

XXIV

Sharlee's Parlor on Another Evening; how One Caller outsat Two, and why; also, how Sharlee looked in her Mirror for a Long Time, and why.

ON the very night after West made his happy discovery, namely on the evening of February 24, at about twenty minutes of nine, Sharlee Weyland's doorbell rang, and Mr. Queed was shown into her parlor.

His advent was a complete surprise to Sharlee. For these nine months, her suggestion that he should call upon her had lain utterly neglected. Since the Reunion she had seen him but four times, twice on the street, and once at each of their offices, when the business of the reformatory had happened to draw them together. The last of these meetings, which had been the briefest, was already six weeks old. In all of her acquaintance with him, extending now over two years and a half, this was the first time that he had ever sought her out with intentions that were, presumably, deliberately social.

The event, Sharlee felt in greeting him, could not have happened, more unfortunately. Queed found the parlor occupied, and the lady's attention engaged, by two young men before him. One of them was Beverley Byrd, who saluted him somewhat moodily. The other was a Mr. Miller — no relation to Miss Miller of Mrs. Paynter's, though a faint something in his *ensemble* lent plausibility to that conjecture — a newcomer to the city who, having been introduced to Miss Weyland somewhere, had taken the liberty of calling without invitation or permission. It was impossible for Sharlee to be rude to anybody under her own roof, but it is equally impossible to describe her manner to Mr. Miller as exactly cordial. He himself was a cordial man, mustached

and anecdotal, who assumed rather more confidence than he actually felt. Beverley Byrd, who did not always hunt in pairs, had taken an unwonted dislike to him at sight. He did not consider him a suitable person to be calling on Sharlee, and he had been doing his best, with considerable deftness and success, to deter him from feeling too much at home.

Byrd wore a beautiful dinner jacket. So did Mr. Miller, with a gray tie, and a gray, brass-buttoned vest, to boot. Queed wore his day clothes of blue, which were not so new as they were the day Sharlee first saw them, on the rustic bridge near the little cemetery. He had, of course, taken it for granted that he would find Miss Weyland alone. Nevertheless, he did not appear disconcerted by the sudden discovery of his mistake, or even by Mr. Miller's glorious waistcoat; he was as grave as ever, but showed no signs of embarrassment. Sharlee caught herself observing him closely, as he shook hands with the two men and selected a chair for himself; she concluded that constant contact with the graces of Charles Gardiner West had not been without its effect upon him. He appeared decidedly more at his ease than Mr. Miller, for instance, and he had another valuable possession which that personage lacked, namely, the face of a gentleman.

But it was too evident that he felt little sense of responsibility for the maintenance of the conversation. He sat back in a chair of exceptionable comfortableness, and allowed Beverley Byrd to discourse with him; a privilege which Byrd exercised fitfully, for his heart was in the talk that Sharlee was dutifully supporting with Mr. Miller. Into this talk he resolutely declined to be drawn, but his ear was alert for opportunities — which came not infrequently — to thrust in a polished oar to the discomfiture of the intruder.

Not that he would necessarily care to do it, but the runner could read Mr. Miller, without a glass, at one hundred paces' distance. He was of the climber type, a self-made man in the earlier and less inspiring stages of the making. Culture had

a dangerous fascination for him. He adored to talk of books; a rash worship, it seemed, since his but bowing acquaintance with them trapped him frequently into mistaken identities over which Sharlee with difficulty kept a straight face, while Byrd palpably rejoiced.

"You know *Thanatopsis*, of course," he would ask, with a rapt and glowing eye — "Lord Byron's beautiful poem on the philosophy of life? Now that is *my* idea of what poetry ought to be, Miss Weyland. . . ."

And Beverley Byrd, breaking his remark to Queed off short in the middle, would turn to Sharlee with a face of studious calm and say:—

"Will you ever forget, Sharlee, the first time you read the other *Thanatopsis* — the one by William Cullen Bryant? Don't you remember how it looked — with the picture of Bryant — in the old Fifth Reader?"

Mr. Miller proved that he could turn brick-red, but he learned nothing from experience.

In time, the talk between the two young men, which had begun so desultorily, warmed up. Byrd had read something besides the Fifth Reader, and Queed had discovered before to-night that he had ideas to express. Their conversation progressed with waxing interest, from the President's message to the causes of the fall of Rome, and thence by wholly logical transitions to the French Revolution and Woman's Suffrage. Byrd gradually became so absorbed that he almost, but not quite, neglected to keep Mr. Miller in his place. As for Queed, he spoke in defense of the "revolt of woman" for five minutes without interruption, and his masterly sentences finally drew the silence and attention of Mr. Miller himself.

"Who is that fellow?" he asked in an undertone. "I did n't catch his name."

Sharlee told him.

"He's got a fine face," observed Mr. Miller. "I've made quite a study of faces, and I never saw one just like his — so absolutely on one note, if you know what I mean."

"What note is that?" asked Sharlee, interested by him for the only time so long as they both did live.

"Well, it's not always easy to put a name to it, but I'd call it . . . *honesty*. — *If you know what I mean.*"

Mr. Miller stayed until half-past ten. The door had hardly shut upon him when Byrd, too, rose.

"Oh, don't go, Beverley!" protested Sharlee. "I've hardly spoken to you."

"Duty calls," said Byrd. "I'm going to walk home with Mr. Miller."

"Beverley — don't! You were quite horrid enough while he was here."

"But you spoiled it all by being so unnecessarily agreeable! It is my business, as your friend and well-wisher, to see that he does n't carry away too jolly a memory of his visit. Take lunch downtown with me to-morrow, won't you, Mr. Queed — at the Business Men's Club? I want to finish our talk about the Catholic nations, and why they're decadent."

Queed said that he would, and Byrd hurried away to overtake Mr. Miller. Or, perhaps that gentleman was only a pretext, and the young man's experienced eye had read that any attempt to outsit the learned assistant editor was foredoomed to failure.

"I'm so glad you stayed," said Sharlee, as Queed reseated himself. "I should n't have liked not to exchange a word with you on your first visit here."

"Oh! This is not my first visit, you may remember."

"Your first voluntary visit, perhaps I should have said."

He let his eyes run over the room, and she could see that he was thinking, half-unconsciously, of the last time when he and she had sat here.

"I had no idea of going," he said absently, "till I had the opportunity of speaking to you."

A brief silence followed, which clearly did not embarrass him, at any rate. Sharlee, feeling the necessity of breaking it, still puzzling herself with speculations as to what had put it into his head to come, said at random:—

"Oh, do tell me — how is old Père Goriot?"

"Père Goriot? I never heard of him."

"Oh, forgive me! It is a name we used to have, long ago, for Professor Nicolovius."

A shadow crossed his brow. "He is extremely well, I believe."

"You are still glad that you ran off with him to live *tête-à-tête* in a bridal cottage?"

"Oh, I suppose so. Yes, certainly!"

His frank face betrayed that the topic was unwelcome to him. For he hated all secrets, and this secret, from this girl, was particularly obnoxious to him. And beyond all that part of it, how could he analyze for anybody his periods of strong revolt against his association with Henry G. Surface, followed by longer and stranger periods when, quite apart from the fact that his word was given and regrets were vain, his consciousness embraced it as having a certain positive value?

He rose restlessly, and in rising his eye fell upon the little clock on the mantel.

"Good heavens!" broke from him. "I had no idea it was so late! I must go directly. Directly."

"Oh, no, you must n't think of it. Your visit to me has just begun — all this time you have been calling on Beverley Byrd."

"Why do you think I came here to-night?" he asked abruptly.

Sharlee, from her large chair, smiled. "I think to see me."

"Oh! — Yes, naturally, but —"

"Well, I think this is the call plainly due me from my Reunion party last year."

"No! Not at all! At the same time, it has been since that day that I have had you on my mind so much."

He said this in a perfectly matter-of-fact voice, but a certain nervousness had broken through into his manner. He took a turn up and down the room, and returned suddenly to his seat.

"Oh, have you had me on your mind?"

"Do you remember my saying that day," he began, resolutely, "that I was not sure whether I had got the better of you or you had got the better of me?"

"I remember very well."

"Well, I have come to tell you that — you have won."

He had plucked a pencil from the arsenal of them in his breast-pocket, and with it was beating a noiseless tattoo on his open left palm. With an effort he met her eyes.

"I say you were right," came from him nervously. "Don't you hear?"

"Was I? Won't you tell me just what you mean?"

"Don't you know?"

"Really I don't think I do. You see, when I used that expression that day, I was speaking only of the editorship —"

"But I was speaking of a theory of life. After all, the two things seem to have been bound together rather closely — just as you said."

He restored his pencil to his pocket, palpably pulled himself together, and proceeded:

"Oh, my theory was wholly rational — far more rational than yours; rationally it was perfect. It was a wholly logical recoil from the idleness, the lack of purpose, the slipshod self-indulgence under many names that I saw, and see, everywhere about me. I have work to do — serious work of large importance — and it seemed to me my duty to carry it through at all hazards. I need not add that it still seems so. Yet it was a life's work, already well along, and there was no need for me to pay an excessive price for mere speed. I elected to let everything go but intellect; I felt that I must do so; and in consequence, by the simplest sort of natural law, all the rest of me was shriveling up — had shriveled up, you will say. Yet I knew very well that my intellect was not the biggest part of me. I have always understood that. . . . Still, it seems that I required you to rediscover it for me in terms of everyday life. . . ."

"No, no!" she interrupted, "I did n't do that. Most of

it you did yourself. The start, the first push — don't you know? — it came from Fifi."

"Well," he said slowly, "what was Fifi but you again in miniature?"

"A great deal else," said Sharlee.

Her gaze fell. She sunk her chin upon her hand, and a silence followed, while before the mind's eye of each rose a vision of Fifi, with her wasted cheeks and great eyes.

"As I say, I sacrificed everything to reason," continued Queed, obviously struggling against embarrassment, "and yet pure reason was never my ideal. I have impressed you as a thoroughly selfish person — you have told me that — and so far as my immediate environment is concerned, I have been, and am. So it may surprise you to be told that a life of service has been from the beginning my ambition and my star. Of course I have always interpreted service in the broadest sense, in terms of the world; that was why I deliberately excluded all purely personal applications of it. Yet it is from a proper combination of reason with — the sociologist's 'consciousness of kind' — fellow-feeling, sympathy, if you prefer, that is derived a life of fullest efficiency. I have always understood the truth of this formula as applied to peoples. It seems that I — rather missed its force as to individuals. I — I am ready to admit that an individual life can draw an added meaning — and richness from a service, not of the future, but of the present — not of the race but . . . well, of the unfortunate on the doorstep. Do you understand," he asked abruptly, "what I am trying to tell you?"

She assured him that she understood perfectly.

A slow painful color came into his face.

"Then you appreciate the nature and the size of the debt I owe you."

"Oh, no, no, no! If I have done anything at all to help you," said Sharlee, considerably moved, "then I am very glad and proud. But as for what you speak of . . . no, no,

people always do these things for themselves. The help comes from within —"

"Oh, *don't* talk like that!" broke from him. "You throw out the idea somehow that I consider that I have undergone some remarkable conversion and transformation. I have n't done anything of the sort. I am just the same as I always was. Just the same. . . . Only now I am willing to admit, as a scientific truth, that time given to things not in themselves directly productive, can be made to pay a good dividend. If what I said led you to think that I meant more than that, then I have, for once, expressed myself badly. I tell you this," he went on hurriedly, "simply because you once interested yourself in trying to convince me of the truth of these views. Some of the things you said that night managed to stick. They managed to stick. Oh, I give you that. I suppose you might say that they gradually became like mottoes or texts — not scientific, of course . . . personal. Therefore, I thought it only fair to tell you that while my cosmos is still mostly Ego — I suppose everybody's is in one way or another — I have — made changes, so that I am no longer wholly out of relation with life."

"I am glad you wanted to tell me," said Sharlee, "but I have known it for — oh, the longest time."

"In a certain sense," he hurried on — "quite a different sense — I should say that your talk — the only one of the kind I ever had — did for me the sort of thing . . . that most men's mothers do for them when they are young."

She made no reply.

"Perhaps," he said, almost defiantly, "you don't like my saying that?"

"Oh, yes! I like it very much."

"And yet," he said, "I don't think of you as I fancy a man would think of his mother, or even of his sister. It is rather extraordinary. It has become clear to me that you have obtained a unique place in my thought — in my regard. Well, good-night."

She looked up at him, without, however, quite meeting his eyes.

"Oh! Do you think you must go?"

"Well — yes. I have said everything that I came to say. Did you want me to stay particularly?"

"Not if you feel that you should n't. You've been very good to give me a whole evening, as it is."

"I'll tell you one more thing before I go."

He took another turn up and down the room, and halted frowning in front of her.

"I am thinking of making an experiment in practical social work next year. What would be your opinion of a free night-school for working boys?"

Sharlee, greatly surprised by the question, said that the field was a splendid one.

He went on at once: "Technical training, of course, would be the nominal basis of it. I could throw in, also, boxing and physical culture. Buck Klinker would be delighted to help there. By the way, you must know Klinker: he has some first-rate ideas about what to do for the working population. Needless to say, both the technical and physical training would be only baits to draw attendance, though both could be made very valuable. My main plan is along a new line. I want to teach what no other school attempts—only one thing, but that to be hammered in so that it can never be forgotten."

"What is that?"

"You might sum it all up as the doctrine of individual responsibility."

She echoed his term inquiringly, and he made a very large gesture.

"I want to see if I can teach boys that they are *not* individuals — not unrelated atoms in a random universe. Teach them that they live in a world of law — of evolution by law — that they are links, every one of them, in a splendid chain that has been running since life began, and will run on to the end of time. Knock into their heads that no chain

is stronger than its weakest link, and that *this means them*. Don't you see what a powerful socializing force there is in the sense of personal responsibility, if cultivated in the right direction? A boy may be willing to take his chances on going to the bad — economically and socially, as well as morally — if he thinks that it is only his own personal concern. But he will hesitate when you once impress upon him that, in doing so, he is blocking the whole magnificent procession. My plan would be to develop these boys' social efficiency by stamping upon them the knowledge that the very humblest of them holds a trusteeship of cosmic importance."

"I understand. . . . How splendid! — not to practice sociology on them, but to teach it to them —"

"But could we get the boys?"

She felt that the unconsciousness with which he took her into partnership was one of the finest compliments that had ever been paid her.

"Oh, I think so! The Department has all sorts of connections, as well as lots of data which would be useful in that way. How Mr. Dayne will welcome you as an ally! And I, too. I think it is fine of you, Mr. Queed, so generous and kind, to —"

"Not at all! Not in the least! I beg you," he interrupted, irritably, "not to go on misunderstanding me. I propose this simply as an adjunct to my own work. It is simply in the nature of a laboratory exercise. In five years the experiment might enable me to check up some of my own conclusions, and so prove very valuable to me."

"In the meantime the experiment will have done a great deal for a certain number of poor boys — unfortunates on your doorstep. . . ."

"That," he said shortly, "is as it may be. But —"

"Mr. Queed," said Sharlee, "why are you honest in every way but one? Why won't you admit that you have thought of this school because you would like to do something to help in the life of this town?"

"Because I am not doing anything of the sort! Why will

you harp on that one string? Good heavens! Aren't you yourself the author of the sentiment that a sociologist ought to have some first-hand knowledge of the problems of society?"

Standing, he gazed down at her, frowning insistently, bent upon staring her out of countenance; and she looked up at him with a Didymus smile which slowly grew. Presently his eyes fell.

"I cannot undertake," he said, in his stiffest way, "to analyze all my motives at all times for your satisfaction. They have nothing whatever to do with the present matter. The sole point up for discussion is the practical question of getting such a school started. Keep it in mind, will you? Give some thought as to ways and means. Your experience with the Department should be helpful to me in getting the plan launched."

"Certainly I will. If you don't object, I'll talk with Mr. Dayne about it, too. He —"

"All right. I don't object. Well, good-night."

Sharlee rose and held out her hand. His expression, as he took and shook it, suddenly changed.

"I suppose you think I have acquired the habit," he said, with an abrupt recurrence of his embarrassment, "of coming to you for counsel and assistance?"

"Well, why should n't you?" she answered seriously. "I have had the opportunity and the time to learn some things —"

"You can't dismiss your kindness so easily as that."

"Oh, I don't think I have been particularly kind."

"Yes, you have. I admit that. You have."

He took the conversation with such painful seriousness that she was glad to lighten it with a smile.

"If you persist in thinking so, you might feel like rewarding me by coming to see me soon again."

"Yes, yes! I shall come to see you soon again. Certainly. Of course," he added hastily, "it is desirable that I should talk with you more at length about my school."

He was staring at her with a conflict of expressions in which, curiously enough, pained bewilderment seemed uppermost. Sharlee laughed, not quite at her ease.

"Do you know, I am still hoping that some day you will come to see me, not to talk about anything definite — just to talk."

"As to that," he replied, "I cannot say. Good-night."

Forgetting that he had already shaken hands, he now went through with it again. This time the ceremony had unexpected results. For now at the first touch of her hand, a sensation closely resembling chain-lightning sprang up his arm, and tingled violently down through all his person. It was as if his arm had not merely fallen suddenly asleep, but was singing uproariously in its slumbers.

"I'm so glad you came," said Sharlee.

He retired in a confusion which he was too untrained to hide. At the door he wheeled abruptly, and cleared himself, with a white face, of evasions that were torturing his conscience.

"I will not say that a probable benefit to the boys *never* entered into my thoughts about the school. Nor do I say that my next visit will be *wholly* to talk about definite things, as you put it. For part of the time, I daresay I should like — just to talk."

Sharlee went upstairs, and stood for a long time gazing at herself in the mirror. Vainly she tried to glean from it the answer to a most interesting conundrum: Did Mr. Queed still think her very beautiful?