

X

Of Fifi on Friendship, and who would be sorry if Queed died; of Queed's Mad Impulse, sternly overcome; of his Indignant Call upon Nicolovius, the Old Professor.

COULD I interrupt you for just a minute, Mr. Queed?"

"No. It is not time yet."

"Cicero's so horrid to-night."

"Don't scatter your difficulties, as I've told you before. Gather them all together and have them ready to present to me at the proper time. I shall make the usual pause," said Mr. Queed, "at nine sharp."

Fifi, after all, had been selfish enough to take the little Doctor at his word. He had both given her the freedom of his dining-room and ordered her to bring her difficulties to him, instead of sitting there and noisily crying over them. And she had done his bidding, night after night. For his part he had stuck manfully by his moment of reckless generosity, no matter how much he may have regretted it. He helped Fifi, upon her request, without spoken protest of censure. But he insisted on doing it after an ironclad schedule: Absolute silence until nine o'clock; then an interlude for the solving of difficulties; absolute silence after that; then at 9.45 a second interlude for the solving of the last difficulties of the night. The old rule of the dining-room, the *Silence* sign, had been necessarily suspended, but the young man enforced his schedule of hours far more strictly than the average railroad.

"Nine o'clock," he announced presently. "Bring me your difficulties."

Fifi's brain was at low ebb to-night. She came around

with several books, and he jabbed his pencil at her open Cicero with some contempt.

"You have a fundamental lack of acquaintance with Latin grammar, Miss — Miss Fifi. You badly need —"

"Why don't you call me Fifi, Mr. Queed? That's what all my friends call me."

He stared at her startled; she thought his eyes looked almost terrified. "My dear young lady! I'm not your friend."

A rare color sprang into Fifi's pallid cheeks: "I — I thought you liked me — from your being so good about helping me with my lessons — and everything."

Queed cleared his throat. "I do like you — in a way. Yes — in that way — I like you very well. I will call you F — Fifi, if you wish. But — friends! Oh, no! They take up more time than such a man as I can afford."

"I don't think I would take up one bit more time as your friend than I do now," said Fifi, in a plaintive voice.

Queed, uncomfortably aware of the flying minutes, felt like saying that that was impossible.

"Oh, I know what I'm talking about, I assure you," said the possessor of two friends in New York. "I have threshed the whole question out in a practical way."

"Suppose," said Fifi, "your book came out and you were very famous, but all alone in the world, without a friend. And you died and there was not one single person to cry and miss you — would you think that was a — a successful life?"

"Oh, I suppose so! Yes, yes!"

"But don't — don't you want to have people like you and be your friend?"

"My dear young lady, it is not a question of what I want. I was not put here in the world to frivol through a life of gross pleasure. I have serious work to do in the service of humankind, and I can do it only by rigid concentration and ruthless elimination of the unessential. Surely you can grasp that?"

"But — if you died to-morrow," said Fifi, fearfully fasci-

nated by this aspect of the young man's majestic isolation, — "don't you know of anybody who'd be really and truly sorry?"

"Really, I've never thought of it, but doubtless my two friends in New York would be sorry after their fashion. They, I believe, are all."

"No they are n't! There's somebody else!"

Queed supposed she was going to say God, but he dutifully inquired, "Who?"

Fifi looked decidedly disappointed. "I thought you knew," she said, gazing at him with childlike directness. "Me."

Queed's eyes fell. There was a brief silence. The young man became aware of a curious sensation in his chest which he did not understand in the least, but which he was not prepared to describe as objectionable. To pass over it, and to bring the conversation to an immediate close, he rapped the open book austere with his pencil.

"We must proceed with the difficulties. Let me hear you try the passage. Come! *Quam ob rem, Quirites. . .*"

The nine o'clock difficulties proceeded with, and duly cleared up, Fifi did not stay for the second, or 9.45, interlude. She closed *M. T. Ciceronis Orationes Selectae*, gathered together her other paraphernalia, and then she said suddenly: —

"I may leave school next week, Mr. Queed. I — don't think I'm going to graduate."

He looked up, surprised and displeased. "Why on earth do you think that?"

"Well, you see, they don't think I'm strong enough to keep up the work right now. The Doctor was here to-day, and that's what he says. It's silly, I think — I know I am."

Queed was playing the devil's tattoo with his pencil, scowling somewhat nervously. "Did you want to graduate particularly?"

A look of exquisite wistfulness swept the child's face, and was gone. "Yes, I wanted to — lots. But I won't mind so

much after I've had time to get used to it. You know the way people are."

There was a silence, during which the young man wrestled with the sudden mad idea of offering to help Fifi with all her lessons each night — not merely with the difficulties — thus enabling her to keep up with her class with a minimum of work. Where such an impulse came from he could not conjecture. He put it down with a stern hand. Personally, he felt, he might be almost willing to make this splendid display of altruism; but for the sake of posterity and the common good, he could not dream of stealing so much time from the *Magnum Opus*.

"Well!" he said rather testily. "That is too bad."

"I know you'll be glad not to have me bothering you any more with my lessons, and all."

"I will not say that."

He looked at Fifi closely, examined her face in a searching, personal manner, which he had probably never before employed in reviewing a human countenance.

"You don't look well — no, not in the least. You are not well. You are a sick girl, and you ought to be in bed at this moment."

Fifi colored with pleasure. "No," she said, "I am not well."

Indeed Fifi was not well. Her cheek spoke of the three pounds she had lost since he had first helped her with her difficulties, and the eleven pounds before that. The hand upon the Turkey-red cloth was of such transparent thinness that you were sure you could see the lamplight shining through. Her eyes were startling, they were so full of other-worldly sweetness and so ringed beneath with shadows.

"And if I stopped coming down here to work nights," queried Fifi shamelessly, "would you — miss me?"

"Miss you?"

"You would n't — you would n't! You'd only be glad not to have me around —"

"I can truthfully say," said the little Doctor, glancing at

his watch, "that I am sorry you are prevented from graduating."

Fifi retired in a fit of coughing. She and her cough had played fast and loose with Queed's great work that evening, and, moreover, it took him a minute and a half to get her out of his mind after she had gone. Not long afterwards, he discovered that the yellow sheet he wrote upon was the last of his pad. That meant that he must count out time to go upstairs and get another one.

Count out time! Why, that was what his whole life had come down to now! What was it but a steady counting out of ever more and more time?

The thirty days of hours ceded to Klinker were up, and instead of at once bringing the prodigal experiment to a close, Doctor Queed found himself terribly tempted to listen to his trainer's entreaties and extend by fifty per centum the time allotted to the gymnasium and open-air pedestrianism. He could not avoid the knowledge that he felt decidedly better since he had begun the exercises, especially during these last few days. For a week "the" headache and he had been strangers. Much more important, he was conscious of bringing to his work, not indeed a livelier interest, for that would have been impossible, but an increasing vitality and an enlarged capacity. He kept the most careful sort of tabs upon himself, and his records seemed to show, at least for the past week or two, that his net volume of work had not been seriously lowered by the hour per day wrung from the Schedule. The exercises, then, seemed to be paying their own freight. And besides all this, they were clearly little mile-stones on the path which led men to physical competency and the ability to protect their articles from public affront.

Still, an hour out was an hour out — three hundred and sixty-five hours a year — three months' delay in finishing his book. Making allowance for increased productivity, a month and a half's delay. And that was only a beginning. The *Post* — Klinker's Exercises for All

Parts of the Body — Klinker himself, who called frequently — now Fifi (eighteen minutes this very evening) — who could say where the mad dissipation would end? On some uncharted isle in the far South Seas, perchance, a man might be let alone to do his work. But in this boarding-house, it was clear now, the effort was foredoomed and hopeless. Once make the smallest concession to the infernal ubiquity of the race, once let the topmost bar of your gate down never so little, and the whole accursed public descended with a whoop to romp all over the premises. What, oh, what was the use of trying? . . .

"Ah, Mr. Queed — well met! Won't you stop in and see me a little while? You're enormously busy, I know — but possibly I can find something to interest you in my poor little collection of books."

Nicolovius, coming up the stairs, had met Queed coming down, pad in hand. The impertinence of the old professor's invitation fitted superbly with the bitterness of the little Doctor's humor. It pressed the martyr's crown upon his brow till the perfectness of his grudge against a hateful world lacked nor jot nor tittle.

"Oh, certainly! Certainly!" he replied, with the utmost indignation.

Nicolovius, bowing courteously, pushed open the door.

It was known in the boarding-house that the remodeling of the Second Hall Back into a private bathroom for Nicolovius had been done at his own expense, and rumor had it that for his two rooms — his "suite," as Mrs. Paynter called it — he paid down the sum of eighteen dollars weekly. The bed-sitting-room into which he now ushered his guest was the prettiest room ever seen by Mr. Queed, who had seen few pretty rooms in his life. Certainly it was a charming room of a usual enough type: lamplit and soft-carpeted; brass fittings about the fireplace where a coal fire glowed; a large red reading-table with the customary litter of books and periodicals; comfortable chairs to sit in; two uncommonly pretty mahogany bookcases with quaint

leaded windows. The crude central identity about all bedrooms that had hitherto come within Queed's ken, to wit, the bed, seemed in this remarkable room to be wanting altogether. For how was he, with his practical inexperience, to know that the handsome leather lounge in the bay-window had its in'ards crammed full of sheets, and blankets, and hings and collapsible legs?

The young man gravitated instinctively toward the book-cases. His expert eye swept over the titles, and his gloom lightened a little.

"You have some fair light reading here, I see," he said, plucking out a richly bound volume of Lecky's *History of European Morals*.

Nicolovius, who was observing him closely, smiled to himself. "Ah, yes. I'm the merest dilettante, without your happiness of being a specialist of authority."

The old professor was a tall man, though somewhat stooped and shrunken, and his head was as bare of hair as the palm of your hand; which of course was why he wore the black silk skull cap about the house. On the contrary his mustaches were singularly long and luxuriant, they, and the short, smart goatee, being of a peculiar deep auburn shade. His eyes were dark, brilliant, and slightly sardonic; there were yellow pouches under them and deep transverse furrows on his forehead; his nose, once powerfully aquiline, appeared to have been broken cleanly across the middle. Taken all in all, he was a figure to be noticed in any company.

He came forward on his rubber heels and stood at his guest's elbow.

"Your field is science, I believe? This Spencer was bound for me years ago, by a clever devil in Pittsburg, of all places; Huxley, too. My Darwin is hit and miss. Mill is here; Hume; the American John Fiske. By chance I have *The Wealth of Nations*. Here is a fine old book, Sir Henry Maine's *Ancient Law*. You know it, of course?"

"All — all! I know them all," murmured the little

Doctor, standing with two books under his arm and plucking out a third. "I look back sometimes and stand amazed at the immensity of my reading. Benjamin Kidd — ha! He won't be in so many libraries when I get through with him. You are rather strong on political economy, I see. Alfred Marshall does very well. Nothing much in philosophy. The *Contrat Social* — absurd."

"Do you care for these?" asked Nicolovius, pointing to a row of well-worn works of Bible criticism. "Of course the Germans are far in the lead in this field, and I am unhappily compelled to rely on translations. Still I have —"

"Here! Look here! I must have this! I must take this book from you!" interrupted Queed, rather excitedly dragging a fat blue volume from a lower shelf. "Crozier's *Civilization and Progress*. What a find! I need it badly. I'll just take it with me now, shall I not? Eh?"

"I shall be only too happy to have you take it," said Nicolovius, blandly, "and as many others as you care for."

"I'll have another look and see," said Queed. "My copy of Crozier disappeared some time before I left New York, and so far I have been unable to replace it. I am showing him up completely. . . . Why, this is singular — extraordinary! There's not a history among all these books — not a volume!"

Nicolovius's expression oddly changed; his whole face seemed to tighten. "No," he said slowly, "I have some reason to dislike history."

The young man straightened sharply, horrified. "Why don't you say at once that you hate Life — Man — the Evolution of the Race — and be done with it?"

"Would that seem so dreadful to you?" The old man's face wore a sad smile. "I might say even that, I fear. Try one of those chairs by the fire. I shall not mind telling you how I came by this feeling. You don't smoke, I believe! You miss a good deal, but since you don't know it, how does it matter?"

Nicolovius's haughty aloofness, his rigid uncommunica-

tiveness, his grand ducal bearing and the fact that he paid eighteen dollars a week for a suite had of course made him a man of mark and mystery in the boarding-house, and in the romancings of Miss Miller he had figured as nearly everything from a fugitive crown prince to a retired counterfeiter. However, Queed positively refused to be drawn away from the book-shelves to listen to his story, and the old professor was compelled to turn away from the fire and to talk, at that, to the back of the young man's head.

Nicolovius, so he told Queed, was not an American at all, but an Irishman, born at Roscommon, Connaught. His grandfather was a German, whence he got his name. But the lad grew up in the image of his mother's people. He became an intense patriot even for Ireland, an extremist among extremists, a notorious firebrand in a land where no wood glows dully. Equipped with a good education and natural parts, he had become a passionate leader in the "Young Ireland" movement; was a storm-centre all during the Home Rule agitations; and suddenly outgrew Ireland overnight during the "Parnellism and Crime" era. He got away to the coast, disguised as a coster, and once had the pleasure of giving a lift in his cart to the search-party who wanted him, dead or alive. This was in the year 1882.

"You were mixed up in the Phoenix Park murders, I daresay?" interjected Queed, in his matter-of-fact way.

"You will excuse my preference for a certain indefiniteness," said Nicolovius, with great sweetness.

On this side, he had drifted accidentally into school-teaching, as a means of livelihood, and stuck at it, in New York, St. Paul, and, for many years, in Chicago. The need of a warmer climate for his health's sake, he said, had driven him South, and some three years before an appointment at Milner's Collegiate School had brought him to the city which he and the young man now alike called their own.

Queed, still sacking the shelves for another find, asked if he had never revisited Ireland.

"Ah, no," said Nicolovius, "there was no gracious par-

don for my little peccadillo, no statute of limitations to run after me and pat me on the head. I love England best with the sea between us. You may fancy that a refugee Irishman has no fondness for reading history."

He flicked the fire-ash from his cigar and looked at Queed. All the time he talked he had been watching the young man, studying him, conning him over. . . .

"My life ended when I was scarcely older than you. I have been dead while I was alive. . . . God pity you, young man, if you ever taste the bitter misery of that!"

Queed turned around surprised at the sudden fierceness of the other's tone. Nicolovius instantly sprang up and went over to poke the fire; he came back directly, smiling easily and pulling at his long cigar.

"Ah, well! Forgive the saddening reminiscences of an old man — not a common weakness with me, I assure you. May I say, Mr. Queed, how much your intellect, your culture, your admirable — ah — poise — amazing they seem to me in so young a man — have appealed to me among a population of Brookes, Bylashes, and Klinkers? You are the first man in many a day that has inspired me with an impulse toward friendship and confidence. It would be a real kindness if you'd come in sometimes of an evening."

At the word "friendship" the young man flinched uncontrollably. Was the whole diabolical world in league to spring out and make friends with him?

"Unfortunately," he said, with his iciest bow, "my time is entirely engrossed by my work."

But as his eye went round the pretty, dim-lit room, he could not help contrasting it with the bleak Scriptorium above, and he added with a change of tone and a sigh:—

"You appear wonderfully comfortable here."

Nicolovius shrugged. "So-so," he said indifferently. "However, I shall make a move before long."

"Indeed?"

"I want more space and independence, more quiet — surcease from meeting fellow-boarders at every step. I

plan to move into an apartment, or perhaps a modest little house, if I can manage it. For I am not rich, unhappily, though I believe the boarders think I am, because I make Emma a present of a dollar each year at the anniversary of the birth of our Lord."

Queed ignored his little pleasantry. He was struck with the fact that Nicolovius had described exactly the sort of living arrangement that he himself most earnestly desired.

"I should have made the move last year," continued Nicolovius, pulling at his auburn mustaches, "except that — well, I am more sensitive to my loneliness as I grow older, and the fact was that I lacked a congenial companion to share a pleasanter home with."

The eyes of the two men met, and they moved away from each other as by common consent. Apparently the same thought popped simultaneously into both their minds. Queed dallied with his thought, frankly and with the purest unaltruism.

Though this was the first time he had ever been in the old professor's pretty room, it was the third or fourth time he had been invited there. Nothing could be clearer than that Nicolovius liked him enormously, — where on earth did he get his fatal gift for attracting people? — nothing than that he was exactly the sort of congenial companion the old man desired. Why should n't he go and live with Nicolovius in his new home, the home of perfect quiet and immunity from boarders? And unbroken leisure, too, for of course Nicolovius would bear all expenses, and he himself would fly from all remunerative work as from the Black Death. Nay more, the old chap would very likely be willing to pay him a salary for his society, or at least, see that he was kept well supplied with everything he needed — books to demolish like this one under his arm, and . . .

He looked up and found the sardonic Italian eyes of the old professor fixed on him with a most curious expression. . . . No, no! Better even Mrs. Paynter's than solitude

shared with this stagey old man, with his repellent face and his purring voice which his eyes so belied.

"I must be going," said Queed hastily.

His host came forward with suave expressions of regret. "However, I feel much complimented that you came at all. Pray honor me again very soon —"

"I'll return this book sometime," continued the young man, already at the door. "You won't mind if I mark it, of course?"

"My dear sir — most certainly not. Indeed I hoped that you would consent to accept it for your own, as a —"

"No, I'll return it. I daresay you will find," he added with a faint smile, but his grossest one, "that my notes have not lessened its value exactly!"

In the hall Queed looked at his watch; ten minutes to ten. *Twenty-five minutes to his visit upon the old professor!*

However, let us be calm and just about it. The twenty-five minutes was not a flat loss: he had got Crozier by it. Crozier was worth twenty-five minutes; thirty-five, if it came to that — fifty! . . . But how to fit such a thing as this into the Schedule — and Klinker's visits — and the time he had given to Fifi to-night and very likely would have to give through an endless chain of to-morrows? Here was the burning crux. Was it endurable that the Schedule must be corrupted yet again?

So far as little Fifi was concerned, it turned out that these agonies were superfluous; he had helped her with her lessons for the last time. She did not appear in the dining-room the next night, or the next, or the next. Inquiries from the boarders drew from Mrs. Paynter the information that the child's cough had pulled her down so that she had been remanded to bed for a day or two to rest up. But resting up appeared not to prove so simple a process as had been anticipated, and the day or two was soon running into weeks.

Halcyon nights Queed enjoyed in the dining-room in Fifi's absence, yet faintly marred in a most singular way

by the very absence which alone made them halcyon. It is a fact that you cannot give to any person fifteen minutes of valuable time every night, and not have your consciousness somewhat involved in that person's abrupt disappearance from your horizon. Messages from Fifi on matters of most trivial import came to Queed occasionally, and these served to keep alive his subtle awareness of her absence. But he never took any notice of the messages, not even of the one which said that he could look in and see her some afternoon if he wanted to.

XI

Concerning a Plan to make a Small Gift to a Fellow-Boarder, and what it led to in the Way of Calls; also touching upon Mr. Queed's Dismissal from the Post, and the Generous Resolve of the Young Lady, Charles Weyland.

THE State Department of Charities was a rudimentary affair in those days, just as Queed had said. Its appropriation was impossibly meager, even with the niggard's increase just wrung from the legislature. The whole Department fitted cozily into a single room in the Capitol; it was small as a South American army, this Department, consisting, indeed, of but the two generals. But the Secretary and the Assistant Secretary worked together like a team of horses. They had already done wonders, and their hopes were high with still more wonders to perform. In especial there was the reformatory. The legislature had adjourned without paying any attention to the reformatory, exactly as it had been meant to do. But a bill had been introduced, at all events, and the *Post* had carried a second editorial, expounding and urging the plan; several papers in the smaller cities of the State had followed the *Post's* lead; and thus the issue had been fairly launched, with the ground well broken for a successful campaign two years later.

The office of the Department was a ship-shape place, with its two desks, a big one and a little one; the typewriter table; the rows and rows of letter-files on shelves; a sectional bookcase containing Charities reports from other States, with two shelves reserved for authoritative books by such writers as Willoughby, Smathers, and Conant. Here, doubtless, would some day stand the colossal work of Queed. At the big desk sat the Rev. Mr. Dayne, a practical idealist of no