

II

Mrs. Paynter's Boarding-House: which was not founded as an Eleemosynary Institution.

THERE was something of a flutter among the gathered boarders when Miss Weyland was seen to be entering the house, and William Klinker, who announced the fact from his place by the window, added that that had ought to help some with the supper. He reminded the parlor that there had been Porterhouse the last time. Miss Miller, from the sofa, told Mr. Klinker archly that he was *so* material. She had only the other day mastered the word, but even that is more than could be said for Mr. Klinker. Major Brooke stood by the Latrobe heater, reading the evening paper under a flaring gas-light. He habitually came down early to get it before anybody else had a chance. By Miss Miller on the sofa sat Mr. Bylash, stroking the glossy moustache which other ladies before her time had admired intensely. Despite her archness Miss Miller had heard with a pang that Miss Weyland was coming to supper, and her reason was not unconnected with this same Mr. Bylash. In earlier meetings she had vaguely noted differences between Mrs. Paynter's pretty niece and herself. True, she considered these differences all in her own favor, as, for example, her far larger back pompadour, with the puffs, but you never could tell about gentlemen.

"I'm surprised," she said to Mr. Klinker, "Mr. Bylash did n't go out to give her the glad hand, and welcome her into our humble *coturee*."

Mr. Bylash, who had been thinking of doing that very thing, said rather shortly that the ladies present quite satisfied *him*.

"And who do you think brought her around and right up to the door?" continued William Klinker, taking no

notice of their blandishments. "Hon. West — Charles Gardenia West —"

A scream from Miss Miller applauded the witty hit.

"Oh, it ain't mine," said Mr. Klinker modestly. "I heard a fellow get it off at the shop the other day. He's a pretty smooth fellow, Charles Gardenia is — a little too smooth for my way of thinking. A fellow that's always so smilin' — Oh, you Smithy!" he suddenly yelled out the window — "Smithy! Hey! — Aw, I can beat the face off you! — Awright — eight sharp at the same place. — Go on, you fat Mohawk you! . . . But say," he resumed to the parlor, "y' know that little woman is a stormy petrel for this house — that's right. Remember the last time she was here — the time we had the Porterhouse? Conference in the dining-room after supper, and the next morning out went the trunks of that red-head fellow — from Baltimore — what's his name? — Milhiser."

"Well, she has n't got any call to intrude in my affairs," said Mr. Bylash, still rather miffed. "I'm here to tell you that!"

"Oh, I ain't speakin' of the reg'lars," answered Klinker, "so don't get nervous. But say, I got kind of a hunch that here is where the little Doc gets his."

Klinker's hunch was not without foundation; this very question was being agitated at that moment in the room just over his head. Miss Weyland, having passed the parlor portières with no thought that her movements were attracting interest on the other side of them, skipped up the stairs, rapped on her Aunt Jennie's door, and ran breathlessly into the room. Her aunt was sitting by the bureau, reading a novel from the circulating library. Though she had been sitting right there since about four o'clock, only getting up once to light the gas, she had a casual air like one who is only killing a moment's time between important engagements. She looked up at the girl's entrance, and an affectionate smile lit her well-lined face.

"My dear Sharlee! I'm so glad to see you."

They kissed tenderly.

"Oh, Aunt Jennie, tell me! Is he — this man you telephoned me about — is he a little, small, dried young man, with spectacles and a brown derby, and needing a hair-cut, and the gravest, drollest manner in the world? Tell me — is he?"

"My dear, you have described him to the life. Where did you see him?"

Sharlee collapsed upon the bed. Presently she revived and outlined the situation to Aunt Jennie.

Mrs. Paynter listened with some interest. If humor is a defect, as they tell us nowadays, she was almost a faultless woman. And in her day she had been a beauty and a toast. You hear it said generously of a thousand, but it happened to be true in her case. The high-bred regularity of feature still survived, but she had let herself go in latter years, as most women will who have other things than themselves to think about, and hard things at that. Her old black dress was carelessly put on; she could look at herself in the mirror by merely leaning forward an inch or two, and it never occurred to her to do it — an uncanny thing in a woman.

"I'm sure it sounds quite like him," said Mrs. Paynter, when her niece had finished. "And so Gardiner West walked around with you. I hope, my dear, you asked him in to supper? We have an exceptionally nice Porterhouse steak to-night. But I suppose he would scorn —"

The girl interrupted her, abolishing and demolishing such a thought. Mr. West would have been only too pleased, she said, but she positively would not ask him, because of the serious work that was afoot that night.

"The pleasure I've so far given your little man," laughed she, patting her aunt's cheeks with her two hands, "has been negligible — I have his word for that — and to-night it is going to be the same, only more so."

Sharlee arose, took off her coat and furs, laid them on the bed, and going to the bureau began fixing her hair in the

back before the long mirror. No matter how well a woman looks to the untrained, or man's, eye, she can always put in some time pleasurably fixing her hair in the back.

"Now," said Sharlee, "to business. Tell me all about the little dead-beat."

"It is four weeks next Monday," said Mrs. Paynter, putting a shoe-horn in her novel to mark the place, "since the young man came to me. He was from New York, and just off the train. He said that he had been recommended to my house, but would not say by whom, nor could he give references. I did not insist on them, for I can't be too strict, Sharlee, with all the other boarding-places there are and that room standing empty for two months hand-running, and then for three months before that, before Miss Catlett, I mean. The fact is, that I ought to be over on the Avenue, where I could have only the best people. It would be infinitely more lucrative — why, my dear, you should hear Amy Marsden talk of her enormous profits! And Amy, while a dear, sweet little woman, is *not* clever! I remember as girls — but to go back even of that to the very heart of the matter, who ever heard of a clever *Wilkerson*? For she, you know, was born . . ."

"Never you mind Mrs. Marsden, Aunt Jennie," said the girl, gently drawing her back to the muttons, — "we'll make lots more money than she some day. So you gave him the room, then?"

"Yes, the room known as the third hall back. A small, neat, economical room, entirely suitable for a single gentleman. I gave him my lowest price, though I must say I did not dream then that he would spend all his time in his room, apparently having no downtown occupation, which is certainly not what one expects from gentlemen, who get low terms on the silent understanding that they will take themselves out of the house directly after breakfast. Nevertheless — will you believe it? — ten days passed and not a word was said about payment. So one morning I stopped him in the hall, as though for a pleasant talk. However, I was careful

to introduce the point, by means of an anecdote I told him, that guests here were expected to pay by the week. Of course I supposed that the hint would be sufficient."

"But it was n't, alas?"

"On the contrary, ten days again passed, and you might suppose there was no such thing as money in all this world. Then I resolved to approach him directly. I knocked on his door, and when he opened it, I told him plainly and in so many words that I would be very much gratified if he would let me have a check whenever convenient, as unfortunately I had heavy bills due that must be met. I was very much mortified, Sharlee! As I stood there facing that young man, dunning him like a grocer's clerk, it flashed into my mind to wonder what your great-grandfather, the Governor, would think if he could have looked down and seen me. For as you know, my dear, though I doubt if you altogether realize it at all times, since our young people of to-day, I regret to have to say it — though of course I do except *you* from this criticism —"

By gentle interruption and deft transition, Sharlee once more wafted the conversation back to the subject in hand. "And when you went so far as to tell him this, how did he take it?"

"He took it admirably. He told me that I need feel no concern about the matter; that while out of funds for the moment, doubtless he would be in funds again shortly. His manner was dignified, calm, unabashed —"

"But it did n't blossom, as we might say, in money?"

"As to that — no. What are you to do, Sharlee? I feel sure the man is not dishonest, — in fact he has a singularly honest face, transparently so, — but he is only somehow queer. He appears an engrossed, absent-minded young man — what is the word I want? — an eccentric. That is what he is, an engrossed young eccentric."

Sharlee leaned against the bureau and looked at her aunt thoughtfully. "Do you gather, Aunt Jennie, that he's a gentleman?"

Mrs. Paynter threw out her hands helplessly. "What does the term mean nowadays? The race of gentlemen, as the class existed in my day, seems to be disappearing from the face of the earth. We see occasional survivals of the old order, like Gardiner West or the young Byrd men, but as a whole — well, my dear, I will only say that the modern standards would have excited horror fifty years ago and —"

"Well, but according to the modern standards, do you think he is?"

"I *don't* know. He is and he is n't. But no — no — no! He is *not* one. No man can be a gentleman who is utterly indifferent to the comfort and feelings of others, do you think so?"

"Indeed, no! And is that what he is?"

"I will illustrate by an incident," said Mrs. Paynter. "As I say, this young man spends his entire time in his room, where he is, I believe, engaged in writing a book."

"Oh, me! Then he's penniless, depend upon it."

"Well, when we had the frost and freeze early last week, he came to me one night and complained of the cold in his room. You know, Sharlee, I do not rent that room as a sitting-room, nor do I expect to heat it, at the low price, other than the heat from the halls. So I invited him to make use of the dining-room in the evenings, which, as you know, with the folding-doors drawn, and the yellow lamp lit, is converted to all intents and purposes into a quiet and comfortable reading-room. Somewhat grumblingly he went down. Fifi was there as usual, doing her algebra by the lamp. The young man took not the smallest notice of her, and presently when she coughed several times — the child's cold happened to be bad that night — he looked up sharply and asked her please to stop. Fifi said that she was afraid she could n't help it. He replied that it was impossible for him to work in the room with a noise of that sort, and either the noise or he would have to vacate. So Fifi gathered up her things and left. I found her, half an hour later, in her

little bed-room, which was ice-cold, coughing and crying over her sums, which she was trying to work at the bureau. That was how I found out about it. The child would never have said a word to me."

"How simply outrageous!" said the girl, and became silent and thoughtful.

"Well, what do you think I'd better do, Sharlee?"

"I think you'd better let me waylay him in the hall after supper and tell him that the time has come when he must either pay up or pack up."

"My dear! Can you well be as blunt as that?"

"Dear Aunt Jennie, as I view it, you are not running an eleemosynary institution here?"

"Of course not," replied Aunt Jennie, who really did not know whether she was or not.

Sharlee dropped into a chair and began manicuring her pretty little nails. "The purpose of this establishment is to collect money from the transient and resident public. Now you're not a bit good at collecting money because you're so well-bred, but I'm not so awfully well-bred —"

"You are —"

"I'm bold — blunt — brazen! I'm forward. I'm resolute and grim. In short, I belong to the younger generation which you despise so —"

"I don't despise *you*, you dear —"

"Come," said Sharlee, springing up; "let's go down. I'm wild to meet Mr. Bylash again. Is he wearing the moleskin vest to-night, do you know? I was fascinated by it the last time I was here. Aunt Jennie, what is the name of this young man — the one I may be compelled to bounce?"

"His name is Queed. Did you ever —?"

"Queed? *Queed*? Q-u-e-e-d?"

"An odd name, is n't it? There were no such people in my day."

"Probably after to-morrow there will be none such once more."

"Mr. Klinker has christened him the little Doctor — a hit at his appearance and studious habits, you see — and even the servants have taken it up."

"Aunt Jennie," said Sharlee at the door, "when you introduce the little Doctor to me, refer to me as your business woman, won't you? Say 'This is my niece, Miss Weyland, who looks after my business affairs for me,' or something like that, will you? It will explain to him why I, a comparative stranger, show such an interest in his financial affairs."

Mrs. Paynter said, "Certainly, my dear," and they went down, the older lady disappearing toward the dining-room. In the parlor Sharlee was greeted cordially and somewhat respectfully. Major Brooke, who appeared to have taken an extra toddy in honor of her coming, or for any other reason why, flung aside his newspaper and seized both her hands. Mr. Bylash, in the moleskin waistcoat, sure enough, bowed low and referred to her agreeably as "stranger," nor did he again return to Miss Miller's side on the sofa. That young lady was gay and giggling, but watchful withal. When Sharlee was not looking, Miss Miller's eye, rather hard now, roved over her ceaselessly from the point of her toe to the top of her feather. What was the trick she had, the little way with her, that so delightfully unlocked the gates of gentlemen's hearts?

At supper they were lively and gay. The butter and preserves were in front of Sharlee, for her to help to; by her side sat Fifi, the young daughter of the house. Major Brooke sat at the head of the table and carved the Porterhouse, upon which when the eyes of William Klinker fell, they irrepressibly shot forth gleams. At the Major's right sat his wife, a pale, depressed, nervous woman, as anybody who had lived thirty years with the gallant officer her husband had a right to be. She was silent, but the Major talked a great deal, not particularly well. Much the same may be said of Mr. Bylash and Miss Miller. Across the table from Mrs. Brooke stood an empty chair. It belonged to the little

Doctor, Mr. Queed. Across the table from Sharlee stood another. This one belonged to the old professor, Nicolovius. When the meal was well along, Nicolovius came in, bowed around the table in his usual formal way, and silently took his place. While Sharlee liked everybody in the boarding-house, including Miss Miller, Professor Nicolovius was the only one of them that she considered at all interesting. This was because of his strongly-cut face, like the grand-ducal villain in a ten-twenty-thirty melodrama, and his habit of saying savage things in a soft, purring voice. He was rude to everybody, and particularly rude, so Sharlee thought, to her. As for the little Doctor, he did not come in at all. Half-way through supper, Sharlee looked at her aunt and gave a meaning glance at the empty seat.

"I don't know what to make of it," said Mrs. Paynter *sotto voce*. "He's usually so regular."

To the third floor she dispatched the colored girl Emma, to knock upon Mr. Queed's door. Presently Emma returned with the report that she had knocked, but could obtain no answer.

"He's probably fallen asleep over his book," murmured Sharlee. "I feel certain it's that kind of book."

But Mrs. Paynter said that he rarely slept, even at night.

". . . Right on my own front porch, mind you!" Major Brooke was declaiming. "And, gentlemen, I shook my finger in his face and said, 'Sir, I never yet met a Republican who was not a rogue!' Yes, sir, that is just what I told him —"

"I'm afraid," said Nicolovius, smoothly, — it was the only word he uttered during the meal, — "your remark harrows Miss Weyland with reminders of the late Mr. Surface."

The Major stopped short, and a silence fell over the table. It was promptly broken by Mrs. Paynter, who invited Mrs. Brooke to have a second cup of coffee. Sharlee looked at her plate and said nothing. Everybody thought that the old professor's remark was in bad taste, for it was generally known that Henry G. Surface was one subject that even

Miss Weyland's intimate friends never mentioned to her. Nicolovius, however, appeared absolutely unconcerned by the boarders' silent rebuke. He ate on, rapidly but abstemiously, and finished before Mr. Bylash, who had had twenty minutes' start of him.

The last boarder rising drew shut the folding-doors into the parlor, while the ladies of the house remained to superintend and assist in clearing off the supper things. The last boarder this time was Mr. Bylash, who tried without success to catch Miss Weyland's eye as he slid to the doors. He hung around in the parlor waiting for her till 8.30, at which time, having neither seen nor heard sign of her, he took Miss Miller out to the moving-picture shows. In the dining-room, when Emma had trayed out the last of the things, the ladies put away the unused silver, watered the geranium, set back some of the chairs, folded up the white cloth, placing it in the sideboard drawer, spread the pretty Turkey-red one in its stead, set the reading lamp upon it; and just then the clock struck eight.

"Now then," said Sharlee.

So the three sat down and held a council of war as to how little Doctor Queed, the young man who would n't pay his board, was to be brought into personal contact with Charlotte Lee Weyland, the grim and resolute collector. Various stratagems were proposed, amid much merriment. But the collector herself adhered to her original idea of a masterly waiting game.

"Only trust me," said she. "He can't spend the rest of his life shut up in that room in a state of dreadful siege. Hunger or thirst will force him out; he'll want to buy some of those apples, or to mail a letter —"

Fifi, who sat on the arm of Sharlee's chair, laughed and coughed. "He never writes any. And he never has gotten but one, and that came to-night."

"Fifi, did you take your syrup before supper? Well, go and take it this minute."

"Mother, it does n't do any good."

"The doctor gave it to you, my child, and it's going to make you better soon."

Sharlee followed Fifi out with troubled eyes. However, Mrs. Paynter at once drew her back to the matter in hand.

"Sharlee, do you know what would be the very way to settle this little difficulty? To write him a formal, business-like letter. We'll —"

"No, I've thought of that, Aunt Jennie, and I don't believe it's the way. A letter could n't get to the bottom of the matter. You see, we want to find out something about this man, and why he isn't paying, and whether there is reason to think he can and will pay. Besides, I think he needs a talking to on general principles."

"Well — but how are you going to do it, my dear?"

"Play a Fabian game. Wait! — be stealthy and wait! If he does n't come out of hiding to-night, I'll return for him to-morrow. I'll keep on coming, night after night, night after night, n— Some one's knocking —"

"Come in," said Mrs. Paynter, looking up.

The door leading into the hall opened, and the man himself stood upon the threshold, looking at them absently.

"May I have some supper, Mrs. Paynter? I was closely engaged and failed to notice the time."

Sharlee arose. "Certainly. I'll get you some at once," she answered innocently enough. But to herself she was saying: "The Lord has delivered him into my hand."

III

Encounter between Charlotte Lee Weyland, a Landlady's Agent, and Doctor Queed, a Young Man who would n't pay his Board.

SHARLEE glanced at Mrs. Paynter, who caught herself and said: "Mr. Queed, my niece — Miss Weyland."

But over the odious phrase, "my business woman," her lips boggled and balked; not to save her life could she bring herself to damn her own niece with such an introduction.

Noticing the omission and looking through the reasons for it as through window-glass, Sharlee smothered a laugh, and bowed. Mr. Queed bowed, but did not laugh or even smile. He drew up a chair at his usual place and sat down. As by an involuntary reflex, his left hand dropped toward his coat-pocket, whence the top edges of a book could be descried protruding. Mrs. Paynter moved vaguely toward the door. As for her business woman, she made at once for the kitchen, where Emma and her faithful co-worker and mother, Laura, rose from their supper to assist her. With her own hands the girl cut a piece of the Porterhouse for Mr. Queed. Creamed potatoes, two large spoonfuls, were added; two rolls; some batterbread; coffee, which had to be diluted with a little hot water to make out the full cup; butter; damson preserves in a saucer: all of which duly set forth and arranged on a shiny black "waiter."

"Enough for a whole platform of doctors," said Sharlee, critically reviewing the spread. "Thank you, Emma."

She took the tray in both hands and pushed open the swing-doors with her side, thus making her ingress to the dining-room in a sort of crab-fashion. Mrs. Paynter was