

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-



ing at them, the young man marvelled at his own princely prodigality.

"I don't know *how* to thank you for them, Mr. Queed. They are so, so sweet, and I do love roses so!"

Indeed her joy in them was too obvious to require any words. Queed decided to say nothing about the mitts.

"I'm glad that they please you," said he, pulling himself together for the ordeal of the call. "How are you getting along up here? Very well, I trust?"

"Fine. It's so quiet and nice. . . . And I don't mind about graduating a bit any more. Is n't that funny?"

"You must hurry up and get well and return to the dining-room again, F—F— Fifi —, and to the algebra lessons —"

"Don't," said Fifi. "I can't bear it."

But she whisked at her eyes with a tiny dab of a handkerchief, and when she looked at him she was smiling, quite clear and happy.

"Have you missed me since I stopped coming?"

"Missed you?" he echoed, exactly as he had done before.

But this time Fifi said, shamelessly, "I'll bet you have! — Have n't you?"

Come, Mr. Queed, be honest. You are supposed to have the scientist's passion for veracity. You mercilessly demand the truth from others. Now take some of your own medicine. Stand out like a man. Have you or have you not missed this girl since she stopped coming?

"Yes," said the little Doctor, rather hollowly, "I . . . have missed you."

Fifi's smile became simply brazen. "Do you know what, Mr. Queed? You like me *lots* more than you will say you do."

The young man averted his eyes. But for some time there had been in his mind the subtle consciousness of something left undone, an occasion which he had failed to meet with the final word of justice. Since he had been in the room, a vague, unwelcome resolve had been forming in his mind,

and at Fifi's bold words, it hardened into final shape. He drew a deep breath.

"You referred to me as your friend once, F — Fifi. And I said that I was not."

"I know."

"I was — mistaken" — so he drained his medicine to the dregs. "I . . . am your friend."

Now the child's smile was the eternal motherly. "Lor', Mr. Queed, I knew it all the time."

Queed looked at the floor. The sight of Fifi affected him most curiously to-day. He felt strangely ill at ease with her, only the more so because she was so amazingly at home with him. She wore her reddish-brown hair not rounded up in front as of old, but parted smoothly in the middle, and this only emphasized the almost saintly purity of her wasted little face. Her buoyant serenity puzzled and disconcerted him.

Meantime Fifi was examining Queed carefully. "You've been doing something to yourself, Mr. Queed! What is it? Why, you look ten times better than even four weeks ago!"

"I think," he said drearily, "it must be Klinker's Exercises. I give them," broke from him, "*one hour and twenty minutes a day!*"

But he pulled himself together, conscientiously determined to take the cheery view with Fifi.

"It is an extraordinary thing, but I am feeling better, physically and mentally, than I ever felt before, and this though I never had a really sick day in my life. It must be the exercises, for that is the only change I have made in my habits. Yet I never supposed that exercise had any such practical value as that. However," he went on slowly, "I am beginning to believe that there are several things in this world that I do not understand."

Here, indeed, was a most humiliating, an epoch-making, confession to come from the little Doctor. It was accompanied with a vague smile, intended to be cheering and just the thing for a sick-room. But the dominant note in this



smile was bewildered and depressed helplessness, and at it the maternal instinct sprang full-grown in Fifi's thin little bosom. A passionate wish to mother the little Doctor tugged at her heart.

"You know what you need, Mr. Queed? Friends — lots of good friends —"

He winced as from a blow. "I assure you —"

"Yes — you — DO!" said Fifi, with surprising emphasis for so weak a little voice. "You need first a good girl friend, one lots older and better than me — one just like Sharlee. O if only you and she *would* be friends! — she'd be the very best in the world! And then you need men friends, plenty of them, and to go around with them, and everything. You ought to like *men* more, Mr. Queed! You ought to learn to be like them, and —"

"Be like them!" he interrupted. "I am like them. Why," he conceded generously, "I am one of them."

Fifi dismissed this with a smile, but he immediately added: "Has it occurred to you that, apart from my greater concentration on my work, I am different from other men?"

"Why, Mr. Queed, you are no more like them than I am! You don't do any of the things they do. You don't —"

"Such as what? Now, Fifi, let us be definite as we go along. Suppose that it was my ambition to be, as you say, like other men. Just what things, in your opinion, should I do?"

"Well, smoke — that's one thing that all men do. And fool around more with people — laugh and joke, and tell funny stories and all. And then you could take an interest in your appearance — your clothes, you know; and be interested in all sorts of things going on around you, like politics and baseball. And go to see girls and take them out sometimes, like to the theatre. Some men that are popular drink, but of course I don't care for that."

Fifi, of course, had no idea that the little Doctor's world had been shattered to its axis that morning by three minutes' talk from Colonel Cowles. Therefore, though con-

scious that there never was a man who did not get a certain pleasure from talking himself over, she was secretly surprised at the patience, even the interest, with which he listened to her. She would have been still more surprised to know that his wonderful memory was nailing down every word with machine-like accuracy.

She expounded her little thesis in considerable detail, and at the end he said: —

"As I've told you, Fifi, my first duty is toward my book — to give it to the cause of civilization at the earliest possible moment. Therefore, the whole question is one of time, rather than of deliberate personal inclination. At present I literally cannot afford to give time to matters which, while doubtless pleasant enough in their fashion —"

"That's what you would have said about the exercise, two months ago. And now look, how it's helped you! And then, Mr. Queed — are you happy?"

Surprised and a little amused, he replied: "Really, I've never stopped to think. I should say, though, that I was perfectly content."

Fifi laughed and coughed. "There's a big difference — is n't there? Why, it's just like the exercise, Mr. Queed. Before you began it you were just *not sick*; now you are *very well*. That's the difference between content and happiness. Now I," she ran on, "am very, very happy. I wake up in the mornings *so* glad that I'm alive that sometimes I can hardly bear it, and all through the day it's like something singing away inside of me! Are you like that?"

No, Mr. Queed must confess that he was not like that. Indeed, few looking at his face at this moment would ever have suspected him of it. Fifi regarded him with a kind of wistful sadness, but he missed the glance, being engaged in consulting his great watch; after which he sprang noisily to his feet, horrified at himself.

"Good heavens — it's ten minutes past five! I must go immediately. Why, I'm twenty-five minutes behind My Schedule!"



Fifi smiled through her wistfulness. "Don't ask me to be sorry, Mr. Queed, because I don't think I can. You see, I have n't taken up a minute of your time for nearly a month, so I was entitled to some of it to-day."

You see! Had n't he figured it exactly right from the beginning? Once give a human being a moment of your time, as a special and extraordinary kindness, and before you can turn around there that being is claiming it wholesale as a matter-of-course right!

"It was so sweet of you to send me these flowers, and then to come and see me, too. . . . Do you know, it's been the very best day I've had since I've been sick, and you've made it so!"

"It's all right. Well, good-bye, Fifi."

Fifi held out both her tiny hands, and he received them because, in the sudden emergency, he could think of no way of avoiding them.

"You'll remember what I said about friends, and *men* — won't you, Mr. Queed? Remember it begins with liking people, liking everybody. Then when you really like them you want to do things for them, and that is happiness."

He looked surprised at this definition of happiness, and then: "Oh — I see. That's your religion, is n't it?"

"No, it's just common sense."

"I'll remember. Well, Fifi, good-bye."

"Good-bye — and thank you for everything."

Into her eyes had sprung a tenderness which he was far from understanding. But he did not like the look of it in the least, and he extricated his hands from the gentle clasp with some abruptness.

From the safe distance of the door he looked back, and wondered why Fifi's great eyes were fixed so solemnly on him.

"Well — good-bye, again. Hurry up and get well —"

"Good-bye — oh, good-bye," said Fifi, and turned her head toward the open window with the blue skies beyond. Did Fifi know? How many have vainly tortured themselves

with that question, as they have watched dear ones slipping without a word down the slopes to the dark Valley! If this child knew that her name had been read out for the greater Graduation, she gave no sign. Sometimes in the mornings she cried a little, without knowing why. Sometimes she said a vague, sad little thing that brought her mother's heart, stone cold, to her mouth. But her talk was mostly very bright and hopeful. Ten minutes before Queed came in she had been telling Mrs. Paynter about something she would do in the fall. If sometimes you would swear that she knew there would never be another fall for her, her very next remark might confound you. So her little face turned easily to the great river with the shining farther shore, and, for her part, there would be no sadness of farewell when she embarked.

By marvelous work, Queed closed up the twenty-five minutes of time he had bestowed upon Fifi, and pulled into supper only three minutes behind running-time. Afterwards, he sat in the Scriptorium, his face like a carven image, the sacred Schedule in his hands. For it had come down to that. Either he must at any cost hew his way back to the fastness of his early days, or he must corrupt the Schedule yet again.

Every minute that he took away from his book meant just that much delay in giving the great work to the world. That fact was the eternal backbone of all his consciousness. On the other balance of his personal equation, there was Buck Klinker and there was Fifi Paynter.

Klinker evidently felt that all bars were down as to him. It would be a hard world indeed if a trainer was denied free access to his only pupil, and Klinker, though he had but the one, was always in as full blast as Muldoon's. He had acquired a habit of "dropping in" at all hours, especially late at night, which, to say the least, was highly wasteful of time. It was Queed's privilege to tell Klinker that he must keep away from the Scriptorium; but in that case Klinker might fairly retort that he would no longer give the



Doc free physical culture. Did he care to bring that issue to the touch? No, he did not. In fact, he must admit that he had a distinct need of Buck, a distinct dependence upon him, for awhile yet at any rate. So he could make no elimination of the non-essential there.

Then there was Fifi. In a week, or possibly two weeks, Fifi would doubtless reappear in his dining-room, and if she had no lessons to trouble him with, she would at any rate feel herself free to talk to him whenever the whim moved her. Had she not let out this very day that she considered that she had a kind of title to his time? So it would be to the end of the chapter. It had been his privilege to tell Fifi that he could not spare her another minute of time till his work was finished. . . . Had been — but no longer was. Looking back now, he found it impossible to reconstruct the chain of impulse and circumstance which had trapped him into it, but the stark fact was that his own lips had authorized Fifi to profane at will his holy time. Not three hours before he had been betrayed into weakly telling her that he was her friend. He was a man of truth and honor. He could not possibly get back of that confession of friendship, or of the privileges it bestowed. So there was no elimination of the non-essential he could make there.

These were the short and ugly facts. And now he must take official cognizance of them.

With a leaden heart and the hands of lamentation, he took the Schedule to pieces and laboriously fitted it together again with a fire-new item in its midst. The item was Human Intercourse, and to it he allotted the sum of thirty minutes per diem.

It was a historic moment in his life, and, unlike most men at such partings of the ways, he was fully conscious of it. Nevertheless, he passed straight from it to another performance hardly less extraordinary. From his table drawer he produced a little memorandum book, and in it — just below a diagram of a new chest-developing exercise invented last night by Klinker — he jotted down the things that Fifi said a man must do to be like other men.

A clean half-hour remained before he must go and call on the young lady with the tom-boy name, Charles Weyland, who knew "what the public liked." He spent it, he, the indefatigable minute-shaver, sitting with the head that no longer ached clamped in his hand. It had been the most disturbing day of his life, but he was not thinking of that exactly. He was thinking what a mistake it had been to leave New York. There he had had but two friends with no possibility of getting any more. Here — it was impossible to blink the fact any longer — he already had two, with at least two more determinedly closing in on him. He had Fifi and he had Buck — yes, Buck; the young lady Charles Weyland had offered him her friendship this very day; and unless he looked alive he would wake up some morning to find that Nicolovius also had captured him as a friend.

He was far better off in New York, where days would go by in which he never saw Tim or Murphy Queed. And yet . . . did he want to go back?