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LEROY SCOTT

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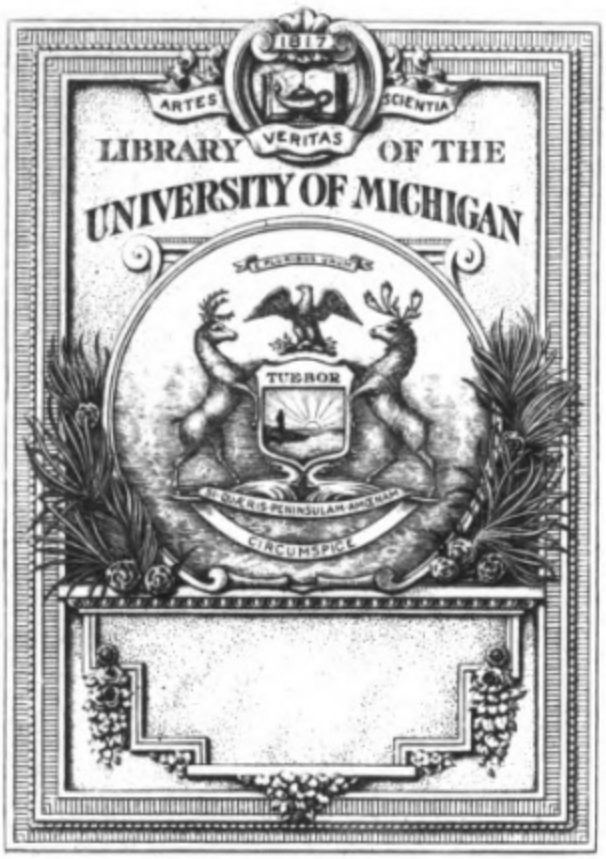

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No. 13 WASHINGTON SQUARE

By Leroy Scott

AUTHOR OF 'COUNSEL FOR THE DEFENSE'
'TO HIM THAT HATH,' 'THE WALKING DELEGATE'
AND 'THE SHEARS OF DESTINY'

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS BY
IRMA DÉRÈMEAUX

DAN-AMERICA ARCHIVES SOCIETY
AALBORG DENMARK

Boston and New York
Houghton Mifflin Company
The Riverside Press Cambridge
1914

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Published June 1914

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Nº 13

WASHINGTON SQUARE

CHAPTER I

THE GREAT MRS. DE PEYSTER

IT was a raw, ill-humored afternoon, yet too late in the spring for the ministration of steam heat, so the unseasonable May chill was banished from Mrs. De Peyster's sitting-room by a wood fire that crackled in the grate; crackled most decorously, be it added, for Mrs. De Peyster's fire would no more have forgotten itself and shown a boisterous enthusiasm than would one of her admirably trained servants. Beside a small steel safe, whose outer shell of exquisite cabinet-work transformed that fortress against burglarious desire into an article of furniture that harmonized with the comfortable elegance of a lady's boudoir, sat Mrs. De Peyster herself — she was born a De Peyster — carefully transferring her jewels from the trays of the safe to leathern cases. She looked quite as Mrs. De Peyster should have looked: with an aura of high dignity that a sixty-year-old dowager of the first water could not surpass, yet with a freshness of person that (had it not been for her dignity) might have made her early forties seem a blossomy thirty-five.

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Before the well-bred fire sat a lady whose tears had long since dried that she had shed when she had bid good-bye to thirty. She was — begging the lady's pardon—a trifle spare, and a trifle pale, and though in a manner well enough dressed her clothes had an air of bewilderment, of general irresolution, as though each article was uncertain in its mind as to whether it purposed to remain where it had been put, or casually wander away on blind and timorous adventures.

A dozen years before, Mrs. De Peyster, then in the fifth year of her widowhood, had graciously undertaken to manage and underwrite the début of her second cousin (not of the main line, be it said) and had tried to discharge her duty in the important matter of securing her a husband. But her efforts had been futile, and to say that Mrs. De Peyster had not succeeded was to admit that poor Olivetta Harmon was indeed a failure. She had lacked the fortune to attract the conservative investor who is looking for a sound business proposition in her he promises to support; she had lacked the good looks to lure on the lover who throws himself romantically away upon a penniless pretty face; and she had not been clever enough to attract the man so irrationally bold as to set sail upon the sea of matrimony with a woman of brains. And so, her brief summer at an end, she had receded to those remote and undiscovered shores on which dwell the poor relations of the Four Hundred; whereon she had lived respect-

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ably, as a lady (for that she should ever appear a lady was due the position of Mrs. De Peyster), upon an almost microscopic income; and from which bleak and distant land of second-cousindom she came in glad and proud obedience to fill an occasional vacant place at one of Mrs. De Peyster's second-best dinner parties.

She had arrived but the moment before to bid her exalted cousin adieu and wish her *bon-voyage*, and was now silently gazing in unenvious admiration at the jewels Mrs. De Peyster was transferring to their traveling-cases — with never a guess that perturbation might exist beneath her kinswoman's composed exterior. As a matter of fact, under the trying circumstances which confronted Mrs. De Peyster, any other household would have been in confusion, any lesser woman might have been headed toward hysteria. But centuries of having had its own will had established the De Peyster habit of believing that things would eventuate according to the De Peyster wish; it was not in the De Peyster blood to give way. And yet, though self-control might restrain worry from the surface, it could not banish it from the private chambers of her being.

Mrs. De Peyster glanced at the open door of her bedroom — hesitated — then called: "Miss Gardner!"

A trim and pretty girl stepped in. "Yes, Mrs. De Peyster."

"Will you please call up Judge Harvey's office

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once more, and inquire if there is any news about my son. And ask when Judge Harvey will be here."

Miss Gardner crossed to Mrs. De Peyster's desk and took up the telephone.

"Why, Cousin Caroline, has Jack —"

"One moment, Olivetta," — motioning toward the telephone, — "until Miss Gardner is through."

They sat silent until the receiver was hung up. Mrs. De Peyster strove to keep anxiety from her voice.

"Well, Miss Gardner, — any trace of my son yet?"

"They have learned nothing whatever."

"And — and Judge Harvey? When will he be here?"

"His office said he was at a meeting of the directors of the New York and New England Railroad, and that he was coming here straight after the meeting."

"Thank you, Miss Gardner. You may now go on with the packing. I'll have the jewels ready very shortly, and Matilda will be in to help you as soon as she is through arranging with the servants."

"Why, Cousin Caroline, what is it about Jack?" burst out Olivetta with an excited flutter after Miss Gardner had gone into the bedroom. "I had n't heard anything of it before! Has — has anything happened to him?"

Olivetta, an intimate, a relative, and a worshipful inferior, was one of the few persons with whom Mrs.

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De Peyster could bring herself to unbend and be confidential. "That is what I do not know. About a week ago Jack suddenly disappeared —"

"Disappeared!"

"Oh, he left a note, telling me not to worry. But not a word has been heard from him since. Of course, it may only be some wild escapade, but then he knew we were going on shipboard this evening, and he should have been home long before this."

"How terrible!" cried the sympathetic Olivetta, pushing into place a few of the inconstant hairpins that threatened to bestrew the floor. "Went a week ago!" And then suddenly: "Why, that was about the time that first rumor was printed of his engagement to Ethel Quintard. And again this morning — in the 'Record' — did you see it?"

"I never give thought to the newspapers," was Mrs. De Peyster's somewhat stiff response.

"You have — have told the police?"

"The police, of course not! But I have advised with Judge Harvey, and he has a firm of private detectives on the case."

"And they have clues?"

"They have nothing, as you just heard Miss Gardner report."

"Cousin Caroline! With all these — these thugs and hold-up men we read about — and all the accidents —"

"Olivetta! Don't!" And then in a more composed voice: "I am hoping it is merely some boyish

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prank. But even that will be bad enough, if he misses the boat."

"Yes, I see. You told me about arranging with Mrs. Quintard also to sail on the Plutonia."

"I had counted on the trip — Jack and Ethel being thrown together, you know."

"Indeed, it was very clever of you!"

"I am hoping it may be only some boyish prank," Mrs. De Peyster repeated. "You may not have noticed it, Olivetta;" she continued, permitting a sigh to escape her, "but of late Jack has acted at times — well, rather queerly."

"Queerly! How?"

"He has been far from being himself. In fact, I have observed a number of things not at all natural to a De Peyster."

"Caroline! What a worry he must be to you!"

"Yes. But I am hoping for the best. And now, please, we will say no more about it."

They were silent for a moment. Miss Gardner entered, took the jewels which in the mean time Mrs. De Peyster had finished putting in their cases, and went again into the bedroom. Olivetta's eyes followed her.

"You are still pleased with Miss Gardner?"

"Thus far she has proved herself competent. I consider myself very fortunate in finding a secretary who is not above some of the duties of a lady's maid. It is a very happy combination for traveling."

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"She seems almost too good to be true," mused Olivetta. "She's really very pretty. I hope Jack has n't —"

"Olivetta! How can you! Jack has never paid her the slightest attention, nor she him."

"Pardon me, Caroline! But she's so pretty, and she's just the sort of girl who attracts men — and — and" — a bit wistfully — "gets engaged and gets married."

"Nonsense, Olivetta. When she first came to me I asked her if she were in love or engaged. She said she was not, and I told her my rules. She is a very sensible girl."

"At any rate, she must be a great relief after that Marie you had."

Mrs. De Peyster flushed, as though at some disagreeable memory.

"Have you learned yet whether Marie was actually a spy for Mrs. Allistair?" inquired Olivetta.

"She confessed that she was getting money besides the wages I paid her. That is proof enough."

"I believe it of Mrs. Allistair! She would n't stop at anything to win your place as social leader. But she could never fill it!"

"She will never win it!" Mrs. De Peyster returned with calm confidence.

At that moment the door from the hallway opened and there entered a woman of middle age, in respectable dull-hued black, with apron of black silk and a white cap.

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"Ah, Matilda," remarked Mrs. De Peyster. "The servants, are they all gone yet?"

"The last one, the cook, is just going, ma'am. There's just William and me left. And the men have already come to board up the windows and the door."

"You paid the servants board wages as I instructed, and made clear to them about coming to Newport when I send orders?"

"Yes, ma'am. And they all understand."

"Good," said Mrs. De Peyster. "You have Mr. Jack's trunks packed?"

"All except a few things he may want to put in himself."

"Very well. You may now continue helping Miss Gardner with my things."

But Matilda did not obey. She trembled — blinked her eyes — choked; then stammered: —

"Please, ma'am, there's — there's something else."

"Something else?" queried Mrs. De Peyster.

"Yes, ma'am. Downstairs there are six or seven young men from the newspapers. They want —"

"Matilda," interrupted Mrs. De Peyster in stern reproof, "you are well enough acquainted with my invariable custom regarding reporters to have acted without referring this matter to me. It is a distinct annoyance," she added, "that one cannot make a single move without the newspapers following one!"

"Indeed it is!" echoed the worshipful and indig-

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nant Olivetta. "But that is because of your position."

"I tried to send them away," said Matilda hurriedly. "And I told them you were never interviewed. But," she ended helplessly, "it did n't do any good. They're all sitting downstairs waiting."

"I shall not see them," Mrs. De Peyster declared firmly.

"There was one," Matilda added timorously, "who drew me aside and whispered that he did n't want an interview. He wants your picture."

"Wants my picture!" exclaimed Mrs. De Peyster.

"Yes, ma'am. He said the pictorial supplement of his paper a week from Sunday was going to have a page of pictures of prominent society women who were sailing for Europe. He said something about calling the page 'Annual Exodus of Social Leaders.' He wants to print that painting of you by that new foreign artist in the center of the page." And Matilda pointed above the fireplace to a gold-framed likeness of Mrs. De Peyster — stately, aloof, remote, of an ineffable composure, a masterpiece of blue-bloodedness.

"You know my invariable custom; give him my invariable answer," was Mrs. De Peyster's crisp response.

"Pardon me, but — but, Cousin Caroline," put in Olivetta, with eager diffidence, "don't you think this is different?"

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"Different?" asked Mrs. De Peyster. "How?"

"This is n't at all like the ordinary offensive newspaper thing. A group of the most prominent social leaders, with you in the center of the page — with you in the center of them all, where you belong! Why, Caroline, — why — why —" In her excitement for the just glorification of her cousin, Olivetta's power of speech went fluttering from her.

"Perhaps it may not be quite the same," admitted Mrs. De Peyster. "But I see no reason for departing from my custom."

"If not for your own sake, then — then for the artist's sake!"Olivetta pursued, a little more eagerly, and a little more of diffidence in her eagerness. "You have taken up M. Dubois — you have been his most distinguished patron — you have been trying to get him properly started. To have his picture displayed like that, think how it will help M. Dubois!"

Mrs. De Peyster gave Olivetta a sharp look, as though she questioned the entire disinterestedness of this argument; then she considered an instant; and in the main it was her human instinct to help a struggling fellow being that dictated her decision.

"Matilda, you may give the man a photograph of the picture. And as I treat the papers without discrimination, you may give photographs to all the reporters who wish them. But on the understanding that M. Dubois is to have conspicuous credit."

"Very well, ma'am."

"And send all of them away."

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"I'll do what I can, ma'am." And Matilda went out.

"What time does the Plutonia sail?" inquired Olivetta, with the haste of one who is trying to get off of very thin ice.

"At one to-night. Matilda will get me a bit of dinner and I shall go aboard right after it."

"How many times does this make that you've been over?"

"I do not know," Mrs. De Peyster answered carelessly. "Thirty or forty, I dare say."

Olivetta's face was wistful with unenvious envy. "Oh, what a pleasure!"

"Going to Europe, Olivetta, is hardly a pleasure," corrected Mrs. De Peyster. "It is a duty one owes one's social position."

"Yes, I know that's true with you, Cousin Caroline. But with me — what a joy! When you took me over with you that summer, we only did the watering-places. But now" — a note of ecstatic desire came into her voice, and she clasped her hands — "but now, to see Paris! — the Louvre! — the Luxembourg! It's the dream of my life!"

Mrs. De Peyster again gave her cousin a suspicious look.

"Olivetta, have you been allowing M. Dubois to pay you any more attention?"

"No, no, — of course not," cried Olivetta, and a sudden color tinted the too-early autumn of her cheeks. "Do you think, after what you said —"

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"M. Dubois is a very good artist, but —"

"I understand, Cousin Caroline," Olivetta put in hastily. "I think too much of your position to think of such a thing. Since you — since then — I have not spoken to him, and have only bowed to him once."

"We will say no more about it," returned Mrs. De Peyster; and she kissed Olivetta with her duchess-like kindness. "By the by, my dear, your comb is on the floor."

"So it is. It's always falling out."

Olivetta picked it up, put it into place, and with nervous hands tried to press into order loose-flying locks of her rather scanty hair.

Mrs. De Peyster arose; her worry about her missing son prompted her to seek the relief of movement. "I think I shall take a turn about the house to see that everything is being properly closed. Would you like to come with me?"

Olivetta would; and, talking, they went together down the stairs. As they neared the ground floor, Matilda's voice arose to them, expostulating, protesting.

"What can that be about?" wondered Mrs. De Peyster, and following the voice toward its source she stepped into her reception-room. Instantly there sprang up and stood before her a young man with the bland, smiling, excessively polite manner of a gentleman-brigand. And around her crowded five or six other figures.

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Matilda, pressing through them, glared at these invaders in helpless wrath, then at her mistress in guilty terror.

"I — I did my best, ma'am. But they would n't go." And before punishment could fall she discreetly fled.

"Pardon this seeming intrusion, Mrs. De Peyster," the foremost young man said rapidly, smoothly, appeasingly. "But we could not go, as you requested. The sailing of Mrs. De Peyster, under the attendant circumstances, is a piece of news of first importance; in fact, almost a national event. We simply had to see you. I trust you perceive and appreciate our professional predicament."

Mrs. De Peyster was glaring at him with devastating majesty.

"This — this is an outrage!"

"Perhaps it may seem an outrage to you," said the young man swiftly, politely, and thoroughly undevastated. "But, really, it is only our duty. Our duty to our papers, and to the great reading public. And when newspaper men are doing their duty they must necessarily fail, to their great personal regret, in the observance of some of the nicer courtesies."

Mrs. De Peyster was almost inarticulate.

"Who — who are you?"

"Mayfair is my name. Of the 'Record.'"

"The 'Record'! That yellow, radical paper!"

Mr. Mayfair stepped nearer. His voice sank to an easy, confidential tone.

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"You are misled by appearances, Mrs. De Peyster. Every paper has got to have a policy; we're the common people's paper — big circulation, you know; and we so denounce the rich on our editorial page. But as a matter of fact we give our readers more live, entertaining, and respectful matter about society people than any other paper in New York. It's just what the common people love. And now" — easily shifting his base — "about this reported engagement of your son and Miss Quintard. As you know, it's the best 'romance in high life' story of the season. Will you either confirm or deny the report?"

"I have nothing whatever to say," flamed out Mrs. De Peyster. "And will you leave this house instantly!"

"Ah, Miss Quintard's mother would not deny it either," commented Mr. Mayfair with his polite imperturbability. His sharp eyes glinted with satisfaction. Young Mr. Mayfair admired himself as being something of the human dynamo. Also it was his private opinion that he was of the order of the super-reporter; nothing ever "got by him." "And so," he went on without a pause, "since the engagement is not denied, I suppose we may take it as a fact. And now" — again with his swift change of base — "may I ask, as a parting word before you sail, whether it is your intention next season to contest with Mrs. Allistair —"

"I have nothing whatever to say!"

"Quite naturally you'd prefer not to say any-

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thing," appeasingly continued the high-geared Mr. Mayfair, "but of course you are going to fight her." Again his sharp, unfoilable eyes glinted. "'Duel for social leadership' — pardon me for speaking of it as such, but that's what it is; and most interesting, I assure you; and I, for one, trust that you will retain your supremacy, for I know — *I know*," he repeated with emphasis — "that Mrs. Allistair has used some methods not altogether — sportsmanlike, may I say? And now" — rapidly shifting once more — "I trust I will not seem indelicate if I inquire whether it is in the scope of your present plans, perhaps at house-parties at the estates of titled friends, to meet the Duke de —"

"I have nothing whatever to say!" gasped Mrs. De Peyster, glaring with consuming fury.

"Naturally. We could hardly expect a categorical 'yes' or 'no.' We understand that your position requires you to be non-committal; and you, of course, understand that we newspaper men interpret a refusal to speak as an answer in the affirmative. Thank you very much for the interview you have given us. And I can assure you that we shall all handle the story with the utmost good taste. Good afternoon."

He bowed. And the next moment the place where he had stood was vacant.

"Of — of all the effrontery!" exploded Mrs. De Peyster.

"Is n't it terrible!" shudderingly gasped the

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sympathetic Olivetta. "I hope they won't really drag in that horrible Duke de Crécy!"

Mrs. De Peyster shuddered, too. The episode of the Duke de Crécy was still salt in an unhealed social wound. The Duke had been New York's most distinguished titled visitor the previous winter; Mrs. De Peyster, to the general envy, had led in his entertainment; there had been whispers of another international marriage. And then, after respectful adieus, the Duke had sailed away — and within a month the papers were giving columns to his scandalous escapades with a sensational Spanish dancer of parsimonious drapery. Whereupon the rumors of Mrs. De Peyster's previously gossiped-of marriage with the now notorious Duke were revived — by the subtle instigation, and as an act of social warfare, so Mrs. De Peyster believed, of her aspiring rival, Mrs. Allistair. And there was one faint rumor, still daringly breathed around, that the Duke had proposed — had been accepted — had run away: in blunt terms, had jilted Mrs. De Peyster.

"We will not speak of this again, Olivetta," Mrs. De Peyster remarked with returning dignity, "but while the matter is up, I will mention that the Duke did propose to me, and that I refused him."

With a gesture she silenced any comment from Olivetta. In a breath or two she was entirely her usual poiseful self. Too many generations had her blood been trained to ways of dignity, and too long had she herself been drilled in composure and self-

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esteem and in a perfect confidence in the thing that she was, for an invasion of newspaper creatures to disturb her for longer than a few moments.

She was moving with stately tread toward the dining-room when Matilda came hurrying up from the nether regions of the house. "Did you know, ma'am," Matilda fluttered eagerly, "that Mr. Jack is home?"

"My son back!" There was vast relief in Mrs. De Peyster's voice. "When did he come?"

"A few minutes ago."

"Did — did he say anything?"

"I have n't seen him, ma'am. He came in the back way, through the stable. William told me about it."

Mrs. De Peyster's voice became composed, severe. "I shall see what he has to say for himself." Majestically, somewhat ominously, she turned and began to mount the stairs, followed by Olivetta and Matilda. But as she passed the library's closed door, she heard Miss Gardner's voice and a second voice — and the second voice was the voice of a man.

Startled, she paused. She caught a few fragments of phrases. Indignation surged up within her. Resolutely she stepped to the door; but by instinct she was no eavesdropper, and she would not come upon people in compromising attitudes without giving them fair warning. So she knocked, waited a moment — then opened the door and entered.

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CHAPTER II

ENTER AN AMIABLE YOUNG GENTLEMAN

HALF an hour earlier, across in Washington Square, a young gentleman was sauntering about taking the crisp May air. He was fashionably but quietly dressed, and in his chamois-gloved hand he swung a jaunty wand of a cane; a slender, lithe young gentleman, with a keen face that had an oddly wide but yet attractive mouth: a young man emanating an essence of lightness both of body and of spirit. He might have been the very person of agreeable, irresponsible Spring, if Spring is ever of the male gender, out for a promenade.

It seemed most casual, the saunter of this pleasant idler; the keenest observer would never have guessed purpose in his stroll. But never for longer than an instant were the frank gray eyes of this young gentleman away from the splendid stone steps, with their carved balustrade, and the fine old doorway of Mrs. De Peyster's house at No. 13 Washington Square.

Presently he noted three men turn up Mrs. De Peyster's steps. Swiftly, but without noticeable haste, he was across the street. The trio had no more than touched the bell when he was beside them.

"What papers are you boys with?" he inquired easily, merging himself at once with the party.

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One man told him — and looked him up and down. "Thought I knew all the fellows," added the speaker, a middle-aged man, "but never ran into you before. What's your rag?"

"'Town Gossip,'" replied the agreeable young gentleman.

"'Town Gossip'!" The old reporter gave a grunt of contempt. "And you've come to interview Mrs. De Peyster?"

"Yes."

"First time I ever knew that leprous scandal-scavenger and black-hander to send a man out in the open to get a story." Evidently the old reporter, whom the others addressed as "colonel," had by his long service acquired the privilege of surly outspokenness. "Thought 'Town Gossip' specialized in butlers and ladies' maids and such — or faked up its dope in the office."

"This is something special." The young gentleman's smiling but unpresuming *camaraderie* seemed unruffled by the colonel's blunt contempt, and though they all drew apart from him he seemed to be untroubled by his journalistic ostracism.

The next moment the door was opened by a stout, short-breathed woman, hat, jacket, and black gloves on. All stepped in. The three late-arriving reporters, seeing in the reception-room beyond a group of newspapermen about a servant, — Matilda making her first futile effort to rid the house of this pestilential horde, generaled by Mr. Mayfair, — started

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quickly toward the members of their fraternity. But the young gentleman remained behind with their stout admitter.

"Huh — thought that was really your size — tackling a servant!" commented the caustic colonel.

But the reporter from "Town Gossip" smiled and did not reply; and the three disappeared into the reception-room. The young gentleman, very politely, half pushed, half followed the stout woman out of the reception-room's range of vision.

"Just leaving, I suppose," he remarked with pleasant matter-of-factness.

"Yes, sir. My bags are down at the basement door. When I heard the ring, I just happened —"

"I understand. You would n't have answered the door, if almost all the regular servants had not been gone. Now, I'd say," smiling engagingly, "that you might be the cook, and a mighty good cook, too."

He had such an "air," did this young man, — the human air of the real gentleman, — that, despite the unexpectedness of his overture, the stout woman, instead of taking offense, flushed with pleasure.

"I ought to be a good one, sir; that's what I'm paid for."

"Seventy-five a month?" estimated the young gentleman.

"Eighty," corrected the cook.

"That's mighty good — twenty dollars a week. But, Mrs. Cook," —again with his open, engaging smile, — "pardon me for not knowing your proper

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name, — could I induce you to enter my employment — at, say, twenty dollars a minute?"

"What — what —"

"For only a limited period," continued the young gentleman — "to be exact, say one minute. Light work," he added with a certain whimsicality, "short hours, seven days out — unusual opportunity."

"But what — what am I to do?" gasped the cook, and before she could gasp again one surprised black glove was clutching two ten-dollar bills.

"Arrange for me to see Miss Gardner — alone. It's all right. She and I are old friends."

"But — but how?" helplessly inquired this mistress of all non-intrigantes.

"Is n't there some room where nobody will come in?"

"The library might be best, sir," pointing up the stairway at a door.

"The library, then! And arrange matters so that no one will know we're meeting."

"But, sir, I don't see how —"

"Most simple, Mrs. Cook. Before you go, you, of course, want to bid Miss Gardner good-bye. Just request the lady in black in there with the reporters to tell Miss Gardner that you want to speak to her and will be waiting in the library. When you 've said that, you've earned the money. Then just watch your chance until the somber lady is n't looking, and continue with your original plan of leaving the house."

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"Perhaps it will work," hesitated the cook. But with a gesture in which there was no hesitation she slipped her minute's pay between the buttons of her waist.

The young gentleman went lightly and swiftly up the stairs and through the mahogany door that had been pointed out to him. Curiously he looked about the spacious, dark-toned room of splendid dignity. He had the ease of the man to whom the world is home, and seemed not one whit abashed by the exclusive grandeur of the great chamber. With a watchful eye on the door, he glanced at the rows and rows of volumes: well-bred authors whom time had elevated to a place among literary "old families." Also he examined some old Chinese ivory carvings with a critical, valuating, meditative eye. Also in passing — and this he did absently, as one might do from habit — he tried the knob of a big safe, but it was locked.

The next moment there was a sound at the door. Instantly he was out of sight behind the brown velvet hangings of a recessed French window. Miss Gardner entered, saw upon the embarrassed edges of none of the shrouded chairs a plump and short-breathed Susan. Surprised, she was turning to leave when a cautious but clear whisper floated across the room.

"Clara!"

She whirled about. At sight of the young gentleman, who had stepped forth, she went pale, then red, then pale again.

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"Eliot — Mr. Bradford!" she exclaimed. Then in a husky frightened whisper: "How did you get in here?"

He sought to take one of her hands, but she put both behind her back. At this repulse the young gentleman winced, then smiled gravely, then pleasantly, — and then with a whimsical upward twist to his wide mouth.

"Via the cook," he answered, and told her the rest.

"Did any one else belonging to the house see you?"

"Besides you and my excellent old friend, the cook, no one."

"But don't you realize that this house is one of the most dangerous places in the world for you?" she cried in a low voice. "Why, Judge Harvey himself is expected here any minute!"

"Judge Harvey!" The equable young man gave a start. But the next moment his poise came back.

"And after what I saw only to-day in the papers about Thomas Preston — ! Don't you know you are this moment standing on a volcano?"

"Yes — but what of it?" he answered cheerfully. "It's the most diverting indoor or outdoor sport I've ever indulged in — dodging eruptions. Besides, in standing on this volcano I have the advantage of also standing near you."

"Did n't I tell you I never wanted to see you again!" she flamed at him. "How dared you come here?"

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"I had to come, dear." His voice was pleading, yet imperturbably pleasant. "You refused to answer the letters I wrote you begging you to meet me somewhere to talk things over. I read that Mrs. De Peyster was sailing to-night, and I knew that you were sailing with her. Surely you understand, before she went, I had to see my wife."

"I refuse to recognize myself as such?" cried Miss Gardner.

"But, my dear, you married —"

"Yes, after knowing you just two days! Oh, you can be charming and plausible, but that shows just how foolish a girl can be when she's a bit tired and lonesome, and then gets a bit of a holiday."

"But, Clara, you really liked me!"

"That was because I did n't know who you were and what you were!"

"But, Clara," he went on easily — he could not help talking easily, though his tone had the true ring of sincerity. There seemed to be no bit of agressive self-assurance about this young gentleman; he seemed to be just quietly, pleasantly, whimsically, unsubduably his natural self. "But, Clara, you must remember that it was as sudden with me as with you. I hardly thought about explaining. And then, I'll be frank, I was afraid if I did tell, you would n't have me. I did side-step a bit, that's a fact."

"You admit this, and yet you expect me to accept as my husband a man who admits he is a crook!"

"My dear Clara," he protested gently, "I never

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admitted I was such an undraped, uneuphonious, square-cornered word as that."

"Well, if a forger is n't a crook, then who is? The business of those forged letters of Thomas Jefferson, do you think I can stand for that?"

The young man was in earnest, deadly earnest; yet he could not help his wide mouth tilting slightly upward to the right. Plainly there was something here that amused him.

"But, Clara, you don't seem to understand that business — and you don't seem to understand me."

"No, I must say I don't!" she said caustically.

"Well, perhaps I can't blame you," he admitted soothingly, "for I don't always understand myself. But really, my dear, you're not seeing this in the right light. Oh, I'm not going to defend myself. It's sad, very sad, but I'll confess I'm no chromo of sweet and haloed rectitude to be held up for the encouragement and beatification of young John D. Rockefeller's Bible Class. Still, I get my living quite as worthily as many of the guests who grace" — with a light wave of his hand about the great chamber — "this noble habitation. Though," in a grieved tone, "I'll confess some of my methods are not yet adequately recognized and protected by law."

"Won't you ever take anything seriously?" she cried in exasperation.

"Besides yourself, what is there to take seriously?"

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"Don't consider me in your calculations, if you please!" And then with sudden suspicion: "See here — you're not here to try any of your tricks on this house, or on Mrs. De Peyster!"

"I was thinking," said he, smiling about the room, "that you might hide me here till the police become infatuated with some other party. A fashionable house closed for the summer — nothing could possibly be superior for my purposes."

"I'd never do it! Besides, Mrs. De Peyster's housekeeper will be here."

"But Mrs. De Peyster's housekeeper would never know I was here."

"I can't stand your talk another minute," she burst out. "Go!"

He did not stir; continued to smile at her pleasantly. "Oh, I'm not really asking the favor, Clara. I'm pretty safe where I'm staying."

"Go, I say! And if you don't care for your own danger, then at least consider mine."

"Yours?"

"I've told you of Mrs. De Peyster's attitude toward married —"

"Then leave her, my dear. Even though it would n't be safe for you to be with me till the police resume their interrupted nap — still, you can have your own flat and your own bank account. Nothing would make me happier."

"Understand this, Mr. Bradford, — I'm going to have nothing to do with you!"

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For a moment he sobered. "Come, Clara: give me a chance to make good —"

"Will you turn straight?" she caught him up sharply. "And will you fix up the affair of the Jefferson letters?"

"That last is a pretty stiff proposition; I don't see how it's to be done. As to the first — but, really, Clara," — smiling again appeasingly, — "really, you take this thing altogether too seriously."

"Too seriously!" She almost choked. "Why — why — I'm through with you! That's final! And I don't dare stay here another minute! Good-bye."

"Wait, Clara." He caught her hand as she turned to go, and spoke rapidly. "I don't think I'm so bad as you think I am — honest. You may change your mind; I hope you do, dear; and if you do, write me, 'phone me, telegraph me, cable me, wireless me. But, of course, not to me direct; the police, you know. Address me in care of the Reverend Mr. Pyecroft." Tense though the moment was to him, the young man could not restrain his odd whimsical smile. "The Reverend Mr. Pyecroft has taken an interest in me; like you he is trying to make me a better man. He'll see that I get your message. Herbert E. Pyecroft — P-y-e-c-r-o-f-t — remember his name. Here's a card of the boarding-house at which he is staying." He thrust the bit of pasteboard into her free hand. "Remember, dear, I really am your husband."

With an outraged gesture she flung the card to the

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floor. "There'll be no message!" Her voice was raised; she trembled in fierce humiliation, and in scorn of him. "You . . . my husband!"

"Yes, your husband!" he said firmly. "And I'm going to make you love me!"

It was at just this moment that Mrs. De Peyster, ascending from her scene with the reporters, was passing without, and it was these last words that she overheard. And it was at just this moment that her knock sounded upon the door.

"Quick, you must n't be seen here!" breathed Miss Gardner. "The French windows there, and out the back way through the stable!"

With a cat's silent swiftness he was at the windows, Miss Gardner beside him. But in the back-yard stood William, the coachman, sunning himself. That way was closed.

"Into the study," whispered Miss Gardner, pointing at a door," and watch your chance to get out!"

In the same instant the heavy sound-proof mahogany door closed softly behind him — leaving Miss Gardner in the middle of the room, with heightened color, breathing rapidly. Into the library swept Mrs. De Peyster, followed by Olivetta and Matilda.

There was a lofty sternness in Mrs. De Peyster's manner. "Miss Gardner, I believe I heard you speaking with a man."

"You did." Miss Gardner was stiff, proudly erect, for she sensed what might be coming.

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"Where is he?"

"He went out through the window," said Miss Gardner.

"Ah, he did not want me to find out about you. But by chance I overheard him say he was your husband."

"He is." Then with an effort: "But husband or no husband, Mrs. De Peyster, I believe I would be of equal value —"

"I desire no scene, no argument," interrupted Mrs. De Peyster, dignified, not a strident note in her voice — for she never lost her self-possession or the true grand manner. "I believe you will remember, Miss Gardner, that when you applied for your present position two months ago, I told you that I made it a rule to have no servants or employees of any kind who were married. As I desired that you should understand my reasons, I informed you that I had once had a cook and a footman who were married, and who paid so much attention to one another that they had time to pay no attention to me. I then asked you if you were married. You informed me you were not."

"And I was not, at that time."

"Indeed! Then you have married since. That makes your deception all the worse. Remember, Miss Gardner, it was on the distinct understanding that you were unmarried that I employed you. I have no desire to pass judgment upon you. I try to be fair and just and generous with all my employees.

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If you had been what you declared yourself to be, and remained such, you could have stayed with me indefinitely. Matilda there came to me as my son's nurse over twenty years ago, and has been with me ever since — happy, as she will tell you, with no desire to change her state whatever."

"N—no — none — none at all!"

Matilda hastily dropped her eyes. Mechanically her eyes noted the rejected card Mr. Bradford had tendered Miss Gardner. Her long habit of perfect orderliness, and perhaps the impulse to hide the slight confusion that suddenly had seized upon her, prompted her to bend over and secure this bit of litter. She glanced at it, would have put it in the waste-basket had that receptacle not been across the room, then thrust it into the capacious slit-pocket of her black skirt.

Mrs. De Peyster continued in her tone of exact justice: "Miss Gardner, you have the perfect right to be married or unmarried. I have the perfect right to have the sort of employees I prefer. But since you are not what you declared yourself to be, I no longer require your service."

Miss Gardner bowed stiffly.

"Matilda, see that Miss Gardner is paid in full to the end of her month; and also pay her one month in advance. And telephone about until you can find me a maid — do not bother about the secretary part of it — a maid who is *not* married, and who can come at once. That is all."

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Matilda, still somewhat pale and agitated, started to follow out the proud Miss Gardner, who gave a swift glance at the study door — while Mrs. De Peyster looked on with her invariable calm majesty.

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CHAPTER III

MISTRESS OF HER HOUSE

BUT at just this moment there was a smart rap at the library door, it was partly opened, and a cheery masculine voice called out: —

"May I come in, mother?"

"You, Jack. You may," was the somewhat eager response from Mrs. De Peyster.

The door swung entirely open, Miss Gardner stepped out, and there entered a young man of twenty-two or three, good-natured confidence in his manner, flawlessly dressed, with hands that were swathed in bandages. He crossed limpingly to Mrs. De Peyster, who, her affection now under control, stood regarding him with reproving and sternly questioning eyes.

"Good-morning, mother, — glad to get back," he said, imprinting an undaunted kiss upon her stately cheek.

Her reply was a continuance of her reproving look. The young man turned to Mrs. De Peyster's faithful satellite.

"Hello, Olivetta. Hands out of commission. You'll have to shake my elbow." And he held out his angled arm.

"Good-morning, Jack," responded Olivetta, in

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trepidation, hardly daring to be gracious where Mrs. De Peyster had been cool.

Jack slipped an arm across Matilda's shoulders. "How are you, Matilda? Glad to see you again."

"And I'm glad to see you again, Mr. Jack," returned Matilda, with a look of stealthy affection.

"Please go, Matilda," said Mrs. De Peyster crisply. "And now, Jack," she continued with frigid dignity after Matilda had withdrawn, "I trust that you will explain your absence, and your long silence."

"Certainly, mother," said Jack, pushing a slip-covered chair before the fireplace — for an open wood fire burned here as in her sitting-room above — and letting himself down into the chair slowly and with extreme care and crossing his legs. "I got a sudden invitation from Reggie Atwater to —"

"You know I do not approve of that young scapegrace!"

"I know you don't. I suppose that's one reason I did n't tell you beforehand what I was up to."

"What have you been doing?"

"Reggie asked me to go on a long trip to try out his new car. It's a hummer. Hundred-and-twenty horse-power — bloody-eyed, fire-spitting devil —"

"Such cars are dangerous," severely commented Mrs. De Peyster, who still kept to her horses and carriage as better maintaining old-family distinction.

"I know. That's another reason I did n't tell you — especially since we were planning a thousand-mile lark."

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"What's the matter with your hands?" suddenly demanded Mrs. De Peyster.

Jack gazed meditatively at the bandaged members.

"You were right about that car being dangerous, mother," said he. "I'll confess the whole business. We were whizzing around a corner coming into Yonkers this morning when the machine skidded. I did a loop-the-loop and lit on my hands. But the skin of my palms —"

"Oh!" shuddered Olivetta.

"Were you much hurt?" asked Mrs. De Peyster, for a moment forgetting her reproving manner in her affectionate concern.

"Mother, with your love for old lace, you certainly would like the openwork effect of my skin. But — the patient will recover."

"I trust this experience has been a lesson to you!" said Mrs. De Peyster with returned severity.

"Oh, it has — a big lesson!" Jack heartily agreed.

"Then I trust you will do nothing of the kind again."

"I trust I won't have to!"

There was rather an odd quality in Jack's tone.

"Won't have to? What do you mean?"

"You've questioned me a lot, mother. I'd like to put a few leading questions to you. And — u'm — alone. Olivetta," he remarked pleasantly, "do you know that Sherlock Holmes found it an instructive and valuable occupation to count the stair-steps in a

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house? Suppose you run out for five minutes and count 'em. I'll bet you a box of —"

Olivetta had risen, somewhat indignantly.

"I never eat candy!"

"A box of hairpins," continued Jack, clumsily picking up one from the floor, "that there are n't more than seventy-five."

"Oh, if you want me out of the way, all right!" said Olivetta, sticking the pin into place.

"Here, is that your purse?" asked Jack, fishing an open purse from beneath the chair Olivetta had just vacated.

"Yes, I'm always dropping it. I lost two —"

"I must say, Olivetta," put in Mrs. De Peyster reprovingly, "that you really must not be so careless!"

Jack was looking at a card that had fallen from the purse.

"Hello! And a ticket to the exhibition of paintings of —"

"Give it to me!" And Olivetta, with suddenly crimson face, snatched purse and card from Jack's hands. "I'll wait up in your bedroom, Caroline, and look at your new gowns." And with a rapidity that approached instantaneity she disappeared.

"Jack," his mother demanded suspiciously, "what was that card?"

"Just an old admission ticket to varnishing day at the spring exhibit of the American Society of Painters," said Jack easily. And without giving Mrs. De Peyster an instant in which to pursue the matter

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further, he awkwardly pushed her favorite chair toward the fire to a place beside his own. "Come sit down, mother. There's a lot of things I want to tell you."

Mrs. De Peyster lowered herself into the chair. "Yes?"

Jack's eyes had meditatively followed Olivetta. "Do you know, mother, that Olivetta would really be an awfully good sort if she only had the right chance?"

"The right chance?"

"Yes. Think of her living on and on in that deadly proper little hotel — chuck full of primped and crimped and proud poor relations who don't dare draw a single full-sized breath without first considering whether such a daring act might not disturb the social standing of somebody over on Fifth Avenue or down here on Washington Square — Oh, I say, mother, five more years of that life and Olivetta will be choked — dessicated — salted away — a regular forever-and-ever-amen old maid. But if —" He hesitated.

"Yes — if?"

"If Olivetta were only to marry some one — some decent fellow — she'd blossom out, grow as young as she actually is — and, who knows, perhaps even her hairpins might stay in."

"Marry, yes. But whom?"

"I've seen a few things — there's a certain party — and —" He stumbled a bit, conscious that he was

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becoming indiscreet. "And, oh, well, just on general principles marriage is a good thing."

"That is just the opinion I have been urging upon you in regard to yourself," returned his mother in her even, confident tone.

"U'm — yes," Jack said hastily. "But that was not — not the first thing I wanted to speak about."

"I believe you did say there were several matters."

"So there are." He rubbed his face tentatively with his bandaged hand; then smiled blandly at his mother. "Yes, there are a few."

"Well?"

"Well, first of all, mother, I want to make a kick."

She frowned. "How often must I request you not to use such common expressions!"

"All right, all right," said he. "Suppose I say, then, that I'm dissatisfied."

"Dissatisfied!" She straightened up. "Dissatisfied! What about? Do I not allow you all the money you want?"

"Yes."

"And have I not practically arranged a match between you and Ethel Quintard? Ethel will have three millions some day. And there is no better family to marry into; that is, except our own."

"Yes, yes, — I know."

"And yet you say you are dissatisfied!" She stared. "What more can you want?"

"Well, for one thing, to go to school," was Jack's amiable response.

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"Go to school! Why — why, you've already had the best of educations! Exeter — Yale — not to speak of private tutors!"

"And what did I learn? That is," he added, "over and above being a fairly decent half-back and learning how to spend money — u'm — pretty thoroughly."

"I trust," said Mrs. De Peyster with all her dignity, "that you learned to be a gentleman!"

"Oh, I suppose I learned that all right," Jack acquiesced. "And I've been working hard at the profession ever since — sixteen to twenty hours a day, no half-holidays and no Sundays off. I can't stand it any longer. So I've decided to go on strike."

"Strike?" exclaimed his mother, bewildered.

"Yes. For better conditions. I'm tired loafing such long hours. I'd like a little leisure in which to work."

"Work!" repeated his mother — and human voice could hardly express amazement greater than did hers. "Work! Jack — you're not in earnest?"

He held upon her a clear-eyed, humorous, but resolute face.

"Don't I look in earnest?"

He did; and his mother could only dazedly repeat, "Work! You go to work!"

"Oh, not at once. No, thank you! I want to ask you to give me a little proper education first that will equip me to do something. You've spent — how much have you spent on my education, mother?

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Tens and tens of thousands, I know. Pretty big investment, on the whole. Now, how large returns do you suppose I can draw on that investment?"

"I was not thinking about dividends; I was thinking about fitting you for your station," returned his mother stiffly.

"Well, as for me, I've been thinking of late about how much I could get out of that investment. I've wanted to test myself and find what I was worth — as a worker." He leaned a little closer. "I say, mother," he said confidentially, "you remember that little explanation I just gave you of my absence."

"About your trip in that high-powered automobile?"

"That was just a high-powered fib. Just a bit of diplomatic romance — for Olivetta's consumption."

"Then where have you been?" demanded Mrs. De Peyster.

"Prospecting. Prospecting to find out just how much that hundred thousand or two or three you've sunk in me is worth. And I've found out. It's present value is not quite nine a week."

"You mean?"

"I mean," he said pleasantly, "I've been at work."

"At work!"

Mrs. De Peyster slowly rose and looked down at him with staring, loose-fallen face.

"At work!" she gasped again. "At work!"

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"Yes, mother. At work."

"But — but that skidding automobile? Those hands?"

"Blisters, mother dear. Most horrible blisters."

"You've worked — you've worked — at what?"

"Well, you see, mother, if I could have knocked out a home run, say a job as a railroad president, when I stepped up to the plate in the first inning, I suppose I would n't have backed away from the chance. But I wanted to find my real value, so I wore cheap clothes and kept clear of my friends. 'What could I do?' every one asked me. You know my answer. And *their* answer! I thought only subway guards could say, 'Step lively,' like that. Lordy, how I tramped! But finally I met a kind gentleman who gave me a chance."

"A gentleman?"

"About the size of your piano — only he had a red mustache and a red shirt and I should say his complexion needed re-decorating. Irish — foreman on a water-main trench."

"And you — you took it?"

"Took it? I grabbed it!"

"J—a—c—k D—e P—e—y—s—t—e—r!" his appalled mother slowly exclaimed — so slowly that each letter seemed to shiver out by itself in horrified disjunction. "Well, at any rate," she declared with returning vigor, "I'm glad you have had enough of it to bring you to your senses and bring you home!"

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"Oh, I've had enough all right. My cubic contents of ache is — well, you would n't believe a man of my size could hold so much discomfort. But that is n't the only thing that brought me home. It was — er — I might say, mother, that it was suggested to me."

"Suggested? I do not understand."

"If you will permit the use of so inelegant an expression, I was 'fired.'"

"Fired?"

"Yes. The foreman intimated — I won't repeat his language, mother, but the muscles stood out on his profanity in regular knots — he intimated, in a way that left no doubt as to his meaning, that I was not quite up to the nine per week standard. I'll be honest with you and admit that I did n't lean against the pay-shed and weep. I still wanted to work, but I decided that I did n't want to start life at its pick-and-shovel end — if I could help it. So here I am, mother, asking you to give me a little real education — say as a mining engineer, or something like that."

Mrs. De Peyster was trembling with indignation.

"J—a—c—k D—e P—e—y—s—t—e—r!" again a letter at a time. "J—a—c—k D—e P—e—y—s—t—e—r! I'm astounded at you!"

"I thought you might be — a little," he admitted.

"I think you might have some consideration for me! And my position!"

"I suppose it is rather selfish of me to want to earn

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my own living. But you don't know what dreary hard work being a gentleman becomes."

"I won't have it!" cried Mrs. De Peyster wrathfully. "This is what comes of your attending that Intercollegiate Socialist thing in college! I protested to the president against the college harboring such unsettling influences, and urged him to put it out."

"Well, dear old prexy did his best to comply."

"It's that Socialist thing! As for what you propose, I simply will not have it!"

"No? I could have started in up at Columbia, and kept it from you. But I wanted to be all on the level—"

"I won't have it!"

"You really mean that you are not going to add a few thousand more to my hundred thousands' worth of education?"

"I certainly shall not!"

"Then," said Jack regretfully, "I suppose after all I've got to start in at the pick-and-shovel end."

"No, you will not! I have reared you to be a gentleman! And you are going to be a gentleman!"

"Well, if that's the way you feel about it," he sighed, "we'll drop the matter — temporarily."

"We'll drop it permanently!" said Mrs. De Peyster decisively. "Besides, all this talk is utterly footless. You seem to forget that you are sailing with me to Europe to-morrow."

"That brings me to the second point. I was hoping," Jack said mildly, "that you would consent to

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