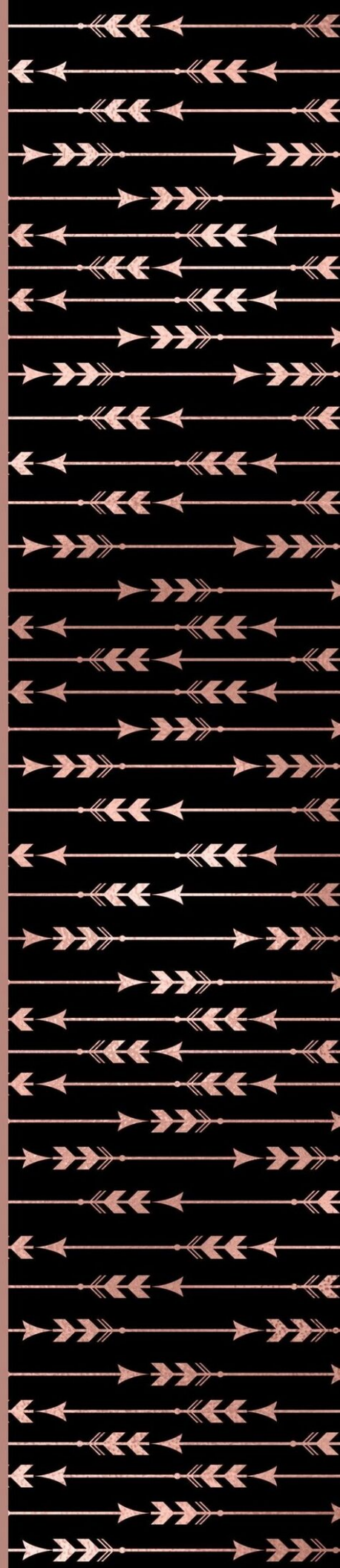


Sheba Blake Publishing Corp.

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A
MAN IN A HURRY

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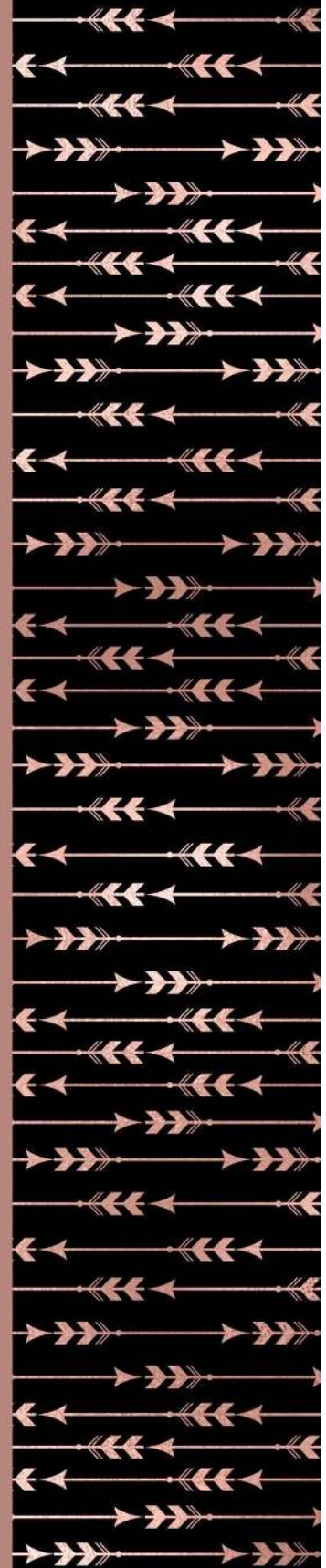


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ROBERT W. CHAMBERS

A Young Man in a Hurry

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Robert W. Chambers asserts the moral right to be identified as the author of this work.

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Contents

1. A Young Man in a Hurry

2. A Pilgrim

3. The Shining Band

4. One Man in a Million

5. The Fire-Warden

6. The Market-Hunter

7. The Path-Master

8. In Nauvoo

9. Marlitt's Shoes

10. Pasque Florida

About the Author

One

A Young Man in a Hurry



“**S**oyez tranquilles, mesdames.... Je suis un jeune homme pressé.... Mais modeste.”—LABICHE.

At ten minutes before five in the evening the office doors of the Florida and Key West Railway Company flew open, and a young man emerged in a hurry.

Suit-case in one hand, umbrella in the other, he sped along the corridor to the elevator-shaft, arriving in time to catch a glimpse of the lighted roof of the cage sliding into depths below.

“Down!” he shouted; but the glimmering cage disappeared, descending until darkness enveloped it.

Then the young man jammed his hat on his head, seized the suit-case and umbrella, and galloped down the steps. The spiral marble staircase echoed his clattering flight; scrub-women heard him coming and fled; he leaped a pail of water and a mop; several old gentlemen flattened themselves against the wall to give him room; and a blond young person with pencils in her hair lisped “Gee!” as he whizzed past and plunged through the storm-doors, which swung back, closing behind him with a hollow thwack.

Outside in the darkness, gray with whirling snowflakes, he saw the wet lamps of cabs shining, and he darted along the line of hansoms and coupés in frantic search for his own.

“Oh, there you are!” he panted, flinging his suit-case up to a snow-covered driver. “Do your best now; we’re late!” And he leaped into the dark coupé, slammed the door, and sank back on the cushions, turning up the collar of his heavy overcoat.

There was a young lady in the farther corner of the cab, buried to her nose in a fur coat. At intervals she shivered and pressed a fluffy muff against her face. A glimmer from the sleet-smear'd lamps fell across her knees.

Down-town flew the cab, swaying around icy corners, bumping over car-tracks, lurching, rattling, jouncing, while its silent occupants, huddled in separate corners, brooded moodily at their respective windows.

Snow blotted the glass, melting and running down; and over the watery panes yellow light from shop windows played fantastically, distorting vision.

Presently the young man pulled out his watch, fumbled for a match-box, struck a light, and groaned as he read the time.

At the sound of the match striking, the young lady turned her head. Then, as the bright flame illuminated the young man’s face, she sat bolt upright, dropping the muff to her lap with a cry of dismay.

He looked up at her. The match burned his fingers; he dropped it and hurriedly lighted another; and the flickering radiance brightened upon the face of a girl whom he had never before laid eyes on.

“Good heavens!” he said. “Where’s my sister?”

The young lady was startled, but resolute. “You have made a dreadful mistake,” she said; “you are in the wrong cab—”

The match went out; there came a brief moment of darkness, then the cab turned a corner, and the ghostly light of electric lamps played over them in quivering succession.

“Will you please stop this cab?” she said, unsteadily. “You have mistaken my cab for yours. I was expecting my brother.”

Stunned, he made no movement to obey. A sudden thrill of fear passed through her.

“I must ask you to stop this cab,” she faltered.

The idiotic blankness of his expression changed to acute alarm.

“Stop this cab?” he cried. “Nothing on earth can induce me to stop this cab!”

“You must!” she insisted, controlling her voice. “You must stop it at once!”

“How can I?” he asked, excitedly; “I’m late now; I haven’t one second to spare!”

“Do you refuse to leave this cab?”

“I beg that you will compose yourself—”

“Will you go?” she insisted.

A jounce sent them flying towards each other; they collided and recoiled, regarding one another in breathless indignation.

“This is simply hideous!” said the young lady, seizing the door-handle.

“Please don’t open that door!” he said. She tried to wrench it open; the handle stuck—or perhaps the strength had left her wrist. But it was not courage that failed, for she faced him, head held high, and—

“You coward!” she said.

Over his face a deep flush burned—and it was a good face, too—youthfully wilful, perhaps, with a firm, clean-cut chin and pleasant eyes.

“If I were a coward,” he said, “I’d stop this cab and get out. I never faced anything that frightened me half as much as you do!”

She looked him straight in the eyes, one hand twisting at the knob.

“Don’t you suppose that this mistake of mine is as humiliating and unwelcome to me as it is to you?” he said. “If you stop this cab it will ruin somebody’s life. Not mine—if it were my own life, I wouldn’t hesitate.”

Her hand, still clasping the silver knob, suddenly fell limp.

“You say that you are in a hurry?” she asked, with dry lips.

“A desperate hurry,” he replied.

“So am I,” she said, bitterly; “and, thanks to your stupidity, I must make the journey without my brother!”

There was a silence, then she turned towards him again:

“Where do you imagine this cab is going?”

“It’s going to Cortlandt Street—isn’t it?” Suddenly the recollection came to him that it was her cab, and that he had only told the driver to drive fast.

The color left his face as he pressed it to the sleet-shot window. Fitful flickers of light, snow, darkness—that was all he could see.

He turned a haggard countenance on her; he was at her mercy. But there was nothing vindictive in her.

“I also am going to Cortlandt Street; you need not be alarmed,” she said.

The color came back to his cheeks. “I suppose,” he ventured, “that you are trying to catch the Eden Limited, as I am.”

“Yes,” she said, coldly; “my brother—” An expression of utter horror came into her face. “What on earth shall I do?” she cried; “my brother has my ticket and my purse!”

A lunge and a bounce sent them into momentary collision; a flare of light from a ferry lantern flashed in their faces; the cab stopped and a porter jerked

open the door, crying:

“Eden Limited? You’d better hurry, lady. They’re closin’ the gates now.”

They sprang out into the storm, she refusing his guiding arm.

“What am I to do?” she said, desperately. “I *must* go on that train, and I haven’t a penny.”

“It’s all right; you’ll take my sister’s ticket,” he said, hurriedly paying the cabman.

A porter seized their two valises from the box and dashed towards the ferry-house; they followed to the turnstile, where the tickets were clipped.

“Now we’ve got to run!” he said. And off they sped, slipped through the closing gates, and ran for the gang-plank, where their porter stood making frantic signs for them to hasten. It was a close connection, but they made it, to the unfeigned amusement of the passengers on deck.

“Sa-ay!” drawled a ferry-hand, giving an extra twist to the wheel as the chains came clanking in, “she puts the bunch on the blink f’r a looker. Hey?”

“Plenty,” said his comrade; adding, after a moment’s weary deliberation, “She’s his tootsy-wootsy sure. B. and G.”

The two young people, who had caught the boat at the last second, stood together, muffled to the eyes, breathing rapidly. She was casting tragic glances astern, where, somewhere behind the smother of snow, New York city lay; he, certain at last of his train, stood beside her, attempting to collect his thoughts and arrange them in some sort of logical sequence.

But the harder he thought, the more illogical the entire episode appeared. How on earth had he ever come to enter a stranger’s cab and drive with a stranger half a mile before either discovered the situation? And what blind luck had sent the cab to the destination he also was bound for—and not a second to spare, either?

He looked at her furtively; she stood by the rail, her fur coat white with snow.

“The poor little thing!” he thought. And he said: “You need not worry about your section, you know. I have my sister’s ticket for you.”

After a moment’s gloomy retrospection he added: “When your brother arrives to knock my head off I’m going to let him do it.”

She made no comment.

“I don’t suppose,” he said, “that you ever could pardon what I have done.”

“No,” she said, “I never could.”

A brief interval passed, disturbed by the hooting of a siren.

“If you had stopped the cab when I asked you to—” she began.

“If I had,” he said, “neither you nor I could have caught this train.”

“If you had not entered my cab, I should have been here at this moment with my brother,” she said. “Now I am here with you—penniless!”

He looked at her miserably, but she was relentless.

“It is the cold selfishness of the incident that shocks me,” she said; “it is not the blunder that offended me—” She stopped short to give him a chance to defend himself; but he did not. “And now,” she added, “you have reduced me to the necessity of—borrowing money—”

“Only a ticket,” he muttered.

But she was not appeased, and her silence was no solace to him.

After a few minutes he said: “It’s horribly cold out here; would you not care to go into the cabin?”

She shook her head, and her cheeks grew hot, for she had heard the observations of the ferrymen as the boat left. She would freeze in obscurity rather than face a lighted cabin full of people. She looked at the porter who

was carrying their valises, and the dreadful idea seized her that he, too, thought them bride and groom.

Furious, half frightened, utterly wretched, she dared not even look at the man whose unheard-of stupidity had inflicted such humiliation upon her.

Tears were close to her eyes; she swallowed, set her head high, and turned her burning cheeks to the pelting snow.

Oh, he should rue it some day! When, how, where, she did not trouble to think; but he should rue it, and his punishment should leave a memory ineffaceable. Pondering on his future tribulation, sternly immersed in visions of justice, his voice startled her:

“The boat is in. Please keep close to me.”

Bump! creak—cre—ak! bump! Then came the clank of wheel and chain, and the crowded cabin, and pressing throngs which crushed her close to his shoulder; and, “Please take my arm,” he said; “I can protect you better so.”

A long, covered way, swarming with people, a glimpse of a street and whirling snowflakes, an iron fence pierced by gates where gilt-and-blue officials stood, saying, monotonously: “Tickets! Please show your tickets. This way for the Palmetto Special. The Eden Limited on track number three.”

“Would you mind holding my umbrella a moment?” he asked.

She took it.

He produced the two tickets and they passed the gate, following a porter who carried their luggage.

Presently their porter climbed the steps of a sleeping-car. She followed and sat down beside her valise, resting her elbow on the polished window-sill, and her flushed cheek on her hand.

He passed her and continued on towards the end of the car, where she saw him engage in animated conversation with several officials. The officials shook

their heads, and, after a while, he came slowly back to where she sat.

“I tried to exchange into another car,” he said. “It cannot be done.”

“Why do you wish to?” she asked, calmly.

“I suppose you would—would rather I did,” he said. “I’ll stay in the smoker all I can.”

She made no comment. He stood staring gloomily at the floor.

“I’m awfully sorry,” he said, at last. “I’m not quite as selfish as you think. My—my younger brother is in a lot of trouble—down at St. Augustine. I couldn’t have saved him if I hadn’t caught this train.... I know you can’t forgive me; so I’ll say—so I’ll ask permission to say good-bye.”

“Don’t—please don’t go,” she said, faintly.

He wheeled towards her again.

“How on earth am I to dine if you go away?” she asked. “I’ve a thousand miles to go, and I’ve simply got to dine.”

“What a stupid brute I am!” he said, between his teeth. “I try to be decent, but I can’t. I’ll do anything in the world to spare you—indeed I will. Tell me, would you prefer to dine alone—”

“Hush! people are listening,” she said, in a low voice. “It’s bad enough to be taken for bride and groom, but if people in this car think we’ve quarrelled I—I simply cannot endure it.”

“Who took us for—that?” he whispered, fiercely.

“Those people behind you; don’t look! I heard that horrid little boy say, ‘B. and G.!’ and others heard it. I—I think you had better sit down here a moment.”

He sat down.

“The question is,” she said, with heightened color, “whether it is less embarrassing for us to be civil to each other or to avoid each other. Everybody

has seen the porter bring in our luggage; everybody supposes we are at least on friendly terms. If I go alone to the dining-car, and you go alone, gossip will begin. I'm miserable enough now—my position is false enough now. I—I cannot stand being stared at for thirty-six hours—”

“If you say so, I'll spread the rumor that you're my sister,” he suggested, anxiously. “Shall I?”

Even she perceived the fatal futility of that suggestion.

“But when you take off your glove everybody will know we're not B. and G.,” he insisted.

She hesitated; a delicate flush crept over her face; then she nervously stripped the glove from her left hand and extended it. A plain gold ring encircled the third finger. “What shall I do?” she whispered. “I can't get it off. I've tried, but I can't.”

“Does it belong there?” he asked, seriously.

“You mean, am I married? No, no,” she said, impatiently; “it's my grandmother's wedding-ring. I was just trying it on this morning—this morning of all mornings! Think of it!”

She looked anxiously at her white fingers, then at him.

“What do you think?” she asked, naïvely; “I've tried soap and cold-cream, but it won't come off.”

“Well,” he said, with a forced laugh, “Fate appears to be personally conducting this tour, and it's probably all right—” He hesitated. “Perhaps it's better than to wear no ring—”

“Why?” she asked, innocently. “Oh! perhaps it's better, after all, to be mistaken for B. and G. than for a pair of unchaperoned creatures. Is that what you mean?”

“Yes,” he said, vaguely.

There came a gentle jolt, a faint grinding sound, a vibration increasing. Lighted lanterns, red and green, glided past their window.

“We’ve started,” he said.

Then a negro porter came jauntily down the aisle, saying something in a low voice to everybody as he passed. And when he came to them he smiled encouragement and made an extra bow, murmuring, “First call for dinner, if you please, madam.”

They were the centre of discreet attention in the dining-car; and neither the ring on her wedding-finger nor their bearing and attitude towards each other were needed to confirm the general conviction.

He tried to do all he could to make it easy for her, but he didn’t know how, or he never would have ordered rice pudding with a confidence that set their own negro waiter grinning from ear to ear.

She bit her red lips and looked out of the window; but the window, blackened by night and quicksilvered by the snow, was only a mirror for a very lovely and distressed face.

Indeed, she was charming in her supposed rôle; their fellow-passengers’ criticisms were exceedingly favorable. Even the young imp who had pronounced them B. and G. with infantile unreserve appeared to be impressed by her fresh, young beauty; and an old clergyman across the aisle beamed on them at intervals, and every beam was a benediction.

As for them, embarrassment and depression were at first masked under a polite gayety; but the excitement of the drama gained on them; appearances were to be kept up in the rôles of a comedy absolutely forced upon them; and that brought exhilaration.

From mental self-absolution they ventured on mentally absolving each other. Fate had done it! Their consciences were free. Their situation was a

challenge in itself, and to accept it must mean to conquer.

Stirring two lumps of sugar into his cup of coffee, he looked up suddenly, to find her gray eyes meeting his across the table. They smiled like friends.

“Of what are you thinking?” she asked.

“I was thinking that perhaps you had forgiven me,” he said, hopefully.

“I have”—she frowned a little—“I *think* I have.”

“And—you do not think me a coward?”

“No,” she said, watching him, chin propped on her linked fingers.

He laughed gratefully.

“As a matter of cold fact,” he observed, “if we had met anywhere in town—under other circumstances—there is no reason that I can see why we shouldn’t have become excellent friends.”

“No reason at all,” she said, thoughtfully.

“And that reminds me,” he went on, dropping his voice and leaning across the table, “I’m going to send back a telegram to my sister, and I fancy you may wish to send one to your wandering brother.”

“I suppose I’d better,” she said. An involuntary shiver passed over her. “He’s probably frantic,” she added.

“Probably,” he admitted.

“My father and mother are in Europe,” she observed. “I hope my brother hasn’t cabled them.”

“I think we’d better get those telegrams off,” he said, motioning the waiter to bring the blanks and find pen and ink.

They waited, gazing meditatively at each other. Presently he said:

“I’d like to tell you what it is that sends me flying down to Florida at an hour’s notice. I think some explanation is due you—if it wouldn’t bore you?”

“Tell me,” she said, quietly.

“Why, then, it’s that headlong idiot of a brother of mine,” he explained. “He’s going to try to marry a girl he has only known twenty-four hours—a girl we never heard of. And I’m on my way to stop it!—the young fool!—and I’ll stop it if I have to drag him home by the heels! Here’s the telegram we got late this afternoon—a regular bombshell.” He drew the yellow bit of paper from his breast-pocket, unfolded it, and read:

“ST. AUGUSTINE, FLORIDA.

“I am going to marry to-morrow the loveliest girl in the United States. Only met her yesterday. Love at first sight. You’ll all worship her! She’s eighteen, a New-Yorker, and her name is Marie Hetherford. JIM.”

He looked up angrily. “What do you think of that?” he demanded.

“Think?” she stammered—“think?” She dropped her hands helplessly, staring at him. “Marie Hetherford is my sister!” she said.

“Your—sister,” he repeated, after a long pause—“*your* sister!”

She pressed a white hand to her forehead, clearing her eyes with a gesture.

“Isn’t it too absurd!” she said, dreamily. “My sister sent us a telegram like yours. Our parents are abroad. So my brother and I threw some things into a trunk and—and started! Oh, did you *ever* hear of anything like this?”

“Your sister!” he repeated, dazed. “*My* brother and *your* sister. And I am on my way to stop it; and you are on your way to stop it—”

She began to laugh—not hysterically, but it was not a natural laugh.

“And,” he went on, “I’ve lost another sister in the shuffle, and you’ve lost another brother in the shuffle, and now there’s a double-shuffle danced by you and me—”

“Don’t. *Don’t!*” she said, faint from laughter.

“Yes, I will,” he said. “And I’ll say more! I’ll say that Destiny is taking exclusive charge of our two families, and it would not surprise me if *your*

brother and *my* sister were driving around New York together at this moment looking for us!"

Their laughter infected the entire dining-car; every waiter snickered; the *enfant terrible* grinned; the aged minister of the Church of England beamed a rapid fire of benedictions on them.

But they had forgotten everybody except each other.

"From what I hear and from what I know personally of your family," she said, "it seems to me that they never waste much time about anything."

"We are rather in that way," he admitted. "I have been in a hurry from the time you first met me—and you see what my brother is going to do."

"Going to do? Are you going to let him?"

"Let him?" He looked steadily at her, and she returned the gaze as steadily. "Yes," he said, "I'm going to let him. And if I tried to stop him I'd get my deserts. I think I know my brother Jim. And I fancy it would take more than his brother to drag him away from your sister." He hesitated a moment. "Is she like—like you?"

"A year younger—yes, we are alike.... And you say that you are going to let him—marry her?"

"Yes—if you don't mind."

The challenge was in his eyes, and she accepted it.

"Is your brother Jim like you?"

"A year younger—yes.... May he marry her?"

She strove to speak easily, but to her consternation she choked, and the bright color dyed her face from neck to hair.

This must not be: she must answer him. To flinch now would be impossible—giving a double meaning and double understanding to a badinage

light as air. Alas! *Il ne faut pas badiner avec l'amour!* Then she answered, saying too much in an effort to say a little with careless and becoming courage.

“If he is like you, he may marry her.... I am glad he is your brother.”

The answering fire burned in his face; she met his eyes, and twice her own fell before their message.

He leaned forward, elbows on the table, hot face between his hands; a careless attitude for others to observe, but a swift glance warned her what was coming—coming in a low, casual voice, checked at intervals as though he were swallowing.

“You are the most splendid girl I ever knew.” He dropped one hand and picked up a flower that had slipped from her finger-bowl. “You are the only person in the world who will not think me crazy for saying this. We’re a headlong race. Will you marry me?”

She bent her head thoughtfully, pressing her mouth to her clasped fingers. Her attitude was repose itself.

“Are you offended?” he asked, looking out of the window.

There was a slight negative motion of her head.

A party of assorted travellers rose from their table and passed them, smiling discreetly; the old minister across the aisle mused in his coffee-cup, caressing his shaven face with wrinkled fingers. The dining-car grew very still.

“It’s in the blood,” he said, under his breath; “my grandparents eloped; my father’s courtship lasted three days from the time he first met my mother—you see what my brother has done in twenty-four hours.... We do things more quickly in these days.... Please—*please* don’t look so unhappy!”

“I—I am not unhappy.... I am willing to—hear you. You were saying something about—about—”

“About love.”

“I—think so. Wait until those people pass!”

He waited, apparently hypnotized by the beauty of the car ceiling. Then: “Of course, if you were not going to be my sister-in-law to-morrow, I’d not go into family matters.”

“No, of course not,” she murmured.

So he gave her a brief outline of his own affairs, and she listened with bent head until there came the pause which was her own cue.

“Why do you tell me this?” she asked, innocently.

“It—it—why, because I love you.”

On common ground once more, she prepared for battle, but to her consternation she found the battle already ended and an enemy calmly preparing for her surrender.

“But when—when do you propose to—to do this?” she asked, in an unsteady voice.

“Now,” he said, firmly.

“Now? Marry me at once?”

“I love you enough to wait a million years—but I won’t. I always expected to fall in love; I’ve rather fancied it would come like this when it came; and I swore I’d never let the chance slip by. We’re a headlong family—but a singularly loyal one. We love but once in our lifetime; and when we love we know it.”

“Do you think that this is that one time?”

“There is no doubt left in me.”

“Then”—she covered her face with her hands, leaning heavily on the table—“then what on earth are we to do?”

“Promise each other to love.”

“Do you promise?”

“Yes, I do promise, forever. Do you?”

She looked up, pale as a ghost. “Yes,” she said.

“Then—please say it,” he whispered.

Some people rose and left the car. She sat apparently buried in colorless reverie. Twice her voice failed her; he bent nearer; and—

“I love you,” she said.

Two

A Pilgrim



The servants had gathered in the front hall to inspect the new arrival—cook, kitchen-maid, butler, flanked on the right by parlor-maids, on the left by a footman and a small buttons.

The new arrival was a snow-white bull-terrier, alert, ardent, quivering in expectation of a welcome among these strangers, madly wagging his whiplike tail in passionate silence.

When the mistress of the house at last came down the great stone stairway, the servants fell back in a semi-circle, leaving her face to face with the white bull-terrier.

“So *that* is the dog!” she said, in faint astonishment. A respectful murmur of assent corroborated her conclusion.

The dog’s eyes met hers; she turned to the servants with a perplexed gesture.

“Is the brougham at the door?” asked the young mistress of the house.

The footman signified that it was.

“Then tell Phelan to come here at once.”