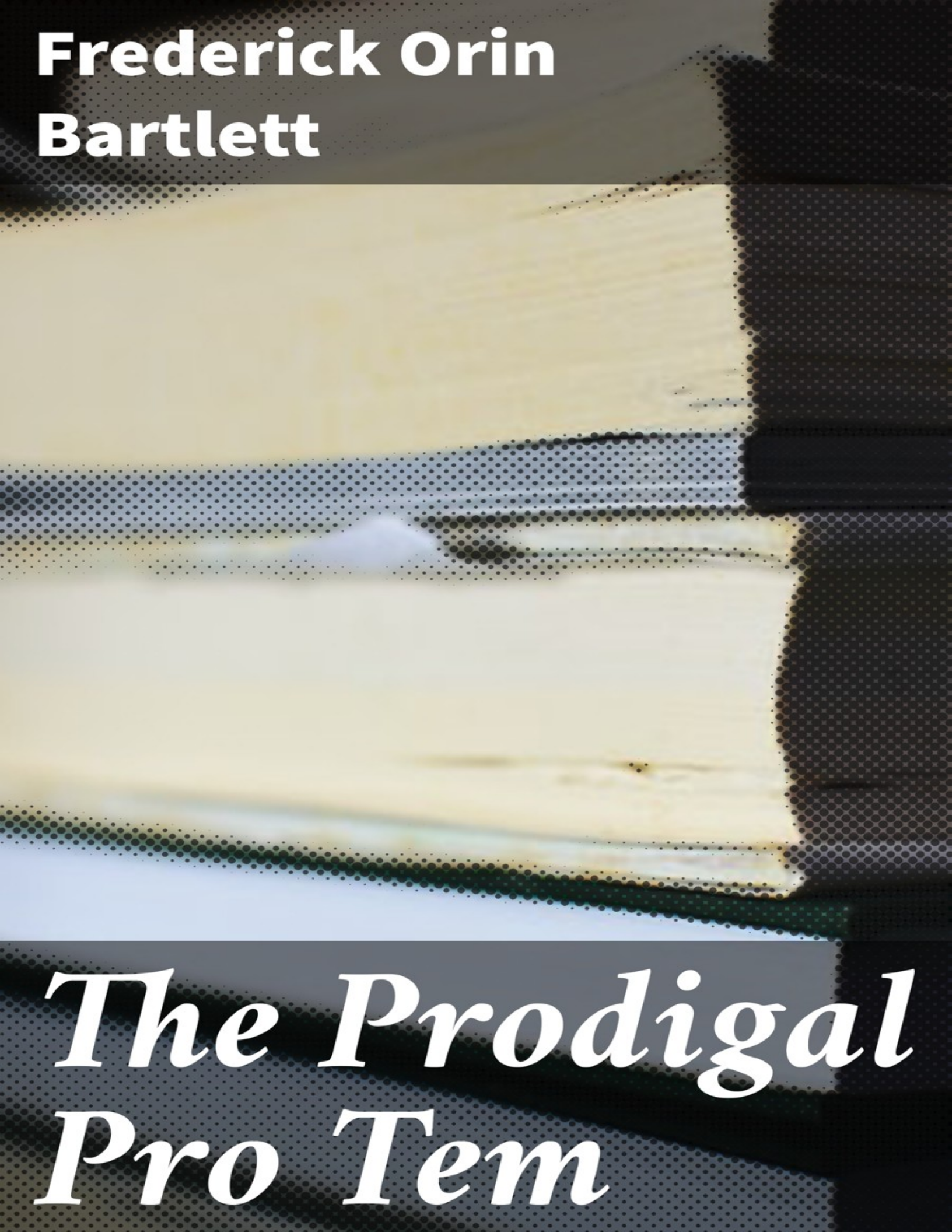
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CHAPTER XXVII IN WHICH EVERYONE LEARNS SOMETHING

CHAPTER I
BARNES—THE PREPOSTEROUS

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If Barnes had been asked to define the one thing lacking in the scene before him, he would probably have answered sentimentally, “A woman—a young and very fair woman,” not that he had any definite figure in mind, but simply because from an artist’s view point the picture, wonderful as it was, seemed now like a marvelous setting without its jewel.

A light breeze from the West, heavy with summer incense, wafted through a golden-moted silence and across a turquoise sky with cotton-blossom clouds. Dense, yet of gossamer fineness; massive, yet light as thistledown, they took their course placidly without disturbing the perfect serenity of their background. In their constant changing, they appeared at times like Spanish galleons with every full-bellied sail straining at its ropes. But they cut no churning path; they left no oily wake. They only cast calm shadows which in their turn swept majestically over the green valley below them. The heavy-leaved trees, the fat grasses, the daisies and roadside ferns found themselves first in the stark sunlight, then in the quiet shade, then in the brazen sun again.

If Barnes had not been in tune with it all, he would have felt out of place here on the top of the long hill up which he had just climbed by the saffron road. As it was, he surveyed the scene with an air of easy content. To a passer-by he might have given the impression of being a large proprietor.

In his heavy walking-boots, his belted trousers, his flannel shirt gathered in at the throat with a light tie, his checked English cap, and his walking-stick, he looked as though he might be making a walking tour of his landed estates. He had a comfortable air of princely sovereignty. His even features, his tall erect frame, his gray-blue eyes, and above all his thin, straight nose carried out the illusion. He had an air more of Bavaria than New England. But his firm lips, surmounted by a bristling blonde mustache, trimmed short and in a straight line, together with his Saxon hair, marked him of a hardier race. He might have been a Dane, but his cheek bones were too high for that, and there was too much good humor written large about the mouth. As a matter of fact he was from New York state and his ancestors had fought under Schuyler. His great grandfather was quoted as having said, “I’d rather be killed as a private under Schuyler than live, a captain, under Gates.” A sentiment his father had paraphrased when he raged at the walking delegate who tried to unionize his shops, “I’ll go broke by myself before I’ll get rich under you.” From that day Barnes, Sr., had moved from one apartment house to another in New York city in a steady crescendo of advancing rentals until now he needed a secretary to look after the tipping alone. And “The Acme Manufacturing Co.” was wrought in iron scrolls across the oven doors of half the cook-stoves in the United States.

This fact, however, had less to do with Barnes to-day than the more romantic one that his father in the days of beginnings, married his book-keeper, a fine-souled English girl, niece of the late Lord Dunnington. Her father, a younger

son, came to America to make his fortune, died soon after, and left the girl penniless. To-day the one romantic spot left in Barnes, Sr., was his ambition to accumulate a fortune so vast that it might overawe his caddish English relatives. It was the mother in Barnes, Jr., and not the father who now stood upon the top of the hills dreaming into the cotton-blossom clouds.

His pose was misleading. Barnes was proprietor of nothing but himself. That was much or little as you happened to feel about it. To himself it was enough to make him glad that he stood here to-day even with only a trifle over ten round dollars to his name. The position was of his own choosing. He might have been secretary to the Acme Manufacturing Co. had he wished, instead of a painter of very good water-colors which as yet, however, had not found so ready a market as the cook-stoves.

The father put it bluntly when he declared, “People must eat to live; they can worry along without pictures.” Perhaps. But he couldn’t. He could worry along better without cook-stoves, as he was proving.

But when a gay shaded patch of blue seen through the straggling cloud-mist made him think of his mother’s wet eyes as they were when in something of a temper he had quit the gorgeous apartment house for good, it occurred to him that his father might have been less irascible about the matter. The man had some grounds for temper to be sure. In college Barnes had devoted himself to Fine Arts and similar subjects when the elder, not recognizing the courses as expressed in the University cipher code, had thought him working assiduously at economics and other useful

branches of manufacturing. Then, too, instead of studying the market conditions of Europe when abroad, he had used the opportunity for living a bit in the Latin quarter and visiting the galleries. He reported home that so far as he could see, people over there had to have pictures; they could worry along without cook-stoves. But even so, he couldn’t stand being browbeaten like an errant schoolboy, and therefore when matters came to a crisis he packed up his sketch-book and started on a jaunt through the Catskills, where Rip Van Winkle had found surcease before him.

Below him stretched acre after acre of farm lands made rich by three generations of toilers. Gray stone walls told bluntly what the task had been. They gave the scene a history such as crumbling castle walls lend to English landscapes. The farms swept down a valley cut by a lazy lowland stream, which looked as though it might furnish good trout fishing. He turned to the left and saw through the birches bordering the road what he had not before noticed—a red brick house half hidden behind a row of elms. Just above, a wagon track led to it. He took a position where he could see the house more in detail. He caught a glimpse of a white-pillared porch and a Dutch door, the upper part swung open. The brass handle shone brightly in the sunshine. To the left there was a capacious barn with chickens scratching industriously before the open door. From somewhere came the coppery tinkle of homing cows. It looked like a place where for the asking one could get milk and honey and good rye bread.

The rural free delivery carrier jogged up the hill and, stopping to drop some mail in a letter-box out of sight

behind the hedge, nodded a cheery “Howdy” to Barnes and jogged on again. This man in his officious Federal uniform destroyed something of the sleepy atmosphere of the place. “Here I am,” he seemed to declare as boisterously as the circular letters of the Acme Manufacturing Co. “Here I am, dear sir or madame, and beg to remain most respectfully yours, the United States of America.”

Barnes, who had opened his portfolio with an idea of sketching the spot, closed it again, tying it in one of those hard knots which invariably in the end he had to cut. But he was checked by a sound from the direction of the letter-box. At first he thought it was a distant whip-poor-will. It was low and had the same note of subdued pathos. Then he concluded that it was a straggling brook running with gentle sobbing among the ferns. But the peculiar sound soon became more individualized. It took on a human note; then a feminine. Finally he awoke to the fact that it was nothing else but the sobbing of a woman. He strode up the grass-grown road to the hidden stretch beyond the fringe of trees. There he found himself confronting a young woman who was kneeling upon the grass, bowed above an open letter in her lap.

She was not over twenty, but tall and lithe. Her heavy hair, black and silken, lay coiled about her head in heavy braids. She was dressed in white with a collar of exquisite lace fastened at her throat with a turquoise pendant. A great orange-colored cat arched its back in apparent sympathy against her skirt. The soft grass had muffled his approach so that for a moment she was unaware that she was not alone.

“I beg your pardon,” he apologized, hat in hand, now not at all sure that he ought to be here.

She was upon her feet in an instant. She looked as though about to run. The cat challenged him with a little spit.

“I didn’t know,” he hastened to explain, “but what you had met with an accident.”

She looked whole enough. He surmised that the letter was the cause of her agitation. If so, he certainly was intruding. Her black eyes, full, Italian, swept by long lashes, seemed to tell him so.

“No,” she murmured, “it is nothing; just bad news. It came so unexpectedly.”

Her lips moved rhythmically to the music of a sweetly lyrical voice. Her teeth were as white as those of the orange-colored cat. She fitted marvelously well into the scene above the valley. Consequently he parried a little to prolong an interview to which he knew he had no right.

“Luckily, bad news generally does come unexpectedly,” he said.

She flashed a look at him as though to fathom his intent. Then she glanced swiftly towards the brick house and seemed instantly in her grief to forget that he was there.

“It will kill him,” she exclaimed below her breath.

Still he hesitated, impressed by the weight of her sorrow.

“If I may be of any service,” he ventured, “I’m on my way to the next village. Any letter or wire—”

She looked up.

“No! No! Such news travels only too quickly,” she answered. Her brows contracted. She went on more to

herself than to him, “If I could only check it before it reaches him.”

“He,” mused Barnes, is at once the most personal and impersonal of pronouns. Next to “She” it is the most pregnant with possibilities of all human utterances.

He wondered, too, how it would be possible to paint a black that had gold in it; an ivory that had rose in it; a pure white that had blue in it. It was not possible. And yet there they were in her hair, her brow, and the setting of her pupils. The tawny cat pressed close to her skirt.

“Then I fear,” he said half in apology, half in hope, as he prepared to leave, “that I can’t help you. And yet,” he reflected aloud, “it seems as though when ill fortune hits hard at anyone the rest of the world ought to club in to help. There ought to be a bad news insurance.”

Her face brightened. But instantly it clouded again as she turned half away.

“But instead of that,” he went on, “the world only raises barriers.”

She recognized his implied offer of help. If her instinct bade her turn from it, there was something in his sturdy presence, above all in his frank eyes, which made him seem to stand for just some such kind-hearted insurance as he had whimsically suggested. It was possible that he from his impersonal point of view might be able to see more clearly than she just what in such a crisis as hers was wisest. At any rate, she said,

“It’s about my brother. He won’t come home.”

Barnes suppressed a smile. He had been prepared for sudden death. He shifted his eyes from her to the brick

house now growing more mellow in the softening twilight.

“That is his home?” he asked.

She nodded, watching him curiously.

“I should think a man ought to be eager to return to such a home as that,” he said.

“He ran away,” she explained with some embarrassment at expressing the more intimate details. “He is somewhere in Alaska.”

Barnes acknowledged her confidence with a sympathetic nod of his head.

“If he is in Alaska,” he suggested, “it will be only a matter of time.”

“That is just the trouble,” she exclaimed impulsively. “That is the pity of it. It will be too late!”

He saw that the boy himself was a mere episode in some more poignant grief. He waited for her to proceed. She said,

“I don’t know why I should tell you this—except that it’s a relief to tell anyone. Father is up there waiting for him—with not long to live. If he hears this—his heart—”

Her fingers closed convulsively over the letter.

“That *is* tough,” he murmured. “Your father expected to see the boy himself to-day?”

“Not to see him, but to hear him, to feel him. Father is blind.”

“That’s still worse. The boy knows of his trouble?”

She nodded.

“Then why won’t he come?”

“Because of a quarrel. He wrote this.”

She handed the letter to Barnes with a quick motion as though in sudden hope that he might be able to gather from

it something she herself had missed. He glanced it through. It was a thoughtless letter. Its whole tone was one of boyish bravado. Barnes flushed as he read it.

“What the boy seems to need,” he commented, “is a cowhiding.”

“I’m afraid he has fallen into bad company,” she apologized for him, but none too heartily.

He checked his own opinion.

“Joe seems almost like a stranger to me,” she confided further. “He has been gone five years now. And the last few years he *was* at home, I was away at school.”

Barnes refrained from congratulating her. He realized how really serious an affair she had upon her hands.

“And you—you must tell your father this yourself?” he asked.

“Yes,” she answered, “and it’s like being ordered to kill him.”

She drew in a deep breath that was half a gasp.

Barnes thought a moment.

“The first thing I should do,” he advised, “would be to tear up the letter.”

“You mean—?”

“I should never let him see that.”

She hesitated a moment and then still half dazed tore it into little bits. She tossed the fragments to the ground. They were harried about the greensward by a light sunset breeze. The yellow cat began to play with them.

“Now,” he advised, “I shouldn’t tell your father anything.”

“But he expected Joe to-day! That would leave him to wait.”

“Isn’t that better?” he asked.

“Ah,” she exclaimed, “the blind wait so hard. There is nothing else for them.”

“But they suffer hard, too. While waiting he could at least —hope.”

She shook her head quickly.

“He would guess.”

“A guess is never a certainty,” he persisted.

“It would be certainty enough to break down his poor heart. Dr. Merriweather said that Joe alone could keep him with us another week.”

Barnes glanced again at the brick house. It scarcely seemed possible that so grim a crisis as this could center there. The situation struck home. In some way he felt the responsibility of this unknown young man’s action resting upon his own shoulders. He, too, in a fit of anger had left a father behind him.

At that moment Barnes was inspired by an idea—a preposterous idea to be sure, but the present situation was preposterous and so was Barnes himself if his father was to be believed. Furthermore most inspired ideas *are* preposterous. It depends a good deal on how they turn out whether or not that adjective clings to them forever. But this one made even Barnes catch his breath. He had to look again at the blue sky, at the gold in her hair, at her eyes now misted like Loch Lomond at dawn.

“There is just one other course for us,” he announced deliberately. “We might deceive him.”

She started back.

“I don’t understand.”

“How many up there must know of this?” he inquired.

“There is only Aunt Philomela,” she managed to answer.

“The servants?”

“They have heard of Joe but never seen him.”

“The neighborhood?”

“We moved here after Joe left.”

She answered his questions mechanically with no suspicion as to what he was leading.

“The boy was young? You say this was five years ago?”

“Yes. Yes.”

“A lad changes a good deal in that time. Do I resemble him—even remotely?”

“You?”

She studied him again as though for the first time she had seen him.

“Joe,” she faltered, “must be now—about your height.”

“That’s enough. A grown man may change in every way except in height.”

“But—”

“There is only a week or so. I am free. Why couldn’t I play the son? Why,” he smiled at the odd whirligig, “why couldn’t I play the prodigal?”

She started back, her hands clasped to her breast, her eyes grown big.

“How impossible!” she exclaimed.

“And humane,” he suggested.

The word caught her attention.

“It would be almost that,” she admitted reluctantly.

He waited. He did not care to press the point by argument. It was merely a suggestion born of the moment—born of the acute necessity of doing something at once. But she must decide for herself. He had done his best, and however it turned this picture was worth remembering.

At first it did not seem to her even a possibility, but once she recovered a little from the shock of her surprise, once she had stripped it of its novelty, and, gazing into his honest eyes, considered it merely as an heroic measure for easing the sick, blind man to his end, she found herself forgetting everything else but the peace it might bring. She, better than he, knew that it *was* possible.

“But,” she exclaimed, “it is such a bit of trickery.”

“Nothing else,” he assured her, “or diplomacy if you wish to dignify it.”

“If—if we succeeded it would make his last days very pleasant.”

“I would do my best.”

“But it is such an obligation—”

“Let me represent the world at its finest. Let me found the bad news insurance company.”

“Surely you can’t afford to sacrifice so much time.”

“I’ll paint a picture or two. I shall be more than repaid.”

“You’re an artist!” she exclaimed as though that might account for many hitherto inexplicable matters.

“I’m striving to deserve that title,” he admitted.

Her head was awhirl with the quick sequence of unexpected events. But in the midst of it she still grasped at this hope.

“Would you,” she gasped, “be good enough to meet my aunt?”

“It will be a pleasure.”

“She is very quick-tempered,” she explained, “so you needn’t pay much attention to her.”

“That is the distinct advantage of quick-tempered relatives,” he affirmed.

“You will come now?”

“Yes,” he agreed readily. “And—it may be helpful—my name is Barnes.”

She shot a swift half-frightened smile at him. “And I am Miss Van Patten.”

He bowed.

She led the way to the house, the yellow cat by her side.

CHAPTER II
THE COURTESY OF THE ROAD

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The little old lady sitting by the window in the big living-room, as serene as Whistler's portrait of his mother, may have had a temper but if so, thought Barnes as he entered at the girl's heels, it was concealed somewhere about her person other than in her face. She was in black with a white cap sitting as daintily light on her gray hair as the first flick of snow on a silver fir. She was a tiny body with shrewd black eyes and a firm thin mouth. Her wrinkled cheeks still had color. She was busy with a wisp of lace.

"Aunt Philomela, this is Mr. Barnes."

The girl spoke the sentence as though it were one word. Aunt Philomela snapped up her head and leveled her astonished black eyes upon a young and decidedly good-looking stranger who was bowing low. Then she shot them at the girl who had turned towards him she had so abruptly introduced.

"I have been thrust so rather forcibly into the honor of your acquaintance," murmured Barnes, "in the hope that I may be of some service."

As he observed the lightning flashes beginning to cut the dark of her eyes, Barnes suspected that she had already found in the hidden depths of them, the missing temper. The formal courtliness of his introductory speech baffled her for a moment, but now she observed in a sharp staccato,

"Perhaps my niece will explain where she had the honor of meeting Mr. Barnes."

“By the hedge,” answered Barnes, assuming the burden of the reply, “just by the letter-box.”

“And she is indebted—”

“To Chance and the courtesy of the road.”

“And the service you propose?” continued the little old lady, clearly still bewildered. “A set of books, perhaps?”

It was evident that her wits were still keen.

“No,” answered Barnes, unruffled. He could blame his portfolio for that accusation. “No, though it’s a matter requiring equal tact if that is possible.”

The aunt, with a queenly nod of her white head towards a chair, graciously gave him permission to be seated, though the red in her cheeks was heightening ominously. Barnes surmising that she was struggling hard not to sacrifice her present advantageous position to a quick tongue, resolved to put the matter bluntly while yet there was time.

“Your niece has just received a letter from your nephew. He writes that he will not come home.”

“My niece confided this personal affair in you?”

He bowed.

“Eleanor,” she demanded, “is this true?”

“That Joe refuses to come home? It is brutally true, Aunt.”

The girl had turned her aunt’s hasty slur neatly. Barnes met her eyes with understanding. As in Miss Van Patten’s case, the grim fact was sufficient to divert the aunt’s attention from everything else.

“He refuses to come back at such a time?” she repeated. “This is terrible!”

There was silence for a moment, and then she added,

“But this will break his heart!”

She glanced excitedly from one to the other of them. The girl crept to her side.

“It will. It will if he learns of it. But he mustn’t.”

“Mustn’t, Eleanor? What other way is there?”

“Mr. Barnes—” began the girl.

The aunt glanced swiftly at the stranger again. He met her eyes steadily—with perhaps the slightest, the very slightest, gallant lowering of them in respectful deference to her age.

“I fail to see how a stranger may assist in so personal a matter,” she observed icily.

“If you will let me explain,” said Barnes. “It seems to me that no one but a stranger can help. I’ve ventured to suggest that I be allowed to ward off the blow; that I be allowed to do this in the only possible way now open—by impersonating the boy.”

The girl straightened herself and waited. Barnes put down his portfolio and accepted the chair which had lately been offered him. Aunt Philomela sat up as stiffly as though suddenly galvanized.

“You—you actually seriously propose such—such base trickery?” she stammered.

“With the most honest intentions in the world,” nodded Barnes.

“You are bold and impertinent, sir!”

“Still with the best intentions in the world.”

“That does not excuse such knavery,” she protested.

The girl broke in,

“Aunt, if you’ll calm yourself and listen a moment. You are unkind to one who has made so generous an offer—”

“Bah,” interrupted Aunt Philomela, “it is too generous.”

Barnes made no reply.

“I must ask Mr.—”

“Barnes,” he supplied as she hesitated.

“To withdraw at once.”

Barnes accepted the decision with equanimity. He reached for his portfolio. But he was beginning to like this little old lady.

The girl checked him with a spirit that was authoritative.

“Would you be good enough to wait a moment,” she requested, “until—until aunt goes upstairs and tells father?”

She turned to her aunt.

“Aunty,” she went on, “you must tell father that Joe refuses to come. You must tell him that Joe is brutal about it. You may tell him that there is no longer any need of his waiting.”

Aunt Philomela quailed.

“Where is the letter?” she demanded feebly.

“I tore it up. It wasn’t suitable for you to read.”

Barnes leaned forward towards the little form which had settled back wearily into the chair. His eyes were tender and sympathetic but there was nothing obtrusive in his attitude.

“Believe me,” he said gently, “I am sorry for you and would do what I can. If what I proposed sounds absurd at first, you see that the only other alternative is cruel. If we can make the end come peacefully and quietly, won’t it justify us somewhat?”

“But why should you, a stranger—” Aunt Philomela began suspiciously.

“I don’t blame you for your doubts,” he answered. “But at such moments as these, who are the strangers? I would help an old man who was bruised by the roadside; why not an old man who lies bruised in his bed?”

“Who are you?” she demanded.

Barnes smiled.

“Ask your cook. I’m the son of the Acme Manufacturing Co.”

The aunt for a moment doubted his sanity.

“Also,” he added, “I paint water-colors—some of them good, some of them indifferent, all of them as well done as I know how to make them.”

“And you came here?” stammered Aunt Philomela, still confused.

“To escape New York. Also for a bit of walking trip to make sketches. For what else—God knows. Perhaps for this.”

Aunt Philomela studied him shrewdly and in spite of herself his mouth started a twinkle in her eyes.

“The whole idea,” she declared, “is absurd.”

“The whole situation,” he returned, “is pitiful.”

“Oh,” moaned Miss Van Patten, “it is. We have no right to stop at anything which shall bring him relief.”

“We have no right to shirk our duty,” returned the aunt with conviction.

“Duty?” queried the girl. “Is it our duty to let father suffer?”

“It is our duty to bear our own burdens and not shift them upon strangers.”

“I see no burden whatever in the undertaking,” corrected Barnes.

“Why don’t you?” challenged the aunt.

That *was* a question. Why was he willing to leave the pleasant freedom of the open road for a task which could not be called in itself pleasurable? The question was even more involved than the shrewd aunt suspected, when the fact was taken into account that he was even willing to act the prodigal—a character for which he had a particular aversion. To his mind the only decent way for the prodigal to return was with the fatted calf over his own shoulders. He must return triumphant, even if repentant. Otherwise it behooved him to stay away in the far country he had chosen and take his medicine like a man. To be sure the present case justified itself, but even so he did not altogether like the flavor of it. Then why was this no burden? It was clearly simply a case of atmosphere. The house itself had something to do with it, the gold in the girl’s hair had something, so did the little old aunt herself with the pink in her crinkly cheeks. He turned from the aunt to the niece. Decidedly, he thought, she should be painted on ivory.

“Why don’t you?” repeated the aunt, pressing home her point.

He glanced out of the window. The West was donning her jewels; pearl, opal, and amethyst.

“Because,” he answered, “the day is very fair.”

“We are indebted then to the sun?”

He avoided the obvious pun and nodded.

“To the sun, the month, the time of day, and—a slight matter of temperament.”

The girl lifted her eyes to his with a smile. The aunt did not repeat again her salient question; instead she frowned.

“I have my two eyes,” she answered enigmatically.

“The world is your debtor,” murmured Barnes, chivalrously.

“Aunty, you ought to think of nothing but father,” broke in the girl. “He will soon wake up in the dark with the old question on his lips.”

There came to them even then the silvery tinkle of a bell from upstairs.

“Oh, dear,” gasped Aunt Philomela.

Her niece stood squarely before her.

“There’s no more time for argument,” she said. “We must decide now at once. Either we must accept Mr. Barnes’ offer or—you must go up to father.”

“Oh, dear,” gasped Aunt Philomela.

“Are you going to him, Aunt?” demanded the girl.

“Oh, dear no,” she trembled. “It quite puts me out of breath to think of it.”

“Then—?”

“Do you think it possible that he can be deceived like this?” she asked.

Barnes arose.

“We can only try. It looks in our favor.”

There was a pause.

“Then?” inquired Barnes, directly.

“Go,” she replied. “Go quickly.”

Which, though ambiguous, decided the matter. Barnes left the room, following the girl who, quite as out of breath as her aunt, led the way.