

my wallet. I snuggled over to my side of the carriage. The newspapers were teeming with stories of new bucco games, and this might be one of the classics of getting rich quick on other people's money. I slyly buttoned up my coat. Anyhow, it was chilly.

On, on we rolled; light after light flashed into the window, gloom followed gloom.

More than a thousand dollars was a large sum for an author to be carrying about; and if the exploit turned out to be a police affair I might be seriously questioned as to how an author came by so large a sum. Yet, as I thought of her necklace, I felt my cheeks grow red with shame. It's so hard to doubt a beautiful young woman! Still, the jewels might not be real. There were many false gems in New York, animate and inanimate. If her jewels were genuine, two years' royalties would not have purchased the pear-shaped pearl pendant that gleamed at her throat. If she really was an adventuress, she was of a new type, and worth studying from the dramatist's point of view. Had she really mistaken me? Quite accidentally I touched her cloak. It was of Persian lamb. Hang it, adventuresses didn't go around in Persian lamb: not in New York. Ha! I had it. I would find out what she was.

I leaned over quickly and kissed her cheek. There was not a sound, only I felt her shudder. She wiped with her handkerchief the spot my lips had touched. I was a cad and a wretch. When she did speak her tones were even and low.

"I did not quite believe that of you," "I could not help it!" I declared, ready to confess that I was an imposter; and as I look back I know that I told the truth when I said that I could not help it. I didn't care where the carriage went, nor what the end would be.

"And I trusted you!" The reproach was genuine.

I had nothing to say. My edifice of suspicions had suddenly tumbled about my ears.

"I am sorry; I have acted like a cad. I am one," I said finally.

"I was helpless. One after another the men we trust fail us."

"Madam, I am a wretch. I am not the gentleman you have taken me to be. I have had the misfortune to resemble another gentleman."

"I never saw you before in all my life, nor any person that resembles you."

I gasped. This was what the old dramatists called a thunderbolt from heaven. I felt for my wallet; it was still in my pocket. Inconsistently I grew angry.

"Then, what the devil—!"

"Do not add profanity to ill-manners," she interposed. "Perhaps I have no right to complain. There is the door, sir; you have but to press the button, stop the driver, and get out. I am in a terribly embarrassing position to-night, one which my own folly has brought me to. It was absolutely necessary that a gentleman should accompany me in this carriage to my destination. When you came forth from your club—the only club the exact location of which I am familiar with—you appeared to be a gentleman, one I could trust to accompany me. To attract your attention, and at the same time arouse your curiosity, I had to resort to equivocal methods. It is an adventure, sir. Will you see it to the end, or shall I press the button?"

"Permit me to ask a question or two?" I was mightily confused at the turn of things.

"Perfect confidence in me, or I shall open the door."

"In any other city but New York—"

"Yes or no!" imperiously.

"Hang it, madam!"

Her hand went out toward the electric button.

"To the end of the world, and no questions asked."

Her hand dropped. "Thank you," gently.

"Curiosity is something we can't help; otherwise I should not be here, ass that I am. Chivalry isn't all dead. If you are in trouble, depend upon me; only I must be back in New York by to-morrow night."

"You will not leave the city. You have no fear?"

"I should not be here else."

"Oh, but you must be imagining all sorts of terrible things."

"I am doing some thinking, I'll admit. How easily a woman can make a fool of a man!"

"Sometimes."

"I am a shining example. How you must have laughed at me! A pretty woman has more power over a man's

destiny than all the signs of the Zodiac put together. And it's natural that he should want to kiss her. Isn't it?"

"I am not a man."

"A saint would have tripped. Put yourself in my place—"

"Thank you; I am perfectly satisfied."

"A beautiful woman asks me to enter her carriage—"

"And, thinking that I had mistaken you for some one I knew, you kissed me!" derisively.

"I wished to learn where I stood in your affections."

"A very interesting method of procedure!"

"And when I touched your hand you acted as if mine had stung you."

"It did."

"There's no getting around that," resignedly. "Shall I tell you frankly what I at one time took you to be?"

"If it will relieve your mind."

"Well, I believed you to be some classic adventuress."

"And you are sure that I am not?"

"Positive now. You see, I have considerable money on my person."

"Wouldn't it be wise for you to hand it over to some policeman to keep for you till to-morrow? Do not take any unnecessary risks. You do not dream into what I am leading you."

The carriage suddenly stopped.

"The journey is at an end," she said.

"So soon."

A moment later the door opened, and I stepped out to assist her to alight. She waved me aside. We stood in front of some millionaire's palace. It was golden with illumination. Was it a wedding and was I to be a witness? Or was some one making his will? Perhaps it was only a ball or a reception. I stopped my cogitations. What was the use of asking myself questions? I should soon know all.

"Follow me," she said, as she lightly mounted the steps.

I followed. . . . Here, in New York, the most unromantic city in all the wide world! I was suddenly seized with nervousness and a partial failure of the cardiac organs to perform their usual functions.

She turned to me. "There is yet time."

"Time for what?"

"Time to run."

"There was a moment. . . . Lead on," quietly. I thought of the young man with the cream tarts.

She touched a bell, and the door opened, admitting us into the hall. A servant took our belongings.

"Dinner is served, miss," said the servant, eyeing me curiously, even suspiciously.

It appeared that I was to dine! What the deuce did it all mean? A dinner at supper-time! A very distressing thought flashed through my mind. Supposing she had known me all along, and had lured me here to witness some amateur performance. I shuddered. I flattered myself. There was no amateur performance, as presently you shall see. I followed her into the dining-room. Fortunately I was in evening dress. I should at least be presentable, and as cool as any man in the room. Comedy or tragedy, or whatever it was going to be, I determined to show that I had good blood in me, even though I had been played for a fool.

Around a table covered with exquisite linen, silver, and glass, sat a party of elegantly-dressed men and women. At the sight of us the guests rose confusedly and made towards us with shouts of laughter, inquiry, and admiration. They gathered round my companion and plied her with a hundred questions, occasionally stealing a glance at me. I saw at once that I stood among a party of ultra-smart people. Somehow I felt that I represented a part in their mad pastimes.

"Where did you find him?" cried one.

"Was it difficult?" asked another.

"I'll wager he didn't need much urging!" roared a gentleman with a rubicund nose.

"He is positively good-looking!" said one woman, eyeing me boldly.

I bowed ironically, and she looked at her neighbour as if to say: "Why, the animal understands what I say!"

"My friends," said the girl, waving her hand toward me, "I have paid my delectable forfeit." Her tones did not bespeak any particular enjoyment.

A wager! I stood alone, my face burning with chagrin. I could feel my ears growing, like the very ass that I was. A wager!

"To table!" cried the gentleman with

rubicund nose. Evidently he was host. "We must have the story in full. It certainly must be worth telling. The girl has brought home a gentleman, I'm hanged!"

The guests resumed their chairs noisily.

The girl faced me, and for a space it was a battle of the eyes.

"Will you do me the honour?" she said half-mockingly, nodding toward the only vacant chairs at the table.

"Would it not be wise for me to go at once?" I asked quietly.

"If you do not sit at the table with me I lose. But please yourself," wearily. "It has all been very distasteful to me."

"I will stay to the bitter end. My conceit and assurance need a drubbing." I offered her my arm. All eyes were centred upon us. She hesitated. "We might as well go through this ordeal in a proper spirit and manner," I said. I rather believe I puzzled her.

She flushed slightly, but laid her hand on my arm, and together we walked over to the vacant chairs and sat down. The laughter and hum of voices ceased instantly.

In faith, I was becoming amused. They were going to have their fun with me; well, two could play at that game.

II.

The host rose, and, leaning on his finger-tips, he addressed me: "Sir, all this doubtless strikes you as rather extraordinary."

"Very extraordinary," I replied.

"To dine under such circumstances is not accorded to every man."

"To which do you refer: the honour or the modus operandi?"

"Both. Now, an explanation is due you."

"So I observe," gravely.

"The pleasure is mine. To begin with, permit me to introduce you to my guests." One by one he named them, the ladies and gentlemen. I had heard of them all. Money had made them famous. "As for myself, I am Daniel Ainsworth; this is my home. I dare say that you have heard of me."

"I have won money on your horses, sir," with all the gravity of expression I found possible to assume.

My remark was greeted with laughter. My host, composing his lips, resumed. "And now, sir, whom have I the honour to address?"

"I am the author of many a famous poem," tranquilly.

"Ah!"

"Yes; Anonymous, Sir, my name would mean nothing to you or your guests; I am poor."

There was a note of admiration in the girl's eyes as she turned her head.

"Besides," I went on, "I want a little revenge."

"Good!" bawled my host; "good! You're a man of kidney, sir. A gentleman is always a gentleman; and I do not need to look at you twice, sir, to note that my niece's choice has been a happy one."

"You have not introduced me to your niece," said I, "who is, next to myself, the most important guest at the table."

"Hang me! The young lady at your side is Miss Helen Berkeley, the best horsewoman in the State, if I do say so myself."

Great applause, as they say in the press gallery. I looked squarely at the girl, but she was busy turning round her empty wineglass.

"I appreciate the honour, sir," I said: "but now will you favour me with the modus operandi, or, to be particular, the reason of all this mystery?"

"I approach that at once. This is leap year, as you will recollect. On January 1st I gave a leap-year party, and in the spirit of fun each lady present declared her intention of bringing to a series of late dinners a gentleman whom none of us knew, either by sight or by reputation. He was to be lured into a carriage by some story or other, and was not to know the true state of things till he sat at the table. My niece was the last on the list. Those who backed down were to give a house-party of a week's length. Women detest house-parties, and that is the one reason why this comedy has gone down the line without a failure. This is the eighth dinner. Each lady present has fulfilled her obligation to the year. We have had some curious specimens of humanity: a barber, a mild lunatic, a detective who thought he was on the trail of some terrible crime, an actor, a political reformer, and an English

groom who palmed himself off as a lord. The actor and yourself, sir, are the only men who seemed to possess any knowledge of the various uses of dinner forks."

"You haven't seen me eat yet," I interposed. All this was highly amusing to me. I was less a victim than a spectator.

"You will do us the honour of permitting us to criticise your knowledge of the forks," laughed Ainsworth. "Now, Nell, tell us how you lured Mr Anonymous into your carriage."

Very quietly she recounted the tale. She omitted but one incident.

"In front of a chub!" cried the ladies unison. "Why in the world didn't we think of that?"

"Miss Berkeley has omitted one thing," said I, maliciously.

"And, pray, what?" asked Miss Berkeley's uncle.

"Remember," she whispered, "you are supposed to be a gentleman."

I took umbrage at the word "supposed."

"Miss Berkeley must tell you what she has omitted in the course of her narrative."

"And I refuse to tell."

"Hang it, Nell, I'll wager Mr Anonymous kissed you!" cried her uncle.

"Caught!" cried one of the ladies.

"Allow me a word," I interposed. I was already sorry. "There was a method in my action which must not be misconstrued. I believed, for a moment, that Miss Berkeley might be a new species of bucco-steerer. If she objected noisily to my salute I should find my case proved: if she cried I was wrong."

"And?"

"She did neither. She rubbed her cheek."

"I'll warrant!" my host bawled. "Oh, this is rich, rich! A bucco-steerer!"

"Miss Berkeley," I whispered, "we are quits."

"Not yet," ominously.

It was almost time for me to go. "I was going to ask your pardon," said the uncle in his hunter-voice; "but I think that you have been paid for your trouble. Is there anything you would like?"

"Three things, sir."

"And these?" he asked, while every one looked curiously at me. I was still an unknown quantity.

"My hat, my coat, and the way to the door, for I presume that you have no further use for me."

My reply appened to the guests as monstrous funny. It was some time ere the laughter subsided. My host seemed threatened with an attack of apoplexy.

"My dear sir," said he, "I beg of you to remain, not as a source of our merriment, but as the chief guest of honour. I believe you have won that place."

I turned to Miss Berkeley. "Do you bid me remain?"

"Silence."

I placed my hand on the back of my chair, preparatory to sliding it from under me. She stayed me.

"Do not go," lowly. "I haven't had my revenge."

I sat down. I was curious to learn what colour this revenge was going to take. "Mr Ainsworth, my compliments!" raising my glass, being very careful not to touch the contents.

"Bully!" cried my host, thumping the table with his fist. "James, a dozen bottles of '96. There's a gentleman," nodding to those nearest him; "you can tell 'em a mile off. A little shy of strangers," humorously falling into horse-talk. "but he's money coming down the home-stretch."

Then everybody began to talk at once, and I knew that the dinner proper was on the way.

"Aren't you just a little above such escapades as this?" I asked of the girl.

"Do not make me any more uncomfortable than I am," she begged. "But having gone into it I had too much courage to back down."

"The true courage would have been to give the house-party."

"But men always insist upon your marrying them at house-parties."

"I see I have much to learn," meekly. "And the men are right."

"What an escape I have had!"

"Meaning house-parties, or that I am a gentleman?"

"If you had not been a gentleman! For, of course, you are, since my uncle