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The Truth About Tristrem Varick: A Novel

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I

It is just as well to say at the onset that the tragedy in which Tristrem Varick was the central figure has not been rightly understood. The world in which he lived, as well as the newspaper public, have had but one theory between them to account for it, and that theory is that Tristrem Varick was insane. Tristrem Varick was not insane. He had, perhaps, a fibre more or a fibre less than the ordinary run of men; that something, in fact, which is the prime factor of individuality and differentiates the possessor from the herd; but to call him insane is nonsense. If he were, it is a pity that there are not more lunatics like him.

It may be that the course of conduct which he pursued in regard to his father's estate served as basis to the theory alluded to. At the time being, it created quite a little stir; it was looked upon as a piece of old-world folly, an eccentricity worthy of the red-heeled days of seigneurial France, and, as such, altogether out of place in a money-getting age like our own. But it was not until after the tragedy that his behavior in that particular was

brought up in evidence against him.

The facts in the case were these: Tristrem's father, Erastus Varick, was a man of large wealth, who, when well on in the forties, married a girl young enough to be his daughter. The lady in question was the only child of a neighbor, Mr. Dirck Van Norden by name, and very pretty is she said to have been. Before the wedding Erastus Varick had his house, which was situated in Waverley Place, refurbished from cellar to garret; he had the parlor – there were parlors in those days – fitted up in white and gold, in the style known as that of the First Empire. The old Dutch furniture, black with age and hair-cloth, was banished. The walls were plastered with a lime cement of peculiar brilliance. The floors of the bedrooms were carpeted with rugs that extended under the beds, a novelty in New York, and the bedsteads themselves, which were vast enough to make coffins for ten people, were curtained with chintz patterns manufactured in Manchester to frighten children. In brief, Erastus Varick succeeded in making the house even less attractive than before, and altogether acted like a man in love.

After three years of marriage, Tristrem was born and Mrs. Varick died. The boy had the best of care and everything that money could procure. He was given that liberal education which usually unfits the recipient for making so much as his bread and butter, and at school, at college, and when he went abroad his supply of funds was of the amplest description. Shortly after his return from foreign lands Erastus Varick was gathered to his

fathers. By his will he bequeathed to Tristrem a Panama hat and a bundle of letters. The rest and residue of his property he devised to the St. Nicholas Hospital. The value of that property amounted to seven million dollars.

Now Dirck Van Norden had not yet moved from the neighborhood to a better place. Tristrem was his only grandson, and when he learned of the tenor of the will, he shook his fist at himself in the looking-glass and swore, in a bountiful old-fashioned manner which was peculiar to him, that his grandson should not be divested of his rights. He set the lawyers to work, and the lawyers were not long in discovering a flaw which, through a wise provision of the legislature, rendered the will null and void. The Hospital made a bold fight. It was shown beyond peradventure that from the time of Tristrem's birth the intention of the testator – and the intention of a testator is what the court most considers – had been to leave his property to a charitable institution. It was proved that he had made other wills of a similar character, and that he had successively destroyed them as his mind changed in regard to minor details and distributions of the trust. But the wise law was there, and there too were the wise lawyers. The decision was made in accordance with the statute, and the estate reverted to Tristrem, who then succeeded in surprising New York. Of his own free will he made over the entire property to the account of the Hospital to which it had been originally devised, and it was in connection with that transfer that he was taxed with old-world folly. But the matter

was misunderstood and afterward forgotten, and only raked up again when the press of two continents busied itself with his name. At that time he was in his twenty-fifth or twenty-sixth year.

He was slender, of medium height, blue of eye, and clear-featured. His hair, which was light in color, he wore brushed upward and back from the forehead. When he walked, it was with a slight stoop, which was the more noticeable in that, being nearsighted, he had a way of holding his chin out and raising his eyebrows as though he were peering at something which he could not quite discern. In his face there was a charm that grew and delighted and fastened on the beholder. At the age of twenty-six he would have been recognized by anyone who had known him as a boy. He had expanded, of course, and a stoop and dimness of vision had come with years; but in his face was the same unmistakable, almost childish, expression of sweet good-will.

His school-days were passed at Concord. When he first appeared there he looked so much like a pretty girl, in his manner was such gentleness, and his nature was found to be so vibrant and sensitive, that his baptismal name was promptly shortened into Trissy. But by the time he reached the fourth form it was lengthened back again to its rightful shape. This change was the result of an evolution of opinion. One day while some companions, with whom he happened to be loitering, scurried behind a fence, he stopped a runaway horse, clinging to the bridle though his arm had been dislocated in the earliest effort. Another

time, when a comrade had been visited, unjustly it appeared, with some terrible punishment – five hundred lines, perhaps, or something equally direful – Tristrem made straight for the master, and argued with him to such effect that the punishment was remitted. And again, when a tutor asked how it was that there was no W in the French language, Tristrem answered, "Because of Waterloo."

Boys are generous in their enthusiasms; they like bravery, they are not deaf to wit, but perhaps of all other things they admire justice most. And Tristrem seemed to exhale it. It is said that everyone has a particular talent for some one thing, whether for good or evil, and the particular talent which was accorded to Tristrem Varick was that of appreciation. He was a born umpire. In disputes his school-fellows turned to him naturally, and accepted his verdict without question. When he reached the altitudes which the Upper School offers, no other boy at St. Paul's was better liked than he. At that time the form of which he was a member – and in which, parenthetically, he ranked rather low – was strengthened by a new-comer, a turbulent, precocious boy who had been expelled from two other schools, and with whom, so ran the gossip, it would go hard were he expelled again. His name was Royal Weldon, and on his watch, and on a seal ring which he wore on his little finger, he displayed an elaborate coat-of-arms under which for legend were the words, *Well done, Weldon*, words which it was reported an English king had bawled in battle, ennobling as he did so the earliest Weldon known to

fame.

Between the two lads, and despite the dissimilarity of their natures, or perhaps precisely on that account, there sprang up a warm friendship which propinquity cemented, for chance or the master had given them a room in common. At first, Tristrem fairly blinked at Weldon's precocity, and Weldon, who was accustomed to be admired, took to Tristrem not unkindly on that account. But after a time Tristrem ceased to blink and began to lecture, not priggishly at all, but in a persuasive manner that was hard to resist. For Weldon was prone to get into difficulties, and equally prone to make the difficulties worse than they need have been. When cross-questioned he would decline to answer; it was a trick he had. Now Tristrem never got into difficulties, except with Latin prosody or a Greek root, and he was frank to a fault.

It so happened that one day the headmaster summoned Tristrem to him. "My dear," he said, "Royal is not acting quite as he should, is he?" To this Tristrem made no reply. "He is a motherless boy," the master continued, "a poor motherless boy. I wish, Tristrem, that you would use your influence with him. I see but one course open to me, unless he does better – " Tristrem was a motherless boy himself, but he answered bravely that he would do what he could. That evening, as he was battling with the platitudes of that Augustan bore who is called the Bard of Mantua, presumably because he was born in Andes – Weldon came in, smelling of tobacco and drink. It was evident that he had been to town.

Tristrem looked up from his task, and as he looked he heard the step of a tutor in the hall. He knew, if the tutor had speech with Weldon, that on the morrow Weldon would leave the school. In a second he had seated him before the open dictionary, and in another second he was kneeling at his own bedside. Hardly had he bowed his head when there came a rap at the door, the tutor entered, saw the kneeling figure, apologized in a whisper, and withdrew.

When Tristrem stood up again, Weldon was sobered and very pale. "Tristrem – " he began, but Tristrem interrupted him. "There, don't say anything, and don't do it again. To-morrow you had better talk it over with the doctor."

Weldon declined to talk it over with anyone, but after that he behaved himself with something approaching propriety. Two years later, in company with his friend, he entered Harvard, from which institution he was subsequently dropped.

Tristrem meanwhile struggled through the allotted four years. He was not brilliant in his studies, the memorizing of abstruse questions and recondite problems was not to his liking. He preferred modern tongues to dead languages, an intricate fugue was more to his taste than the simplest equation, and to his shame it must be noted that he read Petrarch at night. But, though the curriculum was not entirely to his fancy, he was conscientious and did his best. There are answers that he gave in class that are quoted still, tangential flights that startled the listeners into new conceptions of threadbare themes, totally different from

the usual cut and dried response that is learned by rote. And at times he would display an ignorance, a stupidity even, that was fathomless in its abysses.

After graduation, he went abroad. England seemed to him like a rose in bloom, but when autumn came and with it a succession of fogs, each more depressing than the last, he fled to Italy, and wandered among her ghosts and treasuries, and then drifted up again through Germany, to Paris, where he gave his mornings to the Sorbonne and his evenings to orchestra-stalls.

II

It was after an absence of nearly five years that Tristrem Varick returned to the States. He had wearied of foreign lands, and for some time previous he had thought of New York in such wise that it had grown in his mind, and in the growing it had assumed a variety of attractive attributes. He was, therefore, much pleased at the prospect of renewing his acquaintance with Fifth Avenue, and during the homeward journey he pictured to himself the advantages which his native city possessed over any other which he had visited.

He had not, however, been many hours on shore before he found that Fifth Avenue had shrunk. In some unaccountable way the streets had lost their charm, the city seemed provincial. He was perplexed at the discovery that the uniform if depthless civility of older civilizations was rarely observable; he was chagrined to find that the *minutiæ* which, abroad, he had accepted as a matter of course, the thousand trifles which amount, after all, to nothing particularly indispensable, but which serve to make mere existence pleasant, were, when not overlooked, inhibited by statute or custom.

In the course of a week he was surprised into reflecting that, while no other country was more naturally and bountifully favored than his own, there was yet no other where the art of living was as vexatiously misunderstood.

Of these impressions he said nothing. His father asked him no questions, nor did he manifest a desire for any larger sociological information than that which he already possessed. His grandfather was too irascible for anyone to venture with in safety through the shallows of European refinements, and of other relatives Tristrem could not boast. Few of his former friends were at once discoverable, and of those that he encountered some had fallen into the rut and routine of business life, some had married and sent in their resignations to everything but the Humdrum, and some passed their days in an effort to catch a train.

For the moment, therefore, there was no one to whom Tristrem could confide his earliest impressions, and in a month's time the force of these impressions waned; the difference between New York and Paris lost much of its accent, and in its place came a growing admiration for the pluck and power of the nation, an expanding enthusiasm for the stretch and splendor of the land.

During the month that followed, an incident occurred which riveted his patriotism forever. First among the friends and acquaintances whom Tristrem sought on his return was Royal Weldon. Outwardly the handsome, turbulent boy had developed into an admirable specimen of manhood, he had become one on whom the feminine eye likes to linger, and in whose companionship men feel themselves refreshed. His face was beardless and unmustached, and into it had come that strength

which the old prints give to Karl Martel. In the ample jaw and straight lips was a message which a physiognomist would interpret as a promise of successful enterprise, whether of good or evil. It was a face which a Crusader might have possessed, or a pirate of the Spanish main. In a word, he looked like a man who might be a hero to his valet.

Yet, despite this adventurous type of countenance, Weldon's mode of life was seemingly conventional. Shortly after the removal from Harvard, his father was mangled in a railway accident and left the planet and little behind him save debts and dislike. Promptly thereupon Royal Weldon set out to conquer the Stock Exchange. For three years he grit his teeth, and earned fifteen dollars a week. At the end of that period he had succeeded in two things. He had captured the confidence of a prominent financier, and the affection of the financier's daughter. In another twelvemonth he was partner of the one, husband of the other, and the taxpayer of a house in Gramercy Park.

Of these vicissitudes Tristrem had been necessarily informed. During the penury of his friend he had aided him to a not inconsiderable extent; though afar, he had followed his career with affectionate interest, and the day before Weldon's wedding he had caused Tiffany to send the bride a service of silver which was mentioned by the reporters as "elegant" and "chaste." On returning to New York, Tristrem naturally found the door of the house in Gramercy Park wide open, and it came about that it was in that house that his wavering patriotism was riveted.

This event, after the fashion of extraordinary occurrences, happened in a commonplace manner. One Sunday evening he was bidden there to dine. He had broken bread in the house many times before, but the bread breaking had been informal. On this particular occasion, however, other guests had been invited, and Tristrem was given to understand that he would meet some agreeable people.

When he entered the drawing-room, he discovered that of the guests of the evening he was the first to arrive. Even Weldon was not visible; but Mrs. Weldon was, and, as Tristrem entered, she rose from a straight-backed chair in which she had been seated, and greeted him with a smile which she had copied from a chromo.

Mrs. Weldon was exceedingly pretty. She was probably twenty-two or twenty-three years of age, and her intellect was that of a girl of twelve. Her manner was arch and noticeably affected. She had an enervating way of asking unnecessary questions, and of laughing as though it hurt her. On the subject of dress she was very voluble; in brief, she was prettiness and insipidity personified – the sort of woman that ought to be gagged and kept in bed with a doll.

She gave Tristrem a little hand gloved with *Suède*, and asked him had he been at church that morning. Tristrem found a seat, and replied that he had not. "But don't you like to go?" she inquired, emphasizing each word of the question, and ending up with her irritating laugh.

"He does," came a voice from the door and Weldon entered. "He does, but he can resist the temptation." Then there was more conversation of the before-dinner kind, and during its progress the door opened again, and a young girl crossed the room.

She was dressed in a gown of canary, draped with madeira and fluttered with lace. Her arms and neck were bare, and unjewelled. Her hair was Cimmerian, the black of basalt that knows no shade more dark, and it was arranged in such wise that it fell on either side of the forehead, circling a little space above the ear, and then wound into a coil on the neck. This arrangement was not modish, but it was becoming – the only arrangement, in fact, that would have befitted her features, which resembled those of the Cleopatra unearthed by Lieutenant Gorringe. Her eyes were not oval, but round, and they were amber as those of leopards, the yellow of living gold. The corners of her mouth drooped a little, and the mouth itself was rather large than small. When she laughed one could see her tongue; it was like an inner cut of water-melon, and sometimes, when she was silent, the point of it caressed her under lip. Her skin was of that quality which artificial light makes radiant, and yet of which the real delicacy is only apparent by day. She just lacked being tall, and in her face and about her bare arms and neck was the perfume of health. She moved indolently, with a grace of her own. She was not yet twenty, a festival of beauty in the festival of life.

At the rustle of her dress Tristrem had arisen. As the girl crossed the room he bethought him of a garden of lilies; though

why, for the life of him, he could not have explained. He heard his name mentioned, and saw the girl incline her head, but he made little, if any, acknowledgment; he stood quite still, looking at her and through her, and over her and beyond. For some moments he neither moved nor spoke. He was unconscious even that other guests had come.

He gave his hand absently to a popular novelist, Mr. A. B. Fenwick Chisholm-Jones by name, more familiarly known as Alphabet, whom Weldon brought to him, and kept his eyes on the yellow bodice. A fair young woman in pink had taken a position near to where he stood, and was complaining to someone that she had been obliged to give up cigarettes. And when the someone asked whether the abandonment of that pleasure was due to parental interference, the young woman laughed shortly, and explained that she was in training for a tennis tournament. Meanwhile the little group in which Tristrem stood was re-enforced by a new-comer, who attempted to condole with the novelist on the subject of an excoriating attack that one of the critics had recently made on his books, and suggested that he ought to do something about it. But of condolence or advice Mr. Jones would have none.

"Bah!" he exclaimed, "if the beggar doesn't like what I write let him try and do better. I don't care what any of them say. My books sell, and that's the *hauptsache*. Besides, what's the use in arguing with a newspaper? It's like talking metaphysics to a bull; the first you know, you get a horn in your navel." And while the

novelist was expressing his disdain of all adverse criticism, and quoting Emerson to the effect that the average reviewer had the eyes of a bug and the heart of a cat, Tristrem discovered Mrs. Weldon's arm in his own, and presently found himself seated next to her at table.

At the extreme end, to the right of the host, was the girl with the amber eyes. The novelist was at her side. Evidently he had said something amusing, for they were both laughing; he with the complacency of one who has said a good thing, and she with the appreciation of one accustomed to wit. But Tristrem was not permitted to watch her undisturbed. Mrs. Weldon had a right to his attention, and she exercised that right with the pertinacity of a fly that has to be killed to be got rid of. "What do you think of Miss Finch?" she asked, with her stealthy giggle.

"Her name isn't Finch," Tristrem answered, indignantly.

"Yes it is, too – Flossy Finch, her name is; as if I oughtn't to know! Why, we were at Mrs. Garret and Mlle. de l'Entresol's school together for years and years. What makes you say her name isn't Finch? I had you here on purpose to meet her. Did you ever see such hair? There's only one girl in New York – "

"It *is* black," Tristrem assented.

"Black! Why, you must be crazy; it's orange, and that dress of hers – "

Tristrem looked down the table and saw a young lady whom he had not noticed before. Her hair, as Mrs. Weldon had said, was indeed the color of orange, though of an orange not over-

ripe. "I thought you meant that girl next to Royal," he said.

"That! Oh! that's Miss Raritan."

Mrs. Weldon's voice had changed. Evidently Miss Raritan did not arouse in her the same enthusiasm as did Miss Finch. For a moment her lips lost their chromo smile, but presently it returned again, and she piped away anew on the subject of the charms of Flossy Finch, and after an interlude, of which Tristrem heard not one word, she turned and cross-questioned the man on her left.

The conversation had become very animated. From Royal's end of the table came intermittent shrieks of laughter. The novelist was evidently in his finest form. "Do you mean to tell me," Miss Finch asked him across the table, "do you mean to say that you don't believe in platonic affection?"

"I never uttered such a heresy in my life," the novelist replied. "Of course I believe in it; I believe in it thoroughly – between husband and wife."

At this everyone laughed again, except Tristrem, who had not heard, and Mrs. Weldon, who had not understood. The latter, however, felt that Miss Finch was distinguishing herself, and she turned to Tristrem anew.

"I want you to make yourself very agreeable to her," she said. "She is just the girl for you. Don't you think so? Now promise that you will talk to her after dinner."

"Talk metaphysics to a bull, and the first thing you know – the first thing you know – I beg your pardon, Mrs. Weldon, I didn't mean to say that – I don't know how the stupid phrase got in my

head or why I said it." He hesitated a moment, and seemed to think. "H'm," he went on, "I am a trifle tired, I fancy."

Mrs. Weldon looked suspiciously at the glasses at his side, but apparently they had not been so much as tasted; they were full to the rim. She turned again to the guest at her left. The dinner was almost done. She asked a few more questions, and then presently, in a general lull, she gave a glance about her. At that signal the women-folk rose in a body, the men rising also, to let them pass.

Tristrem had risen mechanically with the others, and when the ultimate flounce had disappeared he sat down again and busied himself with a cup of coffee. The other men had drawn their chairs together near him, and over the liqueurs were discussing topics of masculine interest and flavor. Tristrem was about to make some effort to join in the conversation, when from beyond there came the running scale that is the prelude to the cabaletta, *Non più mesta*, from Cenerentola. Then, abruptly, a voice rang out as though it vibrated through labyrinths of gold – a voice that charged the air with resonant accords – a voice prodigious and dominating, grave and fluid; a voice that descended into the caverns of sound, soared to the uttermost heights, scattering notes like showers of stars, evoking visions of flesh and dazzling steel, and in its precipitate flights and vertiginous descents disclosing landscapes riotous with flowers, rich with perfume, sentient with beauty, articulate with love; a voice voluptuous as an organ and languorous as the consonance of citherns and guitars.

Tristrem, as one led in leash, moved from the table and passed into the outer room. Miss Raritan was at the piano. Beyond, a group of women sat hushed and mute; and still the resilient waves of song continued. One by one the men issued noiselessly from the inner room. And then, soon, the voice sank and died away like a chorus entering a crypt.

Miss Raritan rose from the piano. As she did so, Weldon, as it becomes a host, hastened to her. There was a confused hum, a murmur of applause, and above it rose a discreet and prolonged *brava* that must have come from the novelist. Weldon, seemingly, was urging her to sing again. The women had taken up anew some broken thread of gossip, but the men were at the piano, insisting too. Presently Miss Raritan resumed her seat, and the men moved back. Her fingers rippled over the keys like rain. She stayed them a second, and then, in a voice so low that it seemed hardly human, and yet so insistent that it would have filled a cathedral and scaled the dome, she began a ballad that breathed of Provence:

> "O Magali, ma bien aimée,
> Fuyons tous deux sous la ramée
> Au fond du bois silencieux…"

When she had finished, Tristrem started. The earliest notes had sent the blood pulsing through his veins, thrilling him from finger-tips to the end of the spine, and then a lethargy enveloped him and he ceased to hear, and it was not until Miss Raritan stood up again from the piano that he was conscious that he had not

been listening. He had sat near the entrance to the dining-room, and when the applause began afresh he passed out into the hall, found his coat and hat, and left the house.

As he walked down Irving Place he fell to wondering who it was that he had heard complain of being obliged to give up cigarettes, not on account of parental interference but because of a tournament. Yet, after all, what matter did it make? Certainly, he told himself, the Weldons seemed to live very well. Royal must be making money. Mrs. Weldon – Nanny, as Royal called her – was a nice little thing, somewhat – h'm, somewhat – well, not quite up to Royal. She looked like that girl in Munich, the girl that lived over the way, only Mrs. Weldon was prettier and dressed better, much better. Du hast die schönsten Augen. Munich wasn't a bad place, but what a hole Innsprück was. There was that Victoria Cross fellow; whatever became of him? He drank like a fish; it must have caught him by this time. H'm, he *would* give me the address of his shoemaker. I ought to have taken more from that man in Paris. Odd that the Cenerentola was the last thing I should have heard there. The buffo was good, so was the contralto. *She* sings much better. What a voice! what a voice! Now, which was the more perfect, the voice or the girl? Let me see, which is the better fulfilled, the odor of the lily or the lily itself? Tulips I never cared for… That is it, then. I wonder, though —

Tristrem had reached the house in Waverley Place. He let himself in with a latch-key, and went to his room. There he

sat a while, companioned only by his thoughts. Before he fell asleep, his patriotism was riveted. A land that could produce such a specimen of girlhood outvalued Europe, Asia, and Africa combined – aye, a thousand times – and topped and exceeded creation.

III

Among the effects and symptoms of love, there is an involuntary action of the mind which, since the days of Stendhal, has been known as crystallization. When a man becomes interested in a woman, when he pictures her not as she really is, but as she seems to him – as she ought to be, in fact – he experiences, first, admiration; second, desire; third, hope; and, behold, love or its counterfeit is born.

This crystallization affects the individual according to his nature. If that nature be inexperienced, unworn – in a word, if it be virginal, its earliest effects are those of a malady. On the other hand, if the nature on which it operates has received the baptism of fire, its effect is that of a tonic. To the one it is a fever, to the other a bugle-call. In the first instance, admiration is pursued by self-depreciation, desire is pinioned before conventional obstacles, and hope falters beneath a weight of doubt. In the second, admiration, desire, and hope are fused into one sentiment, the charm of the chase, the delight of the prospective quarry. As an example, there is Werther, and there is also Don Juan.

Now Tristrem Varick had never known a mother, sisters he had none, the feminine had been absent from his life, but in his nature there was an untarnishable refinement. During his student-days at Harvard, and throughout his residence abroad,

there had been nothing of that which the French have agreed to denominate as *bonnes fortunes*. Such things may have been in his path, waiting only to be gathered, but, in that case, certain it is that he had passed them by unheeded. To use the figurative phrase, he was incapable of stretching his hand to any woman who had not the power of awakening a lasting affection; and during his wanderings, and despite, too, the example and easy morals of his comrades, no such woman having crossed his horizon, he had been innocent of even the most fugitive liaison. Nevertheless, the morning after the dinner in Gramercy Park, crystallization had done its work. He awoke with the surprise and wonder of an inexperienced sensation; he awoke with the consciousness of being in love, wholly, turbulently, absurdly in love with a girl to whom he had not addressed a single word.

The general opinion to the contrary notwithstanding, there are, after all, very few people who know what love really is. And among those that know, fewer there are that tell. A lexicographer, deservedly forgotten, has defined it as an exchange of fancies, the contact of two epiderms. Another, wiser if less epigrammatic, announced it as a something that no one knew what, coming no one knew whence, and ending no one knew how. But in whatever fashion it may be described, one thing is certain, it has been largely over-rated.

In the case of Tristrem Varick it appeared in its most perfect form. The superlative is used advisedly. Love has a hundred aspects, a thousand toilets. It may come at first sight, in which

event, if it be enduring, it is, as Balzac has put it, a resultant of that prescience which is known as second sight. Or, it may come of the gradual fusion of two natures. It may come of propinquity, of curiosity, of sympathy, of hatred. It may come of the tremors of adolescence, the mutual attraction of one sex for the other; and, again, it may come of natural selection, of the discernment which leads a man through mazes of women to one in particular, to the woman who to him is the one woman in the world and manacles him at her feet. If Tristrem Varick had not met Miss Raritan, it is more than probable that he never would have known the meaning of the word.

When the first surprise at the discovery waned, delight took its place. He saw her amber eyes, he recalled as she had crossed the room the indolent undulation of her hips, he breathed the atmosphere of health which she exhaled, and in his ears her voice still rang. The *Non più mesta* of her song seemed almost a promise, and the *O Magali* an invitation. He recalled the movement of her lips, and fell to wondering what her name might be. At first he fancied that it might be Stella; but that, for some occult reason which only a lover would understand, he abandoned for Thyra, a name which pleasured him awhile and which he repeated aloud until it became sonorous as were it set in titles. But presently some defect presented itself, it sounded less apt, more suited to a blue-eyed daughter of a viking than to one so *brune* as she. Decidedly, Thyra did not suit her. And yet her name might be something utterly commonplace, such as Fanny, for

instance, or Agnes, or Gertrude. But that was a possibility which he declined to entertain. When a girl is baptized, the mother, in choosing the name, should, he told himself, think of the lover who will one day pronounce it. And what had her mother chosen? It would be forethought indeed if she had selected Undine or even Iseult; but what mother was ever clairvoyant enough for that?

He thought this over awhile and was about to give the query up, when suddenly, without an effort on his part, he was visited by a name that announced her as the perfume announces the rose, a name that pictured and painted her, a name that suited her as did her gown of canary, a name that crowned her beauty and explained the melancholy of her lips. "It is Madeleine," he said, "it can be nothing else."

And into the syllables he threw the waving inflection of the French.

"It is Madeleine," he continued, "and when I see her I will tell in what way I divined it."

The possibility that she might be indifferent to such homage did not, for the moment, occur to him. He was loitering in the enchanted gardens of the imagination, which have been visited by us all. It was the improbable that fluttered his pulse.

Hitherto the life of Tristrem Varick had been that of a dilettante. There had been no reason why he should work. His education had unfitted him for labor, and his tastes, if artistic, were not sufficiently pronounced to act as incentives. He handled the brush well enough to know that he could never be a painter; he

had a natural understanding of music, its value was clear to him, yet its composition was barred. The one talent that he possessed – a talent that grows rarer with the days – was that of appreciation, he could admire the masterpieces of others, but creation was not his. A few centuries ago he would have made an admirable knight-errant. In a material age like our own, his *raison a'être* was not obvious. In a word, he was just such an one as his father had intended he should be, one whose normal condition was that of chronic pluperfect subjunctive, and who, if thrown on his own resources, would be helpless indeed.

In some dim way he had been conscious of this before, and hitherto he had accepted it, as he had accepted his father's attitude, as one accepts the inevitable, and put it aside again as something against which, like death, or like life, it is useless to rebel. After all, there was nothing particularly dreadful about it. An inability to be Somebody was not a matter of which the District Attorney is obliged to take cognizance. At least he need do no harm, and he would have wealth enough to do much good. It was in thoughts like these that hitherto he had found consolation. But on this particular morning he looked for them anew, and the search was fruitless. Not one of the old consolations disclosed the slightest worth. He stood before himself naked in his nothingness. The true knowledge of his incompetence had never come home to him before – but now it closed round him in serried arguments, and in the closing shut out all hope of her. Who was he, indeed, to pretend to such a girl?

To win her, he told himself, one must needs be a conqueror, one who has coped with dangers and could flaunt new triumphs as his lady's due. Some soldier bearing a marshal's baton back from war, some hero that had liberated an empire or stolen a republic for himself, some prince of literature or satrap of song, someone, in fact, who, booted and spurred, had entered the Temple of Fame, and claimed the dome as his. But he! What had he to offer? His name, however historical and respected, was an accident of birth. Of the wealth which he would one day possess he had not earned a groat. And, were it lost, the quadrature of the circle would not be more difficult than its restoration. And yet, and yet – though any man she could meet might be better and wiser and stronger than he, not one would care for her more. At least there was something in that, a tangible value, if ever there were one. There was every reason why she should turn her back, and that one reason, and that one only, why she should not. But that one reason, he told himself, was a force in itself. The resuscitation of hope was so sudden that the blood mounted to his temples and pulsated through his veins.

He left the bed in which his meditations had been passed. "They say everything comes to him who waits," he muttered, and then proceeded to dress. He took a tub and got himself, absent-mindedly, into a morning suit. "I don't believe it," he exclaimed, at last, "the world belongs to the impatient, and I am impatient of her."

Tristrem was in no sense a diplomatist. In his ways there

was a candor that was as unusual as it is delightful; yet such is the power of love that, in its first assault, the victim is transformed. The miser turns prodigal, the coward brave, the genius becomes a simpleton, and in the simpleton there awakes a Machiavelli. Tristrem passed a forenoon in trying to unravel as cruel a problem as has ever been given a lover to solve – how, in a city like New York, to meet a girl of whom he knew absolutely nothing, and who was probably unaware of his own existence. He might have waited, it is true – chance holds many an odd trick – but he had decided to be impatient, and in his impatience he went to Gramercy Park and drank tea there, not once, but four afternoons in succession, an excess of civility which surprised Mrs. Weldon not a little.

That he should make an early visit of digestion was quite in the order of things, but when that visit was repeated again and again, Mrs. Weldon, with a commingling of complacency and alarm, told herself that, in her quality of married woman, such persistence should be discouraged. But the opportunity for such discouragement did not present itself, or rather, when it did the need of discouragement had passed. Tristrem drank tea with her several times, and then disappeared abruptly. "He must have known it was hopeless," she reflected, when a week went by unmarked by further enterprise on his part. And then, the intended discouragement notwithstanding, she felt vaguely vexed.

In the tea-drinking Tristrem's object, if not apparent to Mrs.

Weldon, was perfectly clear to himself. He desired to learn something of Miss Raritan, and he knew, if the tea-drinking was continued with sufficient endurance, not only would he acquire, from a talkative lady like his hostess, information of the amplest kind, which after all was secondary, but that in the course of a week the girl herself must put in an appearance. A dinner call, if not obligatory to him, was obligatory to her, and on that obligation he counted.

To those who agree to be bound by what the Western press calls etiquette, there is nothing more inexorable than a social debt. A woman may contest her mantua-maker's bill with impunity, her antenuptial promises may go to protest and she remain unestopped; but let her leave a dinner-call overdue and unpaid, then is she shameless indeed. In this code Tristrem was necessarily learned. On returning to Fifth Avenue he had marvelled somewhat at noting that laws which applied to one sex did not always extend to the other, that civility was not exacted of men, that politeness was relegated to the tape-counter and out of place in a drawing-room; in a word, that it was not good form to be courteous, and not ill-bred to be rude.

While the tea-drinking was in progress he managed without much difficulty to get Mrs. Weldon on the desired topic. There were spacious digressions in her information and abrupt excursions into irrelevant matter, and there were also interruptions by other visitors, and the consequent and tedious exchange of platitude and small-talk. But after the fourth visit

Tristrem found himself in possession of a store of knowledge, the sum and substance of which amounted to this: Miss Raritan lived with her mother in the shady part of the Thirties, near Madison Avenue. Her father was dead. It had been rumored, but with what truth Mrs. Weldon was not prepared to affirm, that the girl had some intention of appearing on the lyric stage, which, if she carried out, would of course be the end of her socially. She had been very much ruin after on account of her voice, and at the Wainwarings the President had said that he had never heard anything like it, and asked her to come to Washington and be present at one of the diplomatic dinners. Personally Mrs. Weldon knew her very slightly, but she intimated that, inasmuch as the government had once sent Raritan *père* abroad as minister – in order probably to be rid of him – his daughter was inclined to look down on those whose fathers held less exalted positions – on Mrs. Weldon herself, for example.

It was with this little store of information that Tristrem left her on the Thursday succeeding the dinner. It was meagre indeed, and yet ample enough to afford him food for reflection. During the gleaning many people had come and gone, but of Miss Raritan he had as yet seen nothing. The next afternoon, however, as he was about to ascend Mrs. Weldon's stoop for the fifth time in five days, the door opened and the girl on whom his thoughts were centred was before him.

Throughout the week he had lived in the expectation of meeting her, it was the one thing that had brought zest to the

day and dreams to the night; there was even a little speech which he had rehearsed, but for the moment he was dumb. He plucked absently at his cuff, to the palms of his hands there came a sudden moisture. In the vestibule above, a servant stood waiting for Miss Raritan to reach the pavement before closing the door, and abruptly, from a barrel-organ at the corner, a waltz was thrown out in jolts.

The girl descended the steps before Tristrem was able to master his emotion.

"Miss Raritan," he began, hastily, "I don't suppose you remember me. I am Mr. Varick. I heard you sing the other night. I have come here every day since in the hope of – ; you see, I wanted to ask if I might not have the privilege of hearing you sing again?"

"If you consider it a privilege, certainly. On Sunday evening, though, I thought you seemed rather bored." She made this answer very graciously, with her head held like a bird's, a trifle to one side.

Tristrem gazed at her in a manner that would have mollified a tigress. "I was not bored. I had never heard anyone sing before."

"Yet your friend, Mr. Weldon, tells me that you are very fond of music."

"That is exactly what I mean."

At this speech of his she looked at him, musingly. "I wish I deserved that," she said.

Tristrem began again with new courage. "It is like anything

else, I fancy. I doubt if anyone, ignorant of difficulties overcome, ever appreciates a masterpiece. A sonnet, if perfect, is only perfect to a sonneteer. The gallery may applaud a drama, it is the playwright who judges it at its worth. It is the sculptor that appreciates a Canova – "

They had reached the corner where the barrel-organ was in ambush. A woman dragging a child with Italy and dirt in its face followed them, her hand outstretched. Tristrem had an artful way of being rid of a beggar, and after the fumble of a moment he gave her some coin.

" – And the artist who appreciates rags," added Miss Raritan.

"Perhaps. I am not fond of rags myself, but I have often caught myself envying the simplicity which they sometimes conceal. That woman, now, she may be as pleased with my little gift as I am to be walking with you."

"I thought it was my voice you liked," Miss Raritan answered, demurely.

Tristrem experienced a mental start. A suspicion entered his mind which he chased indignantly. There was about the girl an aroma that was incompatible with coquetry.

"You would not, I am sure, have me think of you in the *vox et præterea nihil* style," he replied. "To be candid, I thought that very matter over the other night." He hesitated, as though waiting for some question, but she did not so much as look at him, and he continued unassisted. "I thought of a flower and its perfume, I wondered which was the more admirable, and – and – I decided

that I did not care for tulips."

"But that you did care for me, I suppose?"

"Yes, I decided that."

Miss Raritan threw back her head with a movement indicative of impatience.

"I didn't mean to tell you," he added – "that is, not yet."

They had crossed Broadway and were entering Fifth Avenue. There the stream of carriages kept them a moment on the curb.

"I hope," Tristrem began again, "I hope you are not vexed."

"Vexed at what? No, I am not vexed. I am tired; every other man I meet – There, we can cross now. Besides, I am married. Don't get run over. I am going in that shop."

"You are *not* married!"

"Yes, I am; if I were a Harvard graduate I would say to Euterpe. As it is, Scales is more definite." She had led him to the door of a milliner, a portal which Tristrem knew was closed to him. "If you care to come and see me," she added, by way of *congé*, "my husband will probably be at home." And with that she opened the door and passed into the shop.

"I can imagine a husband," thought Tristrem, with a glimmer of that spirit of belated repartee which Thackeray called cab-wit, the brilliancy which comes to us when we are going home, "I can imagine a husband whose greatest merit is his wife."

IV

The fact that few days elapsed before Tristrem Varick availed himself of Miss Raritan's invitation, and that thereafter he continued to avail himself of it with frequence and constancy, should surprise no one. During the earliest of these visits he met Miss Raritan's mother, and was unaccountably annoyed when he heard that lady address her daughter as Viola. He had been so sure that her baptismal name was Madeleine that the one by which he found she was called sounded false as an alias, and continued so to sound until he accustomed himself to the syllables and ended by preferring it to the Madeleine of his fancy. This, however, by the way. Mrs. Raritan was a woman who, in her youth, must have been very beautiful, and traces of that beauty she still preserved. When she spoke her voice endeared her to you, and in her manner there was that something which made you feel that she might be calumniated, as good women often are, but yet that she could never be the subject of gossip. She did not seem resolute, but she did seem warm of heart, and Tristrem felt at ease with her at once.

Of her he saw at first but little. In a city like New York it is difficult for anyone to become suddenly intimate in a household, however cordial and well-intentioned that household may be. And during those hours of the winter days when Miss Raritan was at home it was seldom that her mother was visible. But it was

not long before Tristrem became an occasional guest at dinner, and it was in the process of breaking bread that a semblance of intimacy was established. And at last, when winter had gone and the green afternoons opposed the dusk, Tristrem now and then would drop in of an evening, and in the absence of Miss Raritan pass an hour with her mother. Truly she was not the rose, but did she not dwell at her side?

Meanwhile, Miss Raritan's attitude differed but little from the one which she had first adopted. She treated Tristrem with exasperating familiarity, and kept him at arm's length. She declined to see him when the seeing would have been easy, and summoned him when the summons was least to be expected. He was useful to her as a piece of furniture, and she utilized him as such. In the matter of flowers and theatres he was a convenience. And at routs and assemblies the attention of an heir apparent to seven million was a homage and a tribute which Miss Raritan saw no reason to forego.

In this Tristrem had no one but himself to blame. He had been, and was, almost canine in his demeanor to her. She saw it, knew it, felt it, and treated him accordingly. And he, with the cowardice of love, made little effort at revolt. Now and then he protested to Mrs. Raritan, to whom he had made no secret of his admiration for her daughter, and who consoled him as best she might; but that was all. And so the winter passed and the green afternoons turned sultry, and Tristrem was not a step further advanced than on the day when he had left the girl at

the milliner's. On the infrequent occasions when he had ventured to say some word of that which was nearest his heart, she had listened with tantalizing composure, and when he had paused for encouragement or rebuke, she would make a remark of such inappositeness that anyone else would have planted her there and gone. But Tristrem was none other than himself; his nature commanded and he obeyed.

It so happened that one May morning a note was brought him, in which Miss Raritan said that her mother and herself were to leave in a day or two for the country, and could he not get her something to read on the way. Tristrem passed an hour selecting, with infinite and affectionate care, a small bundle of foreign literature. In the package he found room for Balzac's "Pierrette" and the "Curé de Tours," one of Mme. Craven's stupidities, a volume of platitude in rhyme by François Coppée, a copy of De Amicis' futile wanderings in Spain – a few samples, in fact, of the *pueris virginibusque* school. And that evening, with the bundle under his arm, he sought Miss Raritan.

The girl glanced at the titles and put the books aside. "When we get in order at Narragansett," she said, "I wish you would come up."

Had she kissed him, Tristrem could not have revelled more. "There are any number of hotels," she added, by way of douche.

"Certainly, if you wish it, but – but – "

"Well, but what?"

"I don't know. You see – well, it's this way: You know that I

love you, and you know also that you care for me as for the snows of yester-year. There is no reason why you should do otherwise. I don't mean to complain. If I am unable to make you care, the fault is mine. I did think – h'm – no matter. What I wanted to say is this: there is no reason why you should care, and yet – . See here; take two slips of paper, write on one, I will marry you, and, on the other, Put a bullet through your head, and let me draw. I would take the chance so gladly. But that chance, of course, you will not give. Why should you, after all? Why should I give everything I own to the first beggar I meet? But why should you have any other feeling for me than that which you have? And yet, sometimes I think you don't understand. Any man you meet could be more attractive than I, and very easy he would find it to be so; but no one could care for you more – no one – "

Miss Raritan was sitting opposite to him, her feet crossed, her head thrown back, her eyes fixed on the ceiling. One arm lay along the back of the lounge which she occupied, the other was pendant at her side. And while he still addressed her, she arose with the indolence of a panther, crossed the room, picked up a miniature from a table, eyed it as though she had never seen it before and did not particularly care to see it again, and then, seating herself at the piano, she attacked the *Il segreto per esser felice*, the brindisi from "Lucrezia Borgia."

In the wonder of her voice Tristrem forgot the discourtesy of the action. He listened devoutly. And, as he listened, each note was an electric shock. *Il segreto per esser felice*, indeed!

The secret of happiness was one which she alone of all others in the world could impart. And, as the measures of the song rose and fell, they brought him a transient exhilaration like to that which comes of champagne, dowering him with factitious force wherewith to strive anew. And so it happened that, when the ultimate note had rung out and the girl's fingers loitered on the keys, he went over to her with a face so eloquent that she needed but a glance at it to know what he was seeking to say.

With a gesture coercive as a bit, she lifted one hand from the keys and stayed his lips. Then, she stood up and faced him. "Tristrem," she began, "when I first saw you I told you that I was married to my art. And in an art such as mine there is no divorce. It may be that I shall go on the stage. After all, why should I not? Is society so alluring that I should sacrifice for it that which is to me infinitely preferable? If I have not done so already it is because of my mother. But should I decide to do so, there are years of study before me yet. In which case I could not marry, that is self-evident, not only because I would not marry a man who would suffer me to sing in public – don't interrupt – but also because – well, you told me that you understood the possibilities of the human voice, and you must know what the result would be. But even independent of that, you said a moment ago that I did not love you. Well, I don't. I don't love you. Tristrem, listen to me. I don't love you as you would have me. I wish I did. But I like you. I like you as I can like few other men. Tristrem, except my mother, I have not a friend in the world. Women never care

for me, and men – well, save in the case of yourself, when their friendship has been worth the having, it belonged to someone else. Give me yours."

"It will be hard, very hard."

Miss Raritan moved from where she had been standing and glanced at the clock. "You must go now," she said, "but promise that you will try."

She held her hand to him, and Tristrem raised it to his lips and kissed the wrist. "You might as well ask me to increase my stature," he answered. And presently he dropped the hand which he held and left the house.

It was a perfect night. The moon hung like a yellow feather in the sky, and in the air was a balm that might have come from fields of tamaris and of thyme. The street itself was quiet, and as Tristrem walked on, something of the enchantment of the hour fell upon him. On leaving Miss Raritan, he had been irritated at himself. It seemed to him that when with her he was at his worst; that he stood before her dumb for love, awkward, embarrassed, and ineffectual of speech. It seemed to him that he lacked the tact of other men, and that, could she see him as he really was when unemotionalized by her presence, if the eloquence which came to him in solitude would visit him once at her side, if he could plead to her with the fervor with which he addressed the walls, full surely her answer would be other. She would make no proffer then of friendship, or if she did, it would be of that friendship which is born of love, and is better than love itself. But

as he walked on the enchantment of the night encircled him. He declined to accept her reply; he told himself that in his eagerness he had been abrupt; that a girl who was worth the winning was slow of capture; that he had expected months to give him what only years could afford, and that Time, in which all things unroll, might yet hold this gift for him. He resolved to put his impatience aside like an unbecoming coat. He would pretend to be but a friend. As a friend he would be privileged to see her, and then, some day the force and persistence of his affection would do the rest. He smiled at his own cunning. It was puerile as a jack-straw, but it seemed shrewdness itself to him. Yes, that was the way. He had done wrong; he had unmasked his batteries too soon. And such batteries! But no matter, of his patience he was now assured. On the morrow he would go to her and begin the campaign anew.

He had reached the corner and was on the point of turning down the avenue, when a hansom rattled up and wheeled so suddenly into the street through which he had come, that he stepped back a little to let it pass. As he did so he looked in at the fare. The cab was beyond him in a second, but in the momentary glimpse which he caught of the occupant, he recognized Royal Weldon. And as he continued his way, he wondered where Royal Weldon could be going.

The following evening he went to dine at the Athenæum Club. The house in Waverley Place affected him as might an empty bier in a tomb. The bread that he broke there choked him. His father was as congenial as a spectre. He only appeared when dinner

was announced, and after he had seated himself at the table he asked grace of God in a low, determined fashion, and that was the end of the conversation. Tristrem remembered that in the infrequent vacations of his school and college days, that was the way it always had been, and being tolerably convinced that that was the way it always would be, he preferred, when not expected elsewhere, to dine at the club.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.