

## XXVI

*In which Queed forces the Old Professor's Hand, and the Old Professor takes to his Bed.*

RAINCOAT buttoned to his throat, Queed set his face against the steady downpour. It was a mild, windless night near the end of February, foreshadowing the early spring already nearly due. He had no umbrella, or wish for one: the cool rain in his face was a refreshment and a vivifier.

So the worst had come to the worst, and he had been living for nearly a year on Sharlee Weyland's money, stolen from her by her father's false friend. Wormwood and gall were the fruits that altruism had borne him. Two casual questions had brought out the shameful truth, and these questions could have been asked as easily a year ago as now.

Bitterly did the young man reproach himself now, for his criminal carelessness in regard to the sources of Surface's luxurious income. For the better part of a year he had known the old man for an ex-convict whose embezzlings had run high into six figures. Yet he had gone on fatuously swallowing the story that the money of which the old rogue was so free represented nothing but the savings of a thrifty school-teacher. A dozen things came back to him now to give the lie to that tale. He thought of the costly books that Surface was constantly buying; the expensive repairs he had made in his rented house; the wine that stood on the dinner-table every night; the casual statement from the old man that he meant to retire from the school at the end of the present session. Was there ever a teacher who could live like this after a dozen years' roving work? And the probability was that Surface had never worked at all until, returning to his own city, he had needed a position as a cover and a blind.

Mathematical computations danced through the young man's brain. He figured that their present scale of living must run anywhere from \$3500 to \$5000 a year. Surface's income from the school was known to be \$900 a year. His income from his lodger was \$390 a year. This difference between, say \$4000 and \$1290, was \$2710 a year, or 4 per cent on some \$70,000. And this tidy sum was being filched from the purse of Charlotte Lee Weyland, who worked for her living at an honorarium of \$75 a month.

Queed walked with his head lowered, bent less against the rain than his own stinging thoughts. At the corner of Seventh Street a knot of young men, waiting under a dripping awning for a car that would not come, cried out gayly to the Doc; they were Mercuries; but the Doc failed to respond to their greetings, or even to hear them. He crossed the humming street, northerly, with an experienced sureness acquired since his exploit with the dog Behemoth; and so came into his own section of the town.

He was an apostle of law who of all things loved harmony. Already his mind was busily at work seeking to restore order out of the ruins of his house. Obviously the first thing to do, the one thing that could not wait an hour, was to get his sense of honesty somehow back again. He must compel Surface to hand over to Miss Weyland immediately every cent of money that he had. The delivery could be arranged easily enough, without any sensational revelations. The letter to Miss Weyland could come from a lawyer in the West; in Australia, if the old man liked; that did n't matter. The one thing that did matter was that he should immediately make restitution as fully as lay within the power of them both.

Surface, of course, would desperately resist such a suggestion. Queed knew of but one club which could drive him, to agree to it, one goad which could rowel him to the height. This was his own continued companionship. He could compel Surface to disgorgement only at the price of a new offering of himself to the odious old man who had played false

with him as with everybody else. Queed did not hesitate. At the moment every cost seemed small to clear his dearest belonging, which was his personal honesty, of this stain. As for Surface, nothing could make him more detestable in a moral sense than he had been all along. He had been a thief and a liar from the beginning. Once the cleansing storm was over, their unhappy domestic union could go on much as it had done before.

For his part, he must at once set about restoring his half of the joint living expenses consumed during the past nine months. This money could be passed in through the lawyer with the rest, so that she would never know. Obviously, he would have to make more money than he was making now, which meant that he would have to take still more time from his book. There were his original tax articles in the *Post*, which a publisher had asked him at the time to work over into a primer for college use. There might be a few hundreds to be made there. He could certainly place some articles in the reviews. If for the next twelve months he ruthlessly eliminated everything from his life that did not bring in money, he could perhaps push his earnings for the next year to three thousand dollars, which would be enough to see him through. . . .

And busy with thoughts like these, he came home to Surface's pleasant little house, and was greeted by the old man with kindness and good cheer.

It was dinner-time — for they dined at night now, in some state — and they sat down to four dainty courses, cooked and served by the capable Henderson. The table was a round one, so small that the two men could have shaken hands across it without the smallest exertion. By old Surface's plate stood a gold-topped bottle, containing, not the ruddy burgundy which had become customary of late, but sparkling champagne. Surface referred to it, gracefully, as his medicine; doctors, he said, were apparently under the delusion that schoolmasters had bottomless purses. To this pleasantry Queed made no reply. He was, indeed,

spare with his remarks that evening, and his want of appetite grieved old Henderson sorely.

The servant brought the coffee and retired. He would not be back again till he was rung for: that was the iron rule. The kitchen was separated from the dining-room by a pantry and two doors. Thus the diners were as private as they were ever likely to be in this world, and in the breast of one of them was something that would brook no more delay.

"Professor," said this one, with a face which gave no sign of inner turmoil, "I find myself obliged to refer once more to — an unwelcome subject."

Surface was reaching for his coffee cup; he was destined never to pick it up. His hand fell; found the edge of the table; his long fingers gripped and closed over it.

"Ah?" he said easily, not pretending to doubt what subject was meant. "I'm sorry. I thought that we had laid the old ghosts for good."

"I thought so, too. I was mistaken, it seems."

Across the table, the two men looked at each other. To Surface, the subject must indeed have been the most unwelcome imaginable, especially when forced upon him with so ominous a directness. Yet his manner was the usual bland mask; his face, rather like a bad Roman senator's in the days of the decline, had undergone no perceptible change.

"When I came here to live with you," said Queed, "I understood, of course, that you would be contributing several times as much toward our joint expenses as I. To a certain degree, you would be supporting me. Naturally, I did not altogether like that. But you constantly assured me, you may remember, that you would rather put your savings into a home than anything else, that you could not manage it without my assistance, and that you considered my companionship as fully offsetting the difference in the money we paid. So I became satisfied that the arrangement was honorable to us both."

Surface spoke with fine courtesy. "All this is so true, your contribution toward making our house a home has

been so much greater than my own, that I feel certain nothing can have happened to disturb your satisfaction."

"Yes," said Queed. "I have assumed all the time that the money you were spending here was your own."

There was a silence. Queed looked at the table-cloth. He had just become aware that his task was hateful to him. The one thing to do was to get it over as swiftly and decisively as possible.

"I am at a loss," said the old man, dryly, "to understand where the assumption comes in, in view of the fact that I have stated, more than once —"

"I am forced to tell you that I cannot accept these statements."

For a moment the brilliant eyes looked dangerous. "Are you aware that your language is exceedingly offensive?"

"Yes. I'm very sorry. Nevertheless, this tooth must come out. It has suddenly become apparent to me that you must be spending here the income on hardly less than seventy-five thousand dollars. Do you seriously ask me to believe, now that I directly bring up the matter, that you amassed this by a few years of school-teaching?"

Surface lit a cigarette, and, taking a slow puff, looked unwinkingly into the young man's eyes, which looked as steadily back into his own. "You are mistaken in assuming," he said sternly, "that, in giving you my affection, I have given you any right to cross-examine me in —"

"Yes, you gave it to me when you invited me to your house as, in part, your guest —"

"I am behind the times, indeed, if it is esteemed the privilege of a guest to spy upon his host."

"That," said Queed, quietly, "is altogether unjust. You must know that I am not capable of spying on you. I have, on the contrary, been culpably short-sighted. Never once have I doubted anything you told me until you yourself insisted on rubbing doubts repeatedly into my eyes. Professor," he went on rapidly, "are you aware that those familiar with your story say that, when you — that, after

your misfortune, you started life again with a bank account of between one and two hundred thousand dollars?"

The black eyes lit up like two shoe-buttons in the sunlight. "That is a wicked falsehood, invented at the time by a lying reporter —"

"Do you assert that everything you have now has been earned since your misfortune?"

"Precisely that."

The voice was indignantly firm, but Queed, looking into the old man's face, read there as plain as day that he was lying.

"Think a moment," he said sorrowfully. "This is pretty serious, you see. Are you absolutely sure that you carried over nothing at all?"

"In the sight of God, I did not. But let me tell you, my friend —"

A chair-leg scraped on the carpeted floor, and Queed was standing, playing his trump card with a grim face.

"We must say good-by, Professor — now. I'll send for my things in the morning."

"What do you mean, you —"

"That you and I part company to-night. Good-by."

"Stop!" cried Surface. He rose, greatly excited and leaned over the table. A faint flush drove the yellow from his cheek; his eyes were blazing. He shook a menacing finger at close range in Queed's face, which remained entirely unmoved by the demonstration.

"So this is the reward of my kindness and affection! I won't endure it, do you understand? I won't be kicked into the gutter like an old shoe, do you hear? Sit down in that chair. I forbid you to leave the house."

Queed's gaze was more formidable than his own. "Mr. Surface," he said, in a peculiarly quiet voice, "you forget yourself strangely. You are in no position to speak to me like this."

Surface appeared suddenly to agree with him. He fell back into his chair and dropped his face into his hands.

Queed, standing where he was, watched him across the tiny dinner-table and, against his reason, felt very sorry. How humiliating this ripping up of old dishonor was to the proud old man, rogue though he was, he understood well enough. From nobody in the world but him, he knew, would Surface ever have suffered it to proceed as far as this, and this knowledge made him want to handle the knife with as little roughness as possible.

"I — was wrong," said the muffled voice. "I ask your forgiveness for my outbreak."

"You have it."

Surface straightened himself up, and, by an obvious effort, managed to recapture something like his usual smoothness of voice and manner.

"Will you be good enough to sit down? I will tell you what you wish."

"Certainly. Thank you."

Queed resumed his seat. His face was a little pale, but otherwise just as usual. Inwardly, after the moment of critical uncertainty, he was shaken by a tempest of fierce exultation. His club, after all, was going to be strong enough; the old man would give up the money rather than give up him.

Surface picked up his cigarette. All his storm signals had disappeared as by magic.

"I did manage," began the old man, flicking off his ash with an admirable effect of calm, "to save a small nest-egg from the wreck, to keep me from the poorhouse in my old age. I did not wish to tell you this because, with your lack of acquaintance with business methods, the details would only confuse, and possibly mislead, you. I had, too, another reason for wishing to keep it a surprise. You have forced me, against my preferences, to tell you. As to this small pittance," he said, without the flicker of an eye-lash, "any court in the country would tell you that it is fairly and honorably mine."

"Thank you. I appreciate your telling me this." Queed leaned over the table, and began speaking in a quiet, brisk

voice. "Now, then, here is the situation. You have a certain sum of money put away somewhere, estimated to be not less than a hundred thousand dollars —"

"Nothing of the sort! Far less than that! A few beggarly thousands, which —"

"Very well — a few thousands. Of course your books will readily show the exact figures. This money was withheld at the time your affairs were settled, and therefore was not applied to reducing the — the loss on the trustee account. Of course, if its existence had been known, it would have been so applied. In other words, the Weyland estate has been deprived to the exact extent of the sum withheld. Fortunately, it is never too late to correct an error of this sort. My idea is that we should make the restitution without the loss of an unnecessary day."

Doubtless the old man had seen it coming; he heard the galling proposal with a face which showed nothing stronger than profound surprise. "Restitution! My dear boy, I owe no restitution to any one."

"You hardly take the position that you have acquired a title to the Weyland trustee funds?"

"Ah, there it is!" purred Surface, making a melancholy gesture. "You see why I did not wish to open up this complicated subject. Your ignorance, if you will pardon me, of modern business procedure, makes it very difficult for you to grasp the matter in its proper bearings. Without going into too much detail, let me try to explain it to you. This settlement of my affairs that you speak of was forcibly done by the courts, in the interest of others, and to my great injury. The rascals set out to cut my throat — was it required of me to whet the knife for them? They set out to strip me of the last penny I had, and they had every advantage, despotic powers, with complete access to all my private papers. If the robbers overlooked something that I had, a bagatelle I needed for the days of my adversity, was it my business to pluck them by the sleeve and turn traitor to myself? Why, the law itself gave me what they passed over. I was declared

a bankrupt. Don't you know what that means? It means that the courts assumed responsibility for my affairs, paid off my creditors, and, as a small compensation for having robbed me, wiped the slate clean and declared me free of all claims. And this was twenty-five years ago. My dear boy! Read the Bankruptcy Act. Ask a lawyer, any lawyer —"

"Let us not speak of lawyers — now," interrupted Queed, stirring in his chair. "Let their opinion wait as a last alternative, which, I earnestly hope, need never be used at all. I am not bringing up this point to you now as a legal question, but as a moral one."

"Ah! You do not find that the morals provided by the law are good enough for you, then?"

"If your reading of the law is correct — of which I am not so certain as you are, I fear — it appears that they are not. But —"

"It is my misfortune," interrupted the old man, his hand tightening on the table-edge, "that your sympathies are not with me in the matter. Mistaken sentiment, youthful Quixotism, lead you to take an absurdly distorted view of what —"

"No, I'm afraid not. You see, when stripped of all unnecessary language, the repulsive fact is just this: we are living here on money that was unlawfully abstracted from the Weyland estate. No matter what the law may say, we know that this money morally belongs to its original owners. Now I ask you —"

"Let me put it another way. I can show you exactly where your misapprehension is —"

Queed stopped him short by a gesture. "My mind is so clear on this point that discussion only wastes our time."

The young man's burst of exultation was all but still-born; already despair plucked chilly at his heart-strings. For the first time the depth of his feeling broke through into his voice: "Say, if you like that I am unreasonable, ignorant, unfair. Put it all down to besotted prejudice. . . . Can't you

restore this money because I ask it? Won't you do it as a favor to me?"

Surface's face became agitated. "I believe there is nothing else in the world — that I would n't do for you — a thousand times over — but —"

Then Queed threw the last thing that he had to offer into the scales, namely himself. He leaned over the table and fixed the old man with imploring eyes.

"I'd do my best to make it up to you. I'll — I'll live with you till one or the other of us dies. You'll have somebody to take care of you when you are old, and there will never be any talk of the poorhouse between you and me. It can all be arranged quietly through a lawyer, Professor — and nobody will guess your secret. You and I will find quiet lodgings somewhere, and live together — as friends — live cleanly, honorably, honestly —"

"For God's sake, stop!" said Surface, in a broken voice. "This is more than I can bear."

So Queed knew that it was hopeless, and that the old man meant to cling to his dishonored money, and let his friend go. He sank back in his chair, sick at heart, and a painful silence fell.

"If I refuse," Surface took up the theme, "it is for your sake as well as mine. My boy, you don't know what you ask. It is charity, mere mad charity to people whom I have no love for, who —"

"Then," said Queed, "two things must happen. First, I must lay the facts before Miss Weyland."

Surface's manner changed; his eyes became unpleasant. "You are not serious. You can hardly mean to repeat to anybody what I have told you in sacred confidence."

Queed smiled sadly. "No, you have not told me anything in confidence. You have never told me anything until I first found it out for myself, and then only because denial was useless."

"When I told you my story last June, you assured me —"

"However, you have just admitted that what you told me last June was not the truth."

Again their eyes clashed, and Surface, whose face was slowly losing all its color, even the sallowness, found no sign of yielding in those of the younger man.

Queed resumed: "However, I do not mean that I shall tell her who you are, unless you yourself compel me to. I shall simply let her know that you are known to be alive, within reach of the courts, and in possession of a certain sum of money withheld from the trustee funds. This will enable her to take the matter up with her lawyers and, as I believe, bring it before the courts. If her claim is sustained, she would doubtless give you the opportunity to make restitution through intermediaries, and thus sensational disclosures might be avoided. However, I make you no promises about that."

Surface drew a breath; he permitted his face to show signs of relief. "Since my argument and knowledge carry so little weight with you," he said with a fine air of dignity, "I am willing to let the courts convince you, if you insist. But I do beg —"

Queed cut him short; he felt that he could not bear one of the old man's grandiloquent speeches now. "There is one other thing that must be mentioned," he said in a tired voice. "You understand, of course, that I can live here no longer."

"My God! Don't say that! Are n't you satisfied with what you've done to me without that!"

"I have n't done anything to you. Whatever has been done, you have deliberately done to yourself. I have no desire to hurt or injure you. But — what are you thinking about, to imagine that I could continue to live here — on this money?"

"You contradict yourself twice in the same breath! You just said that you would let the courts settle that question —"

"As to the Weyland estate's claim, yes. But I do not let the courts regulate my own sense of honor."

Surface, elbows on the table, buried his face in his hands. Queed slowly rose, a heart of lead in his breast. He had failed. He had offered all that he had, and it had been unhesitatingly kicked aside. And, unless long litigation was started, and unless it ultimately succeeded, Henry G. Surface would keep his loot.

He glanced about the pleasant little dining-room, symbol of the only home he had ever known, where, after all, he had done great work, and been not unhappy. Personally, he was glad to leave it, glad to stand out from the shadow of the ruin of Henry G. Surface. Nevertheless it was a real parting, the end of an epoch in his life, and there was sadness in that. Sadness, too, he saw, deeper than his repugnance and anger, in the bowed figure before him, the lost old man whom he was to leave solitary henceforward. Saddest of all was the consciousness of his own terrible failure.

He began speaking in a controlled voice.

"This interview is painful to us both. It is useless to prolong it. I — have much to thank you for — kindness which I do not forget now and shall not forget. If you ever reconsider your decision — if you should ever need me for anything — I shall be within call. And now I must leave you . . . sorrier than I can say that our parting must be like this." He paused: his gaze rested on the bent head, and he offered, without hope, the final chance. "Your mind is quite made up? You are sure that — this — is the way you wish the matter settled?"

Surface took his face from his hands and looked up. His expression was a complete surprise. It was neither savage nor anguished, but ingratiating, complacent, full of suppressed excitement. Into his eyes had sprung an indescribable look of cunning, the look of a broken-down diplomat about to outwit his adversary with a last unsuspected card.

"No, no! Of course I'll not let you leave me like this," he said, with a kind of trembling eagerness, and gave a rather painful laugh. "You force my hand. I had not meant to tell you my secret so soon. You can't guess the real reason

why I refuse to give my money to Miss Weyland, even when you ask it, now can you? You can't guess, now can you?"

"I think I can. You had rather have the money than have me."

"Not a bit of it. Nothing of the kind! Personally I care nothing for the money. I am keeping it," said the old man, lowering his voice to a chuckling whisper, "*for you!*" He leaned over the table, fixing Queed with a gaze of triumphant cunning. "I'm going to make you *my heir!* Leave everything I have in the world *to you!*"

A wave of sick disgust swept through the young man, momentarily engulfing his power of speech. Never had the old man's face looked so loathsome to him, never the man himself appeared so utterly detestable.

Surface had risen, whispering and chuckling. "Come up to the sitting-room, my dear boy. I have some papers up there that may open your eyes. You need never work —"

"Stop!" said Queed, and the old man stopped in his tracks. "Can't I make you understand?" he went on, fighting hard for calmness. "Is n't it clear to you that *nothing* could induce me to touch another penny of this money?"

"Ah!" said Surface, in his softest voice. "Ah! And might I inquire the reason for this heroic self-restraint?"

"You choose your words badly. It is no restraint to honest men to decline to take other people's money."

"Ah, I see. I see. I see," said Surface, nodding his shining hairless head up and down.

"Good-by."

"No, no," said the old man, in an odd thick voice. "Not quite yet, if you please. There is still something that I want to say to you."

He came slowly around the tiny table, and Queed watched his coming with bursts of fierce repugnance which set his hard-won muscles to twitching. An elemental satisfaction there might be in throwing the old man through the window. Yet, in a truer sense, he felt that the necessity of manhan-

dling him would be the final touch in this degrading interview.

"You value your society too high, my dear boy," said Surface with a face of chalk. "You want too big a price. I must fork over every penny I have, to a young trollop who happens to have caught your fancy —"

"Stand away from me!" cried Queed, with a face suddenly whiter than his own. "You will tempt me to do what I shall be sorry for afterwards."

But Surface did not budge, and to strike, after all, was hardly possible; it would be no better than murder. The two men stood, white face to white face, the two pairs of fearless eyes scarcely a foot apart. And beyond all the obvious dissimilarity, there appeared a curious resemblance in the two faces at that moment: in each the same habit of unflinching gaze, the same high forehead, the same clean-cut chin, the same straight, thin-lipped mouth.

"Oh, I see through you clearly enough," said Surface. "You're in love with her! You think it is a pretty thing to sacrifice me to her, especially as the sacrifice costs you nothing —"

"Stop! Will you force me in the name of common decency —"

"But I'll not permit you to do it, do you hear?" continued Surface, his face ablaze, his lower lip trembling and twitching, as it does sometimes with the very old. "You need some discipline, my boy. Need some discipline — and you shall have it. You will continue to live with me exactly as you have heretofore, only henceforward I shall direct your movements and endeavor to improve your manners."

He swayed slightly where he stood, and Queed's tenseness suddenly relaxed. Pity rose in his heart above furious resentment; he put out his hand and touched the old man's arm.

"Control yourself," he said in an iron voice. "Come — I will help you to bed before I go."

Surface shook himself free, and laughed unpleasantly.

"Go! Did n't you hear me tell you that you were not going? Who do you think I am that you can flout and browbeat and threaten —"

"Come! Let us go up to bed —"

"Who do you think I am!" repeated Surface, bringing his twitching face nearer, his voice breaking to sudden shrillness. "Who do you think I am, I say?"

Queed thought the old man had gone off his head, and indeed he looked it. He began soothingly: "You are —"

"I'm your father! Your father, do you hear!" cried Surface. "You're my son — Henry G. Surface, Jr.!"

This time, Queed, looking with a wild sudden terror into the flaming eyes, knew that he heard the truth from Surface at last. The revelation broke upon him in a stunning flash. He sprang away from the old man with a movement of loathing unspeakable.

"Father!" he said, in a dull curious whisper. "O God! Father!"

Surface gazed at him, his upper lip drawn up into his old purring sneer.

"So that is how you feel about it, my son?" he inquired suavely, and suddenly crumpled down upon the floor.

The young man shook him by the shoulder, but he did not stir. Henderson came running at the sound of the fall, and together they bore the old man, breathing, but inert as the dead, to his room. In an hour, the doctor had come and gone. In two hours, a trained nurse was sitting by the bed as though she had been there always. The doctor called it a "stroke," superinduced by a "shock." He said that Professor Nicolovius might live for a week, or a year, but was hardly likely to speak again on this side the dark river that runs round the world.

## XXVII

*Sharlee Weyland reads the Morning Post; of Rev. Mr. Dayne's Fight at Ephesus and the Telephone Message that never came; of the Editor's Comment upon the Assistant Editor's Resignation, which perhaps lacked Clarity; and of how Eight Men elect a Mayor.*

NEXT morning, in the first moment she had, Sharlee Weyland read the *Post's* editorial on the reformatory. And as she read she felt as though the skies had fallen, and the friendly earth suddenly risen up and smitten her.

It was a rainy morning, the steady downpour of the night before turned into a fine drizzle; and Sharlee, who nearly always walked, took the car downtown. She was late this morning; there had been but flying minutes she could give to breakfast; not a second to give to anything else; and therefore she took the *Post* with her to read on the ride to "the" office. And, seating herself, she turned immediately to the editorial page, in which the State Department of Charities felt an especial interest this morning.

Both the name and the position of the editorial were immediately disappointing to her. It was not in the leading place, and its caption was simply "As to the Reformatory," which seemed to her too colorless and weak. Subconsciously, she passed the same judgment upon the opening sentences of the text, which somehow failed to ring out that challenge to the obstructionists she had confidently expected. As she read further, her vague disappointment gave way to a sudden breathless incredulity; that to a heartsick rigidity of attention; and when she went back, and began to read the whole article over, slowly and carefully, from the beginning, her face was about the color of the pretty white collar she wore.