

"Then there's two of ye," said Plonny, dryly, "he being the other one."

He removed his unlighted cigar, and spat loudly into a tall brass cuspidor, which he had taken the precaution to place for just such emergencies.

"Meachy," said Plonny, slowly, "I would n't give the job of dog-catcher to a man you could n't trust to stand by his friends."

XXVIII

How Words can be like Blows, and Blue Eyes stab deep; how Queed sits by a Bedside and reviews his Life; and how a Thought leaps at him and will not down.

IN the first crushing burst of revelation, Queed had had a wild impulse to wash his hands of everything, and fly. He would pack Surface off to a hospital; dispose of the house; escape back to Mrs. Paynter's; forget his terrible knowledge, and finally bury it with Surface. His reason fortified the impulse at every point. He owed less than nothing to his father; he had not the slightest responsibility either toward him or for him; to acknowledge the relation between them would do no conceivable good to anybody. He would go back to the Scriptorium, and all would be as it had been before.

But when the moment came either to go or to stay, another and deeper impulse rose against this one, and beat it down. Within him a voice whispered that though he might go back to the Scriptorium, he would never be as he had been before. Whether he acknowledged the relation or not, it was still there. And, in time, his reason brought forth material to fortify this impulse, too: it came out in brief, grim sentences which burned themselves into his mind. Surface was his father. To deny the primal blood-tie was not honorable. The sins of the fathers descended to the children. To suppress Truth was the crowning blasphemy.

Queed did not go. He stayed, resolved, after a violent struggle — it was all over in the first hour of his discovery — to bear his burden, shouldering everything that his sonship involved.

By day and by night the little house stood very quiet. Its secret remained inviolate; the young man was still Mr.

Queed, the old one still Professor Nicolovius, who had suffered the last of his troublesome "strokes." Inside the darkened windows, life moved on silent heels. The doctor came, did nothing, and went. The nurse did nothing but stayed. Queed would have dismissed her at once, except that that would have been bad economy; he must keep his own more valuable time free for the earning of every possible penny. To run the house, he had, for the present, his four hundred and fifty dollars in bank, saved out of his salary. This, he figured, would last nine weeks. Possibly Surface would last longer than that: that remained to be seen.

Late on a March afternoon, Queed finished a review article — his second since he had left the newspaper, four days before — and took it himself to the post-office. He wanted to catch the night mail for the North; and besides his body, jaded by two days' confinement, cried aloud for a little exercise. His fervent desire was to rush out all the articles that were in him, and get money for them back with all possible speed. But he knew that the market for this work was limited. He must find other work immediately; he did not care greatly what kind it was, provided only that it was profitable. Thoughts of ways and means, mostly hard thoughts, occupied his mind all the way downtown. And always it grew plainer to him how much he was going to miss, now of all times, his eighteen hundred a year from the *Post*.

In the narrowest corridor of the post-office — like West in the Byrds' vestibule — he came suddenly face to face with Sharlee Weyland.

The meeting was unwelcome to them both, and both their faces showed it. Sharlee had told herself, a thousand times in a week, that she never wanted to see Mr. Queed again. Queed had known, without telling himself at all, that he did not want to see Miss Weyland, not, at least, till he had had more time to think. But Queed's dread of seeing the girl had nothing to do with what was uppermost in her mind — the *Post's* treacherous editorial. Of course, West had long since made that right as he had promised, as he would have done

with no promising. But — ought he to tell her now, or to wait? . . . And what would she say when she knew the whole shameful truth about him — knew that for nearly a year Surface Senior and Surface Junior, shifty father and hoodwinked son, had been living fatly on the salvage of her own plundered fortune?

She would have passed him with a bow, but Queed, more awkward than she, involuntarily halted. The dingy gas-light, which happened to be behind him, fell full upon her face, and he said at once: —

"How do you do? — not very well, I fear. You look quite used up — not well at all."

Pride raised a red flag in her cheek. She lifted a great muff to her lips, and gave a little laugh.

"Thank you. I am quite well."

Continuing to gaze at her, he went ahead with customary directness: "Then I am afraid you have been taking — the reformatory too hard."

"No, not the reformatory. It is something worse than that. I had a friend once," said Sharlee, muff to her lips, and her level eyes upon him, "and he was not worthy."

To follow out that thought was impossible, but Queed felt very sorry for West when he saw how she said it.

"I'm sorry that you should have had this — to distress you. However —"

"Is n't it rather late to think of that now? As to saying it — I should have thought that you would tell me of your sorrow immediately — or not at all."

A long look passed between them. Down the corridor, on both sides of them, flowed a stream of people bent upon mails; but these two were alone in the world.

"Have you seen West?" asked Queed, in a voice unlike his own.

She made a little movement of irrepressible distaste.

"Yes. . . . But you must not think that he told me. He is too kind, too honorable — to betray his friend."

He stared at her, reft of the power of speech.

From under the wide hat, the blue eyes seemed to leap out and stab him; they lingered, turning the knife, while their owner appeared to be waiting for him to speak; and then with a final twist, they were pulled away, and Queed found himself alone in the corridor.

He dropped his long envelope in the slot labeled *North*, and turned his footsteps toward Duke of Gloucester Street again.

Within him understanding had broken painfully into flame. Miss Weyland believed that he was the author of the unforgivable editorial — *he*, who had so gladly given, first the best abilities he had, and then his position itself, to the cause of Eva Bernheimer. West had seen her, and either through deliberate falseness or his characteristic fondness for shying off from disagreeable subjects — Queed felt pretty sure it was the latter — had failed to reveal the truth. West's motives did not matter in the least. The terrible situation in which he himself had been placed was all that mattered, and that he must straighten out at once. What dumbness had seized his tongue just now he could not imagine. But it was plain that, however much he would have preferred not to see the girl at all, this meeting had made another one immediately necessary: he must see her at once, to-night, and clear himself wholly of this cruel suspicion. And yet . . . he could never clear himself of her *having* suspected him; he understood that, and it seemed to him a terrible thing. No matter how humble her contrition, how abject her apologies, nothing could ever get back of what was written, or change the fact that she had believed him capable of that.

The young man pursued his thoughts over three miles of city streets, and returned to the house of Surface.

The hour was 6.30. He took the nurse's seat by the bedside of his father and sent her away to her dinner.

There was a single gas-light in the sick-room, turned just high enough for the nurse to read her novels. The old man lay like a log, though breathing heavily; under the flickering light, his face looked ghastly. It had gone all to pieces; ad-

vanced old age had taken possession of it in a night. More-over the truth about the auburn mustaches and goatee was coming out in snowy splotches; the fading dye showed a mottle of red and white not agreeable to the eye. Here was not merely senility, but ignoble and repulsive senility.

His father! . . . his *father!* O God! How much better to have sprung, as he once believed, from the honest loins of Tim Queed!

The young man averted his eyes from the detestable face of his father, and let his thoughts turn inward upon himself. For the first time in all his years, he found himself able to trace his own life back to its source, as other men do. A flying trip to New York, and two hours with Tim Queed, had answered all questions, cleared up all doubts. First of all, it had satisfied him that there was no stain upon his birth. Surface's second marriage had been clandestine, but it was genuine; in Newark the young man found the old clergyman who had officiated at the ceremony. His mother, it seemed, had been Miss Floretta May Earle, a "handsome young opery singer," of a group, so Tim said, to which the gentleman, his father, had been very fond of giving his "riskay little bachelore parties."

Tim's story, in fact, was comprehensive at all points. He had been Mr. Surface's coachman and favorite servant in the heyday of the Southern apostate's metropolitan glories. About a year before the final catastrophe, Surface's affairs being then in a shaky condition, the servants had been dismissed, the handsome house sold, and the financier, in a desperate effort to save himself, had moved off somewhere to modest quarters in a side street. That was the last Tim heard of his old patron, till the papers printed the staggering news of his arrest. A few weeks later, Tim one day received a message bidding him come to see his former master in the Tombs.

The disgraced capitalist's trial was then in its early stages, but he entertained not the smallest hope of acquittal. Broken and embittered, he confided to his faithful servant

that, soon after the break-up of his establishment, he had quietly married a wife; that some weeks earlier she had presented him with a son; and that she now lay at the point of death with but remote chances of recovery. To supply her with money was impossible, for his creditors, he said, had not only swooped down like buzzards upon the remnant of his fortune, but were now watching his every move under the suspicion that he had managed to keep something back. All his friends had deserted him as though he were a leper, for his had been the unpardonable sin of being found out. In all the world there was no equal of whom he was not too proud to ask a favor.

In short, he was about to depart for a long sojourn in prison, leaving behind a motherless, friendless, and penniless infant son. Would Tim take him and raise him as his own?

While Tim hesitated over this amazing request, Surface leaned forward and whispered a few words in his ear. He *had* contrived to secrete a little sum of money, a very small sum, but one which, well invested as it was, would provide just enough for the boy's keep. Tim was to receive twenty-five dollars monthly for his trouble and expense; Surface pledged his honor as a gentleman that he would find a way to smuggle this sum to him on the first of every month. Tim, being in straits at the time, accepted with alacrity. No, he could not say that Mr. Surface had exhibited any sorrow over the impending decease of his wife, or any affectionate interest in his son. In fact the ruined man seemed to regard the arrival of the little stranger — "the brat," as he called him — with peculiar exasperation. Tim gathered that he never expected or desired to see his son, whatever the future held, and that, having arranged for food and shelter, he meant to wash his hands of the whole transaction. The honest guardian's sole instructions were to keep mum as the grave; to provide the necessaries of life as long as the boy was dependent upon him; not to interfere with him in any way; but if he left, always to keep an eye on him, and stand ready to produce him on demand. To these things, and particularly to abso-

lute secrecy, Tim was sworn by the most awful of oaths; and so he and his master parted. A week later a carriage was driven up to Tim's residence in the dead of the night, and a small bundle of caterwauling humankind was transferred from the one to the other. Such was the beginning of the life of young Queed. The woman, his mother, had died a day or two before, and where she had been buried Tim had no idea.

So the years passed, while the Queeds watched with amazement the subtly expanding verification of the adage that blood will tell. For Mr. Surface, said Tim, had been a great scholar, and used to sit up to all hours reading books that Thomason, the butler, could n't make head nor tail of; and so with Surface's boy. He was the strange duckling among chickens who, with no guidance, straightway plumed himself for the seas of printed knowledge. Time rolled on. When Surface was released from prison, as the papers announced, there occurred not the smallest change in the status of affairs; except that the monthly remittances now bore the name of Nicolovius, and came from Chicago or some other city in the west. More years passed; and at last, one day, after a lapse of nearly a quarter of a century, the unexpected happened, as it really will sometimes. Tim got a letter in a handwriting he knew well, instructing him to call next day at such-and-such a time and place.

Tim was not disobedient to the summons. He called; and found, instead of the dashing young master he had once known, a soft and savage old man whom he at first utterly failed to recognize. Surface paced the floor and spoke his mind. It seemed that an irresistible impulse had led him back to his old home city; that he had settled and taken work there; and there meant to end his days. Under these circumstances, some deep-hidden instinct — a whim, the old man called it — had put it into his head to consider the claiming and final acknowledgment of his son. After all the Ishmaelitish years of bitterness and wandering, Surface's blood, it seemed, yearned for his blood. But under no cir-

cumstances, he told Tim, would he acknowledge his son before his death, since that would involve the surrender of his incognito; and not even then, so the old man swore, unless he happened to be pleased with the youth — the son of his body whom he had so utterly neglected through all these years. Therefore, his plan was to have the boy where they would meet as strangers; where he could have an opportunity to watch, weigh, and come to know him in the most casual way; and thereafter to act as he saw fit.

So there, in the shabby lodging-house, the little scheme was hatched out. Surface undertook by his own means to draw his son, as the magnet the particle of steel, to his city. Tim, to whom the matter was sure to be broached, was to encourage the young man to go. But more than this: it was to be Tim's diplomatic task to steer him to the house where Surface, as Nicolovius, resided. Surface himself had suggested the device by which this was to be done; merely that Tim, mentioning the difficulties of the boarding-house question in a strange city, was to recall that through the lucky chance of having a cousin in this particular city, he knew of just the place: a house where accommodations were of the best, particularly for those who liked quiet for studious work, and prices ridiculously low. The little stratagem worked admirably. The address which Tim gave young Surface was the address of Mrs. Paynter's, where Surface Senior had lived for nearly three years. And so the young man had gone to his father, straight as a homing pigeon.

How strange, how strange to look back on all this now!

Half reclining in the nurse's chair, unseeing eyes on the shaded and shuttered window, for the fiftieth time Queed let his mind go back over his days at Mrs. Paynter's, reading them all anew in the light of his staggering knowledge. With three communications of the most fragmentary sort, his father had had his full will of his son. With six typewritten lines, he had drawn the young man to his side at his own good pleasure. Boarding-house gossip made it known that the son was in peril of ejection for non-payment of board, and

a twenty-dollar bill had been promptly transmitted — at some risk of discovery — to ease his stringency. Last came the mysterious counsel to make friends and to like people, the particular friends and people intended being consolidated, he could understand now, in the person of old Nicolovius. And that message out of the unknown had had its effect: Queed could see that now, at any rate. His father clearly had been satisfied with the result; he appeared as his father no more. Thenceforward he stalked his prey as Nicolovius — with what consummate skill and success!

Oh, but did he not have a clever father, a stealthy, cunning, merciless father, soft-winged, foul-eyed, hungry-taloned, flitting noiselessly in circles, that grew ever and ever narrower, sure, and unfaltering to the final triumphant swoop! Or no — Rather a coiled and quiescent father, horrible-eyed, lying in slimy rings at the foot of the tree, basilisk gaze fixed upward, while the enthralled bird fluttered hopelessly down, twig by twig, ever nearer and nearer.

But no — his metaphors were very bad; he was sentimentalizing, rhetorizing, a thing that he particularly abhorred. Not in any sense was he the pitiful prey of his father, the hawk or the snake. Rather was he glad that, after long doubt and perplexity, at last he knew. For that was the passion of all his chaste life: to know the truth and to face it without fear.

Surface stirred slightly in his bed, and Queed, turning his eyes, let them rest briefly on that repulsive face. *His father!* . . . And he must wear that name and shoulder that infamy forevermore!

The nurse came back and relieved him of his vigil. He descended the stairs to his solitary dinner. And as he went, and while he lingered over food which he did not eat, his thoughts withdrew from his terrible inheritance to centre anew on the fact that, within an hour, he was to see Miss Weyland again.

The prospect drew him while it even more strongly repelled.

For a week he had hesitated, unable to convince himself that he was justified in telling Miss Weyland at once the whole truth about himself, his father, and her money. There was much on the side of delay. Surface might die at any moment, and this would relieve his son from the smallest reproach of betraying a confidence: the old man himself had said that everything was to be made known when he died. On the other hand Surface might get well, and if he did, he ought to be given a final chance to make the restitution himself. Besides this, there was the great uncertainty about the money. Queed had no idea how much it was, or where it was, or whether or not, upon Surface's death, he himself was to get it by bequest. But all through these doubts, passionately protesting against them, had run his own insistent feeling that it was not right to conceal the truth, even under such confused conditions — not, at least, from the one person who was so clearly entitled to know it. This feeling had reached a climax even before he met the girl this afternoon. Somehow that meeting had served to precipitate his decision. After all, Surface had had both his chance and his warning.

That his sonship would make him detestable in Miss Weyland's sight was highly probable, but he could not let the fear of that keep him silent. His determination to tell her the essential facts had come now, at last, as a kind of corollary to his instant necessity of straightening out the reformatory situation. This latter necessity had dominated his thought ever since the chance meeting in the post-office. And as his mind explored the subject, it ramified, and grew more complicated and oppressive with every step of the way.

It gradually became plain to him that, in clearing himself of responsibility for the *Post's* editorial, he would have to put West in a very unpleasant position. He would have to convict him, not only of having written the perfidious article, but of having left another man under the reproach of having written it. But no; it could not be said that he was putting

West in this position. West had put himself there. It was he who had written the article, and it was he who had kept silent about it. Every man must accept the responsibility for his own acts, or the world would soon be at sixes and sevens. In telling Miss Weyland the truth about the matter, as far as that went, he would be putting himself in an unpleasant position. Nobody liked to see one man "telling on" another. He did not like it himself, as he remembered, for instance, in the case of young Brown in the Blaines College hazing affair.

Queed sat alone in the candle-lit dining-room, thinking things out. A brilliant idea came to him. He would telephone to West, explain the situation to him, and ask him to set it right immediately. West, of course, would do so. At the worst, he had only temporized with the issue — perhaps had lost sight of it altogether — and he would be shocked to learn of the consequences of his procrastination. He himself could postpone his call on Miss Weyland till to-morrow, leaving West to go to-night. Of course, however, nothing his former chief could do now would change the fact that Miss Weyland herself had doubted him.

Undoubtedly, the interview would be a painful one for West. How serious an offense the girl considered the editorial had been plain in his own brief conversation with her. And West would have to acknowledge, further, that he had kept quiet about it for a week. Miss Weyland would forgive West, of course, but he could never be the same to her again. He would always have that spot. Queed himself felt that way about it. He had admired West more than any man he ever knew, more even than Colonel Cowles, but now he could never think very much of him again. He was quite sure that Miss Weyland was like that, too. Thus the matter began to grow very serious. For old Surface, who was always right about people, had said that West was the man that Miss Weyland meant to marry.

Very gradually, for the young man was still a slow analyst where people were concerned, an irresistible conclusion was forced upon him.

Miss Weyland would rather think that he had written the editorial than to know that West had written it.

The thought, when he finally reached it, leapt up at him, but he pushed it away. However, it returned. It became like one of those swinging logs which hunters hang in trees to catch bears: the harder he pushed it away, the harder it swung back at him.

He fully understood the persistence of this idea. It was the heart and soul of the whole question. He himself was simply Miss Weyland's friend, the least among many. If belief in his dishonesty had brought her pain — and he had her word for that — it was a hurt that would quickly pass. False friends are soon forgotten. But to West belonged the shining pedestal in the innermost temple of her heart. It would go hard with the little lady to find at the last moment this stain upon her lover's honor.

He had only to sit still and say nothing to make her happy. That was plain. So the whole issue was shifted. It was not, as it had first seemed, merely a matter between West and himself. The real issue was between Miss Weyland and himself — between her happiness and his . . . no, not his happiness — his self-respect, his sense of justice, his honor, his chaste passion for Truth, his . . . yes, his happiness.

Did he think most of Miss Weyland or of himself? That was what it all came down to. Here was the new demand that his acknowledgment of a personal life was making upon him, the supreme demand, it seemed, that any man's personal life could ever make upon him. For if, on the day when Nicolovius had suddenly revealed himself as Surface, he had been asked to give himself bodily, he was now asked to give himself spiritually — to give all that made him the man he was.

From the stark alternative, once raised, there was no escape. Queed closed with it, and together they went down into deep waters.

XXIX

In which Queed's Shoulders can bear One Man's Roguery and Another's Dishonor, and of what these Fardels cost him: how for the Second Time in his Life he stays out of Bed to think.

SHARLEE, sitting upstairs, took the card from the tray and, seeing the name upon it, imperceptibly hesitated. But even while hesitating, she rose and turned to her dressing-table mirror.

"Very well. Say that I'll be down in a minute."

She felt nervous, she did not know why; chilled at her hands and cold within; she rubbed her cheeks vigorously with a handkerchief to restore to them some of the color which had fled. There was a slightly pinched look at the corners of her mouth, and she smiled at her reflection in the glass, somewhat artificially and elaborately, until she had chased it away. Undoubtedly she had been working too hard by day, and going too hard by night; she must let up, stop burning the candle at both ends. But she must see Mr. Queed, of course, to show him finally that no explanation could explain now. It came into her mind that this was but the third time he had ever been inside her house — the third, and it was the last.

He had been shown into the front parlor, the stiffer and less friendly of the two rooms, and its effect of formality matched well with the temper of their greeting. By the obvious stratagem of coming down with book in one hand and some pretense at fancy-work in the other, Sharlee avoided shaking hands with him. Having served their purpose, the small burdens were laid aside upon the table. He had been standing, awaiting her, in the shadows near the mantel; the chair that he chanced to drop into stood almost under one of the yellow lamps; and when she saw his face, she hardly re-