

"I have already read it."

"Ah! How did it strike you?"

"You ask me that?"

"Certainly," said Colonel Cowles, a little surprised.

"Well, since you ask me, I will say that I thought it rather amusing."

The Colonel looked nettled. He was by nature a choleric man, but in his age he had learned the futility of disputation and affray, and nowadays kept a tight rein upon himself.

"You are frank sir — 'tis a commendable quality. Doubtless your work will put my own poor efforts to the blush."

"I shall leave you to judge of that, Colonel Cowles."

The Colonel, abandoning his hospitable plan of inviting his new assistant to sup with him at the club, bowed with dignity, and Queed eagerly left him. Glancing at his watch in the elevator, the young man figured that the interview, including going and coming, would stand him in an hour's time, which was ten minutes more than he had allowed for it.

V

Selections from Contemporary Opinions of Mr. Queed; also concerning Henry G. Surface, his Life and Deeds; of Fifi, the Landlady's Daughter, and how she happened to look up Altruism in the Dictionary.

A MONTH later, one icy afternoon, Charles Gardiner West ran into Colonel Cowles at the club, where the Colonel, a lone widower, repaired each day at six P. M., there to talk over the state of the Union till nine-thirty.

"Colonel," said West, dropping into a chair, "man to man, what is your opinion of Doctor Queed's editorials?"

"They are unanswerable," said the Colonel, and consulted his favorite ante-prandial refreshment.

West laughed. "Yes, but from the standpoint of the general public, Constant Reader, Pro Bono Publico, and all that?"

"No subscriber will ever be angered by them."

"Would you say that they helped the editorial page or not?"

"They lend to it an academic elegance, a scientific stateliness, a certain grand and austere majesty —"

"Colonel, I asked you for your opinion of those articles."

"Damn it, sir," roared the Colonel, "I've never read one."

Later West repeated the gist of this conversation to Miss Weyland, who ornamented with him a tiny dinner given that evening at the home of their very good friends, Mr. and Mrs. Stewart Byrd.

It was a beautiful little dinner, as befitted the hospitable distinction of the givers. The Stewart Byrds were hosts among a thousand. In him, as it further happens, West (himself the beau ideal of so many) had from long ago recognized

his own paragon and pattern; a worthy one, indeed, this tall young man whose fine abilities and finer faiths were already writing his name so large upon the history of his city. About the dim-lit round of his table there were gathered but six this evening, including the host and hostess; the others, besides Sharlee Weyland and West, being Beverley Byrd and Miss Avery: the youngest of the four Byrd brothers, and heir with them to one of the largest fortunes in the State; and the only daughter of old Avery, who came to us from Mauch Chunk, Pa., his money preceding him in a special train of box cars, especially invented for the transportation of Pennsylvania millions to places where the first families congregate.

"And I had to confess that I'd never read one either. I did begin one," said West — "it was called 'Elementary Principles of Incidence and Distribution,' I remember — but the hour was eleven-thirty and I fell asleep."

"I know exactly how you felt about it," said Sharlee, "for I have read them all — *moi!*"

He looked at her with boundless admiration. "His one reader!"

"There are two of us, if you please. I think of getting up a club — Associated Sons and Daughters of Mr. Queed's Faithful Followers; President, Me. I'll make the other member Secretary, for he is experienced in that work. He's at present Secretary of the Tax Reform League in New York. Did Colonel Cowles show you the wonderful letter that came from him, asking the name of the man who was writing the *Post's* masterly tax articles, et cetera, et cetera?"

"No — really! But tell me, how have you, as President, enjoyed them?"

"I have n't understood a single word in any of them. Where on earth did he dig up his fearful vocabulary? Yet it is the plain duty of both of us to read these articles: you as one of his employers, I as the shrewd landlady's agent who keeps a watchful eye upon the earning power of her boarders."

West mused. "He has a wonderful genius for crushing all the interest out of any subject he touches, has n't he? Yet manifestly the first duty of an editorial is to get itself read. How old do you think he is?"

"Oh — anywhere from twenty-five to — forty-seven."

"He'll be twenty-four this month. I see him sometimes at the office, you know, where he still treats me like an intrusive subscription agent. In some ways, he is undoubtedly the oldest man in the world. In another way he has n't any age at all. Spiritually he is unborn — he simply does n't exist at all. I diagnose his complaint as ingrowing egoism of a singularly virulent variety."

It was beyond Sharlee's power to controvert this diagnosis. Mr. Queed had in fact impressed her as the most frankly and grossly self-centred person she had ever seen in her life. But unlike West, her uppermost feeling in regard to him was a strong sense of pity. She knew things about his life that West did not know and probably never would. For though the little Doctor of Mrs. Paynter's had probably not intended to give her a confidence, and certainly had no right to do so, she had thus regarded what he said to her in the dining-room that night, and of his pathetic situation in regard to a father she never meant to say a word to anybody.

"I sized him up for a remarkable man," said she, "when I saw the wonderful way he sat upon his hat that afternoon. Don't you remember? He struck me then as the most natural, unconscious, and direct human being I ever saw — don't you think that? — and now think of his powers of concentration. All his waking time, except what he gives to the *Post*, goes to that awful book of his. He is ridiculous now because his theory of life is ridiculous. But suppose it popped into his head some day to switch all that directness and concentrated energy in some other direction. Don't you think he might be rather a formidable young person?"

West conceded that there might be something in that. And happening to glance across the flower-sweet table at

the moment, he was adroitly detached and re-attached by the superbly "finished" Miss Avery.

The little dinner progressed. Nor was this the only spot in town where evening meals were going forward amid stimulating talk. Far away over the town, at the same hour, the paying guests of Mrs. Paynter's were gathered about her hospitable board, plying the twin arts of supping and talking. And as Sharlee's fellow-diners talked of Mr. Queed, it chanced that Mr. Queed's fellow-suppers were talking of Sharlee, or at any rate of her family's famous misfortune. Mr. Queed, it is true, did not appreciate this fact, for the name of the female agent who had taken his Twenty from him could not have been more unknown to him if she had been a dweller in Phrygia or far Cappadocia.

Major Brooke told, not by request, one of his well-known stories about how he had flouted and routed the Republicans in 1875. The plot of these stories was always the same, but the setting shifted about here and there, and this one had to do with a county election in which, the Major said, the Republicans and negroes had gone the limit trying to swindle the Democrats out of the esteemed offices.

"And I said, 'You' — the ladies will excuse me, I'm sure — 'You lying rascal,' s' I, 'don't you dare to contradict me! You're all tarred with the same pitch,' s' I. 'Everything you touch turns corrupt and rotten. Look at Henry G. Surface,' s' I. 'The finest fellow God ever made, till the palsied hand of Republicanism fell upon him, and now cankering and rotting in jail —'"

"But Henry G. Surface was n't rotting in jail in 1875," said William Klinker, and boldly winked at the little Doctor.

The Major, disconcerted for an instant by his anachronism, recovered superbly. "My vision, sir, was prophetic. The stain was upon him. The cloven foot had already been betrayed. . . ."

"And who was Henry G. Surface?" inquired Mr. Queed. "What! You have n't heard that infamous story!"

cried the Major, with the surprised delight of the inveterate raconteur who has unexpectedly stumbled upon an audience.

A chair-leg scraped, and Professor Nicolovius was standing, bowing in his sardonic way to Mrs. Paynter.

"Since I have happened to hear it often, madam, through Major Brooke's tireless kindness, you will perhaps be so good as to excuse me."

And he stalked out of the room, head up, his auburn goatee stabbing the atmosphere before him, in rather a heavy silence.

"Pish!" snapped the Major, when the door had safely shut. And tapping his forehead significantly, he gave his head a few solemn wags and launched upon the worn biography of Henry G. Surface.

Tattered with much use as the story is, and was, the boarders listened with a perennial interest while Major Brooke expounded the familiar details. His wealth of picturesque language we may safely omit, and briefly remind the student of the byways of history how Henry G. Surface found himself, during the decade following Appomattox, with his little world at his feet. He was thirty at the time, handsome, gifted, high-spirited, a brilliant young man who already stood high in the councils of the State. But he was also restless in disposition, arrogant, overweeningly vain, and ambitious past all belief — "a yellow streak in him, and we did n't know it!" bellowed the Major. Bitterly chagrined by his failure to secure, from a legislature of the early seventies, the United States Senatorship which he had confidently expected, young Surface, in a burst of anger and resentment, committed the unforgivable sin. He went over bag and baggage to the other side, to the "nigger party" whom all his family, friends, and relations, all his "class," everybody else with his instincts and traditions, were desperately struggling, by hook and by crook, to crush.

In our mild modern preferences as between presidents, or this governor and that, we catch no reminiscence of the

fierce antagonisms of the elections of reconstruction days. The idolized young tribune of the people became a Judas Iscariot overnight, with no silver pieces as the price of his apostasy. If he expected immediate preferment from the other camp, he was again bitterly disappointed. Life meantime had become unbearable to him. He was ostracized more studiously than any leper; it is said that his own father cut him when they passed each other in the street. His young wife died, heartbroken, it was believed, by the flood of hatred and vilification that poured in upon her husband. One man alone stood by Surface in his downfall, his classmate and friend of his bosom from the cradle, John Randolph Weyland, a good man and a true. Weyland's affection never faltered. When Surface withdrew from the State with a heart full of savage rancor, Weyland went every year or two to visit him, first in Chicago and later in New York, where the exile was not slow in winning name and fortune as a daring speculator. And when Weyland died, leaving a widow and infant daughter, he gave a final proof of his trust by making Surface sole trustee of his estate, which was a large one for that time and place. Few have forgotten how the political traitor rewarded this misplaced confidence. The crash came within a few months. Surface was arrested in the company of a woman whom he referred to as his wife. The trust fund, saving a fraction, was gone, swallowed up to stay some rickety deal. Surface was convicted of embezzlement and sentenced to ten years at hard labor, and every Democrat in the State cried, "I told you so." What had become of him after his release from prison, nobody knew; some of the boarders said that he was living in the west, or in Australia; others, that he was not living anywhere, unless on the shores of perpetual torment. All agreed that the alleged second Mrs. Surface had long since died — all, that is, but Klinker, who said that she had only pretended to die in order to make a fade-away with the gate receipts. For many persons believed, it seemed, that Surface, by clever juggling of his

books, had managed to "hold out" a large sum of money in the enforced settlement of his affairs. At any rate, very little of it ever came back to the family of the man who had put trust in him, and that was why the daughter, whose name was Charlotte Lee Weyland, now worked for her daily bread.

That Major Brooke's hearers found this story of ever-green interest was natural enough. For besides the brilliant blackness of the narrative, there was the close personal connection that all Paynterites had with some of its chief personages. Did not the sister-in-law of John Randolph Weyland sit and preside over them daily, pouring their coffee morning and night with her own hands? And did not the very girl whose fortune had been stolen, the bereft herself, come now and then to sit among them, occupying that identical chair which Mr. Bylash could touch by merely putting out his hand? Henry G. Surface's story? Why, Mrs. Paynter's wrote it!

These personal bearings were of course lost upon Mr. Queed, the name Weyland being utterly without significance to him. He left the table the moment he had absorbed all the supper he wanted. In the hall he ran upon Professor Nicolovius, the impressive-looking master of Greek at Milner's Collegiate School, who, already hatted and over-coated, was drawing on his gloves under the depressed fancy chandelier. The old professor glanced up at the sound of footsteps and favored Queed with a bland smile.

"I can't resist taking our doughty swashbuckler down a peg or two every now and then," said he. "Did you ever know such an interminable ass?"

"Really, I never thought about it," said the young man, raising his eye-brows in surprise and annoyance at being addressed.

"Then take my word for it. You'll not find his match in America. You show your wisdom, at any rate, in giving as little of your valuable time as possible to our charming supper-table."

"That hardly argues any Solomonic wisdom, I fancy."

"You're in the hands of the Philistines here, Mr. Queed," said Nicolovius, snapping his final button. "May I say that I have read some of your editorials in the *Post* with — ah — pleasure and profit? I should feel flattered if you would come to see me in my room some evening, where I can offer you, at any rate, a fire and a so-so cigar."

"Thank you. However, I do not smoke," said Doctor Queed, and, bowing coldly to the old professor, started rapidly up the stairs.

Aloft the young man went to his scriptorium, happy in the thought that five hours of incorruptible leisure and unswerving devotion to his heart's dearest lay before him. It had been a day when the *Post* did not require him; hour by hour since breakfast he had fared gloriously upon his book. But to-night his little room was cold; unendurably cold; not even the flamings of genius could overcome its rigor; and hardly half an hour had passed before he became aware that his sanctum was altogether uninhabitable. Bitterly he faced the knowledge that he must fare forth into the outer world of the dining-room that night; irritably he gathered up his books and papers.

Half-way down the first flight a thought struck Queed, and he retraced his steps. The last time that he had been compelled to the dining-room the landlady's daughter had been there — (it was all an accident, poor child! Had n't she vowed to herself never to intrude on the little Doctor again?) — and, stupidly breaking the point of her pencil, had had the hardihood to ask him for the loan of his knife. Mr. Queed was determined that this sort of thing should not occur again. A method for enforcing his determination, at once firm and courteous, had occurred to him. One could never tell when trespassers would stray into the dining-room — his dining-room by right of his exalted claim. Rummaging in his bottom bureau drawer, he produced a placard, like a narrow little sign-board, and tucking it under his arm, went on downstairs.

The precaution was by no means superfluous. Disgustingly enough the landlady's daughter was once more in his dining-room before him, the paraphernalia of her algebra spread over half the Turkey-red cloth. Fifi looked up, plainly terrified at his entrance and his forbidding expression. It was her second dreadful blunder, poor luckless little wight! She had faithfully waited a whole half-hour, and Mr. Queed had shown no signs of coming down. Never had he waited so long as this when he meant to claim the dining-room. Mrs. Paynter's room, nominally heated by a flume from the Latrobe heater in the parlor, was noticeably coolish on a wintry night. Besides, there was no table in it, and everybody knows that algebra is hard enough under the most favorable conditions, let alone having to do it on your knee. It seemed absolutely safe; Fifi had yielded to the summons of the familiar comforts; and now —

"Oh—how do you do?" she was saying in a frightened voice.

Mr. Queed bowed, indignantly. Silently he marched to his chair, the one just opposite, and sat down in offended majesty. To Fifi it seemed that to get up at once and leave the room, which she would gladly have done, would be too crude a thing to do, too gross a rebuke to the little Doctor's Ego. She was wrong, of course, though her sensibilities were indubitably right. Therefore she feigned enormous engrossment in her algebra, and struggled to make herself as small and inoffensive as she could.

The landlady's daughter wore a Peter Thompson suit of blue serge, which revealed a few inches of very thin white neck. She was sixteen and reddish-haired, and it was her last year at the High School. The reference is to Fifi's completion of the regular curriculum, and not to any impending promotion to a still Higher School. She was a fond, uncomplaining little thing, who had never hurt anybody's feelings in her life, and her eyes, which were light blue, had just that look of ethereal sweetness you see in Burne-Jones's women and for just that same reason. Her syrup

she took with commendable faithfulness; the doctor, in rare visits, spoke cheerily of the time when she was to be quite strong and well again; but there were moments when Sharlee Weyland, looking at her little cousin's face in repose, felt her heart stop still.

Fifi dallied with her algebra, hoping and praying that she would not *have* to cough. She had been very happy all that day. There was no particular reason for it; so it was the nicest kind of happiness, the kind that comes from inside, which even the presence of the little Doctor could not take away from her. Heaven knew that Fifi harbored no grudge against Mr. Queed, and she had not forgotten what Sharlee said about being gentle with him. But how to be gentle with so austere a young Socrates? Raising her head upon the pretext of turning a page, Fifi stole a hurried glance at him.

The first thing Mr. Queed had done on sitting down was to produce his placard, silently congratulating himself on having brought it. Selecting the book which he would be least likely to need, he shoved it well forward, nearly half-way across the table, and against the volume propped up his little pasteboard sign, the printed part staring straight toward Fifi. The sign was an old one which he had chanced to pick up years ago at the Astor Library. It read:

SILENCE

Arch-type and model of courteous warning!

When Fifi read the little Doctor's sign, her feelings were not in the least wounded, insufficiently subtle though some particular people might have thought its admonition to be. On the contrary, it was only by the promptest work in getting her handkerchief into her mouth that she avoided laughing out loud. The two of them alone in the room and his *Silence* sign gazing at her like a pasteboard Gorgon!

Fifi became more than ever interested in Mr. Queed. An intense and strictly feminine curiosity filled her soul to know something of the nature of that work which demanded

so stern a noiselessness. Observing rigorously the printed Rule of the Dining-Room, she could not forbear to pilfer glance after glance at the promulgator of it. Mr. Queed was writing, not reading, to-night. He wrote very slowly on half-size yellow pads, worth seventy-five cents a dozen, using the books only for reference. Now he tore off a sheet only partly filled with his small handwriting, and at the head of a new sheet inscribed a Roman numeral, with a single word under that. Like her cousin Sharlee at an earlier date, Fifi experienced a desire to study out, upside down, what this heading was. Several peeks were needed, with artful attention to algebra between whiles, before she was at last convinced that she had it. Undoubtedly it was

XVIII

ALTRUISM

There was nothing enormous about Fifi's vocabulary, but she well knew what to do in a case like this. Behind her stood a battered little walnut bookcase, containing the Paynter library. After a safe interval of absorption in her sums, she pushed back her chair with the most respectful quietude and pulled out a tall volume. The pages of it she turned with blank studious face but considerable inner expectancy: Af — Ai — Al — Alf. . . .

A giggle shattered the academic calm, and Fifi, in horror, realized that she was the author of it. She looked up quickly, and her worst fears were realized. Mr. Queed was staring at her, as one scarcely able to credit his own senses, icy rebuke piercing through and overflowing his great round spectacles.

"I beg your pardon! — Mr. Queed. It — it slipped out, really —"

But the young man thought that the time had come when this question of noise in his dining-room must be settled once and for all.

"Indeed? Be kind enough to explain the occasion of it."

"Why," said Fifi, too truthful to prevaricate and completely cowed, "it — it was only the meaning of a word here. It — was silly of me. I — I can't explain it — exactly —"

"Suppose you try. Since your merriment interrupts my work, I claim the privilege of sharing it."

"Well! I — I — happened to see that word at the head of the page you are writing —"

"Proceed."

"I — I looked it up in the dictionary. It *says*," she read out with a gulp and a cough, "it means 'self-sacrificing devotion to the interests of others.'"

The poor child thought her point must now be indelicately plain, but the lips of Doctor Queed merely emitted another close-clipped: "Proceed."

At a desperate loss as she was, Fifi was suddenly visited by an idea. "Oh! I see. You're — you're writing *against* altruism, are n't you?"

"What leads you to that conclusion, if I may ask?"

"Why — I — I suppose it's the — way you — you do. Of course I ought n't to have said it —"

"Go on. What way that I do?"

Poor Fifi saw that she was floundering in ever more deeply. With the boldness of despair she blurted out: "Well — one thing — you sent me out of the room that night — when I coughed, you know. I — I don't understand about altruism like you do, but I — should think it was — my interests to stay here —"

There followed a brief silence, which made Fifi more miserable than any open rebuke, and then Mr. Queed said in a dry tone: "I am engaged upon a work of great importance to the public, I may say to posterity. Perhaps you can appreciate that such a work is entitled to the most favorable conditions in which to pursue it."

"Of course. Indeed I understand perfectly, Mr. Queed," said Fifi, immediately touched by what seemed like kindness from him. And she added innocently: "All men —"

writing men, I mean — feel that way about their work — I suppose. I remember Mr. Sutro who used to have the very same room you're in now. He was writing a five-act play, all in poetry, to show the horrors of war, and he used to say —"

The young man involuntarily shuddered. "I have nothing to do with other men. I am thinking," he said with rather an unfortunate choice of words, "only of myself."

"Oh — I see! Now I understand exactly!"

"What is it that you see and understand so exactly?"

"Why, the way you feel about altruism. You believe in it for other people, but not for yourself! Is n't that right?"

They stared across the table at each other: innocent Fifi, who barely knew the meaning of altruism, but had practiced it from the time she could practice anything, and the little Doctor, who knew everything about altruism that social science would ever formulate, and had stopped right there. All at once, his look altered; from objective it became subjective. The question seemed suddenly to hook onto something inside, like a still street-car gripping hold of a cable and beginning to move; the mind's eye of the young man appeared to be seized and swept inward. Presently without a word he resumed his writing.

Fifi was much disturbed at the effect of her artless question, and just when everything was beginning to go so nicely too. In about half an hour, when she got up to retire, she said timidly: —

"I'm sorry if I — I was rude just now, Mr. Queed. Indeed, I did n't mean to be. . . ."

"I did not say that you were rude," he answered without looking up.

But at the door Fifi was arrested by his voice.

"Why do you think it to your advantage to work in here?"

"It's — it's a good deal warmer, you know," said Fifi, flustered, "and — then of course there's the table and lamp. But it's quite all right upstairs — really!"

He made no answer.