Chambers Robert William

Quick Action

Robert Chambers
Quick Action

http://www.litres.ru/pages/biblio_book/?art=23164027
Quick Action:

Содержание

Chambers Robert
W. Robert William
Quick Action

TO

PENELOPE SEARS

DEBUTANTE

To rhyme your name
With something lovely, fresh and young,
And sing the same
In measures heretofore unsung,
Is far beyond me, I'm afraid;
I'll not attempt it, dearest maid.

No, not in verse,
Synthetic, stately, classic, chaste,
Shall I rehearse —
Although in perfectly good taste —

A catalogue of every grace
That you inherit from your race.

Gracious and kind,
The gods your beauty gave to you,
And with a mind
These same kind gods endowed you, too;
That charming union is, I fear,
Somewhat uncommon on this sphere.

I have no doubt
That scores of poets chant your fame;
No doubt, about
A million suitors press their claim;
And fashion, elegance and wit
Are at your feet inclined to sit.

Penelope,
The fire-light flickers to and fro:
In you I see
The winsome child I used to know —
My little Maiden of Romance
Still whirling in your Shadow Dance.

Though woman-grown,
To my unreconciled surprise
I gladly own
The same light lies within your eyes —
The same sweet candour which beguiled

Your rhymster when you were a child.

And so I come,
With limping verse to you again,
Amid the hum
Of that young world wherein you reign —
Only a moment to appear
And say: "Your rhymster loves you, dear."

R. W. C.

PREFACE

Always animated by a desire to contribute in a small way toward scientific investigation, the author offers this humble volume to a more serious audience than he has so far ventured to address.

For all those who have outgrown the superficial amusement of mere fiction this volume, replete with purpose, is written in hopes that it may stimulate students to original research in certain obscure realms of science, the borderlands of which, hitherto, have been scarcely crossed.

There is perhaps no division of science as important, none so little understood, as the science of Crystal Gazing.

A vast field of individual research opens before the earnest, patient, and sober minded investigator who shall study the subject and discover those occult laws which govern the intimate relations between crystals, playing cards, cigarettes, soiled pink wrappers, and the Police.

Amor nihil est celerius!

I

There was a new crescent moon in the west which, with the star above it, made an agreeable oriental combination.

In the haze over bay and river enough rose and purple remained to veil the awakening glitter of the monstrous city sprawling supine between river, sound, and sea. And its incessant monotone pulsated, groaning, dying, ceaseless, interminable in the light-shot depths of its darkening streets.

The sky-drawing-room windows of the Countess Athalie were all wide open, but the only light in the room came from a crystal sphere poised on a tripod. It had the quality and lustre of moonlight, and we had never been able to find out its source, for no electric wires were visible, and one could move the tripod about the room.

The crystal sphere itself appeared to be luminous, yet it remained perfectly transparent, whatever the source of its silvery phosphorescence.

At any rate, it was the only light in the room except the dulled glimmer of our cigarettes, and its mild, mysterious light enabled us to see one another as through a glass darkly.

There were a number of men there that evening. I don't remember, now, who they all were. Some had dined early; others, during the evening, strolled away into the city to dine somewhere or other, drifting back afterward for coffee and sweetmeats and

cigarettes in the sky-drawing-room of the Countess Athalie.

As usual the girl was curled up by the open window among her silken cushions, one smooth little gem-laden hand playing with the green jade god, her still dark eyes, which slanted a little, fixed dreamily upon infinite distance – or so it always seemed to us.

Through the rusty and corrugated arabesques of the iron balcony she could see, if she chose, the yellow flare where Sixth Avenue crossed the shabby street to the eastward. Beyond that, and parallel, a brighter glow marked Broadway. Further east street lamps stretched away into converging perspective, which vanished to a point in the faint nebular radiance above the East River.

All this the Countess Athalie could see if she chose. Perhaps she did see it. We never seemed to know just what she was looking at even when she turned her dark eyes on us or on her crystal sphere cradled upon its slender tripod.

But the sphere seemed to understand, for sometimes, under her still gaze, it clouded magnificently like a black opal – another thing we never understood, and therefore made light of.

"They have placed policemen before several houses on this street," remarked the Countess Athalie.

Stafford, tall and slim in his evening dress, relieved her of her coffee cup.

"Has anybody bothered you?" he asked.

"Not yet."

Young Duane picked up a pack of cards at his elbow and

shuffled them, languidly.

"Where is the Ace of Diamonds, Athalie?" he asked.

"Any card you try to draw will be the Ace of Diamonds," replied the girl indifferently.

"Can't I escape drawing it?"

"No."

We all turned and looked at Duane. He quickly spread the pack, fan-shaped, backs up. After a moment's choosing he drew a card, looked at it, held it up for us to see. It was the Ace of Diamonds.

"Would you mind trying that again, Athalie?" I asked. And Duane replaced the card and shuffled the pack.

"But it's gone, now," said the girl.

"I replaced it in the pack," explained Duane.

"No, you gave it to me," she said.

We all smiled. Duane searched through the pack in his hands, once, twice; then he laughed. The girl held up one empty hand. Then, somehow or other, there was the Ace of Diamonds between her delicate little thumb and forefinger.

She held it a moment or two for our inspection; then, curving her wrist, sent it scaling out into the darkness. It soared away above the street, tipped up, and describing an aerial ellipse, returned straight to the balcony where she caught it in her fingers.

Twice she did this; but the third time, high in the air, the card burst into violet flame and vanished.

"That," remarked Stafford, "is one thing which I wish to learn

how to do."

"Two hundred dollars," said the Countess Athalie, " – in two lessons; also, your word of honour."

"Monday," nodded Stafford, taking out a note-book and making a memorandum, " – at five in the afternoon."

"Monday and Wednesday at five," said the girl, lighting a cigarette and gazing dreamily at nothing.

From somewhere in the room came a voice.

"Did they ever catch that crook, Athalie?"

"Which?"

"The Fifty-ninth Street safe-blower?"

"Yes."

"Did *you* find him?"

She nodded.

"How? In your crystal?" I asked.

"Yes, he was there."

"It's odd," mused Duane, "that you can never do anything of advantage to yourself by gazing into your crystal."

"It's the invariable limit to clairvoyance," she remarked.

"A sort of penalty for being super-gifted," added Stafford.

"Perhaps… We can't help ourselves."

"It's too bad," I volunteered.

"Oh, I don't care," she said, with a slight shrug of her pretty shoulders.

"Come," said somebody, teasingly, "wouldn't you like to know how soon you are going to fall in love, and with whom?"

She laughed, dropped her cigarette into a silver bowl, stretched her arms above her head, straightened her slender figure, turned her head and looked at us.

"No," she said, "I do not wish to know. Light is swift; Thought is swifter; but Love is the swiftest thing in Life, and if it is now travelling toward me, it will strike me soon enough to suit me."

Stafford leaned forward and arranged the cushions for her; she sank back among them, her dark eyes still on us.

"Hours are slow," she said; "years are slower, but the slowest thing in Life is Love. If it is now travelling toward me, it will reach me soon enough to suit me."

"I," said Duane, "prefer quick action, O Athalie, the Beautiful!"

"Athalie, lovely and incomparable," said Stafford, "I, also, prefer quick action."

"Play *Scheherazade* for us, Athalie," I said, "else we slay you with our compliments."

A voice or two from distant corners repeated the menace. A match flared and a fresh cigarette glowed faintly.

Somebody brought the tripod with its crystal sphere and set it down in the middle of the room. Its mild rays fell on the marble basin of the tiny fountain, – Duane's offering. The goldfish which I had given her were floating there fast asleep.

When we had placed sweetmeats and cigarettes convenient for her, we all, in turn, with circumstance and ceremony, bent over her left hand where it rested listlessly among the cushions,

saluting the emerald on her third finger with our lips.

Then the dim circle closed around her, nearer.

"Of all the visions which have passed before your eyes within the depths of that crystal globe," said Duane, " – of all the histories of men and women which, unsuspected by them, you have witnessed, seated here in this silent, silk-hung place, we desire to hear only those in which Fate has been swiftest, Opportunity a loosened arrow, Destiny a flash of lightning."

"But the victims of quick action must be nameless, except as I choose to mask them," she said, looking dreamily into her crystal.

After a moment's silence Duane said in a low voice:

"Does anybody notice the odour of orange blossoms?"

We all noticed the fragrance.

"I seem to catch a whiff of the sea, also," ventured Stafford. "Am I right?"

"Yes," she nodded, "you will notice the odour of the semi-tropics, even if you miss the point of everything I tell you."

"In other words," said I, "we are but a material bunch, Athalie, and may be addressed and amused only through our physical senses. Very well: transpose from the spiritual for us if you please a little story of quick action which has happened here in the crystal under your matchless eyes!"

II

With her silver tongs she selected a sweetmeat. When it had melted in her sweeter mouth, she lighted a cigarette, saluted us with a gay little gesture and smilingly began:

"Don't ask me how I know what these people said; that is *my* concern, not yours. Don't ask me how I know what unspoken thoughts animated these people; that is *my* affair. Nor how I seem to be perfectly acquainted with their past histories; for *that* is part of my profession."

"And still the wonder grew," commented the novelist tritely, "that one small head could carry all she knew!"

"Why," asked Stafford, "do you refuse to reveal your secret? Do you no longer trust us, Athalie?"

She answered: "*Comment prétendons-nous qu'un autre garde notre secret, si nous n'avons pas pu le garder nous-même?*"

Nobody replied.

"Now," she said, laughingly, "I will tell you all that I know about the *Orange Puppy*."

Plans for her first debut began before her birth. When it became reasonably certain that she was destined to decorate the earth, she was entered on the waiting lists of two schools – The Dinglenook School for Boys, and The Idlebrook Institute for Young Ladies – her parents taking no chances, but playing both ends coming and going.

When ultimately she made her first earthly appearance, and it was apparent that she was destined to embellish the planet in the guise of a girl, the process of grooming her for her second debut, some eighteen years in the future, began. She lived in sanitary and sterilized seclusion, eating by the ounce, sleeping through accurately measured minutes, every atom of her anatomy inspected daily, every pore of her skin explored, every garment she wore weighed, every respiration, pulse beat, and fluctuation of bodily temperature carefully noted and discussed.

When she appeared her hair was black. After she shed this, it came in red; when she was eight her hair was coppery, lashes black, eyes blue, and her skin snow and wild-strawberry tints in agreeably delicate nuances. Several millions were set aside to grow up with her and for her. Also, the list of foreign and aristocratic babyhood was scanned and several dozen possibilities checked off – the list running from the progeny of down-and-out monarchs with a sporting chance for a crown, to the more solid infant aristocracy of Britain.

At the age of nine, the only symptom of intellect that had yet appeared in her was a superbly developed temper. That year she eluded a governess and two trained nurses in the park, and was discovered playing with some unsterilized children near the duck-pond, both hands full of slime and pollywogs.

It was the only crack in the routine through which she ever crawled. Lessons daily in riding, driving, dancing, fencing, gymnastics, squash, tennis, skating, plugged every avenue of

escape between morning school and evening sleep, after a mental bath in sterilized literature. Once, out of the window she saw a fire. This event, with several runaways on the bridle-path, included the sensations of her life up to her release from special instructors, and her entry into Idlebrook Institute.

Here she did all she could to misbehave in a blind and instinctive fashion, but opportunities were pitiably few; and by the time she had graduated, honest deviltry seemed to have been starved out of her; and a half year's finishing abroad apparently eliminated it, leaving only a half-confused desire to be let alone. But solitude was the luxury always denied her.

Unlike the usual debutante, who is a social veteran two years before her presentation, and who at eighteen lacks no experience except intellectual, Miss Cassillis had become neither a judge of champagne nor an expert in the various cabaret steps popular at country houses and the more exclusive dives.

"Mother," she said calmly, on her eighteenth birthday, "do you know that I am known among my associates as a dead one?" At which that fat and hard-eyed matron laughed, surveying her symmetrical daughter with grim content.

"Let me tell you something," she said. "America, socially, is only one vast cabaret, mostly consisting of performers. The spectators are few. You're one. Conditions are reversed across the water; the audience is in the majority… How do you like young Willowmere?"

The girl replied that she liked Lord Willowmere. She might

have added that she was prepared to like anything in trousers that would give her a few hours off.

"Do you think," said her mother, "you can be trusted to play in the social cabaret all next winter, and then marry Willowmere?"

Said Cecil: "I am perfectly ready to marry anybody before luncheon, if you will let me."

"I do not wish you to feel *that* way."

"Mother, I *do*! All I want is to be let alone long enough to learn something for myself."

"What do you not know? What have you *not* learned? What accomplishment do you lack, little daughter? What is it you wish?"

The girl glanced out of the window. A young and extremely well-built man went striding down the avenue about his business. He looked a little like a man she had seen playing ball on the Harvard team a year ago. She sighed unconsciously.

"I've learned about everything there is to learn, I suppose… Except – where do men go when they walk so busily about their business?"

"Down town," said her mother, laughing.

"What do they do there?"

"A million things concerning millions."

"But I don't see how there's anything left for them to do after their education is completed. What is there left for me to do, except to marry and have a few children?"

"What do you want to do?"

"Nothing… I'd like to have something to do which would make me look busy and make me walk rather fast – like that young man who was hurrying down town all by himself. Then I'd like to be let alone while I'm busy with my own affairs."

"When you marry Willowmere you'll be busy enough." She might have added: "And lonely enough."

"I'll be occupied in telling others how to busy themselves with my affairs. But there won't be anything for *me* to do, will there?"

"Yes, dear child; it will be one steady fight to better a good position. It will afford you constant exercise."

The tall young girl bit her lip and shook her pretty head in silence. She felt instinctively that she knew how to do that. But that was not the exercise she wanted. She looked out into the February sunshine and saw the blue shadows on the snow and the sidewalks dark and wet, and the little gutter arabs throwing snow-balls, and a yellow pup barking blissfully. And, apropos of nothing at all, she suddenly remembered how she had run away when she was nine; and a rush of blind desire surged within her. What it meant she did not know, did not trouble to consider, but it stirred her until the soft fire burned in her cheeks, and left her twisting her white fingers, lips parted, staring across the wintry park into the blue tracery of trees. To Miss Cassillis adolescence came late.

They sang *Le Donne Curiose* at the opera that evening; she sat in her father's box; numbers of youthful, sleek-headed, white-shirted young men came between the acts. She talked to all

with the ardor of the young and unsatisfied; and, mentally and spiritually still unsatisfied, buried in fur, she was whirled back through snowy streets to the great grey mansion of her nativity, and the silence of her white-hung chamber.

All through February the preparatory régime continued, with preliminary canters at theatre and opera, informal party practice, and trial dinners. Always she gave herself completely to every moment with a wistful and unquenched faith, eager novice in her quest of what was lacking in her life; ardent enthusiast in her restless searching for the remedy. And, unsatisfied, lingering mentally by the door of Chance, lest she miss somewhere the magic that satisfies and quiets – lest the gates of Opportunity swing open after she had turned away – reluctantly she returned to the companionship of her own solitary mind and undeveloped soul, and sat down to starve with them in spirit, wondering wherein might lie the reason for this new hunger that assailed her, mind and body.

She ran up her private flag the next winter, amid a thousand other gay and flaunting colours breaking out all over town. The newspapers roared a salute to the wealthiest debutante; and an enthusiastic press, not yet housebroken but agile with much exercise in leaping and fawning, leaped now about the debutante's slippers, grinning, slavering and panting. Later, led by instinct and its Celebrated Nose, it bounded toward young Lord Willowmere, jumped and fawned about him, slightly soiling him, until in midwinter the engagement it had announced

was corroborated, and a million shop-girls and old women were in a furor.

He was a ruddy-faced young man who wore his bowler hat toward the back of his head, a small, pointed moustache, and who walked always as though he were shod in riding boots.

He would have made a healthy studgroom for any gentleman's stable. Person and intellect were always thoroughly scrubbed as with saddle-soap. Had he been able to afford it, his stables would have been second to none in England.

Soon he would be able to afford it.

To his intimates, including his fiancée, he was known as "Stirrups." All day long he was in the saddle or on the box, every evening at the Cataract Club or at a cabaret. Between times he called upon Miss Cassillis – usually finding her out. When he found her not at home, he called elsewhere, very casually.

Two continents were deeply stirred over the impending alliance.

III

Young Jones, in wildest Florida, had never heard of it or of her, or of her income. His own fortune amounted to six hundred dollars, and he had been born in Brooklyn, and what his salary might be only he and the Smithsonian Institution knew.

He was an industrious young man, no better than you or I, accepting thankfully every opportunity for mischief which the Dead Lake region afforded. No opportunities of that kind ever presenting themselves in that region, he went once a month to Miami in the *Orange Puppy*, and drank too many swizzles and so forth, et cetera.

Having accomplished this, he returned to the wharf, put the *Orange Puppy* into commission, hoisted sail, and squared away for Matanzas Inlet, finding himself too weak-minded to go home by a more direct route.

He had been on his monthly pilgrimage to Miami, and was homeward bound noisily, using his auxiliary power so that silence should not descend upon him too abruptly. He had been, for half an hour now, immersed in a species of solitaire known as The Idiot's Delight, when he caught himself cheating himself, and indignantly scattered the pack to the four winds – three of which, however, were not blowing. One card, the deuce of hearts, fluttered seaward like a white butterfly. Beyond it he caught sight of another white speck, shining like a gull's breast.

It was a big yacht steaming in from the open sea; and her bill of lading included Miss Cassillis and Willowmere. But Jones could not know that. So he merely blinked at the distant *Chihuahua*, yawned, flipped the last card overboard, and swung the *Orange Puppy* into the inlet, which brimmed rather peacefully, the tide being nearly at flood.

Far away on the deck of the *Chihuahua* the quick-fire racket of Jones's auxiliary was amazingly audible. Miss Cassillis, from her deck-chair, could see the *Orange Puppy*, a fleck of glimmering white across a sapphire sea. How was she to divine that one Delancy Jones was aboard of her? All she saw when the two boats came near each other was a noisy little craft progressing toward the lagoon, emitting an earsplitting racket; and a tall, lank young man clad in flannels lounging at the tiller and smoking a cigarette.

Around her on the snowy deck were disposed the guests of her parents, mostly corpulent, swizzles at every elbow, gracefully relaxing after a morning devoted to arduous idleness. The Victor on deck, which had furnished the incentive to her turkey-trotting with Lord Willowmere, was still exuding a syncopated melody. Across the water, Jones heard it and stood looking at the great yacht as the *Orange Puppy* kicked her way through the intensely blue water under an azure sky.

Willowmere lounged over to the rail and gazed wearily at the sand dunes and palmettos. Presently Miss Cassillis slipped from her deck-chair to her white-shod feet, and walked over to where

he stood. He said something about the possibilities of "havin' a bit of shootin'," with a vague wave of his highly-coloured hand toward the palmetto forests beyond the lagoon.

If the girl heard him she made no comment. After a while, as the distance between the *Chihuahua* and the *Orange Puppy* lengthened, she levelled her sea glasses at the latter craft, and found that the young man at the helm was also examining her through his binoculars.

While she inspected him, several unrelated ideas passed through her head; she thought he was very much sunburned and that his hatless head was attractive, with its short yellow hair crisped by the sun. Without any particular reason, apparently, she recollected a young man she had seen the winter before, striding down the wintry avenue about his business. He might have been this young man for all she knew. Like the other, this one wore yellow hair. Then, with no logic in the sequence of her thoughts, suddenly the memory of how she had run away when she was nine years old set her pulses beating, filling her heart with the strange, wistful, thrilling, overwhelming longing which she had supposed would never again assail her, now that she was engaged to be married. And once more the soft fire burned in her cheeks.

"Stirrups," she said, scarcely knowing what she was saying, "I don't think I'll marry you after all. It's just occurred to me."

"Oh, I say!" protested Willowmere languidly, never for a moment mistrusting that the point of her remark was buried in some species of American humour. He always submitted

to American humour. There was nothing else to do, except to understand it.

"Stirrups, dear?"

"What?"

"You're very pink and healthy, aren't you?"

He shrugged his accustomed shrug of resignation.

"Oh, I say – come, now – " he murmured, lighting a cigarette.

"What a horrid smash there would be if I didn't make good, wouldn't there, Stirrups?" She mused, her blue eyes resting on him, too coldly.

"Rather," he replied, comfortably settling his arms on the rail.

"It might happen, you know. Suppose I fell overboard?"

"Fish you out, ducky."

"Suppose I – ran away?"

"Ow."

"What would you do, Stirrups? Why, you'd go back to town and try to pick another winner. Wouldn't you?"

He laughed.

"Naturally that is what you would do, isn't it?" She considered him curiously for a moment, then smiled. "How funny!" she said, almost breathlessly.

"Rather," he murmured, and flicked his cigarette overboard.

The *Orange Puppy* had disappeared beyond the thicket of palmettos across the point. The air was very warm and still.

Her father waddled forward presently, wearing the impressive summer regalia of a commodore in the Siwanois Yacht Club. His

daughter's blue eyes rested on the portly waistline of her parent – then on his fluffy chop-whiskers. A vacant, hunted look came into her eyes.

"Father," she said almost listlessly, "I'm going to run away again."

"When do you start?" inquired that facetious man.

"Now, I think. What is there over there?" – turning her face again toward the distant lagoon, with its endless forests of water-oak, cedar, and palmetto.

"Over there," said her father, "reside several species of snakes and alligators. Also other reptiles, a number of birds, and animals, and much microbic mud."

She bit her lip. "I see," she said, nodding.

Willowmere said: "We should find some shootin' along the lagoon. Look at the ducks."

Mr. Cassillis yawned; he had eaten too heavily of duck to be interested. Very thoughtfully he presented himself with a cigar, turned it over and over between his soft fingers, and yawned again. Then, nodding solemnly as though in emphasis of a profound idea of which he had just been happily delivered, he waddled slowly back along the deck.

His daughter looked after him until he disappeared; gazed around her at the dawdling assortment of guests aboard, then lifted her quiet eyes to Willowmere.

"Ducky," she said, "I can't stand it. I'm going to run away."

"Come on, then," he said, linking his arm in hers.

The Victor still exuded the Tango.

She hesitated. Then freeing herself:

"Oh, not with you, Stirrups! I wish to go away somewhere entirely alone. Could you understand?" she added wistfully.

He stifled a yawn. American humour bored him excessively.

"You'll be back in a day or two?" he inquired. And laughed violently when the subtlety of his own wit struck him.

"In a day or two or not at all. Good-bye, Stirrups."

"Bye."

The sun blazed on her coppery hair and on the white skin that never burned, as she walked slowly across the yacht's deck and disappeared below.

While she was writing in her cabin, the *Chihuahua* dropped her anchors. Miss Cassillis listened to the piping, the thud of feet on deck, the rattle and distant sound of voices. Then she continued her note:

> I merely desire to run away. I don't know why, Mother, dear. But the longing to bolt has been incubating for many years. And now it's too strong to resist. I don't quite understand how it came to a crisis on deck just now, but I looked at Stirrups, whose skin is too pink, and at Father, who had lunched too sumptuously, and at the people on deck, all digesting in a row – and then at the green woods on shore, and the strip of white where a fairy surf was piling up foam into magic castles and snowy battlements, ephemeral, exquisite. And all at once it came over me that I must go.
>
> Don't be alarmed. I shall provision a deck canoe, take a

tent, some rugs and books, and paddle into that lagoon. If you will just let me alone for two or three days, I promise I'll return safe and sound, and satisfied. For something has got to be done in regard to that longing of mine. But really, I think that if you and Father *won't* understand, and if you send snooping people after me, I won't come back at all, and I'll never marry Stirrups. Please understand me, Mother, dear.

Cecil.

This effusion she pinned to her pillow, then rang for the steward and ordered the canoe to be brought alongside, provisioned for a three days' shooting trip.

So open, frank, and guileless were her orders that nobody who took them suspected anything unusual; and in the full heat and glare of the afternoon siesta, when parents, fiancé, and assorted guests were all asleep and in full process of digestion and the crew of the *Chihuahua* was drowsing from stem to stern, a brace of sailors innocently connived at her escape, aided her into the canoe, and, doubting nothing, watched her paddle away through the inlet, and into the distant lagoon, which lay sparkling in golden and turquoise tints, set with palms like a stupid picture in a child's geography.

Later, the *Chihuahua* fired a frantic gun. Later still, two boats left the yacht, commanded respectively by one angry parent and one fiancé, profoundly bored.

IV

When Miss Cassillis heard the gun, it sounded very far away. But it irritated as well as scared her. She pushed the canoe energetically through a screen of foliage overhanging the bank of the lagoon, it being merely her immediate instinct to hide herself.

To her surprise and pleasure, she discovered herself in a narrow, deep lead, which had been entirely concealed by the leaves, and which wound away through an illimitable vista of reeds, widening as she paddled forward, until it seemed like a glassy river bordered by live-oak, water-oak, pine, and palmetto, curving out into a flat and endless land of forests.

Here was liberty at last! No pursuit need now be feared, for the entrance to this paradise which she had forced by a chance impulse could never be suspected by parent or fiancé.

A little breeze blew her hair and loosened it; silently her paddle dipped, swept astern in a swirl of bubbles, flashed dripping, and dipped again.

Ahead of her a snake-bird slipped from a dead branch into the water; a cormorant perched on the whitened skeleton of a mango, made hideous efforts to swallow a mullet before her approach disorganized his manœuvres.

So silently the canoe stole along that the fat alligators, dozing in the saw-grass, dozed on until she stirred them purposely with a low tap of her paddle against the thwarts; then they rose, great

lumbering bodies propped high on squatty legs, waddled swiftly to the bank's edge, and slid headlong into the water.

Everywhere dragon-flies glittered over the saw-grass; wild ducks with golden eyes and heads like balls of brown plush swam leisurely out of the way; a few mallard, pretending to be frightened, splashed and clattered into flight, the sunlight jewelling the emerald heads of the drakes.

"Wonderful, wonderful," her heart was singing to itself, while her enchanted eyes missed nothing – neither the feebly flying and strangely shaped, velvety black butterflies, the narrow wings of which were striped with violent yellow; nor the metallic blue and crestless jays that sat on saplings, watching her; nor the pelicans fishing with nature's orange and iridescent net in the shallows; nor the tall, slate-blue birds that marched in dignified retreat through the sedge, picking up their stilt-like legs with the precision of German foot-soldiers on parade.

These and other phenomena made her drop her paddle at intervals and clap her hands softly in an ecstasy beyond mere exclamation. How restfully green was the world; how limpid the water; how royally blue the heavens! Listening, she could hear the soft stirring of palmetto fronds in the forests; the celestial song of a little bird that sat on a sparkle-berry bush, its delicate long-curved bill tilted skyward. Then the deep note of splendour flashed across the scheme of sound and colour as a crimson cardinal alighted near her, crest erect.

But more wonderful than all was that at last, after eighteen

years, she was utterly alone; and liberty was showering its inestimable gifts upon her in breathless prodigality – liberty to see with her own eyes and judge with her own senses; liberty to linger capriciously amid mental fancies, to move on impulsively to others; liberty to reflect unurged and unrestricted; liberty to choose, to reject, to ignore.

Now and then a brilliant swimming snake filled her with interest and curiosity. Once, on a flat, low bush, she saw a dull, heavy, blunt-bodied serpent lying asleep in the sun like an old and swollen section of rubber hose. But when she ventured to touch the bush with her paddle, the snake reared high and yawned at her with jaws which seemed to be lined in white satin. Which fortunately made her uneasy, and she meddled no more with the Little Death of the southern swamps.

She was now passing very close to the edge of the "hammock," where palmettos overhung the water; and as the cool, dim woodlands seemed to invite her, she looked about her leisurely for an agreeable landing place. There were plenty to choose from; and she selected a little sandy point under a red cedar tree, drove her canoe upon it, and calmly stepped ashore. And found herself looking into the countenance of Jones.

For a full minute they inspected each other, apparently bereft of the power of speech.

She said, finally: "About a year ago last February, did you happen to walk down Fifth Avenue – very busily? Did you?"

It took him an appreciable time to concentrate for mental

retrospection.

"Yes," he said, "I did."

"You were going down town, weren't you?"

"Yes."

"On business?"

"Yes," he said, bewildered.

"I wonder," she said timidly, "if you would tell me what that business was? Do you mind? Because, really, I don't mean to be impertinent."

He made an effort to reflect. It was difficult to reflect and to keep his eyes on her but also it is impolite to converse with anybody and look elsewhere. This he had been taught at his mother's knee – and sometimes over it.

"My business down town," he said very slowly, "was with an officer of the Smithsonian Institution who had come on from Washington to see something which I had brought with me from Florida."

"Would you mind telling me what it was you brought with you from Florida?" she asked wistfully.

"No. It was malaria."

"What!"

"It was malaria," he repeated politely.

"I – I don't see how you could – could show it to him," she murmured, perplexed.

"Well, I'll tell you how I showed it to him. I made a little incision in my skin with a lancet; he made a smear or two – "

"A – what?"

"A smear – he put a few drops of my blood on some glass plates."

"Why?"

"To examine them under the microscope."

"Why?"

"So that he might determine what particular kind of malaria I had brought back with me."

"Did he find out?" she asked, deeply interested.

"Yes," said Jones, displaying mild symptoms of enthusiasm, "he discovered that I was fairly swarming with a perfectly new and undescribed species of bacillus. That bacillus," he added, with modest diffidence, "is now named after me."

She looked at him very earnestly, dropped her blue eyes, raised them again after a moment:

"It must be – pleasant – to give one's name to a bacillus."

"It is an agreeable and exciting privilege. When I look into the culture tubes I feel an intimate relationship with those bacilli which I have never felt for any human being."

"You – you are a – " she hesitated, with a slight but charming colour in her cheeks, "a naturalist, I presume?" And she added hastily, "No doubt you are a famous one, and my question must sound ignorant and absurd to you. But as I do not know your name – "

"It is Jones," he said gloomily, " – and I am not famous."

"Mine is Cecil Cassillis; and neither am I," she said. "But

I thought when naturalists gave their names to butterflies and microbes that everything concerned immediately became celebrated."

Jones smiled; and she thought his expression very attractive.

"No," he said, "fame crowns the man who, celebrated only for his wealth, names hotels, tug-boats, and art galleries after himself. Thus are Immortals made."

She laughed, standing there gracefully as a boy, her hands resting on her narrow hips. She laughed again. A tug-boat, a hotel, and a cigar were named after her father.

"Fame is an extraordinary thing," she said. "But liberty is still more wonderful, isn't it?"

"Liberty is only comparative," he said, smiling. "There is really no such thing as absolute freedom."

"*You* have all the freedom you desire, haven't you?"

"Well – I enjoy the only approach to absolute liberty I ever heard of."

"What kind of liberty is that?"

"Freedom to think as I please, no matter what I'm obliged to do."

"But you do what you please, too, don't you?"

"Oh, no!" he said smiling. "The man was never born who did what he pleased."

"Why not? You choose your own work, don't you?"

"Yes. But once the liberty of choice is exercised, freedom ends. I choose my profession. There my liberty ends, because

instantly I am enslaved by the conditions which make my choice a profession."

She was deeply interested. A mossy log lay near them; she seated herself to listen, her elbow on her knee, and her chin cupped in her hand. But Jones became silent.

"Were you not in that funny little boat that passed the inlet about three hours ago?" she asked.

"The *Orange Puppy*? Yes."

"What an odd name for a boat – the *Orange Puppy*!"

"An orange puppy," he explained, "is the name given in the Florida orange groves to the caterpillar of a large swallow-tail butterfly, which feeds on orange leaves. The butterfly it turns into is known to entomologists as *Papilio cresphontes* and *Papilio thoas*. The latter is a misnomer."

She gazed upon this young man in undisguised admiration.

"Once," she said, "when I was nine years old, I ran away from a governess and two trained nurses. They found me with both hands full of muddy pollywogs. It has nothing to do with what you are saying, but I thought I'd tell you."

He insisted that the episode she recalled was most interesting and unusual, considered purely as a human document.

"Would you tell me what you are doing down here in these forests?" she asked, " – as we are discussing human documents."

"Yes," he said. "I am investigating several thousand small caterpillars which are feeding on the scrub-palmetto."

"Is that your *business*?"

"Exactly. If you will remain very still for a moment and listen very intently you can hear the noise which these caterpillars make while they are eating."

She thought of the *Chihuahua*, and it occurred to her that she had rather tired of seeing things eat. However, except in Europe, she had never *heard* things eat. So she listened.

He said: "These caterpillars are in their third moult – that is, they have changed their skin three times since emerging from the egg – and are now busily chewing the immature fruit of the scrub-palmetto. You can hear them very plainly."

She sat silent, spellbound; and presently in the woodland stillness, all around her she heard the delicate and continuous sound – the steady, sustained noise of thousands of tiny jaws, all crunching, all busily working together. And when she realized what the elfin rustle really meant, she turned her delighted and grateful eyes on Jones. And the beauty of them made him exceedingly thoughtful.

"Will you explain to me," she whispered, "why you are studying these caterpillars, Mr. Jones?"

"Because they are spreading out over the forests. Until recently this particular species of caterpillar, and the pretty little moth into which it ultimately turns, were entirely confined to a narrow strip of jungle, only a few miles long, lying on the Halifax River. Nowhere else in all the world could these little creatures be found. But recently they have been reported from the Dead Lake country. So the Smithsonian Institution sent me down here

to study them, and find out whither they were spreading, and whether any natural parasitic enemies had yet appeared to check them."

She gazed at him, fascinated.

"Have any appeared?" she asked, under her breath.

"I have not yet found a single creature that preys upon them."

"Isn't it a very arduous and difficult task to watch these thousands of little caterpillars all day long?"

"It is quite impossible for me to do it thoroughly all alone."

"Would you like to have me help you?" she asked innocently.

Which rather bowled him over, but he said:

"I'd b-b-be d-d-delighted – only you haven't time, have you?"

"I have three days. I've brought a tent, you see, and everything necessary – rugs, magazines, blankets, toilet articles, bon-bons, books – everything, in fact, to last three days… I wonder how that tent is put up. Do you know?"

He went over to the canoe and gazed at the tent.

"I think I could pitch it for you," he said.

"Oh, thanks so much! May I help you? I think I'll put it here on this pretty stretch of white sand by the water's edge."

"I'm afraid that wouldn't do," he said, gravely.

"Why?"

"Because the lagoon is tidal. You'd be awash sooner or later."

"I see. Well, then, anywhere in the woods will do – "

"Not *anywhere*," he said, smiling. "High water leaves few dry places in this forest; in fact – I'm afraid that my shack is perched

on the only spot which is absolutely dry at all times. It is a shell mound – the only one in the Dead Lake region."

"Isn't there room for my tent beside yours?" she asked, a trifle anxiously.

"Y-es," he said, in a voice as matter of fact as her own. "How many will there be in your party?"

"In my *party*! Why, only myself," she said, with smiling animation.

"Oh, I see!" But he didn't.

They lugged the tent back among the trees to the low shell mound, where in the centre of a ring of pines and evergreen oaks his open-faced shack stood, thatched with palmetto fans. She gazed upon the wash drying on the line, upon a brace of dead ducks hanging from the eaves, upon the smoky kettle and the ashes of the fire. Purest delight sparkled in her blue eyes.

Erecting her silk tent with practiced hands, he said carelessly:

"In case you cared to send any word to the yacht – "

"Did I say that I came from the yacht?" she asked; and her straight eyebrows bent a trifle inward.

"Didn't you?"

"Will you promise me something, Mr. Jones?"

The things he was prepared to promise her choked him for a second, but when he regained control of his vocal powers he said, very pleasantly, that he would gladly promise her anything.

"Then don't ask me where I came from. Let me stay three days. Then I'll go very quietly away, and never trouble you again.

Is it a promise?"

"Yes," he said, not looking at her. His face had become very serious; she noticed it – and how well his head was set on his shoulders, and how his clipped hair was burned to the color of crisp hay.

"You were Harvard, of course," she said, unthinkingly.

"Yes." He mentioned the year.

"Not crew?"

"No."

"Baseball?"

"'Varsity pitcher," he nodded, surprised.

"Then this is the third time I've seen you… I wonder what it is about you – " She remained silent, watching him burying her water bottles in the cool marl.

When all was in order, he smiled, made her a little formal bow, and evinced a disposition to retire and leave her in possession.

"I thought we were going to work at once!" she said uneasily. "I am quite ready." And, as he did not seem to comprehend, "I was going to help you to examine the little caterpillars, one by one; and the minute I saw anything trying to bite them I was going to call you. Didn't you understand?" she added wistfully.

"That will be fine!" he said, with an enthusiasm very poorly controlled.

"You will show me where the little creatures are hiding, won't you?"

"Indeed I will! Here they are, all about us!" He made a

sweeping gesture over the low undergrowth of scrub-palmetto; and the next moment:

"I see them!" she exclaimed, delighted. "Oh, what funny, scrubby, busy little creatures! They are everywhere —*everywhere*! Why, there seem to be thousands and thousands of them! And all are eating the tiny green bunches of fruit!"

They bent together over a group of feeding larvæ; he handed her a pocket microscope like his own; and, enchanted, she studied the tiny things while he briefly described their various stages of development from the little eggs to the pretty, pearl-tinted moth so charmingly striped with delicate, brown lines – a rare prize in the cabinet of any collector.

V

Through the golden forest light of afternoon, they moved from shrub to shrub; and he taught her to be on the watch for any possible foes of the neat and busy little caterpillars, warning her to watch for birds, spiders, beetles, ichneumon flies, possibly squirrels or even hornets. She nodded her comprehension; he went one way, she the other. For nearly ten minutes they remained separated, and it seemed ages to one of them anyway.

But the caterpillars appeared to be immune. Nothing whatever interfered with them; wandering beetles left them unmolested; no birds even noticed them; no gauzy-winged and parasitic flies investigated them.

"Mr. Jones!" she called.

He was at her side in an instant.

"I only wanted to know where you were," she said happily.

The sun hung red over the lagoon when they sauntered back to camp. She went into her tent with a cheerful nod to him, which said:

"I've had a splendid time, and I'll rejoin you in a few moments."

When she emerged in fresh white flannels, she found him writing in a blank-book.

"I wonder if I might see?" she said. "If it's scientific, I mean."

"It is, entirely."

So she seated herself on the ground beside him, and read over his shoulder the entries he was making in his field book concerning the day's doings. When he had finished his entry, she said:

"You have not mentioned my coming to you, and how we looked for ichneumon flies together."

"I – " He was silent.

She added timidly: "I know I count for absolutely nothing in the important experiences of a naturalist, but – I did look very hard for ichneumon flies. Couldn't you write in your field book that I tried very hard to help you?"

He wrote gravely:

"Miss Cassillis most generously volunteered her invaluable aid, and spared no effort to discover any possible foe that might prove to be parasitic upon these larvæ. But so far without success."

"Thank you," she said, in a very low voice. And after a short silence: "It was not mere vanity, Mr. Jones. Do you understand?"

"I know it was not vanity, even if I do not entirely understand."

"Shall I tell you?"

"Please."

"It was the first thing that I have ever been permitted to do all by myself. It meant so much to me… And I wished to have a little record of it – even if you think it is of no scientific importance."

"It is of more importance than – " But he managed to stop himself, slightly startled. She had lifted her head from the pages

of the field book to look at him. When his voice failed, and while the red burned brilliantly in his ears, she resumed her perusal of his journal, gravely. After a while, though she turned the pages as if she were really reading, he concluded that her mind was elsewhere. It was.

Presently he rose, mended the fire, filled the kettle, and unhooked the brace of wild ducks from the eaves where they swung, and marched off with them toward the water.

When he returned, the ducks were plucked and split for broiling. He found her seated as he had left her, dreaming awake, idle hands folded on the pages of his open field book.

For dinner they had broiled mallard, coffee, ash-cakes, and bon-bons. After it she smoked a cigarette with him.

Later she informed him that it was her first, and that she liked it, and requested another.

"Don't," he said, smiling.

"Why?"

"It spoils a girl's voice, ultimately."

"But it's very agreeable."

"Will you promise not to?" he asked, lightly.

Suddenly her blue eyes became serious.

"Yes," she said, "if you wish."

The woods grew darker. Far across the lagoon a tiger-owl woke up and began to yelp like a half-strangled hobgoblin.

She sat silent for a little while, then very quietly and frankly put her hand on Jones's. It was shaking.

"I am afraid of that sound," she said calmly.

"It is only a big owl," he reassured her, retaining her hand.

"Is that what it is? How *very* dark the woods are! I had no idea that there could be such utter darkness. I am not sure that I care for it."

"There is nothing to harm you in these woods."

"No bears and wolves and panthers?"

"There are a few – and all very anxious to keep away from anything human."

"Are you sure?"

"Absolutely."

"Do you mind if I leave my hand where it is?"

It appeared that he had no insurmountable objections.

After the seventh tiger-owl had awakened and the inky blackness quivered with the witch-like shouting and hellish tumult, he felt her shoulder pressing against his. And bending to look into her face saw that all the colour in it had fled.

"You mustn't be frightened," he said earnestly.

"But I am. I'm sorry… I'll try to accustom myself to it… The darkness is a – a trifle terrifying – isn't it?"

"It's beautiful, too," he said, looking up at the firelit foliage overhead. She looked up also, her slender throat glimmering rosy in the embers' glare. After a moment she nodded:

"It *is* wonderful… If I only had a little time to accustom myself to it I am sure I should love it… Oh! What was that very loud splash out there in the dark?"

"A big fish playing in the lagoon; or perhaps wild ducks feeding."

After a few minutes he felt her soft hand tighten within his.

"It sounds as though some great creature were prowling around our fire," she whispered. "Do you hear its stealthy tread?"

"Noises in the forest are exaggerated," he said carelessly. "It may be a squirrel or some little furry creature out hunting for his supper. Please don't be afraid."

"Then it *isn't* a bear?"

"No, dear," he said, so naturally and unthinkingly that for a full second neither realised the awful break of Delancy Jones.

When they did they said nothing about it. But it was some time before speech was resumed. She was the first to recover. Perhaps the demoralisation was largely his. It usually is that way.

She said: "This has been the most perfect day of my entire life. I'm even glad I am a little scared. It is delicious to be a trifle afraid. But I'm not, now – very much… Is there any established hour for bedtime in the woods?"

"Inclination sounds the hour."

"Isn't that wonderful!" she sighed, her eyes on the fire. "Inclination rules in the forest… And here I am."

The firelight on her copper-tinted hair masked her lovely eyes in a soft shadow. Her shoulder stirred rhythmically as she breathed.

"And here you live all alone," she mused, half to herself… "I once saw you pitch a game against Yale… And the next time

I saw you walking very busily down Fifth Avenue… And now – you are – here… That is wonderful… Everything seems to be wonderful in this place… Wh-what *is* that flapping noise, please?"

"Two herons fighting in the sedge."

"You know everything… That is the most wonderful of all. And yet you say you are not famous?"

"Nobody ever heard of me outside the Smithsonian."

"But – you *must* become famous. To-morrow I shall look very hard for an ichneumon fly for you – "

"But your discovery will make *you* famous, Miss Cassillis – "

"Why – why, it's for *you* that I am going to search so hard! Did you suppose I would dream of claiming any of the glory!"

He said, striving to speak coolly:

"It is very generous and sweet of you… And, after all, I hardly suppose that you need any added lustre or any additional happiness in a life which must be so full, so complete, and so care-free."

She was silent for a while, then:

"Is *your* life then so full of care, Mr. Jones?"

"Oh, no," he said; "I get on somehow."

"Tell me," she insisted.

"What am I to tell you?"

"Why it is that your life is care-ridden."

"But it isn't – "

"Tell me!"

He said, gaily enough: "To labour for others is sometimes a little irksome… I am not discontented… Only, if I had means – if I had barely sufficient – there are so many fascinating and exciting lines of independent research to follow – to make a name in – " He broke off with a light laugh, leaned forward and laid another log on the fire.

"You can not afford it?" she asked, in a low voice; and for the moment astonishment ruled her to discover that this very perfect specimen of intelligent and gifted manhood was struggling under such an amazingly trifling disadvantage. Only from reading and from hearsay had she been even vaguely acquainted with the existence of poverty.

"No," he said pleasantly, "I can not yet afford myself the happiness of independent research."

"When will you be able to afford it?"

Neither were embarrassed; he looked thoughtfully into the fire; and for a while she watched him in his brown study.

"Will it be soon?" she asked, under her breath.

"No, dear."

That time a full minute intervened before either realised how he had answered. And both remained exceedingly still until she said calmly:

"I thought you were the very ideal embodiment of personal liberty. And now I find that wretched and petty and ignoble circumstances fetter even such a man as you are. It – it is – is heartbreaking."

"It won't last forever," he said, controlling his voice.

"But the years are going – the best years, Mr. Jones. And your life's work beckons you. And you are equipped for it, and you can not take it!"

"Some day – " But he could say no more then, with her hand tightening in his.

"To – to rise superior to circumstances – that is god-like, isn't it?" she said.

"Yes." He laughed. "But on six hundred dollars a year a man can't rise very high above circumstances."

The shock left her silent. Any gown of hers cost more than that. Then the awfulness of it all rose before her in its true and hideous proportions. And there was nothing for her to do about it, nothing, absolutely nothing, except to endure the degradation of her wealth and remember that the merest tithe of it could have made this man beside her immortally famous – if, perhaps, no more wonderful than he already was in her eyes.

Was there no way to aid him? She could look for ichneumon flies in the morning. And on the morning after that. And the next morning she would say good-bye and go away forever – out of this enchanted forest, out of his life, back to the *Chihuahua*, and to her guests who ate often and digested all day long – back to her father, her mother – back to Stirrups —

He felt her hand close on his convulsively, and turned to encounter her flushed and determined face.

"You like me, don't you?" she said.

"Yes." After a moment he said: "Yes – absolutely."

"Do you like me enough to – to let me help you in your research work – to be patient enough to teach me a little until I catch up with you?.. So we can go on together?.. I know I am presumptuous – perhaps importunate – but I thought – somehow – if you did like me well enough – it would be – very agreeable – "

"It would be!.. And I – like you enough for – anything. But you could not remain here – "

"I don't mean here."

"Where, then?"

"Where?" She looked vaguely about her in the firelight. "Why, everywhere. Wherever you go to make your researches."

"Dear, I would go to Ceylon if I could."

"I also," she said.

He turned a little pale, looking at her in silence. She said calmly: "What would you do in Ceylon?"

"Study the unknown life-histories of the rarer Ornithoptera."

She knew no more than a kitten what he meant. But she wanted to know, and, moreover, was perfectly capable of comprehending.

"Whatever you desire to study," she said, "would prove delightful to me… If you want me. Do you?"

"Want you!" Then he bit his lip.

"Don't you? Tell me frankly if you don't. But I think, somehow, you would not make a mistake if you did want me. I really am intelligent. I didn't know it until I talked with you.

Now, I know it. But I have never been able to give expression to it or cultivate it… And, somehow, I know I would not be a drag on you – if you would teach me a little in the beginning."

He said: "What can I teach *you*, Cecil? Not the heavenly frankness that you already use so sweetly. Not the smiling and serene nobility which carries your head so daintily and so fearlessly. Not the calm purity of thought, nor the serene goodness of mind that has graciously included a poor devil like me in your broad and generous sympathies – "

"Please!" she faltered, flushing. "I am not what you say – though to hear you say such things is a great happiness – a pleasure – very intense – and wonderful – and new. But I am nothing, *nothing*– unless I should become useful to you. I *could* amount to something – with – you – " She checked herself; looked at him as though a trifle frightened. "Unless," she added with an effort, "you are in love with somebody else. I didn't think of that. *Are* you?"

"No," he said. "Are you?"

"No… I have never been in love… This is the nearest I have come to it."

"And I."

She smiled faintly.

"If we – "

"Oh, yes," he said, calmly, "if we are to pass the balance of our existence in combined research, it would be rather necessary for us to marry."

"Do you mind?"

"On the contrary. Do you?"

"Not in the least. Do you really mean it? It wouldn't be disagreeable, would it? You are above marrying for mere sentiment, aren't you? Because, somehow, I seem to know you like me… And it would be death for me – a mental death – to go back now to – to Stirrups – "

"Where?"

"To – why do you ask? Couldn't you take me on faith?"

He said, unsteadily: "If you rose up out of the silvery lagoon, just born from the starlight and the mist, I would take you."

"You – you are a poet, too," she faltered. "You seem to be about everything desirable."

"I'm only a man very, very deep in – love."

"In love!.. I thought – "

"Ah, but you need think no more. You *know* now, Cecil."

She remained silent, thinking for a long while. Then, very quietly:

"Yes, I know… It is that way with me also. For I no sooner find my liberty than I lose it – in the same moment – to you. We must never again be separated… Do you feel as I do?"

"Absolutely… But it must be so."

"Why?" she asked, troubled.

"For one thing, I shall have to work harder now."

"Why?"

"Don't you know we can not marry on what I have?"

"Oh! Is *that* the reason?" She laughed, sprang lightly to her feet, stood looking down at him. He got up, slowly.

"I bring you," she said, "six hundred dollars a year. And a *little* more. Which sweeps away that obstacle. Doesn't it?"

"I could not ask you to live on that – "

"I can live on what you live on! I should wish to. It would make me utterly and supremely happy."

Her flushed, young face confronted his as she took a short, eager step toward him.

"I am not making love to you," she said, " – at least, I don't think I am. All I desire is to help – to give you myself – my youth, energy, ambition, intelligence – and what I have – which is of no use to me unless it is useful to you. Won't you take these things from me?"

"Do you give me your heart, too, Cecil?"

She smiled faintly, knowing now that she had already given it. She did not answer, but her under lip trembled, and she caught it between her teeth as he took her hands and kissed them in silence.

VI

"Miami is not very far, is it?" she asked, as she sprang aboard the *Orange Puppy*.

"Not very, dear."

"We could get a license immediately, couldn't we?"

"I think so."

"And then it will not take us very long to get married, will it?"

"Not very."

"What a wonderful night!" she murmured, looking up at the stars. She turned toward the shore. "What a wonderful place for a honeymoon!.. And we can continue business, too, and watch our caterpillars all day long! Oh, it is all too wonderful, wonderful!" She kissed her hand to the unseen camp. "We will be back to-morrow!" she called softly. Then a sudden thought struck her. "You never can get the *Orange Puppy* through that narrow lead, can you?"

"Oh, there is an easier way out," he said, taking the tiller as the sail filled.

Her head dropped back against his knees. Now and then her lips moved, murmuring in sheerest happiness the thoughts that drifted through her enchanted mind.

"I wonder when it began," she whispered, " – at the ball-game – or on Fifth Avenue – or when I saw you here? It seems to me as if I always had been in love with you."

Outside in the ocean, the breeze stiffened and the perfume was tinged with salt.

Lying back against his knees, her eyes fixed dreamily on the stars, she murmured:

"Stirrups *will* be surprised."

"What are you talking about down there all by yourself?" he whispered, bending over her.

She looked up into his eyes. Suddenly her own filled; and she put up both arms, linking them around his neck.

And so the *Orange Puppy* sailed away into the viewless, formless, starry mystery of all romance.

After a silence the young novelist, who had been poking the goldfish, said slowly: "That's pretty poor fiction, Athalie, but, as a matter of simple fact and inartistic truth, recording sentimental celerity, it stands unequalled."

"Straight facts make poor fiction," remarked Duane.

"It all depends on who makes the fiction out of them," I ventured.

"Not always," said Athalie. "There are facts which when straightly told are far stranger than fiction. I noticed a case of that sort in my crystal last winter." And to the youthful novelist she said: "Don't try to guess who the people were if I tell it, will you?"

"No," he promised.

"Please fix my cushions," she said to nobody in particular. And after the stampede was over she selected another cigarette,

thoughtfully, but did not light it.

VII

"You are queer folk, you writers of fiction," she mused aloud. "No monarch ordained of God takes himself more seriously; no actor lives more absolutely in a world made out of his imagination."

She lighted her cigarette: "You often speak of your most 'important' book, – as though any fiction ever written were important. Painters speak of their most important pictures; sculptors, composers, creative creatures of every species employ the adjective. And it is all very silly. Facts only can be characterised as important; figments of the creative imagination are as unimportant – " she blew a dainty ring of smoke toward the crystal globe – "as that! '*Tout ce qu'ont fait les hommes, les hommes peuvent le détruire. Il n'y a de caractères inéffaçables que ceux qu' imprime la nature.*' There has never been but one important author."

I said smilingly: "To quote the gentleman you think important enough to quote, Athalie, '*Tout est bien sortant des mains de l'Auteur des choses: tout dégénere entre les mains de l'homme.*'"

Said the novelist simply: "Imagination alone makes facts important. '*Cette superbe puissance, ennemie de la raison!*'"

"O Athalie," whispered Duane, "night-blooming, exquisite blossom of the arid municipal desert, recount for us these facts which you possess and which, in your delightful opinion, are

stranger than fiction, and more important."

And Athalie, choosing another sweetmeat, looked at us until it had dissolved in her fragrant mouth. Then she spoke very gravely, while her dark eyes laughed at us:

When young Lord Willowmere's fiancée ran away from him and married Delancy Jones, that bereaved nobleman experienced a certain portion of the universal shock which this social seismic disturbance spread far and wide over two hemispheres.

That such a girl should marry beneath her naturally disgusted everybody. So both Jones and his wife were properly damned.

England read its morning paper, shrugged its derision, and remarked that nobody ought to be surprised at anything that happened in the States. "The States" swallowed the rebuke and squirmed.

Now, among the sturdy yeomanry, gentry, and nobility of those same British and impressive Isles there was an earnest gentleman whose ample waist and means and scholarly tastes inclined him to a sedentary life of research. The study of human nature in its various native and exotic phases had for forty years obsessed his insular intellect. Philologist, anthropologist, calm philosopher, and benignant observer, this gentleman, who had never visited the United States, determined to do so now. For, he reasoned – and very properly – a country where such a thing could happen to a British nobleman and a Peer of the Realm must be worth exploring, and its curious inhabitants merited, perhaps, the impersonally judicial inspection of an F. R. B. A. whose

gigantic work on the folk manners of the world had now reached its twentieth volume, without as yet including the United States. So he determined to devote several chapters in the forthcoming and twenty-first volume to the recent colonies of Great Britain.

Now, when the Duke of Pillchester concluded to do anything, that thing was invariably and thoroughly done. And so, before it entirely realised the honour in store for it, the United States was buttoning its collar, tying its white tie, and rushing down stairs to open its front door to the Duke of Pillchester, the Duchess of Pillchester, and the Lady Alene Innesly, their youthful and ornamental daughter.

For a number of months after its arrival, the Ducal party inspected the Yankee continent through a lens made for purposes of scientific investigation only. The massed wealth of the nation met their Graces in solid divisions of social worth. The shock was mutual.

Then the massed poverty of the continent was exhibited, leaving the poverty indifferent and slightly bored, and the Ducal party taking notes.

It was his Grace's determination to study the folk-ways of Americans; and what the Duke wished the Duchess dutifully desired. The Lady Alene Innesly, however, was dragged most reluctantly from function to function, from palace to purlieu, from theatre to cathedral, from Coney Island to Newport. She was "havin' a rotten time."

All day long she had nothing to look at but an overdressed

and alien race whose voices distressed her; day after day she had nothing to say except, "How d'y do," and "Mother, shall we have tea?" Week after week she had nothing to think of except the bare, unkempt ugliness of the cities she saw; the raw waste and sordid uglification of what once had been matchless natural resources; dirty rivers, ruined woodlands, flimsy buildings, ignorant architecture. The ostentatious and wretched hotels depressed her; the poor railroads and bad manners disgusted her.

Listless, uninterested, Britishly enduring what she could not escape, the little Lady Alene had made not the slightest effort to mitigate the circumstances of her temporary fate. She was civilly incurious concerning the people she met; their social customs, amusements, pastimes, duties, various species of business or of leisure interested her not a whit. All the men looked alike to her; all the women were over-gowned, tiresomely pretty, and might learn one day how to behave themselves after they had found out how to make their voices behave.

Meanwhile, requiring summer clothing – tweeds and shooting boots being not what the climate seemed to require in July – she discovered with languid surprise that for the first time in her limited life she was well gowned. A few moments afterward another surprise faintly thrilled her, for, chancing to glance at herself after a Yankee hairdresser had finished her hair, she discovered to her astonishment that she was pretty.

For several days this fact preyed upon her mind, alternately troubling and fascinating her. There were several men at home

who would certainly sit up; Willowmere among others.

As for considering her newly discovered beauty any advantage in America, the idea had not entered her mind. Why should it? All the men looked alike; all wore sleek hair, hats on the backs of their heads, clothing that fitted like a coster's trousers. She had absolutely no use for them, and properly.

However, she continued to cultivate her beauty and to adorn it with Yankee clothing and headgear befitting; which filled up considerable time during the day, leaving her fewer empty hours to fill with tea and three-volumed novels from the British Isles.

Now, it had never occurred to the Lady Alene Innesly to read anything except British fact and fiction. She had never been sufficiently interested even to open an American book. Why should she, as long as the three props of her national literature endured intact – curates, tea, and thoroughbred horses?

But there came a time during the ensuing winter when the last of the three-volumed novels had been assimilated, the last serious tome digested; and there stretched out before her a bookless prospect which presently began to dismay her with the aridness of its perspective.

The catastrophe occurred while the Ducal party was investigating the strange folk-customs of those Americans who gathered during the winter in gigantic Florida hotels and lived there, uncomfortably lodged, vilely fed, and shamelessly robbed, while third-rate orchestras play cabaret music and enervating breezes stir the cabbage-palmettos till they rustle like bath-room

rubber plants.

It was a bad place and a bad time of year for a young and British girl to be deprived of her native and soporific fiction; for the livelier and Frenchier of British novelists were self-denied her, because somebody had said they were not unlike Americans.

Now she was, in the uncouth vernacular of the country, up against it for fair! She didn't know what it was called, but she realised how it felt to be against something.

Three days she endured it, dozing in her room, half awake when the sea-breeze rattled the Venetian blinds, or the niggers were noisy at baseball.

On the fourth day she arose, went to the window, gazed disgustedly out over the tawdry villas of Verbena Inlet, then rang for her maid.

"Bunn," she said, "here are three sovereigns. You will please buy for me one specimen of every book on sale in the corridor of this hotel. And, Bunn! – "

"Yes, my lady."

"What was it you were eating the other day?"

"Chewing-gum, my lady."

"Is it – agreeable?"

"Yes, my lady."

"Is it nourishing?"

"No, my lady. It is not intended to be eaten; it is to be chewed."

"Then one does not swallow it when one supposes it to be sufficiently masticated?"

"No, my lady."
"What does one do with it?"
"Beg pardon, my lady – one spits it out."
"Ow," said the girl.

VIII

She was lying on the bed when a relay of servants staggered in bearing gaudy piles of the most recent and popular novels, and placed them in tottering profusion upon the adjacent furniture.

The Lady Alene turned her head where it lay lazily pillowed on her left arm, and glanced indifferently at the multi-coloured battlement of books. The majority of the covers were embellished with the heads of young women, all endowed with vaudeville-like beauty – it having been discovered by intelligent publishers that a girl's head on any book sells it.

On some covers were displayed coloured pictures of handsome and athletic American young men, usually kissing beautiful young ladies who wore crowns, ermines, and foreign orders over dinner dresses. Sometimes, however, they were kicking Kings. That seemed rather odd to the Lady Alene, and she sat up on the bed and reached out her hand. It encountered a book on which rested a small, oblong package. She took book and package. On the pink wrapper of the latter she read this verse:

> Why are my teeth so white and bright?
> Because I chew with all my might
> The gum that fills me with delight
> And keeps me healthy day and night.

Five cents.

The Lady Alene's unaccustomed fingers became occupied with the pink wrapper. Presently she withdrew from it a thin and brittle object, examined it, and gravely placed it in her mouth.

For a while the perplexed and apprehensive expression remained upon her face, but it faded gradually, and after a few minutes her lovely features settled into an expression resembling contentment. And, delicately, discreetly, at leisurely intervals, her fresh, sweet lips moved as though she were murmuring a prayer.

All that afternoon she perused the first American novel she had ever read. And the cumulative effect of the fiction upon her literal mind was amazing as she turned page after page, and, gradually gathering mental and nervous speed, dashed from one chapter, bang! into another, only to be occultly adjured to "take the car ahead" – which she now did quite naturally, and on the run.

Never, never had she imagined such things could be! Always heretofore, to her, fiction had been a strict reflection of actuality in which a dull imagination was licensed to walk about if it kept off the grass. And it always did in the only novels to which she had been accustomed.

But good heavens! Here was a realism at work in these pages so astonishing yet so convincing, so subtle yet so natural, so matter of fact yet so astoundingly new to her that the book she

was reading was already changing the entire complexion of the Yankee continent for her.

It had to do with a young, penniless, and athletic American who went to Europe, tipped a king off his throne, pushed a few dukes, counts, and barons out of the way, reorganized the army, and went home taking with him a beautiful and exclusive princess with honest intentions.

The inhabitants of several villages wept at his departure; the abashed nobility made unsuccessful attempts to shoot him; otherwise the trip to the Cunard Line pier was uneventful, and diplomatic circles paid no attention to the incident.

When the Lady Alene finished the story her oval face ached; but this was no time to consider aches. So with a charming abandon she relieved her pretty teeth of the morceau, replaced it with another, helped herself to a second novel, settled back on her pillow, and opened the enchanted pages.

And zip! Instantly she became acquainted with another athletic and penniless American who was raising the devil in the Balkans.

Never in her life had she dreamed that any nation contained such fearless, fascinating, resourceful, epigrammatic, and desirable young men! And here she was in the very midst of them, and never had realised it until now.

Where were they? All around her, no doubt. When, a few days later, she had read some baker's dozen novels, and in each one of them had discovered similar athletic, penniless, and omniscient

American young men, her opinion was confirmed, and she could no longer doubt that, like the fiction of her own country, the romances of American novelists must have a substantial foundation in solid fact.

There could be no use in quibbling. The situation had become exciting. Her youthful imagination was now fired; her Saxon blood thoroughly stirred. She knew perfectly well that there were in her own country no young men like these she had read about – not a man-jack among them who would ever dream of dashing about the world cuffing the ears of reprehensible monarchs, meting out condign punishment to refractory nobility, reconstructing governments and states and armies, and escaping with a princess every time.

Not that she actually believed that such episodes were of common occurrence. Young as she was she knew better. But somehow it seemed very clear to her that a race of writers who were so unanimous on the subject and a nation which so complacently read of these events without denying their plausibility, must within itself harbour germs and seeds of romance and reckless deeds which no doubt had produced a number of young men thoroughly capable of doing a few of the exciting things she had read about.

Now she regretted she had not noticed the men she had met; now she was indeed sorry she had not at least taken pains to learn to distinguish them one from the other. She wished that she had investigated this reckless, chivalrous, energetic, and

distinguishing trait of the American young man.

It seemed odd, too, that Pa-*pa* had never investigated it; that Ma-*ma* had never appeared to notice it.

She mentioned it at dinner carelessly, in the midst of a natural and British silence. Neither parent enlightened her. One said, "Fancy!" And the other said, "Ow."

And so, as both parents departed the following morning to investigate the tarpon fishing at Miami, the little Lady Alene made private preparations to investigate and closely observe the astonishing, reckless, and romantic tendencies of the American young man. Her tour of discovery she scheduled for five o'clock that afternoon.

Just how these investigations were to be accomplished she did not see very clearly. She had carefully refrained from knowing anybody in the hotel. So how to go about it she did not know; but she knew enough after luncheon to have her hair done by somebody besides her maid, selected the most American gown in her repertoire, took a sunshade hitherto disdained, and glanced in the mirror at a picture in white, with gold hair, violet eyes, and a skin of snow and roses.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.