

"Mr. Queed."

Sharlee rose hurriedly, since hurry was so evidently necessary. She felt profoundly stirred, she hardly knew why; all her airs of a haughty princess were fled; and she intercepted him with no remnant of her pretense that she was putting a shabby inferior in his place.

"I want to tell you," she said, somewhat nervously, "that I—I—admire very much the way you've taken this. No ordinary man would have listened with such —"

"I never pretended to be an ordinary man."

He moved, but she stood unmoving in front of him, the pretty portrait of a lady in blue, and the eyes that she fastened upon him reminded him vaguely of Fifi's.

"Perhaps I—should tell you," said Sharlee, "just why I—"

"Now don't," he said, smiling faintly at her with his old air of a grandfather — "don't spoil it all by saying that you did n't mean it."

Under his smile she colored a little, and, despite herself, looked confused. He took advantage of her embarrassment to pass her with another bow and go out, leaving her struggling desperately with the feeling that he had got the best of her after all.

But the door opened again a little way, almost at once, and the trim-cut, academic face, with the lamplight falling upon the round glasses and blotting them out in a yellow smudge, appeared in the crevice.

"By the way, you were wrong in saying that I pulled down my blind on the evolutionary process now going on in the South. I give four thousand words to it in my *Historical Perspective*, volume one."

## XIV

*In which Klinker quotes Scripture, and Queed has helped Fifi with her Lessons for the Last Time.*

THE tax-articles in the *Post* had ceased after the adjournment of the Legislature, which body gave no signs of ever having heard of them. Mr. Queed's new series dealt authoritatively with "Currency Systems of the World." He polished the systems off at the rate of three a week. But he had asked and obtained permission to submit, also, voluntary contributions on topics of his own choosing, and now for a fortnight these offerings had died daily in Colonel Cowles's waste-basket.

As for his book, Queed could not bear to think of it in these days. Deliberately he had put a winding-sheet about his heart's desire, and laid it away in a drawer, until such time as he had indisputably qualified himself to be editor of the *Post*. Having qualified, he could open that drawer again, with a rushing access of stifled ardor, and await the Colonel's demise; but to do this, he figured now, would take him not less than two months and a half. Two months and a half wrenched from the Schedule! That sacred bill of rights not merely corrupted, but for a space nullified and cancelled! Yes, it was the ultimate sacrifice that outraged pride of intellect had demanded; but the young man would not flinch. And there were moments when Trainer Klinker was startled by the close-shut misery of his face.

The Scriptorium had been degraded into a sickening school of journalism. Day after day, night after night, Queed sat at his tiny table poring over back files of the *Post*, examining Colonel Cowles's editorials as a geologist examines a Silurian deposit. He analyzed, classified, tabu-

lated, computed averages, worked out underlying laws; and gradually, with great travail — for the journalese language was to him as Greek to another — he deduced from a thousand editorials a few broad principles, somewhat as follows:—

1. That the Colonel dealt with a very wide range of concrete topics, including many that appeared extremely trivial. (Whereas he, Queed, had dealt almost exclusively with abstract principles, rarely taking cognizance of any event that had happened later than 1850.)

2. That nearly all the Colonel's "best" articles — *i. e.*, best-liked, most popular: the kind that Major Brooke and Mr. Bylash, or even Miss Miller, were apt to talk about at the supper-table — dealt with topics of a purely local and ephemeral interest.

3. That the Colonel never went deeply or exhaustively into any group of facts, but that, taking one broad simple hypothesis as his text, he hammered that over and over, saying the same thing again and again in different ways, but always with a wealth of imagery and picturesque phrasing.

4. That the Colonel invariably got his humorous effects by a good-natured but sometimes sharp ridicule, the process of which was to exaggerate the argument or travesty the cause he was attacking until it became absurd.

5. That the Colonel, no matter what his theme, always wrote with vigor and heat and color: so that even if he were dealing with something on the other side of the world, you might suppose that he, personally, was intensely gratified or extremely indignant about it, as the case might be.

These principles Queed was endeavoring, with his peculiar faculty for patient effort, to apply practically in his daily offerings. It is enough to say that he found the task harder than Klinker's Exercises, and that the little article on the city's method of removing garbage, which failed to appear in this morning's *Post*, had stood him seven hours of time.

It was a warm rainy night in early May. Careful listening disclosed the fact that Buck Klinker, who had as usual walked up from the gymnasium with Queed, was changing his shoes in the next room, preparatory for supper. Otherwise the house was very still. Fifi had been steadily reported "not so well" for a long time and, for two days, very ill. Queed sitting before the table, his gas ablaze and his shade up, tilted back his chair and thought of her now. All at once, with no conscious volition on his part, he found himself saying over the startling little credo that Fifi had suggested for his taking, on the day he sent her the roses.

*To like men and do the things that men do. To smoke. To laugh. To joke and tell funny stories. To take a . . .*

The door of the Scriptorium-editorium opened and Buck Klinker, entering without formalities, threw himself, according to his habit, upon the tiny bed. This time he came by invitation, to complete the decidedly interesting conversation upon which the two men had walked up town; but talk did not at once begin. A book rowelled the small of Klinker's back as he reclined upon the pillow, and plucking it from beneath him, he glanced at the back of it.

"*Vanity Fair*. Did n't know you ever read story-books, Doc."

The Doc did not answer. He was occupied with the thought that not one of the things that Fifi had urged upon him did he at present do. Smoking he could of course take up at any time. Buck Klinker worked in a tobacconist's shop; it might be a good idea to consult him as to what was the best way to begin. As for telling funny stories — did he for the life of him know one to tell? He racked his brain in vain. There were two books that he remembered having seen in the Astor Library, *The Percy Anecdotes*, and Mark Lemon's *Jest Book*; perhaps the State Library had them. . . . Stay! Did not Willoughby himself somewhere introduce an anecdote of a distinctly humorous nature?

"It ain't much," said Buck, dropping Thackeray to the floor. "I read the whole thing once. — No, I guess I'm

thinkin' of *The County Fair*, a drammer that I saw at the Bee-jou. But I guess they're all the same, those Fairs.

"Say Doc," he went on presently, "I'm going to double you on Number Seven, beginning from to-morrow, hear?"

Number Seven was one of the stiffest of Klinker's Exercises for All Parts of the Body. Queed looked up absently.

"That's right," said his trainer, inexorably. "It's just what you need. I had a long talk with Smithy, last night."

"Buck," said the Doctor, clearing his throat, "have I ever — ahem — told you of the famous reply of Dr. Johnson to the Billingsgate fishwives?"

"Johnson? Who? Fat, sandy-haired man lives on Third Street?"

"No, Dr. Samuel Johnson, the well-known English author and — character. It is related that on one occasion Dr. Johnson approached the fishwives at Billingsgate to purchase of their wares. The exact details of the story are not altogether clear in my memory, but, as I recall it, something the good Doctor said angered these women, for they began showering him with profane and blasphemous names. At this style of language the fishwives are said to be extremely proficient. What do you fancy that Dr. Johnson called them in return? But you could hardly guess. He called them parallelopipedons. I am not entirely certain whether it was parallelopipedons or isosceles triangles. Possibly there are two versions of the story."

Buck stared at him, frankly and greatly bewildered, and noticed that the little Doctor was staring at him, with strong marks of anxiety on his face.

"I should perhaps say," added Queed, "that parallelopipedons and isosceles triangles are not profane or swearing words at all. They are, in fact, merely the designations applied to geometrical figures."

"Oh," said Klinker. "Oh."

There was a brief pause.

"Ah, well! . . . Go on with what you were telling me as we walked up, then!"

"Sure thing. But I don't catch the conversation. What was all that con you were giving me —?"

"Con?"

"About Johnson and the triangles."

"It simply occurred to me to tell you a funny story, of the sort that men are known to like, with the hope of amusing you —"

"Why, that was n't a funny story, Doc."

"I assure you that it was."

"Don't see it," said Klinker.

"That is not my responsibility, in any sense."

Thus Doctor Queed, sitting stiffly on his hard little chair, and gazing with annoyance at Klinker through the iron bars at the foot of the bed.

"Blest if I pipe," said Buck, and scratched his head.

"I cannot both tell the stories and furnish the brains to appreciate them. Kindly proceed with what you were telling me."

So Buck, obliging but mystified, dropped back upon the bed and proceeded, tooth-pick energetically at work. His theme was a problem with which nearly every city is unhappily familiar. In Buck's terminology, it was identified as "The Centre Street mashers": those pimply, weak-faced, bad-eyed young men who congregate at prominent corners every afternoon, especially Saturdays, to smirk at the working-girls, and to pass, wherever they could, from their murmured, "Hello, Kiddo," and "Where you goin', baby?" to less innocent things.

Buck's air of leisureliness dropped from him as he talked; his orange-stick worked ever more and more furiously; his honest voice grew passionate as he described conditions as he knew them.

". . . And some fool of a girl, no more than a child for knowing what she's doin', laughs and answers back — just for the fun of it, not looking for harm, and right there's where your trouble begins. Maybe that night after doin' the picture shows; maybe another night; but it's sure to

come. Dammit, Doc, I'm no saint nor sam-singer and I've done things I had n't ought like other men, and woke up shamed the next morning, too, but I've got a sister who's a decent good girl as there is anywhere, and by God, sir, I'd *kill* a man who just looked at her with the dirty eyes of them little soft-mouth blaggards!"

Queed, unaffectedly interested, asked the usual question — could not the girls be taught at home the dangers of such acquaintances? — and Buck pulverized it in the usual way.

"Who in blazes is goin' to teach 'em? Don't you know *anything* about what kind of homes they got? Why, man, they're *the sisters of the little blaggards!*"

He painted a dark picture of the home-life of many of these girls: its hard work and unrelenting poverty; its cheerlessness; the absence of any fun; the irresistible allurements of the flashily-dressed stranger who jingles money in his pocket and offers to "show a good time." Then he told a typical story, the story of a little girl he knew, who worked in a department store for three dollars and a half a week, and whose drunken father took over the last cent of that every Saturday night. This girl's name was Eva Bernheimer, and she was sixteen years old and "in trouble."

"You know what, Doc?" Buck ended. "You'd ought to take it up in the *Post* — that's what. There's a fine piece to be written, showin' up them little hunters."

It was characteristic of Doctor Queed that such an idea had not and would not have occurred to him: applying his new science of editorial writing to a practical problem dipped from the stream of every-day life was still rather beyond him. But it was also characteristic of him that, once the idea had been suggested to him, he instantly perceived its value. He looked at Buck admiringly through the iron bars.

"You are quite right. There is."

"You know they are trying to get up a reformatory — girls' home, some call it. That's all right, if you can't do

better, but it don't get to the bottom of it. The right way with a thing like this is to *take it before it happens!*"

"You are quite right, Buck."

"Yes — but how're you goin' to do it? You sit up here all day and night with your books and studies, Doc — where's your cure for a sorry trouble like this?"

"That is a fair question. I cannot answer definitely until I have studied the situation out in a practical way. But I will say that the general problem is one of the most difficult with which social science has to deal."

"I know what had ought to be done. The blaggards ought to be shot. Damn every last one of them, I say."

Klinker conversed in his anger something like the ladies of Billingsgate, but Queed did not notice this. He sat back in his chair, absorbedly thinking that here, at all events, was a theme which had enough practical relation with life. He himself had seen a group of the odious "mashers" with his own eyes; Buck had pointed them out as they walked up. Never had a social problem come so close home to him as this: not a thing of text-book theories, but a burning issue working out around the corner on people that Klinker knew. And Klinker's question had been an acute one, challenging the immediate value of social science itself.

His thought veered, swept out of its channel by an unwonted wave of bitterness. Klinker had offered him this material, Klinker had advised him to write an editorial about it, Klinker had pointed out for him, in almost a superior way, just where the trouble lay. Nor was this all. Of late everybody seemed to be giving him advice. Only the other week it was Fifi; and that same day, the young lady Charles Weyland. What was there about him that invited this sort of thing? . . . And he was going to take Klinker's advice; he had seized upon it gratefully. Nor could he say that he was utterly insensate to Fifi's: he had caught himself saying over part of it not ten minutes ago. As for Charles Weyland's ripsaw criticisms, he had analyzed them dispassionately, as he had promised, and his reason rejected

them in toto. Yet he could not exactly say that he had wholly purged them out of his mind. No . . . the fact was that some of her phrases had managed to burn themselves into his brain.

Presently Klinker said another thing that his friend the little Doctor remembered for a long time.

"Do you know what's the finest line in Scripture, Doc? *But He spake of the temple of His body.* I heard a minister get that off in a church once, in a sermon, and I don't guess I'll ever forget it. A dandy, ain't it? . . . Exercise and live straight. Keep your temple strong and clean. If I was a parson, I tell you, I'd go right to Seventh and Centre next Saturday and give a talk to them blaggards on that. *But He spake of . . .*"

Klinker stopped as though he had been shot. A sudden agonized scream from downstairs jerked him off the bed and to his feet in a second, solemn as at the last trump. He stared at Queed wide-eyed, his honest red face suddenly white.

"God forgive me for talkin' so loud. . . . I'd ought to have known. . . ."

"What is it? Who was that?" demanded Queed, startled more by Klinker's look than by that scream.

But Klinker only turned and slipped softly out of the door, tipping on his toes as though somebody near at hand were asleep.

Queed was left bewildered, and completely at a loss. Whatever the matter was, it clearly concerned Buck Klinker. Equally clearly, it did not concern him. People had a right to scream if they felt that way, without having a horde of boarders hurry out and call them to book.

However, his scientist's fondness for getting at the underlying causes — or as some call it, curiosity — presently obtained control of him, and he went downstairs.

There is no privacy of grief in the communism of a middle-class boarding-house. It is ordered that your neighbor shall gaze upon your woe and you shall stare at his

anguish, when both are new and raw. That cry of pain had been instantly followed by a stir of movement; a little shiver ran through the house. Doors opened and shut; voices murmured; quick feet sounded on the stairs. Now the boarders were gathered in the parlor, very still and solemn, yet not to save their lives unaware that for them the humdrum round was to go on just the same. And here, of course, is no matter of a boarding-house: for queens must eat though kings lie high in state.

To Mrs. Paynter's parlor came a girl, white-faced and shadowy-eyed, but for those hours at least, calm and tearless and the mistress of herself. The boarders rose as she appeared in the door, and she saw that after all she had no need to tell them anything. They came and took her hand, one by one, which was the hardest to bear, and even Mr. Bylash seemed touched with a new dignity, and even Miss Miller's pompadour looked human and sorry. But two faces Miss Weyland did not see among the kind-eyed boarders: the old professor, who had locked himself in his room, and the little Doctor who was at that moment coming down the steps.

"Supper's very late," said she. "Emma and Laura . . . have been much upset. I'll have it on the table in a minute."

She turned into the hall and saw Queed on the stairs. He halted his descent five steps from the bottom, and she came to the banisters and stood and looked up at him. And if any memory of their last meeting was with them then, neither of them gave any sign of it.

"You know —?"

"No, I don't know," he replied, disturbed by her look, he did not know why, and involuntarily lowering his voice. "I came down expressly to find out."

"Fifi — She —"

"Is worse again?"

"She . . . stopped breathing a few minutes ago."

"Dead!"

Sharlee winced visibly at the word, as the fresh stricken always will.

The little Doctor turned his head vaguely away. The house was so still that the creaking of the stairs as his weight shifted from one foot to another, sounded horribly loud; he noticed it, and regretted having moved. The idea of Fifi's dying had of course never occurred to him. Something put into his head the simple thought that he would never help the little girl with her algebra again, and at once he was conscious of an odd and decidedly unpleasant sensation, somewhere far away inside of him. He felt that he ought to say something, to sum up his attitude toward the unexpected event, but for once in his life he experienced a difficulty in formulating his thought in precise language. However, the pause was of the briefest.

"I think," said Sharlee, "the funeral will be Monday afternoon. . . . You will go, won't you?"

Queed turned upon her a clouded brow. The thought of taking personal part in such mummery as a funeral — "barbaric rites," he called them in the forthcoming Work — was entirely distasteful to him. "No," he said, hastily. "No, I could hardly do that —"

"Fifi — would like it. It is the last time you will have to do anything for her."

"Like it? It is hardly as if she would know —!"

"Might n't you show your regard for a friend just the same, even if your friend was never to know about it? . . . Besides — I think of these things another way, and so did Fifi."

He peered down at her over the banisters, oddly disquieted. The flaring gas lamp beat mercilessly upon her face, and it occurred to him that she looked tired around her eyes.

"I think Fifi will know . . . and be glad," said Sharlee. "She liked and admired you. Only day before yesterday she spoke of you. Now she . . . has gone, and this is the one way left for any of us to show that we are sorry."

Long afterwards, Queed thought that if Charles Weyland's lashes had not glittered with sudden tears at that moment he would have refused her. But her lashes did so glitter, and he capitulated at once; and turning instantly went heavy-hearted up the stairs.