

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

common sort, a kind-faced man with a crisp brown mustache. At the typewriter-table sat Sharlee Weyland, writing firm letters to thirty-one county almshouse keepers. It was hard upon noon. Sharlee looked tired and sad about the eyes. She had not been to supper at Mrs. Paynter's for months, but she went there nearly every afternoon from the office to see Fifi, who had been in bed for four weeks.

The Department door opened, with no premonitory knock, and in walked, of all people, Mr. Queed.

Sharlee came forward very cordially to greet the visitor, and at once presented him to the Secretary. However Queed dismissed Mr. Dayne very easily, and gazing at Sharlee sharply through his spectacles, said:

"I should like to speak to you in private a moment."

"Certainly," said Sharlee.

"I'll step into the hall," said kind-faced Mr. Dayne.

"No, no. Indeed you must n't. We will."

Sharlee faced the young man in the sunlit hall with sympathetic expectancy and some curiosity in her eyes.

"There is," he began without preliminaries, "a girl at the house where I board, who has been confined to her bed with sickness for some weeks. It appears that she has grown thin and weak, so that they will not permit her to graduate at her school. This involves a considerable disappointment to her."

"You are speaking of Fifi," said Sharlee, gently.

"That is the girl's name, if it is of any interest to you —"

"You know she is my first cousin."

"Possibly so," he replied, as though to say that no one had the smallest right to hold him responsible for that. "In this connection, a small point has arisen upon which advice is required, the advice of a woman. You happen to be the only other girl I know. This," said Queed, "is why I have called."

Sharlee felt flattered. "You are most welcome to my advice, Mr. Queed."

He frowned at her through glasses that looked as big and

as round as butter-saucers, with an expression in which impatience contended with faint embarrassment.

"As her fellow-lodger," he resumed, precisely, "I have been in the habit of assisting this girl with her studies and have thus come to take an interest in her — a small interest. During her sickness, it seems, many of the boarders have been in to call upon her. In a similar way, she has sent me several messages inviting me to call, but I have not been in position to accept any of these invitations. It does not follow that, because I gave some of my time in the past to assisting her with her lessons, I can afford to give more of it now for purposes of — of mere sociability. I make the situation clear to you?"

Sharlee, to whom Fifi had long since made the situation clear, puckered her brow like one carefully rehearsing the several facts. "Yes, I believe that is all perfectly clear, Mr. Queed."

He hesitated visibly; then his lips tightened and, gazing at her with a touch of something like defiance, he said: "On the other hand, I do not wish this girl to think that I bear her ill-will for the time I have given her in the past. I — ahem — have therefore concluded to make her a present, a small gift."

Sharlee stood looking at him without a reply.

"Well?" said he, annoyed. "I am not certain what form this small gift had best take."

She turned away from him and walked to the end of the hall, where the window was. To Queed's great perplexity, she stood there looking out for some time, her back toward him. Soon it came into his mind that she meant to indicate that their interview was over, and this attitude seemed extremely strange to him. He could not understand it at all.

"I fear that you have failed to follow me, after all," he called after her, presently. "This was the point — as to what form the gift should take — upon which I wanted a woman's advice."

"I understand." She came back to him slowly, with

bright eyes. "I know it would please Fifi very much to have a gift from you. Had you thought at all, yourself, what you would like to give?"

"Yes," he said, frowning vaguely, "I examined the shop windows as I came down and pretty well decided on something. Then at the last minute I was not altogether sure."

"Yes? Tell me what."

"I thought I would give her a pair of silk mitts."

Sharlee's eyes never left his, and her face was very sweet and grave.

"White silk ones," said he — "or black either, for that matter, for the price is the same."

"Well," said she, "why did you select mitts, specially?"

"What first attracted me to them," he said simply, "was that they came to precisely the sum I had planned to spend: seventy-five cents."

The little corrugation in Sharlee's brow showed how carefully she was thinking over the young man's suggestion from all possible points of view. You could easily follow her thought by her speaking sequence of expressions. Clearly it ran like this: "Mitts — splendid! Just the gift for a girl who's sick in bed. The one point to consider is, could any other gift possibly be better? No, surely none. . . . Wait a minute, though! Let's take this thing slowly and be absolutely sure we're right before we go ahead. . . . Run over carefully all the things that are ever used as gifts. Anything there that is better than mitts? Perhaps, after all . . . Mitts . . . Why, look here, is n't there one small objection, one trifling want of the fulness of perfection to be raised against the gift of mitts?"

"There's this point against mitts," said Sharlee slowly. "Fifi's in bed now, and I'm afraid she's likely to be there for some time. Of course she could not wear the mitts in bed. She would have to tuck them away in a drawer somewhere. Don't you think it might be a good idea to give her something that she could enjoy at once — something that

would give her pleasure *now* and so help to lighten these tedious hours while she must be in her room?"

The mitts were the child of Queed's own brain. Unconsciously he had set his heart on them; but his clock-like mind at once grasped the logic of this argument, and he met it generously.

"Your point is well taken. It proves the wisdom of getting the advice of a woman on such a matter. Now I had thought also of a book —"

"I'll tell you!" cried Sharlee, nearly bowled over by a brilliant inspiration. "A *great* many men that I know make it a rule to send flowers to girls that are sick, and —"

"*Flowers!*"

"It does seem foolish — *such* a waste, does n't it? — but really you've no idea how mad girls are about flowers, or how much real joy they can bring into a sick-room. And, by changing the water often, and — so on, they last a *long* time, really an incredible time —"

"You recommend flowers, then? Very well," he said resolutely — "that is settled then. Now as to the kind. I have only a botanical knowledge of flowers — shall we say something in asters, perhaps, chrysanthemums or dahlias? What is your advice as to that?"

"Well, I advise roses."

"Roses — good. I had forgotten them for the moment. White roses?"

A little shiver ran through her. "No, no! Let them be the reddest you can find."

"Next, as to the cost of red roses."

"Oh, there'll be no trouble about *that*. Simply tell the florist that you want seventy-five cents' worth, and he will give you a fine bunch of them. By the way, I'd better put his name and address down on a piece of paper for you. Be sure to go to this one because I know him, and he's extremely reliable."

He took the slip from her, thanked her, bowed gravely, and turned to go. A question had risen involuntarily to

the tip of her tongue; it hung there for a breath, its fate in the balance; and then she released it, casually, when another second would have been too late.

"How is your work on the *Post* going?"

He wheeled as though she had struck him, and looked at her with a sudden odd hardening of the lower part of his face.

"The *Post* discharged me this morning."

"Oh —"

It was all that she could say, for she knew it very well. She had had it from Colonel Cowles two days before it happened, which was three days after the April meeting of the directors. Charles Gardiner West, who was to have raised his voice in behalf of Mr. Queed on that occasion, happened not to be present at all. Having effected the dissolution of Semple and West, he had gone to the country for a month's rest, in preparation for that mapping out of collegiate plans which was to precede his tour of Europe. Hence the directors, hearing no protests from intercessors, unanimously bestowed discretion upon the Colonel to replace the transcendental scientist with a juicier assistant at a larger salary.

"At least," the young man qualified, with a curious mixture of aggressiveness and intense mortification, "the *Post* will discharge me on the 15th day of May unless I show marked improvement. I believe that improvement was exactly the word the estimable Colonel employed."

"I'm awfully sorry," said Sharlee — "awfully! But after all, you want only some routine hack-work — any routine hack-work — to establish a little income. It will not be very hard to find something else, as good or even better."

"You do not appear to grasp the fact that, apart from any considerations of that sort, this is an unpleasant, a most offensive thing to have happen —"

"Oh, but that is just what it is n't, Mr. Queed," said Sharlee, who quite failed to appreciate his morbid tenderness for even the least of his intellectual offspring. "You have taken no pride in the newspaper work; you look down

on it as altogether beneath you. You cannot mind this in any personal way —"

"I mind it," said he, "like the devil."

The word fell comically from his lips, but Sharlee, leaning against the shut door, looked at him with grave sympathy in her eyes.

"Mr. Queed, if you had tried to write nursery rhymes and — failed, would you have taken it to heart?"

"Never mind arguing it. In fact, I don't know that I could explain it to you in a thoroughly logical and convincing way. The central fact, the concrete thing, is that I do object most decidedly. I have spent too much time in equipping myself to express valuable ideas in discriminating language to be kicked out of a second-rate newspaper office like an incompetent office-boy. Of course I shall not submit to it."

"Do you care to tell me what you mean to do?"

"Do!" He hit the door-post a sudden blow with an unexpectedly large hand. "I shall have myself elected editor of the *Post*."

"But — but — but —" said the girl, taken aback by the largeness of this order — "But you don't expect to oust Colonel Cowles?"

"We are not necessarily speaking of to-morrow or next day. An actuary will tell you that I am likely to outlive Colonel Cowles. I mean, first, to have my dismissal recalled, and, second, to be made regular assistant editor at three times my present salary. That is my immediate reply to the directors of the *Post*. I am willing to let the editorship wait till old Cowles dies."

"Tell me," said Sharlee, "would you personally like to be editor of the *Post*?"

"Like it! I'll resign the day after they elect me. Call it sheer wounded vanity — anything you like! The name makes no difference. I know only that I will have the editorship for a day — and all for the worthless pleasure of pitching it in their faces." He looked past her out of the window, and his light gray eyes filled with an indescribable bitterness.

"And to have the editorship," he thought out loud, "I must unlearn everything that I know about writing, and deliberately learn to write like a demagogic ass."

Sharlee tapped the calcimine with her pointed fingernails. He spoke, as ever, with overweening confidence, but she knew that he would never win any editorship in this spirit. He was going at the quest with a new burst of intellectual contempt, though it was this very intellectual contempt that had led to his downfall.

"But your own private work?"

"Don't speak of it, I beg!" He flinched uncontrollably; but of his own accord he added, in carefully repressed tones: "To qualify for the editorship of course means—a terrible interruption and delay. It means that *I must side-track My Book for two months or even longer!*"

Two months! It would take him five years and probably he would not be qualified then.

Sharlee hesitated. "Have you fully made up your mind to—to be editor?"

He turned upon her vehemently. "May I ask you never to waste my time with questions of that sort. I never—never—say anything until I have fully made up my mind about it. Good-morning."

"No, no, no! Don't go yet! Please—I want to speak to you a minute."

He stopped and turned, but did not retrace the three steps he had taken. Sharlee leaned against the door and looked away from him, out into the park.

The little Doctor was badly in need of a surgical operation. Somebody must perform it for him, or his whole life was a dusty waste. That he still had glimmerings, he had shown this very hour, in wanting to make a gift to his sick little fellow-lodger. His resentment over his dismissal from the *Post*, too, was an unexpectedly human touch in him. But in the same breath with these things the young man had showed himself at his worst: the glimmerings were so overlaid with an incredible snobbery of the mind, so en-

crusted with the rankest and grossest egotism, that soon they must flutter and die out, leaving him stone-blind against the sunshine and the morning. No scratch could penetrate that Achilles-armor of self-sufficiency. There must be a shock to break it apart, or a vicious stabbing to cut through it to such spark as was still alive.

Somebody must administer that shock or do that stabbing. Why not she? He would hate the sight of her forevermore, but . . .

"Mr. Queed," said Sharlee, turning toward him, "you let me see, from what you are doing this morning, that you think of Fifi as your friend. I'd like to ask if you think of me in that way, too."

O Lord, *Lord!* Here was another one!

"No," he said positively. "Think of you as I do of Fifi! No, no! No, I do not."

"I don't mean to ask if you think of me as you do of Fifi. Of course I am sure you don't. I only mean—let me put it this way: Do you believe that I have your—interests at heart, and would like to do anything I could to help you?"

He thought this over warily. Doubtless doomed Smathers would have smiled to note the slowness with which his great rival's mind threshed out such a question as this.

"If you state your proposition in that way, I reply, tentatively, yes."

"Then can you spare me half an hour to-night after supper?"

"For what purpose?"

"For you and me," she smiled. "I'd like you to come and see me, at my house, where we could really have a little talk. You see, I know Colonel Cowles very well indeed, and I have read the *Post* for oh, many, many years! In this way I know something about the kind of articles people here like to read, and about—what is needed to write such articles. I think I might make a suggestion or two that—would help. Will you come?"

After somewhat too obvious a consideration, Queed consented. Sharlee thanked him.

"I'll put my address down on the back of that paper, shall I? And I think I'll put my name, too, for I don't believe you have the faintest idea what it is."

"Oh, yes. The name is Miss Charlie Weyland. It appears that you were named after a boy?"

"Oh, it's only a silly nickname. Here's your little directory back. I'll be very glad to see you — at half-past eight, shall we say? But, Mr. Queed — don't come unless you feel sure that I really want to help. For I'm afraid I'll have to say a good deal that will make you very mad."

He bowed and walked away. Sharlee went to the telephone and called Bartlett's, the florist. She told Mr. Bartlett that a young man would come in there in a few minutes — full description of the young man — asking for seventy-five cents' worth of red roses; Mr. Bartlett would please give him two dozen roses, and charge the difference to her, Miss Weyland; the entire transaction to be kept discreetly quiet.

However the transaction was not kept entirely quiet. The roses were delivered promptly, and became the chief topic of conversation at Mrs. Paynter's dinner-table. Through an enforced remark of Mr. Queed's, and the later discursive gossip of the boarders, it became disseminated over the town that Bartlett's was selling American Beauties at thirty-seven and a half cents a dozen, and the poor man had to buy ten inches, double column, in the *Post* next morning to get himself straightened out and reestablish Bartlett's familiar quotations.

XII

More Consequences of the Plan about the Gift, and of how Mr. Queed drinks his Medicine like a Man; Fifi on Men, and how they do; Second Corruption of The Sacred Schedule.

QUEED'S irrational impulse to make Fifi a small gift cost him the heart of his morning. A call would have been cheaper, after all. Nor was the end yet. In this world it never is, where one event invariably hangs by the tail of another in ruthless concatenation. Starting out for Open-air Pedestrianism at 4.45 that afternoon, the young man was waylaid in the hall by Mrs. Paynter, at the very door of the big bedroom into which Fifi had long since been moved. The landlady, backing Queed against the banisters, told him how much her daughter had been pleased by his beautiful remembrance. The child, she said, wanted particularly to thank him herself, and would n't he please come in and see her just a moment?

As Mrs. Paynter threw open the door in the act of making the extraordinary request, escape was impossible. Queed found himself inside the room before he knew what he was doing. As for Mrs. Paynter, she somewhat treacherously slipped away to consult with Laura as to what for supper.

It was a mild sunny afternoon, with a light April wind idly kicking at the curtains. Fifi sat over by the open window in a tilted-back Morris chair, a sweet-faced little thing, all eyes and pallor. From her many covers she extricated a fragile hand, frilled with the sleeve of a pretty flowered kimono.

"Look at them! Are n't they glorious!"

On a table at her elbow his roses nodded from a wide-lipped vase, a gorgeous riot of flame and fragrance. Gaz-