sell to the papers, an' a sorrerin' over the cold world what refuses to buy his poems—an' a mortgage onto his house an' a threat to foreclose."

"Indeed," said Briggs dreamily, for it was his business to attend to the foreclosure of the mortgage on the poet's house.

"Was you fixin' to go up an' see the place?" inquired the agent.

"Shall I be obliged to walk?"

"I guess you will if you can't flutter," replied the agent. "I ain't got no wagon an' no horse."

"How far is it?"

"Five mile, sir."

With a groan Mr. Briggs arose, lifted his suit-case, and, walking to the platform's edge, cast an agitated glance up the dusty road.

Then he turned around and examined the single building in sight—station, water-tower, post-office and telegraph-office all in one, and incidentally the abode of the station-agent, whose duties included that of postmaster and operator.

"I'll write a letter first," said Briggs. And this is what he wrote:

Rose-Cross P.O.,
June 25, 1904.

Dear Wayne: Do you remember that tract of land, adjoining your preserve, which you attempted to buy four years ago? It was held by a crank community, and they refused to sell, and made

trouble for your patrols by dumping dye-stuffs and sawdust into the Ashton Creek.

Well, the community has broken up, the shops are in ruins, and there is nobody there now except that bankrupt poet, Guilford. I bought the mortgage for you, foreseeing a slump in that sort of art, and I expect to begin foreclosure proceedings and buy in the tract, which, as you will recollect, includes some fine game cover and the Ashton stream, where you wanted to establish a hatchery. This is a God-forsaken spot. I'm on my way to the poet's now. Shall I begin foreclosure proceedings and fire him? Wire me what to do.

Yours,
Briggs.

Wayne received this letter two days later. Preoccupied as he was in fitting out his yacht for commission, he wired briefly, "Fire poet," and dismissed the matter from his mind.

The next day, grappling with the problem of Japanese stewards and the decadence of all sailormen, he received a telegram from Briggs:

"Can't you manage to come up here?"

Irritated, he telegraphed back:

"Impossible. Why don't you arrange to fire poet?" And Briggs replied: "Can't fire poet. There are extenuating circumstances."

"Did you say exterminating or extenuating?" wired Wayne. "I said extenuating," replied Briggs.

Then the following telegrams were exchanged in order:

(1)

What are the extenuating circumstances?

Wayne.

(2)

Eight innocent children. Come up at once.

Briggs.

(3)

Boat in commission. Can't go. Why don't you fix things?

Wayne.

(4)

How?

Briggs.

(5)

(Dated New London.)

What on earth is the matter with you? Are you going to fix things and join me at Bar Harbor or are you not?

Wayne.

(6)

As I don't know how you want me to fix things, I can not join you.

Briggs.

(7)

(Dated Portland, Maine.)

Stuyvesant Briggs, what the devil is the matter with you? It's absolutely necessary that I have the Ashton stream for a hatchery, and you know it. What sort of a business man are you, anyhow? Of course I don't propose to treat that poet inhumanly. Arrange to bid in the tract, run up the price against your own bidding, and let the poet have a few thousand if he is hard put. Don't worry

me any more; I'm busy with a fool crew, and you are spoiling my cruise by not joining me.

Wayne.

(8)

He won't do it.

Briggs.

(9)

Who won't do *what*?

Wayne.

(10)

Poet refuses to discuss the matter.

Briggs.

(11)

Fire that poet. You've spoiled my cruise with your telegrams.

Wayne.

(12)

(*Marked "Collect."*)

Look here, George Wayne, don't drive me to desperation. You ought to come up and face the situation yourself. I can't fire a poet with eight helpless children, can I? And while I'm about it, let me inform you that every time you telegraph me it costs me five dollars for a carrier to bring the despatch over from the station; and every time I telegraph you I am obliged to walk five miles to send it and five miles back again. I'm mad all through, and my shoes are worn out, and I'm tired. Besides, I'm too busy to telegraph.

Briggs.

(13)

Do you expect me to stop my cruise and travel up to that hole on account of eight extenuating kids?

Wayne.

(14)

I do.

Briggs.

(15)

Are you mad?

Wayne.

(16)

Thoroughly. And extremely busy.

Briggs.

(17)

For the last time, Stuyve Briggs, are you going to bounce one defaulting poet and progeny, arrange to have survey and warnings posted, order timber and troughs for hatchery, engage extra patrol—or are you not?

Wayne.

(18)

No.

Briggs.

(19)

(*Received a day later by Mr. Wayne.*)
Are you coming?

Briggs.

(20)

I'm coming to punch your head.

Wayne.

II

WHEN George Wayne arrived at Rose-Cross station, seaburnt, angry, and in excellent athletic condition, Briggs locked himself in the waiting-room and attempted to calm the newcomer from the window.

"If you're going to pitch into me, George," he said, "I'm hanged if I come out, and you can go to Guilford's alone."

"Come out of there," said Wayne dangerously.

"It isn't because I'm afraid of you," explained Briggs, "but it's merely that I don't choose to present either you or myself to a lot of pretty girls with the marks of conflict all over our eyes and noses."

At the words "pretty girls" Wayne's battle-set features relaxed. He motioned to the Pullman porter to deposit his luggage on the empty platform; the melancholy bell-notes of the locomotive sounded, the train moved slowly forward.

"Pretty girls?" he repeated in a softer voice. "Where are they staying? Of course, under the circumstances a personal encounter is superfluous. Where are they staying?"

"At Guilford's. I told you so in my telegrams, didn't I?"

"No, you didn't. You spoke only of a poet and his eight helpless children."

"Well, those girls are the eight children," retorted Briggs sullenly, emerging from the station.

"Do you mean to tell me–"

"Yes, I do. They're his children, aren't they—even if they are girls, and pretty." He offered a mollifying hand; Wayne took it, shook it uncertainly, and fell into step beside his friend. "Eight pretty girls," he repeated under his breath. "What did you do, Stuyve?"

"What was I to do?" inquired Briggs, nervously worrying his short blond mustache. "When I arrived here I had made up my mind to fire the poet and arrange for the hatchery and patrol. The farther I walked through the dust of this accursed road, lugging my suit-case as you are doing now, the surer I was that I'd get rid of the poet without mercy. But–"

"Well?" inquired Wayne, astonished.

"But when I'd trudged some five miles up the stifling road I suddenly emerged into a wonderful mountain meadow. I tell you, George, it looked fresh and sweet as Heaven after that dusty, parching tramp—a mountain meadow deep with mint and juicy green grasses, and all cut up by little rushing streams as cold as ice. There were a lot of girls in pink sunbonnets picking wild strawberries in the middle distance," he added thoughtfully. "It was picturesque, wasn't it? Come, now, George, wouldn't that give you pause?—eight girls in pink pajamas–"

"What!!!"

"And sunbonnets—a sort of dress reform of the poet's."

"Well?" inquired Wayne coldly.

"And there was the 'house beautiful,' mercifully screened by

woods," continued Briggs. "He calls it the house beautiful, you know."

"Why not the beautiful house?" asked Wayne, still more coldly.

"Oh, he gets everything upside down. Guilford is harmless, you'll see." He began to whistle Fatinitza softly. There was a silence; then Wayne said:

"You interrupted your narrative."

"Where was I?"

"In the foreground with eight pink pajamas in the middle distance."

"Oh, yes. So there I was, travel-worn, thirsty, weary, uncertain–"

"Cut it," observed Wayne.

"And a stranger," continued Briggs with dignity, "in a strange country–"

"Peculiarity of strangers."

Briggs took no notice. "I drank from the cool springs; I lingered to pluck a delicious berry or two, I bathed my hot face, I–"

"Where," demanded Wayne, "were the eight pink 'uns?"

"Still in the middle distance. Don't interrupt me, George; I'm slowly drawing closer to them."

"Well, get a move on," retorted Wayne sulkily.

"I'm quite close to them now," explained Briggs; "close enough to remove my hat and smile and inquire the way to

Guilford's. One superb young creature, with creamy skin and very red lips–"

Wayne halted and set down his suit-case.

"I'm not romancing; you'll see," said Briggs earnestly. "As I was saying, this young goddess looked at me in the sweetest way and said that Guilford was her father. And, Wayne, do you know what she did? She—er—came straight up to me and took hold of my hand, and led me up the path toward the high-art house, which is built of cobblestones! Think! Built of cobble–"

"Took you by the hand?" repeated Wayne incredulously.

"Oh, it was all right, George! I found out all about that sort of innocent thing later."

"Did you?"

"Certainly. These girls have been brought up like so many guileless speckled fawns out here in the backwoods. You know all about Guilford, the poet who's dead stuck on Nature and simplicity. Well, that's the man and that's his pose. He hasn't any money, and he won't work. His daughters raise vegetables, and he makes 'em wear bloomers, and he writes about chippy-birds and the house beautiful, and tells people to be natural, and wishes that everybody could go around without clothes and pick daisies–"

"Do *they*?" demanded Wayne in an awful voice. "You *said* they wore bloomers. Did you say that to break the news more gently? Did you!"

"Of course they are clothed," explained his friend querulously; "though sometimes they wade about without shoes and stockings

and do the nymph business. And, George, it's astonishing how modest that sort of dress is. And it's amazing how much they know. Why, they can talk Greek—*talk* it, mind you. Every one of them can speak half a dozen languages—Guilford is a corker on culture, you know—and they can play harps and pianos and things, and give me thirty at tennis, even Chlorippe, the twelve-year-old–"

"Is that her name?" asked Wayne.

"Chlorippe? Yes. That bat-headed poet named all his children after butterflies. Let's see," he continued, telling off the names on his fingers; "there's Chlorippe, twelve; Philodice, thirteen; Dione, fourteen; Aphrodite, fifteen; Cybele, sixteen; Lissa, seventeen; Iole, eighteen, and Vanessa, nineteen. And, Wayne, never have the Elysian fields contained such a bunch of wholesome beauty as that mountain meadow contains all day long."

Wayne, trudging along, suit-case firmly gripped, turned a pair of suspicious eyes upon his friend.

"Of course," observed Briggs candidly, "I simply couldn't foreclose on the father of such children, could I? Besides, he won't let me discuss the subject."

"I'll investigate the matter personally," said Wayne.

"Nowhere to lay their heads! Think of it, George. And all because a turtle-fed, claret-flushed, idle and rich young man wants their earthly Paradise for a fish-hatchery. Think of it! A pampered, turtle-fed–"

"You've said that before," snapped Wayne. "If you were half decent you'd help me with this suit-case. Whew! It's hot as Yonkers on this cattle-trail you call a road. How near are we to Guilford's?"

An hour later Briggs said: "By the way, George, what are you going to do about the matter?"

Wayne, flushed, dusty, perspiring, scowled at him.

"What matter?"

"The foreclosure."

"I don't know; how can I know until I see Guilford?"

"But you need the hatchery–"

"I know it."

"But he won't let you discuss it–"

"If," said Wayne angrily, "you had spent half the time talking business with the poet that you spent picking strawberries with his helpless children I should not now be lugging this suit-case up this mountain. Decency requires few observations from *you* just now."

"Pooh!" said Briggs. "Wait till you see Iole."

"Why Iole? Why not Vanessa?"

"Don't—that's all," retorted Briggs, reddening.

Wayne plumped his valise down in the dust, mopped his brow, folded his arms, and regarded Briggs between the eyes.

"You have the infernal cheek, after getting me up here, to intimate that you have taken the pick?"

"I do," replied Briggs firmly. The two young fellows faced

each other.

"By the way," observed Briggs casually, "the stock they come from is as good if not better than ours. This is a straight game."

"Do you mean to say that you—you are—seriously–"

"Something like it. There! Now you know."

"For Heaven's sake, Stuyve–"

"Yes, for Heaven's sake and in Heaven's name don't get any wrong ideas into your vicious head."

"What?"

"I tell you," said Briggs, "that I was never closer to falling in love than I am to-day. And I've been here just two weeks."

"Oh, Lord–"

"Amen," muttered Briggs. "Here, give me your carpet-bag, you brute. We're on the edge of Paradise."

III

BEFORE we discuss my financial difficulties," said the poet, lifting his plump white hand and waving it in unctuous waves about the veranda, "let me show you our home, Mr. Wayne. May I?"

"Certainly," said Wayne politely, following Guilford into the house.

They entered a hall; there was absolutely nothing in the hall except a small table on which reposed a single daisy in a glass of water.

"Simplicity," breathed Guilford—"a single blossom against a background of nothing at all. You follow me, Mr. Wayne?"

"Not—exactly–"

The poet smiled a large, tender smile, and, with inverted thumb, executed a gesture as though making several spots in the air.

"The concentration of composition," he explained; "the elimination of complexity; the isolation of the concrete in the center of the abstract; something in the midst of nothing. It is a very precious thought, Mr. Wayne."

"Certainly," muttered Wayne; and they moved on.

"This," said the poet, "is what I call my den."

Wayne, not knowing what to say, sidled around the walls. It was almost bare of furniture; what there was appeared to be of

the slab variety.

"I call my house the house beautiful," murmured Guilford with his large, sweet smile. "Beauty is simplicity; beauty is unconsciousness; beauty is the child of elimination. A single fly in an empty room is beautiful to me, Mr. Wayne."

"They carry germs," muttered Wayne, but the poet did not hear him and led the way to another enormous room, bare of everything save for eight thick and very beautiful Kazak rugs on the polished floor.

"My children's bedroom," he whispered solemnly.

"You don't mean to say they sleep on those Oriental rugs!" stammered Wayne.

"They do," murmured the poet. The tender sweetness of his ample smile was overpowering—like too much bay rum after shaving. "Sparta, Mr. Wayne, Sparta! And the result? My babes are perfect, physically, spiritually. Elimination wrought the miracle; yonder they sleep, innocent as the Graces, with all the windows open, clothed in moonlight or starlight, as the astronomical conditions may be. At the break of dawn they are afield, simply clothed, free limbed, unhampered by the tawdry harness of degenerate civilization. And as they wander through the verdure," he added with rapt enthusiasm, "plucking shy blossoms, gathering simples and herbs and vegetables for our bountiful and natural repast, they sing as they go, and every tremulous thrill of melody falls like balm on a father's heart." The overpowering sweetness of his smile drugged Wayne. Presently

he edged toward the door, and the poet followed, a dreamy radiance on his features as though emanating from sacred inward meditation.

They sat down on the veranda; Wayne fumbled for his cigar-case, but his unnerved fingers fell away; he dared not smoke.

"About—about that business matter," he ventured feebly; but the poet raised his plump white hand.

"You are my guest," he said graciously. "While you are my guest nothing shall intrude to cloud our happiness."

Perplexed, almost muddled, Wayne strove in vain to find a reason for the elimination of the matter that had interrupted his cruise and brought him to Rose-Cross, the maddest yachtsman on the Atlantic. Why should Guilford forbid the topic as though its discussion were painful to Wayne?

"He always gets the wrong end foremost, as Briggs said," thought the young man. "I wonder where the deuce Briggs can be? I'm no match for this bunch."

His thoughts halted; he became aware that the poet was speaking in a rich, resonant voice, and he listened in an attitude of painful politeness.

"It's the little things that are most precious," the poet was saying, and pinched the air with forefinger and thumb and pursed up his lips as though to whistle some saccharine air.

"The little things," he continued, delicately perforating the atmosphere as though selecting a diatom.

"Big things go, too," ventured Wayne.

"No," said the poet; "no—or rather they *do* go, in a certain sense, for every little thing is precious, and therefore little things are big!–big with portent, big in value. Do you follow me, Mr. Wayne?"

Wayne's fascinated eyes were fixed on the poet. The latter picked out another atom from the atmosphere and held it up for Mr. Wayne's inspection; and while that young man's eyes protruded the poet rambled on and on until the melody of his voice became a ceaseless sound, a vague, sustained monotone, which seemed to bore into Wayne's brain until his legs twitched with a furious desire for flight.

When he obtained command of himself the poet was saying, "It is my hour for withdrawal. It were insincere and artificial to ask your indulgence–"

He rose to his rotund height.

"You are due to sit in your cage," stammered Wayne, comprehending.

"My den," corrected the poet, saturating the air with the sweetness of his smile.

Wayne arose. "About that business—" he began desperately; but the poet's soft, heavy hand hovered in mid-air, and Wayne sat down so suddenly that when his eyes recovered their focus the poet had disappeared.

A benumbed resentment struggled within him for adequate expression; he hitched his chair about to command a view of the meadow, then sat motionless, hypnotized by the view. Eight

girls, clad in pink blouses and trousers, golden hair twisted up, decorated the landscape. Some were kneeling, filling baskets of woven, scented grasses with wild strawberries; some were wading the branches of the meadow brook, searching for trout with grass-woven nets; some picked early peas; two were playing a lightning set at tennis. And in the center of everything that was going on was Briggs, perfectly at ease, making himself agreeably at home.

The spectacle of Briggs among the Hamadryads appeared to paralyze Wayne.

Then an immense, intense resentment set every nerve in him tingling. Briggs, his friend, his confidential business adviser, his indispensable *alter ego*, had abandoned him to be tormented by this fat, saccharine poet—abandoned him while he, Briggs, made himself popular with eight of the most amazingly bewitching maidens mortal man might marvel on! The meanness stung Wayne till he jumped to his feet and strode out into the sunshine, menacing eyes fastened on Briggs.

"Now wouldn't that sting you!" he breathed fiercely, turning up his trousers and stepping gingerly across the brook.

Whether or not Briggs saw him coming and kept sidling away he could not determine; he did not wish to shout; he kept passing pretty girls and taking off his hat, and following Briggs about, but he never seemed to come any nearer to Briggs; Briggs always appeared in the middle distance, flitting genially from girl to girl; and presently the absurdity of his performance struck Wayne,

and he sat down on the bank of the brook, too mad to think. There was a pretty girl picking strawberries near-by; he rose, took off his hat to her, and sat down again. She was one of those graceful, clean-limbed, creamy-skinned creatures described by Briggs; her hair was twisted up into a heavy, glistening knot, showing the back of a white neck; her eyes matched the sky and her lips the berries she occasionally bit into or dropped to the bottom of her woven basket.

Once or twice she looked up fearlessly at Wayne as her search for berries brought her nearer; and Wayne forgot the perfidy of Briggs in an effort to look politely amiable.

Presently she straightened up where she was kneeling in the long grass and stretched her arms. Then, still kneeling, she gazed curiously at Wayne with all the charm of a friendly wild thing unafraid.

"Shall we play tennis?" she asked.

"Certainly," said Wayne, startled.

"Come, then," she said, picking up her basket in one hand and extending the other to Wayne.

He took the fresh, cool fingers, and turned scarlet. Once his glance sneaked toward Briggs, but that young man was absorbed in fishing for brook trout with a net! Oh, ye little fishes! with a *net*!

Wayne's brain seemed to be swarming with glittering pink-winged thoughts all singing. He walked on air, holding tightly to the hand of his goddess, seeing nothing but a blur of green and

sunshine. Then a clean-cut idea stabbed him like a stiletto: was this Vanessa or Iole? And, to his own astonishment, he asked her quite naturally.

"Iole," she said, laughing. "Why?"

"Thank goodness," he said irrationally.

"But why?" she persisted curiously.

"Briggs—Briggs—" he stammered, and got no further. Perplexed, his goddess walked on, thoughtful, pure-lidded eyes searching some reasonable interpretation for the phrase, "Briggs—Briggs." But as Wayne gave her no aid, she presently dismissed the problem, and bade him select a tennis bat.

"I do hope you play well," she said. Her hope was comparatively vain; she batted Wayne around the court, drove him wildly from corner to corner, stampeded him with volleys, lured him with lobs, and finally left him reeling dizzily about, while she came around from behind the net, saying, "It's all because you have no tennis shoes. Come; we'll rest under the trees and console ourselves with chess."

Under a group of huge silver beeches a stone chess-table was set embedded in the moss; and Iole indolently stretched herself out on one side, chin on hands, while Wayne sorted weather-beaten basalt and marble chess-men which lay in a pile under the tree.

She chatted on without the faintest trace of self-consciousness the while he arranged the pieces; then she began to move. He took a long time between each move; but no sooner did he move

than, still talking, she extended her hand and shoved her piece into place without a fraction of a second's hesitation.

When she had mated him twice, and he was still gazing blankly at the mess into which she had driven his forces, she sat up sideways, gathering her slim ankles into one hand, and cast about her for something to do, eyes wandering over the sunny meadow.

"We had horses," she mused; "we rode like demons, bareback, until trouble came."

"Trouble?"

"Oh, not trouble—poverty. So our horses had to go. What shall we do—you and I?" There was something so subtly sweet, so exquisitely innocent in the coupling of the pronouns that a thrill passed completely through Wayne, and probably came out on the other side.

"I know what I'm going to do," he said, drawing a note-book and a pencil from his pocket and beginning to write, holding it so she could see.

"Do you want me to look over your shoulder?" she asked.

"Please."

She did; and it affected his penmanship so that the writing grew wabbly. Still she could read:

(Telegram)

To Sailing Master, Yacht Thendara, Bar Harbor:

Put boat out of commission. I may be away all summer.

Wayne.

"How far is it to the station?" asked Wayne, turning to look into her eyes.

"Only five miles," she said. "I'll walk with you if you like. Shall I?"

IV

WEALTH," observed the poet, waving his heavy white hand, "is a figure of speech, Mr. Wayne. Only by the process of elimination can one arrive at the exquisite simplicity of poverty—care-free poverty. Even a single penny is a burden—the flaw in the marble, the fly in the amber of perfection. Cast it away and enter Eden!" And joining thumb and forefinger, he plucked a figurative copper from the atmosphere, tossed it away, and wiped his fingers on his handkerchief.

"But—" began Wayne uneasily.

"Try it," smiled the poet, diffusing sweetness; "try it. Dismiss all thoughts of money from your mind."

"I do," said Wayne, somewhat relieved. "I thought you meant for me to chuck my securities overboard and eat herbs."

"Not in your case—no, not in your case. *I* can do that; I have done it. No, your sacred mission is simply to forget that you are wealthy. That is a very precious thought, Mr. Wayne—remain a Crœsus and forget it! Not to eliminate your *wealth*, but eliminate all *thought* of it. Very, very precious."

"Well, I never think about things like that except at a directors' meeting," blurted out the young fellow. "Perhaps it's because I've never had to think about it."

The poet sighed so sweetly that the atmosphere seemed to drip with the saccharine injection.

"I wish," ventured Wayne, "that you would let me mention the subject of business"—the poet shook his head indulgently—"just to say that I'm not going to foreclose." He laid a packet of legal papers in the poet's hand.

"Hush," smiled Guilford, "this is not seemly in the house beautiful.... *What* was it you said, Mr. Wayne?"

"I? I was going to say that I just wanted—wanted to stay here—be your guest, if you'll let me," he said honestly. "I was cruising—I didn't understand—Briggs—Briggs—" He stuck.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.