

## XXII

*In which Professor Nicolovius drops a Letter on the Floor, and Queed conjectures that Happiness sometimes comes to Men wearing a Strange Face.*

QUEED sat alone in the sitting-room of the Duke of Gloucester Street house. His afternoon's experiences had interested him largely. By subtle and occult processes which defied his analysis, what he had seen and heard had proved mysteriously disturbing — all this outpouring of irrational sentiment in which he had no share. So had his conversation with the girl disturbed him. He was in a condition of mental unrest, undefined but acute; odds and ends of curious thought kicked about within him, challenging him to follow them down to unexplored depths. But he was paying no attention to them now.

He sat in the sitting-room, wondering how Nicolovius had ever happened to think of that story about the Fenian refugee.

For Queed had been gradually driven to that unpleasant point. While living in the old man's house, he was, despite his conscientious efforts, virtually spying upon him.

The Fenian story had always had its questionable points; but so long as the two men were merely chance fellow-boarders, it did as well as any other. Now that they lived together, however, the multiplying suggestions that the old professor was something far other than he pretended became rather important. The young man could not help being aware that Nicolovius neither looked nor talked in the slightest degree like an Irishman. He could not help being certain that an Irishman who had fled to escape punishment for a political crime, in 1882, could have safely returned to his country long ago; and would undoubtedly have kept up relations with

his friends overseas in the meantime. Nor could he help being struck with such facts as that Nicolovius, while apparently little interested in the occasional cables about Irish affairs, had become seemingly absorbed in the three days' doings of the United Confederate Veterans.

Now it was entirely all right for the old man to have a secret, and keep it. There was not the smallest quarrel on that score. But it was not in the least all right for one man to live with another, pretending to believe in him, when in reality he was doubting and questioning him at every move. The want of candor involved in his present relations with Nicolovius continually fretted Queed's conscience. Ought he not in common honesty to tell the old man that he could not believe the Irish biography, leaving it to him to decide what he wanted to do about it?

Nicolovius, tramping in only a few minutes behind Queed, greeted his young friend as blandly as ever. Physically, he seemed tired; much dust of city streets clung to his commonly spotless boots; but his eyes were so extraordinarily brilliant that Queed at first wondered if he could have been drinking. However, this thought died almost as soon as it was born.

The professor walked over to the window and stood looking out, hat on head. Presently he said: "You saw the grand parade, I suppose? For indeed there was no escaping it."

Queed said that he had seen it.

"You had a good place to see it from, I hope?"

Excellent; Miss Weyland's porch.

"Ah!" said Nicolovius, with rather an emphasis, and permitted a pause to fall. "A most charming young lady — charming," he went on, with his note of velvet irony which the young man peculiarly disliked. "I hear she is to marry your Mr. West. An eminently suitable match in every way. Yet I shall not soon forget how that delightful young man defrauded you of the editorship."

Silence from Mr. Queed, the question of the editorship having already been thoroughly threshed out between them.

"I, too, saw the gallant proceedings," resumed Nicolovius, retracing his thought. "What an outfit! What an outfit!"

He dropped down into his easy chair by the table, removed his straw hat with traces of a rare irritation in his manner, put on his black skull cap, and presently purred his thoughts aloud:—

"No writer has yet done anything like justice to the old soldier cult in the post-bellum South. Doubtless it may lie out of the province of you historians, but what a theme for a new Thackeray! With such a fetish your priestcraft of the Middle Ages is not to be compared for a moment. There is no parallel among civilized nations; to find one you must go to the Voodooism of the savage black. For more than a generation all the intelligence of the South has been asked, nay compelled, to come and bow down before these alms-begging loblollies. To refuse to make obeisance was treason. The entire public thought of a vast section of the country has revolved around the figure of a worthless old grafter in a tattered gray shirt. Every question is settled when some moth-eaten ne'er-do-well lets out what is known as a 'rebel yell.' The most polished and profound speech conceivable is answered when a jackass mounts the platform and brays out something about the gallant boys in gray. The cry for progress, for material advancement, for moral and social betterment, is stifled, that everybody may have breath to shout for a flapping trouser's leg worn by a degraded old sot. All that your Southern statesmen have had to give a people who were stripped to the bone is fulsome rhetoric about the Wounded Warrior of Wahoo, or some other inflated nonentity, whereupon the mesmerized population have loyally fallen on their faces and shouted, 'Praise the Lord.' And all the while they were going through this wretched mummery, they were hungry and thirsty and naked—destitute in a smiling land of plenty. Do you wonder that I think old-soldierism is the meanest profession the Lord ever suffered to thrive? I tell you Baal and Moloch

never took such toll of their idolaters as these shabby old gods of the gray shirt."

"Professor Nicolovius," said Queed, with a slow smile, "where on earth do you exhume your ideas of Southern history?"

"Observation, my dear boy! God bless us, have n't I had three years of this city to use my eyes and ears in? And I had a peculiar training in my youth," he added, retrospectively, "to fit me to see straight and generalize accurately."

... Could n't the man see that no persecuted Irishman ever talked in such a way since the world began? If he had a part to play, why in the name of common sense could n't he play it respectably?

Queed got up, and began strolling about the floor. In his mind was what Sharlee Weyland had said to him two hours before: "All the bitterness nowadays comes from the non-combatants, the camp-followers, the sutlers, and the cowards." Under which of these heads did his friend, the old professor, fall? ... Why had he ever thought of Nicolovius as, perhaps, a broken Union officer? A broken Union officer would feel bitter, if at all, against the Union. A man who felt so bitter against the South—

A resolution was rapidly hardening in the young man's mind. He felt this attitude of doubt and suspicion, these thoughts that he was now thinking about the man whose roof he shared, as an unclean spot upon his chaste passion for truth. He could not feel honest again until he had wiped it off. ... And, after all, what did he owe to Nicolovius?

"But I must not leave you under the impression," said Nicolovius, almost testily for him, "that my ideas are unique and extraordinary. They are shared, in fact, by Southern historians of repute and—"

Queed turned on him. "But you never read Southern historians."

Nicolovius had a smile for that, though his expression seemed subtly to shift. "I must make confession to you.

Three days ago, I broke the habits of quarter of a century. At the second-hand shop on Centre Street I bought, actually, a little volume of history. It is surprising how these Southern manifestations have interested me."

Queed was an undesirable person for any man to live with who had a secret to keep. His mind was relentlessly constructive; it would build you up the whole dinosaur from the single left great digitus. For apparently no reason at all, there had popped into his head a chance remark of Major Brooke's a year ago, which he had never thought of from that day to this: "I can't get over thinking that I've seen that man before a long time ago, when he looked entirely different, and yet somehow the same too."

"I will show you my purchase," added Nicolovius, after a moment of seeming irresolution.

He disappeared down the hall to his bedroom, a retreat in which Queed had never set foot, and returned promptly carrying a dingy duodecimo in worn brown leather. As he entered the room, he absently raised the volume to his lips and blew along the edges.

Queed's mental processes were beyond his own control. "Three days old," flashed into his mind, "and he blows dust from it."

"What is the book?" he asked.

"A very able little history of the Reconstruction era in this State. I have a mind to read you a passage and convert you."

Nicolovius sat down, and began turning the pages. Queed stood a step away, watching him intently. The old man fluttered the leaves vaguely for a moment; then his expression shifted and, straightening up, he suddenly closed the book.

"I don't appear to find," he said easily, "the little passage that so impressed me the day before yesterday. And after all, what would be the use of reading it to you? You impetuous young men will never listen to the wisdom of your elders."

Smiling blandly, the subject closed, it might have been forever, Nicolovius reached out toward the table to flick the ash from his cigarette. In so doing, as luck had it, he struck the book and knocked it from his knees. Something shook from its pages as it dropped, and fell almost at Queed's feet. Mechanically he stooped to pick it up.

It was a letter, at any rate an envelope, and it had fallen face up, full in the light of the open window. The envelope bore an address, in faded ink, but written in a bold legible hand. Not to save his soul could Queed have avoided seeing it:

*Henry G. Surface, Esq.,  
36 Washington Street.*

There was a dead silence: a silence that from matter-of-fact suddenly became unendurable.

Queed handed the envelope to Nicolovius. Nicolovius glanced at it, while pretending not to, and his eyelash flickered; his face was about the color of cigar ashes. Queed walked away, waiting.

He expected that the old man would immediately demand whether he had seen that name and address, or at least would immediately say something. But he did nothing of the sort. When Queed turned at the end of the room, Nicolovius was fluttering the pages of his book again, apparently absorbed in it, apparently quite forgetting that he had just laid it aside. Then Queed understood. Nicolovius did not mean to say or do anything. He meant to pass over the little incident altogether.

However, the pretense had now reached a point when Queed could no longer endure it.

"Perhaps, after all," said Nicolovius, in his studiously bland voice, "I am a little sweeping —"

Queed stood in front of him, interrupting, suddenly not at ease. "Professor Nicolovius."

"Yes?"

"I must say something that will offend you, I'm afraid.

For some time I have found myself unable to believe the—story of your life you were once good enough to give me.”

“Ah, well,” said Nicolovius, engrossed in his book, “it is not required of you to believe it. We need have no quarrel about that.”

Suddenly Queed found that he hated to give the stab, but he did not falter.

“I must be frank with you, professor. I saw whom that envelope was addressed to just now.”

“Nor need we quarrel about that.”

But Queed’s steady gaze upon him presently grew unbearable, and at last the old man raised his head.

“Well? Whom was it addressed to?”

Queed felt disturbingly sorry for him, and, in the same thought, admired his iron control. The old professor’s face was gray; his very lips were colorless; but his eyes were steady, and his voice was the voice of every day.

“I think,” said Queed, quietly, “that it is addressed to you.”

There was a lengthening silence while the two men, motionless, looked into each other’s eyes. The level gaze of each held just the same look of faint horror, horror subdued and controlled, but still there. Their stare became fascinated; it ran on as though nothing could ever happen to break it off. To Queed it seemed as if everything in the world had dropped away but those brilliant eyes, frightened yet unafraid, boring into his.

Nicolovius broke the silence. The triumph of his intelligence over his emotions showed in the fact that he attempted no denial.

“Well?” he said somewhat thickly. “Well? — Well?”

Under the look of the younger man, he was beginning to break. Into the old eyes had sprung a deadly terror, a look as though his immortal soul might hang on what the young man was going to say next. To answer this look, a blind impulse in Queed bade him strike out, to say or do something;

and his reason, which was always detached and impersonal, was amazed to hear his voice saying:—

“It’s all right, professor. Not a thing is going to happen.”

The old man licked his lips. “You . . . will stay on here?”

And Queed’s voice answered: “As long as you want me.”

Nicolovius, who had been born Surface, suffered a moment of collapse. He fell back in his chair, and covered his face with his hands.

The dying efforts of the June sun still showed in the pretty sitting-room, though the town clocks were striking seven. From without floated in the voices of merry passers; eddies of the day’s celebration broke even into this quiet street. Queed sat down in a big-armed rocker, and looked out the window into the pink west.

So, in a minute’s time and by a wholly chance happening, the mystery was out at last. Professor Nicolovius, the bland recluse of Mrs. Paynter’s, and Henry G. Surface, political arch-traitor, ex-convict, and falsest of false friends, were one and the same man.

The truth had been instantly plain to Queed when the name had blazed up at him from the envelope on the floor. It was as though Fate herself had tossed that envelope under his eyes, as the answer to all his questionings. Not an instant’s doubt had troubled him; and now a score of memories were marshaling themselves before him to show that his first flashing certainty had been sound. As for the book, it was clearly from the library of the old man’s youth, kept and hidden away for some reason, when nearly everything else had been destroyed. Between the musty pages the accusing letter had lain forgotten for thirty years, waiting for this moment.

He turned and glanced once at the silent figure, huddled back in the chair with covered eyes; the unhappy old man whom nobody had ever trusted without regretting it. *Henry G. Surface* — whose name was a synonym for those traits and things which honest men of all peoples and climes have

always hated most, treachery, perfidy, base betrayal of trust, shameful dishonesty — who had crowded the word *infamy* from the popular lexicon of politics with the keener, more biting epithet, *Surfaceism*. And here — wonder of wonders — sat Surface before him, drawn back to the scene of his fall like a murderer to the body and the scarlet stain upon the floor, caught, trapped, the careful mask of many years plucked from him at a sudden word, leaving him no covering upon earth but his smooth white hands. And he, Queed, was this man's closest, his only friend, chosen out of all the world to live with him and minister to his declining years. . . .

"It's true!" now broke through the concealing hands. "I am that man. . . . God help me!"

Queed looked unseeingly out of the window, where the sun was couching in a bed of copper flame stippled over with brightest azure. Why had he done it? What crazy prompting had struck from him that promise to yoke his destiny forever with this terrible old man? If Nicolovius, the Fenian refugee, had never won his liking, Surface, the Satan apostate, was detestable to him. What devil of impulse had trapped from him the mad offer to spend his days in the company of such a creature, and in the shadow of so odious an ill-fame?

As on the day when Fifi had asked him her innocent question about altruism, a sudden tide swept the young man's thoughts inward. And after them, this time, groped the blundering feet of his spirit.

Here was he, a mature man, who, in point of work, in all practical and demonstrable ways, was the millionth man. He was a great editorial writer, which was a minor but genuine activity. He was a yet greater writer on social science, which was one of the supreme activities. On this side, then, certainly the chief side, there could be no question about the successfulness of his life. His working life was, or would be before he was through, brilliantly successful. But it had for some time been plain to him that he stopped short

there. He was a great workman, but that was all. He was a superb rationalist; but after that he did not exist.

Through the science of Human Intercourse, he saw much more of people now than he had ever done before, and thus it had become driven home upon him that most people had two lives, their outer or practical lives, and their inner or personal lives. But he himself had but one life. He was a machine; a machine which turned out matchless work for the enlightenment of the world, but after all a machine. He was intellect. He was Pure Reason. Yet he himself had said, and written, that intellectual supremacy was not the true badge of supremacy of type. There was nothing sure of races that was not equally sure of the individuals which make up those races. Yet intellect was all he was. Vast areas of thought, feeling, and conduct, in which the people around him spent so much of their time, were entirely closed to him. He had no personal life at all. That part of him had atrophied from lack of use, like the eyes of the mole and of those sightless fishes men take from the waters of caverns.

And now this part of him, which had for some time been stirring uneasily, had risen suddenly without bidding of his and in defiance of his reason, and laid hold of something in his environment. In doing so, it appeared to have thrust upon him an inner, or personal, life from this time forward. That life lay in being of use to the old man before him: he who had never been of personal use to anybody so far, and the miserable old man who had no comfort anywhere but in him.

He knew the scientific name of this kind of behavior very well. It was altruism, the irrational force that had put a new face upon the world. Fifi, he remembered well, had assured him that in altruism he would find that fiercer happiness which was as much better than content as being well was better than not being sick. But . . . could this be happiness, this whirling confusion that put him to such straits to keep a calm face above the tumult of his breast? If this was happiness, then it came to him for their first meeting wearing a strange face. . . .

"You know the story?"

Queed moved in his chair. "Yes. I — have heard it."

"Of course," said Nicolovius. "It is as well known as Iscariot's. By God, how they've hounded me!"

Evidently he was recovering fast. There was bitterness, rather than shame, in his voice. He took his hands from his eyes, adjusted his cap, stiffened up in his chair. The sallow tints were coming back into his face; his lips took on color; his eye and hand were steady. Not every man could have passed through such a cataclysm and emerged so little marked. He picked up his cigarette from the table; it was still going. This fact was symbolic: the great shock had come and passed within the smoking of an inch of cigarette. The pretty room was as it was before. Pale sunshine still flickered on the swelling curtain. The leather desk-clock gayly ticked the passing seconds. The young man's clean-cut face looked as quiet as ever.

Upon Queed the old man fastened his fearless black eyes.

"I meant to tell you all this some day," he said, in quite a natural voice. "Now the day has come a little sooner than I had meant — that is all. I know that my confidence is safe with you — till I die."

"I think you have nothing to fear by trusting me," said Queed, and added at once: "But you need tell me nothing unless you prefer."

A kind of softness shone for a moment in Surface's eyes. "Nobody could look at your face," he said gently, "and ever be afraid to trust you."

The telephone rang, and Queed could answer it by merely putting out his hand. It was West, from the office, asking that he report for work that night, as he himself was compelled to be away.

Presently Surface began talking; talking in snatches, more to himself than to his young friend, rambling backward over his broken life in passionate reminiscence. He talked a long time thus, while the daylight faded and dusk crept into the room, and then night; and Queed listened, giv-

ing him all the rein he wanted and saying never a word himself.

". . . Pray your gods," said Surface, "that you never have such reason to hate your fellow-men as I have had, my boy. For that has been the keynote of my unhappy life. God, how I hated them all, and how I do yet! . . . Not least Weyland, with his ostentatious virtue, his holier-than-thou kindness, his self-righteous magnanimity tossed even to *me* . . . the broken-kneed idol whom others passed with averted face, and there was none so poor to do me reverence. . . ."

So this, mused Queed, was the meaning of the old professor's invincible dislike for Miss Weyland, which he had made so obvious in the boarding-house that even Mr. Bylash commented on it. He had never been able to forgive her father's generosity, which he had so terribly betrayed; her name and her blood rankled and festered eternally in the heart of the faithless friend and the striped trustee.

Henderson, the ancient African who attended the two men, knocked upon the shut door with the deprecatory announcement that he had twice rung the supper-bell.

"Take the things back to the kitchen, Henderson," said Queed. "I'll ring when we are ready."

The breeze was freshening, blowing full upon Surface, who did not appear to notice it. Queed got up and lowered the window. The old man's neglected cigarette burned his fingers; he lit another; it, too, burned itself down to the cork-tip without receiving the attention of a puff.

Presently he went on talking:

"I was of a high-spirited line. Thank God, I never learned to fawn on the hand that lashed me. Insult I would not brook. I struck back, and when I struck, I struck to kill. — Did I not? So hard that the State reeled. . . . So hard that if I had had something better than mean negroes and worse whites for my tools, fifth-rate scavengers, buzzards of politics . . . this hand would have written the history of the State in these forty years.

"That was the way I struck, and how did they answer me? — Ostracism . . . Coventry . . . The weapons of mean old women, and dogs. . . . The dogs! That is what they were. . . .

"Well, other arms were ready to receive me. Others were fairer-minded than the cowardly bigots who could blow hot or cold as their selfish interests and prostituted leaders whispered. I was not a man to be kept down. Oh, my new friends were legion, and I was king again. But it was never the same. In that way, they beat me. I give them that. . . . Not they, though. It was deep calling to deep. My blood — heritage — tradition — education — all that I was . . . this was what tortured me with what was gone, and kept calling.

"Wicked injustice and a lost birthright. . . . Oh, memory was there to crucify me, by day and by night. And yet . . . Why, it was a thing that is done every day by men these people say their prayers to. . . . Oh, yes — I wanted to punish — *him* for his smug condescension, his patronizing playing of the good Samaritan. And through him all these others . . . show them that their old idol wore claws on those feet of clay. But not in that way. No, a much cleverer way than that. Perhaps there would be no money when they asked for it, but I was to smile blandly and go on about my business. They were never to reach *me*. But the Surfaces were never skilled at juggling dirty money. . . .

"They took me off my guard. The most technical fault — a trifle. . . . Another day or two and everything would have been all right. They had my word for it — and you know how they replied. . . . The infamous tyranny of the majority. The greatest judicial crime in a decade, and they laughed.

"So now I lie awake in the long nights with nine years of *that* to look back on.

"Let my life be a lesson to you teaching you — if nothing else — that it is of no use to fight society. They have a hopeless advantage, the contemptible advantage of numbers, and they are not ashamed to use it. . . . But my spirit

would not let me lie quiet under injury and insult. I was ever a fighter, born to die with my spurs on. And when I die at last, they will find that I go with a Parthian shot . . . and after all have the last word.

"So I came out into a bright world again, an old man before my time, ruined forever, marked with a scarlet mark to wear to my grave. . . .

"And then in time, as of course it would, the resolve came to me to come straight back here to die. A man wants to die among his own people. They were all that ever meant anything to me — they have that to boast of. . . . I loved this city once. To die anywhere else . . . why, it was meaningless, a burlesque on death. I looked at my face in the glass; my own mother would not have known me. And so I came straight to Jennie Paynter's, such was my whim . . . whom I held on my knee fifty years ago.

". . . Oh, it's been funny . . . so funny. . . . to sit at that intolerable table, and hear poor old Brooke on Reconstruction.

"And I've wondered what little Jennie Paynter would do, if I had risen on one of these occasions and spoken my name to the table. How I've hated her — hated the look and sight of her — and all the while embracing it for dear life. She has told me much that she never knew I listened to — many a bit about old friends . . . forty years since I'd heard their names. And Brooke has told me much, the dotting old ass.

"But the life grew unbearable to a man of my temper. I could afford the decency of privacy in my old age. For I had worked hard and saved since. . . .

"And then you came . . . a scholar and a gentleman."

It was quite dark in the room. Surface's voice had suddenly changed. The bitterness faded out of it; it became gentler than Queed had ever heard it.

"I did not find you out at once. My life had made me unsocial — and out of the Nazareth of that house I never looked for any good to come. But when once I took note of you, each day I saw you clearer and truer. I saw you fight-

ing, and asking no odds—for elbow-room to do your own work, for your way up on the newspaper, for bodily strength and health — everywhere I saw you, you were fighting indomitably. I have always loved a fighter. You were young and a stranger, alone like me; you stirred no memories of a past that now, in my age, I would forget; your face was the face of honor and truth. I thought: What a blessing if I could make a friend of this young man for the little while that is left me! . . . And you have been a blessing and a joy — more than you can dream. And now you will not cast me off, like the others. . . . I do not know the words with which to try to thank you. . . .”

“Oh, don’t,” came Queed’s voice hastily out of the dark. “There is no question of thanks here.”

He got up, lit the lamps, pulled down the shade. The old man lay back in his chair, his hands gripping its arms, the lamplight full upon him. Never had Queed seen him look less inspiring to affection. His black cap had gotten pushed to one side, which both revealed a considerable area of hairless head, and imparted to the whole face an odd and rakish air; the Italian eyes did not wholly match with the softness of his voice; the thin-lipped mouth under the long auburn mustache looked neither sorrowful nor kind. It was Queed’s lifelong habit never to look back with vain regrets; and he needed all of his resolution now.

He stood in front of the man whose terrible secret he had surprised, and outwardly he was as calm as ever.

“Professor Nicolovius,” he said, with a faint emphasis upon the name, “all this is as though it had never passed between us. And now let’s go and get some supper.”

Surface rose to his height and took Queed’s hand in a grip like iron. His eyes glistened with sudden moisture.

“God bless you, boy! You’re a *man!*”

It had been a memorable conversation in the life of both men, opening up obvious after-lines of more or less momentous thought. Yet each of them, as it happened, neglected

these lines for a corollary detail of apparently much less seriousness, and pretty nearly the same detail at that. For Surface sat long that evening, meditating how he might most surely break up the friendship between his young friend and Sharlee Weyland; while Queed, all during his busy hours at the office, found his thoughts of Nicolovius dominated by speculations as to what Miss Weyland would say, if she knew that he had formed a lifelong compact with the man who had betrayed her father’s friendship and looted her own fortune.