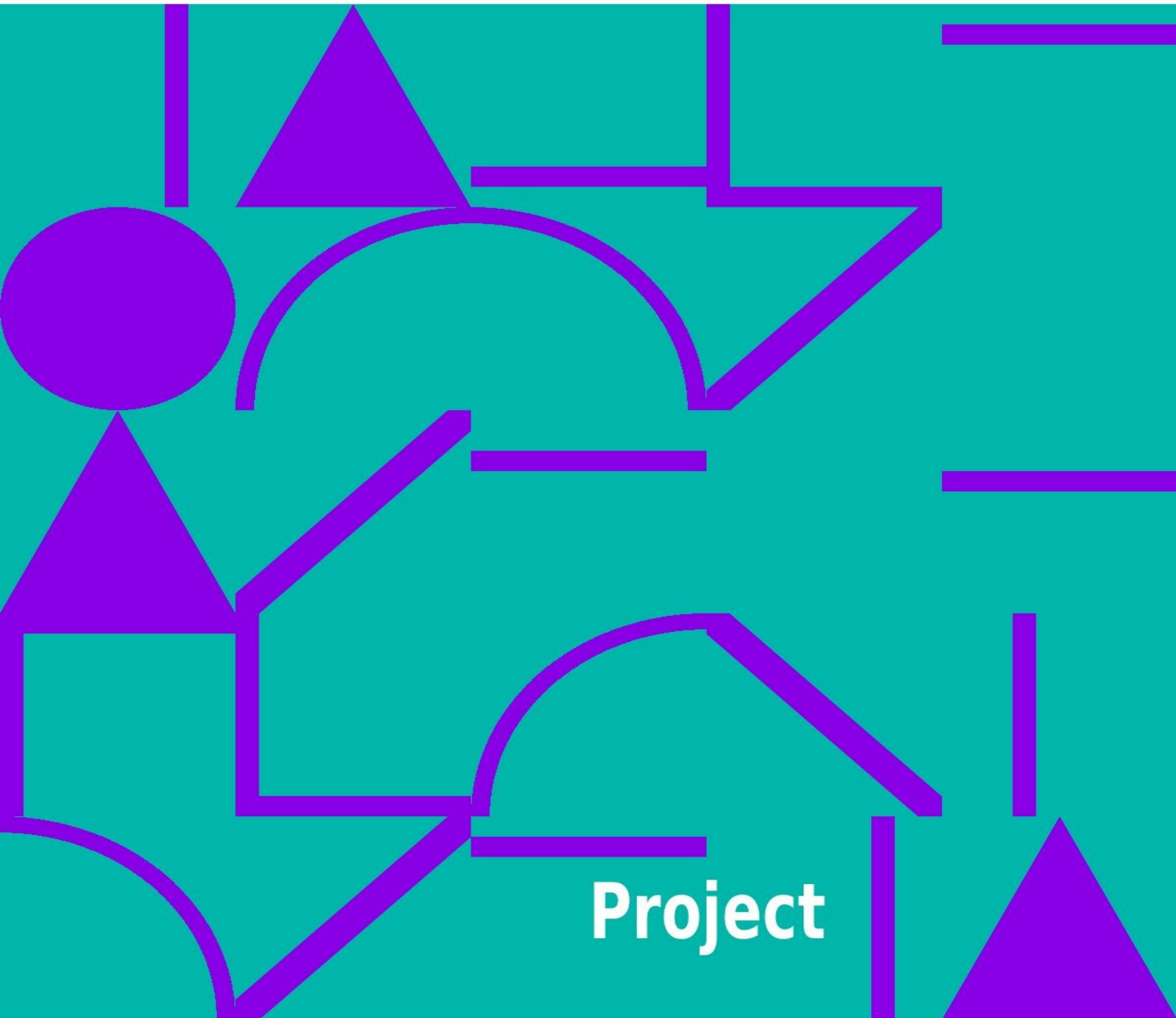
Harlequin and Columbine

Booth Tarkington



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HARLEQUIN AND COLUMBINE

By Booth Tarkington

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I

For a lucky glimpse of the great Talbot Potter, the girls who caught it may thank that conjunction of Olympian events which brings within the boundaries of one November week the Horse Show and the roaring climax of the football months and the more dulcet, yet vast, beginning of the opera season. Some throbbing of attendant multitudes coming to the ears of Talbot Potter, he obeyed an inward call to walk to rehearsal by way of Fifth Avenue, and turning out of Forty-fourth Street to become part of the people-sea of the southward current, felt the eyes of the northward beating upon his face like the pulsing successions of an exhilarating surf. His Fifth Avenue knew its Talbot Potter.

Strangers used to leisurely appraisals upon their own thoroughfares are apt to believe that Fifth Avenue notices nothing; but they are mistaken; it is New York that is preoccupied, not Fifth Avenue. The Fifth Avenue eye, like a policeman's, familiar with a variety of types, catalogues you and replaces you upon the shelf with such automatic rapidity that you are not aware you have been taken down. Fifth Avenue is secretly populous with observers who take note of everything.

Of course, among these peregrinate great numbers almost in a stupor so far as what is closest around them is concerned; and there are those, too, who are so completely busied with either the consciousness of being noticed, or the hope of being noticed, or the hatred of it, that they take note of nothing else. Fifth Avenue expressions are a filling meal for the prowling lonely joker; but what will most satisfy his cannibal appetite is the passage of the self-conscious men and women. For here, on a good day, he cannot fail to relish some extreme cases of their whimsical disease: fledgling young men making believe to be haughty to cover their dreadful symptoms, the mask itself thus revealing what it seeks to conceal; timid young ladies, likewise treacherously exposed by their defenses; and very different ladies, but in similar case, being retouched ladies, tinted ladies; and ladies who know that they are pretty at first sight, ladies who chat with some obscured companion only to offer the public a treat of graceful gestures; and poor ladies making believe to be rich ladies; and rich ladies making believe to be important ladies; and many other sorts of conscious ladies. And men—ah, pitiful!—pitiful the wretch whose hardihood has involved him in cruel and unusual great gloss and unsheltered tailed coat. Any man in his overcoat is wrapped in his castle; he fears nothing. But to this hunted creature,

naked in his robin's tail, the whole panorama of the Avenue is merely a blurred audience, focusing upon him a vast glare of derision; he walks swiftly, as upon fire, pretends to careless sidelong interest in shop-windows as he goes, makes play with his unfamiliar cane only to be horror-stricken at the flourishings so evoked of his wild gloves; and at last, fairly crawling with the eyes he feels all over him, he must draw forth his handkerchief and shelter behind it, poor man, in the dishonourable affectation of a sneeze!

Piquant contrast to these obsessions, the well-known expression of Talbot Potter lifted him above the crowd to such high serenity his face might have been that of a young Pope, with a dash of Sydney Carton. His glance fixed itself, in its benign detachment, upon the misty top of the Flatiron, far down the street, and the more frequent the plainly visible recognitions among the north-bound people, the less he seemed aware of them. And yet, whenever the sieving current of pedestrians brought momentarily face to face with him a girl or woman, apparently civilized and in the mode, who obviously had never seen him before and seemed not to care if it should be her fate never to repeat the experience, Talbot Potter had a certain desire. If society had established a rule that all men must instantly obey and act upon every fleeting impulse, Talbot Potter would have taken that girl or woman by the shoulders and said to her: “What's the matter with you!”

At Forty-second Street he crossed over, proceeded to the middle of the block, and halted dreamily on the edge of the pavement, his back to the crowd. His face was toward the Library, with its two annoyed pet lions, typifying learning, and he appeared to study the great building. One or two of the passersby had seen him standing on that self-same spot before;—in fact, he always stopped there whenever he walked down the Avenue.

For a little time (not too long) he stood there; and thus absorbed he was, as they say, a Picture. Moreover, being such a popular one, he attracted much interest. People paused to observe him; and all unaware of their attention, he suddenly smiled charmingly, as at some gentle pleasantry in his own mind—something he had remembered from a book, no doubt. It was a wonderful smile, and vanished slowly, leaving a rapt look; evidently he was lost in musing upon architecture and sculpture and beautiful books. A girl whisking by in an automobile had time to guess, reverently, that the phrase in his mind was: “A Stately Home for Beautiful Books!” Dinner-tables would hear, that evening, how Talbot Potter stood there, oblivious of everything else, studying the Library!

This slight sketch of artistic reverie completed, he went on, proceeding a little more rapidly down the Avenue; presently turned over to the stage door of

Wallack's, made his way through the ensuing passages, and appeared upon the vasty stage of the old theatre, where his company of actors awaited his coming to begin the rehearsal of a new play.

II

“First act, please, ladies and gentlemen!”

Thus spake, without emotion, Packer, the stage-manager; but out in the dusky auditorium, Stewart Canby, the new playwright, began to tremble. It was his first rehearsal.

He and one other sat in the shadowy hollow of the orchestra, two obscure little shapes on the floor of the enormous cavern. The other was Talbot Potter's manager, Carson Tinker, a neat, grim, small old man with a definite appearance of having long ago learned that after a little while life will beat anybody's game, no matter how good. He observed the nervousness of the playwright, but without interest. He had seen too many.

Young Canby's play was a study of egoism, being the portrait of a man wholly given over to selfish ambitions finally attained, but “at the cost of every good thing in his life,” including the loss of his “honour,” his lady-love, and the trust and affection of his friends. Young Canby had worked patiently at his manuscript, rewriting, condensing, pouring over it the sincere sweat of his brow and the light of his boarding-house lamp during most of the evenings of two years, until at last he was able to tell his confidants, rather huskily, that there was “not one single superfluous word in it,” not one that could possibly be cut, nor one that could be changed without “altering the significance of the whole work.”

The moment was at hand when he was to see the vision of so many toilsome hours begin to grow alive. What had been no more than little black marks on white paper was now to become a living voice vibrating the actual air. No wonder, then, that tremors seized him; Pygmalion shook as Galatea began to breathe, and to young Canby it was no less a miracle that his black marks and white paper should thus come to life.

“Miss Ellsling!” called the stage-manager. “Miss Ellsling, you're on. You're on artificial stone bench in garden, down right. Mr. Nippert, you're on. You're over yonder, right cen—-”

“Not at all!” interrupted Talbot Potter, who had taken his seat at a small table near the trough where the footlights lay asleep, like the row of night-watchmen they were. “Not at all!” he repeated sharply, thumping the table with his knuckles. “That's all out. It's cut. Nippert doesn't come on in this scene at all. You've got the original script there, Packer. Good heavens! Packer, can't you

ever get anything right? Didn't I distinctly tell you—Here! Come here! Not garden set, at all. Play it interior, same as act second. Look, Packer, look! Miss Ellsling down left, in chair by escritoire. In heaven's name, can you read, Packer?”

“Yessir, yessir. I see, sir, I see!” said Packer with piteous eagerness, taking the manuscript the star handed him. “Now, then, Miss Ellsling, if you please—”

“I will have my tea indoors,” Miss Ellsling began promptly, striking an imaginary bell. “I will have my tea indoors, to-day, I think, Pritchard. It is cooler indoors, to-day, I think, on the whole, and so it will be pleasanter to have my tea indoors to-day. Strike bell again. Do you hear, Pritchard?”

Out in the dimness beyond the stage the thin figure of the new playwright rose dazedly from an orchestra chair.

“What—what's this?” he stammered, the choked sounds he made not reaching the stage.

“What's the matter?” The question came from Carson Tinker, but his tone was incurious, manifesting no interest whatever. Tinker's voice, like his pale, spectacled glance, was not tired; it was dead.

“Tea!” gasped Canby. “People are sick of tea! I didn't write any tea!”

“There isn't any,” said Tinker. “The way he's got it, there's an interruption before the tea comes, and it isn't brought in.”

“But she's ordered it! If it doesn't come the audience will wonder—”

“No,” said Tinker. “They won't think of that. They won't hear her order it.”

“Then for heaven's sake, why has he put it in? I wrote this play to begin right in the story—”

“That's the trouble. They never hear the beginning. They're slamming seats, taking off wraps, looking round to see who's there. That's why we used to begin plays with servants dusting and 'Well-I-never-half-past-nine-and-the-young-master-not-yet-risen!”

“I wrote it to begin with a garden scene,” Canby protested, unheeding. “Why —”

“He's changed this act a good deal.”

“But I wrote—”

“He never uses garden sets. Not intimate enough; and they're a nuisance to light. I wouldn't worry about it.”

“But it changes the whole signifi—”

“Well, talk to him about it,” said Tinker, adding lifelessly, “I wouldn't argue with him much, though. I never knew anybody do anything with him that way yet.”

Miss Ellsling, on the stage, seemed to be supplementing this remark. “Roderick Hanscom is a determined man,” she said, in character. “He is hard as steel to a treacherous enemy, but he is tender and gentle to women and children. Only yesterday I saw him pick up a fallen crippled child from beneath the relentless horses' feet on a crossing, at the risk of his very life, and then as he placed it in the mother's arms, he smiled that wonderful smile of his, that wonderful smile of his that seems to brighten the whole world! Wait till you meet him. But that is his step now and you shall judge for yourselves! Let us rise, if you please, to give him befitting greeting.”

“What—what!” gasped Canby.

“Sh!” Tinker whispered.

“But all I wrote for her to say, when Roderick Hanscom's name is mentioned, was 'I don't think I like him.' My God!”

“Sh!”

“The Honourable Robert Hanscom!” shouted Packer, in a ringing voice as a stage-servant, or herald.

“It gives him an entrance, you see,” murmured Tinker. “Your script just let him walk on.”

“And all that horrible stuff about his 'wonderful smile!'” Canby babbled. “Think of his putting that in himself.”

“Well, you hadn't done it for him. It is a wonderful smile, isn't it?”

“My God!”

“Sh!”

Talbot Potter had stepped to the centre of the stage and was smiling the wonderful smile. “Mildred, and you, my other friends, good friends,” he began, “for I know that you are all true friends here, and I can trust you with a secret very near my heart—”

“Most of them are supposed never to have seen him before,” said Canby, hoarsely. “And she's just told them they could judge for themselves when—”

“They won't notice that.”

“You mean the audience won't—”

“No, they won't,” said Tinker.

“But good heavens! it's 'Donald Gray,' the other character, that trusts him with the secret, and he betrays it later. This upsets the whole—”

“Well, talk to him. I can't help it.”

“It is a political secret,” Potter continued, reading from a manuscript in his hand, “and almost a matter of life and death. But I trust you with it openly and fearlessly because—”

At this point his voice was lost in a destroying uproar. Perceiving that the rehearsal was well under way, and that the star had made his entrance, two of the stage-hands attached to the theatre ascended to the flies and set up a great bellowing on high. “Lower that strip!” “You don't want that strip lowered, I tell you!” “Oh, my Lord! Can't you lower that strip!” Another workman at the rear of the stage began to saw a plank, and somebody else, concealed behind a bit of scenery, hammered terrifically upon metal. Altogether it was a successful outbreak.

Potter threw his manuscript upon the table, a gesture that caused the shoulders of Packer to move in a visible shudder, and the company, all eyes fixed upon the face of the star, suddenly wore the look of people watching a mysterious sealed packet from which a muffled ticking is heard. The bellowing and the sawing and the hammering increased in fury.

In the orchestra a rusty gleam of something like mummified pleasure passed unseen behind the spectacles of old Carson Tinker. “Stage-hands are the devil,” he explained to the stupefied Canby. “Rehearsals bore them and they love to hear what an actor says when his nerves go to pieces. If Potter blows up they'll quiet down to enjoy it and then do it again pretty soon. If he doesn't blow up he'll take it out on somebody else later.”

Potter stood silent in the centre of the stage, expressionless, which seemed to terrify the stage-manager. “Just one second, Mr. Potter!” he screamed, his brow pearly with the anguish of apprehension. “Just one second, sir!”

He went hotfoot among the disturbers, protesting, commanding, imploring, and plausibly answering severe questions. “Well, when do you expect us to git this work done?” “We got our work to do, ain't we?” until finally the tumult ceased, the saw slowing down last of all, tapering off reluctantly into a silence of plaintive disappointment; whereupon Packer resumed his place, under a light at the side of the stage, turning the pages of his manuscript with fluttering fingers and keeping his eyes fixed guiltily upon it. The company of actors also carefully removed their gaze from the star and looked guilty.

Potter allowed the fatal hush to continue, while the culpability of Packer and

the company seemed mysteriously to increase until they all reeked with it. The stage-hands had withdrawn in a grieved manner somewhere into the huge rearward spaces of the old building. They belonged to the theatre, not to Potter, and, besides, they had a union. But the actors were dependent upon Potter for the coming winter's work and wages; they were his employees.

At last he spoke: “We will go on with the rehearsal,” he said quietly.

“Ah!” murmured old Tinker. “He'll take it out on somebody else.” And with every precaution not to jar down a seat in passing, he edged his way to the aisle and went softly thereby to the extreme rear of the house. He was an employee, too.

III

It was a luckless lady who helped to fulfil the prediction. Technically she was the “ingenue”; publicly she was “Miss Carol Lyston”; legally she was a Mrs. Surbilt, being wife to the established leading man of that ilk, Vorly Surbilt. Miss Lyston had come to the rehearsal in a condition of exhausted nerves, owing to her husband's having just accepted, over her protest, a “road” engagement with a lady-star of such susceptible gallantry she had never yet been known to resist falling in love with her leading-man before she quarrelled with him. Miss Lyston's protest having lasted the whole of the preceeding night, and not at all concluding with Mr. Surbilt's departure, about breakfast-time, avowedly to seek total anaesthesia by means of a long list of liquors, which he named, she had spent the hours before rehearsal interviewing female acquaintances who had been members of the susceptible lady's company—a proceeding which indicates that she deliberately courted hysteria.

Shortly after the outraged rehearsal had been resumed, she unfortunately uttered a loud, dry sob, startlingly irrelevant to the matter in hand. It came during the revelation of “Roderick Hanscom's” secret, and Potter stopped instantly.

“Who did that?”

“Miss Lyston, sir,” Packer responded loyally, such matters being part of his duty.

The star turned to face the agitated criminal. “Miss Lyston,” he said, delaying each syllable to pack it more solidly with ice, “will you be good enough to inform this company if there is anything in your lines to warrant your breaking into a speech of mine with a horrible noise like that?”

“Nothing.”

“Then perhaps you will inform us why you do break into a speech of mine with a horrible noise like that?”

“I only coughed, Mr. Potter,” said Miss Lyston, shaking.

“Coughed!” he repeated slowly, and then with a sudden tragic fury shouted at the top of his splendid voice, “COUGHED!” He swung away from her, and strode up and down the stage, struggling with emotion, while the stricken company fastened their eyes to their strips of manuscript, as if in study, and looked neither at him nor Miss Lyston.

“You only coughed!” He paused before her in his stride. “Is it your purpose to cough during my speeches when this play is produced before an audience?” He waited for no reply, but taking his head woefully in his hands, began to pace up and down again, turning at last toward the dark auditorium to address his invisible manager:

“Really, really, Mr. Tinker,” he cried, despairingly, “we shall have to change some of these people. I can't act with—Mr. Tinker! Where's Mr. Tinker? Mr. Tinker! My soul! He's gone! He always is gone when I want him! I wonder how many men would bear what I—” But here he interrupted himself unexpectedly. “Go on with the rehearsal! Packer, where were we?”

“Here, sir, right here,” brightly responded Packer, ready finger upon the proper spot in the manuscript. “You had just begun, 'Nothing in this world but that one thing can defeat my certain election and nothing but that one thing shall de—”

“That will do,” thundered his master. “Are you going to play the part? Get out of the way and let's get on with the act, in heaven's name! Down stage a step, Miss Ellsling. No; I said down. A step, not a mile! There! Now, if you consent to be ready, ladies and gentlemen. Very well. 'Nothing in this world but that one thing can defeat my certain election and noth—'” Again he interrupted himself unexpectedly. In the middle of the word there came a catch in his voice; he broke off, and whirling once more upon the miserable Miss Lyston, he transfixed her with a forefinger and a yell.

“It wasn't a cough! What was that horrible noise you made?”

Miss Lyston, being unable to reply in words, gave him for answer an object-lesson which demonstrated plainly the nature of the horrible noise. She broke into loud, consecutive sobs, while Potter, very little the real cause of them, altered in expression from indignation to the neighborhood of lunacy.

“She's doing this in purpose!” he cried. “What's the matter with her? She's sick! Miss Lyston, you're sick! Packer, get her away—take her away. She's sick! Send her home—send her home in a cab! Packer!”

“Yes, Mr. Potter, I'll arrange it. Don't be disturbed.”

The stage-manager was already at the sobbing lady's side, and she leaned upon him gratefully, continuing to produce the symptoms of her illness.

“Put her in a cab at once,” said the star, somewhat recovered from his consternation. “You can pay the cabman,” he added. “Make her as comfortable as you can; she's really ill. Miss Lyston, you shouldn't have tried to rehearse when you're so ill. Do everything possible for Miss Lyston's comfort, Packer.”

He followed the pair as they entered the passageway to the stage door; then, Miss Lyston's demonstrations becoming less audible, he halted abruptly, and his brow grew dark with suspicion. When Packer returned, he beckoned him aside. “Didn't she seem all right as soon as she got out of my sight?”

“No, sir; she seemed pretty badly upset.”

“What about?”

“Oh, something entirely outside of rehearsal, sir,” Packer answered in haste. “Entirely outside. She wanted to know if I'd heard any gossip about her husband lately. That's it, Mr. Potter.”

“You don't think she was shamming just to get off?”

“Oh, not at all. I—”

“Ha! She may have fooled you, Packer, or perhaps—perhaps”—he paused, frowning—“perhaps you were trying to fool me, too. I don't know your private life; you may have reasons to help her de—”

“Mr. Potter!” cried the distressed man. “What could be my object? I don't know Miss Lyston off. I was only telling you the simple truth.”

“How do I know?” Potter gave him a piercing look. “People are always trying to take advantage of me.”

“But Mr. Potter, I—”

“Don't get it into your head that I am too easy, Packer! You think you've got a luxurious thing of it here, with me, but—” He concluded with an ominous shake of the head in lieu of words, then returned to the centre of the stage. “Are we to be all day getting on with this rehearsal?”

Packer flew to the table and seized the manuscript he had left there. “All ready, sir! 'Nothing in this world but one thing can defeat'—and so on, so on. All ready, sir!”

The star made no reply but to gaze upon him stonily, a stare which produced another dreadful silence. Packer tried to smile, a lamentable sight.

“Something wrong, Mr. Potter?” he finally ventured, desperately.

The answer came in a voice cracking with emotional strain: “I wonder how many men bear what I bear? I wonder how many men would pay a stage-manager the salary I pay, and then do all his work for him!”

“Mr. Potter, if you'll tell me what's the matter,” Packer quavered; “if you'll only tell me—”

“The understudy, idiot! Where is the understudy to read Miss Lyston's part?

You haven't got one! I knew it! I told you last week to engage an understudy for the women's parts, and you haven't done it. I knew it, I knew it! God help me, I knew it!”

“But I did, sir. I've got her here.”

Packer ran to the back of the stage, shouting loudly: “Miss-oh, Miss—I forget-your-name! Understudy! Miss—”

“I'm here!”

It was an odd, slender voice that spoke, just behind Talbot Potter, and he turned to stare at a little figure in black—she had come so quietly out of the shadows of the scenery into Miss Lyston's place that no one had noticed. She was indefinite of outline still, in the sparse light of that cavernous place; and, with a veil lifted just to the level of her brows, under a shadowing black hat, not much was to be clearly discerned of her except that she was small and pale and had bright eyes. But even the two words she spoke proved the peculiar quality of her voice: it was like the tremolo of a zither string; and at the sound of it the actors on each side of her instinctively moved a step back for a better view of her, while in his lurking place old Tinker let his dry lips open a little, which was as near as he ever came, nowadays, to a look of interest. He had noted that this voice, sweet as rain, and vibrant, but not loud, was the ordinary speaking voice of the understudy, and that her “I'm here,” had sounded, soft and clear, across the deep orchestra to the last row in the house.

“Of course!” Packer cried. “There she is, Mr. Potter! There's Miss—Miss—”

“Is her name 'Missmiss'?” the star demanded bitterly.

“No sir. I've forgotten it, just this moment, Mr. Potter, but I've got it. I've got it right here.” He began frantically to turn out the contents of his pockets. “It's in my memorandum book, if I could only find—”

“The devil, the devil!” shouted Potter. “A fine understudy you've got for us! She sees me standing here like—like a statue—delaying the whole rehearsal, while we wait for you to find her name, and she won't open her lips!” He swept the air with a furious gesture, and a subtle faint relief became manifest throughout the company at this token that the newcomer was indeed to fill Miss Lyston's place for one rehearsal at least. “Why don't you tell us your name?” he roared.

“I understood,” said the zither-sweet voice, “that I was never to speak to you unless you directly asked me a question. My—”

“My soul! Have you got a name?”

“Wanda Malone.”

Potter had never heard it until that moment, but his expression showed that he considered it another outrage.

IV

The rehearsal proceeded, and under that cover old Tinker came noiselessly down the aisle and resumed his seat beside Canby, who was uttering short, broken sighs, and appeared to have been trying with fair success to give himself a shampoo.

“It's ruined, Mr. Tinker!” he moaned, and his accompanying gesture was misleading, seeming to indicate that he alluded to his hair. “It's all ruined if he sticks to these horrible lines he's put in—people told me I ought to have it in my contract that nothing could be changed. I was trying to make the audience see the tragedy of egoism in my play—and how people get to hating an egoist. I made 'Roderick Hanscom' a disagreeable character on purpose, and—oh, listen to that!”

Miss Ellsling and Talbot Potter stood alone, near the front of the stage. “Why do you waste such goodness on me, Roderick?” Miss Ellsling was inquiring. “It is noble and I feel that I am unworthy of you.”

“No, Mildred, believe me,” Potter read from his manuscript, “I would rather decline the nomination and abandon my career, and go to live in some quiet spot far from all this, than that you should know one single moment's unhappiness, for you mean far more to me than worldly success.” He kissed her hand with reverence, and lifted his head slowly, facing the audience with rapt gaze; his wonderful smile—that ineffable smile of abnegation and benignity—just beginning to dawn.

Coming from behind him, and therefore unable to see his face, Miss Wanda Malone advanced in her character of ingenue, speaking with an effect of gayety: “Now what are you two good people conspiring about?”

Potter stamped the floor; there was wrenched from him an incoherent shriek containing fragments of profane words and ending distinguishably with: “It's that Missmiss again!”

Packer impelled himself upon Miss Malone, pushing her back. “No, no, no!” he cried. “Count ten! Count ten before you come down with that speech. You mustn't interrupt Mr. Potter, Miss—Miss—”

“It was my cue,” she said composedly, showing her little pamphlet of typewritten manuscript. “Wasn't I meant to speak on the cue?”

Talbot Potter recovered himself sufficiently to utter a cry of despair: “And these are the kind of people an artist must work with!” He lifted his arms to heaven, calling upon the high gods for pity; then, with a sudden turn of fury, ran to the back of the stage and came mincing forward evidently intending saturnine mimicry, repeating the ingenue's speech in a mocking falsetto: “Now what are you two good people conspiring about?” After that he whirled upon her, demanding with ferocity: “You've got something you can think with in your head, haven't you, Missmiss? Then what do you think of that?”

Miss Malone smiled, and it was a smile that would have gone a long way at a college dance. Here, it made the pitying company shudder for her. “I think it's a silly, makeshift sort of a speech,” she said cheerfully, in which opinion the unhappy playwright out in the audience hotly agreed. “It's a bit of threadbare archness, and if I were to play Miss Lyston's part, I'd be glad to have it changed!”

Potter looked dazed. “Is it your idea,” he said in a ghostly voice, “that I was asking for your impression of the dramatic and literary value of that line?”

She seemed surprised. “Weren't you?”

It was too much for Potter. He had brilliant and unusual powers of expression, but this was beyond them. He went to the chair beside the little table, flung himself upon it, his legs outstretched, his arms dangling inert, and stared haggardly upward at nothing.

Packer staggered into the breach. “You interrupted the smile, Miss—Mi—”

“Miss Malone,” she prompted.

“You interrupted the smile, Miss Malone. Mr. Potter gives them the smile there. You must count ten for it, after your cue. Ten—slow. Count slow. Mark it on your sides, Miss—ah—Miss. 'Count ten for smile. Write it down please, Miss—Miss—”

Potter spoke wearily. “Be kind enough to let me know, Packer, when you and Missmiss can bring yourselves to permit this rehearsal to continue.”

“All ready, sir,” said Packer briskly. “All ready now, Mr. Potter.” And upon the star's limply rising, Miss Ellsling, most tactful of leading women, went back to his cue with a change of emphasis in her reading that helped to restore him somewhat to his poise. “It is noble,” she repeated, “and I feel that I am unworthy of you!”

Counting ten slowly proved to be the proper deference to the smile, and Miss Malone was allowed to come down the stage and complete, undisturbed, her

ingenue request to know what the two good people were conspiring about. Thereafter the rehearsal went on in a strange, unreal peace like that of a prairie noon in the cyclone season.

“Notice that girl?” old Tinker muttered, as Wanda Malone finished another ingenue question with a light laugh, as commanded by her manuscript. “She's frightened but she's steady.”

“What girl?” Canby was shampooing himself feverishly and had little interest in girls. “I made it a disagreeable character because—”

“I mean the one he's letting out on—Malone,” said Tinker. “Didn't you notice her voice? Her laugh reminds me of Fanny Caton's—and Dora Preston's—”

“Who?” Canby asked vaguely.

“Oh, nobody you'd remember; some old-time actresses that had their day—and died—long ago. This girl's voice made me think of them.”

“She may, she may,” said Canby hurriedly. “Mr. Tinker, the play is ruined. He's tangled the whole act up so that I can't tell what it's about myself. Instead of Roderick Hanscom's being a man that people dislike for his conceit and selfishness he's got him absolutely turned round. I oughtn't to allow it—but everything's so different from what I thought it would be! He doesn't seem to know I'm here. I came prepared to read the play to the company; I thought he'd want me to.”

“Oh, no,” said Tinker. “He never does that.”

“Why not?”

“Wastes time, for one thing. The actors don't listen except when their own parts are being read.”

“Good gracious!”

“Their own parts are all they have to look out for,” the old man informed him dryly. “I've known actors to play a long time in parts that didn't appear in the last act, and they never know how the play ended.”

“Good gracious!”

“Never cared, either,” Tinker added.

“Good gr—”

“Sh! He's breaking out again!”

A shriek of agony came from the stage. “Pack-e-r-r-! Where did you find this Missmiss understudy? Can't you get me people of experience? I really cannot bear this kind of thing—I can not!” And Potter flung himself upon the chair,

leaving the slight figure in black standing alone in the centre of the stage. He sprang up again, however, surprisingly, upon the very instant of despairing collapse. “What do you mean by this perpetual torture of me?” he wailed at her. “Don't you know what you did?”

“No, Mr. Potter.” She looked at him bravely, but she began to grow red.

“You don't?” he cried incredulously. “You don't know what you did? You moved! How are they going to get my face if you move? Don't you know enough to hold a picture and not ruin it by moving?”

“There was a movement written for that cue,” she said, a little tremulously. “The business in the script is, 'Showing that she is touched by Roderick's nobleness, lifts handkerchief impulsive gesture to eyes.'”

“Not,” he shouted, “not during the SMILE!”

“Oh!” she cried remorsefully. “Have I done that again?”

“'Again!' I don't know how many times you've done it!” He flung his arms wide, with hands outspread and fingers vibrating. “You do it every time you get the chance! You do it perpetually! You don't do anything else! It's all you live for!”

He hurled his manuscript violently at the table, Packer making a wonderful pick-up catch of it just as it touched the floor.

“That's all!” And the unhappy artist sank into the chair in a crumpled stupor.

“Ten o'clock to-morrow morning, ladies and gentlemen!” Packer called immediately, with brisk cheerfulness. “Please notice: to-morrow's rehearsal is in the morning. Ten o'clock to-morrow morning!”

“Tell the understudy to wait, Packer,” said the star abysmally, and Packer addressed himself to the departing backs of the company:

“Mr. Potter wants to speak to Miss—Miss—”

“Malone,” prompted the owner of the name, without resentment.

“Wait a moment, Miss Malone,” said Potter, looking up wearily. “Is Mr. Tinker anywhere about?”

“I'm here, Mr. Potter.” Tinker came forward to the orchestra railing.

“I've been thinking about this play, Mr. Tinker,” Potter said, shaking his head despondently. “I don't know about it. I'm very, very doubtful about it.” He peered over Tinker's head, squinting his eyes, and seemed for the first time to be aware of the playwright's presence. “Oh, are you there, Mr. Canby? When did you come in?”

“I've been here all the time,” said the dishevelled Canby, coming forward. “I supposed it was my business to be here, but-”

“Very glad to have you if you wish,” Potter interrupted gloomily. “Any time. Any time you like. I was just telling Mr. Tinker that I don't know about your play. I don't know if it'll do at all.”

“If you'd play it,” Canby began, “the way I wrote it—”

“In the first place,” Potter said with sudden vehemence, “it lacks Punch! Where's your Punch in this play, Mr. Canby? Where is there any Punch whatever in the whole four acts? Surely, after this rehearsal, you don't mean to claim that the first act has one single ounce of Punch in it!”

“But you've twisted this act all round,” the unhappy young man protested. “The way you have it I can't tell what it's got to it. I meant Roderick Hanscom to be a disagr—”

“Mr. Canby,” said the star, rising impressively, “if we played that act the way you wrote it, we'd last just about four minutes of the opening night. You gave me absolutely nothing to do! Other people talked at me and I had to stand there and be talked at for twenty minutes straight, like a blithering ninny!”

“Well, as you have it, the other actors have to stand there like ninnies,” poor Canby retorted miserably, “while you talk at them almost the whole time.”

“My soul!” Potter struck the table with the palm of his hand. “Do you think anybody's going to pay two dollars to watch me listen to my company for three hours? No, my dear man, your play's got to give me something to do! You'll have to rewrite the second and third acts. I've done what I could for the first, but, good God! Mr. Canby, I can't write your whole play for you! You'll have to get some Punch into it or we'll never be able to go on with it.”

“I don't know what you mean,” said the playwright helplessly. “I never did know what people mean by Punch.”

“Punch? It's what grips 'em,” Potter returned with vehemence. “Punch is what keeps 'em sitting on the edge of their seats. Big love scenes! They've got Punch. Or a big scene with a man. Give me a big scene with a man.” He illustrated his meaning with startling intensity, crouching and seizing an imaginary antagonist by the throat, shaking him and snarling between his clenched teeth, while his own throat swelled and reddened: “Now, damn you! You dog! So on, so on, so on! Zowie!” Suddenly his figure straightened. “Then change. See?” He became serene, almost august. “'No! I will not soil these hands with you. So on, so on, so on. I give you your worthless life. Go!'” He completed his generosity by giving Canby and Tinker the smile, after which he concluded much more cheerfully:

“Something like that, Mr. Canby, and we'll have some real Punch in your play.”

“But there isn't any chance for that kind of a scene in it,” the playwright objected. “It's the study of an egoist, a disagree—”

“There!” exclaimed Potter. “That's it! Do you think people are going to pay two dollars to see Talbot Potter behave like a cad? They won't do it; they pay two dollars to see me as I am—not pretending to be the kind of man your 'Roderick Hanscom' was. No, Mr. Canby, I accepted your play because it has got quite a fair situation in the third act, and because I thought I saw a chance in it to keep some of the strength of 'Roderick Hanscom' and yet make him lovable.”

“But, great heavens! if you make him lovable the character's ruined. Besides, the audience won't want to see him lose the girl at the end and 'Donald Grey' get her!”

“No, they won't; that's it exactly,” said Potter thoughtfully. “You'll have to fix that, Mr. Canby. 'Roderick Hanscom' will have to win her by a great sacrifice in the last act. A great, strong, lovable man, Mr. Canby; that's the kind of character I want to play: a big, sweet, lovable fellow, with the heart of a child, that makes a great sacrifice for a woman. I don't want to play 'egoists'; I don't want to play character parts. No.” He shook his head musingly, and concluded, the while a light of ineffable sweetness shone from his remarkable eyes: “Mr. Canby, no! My audience comes to see Talbot Potter. You go over these other acts and write the part so that I can play myself.”

The playwright gazed upon him, inarticulate, and Potter, shaking himself slightly, like one aroused from a pleasant little reverie, turned to the waiting figure of the girl.

“What is it, Miss Malone?” he asked mildly. “Did you want to speak to me?”

“You told Mr. Packer to ask me to wait,” she said.

“Did I? Oh, yes, so I did. If you please, take off your hat and veil, Miss Malone?”

She gave him a startled look; then, without a word, slowly obeyed.

“Ah, yes,” he said a moment later. “We'll find something else for Miss Lyston when she recovers. You will keep the part.”

V

When Canby (with his hair smoothed) descended to the basement dining room of his Madison Avenue boarding-house that evening, his table comrades gave him an effective entrance; they rose, waving napkins and cheering, and there were cries of “Author! Author!” “Speech!” and “Cher maitre!”

The recipient of these honours bore them with an uneasiness attributed to modesty, and making inadequate response, sat down to his soup with no importunate appetite.

“Seriously, though,” said a bearded man opposite, who always broke into everything with “seriously though,” or else, “all joking aside,” and had thereby gained a reputation for conservatism and soundness—“seriously, though, it must have been a great experience to take charge of the rehearsal of such a company as Talbot Potter's.”

“Tell us how it felt, Canby, old boy,” said another. “How does it feel to sit up there like a king makin' everybody step around to suit you?”

Other neighbors took it up.

“Any pretty girls in the company, Can?”

“How does it feel to be a great dramatist, old man?”

“When you goin' to hire a valet-chauffeur?”

“Better ask him when he's goin' to take us to rehearsal, to see him in his glory.”

“Gentlemen, gentlemen,” said the hostess deprecatingly, “Miss Cornish is trying to speak to Mr. Canby.”

Miss Cornish, a middle-aged lady in black lace, sat at her right, at the head of the largest table, being the most paying of these paying guests, by which virtue she held also the ingleside premiership of the parlour overhead. She was reputed to walk much among gentles, and to have a high taste in letters and the drama; for she was chief of an essay club, had a hushing manner, and often quoted with precision from reviews, or from such publishers' advertisements as contained no slang; and she was a member of one of the leagues for patronizing the theatre in moderation.

“Mr. Canby,” said the hostess pleasantly, “Miss Cornish wishes to—”

This obtained the attention of the assembly, while Canby, at the other end of the room, sat back in his chair with the unenthusiastic air of a man being served with papers.

“Yes, Miss Cornish.”

Miss Cornish cleared her throat, not practically, but with culture, as preliminary to an address. “I was saying, Mr. Canby,” she began, “that I had a suggestion to make which may not only interest you, but certain others of us who do not enjoy equal opportunities in some matters—as—as others of us who do. Indeed, I believe it will interest all of us without regard to—to—to this. What I was about to suggest was that since today you have had a very interesting experience, not only interesting because you have entered into a professional as well as personal friendship with one of our foremost artists—an artist whose work is cultivated always—but also interesting because there are some of us here whose more practical occupations and walk in life must necessarily withhold them from—from this. What I meant to suggest was that, as this prevents them from—from this—would it not be a favourable opportunity for them to—to glean some commentary upon the actual methods of a field of art? Personally, it happens that whenever opportunities and invitations have been—have been urged, other duties intervened, but though, on that account never having been actually present, I am familiar, of course, through conversation with great artists and memoirs and—and other sources of literature—with the procedure and etiquette of rehearsal. But others among us, no doubt through lack of leisure, are perhaps less so than—than this. What I wished to suggest was that, not now, but after dinner, we all assemble quietly, in the large parlour upstairs, of which Mrs. Reibold has kindly consented to allow us the use for the evening, for this purpose, and that you, Mr. Canby, would then give us an informal talk—” (She was momentarily interrupted by a deferential murmur of “Hear! Hear!” from everybody.) “What I meant to suggest,” she resumed, smiling graciously as from a platform, “was a sort of descriptive lecture, of course wholly informal—not so much upon your little play itself, Mr. Canby, for I believe we are all familiar with its subject-matter, but what would perhaps be more improving in artistic ways would be that you give us your impressions of this little experience of yours to-day while it is fresh in your mind. I would suggest that you tell us, simply, and in your own way, exactly what was the form of procedure at rehearsal, so that those of us not so fortunate as to be already en rapport with such matters may form a helpful and artistic idea of—of this. I would suggest that you go into some details of this, perhaps adding whatever anecdotes or incidents of—of—of the day—you think would give additional value to this. I

would suggest that you tell us, for instance, how you were received upon your arrival, who took you to the most favourable position for observing the performance, and what was said. We should be glad to hear also, I am sure, and artistic thoughts or—or knowledge—Mr. Potter may have let fall in the green-room; or even a few witticisms might not be out of place, if you should recall these. We should all like to know, I am sure, what Mr. Potter's method of conceiving his part was. Also, does he leave entire freedom to his company in the creation of their own roles, or does he aid them? Many questions, no doubt, occur to all of us. For instance: Did Mr. Potter offer you any suggestions for changes and alterations that might aid to develop the literary and artistic value of the pl—”

The placid voice, flowing on in gentle great content of itself (while all the boarders gallantly refrained from eating), was checked by an interruption which united into one shattering impact the effects of lese-majeste and of violence.

“Couldn't! No! No parlour! Horrib—”

The words mingled in the throat of the playwright, producing an explosion somewhere between choke and bellow, as he got upon his feet, overturning his chair and coincidentally dislodging several articles of china and glassware. He stood among the ruins for one moment, publicly wiping his brow with a napkin, then plunged, murmuring, out of the room and up the stairway; and, before any of the company had recovered speech, the front door was heard to slam tumultuously, its reverberations being simultaneous with the sound of footsteps running down the stoop.

Turning northward upon the pavement, the fugitive hurriedly passed the two lighted windows of the dining-room; they rattled with a concussion—the outburst of suddenly released voices beginning what was to be a protracted wake over the remains of his reputation as a gentleman. He fled, flinging on his overcoat as he went. In his pockets were portions of the manuscript of his play, already distorted since rehearsal to suit the new nobleness of “Roderick Hanscom,” and among these inky sheets was a note from Talbot Potter, received just before dinner:

Dear Mr. Canby,

Come up to my apartments at the Pantheon after dinner and let me see what changes you have been able to make in the second and third acts. I should like to look at them before deciding to put on another play I have been considering.

Hastily y'rs,

Tal't Potter.

VI

Canby walked fast, the clamorous dining-room seeming to pursue him, and the thought of what figure he had cut there filling him with horror of himself, though he found a little consolation in wondering if he hadn't insulted Miss Cornish because he was a genius and couldn't help doing queer things. That solace was slight, indeed; Canby was only twenty-seven, but he was frightened.

The night before he had been as eagerly happy as a boy at Christmas Eve. He had finished his last day at the office, and after initiating the youth who was to take his desk, had parted with his employer genially, but to the undeniable satisfaction of both. The new career, opening so gloriously, a month earlier, with Talbot Potter's acceptance of the play, was thus definitely adopted, and no old one left to fall back upon. And Madison Avenue, after dark, shows little to reassure a new playwright who carries in his pocket a note ending with the words, “before deciding to put on another play I have been considering.” It was Bleak Street, that night, for young Stewart Canby, and a bleak, bleak walk he took therein.

Desperate alterations were already scratched into the manuscript; plans for more and more ran overlapping one another in his mind, accompanied by phrases—echoes and fragments of Talbot Potter: “Punch! What this play needs is Punch!” “Big love scenes!” “Big scene with a man!” “Great sacrifice for a woman!” “Big-hearted, lovable fellow!” “You dog! So on, so on!” “Zowie!” He must get all this into the play and yet preserve his “third act situation,” leniently admitted to be “quite a fair” one. Slacking his gait somewhat, the tormented young man lifted his hat in order to run his hand viciously through his hair, which he seemed to blame for everything. Then he muttered, under his breath, indignantly: “Darn you, let me alone!”

Curious bedevilment! It was not Talbot Potter whom he thus adjured: it was Wanda Malone. And yet, during the rehearsal, he had not once thought consciously of the understudy; and he had come away from the theatre occupied—exclusively, he would have sworn—with the predicament in which he found himself and his play. Surely that was enough to fill and overflow any new playwright's mind, but, about half an hour after he had reached his room and set to work upon the manuscript of the second act, he discovered that he had retained, unawares, a singularly clear impression of Miss Malone.

Then, presently, he realized that distinct pictures of her kept coming between him and his work, and that her voice rang softly and persistently in his ear. Over and over in that voice's slender music—plaintive, laughing, reaching everywhere so clearly—he heard the detested “line”: “What are you two good people conspiring about?” Over and over he saw the slow, comprehending movement with which she removed her hat and veil to let Talbot Potter judge her. And as she stood, with that critic's eye searching her, Canby remembered that through some untraceable association of ideas he had inexplicably thought of a drawing of “Florence Dombey” in an old set of Dickens engravings he had seen at his grandfather's in his boyhood—and had not seen since. And he remembered the lilac bushes in bloom on a May morning at his grandfather's. Somehow she made him think of them, too.

And as he sat at his desk, striving to concentrate upon the manuscript, the clearness with which Wanda Malone came before him increased; she became more and more vivid to him, and she would not be dismissed; she persisted and insisted, becoming first an annoyance, and then, as he fought the witchery, a serious detriment to his writing. She became part of every thought about his play, and of every other thought. He did not want her; he felt no interest in her; he had vital work to do—and she haunted him, seemed to be in the very room with him. He worked in spite of her, but she pursued him none the less constantly; she had gone down the stairs to dinner with him; she floated before him throughout the torture of Miss Cornish's address; she was present even when he exploded and fled; she was with him now, in this desolate walk toward Talbot Potter's apartment—the pale, symmetrical little face and the relentless sweet voice commandeering the attention he wanted desperately to keep upon what he meant to say to Potter.

Once before in his life he had suffered such an experience: that of having his thoughts possessed, against his will, by a person he did not know and did not care to know. It had followed his happening to see an intoxicated truck-driver lying beneath an overturned wagon. “Easy, boys! Don' mangle me!” the man kept begging his rescuers. And Canby recalled how “Easy, boys! Don' mangle me!” sounded plaintively in his ears for days, bothering him in his work at the office. Remembering it now, he felt a spiteful satisfaction in classing that obsession with this one. It seemed at least a step toward teaching Miss Wanda Malone to know her place.

But he got no respite from the siege, and was still incessantly beleaguered when he encountered the marble severities of the Pantheon Apartments' entrance hall and those of its field-marshal, who paraded him stonily to the elevator. Mr.

Potter's apartment was upon the twelfth floor, a facet stated in a monosyllable by the field-marshal, and confirmed, upon the opening of the cage at that height, by Mr. Potter's voice melodiously belling a flourish of laughter on the other side of a closed door bearing his card. It was rich laughter, cadenced and deep and loud, but so musically modulated that, though it might never seem impromptu, even old Carson Tinker had once declared that he liked to listen to it almost as much as Potter did.

Old Carson Tinker was listening to it now, as Canby discovered, after a lisping Japanese had announced him at the doorway of a cream-coloured Louis Sixteenth salon: an exquisite apartment, delicately personalized here and there by luxurious fragilities which would have done charmingly, on the stage, for a marquise's boudoir. Old Tinker, in evening dress, sat uncomfortably, sideways, upon the edge of a wicker and brocade “chaise lounge,” finishing a tiny glass of chartreuse, while Talbot Potter, in the middle of the room, took leave of a second guest who had been dining with him.

Potter was concluding the rendition of hilarity which had penetrated to the outer hall, and, merely waving the playwright toward Tinker, swept the same gesture upward to complete it by resting a cordial hand upon the departing guest's shoulder. This personage, a wasp-figured, languorous youth, with pale plastered hair over a talcum face, flicked his host lightly upon the breast with a pair of white gloves.

“None the less, Pottuh,” he said, “why shouldn't you play Othello as a mulatto? I maintain, you see, it would be taking a step in technique; they'd get the face, you see. Then I want you to do something really and truly big: Oedipus. Why not Oedipus? Think of giving the States a thing like Oedipus done as you could do it! Of coss, I don't say you could ever be another Mewnay-Sooyay. No. I don't go that far. You haven't Mewnay-Sooyay's technique. But you could give us just the savour of Attic culture—at least the savour, you see. The mere savour would be something. Why should you keep on producing these cheap little plays they foist on you? Oh, I know you always score a personal success in the wahst of them, but they've never given you a Big character—and the play, outside of you, is always piffle. Of coss, you know what I've always wanted you to do, what I've constantly insisted in print: Rostand. You commission Rostand to do one of his magnificent things for you and we serious men will do our part. Now, my duh good chap, I must be getting on, or the little gel will be telephoning all round the town!” He turned to the door, pausing upon the threshold. “Now, don't let any of these cheap little fellows foist any of their cheap little plays on you. This for my stirrup-cup: you cable Rostand tomorrow. Drop the cheap little

things and cable Rostand. Tell him I suggested it, if you like.” He disappeared in the hallway, calling back: “My duh Pottuh, good-night!” And the outer door was heard to close.

Canby, feeling a natural prejudice against this personage, glanced uneasily at Talbot Potter's face and was surprised to find that fine bit of modelling contorted with rage. The sight of this emotion was reassuring, but its source was a mystery, for it had seemed to the playwright that the wasp-waisted youth's remarks—though horribly damaging to the cheap little Canbys with their cheap little “Roderick Hanscoms”—were on the whole rather flattering to the subject of them, and betokened a real interest in his career.

“Ass!” said Potter.

Canby exhaled a breath of relief. He began to feel that it might be possible to like this man.

“Ass!” said Potter, striding up and down the room. “Ass! Ass! Ass! Ass!”

And Canby felt easier and happier. He foresaw, too, that there would be no cabling to Rostand, a thing he had naively feared, for a moment, as imminent.

Potter halted, bursting into speech less monosyllabic but no less vehement: “Mr. Tinker, did you ever see Mounet-Sully?”

“No.”

“Did you, Mr. Canby?”

“No.”

“Mewnay-Sooyay!” Potter mimicked the pronunciation of his adviser. “'Mewnay-Sooyay! Of coss I don't say YOU could ever be another Mewnay-Sooyay!' Ass! I'll tell you what Mounet-Sully's 'technique' amounts to, Mr. Tinker. It's yell! Just yell, yell, yell! Does he think I can't yell! Why, Packer could open his mouth like a hippopotamus and yell through a part! Ass!”

“Was that young man a-a critic?” Canby asked.

“No!” shouted Potter. “There aren't any!”

“He writes about theatrical matters,” said Carson Tinker. “Talky-talk writing: 'the drama'—'temperament'—'people of cultivation'—quotes Latin or Italian or something. 'Technique' is his star word; he plays 'technique' for a hand every other line. Doesn't do any harm; in fact, I think he does us a good deal of good. Lots of people read that talky-talk writing nowadays. Not in New York, but in road-towns, where they have plenty of time. This fellow's never against any show much, unless he takes a notion. You slip 'dolsy far nienty' or something about Danty or logarithms somewhere into your play, where it won't delay the

action much, and he'll be for you.”

Canby nodded and laughed eagerly. Tinker seemed to take it for granted that “Roderick Hanscom” was to be produced in spite of “another play I have been considering.”

“There aren't any critics, I tell you!” Potter stormed. “Mounet-Sully!”

“Well,” said old Tinker quietly, “I'd like to believe it, but people making a living that way have ruined a good many million dollars' worth of property in this town. Some of it was very good property.” He paused, and added: “Some of it was mine, too.”

“Good property?” said the playwright with fresh uneasiness. “You mean the critics sometimes ruin a good play?”

“How do they know a good play—or good acting?” Tinker returned placidly. “Every play you ever saw in your life, some people in the audience said they thought it was good; some said it was bad. How do critics know any more about it than anybody else? For instance, how can anybody that hasn't been in the business tell what's good acting and what's a good part?”

“But a critic—aren't critics in the bus—”

“No. They aren't theatrical people,” said Tinker dryly. “They're writers.”

“But some of them must have studied from the inside,” Canby urged, feeling that “Roderick Hanscom's” chances were getting slighter and slighter. “Some of them must have either been managers for a while, or actors—or had plays pro—”

“No,” said Tinker. “If they had they wouldn't do for critics. They wouldn't have the heart.”

“They oughtn't to have so much power!” the young man exclaimed passionately. “Think of a playwright working on his play—two years, maybe—night after night—and then, all in one swoop, these fellows that you say don't know anything—”

“Power!” Potter laughed contemptuously. “Tinker, you're in your dotage! Look at what I've done: Haven't I made my way in spite of everything they could do to stifle me? And have I ever compromised for one moment? Haven't I gone my own way, absolutely?”

“Yes.” Tinker's face was more cryptic than usual. “Yes, indeed!”

“Power! Haven't I made them eat out of my hand? Look at that ass—glad to crawl in here and nibble a crust from my table to-night! Ass!” He had halted for a second in front of the manager, but resumed his pacing with a mutter of

subterranean thunder: “Mounet-Sully!”

“Hasn't the public got a mind?” cried Canby. “Doesn't the public understand that a good play might be ruined by these scoundrels?”

Old Tinker returned his chartreuse glass to the case whence it came, a miniature sedan chair in silver and painted silk. “The public?” he said. “I've never been able to find out what that was. Just about the time I decided it was a trained sheep it turned out to be a cyclone. You think it's intelligent, and it plays the fool; you decide it's a fool, and it turns out to know more than you do. You make love to it, and it may sidle up and kiss you—or give you a good, hard kick!”

“But if we make this a good play—”

“It won't be a play at all,” said Tinker, “unless the public thinks it's a good one. A play isn't something you read; it's something actors do on a stage; and they can't afford to do it unless the public pays to watch 'em. If it won't buy tickets, you haven't got a play; you've only got some typewriting.”

Canby glanced involuntarily at the blue-covered manuscript he had placed upon a table beside him. It had a guilty look.

“I get confused,” he said. “If the public's so flighty, why does it take so much stock in what these wolves print about a play?”

“Print. That's it,” old Tinker answered serenely. “Write your opinion in a letter or say it with your mouth, and it doesn't amount to anything. Print's different. You see some nonsense about yourself in a newspaper, and you think I'm an idiot for believing it. But you read nonsense about me, and you believe it. You don't stop and think; 'That's a lie; he isn't that sort of a man.' No. You just wonder why I'm such a darn fool.”

“Then these cannibals have got us where—”

“Dotage!” Talbot Potter broke in, halting under the chandelier. “Tinker's reached his dotage!” He levelled a denouncing forefinger at the manager. “Do you mean to tell me that if I decide to go on with Mr. Canby's play any critic or combination or cabal of critics can keep it from being a success? Then I tell you, you're in your dotage! For one point, if I play this part they're going to say it's a big thing; I don't mean the play, of course, because you must know, yourself, Mr. Canby, we could bribe them into calling it a strong play. We know it isn't, and they'll know it isn't. What I mean is the characterization of 'Roderick Hanscom.' I tell you, if I do it, they're going to call it a big thing. They aren't all maniacs about everything made in France, thank heaven! Rostand! Ass! I'm not playing parts with a clothespin on the end of my nose!” And again he mimicked the

departed visitor: “'This for my stirrup-cup: you cable Rostand tomorrow.' My soul! Does he think I want to play CHICKENS?”

Sulphurously, he resumed his pacing of the floor.

Old Tinker seemed unaffected by this outburst, but for that matter he seemed unaffected by anything. His dead gaze followed his employer's to-and-fro striding as a cat's follows a pendulum, but without the cat's curiosity about a pendulum. He never interrupted when Potter was speaking; and Canby noticed that whenever Potter talked at any length Tinker looked thoughtful and distant, like a mechanic so accustomed to the whirr and thunder of the machine-shop that he may indulge in reveries there. After a moment or two the old fellow ceased to follow the pendulum stride, and turned to the playwright.

“I'll tell you the two surest ways to make what you call the public like a play, Mr. Canby,” he said. “Nothing is sure, but these are the nearest to it. Make 'em laugh. I mean, make 'em laugh after they get home, or the next day in the office, any time they get to thinking about it. The other way is to get two actors for your lovers that the audience, young and old, can't help falling in love with; a young actor that the females in the audience think they'd like to marry, and a young actress that the males all think they'd like to marry. It doesn't matter much about the writing; just have something interfere between them from eight-fifteen until along about twenty-five minutes after ten. The two lovers don't necessarily have to know much about acting, either, though of course it's better if they happen to. The best stage-lover I ever knew, and the one that played in the most successes, did happen to understand acting thor—”

“Who was that?” Potter interrupted fiercely. “Mounet-Sully?”

“No. I meant Dora Preston.”

“Never heard of her!”

“No,” said the old man. “You wouldn't. They don't put up monuments to pretty actresses, nor write about them in school histories. She dropped dead in her dressing-room one night forty-two years ago. I was thinking of her to-day; something reminded me of her.”

“Was she a friend of yours, Mr. Tinker?” Canby asked.

“Friend? No. I was an usher in the old Calumet Theatre, and she owned New York. She had this quality; every man in the audience fell in love with her. So did the women, too, for that matter, and the actors who played with her. When she played a love-scene, people who'd been married thirty years would sit and watch her and hold each other's hands—yes, with tears in their eyes. I've seen 'em. And after the performance, one night, the stage-door keeper, a man seventy

years old, was caught kissing the latch of the door where she'd touched it; and he was sober, too. There was something about her looks and something about her voice you couldn't get away from. You couldn't tell to save you what it was, but after you'd seen her she'd seem to be with you for days, and you couldn't think much about anything else, even if you wanted to. People used to go around in a kind of spell; they couldn't think of anything or talk of anything but Dora Preston. It didn't matter much what she did; everything she did made you feel like a boy falling in love the first time. It made you think of apple-blossoms and moonlight just to look at her. She—”

“See here, Mr. Canby”—Talbot Potter interrupted suddenly. He dropped into a chair and picked up the manuscript—“See here! I've got an idea that may save this play. Suppose we let 'Roderick Hanscom' make his sacrifice, not for the heroine, but because he's in love with the other girl—the ingenue—I've forgotten the name you call her in the script. I mean the part played by that little Miss Miss girl—Miss-what's-her-name—Wanda Malone!”

Canby stared at Potter in fascinated amazement, his straining eyes showing the whites above and below the pupils. It was the look of a man struck dumb by a sudden marvel of telepathy.

“Why, yes,” he said slowly, when he had recovered his breath, “I believe that would be a good idea!”

VII

For two hours, responding to the manipulation of the star and his thoroughly subjugated playwright, the character of “Roderick Hanscom” grew nobler and nobler, speech by speech and deed by deed, while the expression of the gentleman who was to impersonate it became, in precise parallel with this regeneration, sweeter and loftier and lovelier.

“A little Biblical quotation wouldn't go so bad right in there,” he said, when they had finally established the Great Sacrifice for a Woman. “We'll let Roderick have a line like: 'Greater love hath no man than laying down his life to save another's.'” He touched a page of the manuscript with his finger. “There's a good place for it.”

“Aren't you afraid it would sound a little—smug?” Canby asked timidly. “The way we've got him now, Roderick seems to me to be always seeing himself as a splendid man and sort of pointing it out to the—”

“Good gracious!” cried Potter, astounded. “Hasn't it got to be pointed out? The audience hasn't got a whole lifetime to study him in; it's only got about two hours. Besides, I don't see what you say; I don't see it at all! It seems to me I've worked him around into being a perfectly natural character.”

“I suppose you're right,” said Canby, meekly scribbling.

“Biblical quotations never do any harm to the box-office,” Potter added. “You may not get a hand on 'em, but you'll never get a cough, either.” He looked dreamily at the ceiling. “I've often thought of doing a Biblical play. I'd have it built around the character of St. Paul. That's one they haven't touched yet, and it's new. I wouldn't do it with a beard and long hair. I wouldn't use much makeup. No. Just the face as it is.”

“You can do practically anything with a religious show,” said Tinker. “That's been proved. You can run in gambling and horse-racing and ballys, and you'll get people into the house, night after night, that think the theatre's wicked and wouldn't go to see 'Rip Van Winkle.' They do a lot of good, too—religious shows—just that way.”

“I think I'd play it in armour,” Potter continued his thought, still gazing at the ceiling. “I believe it would be a big thing.”

“It might if it was touted right,” said Tinker. “It all depends on the touting. If

you get it touted to the tank towns that you've got a play with the great religious gonzabo, then your show's a big property. Same if you get it touted for a great educational gonzabo. Or 'artistic.' Get it touted right for 'artistic,' and the tanks'll think they like it, even if they don't. Look at 'Cyrano'—they liked Mansfield and his acting, but they didn't like the show. They said they liked the show, and thought they did, but they didn't. If they'd like it as much as they said they did, that show would be running like 'Uncle Tom's Cabin.' Speaking of that”—he paused, coughed, and went on—“I'm glad you've got the ingenue's part straightened out in this piece. I thought from the first it would stand a little lengthening.”

Potter, unheeding, dreamily proceeded: “In silver armour. Might silver the hair a little—not too much. Play it as a spiritual character, but not solemn. Wouldn't make it turgid; keep it light. Have the whole play spiritual but light. For instance, have room in it for a religious ingenue part—make her a younger sister of Mary Magdalene, say, with St. Paul becoming converted for her sake after he'd been a Roman General. I believe it's a big idea.”

Canby was growing nervous. All this seemed to be rambling farther and farther from “Roderick Hanscom.” Potter relieved his anxiety, however, after a thoughtful sigh, by saying abruptly: “Well, well, we can't go into a big production like that, this late in the year. We'll have to see what can be done with 'Roderick Hanscom.'” He looked at the door, where the Japanese was performing a shrinking curtsey. “What is it, Sato?”

“Miss Pata.”

“Who?”

“Miss Pata.”

A voice called from the hallway: “It's me, Mr. Potter. Packer.”

“Oh, come in! Come in!”

The stage-manager made a deferential entrance. “It's about Miss—”

“Sit down, Packer.”

“Thank you, Mr. Potter.” Evidently considering the command a favour, Packer sat. “I saw Miss Lyston, sir—”

“I won't turn her adrift,” said his employer peevishly. “You see, Mr. Canby, here's another of the difficulties of my position. Miss Lyston has been with me for several years, and for this piece we've got somebody I think will play her part better, but I haven't any other part for Miss Lyston. And we start so late in the season, this year, she'll probably not be able to get anything else to do; so she's

on my hands. I can't turn people out in the snow like that. Some managers can, but I can't. And yet I have letters begging me for all kinds of charities every day. They don't know what my company costs me in money like this—absolutely thrown away so far as any benefit to me is concerned. And often I find I've been taken advantage of, too. I shouldn't be at all surprised to find that Miss Lyston has comfortable investments right now, and that she's only scheming to—Packer, don't you know whether she's been saving her salary or not? If you don't you ought to."

"I came to tell you, sir. I thought you might be relieved to know. We don't have to bother about her, Mr. Potter. I've been to see her at her flat, this evening, and she's as anxious to get away from us, Mr. Potter, as we are to—"

The star rose to his feet, his face suffusing. "You sit there," he exclaimed, "and tell me that a member of my company finds the association so distasteful that she wants to get away!"

"Oh, no, Mr. Potter!" the stage-manager protested. "Not that at all! She's very sorry to go. She asked me to tell you that she felt she was giving up a great honour, and to thank you for all your kindness to her."

"Go on!" Potter sternly bade him. "Why does she wish to leave my company?"

"Why, it seems she's very much in love with her husband, sir, Vorley Surbilt __"

"It doesn't seem possible," said Potter, shaking his head. "I know him, and it sounds like something you're making up as you go along, Packer."

"Indeed, I'm not, Mr. Potter!" the stage-manager cried, in simple distress. "I wouldn't know how."

"Go on!"

"Well, sir, it seems Vorly Surbilt was to go out with Mrs. Romaley, and it seems that when Miss Lyston left rehearsal she drove around till she found him __"

"Ah! I knew she was fooling me! I knew she wasn't sick! Went to drive with her husband, and I pay the cab bill!"

"No, no, sir! I forgot to tell you; she wouldn't let me pay it. She took him home and put him to bed—and from what I heard on Broadway it was time somebody did! It seems they'd had an offer to go into a vaudeville piece together, and after she got him to bed she telephoned the vaudeville man, and had him bring up a contract, and they signed it, though she had to guide Vorley's

hand for him. Anyway, he's signed up all right, and so is she. That's why she was so anxious about fixing it up with us. I told her it would be all right."

Potter relapsed into his chair in an attitude of gloom. "So they've begun to leave Talbot Potter's company!" he said, nodding his head with bitter melancholy. "For vaudeville! I'd better go to farming at once; I often think of it. What sort of an act is it that Miss Lyston prefers to remaining with me? Acrobatic?"

"It's a little play," said Packer. "It's from the Grand Guignol."

"French!" Potter this simply as an added insult on the part of Miss Lyston. "French!"

"They say it's a wonderful little thing," said Packer innocently, but it was as if he had run a needle into his sensitive employer. Potter instantly sprang up again with a cry of pain.

"Of course it's wonderful! It's French; everything French is wonderful, magnificent, Supreme! Everything French is HOLY! Good God, Packer! You'll be telling me what my 'technique' ought to be, next!"

He hurled himself again into the chair and moaned, then in a dismal voice inquired; "Miss Lyston struck you as feeling that her condition in life was distinctly improved by this ascent into vaudeville, didn't she?"

"Oh, not at all, Mr. Potter! But, of course," Packer explained deprecatingly, "she's pleased to have Vorly where she can keep an eye on him. She said that though she was all broken up about leaving the company, she expected to be very happy in looking after him. You see, sir, it's the first time in all their married life they've had a chance to be together except one summer when neither of 'em could get a stock engagement."

Potter made no reply but to shake his head despondently, and Packer sat silent in deference, as if waiting to be questioned further. It was the playwright who presently filled the void. "Why haven't Mr. and Mrs. Surbilt gone into the same companies, if they care to be together? I should think they'd have made it a point to get engagements in the same ones."

Packer looked disturbed. "It's not done much," he said.

"Besides, Vorly Surbilt plays leading parts with women stars," old Tinker volunteered. "You see, naturally, it wouldn't do at all."

"Jealousy, you mean?"

"Not necessarily the kind you're thinking of. But it just doesn't do."

"Some managers will allow married couples in their companies," Potter said,

adding emphatically: “I won't! I never have and I never will! Never! There's just one thing every soul in my support has got to keep working for, and that is a high-tension performance every night in the year. If married people are in love with each other, they're going to think more about that than about the fact that they're working for me. If they aren't in love with each other, there's the devil to pay. I'd let the best man or woman in the profession go—and they could go to vaudeville, for all I cared!—if I had to keep their wives or husbands travelling with us. I won't have 'em! My soul! I don't marry, do I?”

Packer rose. “Is there anything else for me, Mr. Potter?”

“Yes. Take this interlined script, get some copies typewritten, and see that the company's sides are changed to suit it. Be especially careful about that young Miss—ah—Miss Malone's. You'll find her part is altered considerably, and will be even more, when Mr. Canby gets the dialogue for other changes finished. He'll let you have them to-morrow. By the way, Packer, where did you find—” He paused, stretched out his hand to the miniature sedan chair of liqueurs, took a decanter and tiny glass therefrom, and carefully poured himself a sparkling emerald of creme de menthe. “Will you have something, Mr. Canby?” he asked. “You, Tinker?”

Both declined in silence; they seemed preoccupied.

“Where did I what, Mr. Potter?” asked the stage-manager, reminding him of the question left unfinished.

“What?”

“You said: 'By the way, where did you find—'”

“Oh, yes.” Potter smiled negligently. “Where did you find that little Miss Malone? At the agents'?”

Packer echoed him: “Where did I find her?” He scratched his head. “Miss”—he said ruminatively, repeating the word slowly, like a man trying to work out the solution of a puzzle—“Miss—”

“Miss Malone. I suppose you got her at an agent's?”

“Let's see,” said Packer. “At an agent's? No. No, it wasn't. Come to think of it, it wasn't.”

“Then where did you get her?” Tinker inquired.

“That's what I just asked him,” Potter said, placing his glass upon a table without having tasted the liqueur. “What's the matter, Packer? Gone to sleep?”

“I remember now,” said Packer, laughing deferentially. “Of course! No. It wasn't through any of the agents. Now I remember—come to think of it—I sort

of ran across her myself, as a matter of fact. I wasn't just sure who you meant at first. You mean the understudy, the one that's to play Miss Lyston's part, that Miss—Miss—" He snapped a finger and thumb to spur memory and then, as in triumphant solution of his puzzle, cried, "Ma—Malone! Miss Malone!"

"Yes," said Potter, looking upon him darkly. "Where did you sort of run across her, come to think of it, as a matter of fact?"

"Oh, I remember all about it, now," said Packer brightly. "Why, she was playing last summer in stock out at Seeleyville, Pennsylvania. That's only about six miles from Packer's Ridge, where my father lives. I spent a couple of weeks with him, and we trolleyed over one evening to see 'The Little Minister,' because father got it in his head some way that it was about the Baptists, and I couldn't talk him out of it. It wasn't as bad a performance as you'd think, and this little girl was a pretty fair 'Babbie.' Father forgot all about the Baptists and kept talking about her after we got home, until nothing would do but we must go over and see that show again. He wanted to take her right out to the farm and adopt her—or something; he's a widower, and all alone out there. Fact is, I had all I could do to keep him from going around to ask her, and I was pretty near afraid he'd speak to her from the audience. Well, to satisfy him, I did go around after the show, and gave her my card, and told her if I could do anything for her in New York to let me know. Of course, naturally, when I got back to town I forgot all about it, but I got a note from her that she was here, looking for an engagement, the very day you told me to scare up an understudy. So I thought she might do as well as anybody I'd get at the agent's, and I let her have it." He drew a breath of relief, like that of a witness leaving the stand, and with another placative laugh, letting his eyes fall humbly under the steady scrutiny of his master, he concluded: "Of course I remember all about it, only at first I wasn't sure which one you meant; it's such a large company."

"I see," said Potter grimly. "You engaged her to please your father."

"Oh, Mr. Potter!" the stage-manager protested. "If you don't like her—"

"That will do!" Potter cut him off, and paced the floor, virulently brooding. "And so Talbot Potter's company is to be made up of actors engaged to suit the personal whims of L. Smith Packer's father, old Mister Packer of Baptist Ridge, near Seeleyville, Pennsylvania!"

"But, Mr. Potter, if you don't—"

"I said that would DO!" roared Potter. "Good-night!"

"Good-night, sir," said the stage-manager humbly, and humbly got himself out of the room, to be heard, an instant later, bidding the Japanese an apologetic

good-night at the outer door of the apartment.

Canby rose to take his own departure, promising to have the new dialogue “worked out” by morning.

“He is, too!” said Potter, not heeding the playwright, but confirming an unuttered thought in his own mind. He halted at the table, where he had set his tiny glass, and gulped the emerald at a swallow. “I always thought he was!”

“Was what?” inquired old Tinker.

“A hypocrite!”

“D'you mean Packer?” said Tinker incredulously.

“He's a hypocrite!” Potter shouted fiercely. “And I shouldn't be surprised if his father was another! Widower! I never saw the man in my life, but I'd swear it on oath! He is a hypocrite! Packer's father is a damned old Baptist hypocrite!”

VIII

With this sonorous bit of character reading still ringing in his ears, Canby emerged from the cream-coloured apartment to find the stoop-shouldered figure of the also hypocritical son leaning wearily against the wall, waiting for a delaying elevator. The attitude was not wholly devoid of pathos, to Canby's view of it. Neither was the careworn, harried face, unharmoniously topped by a green hat so sparklingly jaunty, not only in colour but in its shape and the angle of its perch, that it was outright hilarious, and, above the face of Packer, made the playwright think pityingly of a St. Patrick's Day party holding a noisy celebration upon a hearse.

Its wearer nodded solemnly as the elevator bounced up, flashing, and settled to the level of the floor; but the quick drop through the long shaft seemed to do the stage-manager a disproportionate amount of good. Halfway down he emitted a heavy “Whew!” of relief and threw back his shoulders. He seemed to swell, to grow larger; lines verged into the texture of his face, disappearing; and with them went care and seeming years. Canby had casually taken him to be about forty, but so radical was the transformation of him that, as the distance from his harrowing overlord increased, the playwright beheld another kind of creature. In place of the placative, middle-aged varlet, troubled and hurrying to serve, there stepped out of the elevator, at the street level, a deep-chested, assertive, manly adventurer, about thirty, kindly eyed, picturesque, and careless. The green hat belonged to him perfectly.

He gave Canby a look of burlesque ruefulness over his shoulder, the comedy appeal of one schoolboy to another as they leave a scolding teacher on the far side of the door. “The governor does keep himself worked up!” he laughed, as they reached the street and paused. “If it isn't one thing, it's some thing!”

“Perhaps it's my play just now,” said Canby. “I was afraid, earlier this evening, he meant to drop it. Making so many changes may have upset his nerves.”

“Lord bless your soul! No!” exclaimed the new Packer. “His nerves are all right! He's always the same! He can't help it!”

“I thought possibly he might have been more upset than usual,” Canby said. “There was a critic or something that—”

“No, no, Mr. Canby!” Packer chuckled. “New plays and critics, they don't

worry him any more than anything else. Of course he isn't going to be pleased with any critics. Most of them give him splendid notices, but they don't please him. How could they?”

“He's always the same, you think?” Canby said blankly.

“Always—always at top pitch, that is, and always unexpected. You'll see as you get to know him. You won't know him any better than you do now, Mr. Canby; you'll only know him more. I've been with him for four years—stage-manager—hired man—maid-of-all-work—order his meals for him in hotels—and I guess old Tinker and I know him as well as anybody does, but it's a mighty big job to handle him just right. It keeps us hopping, but that's bread and butter. Not much bread and butter anywhere these days unless you do hop! We all have to hop for somebody!” He chuckled again, and then unexpectedly became so serious he was almost truculent. “And I tell you, Mr. Canby,” he cried, “by George! I'd sooner hop for Talbot Potter than for any other man that ever walked the earth!”

He took a yellow walking-stick from under his arm, thrust the manuscript Potter had given him into the pocket of his light overcoat, and bade his companion good-night with a genial flourish of the stick. “Subway to Brooklyn for mine. Your play will go, all right; don't worry about that, Mr. Canby. Good-night and good luck, Mr. Canby.”

Canby went the other way, marvelling.

It was eleven; and for half an hour the theatres had been releasing their audiences to the streets;—the sidewalks were bobbing and fluttering; automobiles cometed by bleating peevishly. Suddenly, through the window of a limousine, brilliantly lighted within, Canby saw the face of Wanda Malone, laughing, and embowered in white furs. He stopped, startled; then he realized that Wanda Malone's hair was not red. The girl in the limousine had red hair, and was altogether unlike Wanda Malone in feature and expression.

He walked on angrily.

Immediately a slender girl, prettily dressed, passed him. She clung charmingly to the arm of a big boy; and to Canby's first glance she was Wanda Malone. Wrenching his eyes from her, he saw Wanda Malone across the street getting into a taxicab, and then he stumbled out of the way of a Wanda Malone who almost walked into him. Wherever there was a graceful gesture or turn of the head, there was Wanda Malone.

He wheeled, and walked back toward Broadway, and thought he caught a glimpse of Packer going into a crowded drug-store near the corner. The man he

took to be Packer lifted his hat and spoke to a girl who was sitting at a table and drinking soda-water, but when she looked up and seemed to be Wanda Malone with a blue veil down to her nose, Canby turned on his heel, face-about, and headed violently for home.

When he reached quieter streets his gait slackened, and he walked slowly, lost in deep reverie. By and by he came to a halt, and stood still for several minutes without knowing it. Slowly he came out of the trance, wondering where he was. Then he realized that his staring eyes had halted him automatically; and as they finally conveyed their information to his conscious mind, he perceived that he was standing directly in front of a saloon, and glaring at the sign upon the window:

ALES WINES LIQUORS AND CIGARS TIM MALONE

At that, somewhere in his inside, he cried out, in a kind of anguish: “Isn't there anything—anywhere—any more—except Wanda Malone!”

IX

“Second act, ladies and gentlemen!” cried Packer, at precisely ten o'clock the next morning.

About a dozen actors were chatting in small groups upon the stage; three or four paced singly, muttering and mildly gesticulating, with the fretful preoccupation of people trying to remember; two or three, seated, bent over their typewritten “sides,” studying intently; and a few, invisible from the auditorium, were scattered about the rearward rooms and passageways. Talbot Potter, himself, was nowhere to be seen, and, what was even more important to one tumultuously beating heart “in front,” neither was Wanda Malone. Mr. Stewart Canby in a silvery new suit, wearing a white border to his waistcoat collar and other decorations proper to a new playwright, sat in the centre of the front row of the orchestra. Yesterday he had taken a seat about nine rows back.

He bore no surface signs of the wear and tear of a witches' night; riding his runaway play and fighting the enchantment that was upon him. Elastic twenty-seven does not mark a bedless session with violet arcs below its eyes;—what violet a witch had used upon Stewart Canby this morning appeared as a dewey boutonniere in the lapel of his new coat; he was that far gone.

Miss Ellsling and a youth of the company took their places near the front of the stage and began the rehearsal of the second act with a dialogue that led up to the entrance of the star with the “ingenue,” both of whom still remained out of the playwright's range of vision.

As the moment for their appearance drew near, Canby became, to his own rage, almost uncontrollably agitated. Miss Ellsling's scene, which he should have followed carefully, meant nothing to him but a ticking off of the seconds before he should behold with his physical eyes the living presence of the fairy ghost that had put a spell upon him. He was tremulous all over.

Miss Ellsling and her companion came to a full stop and stood waiting. Thereupon Packer went to the rear of the stage, leaned through an open doorway, and spoke deferentially:

“Mr. Potter? All ready, sir. All ready, Miss—ah—Malone?”

Then he stepped back with the air of an unimportant person making way for his betters to pass before him, while Canby's eyes fixed themselves glassily upon

the shabby old doorway through which an actual, breathing Wanda Malone was to come.

But he was destined not to see her appear in that expectant frame. Twenty years before—though he had forgotten it—in a dazzling room where there was a Christmas tree, he had uttered a shriek of ecstatic timidity just as a jingling Santa Claus began to emerge from behind the tree, and he had run out of the room and out of the house. He did exactly the same thing now, though this time the shriek was not vocal.

Suffocating, he fled up the aisle and out into the lobby. There he addressed himself distractedly but plainly:

“Jackass!”

Breathing heavily, he went out to the wide front steps of the theatre and stood, sunlit Broadway swimming before him.

“Hello, Canby!”

A shabby, shaggy, pale young man, with hot eyes, checked his ardent gait and paused, extending a cordial, thin hand, the fingers browned at the sides by cigarettes smoked to the bitter end. “Rieger,” he said. “Arnold Rieger. Remember me at the old Ink Club meetings before we broke up?”

“Yes,” said Canby dimly. “Yes. The old Ink Club. I came out for a breath of air. Just a breath.”

“We used to settle the universe in that little back restaurant room,” said Rieger. “Not one of use had ever got a thing into print—and me, I haven't yet, for that matter. Editors still hate my stuff. I've kept my oath, though; I've never compromised—never for a moment.”

“Yes,” Canby responded feebly, wondering what the man was talking about. Wanda Malone was surely on the stage, now. If he turned, walked about thirty feet, and opened a door, he would see her—hear her speaking!

“I've had news of your success,” said Rieger. “I saw in the paper that Talbot Potter was to put on a play you'd written. I congratulate you. That man's a great artist, but he never seems to get a good play; he's always much, much greater than his part. I'm sure you've given him a real play at last. I remember your principles: Realism; no compromise! The truth; no shirking it, no tampering with it! You've struck out for that—you've never compro—”

“No. Oh, no,” said Canby, waking up a little. “Of course you've got to make a little change or two in plays. You see, you've got to make an actor like a play or he won't play it, and if he won't play it you haven't got any play—you've only

got some typewriting."

Rieger set his foot upon the step and rested his left forearm upon his knee, and attitude comfortable for street debate. "Admitting the truth of that for the sake of argument, and only for the moment, because I don't for one instant accept such a jesuitism—"

"Yes," said Canby dreamily. "Yes." And, with not only apparent but genuine unconsciousness of this one-time friend's existence, he turned and walked back into the lobby, and presently was vaguely aware that somebody near the street doors of the theatre seemed to be in a temper. Somebody kept shouting "Swell-headed pup!" and "Go to the devil!" at somebody else repeatedly, but finally went away, after reaching a vociferous climax of even harsher epithets and instructions.

The departure of this raging unknown left the lobby quiet; Canby had gone near to the inner doors. Listening fearfully, he heard through these a murmurous baritone cadencing: Talbot Potter declaiming the inwardness of "Roderick Hanscom"; and then—oh, bells of Elfland faintly chiming!—the voice of Wanda Malone!

He pressed, trembling, against the doors, and went in.

Talbot Potter and Wanda Malone stood together, the two alone in the great hollow space of the stage. The actors of the company, silent and remote, watched them; old Tinker, halfway down an aisle, stood listening; and near the proscenium two workmen, tools in their hands, had paused in attitudes of arrested motion. Save for the voices of the two players, the whole vast cavern of the theatre was as still as the very self of silence. And the stirless air that filled it was charged with necromancy.

Rehearsal is like the painted canvas without a frame; it is more like a plaster cast, most like of all to the sculptor's hollow moulds. It needs the bronze to bring a statue to life, and it needs the audience to bring a play to life. Some glamour must come from one to the other; some wind of enchantment must blow between them—there must be a magic spell. But these two actors had produced the spell without the audience.

And yet they were only reading a wistful little love-scene that Stewart Canby had written the night before.

Two people were falling in love with each other, neither realizing it. And these two who played the lovers had found some hidden rhythm that brought them together in one picture as a chord is one sound. They played to each other and with each other instinctively; Talbot Potter had forgotten "the smile" and all the

mechanism that went with it. The two held the little breathless silences of lovers; they broke these silences timidly, and then their movements and voices ran together like waters in a fountain. A radiance was about them as it is about all lovers; they were suffused with it.

To Stewart Canby, watching, they seemed to move within a sorcerer's circle of enchantment. Upon his disturbed mind there was dawning a conviction that these inspired mummers were beings apart from him, knowing things he never could know, feeling things he never could feel, belonging to another planet whither he could never voyage, where strange winds blew and all things lived and grew in a light beyond his understanding. For the light that shone in the faces of these two was “the light that never was, on sea or land.”

It had its blessing for him. From that moment, if he had known it, this play, which was being born of so many parents, was certain of “success,” of “popularity,” and of what quality of renown such things may bring. And he who was to be called its author stood there a Made Man, unless some accident befell.

Miss Ellsling spoke and came forward, another actor with her. The scene was over. There was a clearing of throats; everybody moved. The stage-carpenter and his assistant went away blinking, like men roused from deep sleep. The routine of rehearsal resumed its place; and old Tinker, who had not stirred a muscle, rubbed the back of his neck suddenly, and came up the aisle to Canby.

“Good business!” he cried. “Did you see that little run off the stage she made when Miss Ellsling came on? And you saw what he can do when he wants to!”

“He?” Canby echoed. “He?”

“Played for the scene instead of himself. Oh, he can do it! He's an old hand—got too many tricks in the bag to let her get the piece away from him—but he's found a girl that can play with him at last, and he'll use every value she's got. He knows good property when he sees it. She's got a pretty good box of tricks herself; stock's the way to learn 'em, but it's apt to take the bloom off. It hasn't taken off any of hers, the darlin'! What do you think, Mr. Canby?”

To Canby, who hardly noticed that this dead old man had come to life, the speech was jargon. The playwright was preoccupied with the fact that Talbot Potter was still on the stage, would continue there until the rather distant end of the act, and that the “ingenue,” after completing the little run at her exit, had begun to study the manuscript of her part, and in that absorption had disappeared through a door into the rear passageway. Canby knew that she was not to be “on” again until the next act, and he followed a desperate impulse.

“See a person,” he mumbled, and went out through the lobby, turned south to

the cross-street, proceeded thereby to the stage-door of the theatre, and resolutely crossed the path of the distrustful man who lounged there.

“Here!” called the distrustful man.

“I'm with the show,” said Canby, an expression foreign to his lips and a clear case of inspiration. The distrustful man waved him on.

Wanda Malone was leaning against the wall at the other end of the passageway, studying her manuscript. She did not look up until he paused beside her.

“Miss Malone,” he began. “I have come—I have come—I have-ah—”

These were his first words to her. She did nothing more than look at him inquiringly, but with such radiance that he floundered to a stop. There were only two things within his power to do: he had either to cough or to speak much too sweetly.

“There's a draught here,” she said, Christian anxiety roused by the paroxysm which rescued him from the damning alternative. “You oughtn't to stand here perhaps, Mr. Canby.”

“'Canby?'” he repeated inquiringly, the name seeming new to him. “Canby?”

“You're Mr. Canby, aren't you?”

“I meant where—who—” he stammered. “How did you know?”

“The stage-manager pointed you out to me yesterday at rehearsal. I was so excited! You're the first author I ever saw, you see. I've been in stock where we don't see authors.”

“Do you—like it?” he said. “I mean stock. Do you like stock? How much do you like stock? I ah—” Again he fell back upon the faithful old device of nervous people since the world began.

“I'm sure you oughtn't to stand in this passageway,” she urged.

“No, no!” he said hurriedly. “I love it! I love it! I haven't any cold. It's the air. That's what does it.” He nodded brightly, with the expression of a man who knows the answer to everything. “It's bad for me.”

“Then you—”

“No,” he said, and went back to the beginning. “I have come—I wanted to come—I wished to say that I wi—” He put forth a manful effort which made him master of the speech he had planned. “I want to thank you for the way you play your part. What I wrote seemed dry stuff, but when you act it, why, then, it seems to be—beautiful!”

“Oh! Do you think so?” she cried, her eyes bedewing ineffably. “Do you think so?”

“Oh—I—oh!—” He got no further, and, although a stranger to the context of this conversation might have supposed him to be speaking of a celebrated commonwealth, Mother of Presidents, his meaning was sufficiently clear to Wanda Malone.

“You're lovely to me,” she said, wiping her eyes. “Lovely! I'll never forget it! I'll never forget anything that's happened to me all this beautiful, beautiful week!”

The little kerchief she had lifted to her eyes was wet with tears not of the stage. “It seems so foolish!” she said bravely. “It's because I'm so happy! Everything has come all at once, this week. I'd never been in New York before in my life. Doesn't that seem funny for a girl that's been on the stage ever since she left school? And now I am here, all at once I get this beautiful part you've written, and you tell me you like it—and Mr. Potter says he likes it. Oh! Mr. Potter's just beautiful to me! Don't you think Mr. Potter's wonderful, Mr. Canby?”

The truth about Mr. Canby's opinion of Mr. Potter at this moment was not to the playwright's credit. However, he went only so far as to say: “I didn't like him much yesterday afternoon.”

“Oh, no, no!” she said quickly. “That was every bit my fault. I was frightened and it made me stupid. And he's just beautiful to me to-day! But I'd never mind anything from a man that works with you as he does. It's the most wonderful thing! To a woman who loves her profession for its own sake—”

“You do, Miss Malone?”

“Love it?” she cried. “Is there anything like it in the world?”

“I might have known you felt that, from your acting,” he said, managing somehow to be coherent, though it was difficult.

“Oh, but we all do!” she protested eagerly. “I believe all actors love it more than they love life itself. Don't think I mean those that never grew up out of their 'show-off' time in childhood. Those don't count, in what I mean, any more than the 'show-girls' and heaven knows what not that the newspapers call 'actresses'. Oh, Mr. Canby, I mean the people with the art and the fire born in them: those who must come to the stage and who ought to and who do. It isn't because we want to be 'looked at' that we go on the stage and starve to stay there! It's because we want to make pictures—to make pictures of characters in plays for people in audiences. It's like being a sculptor or painter; only we paint and model

with ourselves—and we're different from sculptors and painters because they do their work in quiet studios, while we do ours under the tension of great crowds watching every stroke we make—and, oh, the exhilaration when they show us we make the right stroke!”

“Bravo!” he said. “Bravo!”

“Isn't it the greatest of all the arts? Isn't it?” she went on with the same glowing eagerness. “We feed our nerves to it, and our lives to it, and are glad! It makes us different from other people. But what of that? Don't we give ourselves? Don't we live and die just to make these pictures for the world? Oughtn't the world to be thankful for us? Oughtn't it? Oh, it is, Mr. Canby; it is thankful for us; and I, for one, never forget that a Prime Minister of England was proud to warm Davy Garrick's breeches at the grate for him!”

She clapped her hands together in a gesture of such spirit and fire that Canby could have thrown his hat in the air and cheered, she had lifted him so clear of his timidity.

“Bravo!” he cried again. “Bravo!”

At that she blushed. “What a little goose I am!” she cried. “Playing the orator! Mr. Canby, you mustn't mind—”

“I won't!”

“It's because I'm so happy,” she explained—to his way of thinking, divinely. “I'm so happy I just pour out everything. I want to sing every minute. You see, it seemed such a long while that I was waiting for my chance. Some of us wait forever, Mr. Canby, and I was so afraid mine might never come. If it hadn't come now it might never have come. If I'd missed this one, I might never have had another. It frightens me to think of it—and I oughtn't to be thinking of it! I ought to be spending all my time on my knees thanking God that old Mr. Packer got it into his head that 'The Little Minister' was a play about the Baptists!”

“I don't see—”

“If he hadn't,” she said, “I wouldn't be here!”

“God bless old Mr. Packer!”

“I hope you mean it, Mr. Canby.” She blushed again, because there was no possible doubt that he meant it. “It seems a miracle to me that I am here, and that my chance is here with me, at last. It's twice as good a chance as it was yesterday, thanks to you. You've given me such beautiful new things to do and such beautiful new things to say. How I'll work at it! After rehearsal this afternoon I'll learn every word of it in the tunnel before I get to my station in

Brooklyn. That's funny, too, isn't it; the first time I've ever been to New York I go and board over in Brooklyn! But it's a beautiful place to study, and by the time I get home I'll know the lines and have all the rest of the time for the real work: trying to make myself into a faraway picture of the adorable girl you had in your mind when you wrote it. You see—”

She checked herself again. “Oh! Oh!” she said, half-laughing, half-ashamed. “I've never talked so much in my life! You see it seems to me that the whole world has just burst into bloom!”

She radiated a happiness that was almost tangible; it was a glow so real it seemed to warm and light that dingy old passageway. Certainly it warmed and lighted the young man who stood there with her. For him, too, the whole world was transfigured, and life just an orchard to walk through in perpetual April morning.

The voice of Packer proclaimed: “Two o'clock, ladies and gentlemen! Rehearsal two o'clock this afternoon!”

The next moment he looked into the passageway. “This afternoon's rehearsal, two o'clock, Miss—ahh—Malone. Oh, Mr. Canby, Mr. Potter wants you to go to lunch with him and Mr. Tinker. He's waiting. This way, Mr. Canby.”

“In a moment,” said the young playwright. “Miss Malone, you spoke of your going home to work at making yourself into 'the adorable girl' I had in my mind when I wrote your part. It oughtn't”—he faltered, growing red—“it oughtn't to take much—much work!”

And, breathless, he followed the genially waiting Packer.

X

“Your overcoat, Mr. Potter!” called that faithful servitor as Potter was going out through the theatre with old Tinker and Canby. “You've forgotten your overcoat, sir.”

“I don't want it.”

“Yes sir; but it's a little raw to-day.” He leaped down into the orchestra from the high stage, striking his knee upon a chair with violence, but, pausing not an instant for that, came running up the aisle carrying the overcoat. “You might want it after you get out into the air, Mr. Potter. I'm sure Mr. Tinker or Mr. Canby won't mind taking charge of it for you until you feel like putting it on.”

“Lord! Don't make such a fuss, Packer. Put it on me—put it on me!”

He extended his arms behind him, and was enveloped solicitously and reverently in the garment.

“Confound him!” said Potter good-humouredly, as they came out into the lobby. “It is chilly; he's usually right, the idiot!”

Turning from Broadway, at the corner, they went over to Fifth Avenue, where Potter's unconsciousness of the people who recognized and stared at him was, as usual, one of the finest things he did, either upon the stage or “off.” Superb performance as it was, it went for nothing with Stewart Canby, who did not even see it, for he walked entranced, not in a town, but through orchards in bloom.

If Wanda Malone had remained with him, clear and insistent after yesterday's impersonal vision of her at rehearsal, what was she now, when every tremulous lilt of the zither-string voice, and every little gesture of the impulsive hands, and every eager change of the glowing face, were fresh and living, in all their beautiful reality, but a matter of minutes past? He no longer resisted the bewitchment; he wanted all of it. His companions and himself were as trees walking, and when they had taken their seats at a table in the men's restaurant of a hotel where he had never been, he was not roused from his rapturous apathy even by the conduct of probably the most remarkable maitre d'hotel in the world.

“You don't git 'em!” said this personage briefly, when Potter had ordered chops and “oeufs a la creole” and lettuce salad, from a card. “You got to eat partridge and asparagus tips salad!”

And he went away, leaving the terrible Potter resigned and unrebellious.

The partridge was undeniable when it came; a stuffed man would have eaten it. But Talbot Potter and his two guests did little more than nibble it; they neither ate nor talked, and yet they looked anything but unhappy. Detached from their surroundings, as they sat over their coffee, they might have been taken to be three poetic gentlemen listening to a serenade.

After a long and apparently satisfactory silence, Talbot Potter looked at his watch, but not, as it proved, to see if it was time to return to the theatre, his ensuing action being to send a messenger to procure a fresh orchid to take the place of the one that had begun to droop a little from his buttonhold. He attached the new one with an attentive gravity shared by his companions.

“Good thing, a boutonniere,” he explained. “Lighten it up a little. Rehearsal's dry work, usually. Thinking about it last night. Why not lighten it up a little? Why shouldn't an actor dress as well for a company of strangers at a reception? Ought to make it as cheerful as we can.”

“Yes,” said Tinker, nodding. “Something in that. I believe they work better. I must say I never saw much better work than those people were doing this morning. It was a fine rehearsal.”

“It's a fine company,” Potter said warmly. “They're the best people I ever had. They're all good, every one of them, and they're putting their hearts into this play. It's the kind of work that makes me proud to be an actor. I am proud to be an actor! Is there anything better?” He touched the young playwright on the arm, a gesture that hinted affection. “Stewart Canby,” he said, “I want to tell you I think we're going to make a big thing out of this play. It's going to be the best I've ever done. It's going to be beautiful!”

From the doorway into the lobby of the hotel there came a pretty sound of girlish voices whispering and laughing excitedly, and, glancing that way, the three men beheld a group of peering nymphs who fled, delighted.

“Ladies stop to rubber at Mr. Potter,” explained the remarkable headwaiter over the star's shoulder. “Mr. Potter, it's time you got marrit, anyhow. You git marrit, you don't git stared at so much!” He paused not for a reply, but hastened away to countermand the order of another customer.

“Married,” said Potter musingly. “Well, there is such a thing as remaining a bachelor too long—even for an actor.”

“Widower, either,” assented Mr. Tinker as from a gentle reverie. “A man's never too old to get married.”

His employer looked at him somewhat disapprovingly, but said nothing; and presently the three rose, without vocal suggestion from any of them, and strolled

thoughtfully back to the theatre, pausing a moment by the way, while Tinker bought a white carnation for his buttonhole. There was a good deal, he remarked absent-mindedly, in what Mr. Potter had said about lightening up a rehearsal.

Probably there never was a more lightened-up rehearsal than that afternoon's. Potter's amiability continued;—nay, it increased: he was cordial; he was angelic; he was exalted and unprecedented. A stranger would have thought Packer the person in control; and the actors, losing their nervousness, were allowed to display not only their energy but their intelligence. The stage became a cheery workshop, where ambition flourished and kindness was the rule. For thus did the starry happiness that glowed within the beatific bosom of the little “ingenue” make Arcady around her.

At four o'clock Talbot Potter stepped to the front of the stage and lifted his hand benevolently. “That will do for to-day,” he said, facing the company. “Ladies and gentlemen, I thank you. I have never had a better rehearsal, and I think it is only your due to say you have pleased me very much, indeed. I cannot tell you how much. I feel strongly assured of our success in this play. Again I thank you. Ladies and gentlemen”—he waved his hand in dismissal—“till to-morrow morning.”

“By Joles!” old Carson Tinker muttered. “I never knew anything like it!”

“Oh—ah—Packer,” called the star, as the actors moved toward the doors. “Packer, ask Miss—Malone to wait a moment. I want—I'd like to go over a little business in the next act before tomorrow.”

“Yes, Mr. Potter?” It was she who answered, turning eagerly to him.

“In a moment, Miss Malone.” He spoke to the stage-manager in a low tone, and the latter came down into the auditorium, where Canby and Tinker had remained in their seats.

“He says for you not to wait, gentlemen. There's nothing more to do this afternoon, and he may be detained quite a time.”

The violet boutonniere and the white carnation went somewhat reluctantly up the aisle together, and, after a last glance back at the stage from the doorway, found themselves in the colder air of the lobby, a little wilted.

Bidding Tinker farewell, on the steps of the theatre, Canby walked briskly out to the Park, and there, abating his energy, paced the loneliest paths he could find until long after dark. They were not lonely for him; a radiant presence went with him through the twilight. She was all about him: in the blue brightness of the afterglow, in the haze of the meadow stretches, and in the elusive woodland scents that vanished as he caught them;—she was in the rosy vapour wreaths on

the high horizon, in the laughter of children playing somewhere in the darkness, in the twinkling of the lights that began to show—for now she was wherever a lover finds his lady, and that is everywhere. He went over and over their talk of the morning, rehearsing wonderful things he would say to her upon the morrow, and taking the liberty of suggesting replies from her even more wonderful. It was a rhapsody; he was as happy as Tom o'Bedlam.

By and by, he went to a restaurant in the Park and ordered food to be brought him. Then, after looking at it with an expression of fixed animation for half an hour, he paid for it and went home. He let himself into the boarding-house quietly, having hazy impressions that he was not popular there, also that it might be embarrassing to encounter Miss Cornish in the hall; and, after reconnoitering the stairway, went cautiously up to his room.

Three minutes later he came bounding down again, stricken white, and not caring if he encountered the devil. On his table he had found a package—the complete manuscript of “Roderick Hanscom” and this scrawl:

Canby,

I can't produce your play—everything off.

Y'rs,

Tal't P'r.

XI

Carson Tinker was in the elevator at the Pantheon, and the operator was closing the door thereof, about to ascend, but delayed upon a sound of running footsteps and a call of “Up!” Stewart Canby plunged into the cage; his hat, clutched in his hand, disclosing emphatically that he had been at his hair again.

“What's he mean?” he demanded fiercely. “What have I done?”

“What's the matter?” inquired the calm Tinker.

“What's he called it off for?”

“Called what off?”

“The play! My play!”

“I don't know what you're talking about. I haven't seen him since rehearsal. His Japanese boy called me on the telephone a little while ago and told me he wanted to see me.”

“He did?” cried the distracted Canby. “The Japanese boy wanted to see—”

“No,” Tinker corrected. “He did.”

“And you haven't heard—”

“Twelfth,” urged the operator, having opened the door. “Twelfth, if you please, gentlemen.”

“I haven't heard anything to cause excitement,” said Tinker, stepping out. “I haven't heard anything at all.” He pressed the tiny disc beside the door of Potter's apartment. “What's upset you?”

With a pathetic gesture Canby handed him Potter's note. “What have I done? What does he think I've done to him?”

Tinker read the note and shook his head. “The Lord knows! You see he's all moods, and they change—they change any time. He knows his business, but you can't count on him. He's liable to do anything—anything at all.”

“But what reason—”

The Japanese boy, Sato, stood bobbing in the doorway.

“Mis' Potter kassee,” he said courteously. “Ve'y so'y Mis' Potter kassee nobody.”

“Can't see us?” said Tinker. “Yes, he can. You telephoned me that he wanted

to see me, not over a quarter of an hour ago.”

Sato beamed upon him enthusiastically. “Yisso, yisso! See Mis' Tinker, yisso! You come in, Mis' Tinker. Ve'y so'y. Mis' Potter kassee nobody.”

“You mean he'll see Mister Tinker but won't see anybody else?” cried the playwright.

“Yisso,” said Sato, delighted. “Ve'y so'y. Mis' Potter kassee nobody.”

“I will see him. I—”

“Wait. It's all right,” Tinker reassured him soothingly. “It's all right, Sato. You go and tell Mr. Potter that I'm here and Mr. Canby came with me.”

“Yisso.” Sato stood back from the door obediently, and they passed into the hall. “You sidowm, please.”

“Tell him we're waiting in here,” said Tinker, leading the way into the cream-coloured salon.

“Yisso.” Sato disappeared.

The pretty room was exquisitely cheerful, a coal fire burning rosily in the neat little grate, but for its effect upon Canby it might have been a dentist's anteroom. He was unable to sit, and began to pace up and down, shampooing himself with both hands.

“I've racked my brains every step of the way here,” he groaned. “All I could think of was that possibly I've unconsciously paralleled some other play that I never saw. Maybe someone's told him about a plot like mine. Such things must happen—they do happen, of course—because all plots are old. But I can't believe my treatment of it could be so like—”

“I don't think it's that,” said Tinker. “It's never anything you expect—with him.”

“Well, what else can it be?” the playwright demanded. “I haven't done anything to offend him. What have I done that he should—”

“You'd better sit down,” the manager advised him. “Going plumb crazy never helped anything yet that I know of.”

“But, good heavens! How can I—”

“Sh!” whispered Tinker.

A tragic figure made its appearance upon the threshold of the inner doorway: Potter, his face set with epic woe, gloom burning in his eyes like the green fire in a tripod at a funeral of state. His plastic hair hung damp and irregular over his white brow—a wreath upon a tombstone in the rain—and his garment, from

throat to ankle, was a dressing-gown of dead black, embroidered in purple; soiled, magnificent, awful. Beneath its midnight border were his bare ankles, final testimony to his desperate condition, for only in ultimate despair does a suffering man remove his trousers. The feet themselves were distractedly not of the tableau, being immersed in bedroom shoes of gay white fur shaped in a Romeo pattern; but this was the grimmest touch of all—the merry song of mad Ophelia.

“Mr. Potter!” the playwright began, “I—”

Potter turned without a word and disappeared into the room whence he came.

“Mr. Potter!” Canby started to follow. “Mr. Pot—”

“Sh!” whispered Tinker.

Potter appeared again upon the threshold In one hand he held a large goblet; in the other a bottle of Bourbon whiskey, just opened. With solemn tread he approached a delicate table, set the goblet upon it, and lifted the bottle high above.

“I am in no condition to talk to anybody,” he said hoarsely. “I am about to take my first drink of spirits in five years.”

And he tilted the bottle. The liquor clucked and guggled, plashed into the goblet, and splashed upon the table; but when he set the bottle down the glass was full to its capacious brim, and looked, upon the little “Louis Sixteenth” table, like a sot at the Trianon. Potter stepped back and pointed to it majestically.

“That,” he said, “is the size of the drink I am about to take!”

“Mr. Potter,” said Canby hotly, “will you tell me what's the matter with my play? Haven't I made every change you suggested? Haven't—”

Potter tossed his arms above his head and flung himself full length upon the chaise lounge.

“STOP it!” he shouted. “I won't be pestered. I won't! Nothing's the matter with your play!”

“Then what—”

Potter swung himself round to a sitting position and hammered with his open palm upon his knee for emphasis: “Nothing's the matter with it, I tell you! I simply won't play it!”

“Why not?”

“I simply won't play it! I don't like it!”

The playwright dropped into a chair, open-mouthed. “Will you tell me why

you ever accepted it?”

“I don't like any play! I hate 'em all! I'm through with 'em all! I'm through with the whole business! 'Show-business!' Faugh!”

Old Tinker regarded him thoughtfully, then inquired: “Gone back on it?”

“I tell you I'm going to buy a farm!” He sprang up, went to the mantel and struck it a startling blow with his fist, which appeared to calm him somewhat—for a moment. “I've been thinking of it for a long time. I ought never to have been in this business at all, and I'm going to live in the country. Oh, I'm in my right mind!” He paused to glare indignantly in response to old Tinker's steady gaze. “Of course you think 'something's happened' to upset me. Well, nothing has. Nothing of the slightest consequence has occurred since I saw you at rehearsal. Can't a man be allowed to think? I just came home here and got to thinking of the kind of life I lead—and I decided that I'm tired of it. And I'm not going to lead it any longer. That's all.”

“Ah,” said Tinker quietly. “Nerves.”

Talbot Potter appealed to the universe with a passionate gesture. “Nerves!” he cried bitterly. “Yes, that's what they say when an actor dares to think. 'Go on! Play your part! Be a marionette forever!' That's what you tell us! 'Slave for your living, you sordid little puppet! Squirm and sweat and strut, but don't you ever dare to think!' You tell us that because you know if we ever did stop to think for one instant about ourselves you wouldn't have any actors! Actors! Faugh! What do we get, I ask you?”

He strode close to Tinker and shook a frantic forefinger within a foot of the quiet old fellow's face.

“What do I get?” he demanded, passionately. “Do you think it means anything to me that some fat old woman sees me making love to a sawdust actress at a matinee and then goes home and hates her fat old husband across the dinner-table?”

He returned to the fireplace, seeming appeased, at least infinitesimally, by this thought. “There wouldn't even be that, except for the mystery. It's only because I'm mysterious to them—the way a man always thinks the girl he doesn't know is prettier than the one he's with. What's that got to do with acting? What is acting, anyhow?” His voice rose passionately again. “I'll tell you one thing it is: It's the most sordid profession in this devilish world!”

He strode to the centre of the room. “It's at the bottom—in the muck! That's where it is. And it ought to be! What am I, out there on that silly platform they call a stage? A fool, that's all, making faces, and pretending to be somebody with

another name, for two dollars! A monkey-on-a-stick for the children! Of course the world despises us! Why shouldn't it? It calls us mummers and mountebanks, and that's what we are! Buffoons! We aren't men and women at all—we're strolling players! We're gypsies! One of us marries a broker's daughter and her relatives say she's married 'a damned actor!' That's what they say—'a damned actor!' Great heavens, Tinker, can't a man get tired of being called a 'damned actor' without your making all this uproar over it—squalling 'nerves' in my face till I wish I was dead and done with it!”

He went back to the fireplace again, but omitted another dolorous stroke upon the mantel. “And look at the women in the profession,” he continued, as he turned to face his visitors. “My soul! Look at them! Nothing but sawdust—sawdust—sawdust! Do you expect to go on acting with sawdust? Making sawdust love with sawdust? Sawdust, I tell you! Sawdust—sawdust—saw—”

“Oh, no,” said Tinker easily. “Not all. Not by any means. No.”

“Show me one that isn't sawdust!” the tragedian cried fiercely. “Show me just one!”

“We-ll,” said Tinker with extraordinary deliberation, “to start near home: Wanda Malone.”

Potter burst into terrible laughter. “All sawdust! That's why I discharged her this afternoon.”

“You what?” Canby shouted incredulously.

“I dismissed her from my company,” said Potter with a startling change to icy calmness. “I dismissed her from my company this afternoon.”

Old Tinker leaned forward. “You didn't!”

Potter's iciness increased. “Shall I repeat it? I was obliged to dismiss Miss Wanda Malone from my company, this afternoon, after rehearsal.”

“Why?” Canby gasped.

“Because,” said Potter, with the same calmness, “she has an utterly commonplace mind.”

Canby rose in agitation, quite unable, for that moment, to speak; but Tinker, still leaning forward, gazing intently at the face of the actor, made a low, long-drawn sound of wonder and affirmation, the slow exclamation of a man comprehending what amazes him. “So that's it!”

“Besides being intensely ordinary,” said Potter, with superiority, “I discovered that she is deceitful. That had nothing whatever to do with my decision to leave the stage.” He whirled upon Tinker suddenly, and shouted: “No matter what you

think!”

“No,” said Tinker. “No matter.”

Potter laughed. “Talbot Potter leaves the stage because a little 'ingenue' understudy tries to break the rules of his company! Likely, isn't it?”

“Looks so,” said old Tinker.

“Does it?” retorted Potter with rising fury. “Then I'll tell you, since you seem not to know it, that I'm not going to leave the stage! Can't a man give vent to his feelings once in his life without being caught up and held to it by every old school-teacher that's stumbled into the 'show-business' by mistake! We're going right on with this play, I tell you; we rehearse it to-morrow morning just the same as if this hadn't happened. Only there will be a new 'ingenue' in Miss Malone's place. People can't break iron rules in my company. Maybe they could in Mounet-Sully's, but they can't in mine!”

“What rule did she break?” Canby's voice was unsteady. “What rule?”

“Yes,” Tinker urged. “Tell us what it was.”

“After rehearsal,” the star began with dignity, “I was—I—” He paused. “I was disappointed in her.”

“Ye-es?” drawled Tinker encouragingly.

Potter sent him a vicious glance, but continued: “I had hopes of her intelligence—as an actress. She seemed to have, also, a fairly attractive personality. I felt some little—ah, interest in her, personally. There is something about her that—” Again he paused. “I talked to her—about her part—at length; and finally I—ah—said I should be glad to walk home with her, as it was after dark. She said no, she wouldn't let me take so much trouble, because she lived almost at the other end of Brooklyn. It seemed to me that—ah, she is very young—you both probably noticed that—so I said I would—that is, I offered to drive her home in a taxicab. She thanked me, but said she couldn't. She kept saying that she was sorry, but she couldn't. It seemed very peculiar, and, in fact, I insisted. I asked her if she objected to me as an escort, and she said, 'Oh, no!' and got more and more embarrassed. I wanted to know what was the matter and why she couldn't seem to like—that is, I talked very kindly to her, very kindly indeed. Nobody could have been kinder!” He cleared his throat loudly and firmly, with an angry look at Tinker. “I say nobody could have been kinder to an obscure member of the company that I was to Miss Malone. But I was decided. That's all. That's all there was to it. I was merely kind. That's all.” He waved his hand as in dismissal of the subject.

“All?” repeated Canby. “All? You haven't—”

“Oh, yes.” Potter seemed surprised at his own omission. “Oh, yes. Right in the midst of—of what I was saying—she blurted out that she couldn't let me take her home, because 'Lancelot' was waiting for her at a corner drug-store.”

“Lancelot!” There was a catch of dismay in Canby's outcry.

“That's what I said, 'Lancelot'!” cried Potter, more desolately than he intended. “It seems they've been meeting after rehearsal, in their damn corner drug-store. Lancelot!” His voice rose in fury. “If I'd known I had a man named Lancelot in my company I'd have discharged him long ago! If I'd known it was his name I'd have shot him. 'Lancelot!' He came sneaking in there just after she'd blundered it all out to me. Got uneasy because she didn't come, and came to see what was the matter. Naturally, I discharged them both, on the spot! I've never had a rule of my company broken yet—and I never will! He didn't say a word. He didn't dare.”

“Who?” shouted Canby and old Tinker together.

“Lancelot!” said Potter savagely.

“Who?”

“Packer! His first name's Lancelot, the hypocrite! L. Smith Packer! She's Mrs. Packer! They were married two days before rehearsals began. She's Mrs. L. Smith Packer!”

XII

As the sound of the furious voice stopped short, there fell a stricken silence upon these three men.

Old Carson Tinker's gaze drifted downward from his employer's face. He sat, then, gazing into the rosy little fire until something upon the lapel of his coat caught his attention—a wilted and disreputable carnation. He threw it into the fire; and, with a sombre satisfaction, watched it sizzle. This brief pleasure ended, he became expressionless and relapsed into complete mummification.

Potter cleared his throat several times, and as many times seemed about to speak, and did not; but finally, hearing a murmur from the old man gazing at the fire, he requested to be informed of its nature.

“What?” Tinker asked, feebly.

“I said: 'What are you mumbling about?'”

“Nothing.”

“What was it you said?”

“I said it was the bride-look,” said the old man gently. “That's what it was about her—the bride-look.”

“The bride-look!”

It was a word that went deep into the mourning heart of the playwright. “The bride-look!” That was it: the bride's happiness!

“She had more than that,” said Potter peevishly, but, if the others had noticed it his voice shook. “She could act! And I don't know how the devil to get along without that hypocrite. Just like her to marry the first regular man that asked her!”

Then young Stewart Canby had a vision of a room in a boarding-house far over in Brooklyn, and of two poor, brave young people there, and of a loss more actual than his own—a vision of a hard-working, careworn, stalwart Packer trying to comfort a weeping little bride who had lost her chance—the one chance —“that might never have come!”

Something leaped into generous life within him.

“I think I was almost going to ask her to marry me, to-morrow,” he said, turning to Talbot Potter. “But I'm glad Packer's the man. For years he's been a kind of nurse for you, Mr. Potter. And that's what she needs—a nurse—because she's a genius, too. And it will all be wasted if she doesn't get her chance!”

“Are you asking me to take her back?” Potter cried fiercely. “Do you think I'll break one of my iron—”

“We couldn't all have married her!” said the playwright with a fine inspiration. “But if you take her back we can all see her—every day!”

The actor gazed upon him sternly, but with sensitive lips beginning to quiver. He spoke uncertainly.

“Well,” he began. “I'm no stubborn Frenchman—”

“Do it!” cried Canby.

Then Potter's expression changed; he looked queer.

He clapped his hands loudly;—Sato appeared.

“Sato, take that stuff out.” He pointed to the untouched whiskey. “Order supper at ten o'clock—for five people. Champagne. Orchids. Get me a taxicab in half an hour.”

“Yisso!”

Tinker rose, astounded. “Taxicab? Where you—”

“To Brooklyn!” shouted Potter with shining eyes. “She'll drive with me if I bring them both, I guess, won't she?”

He began to sing:

“For to-night we'll merry, merry be!
For to-night we'll merry, merry be—”

Leaping uproariously upon the aged Tinker, he caught him by the waist and waltzed him round and round the room.

THE END

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