THE BUBBLE REPUTATION

By Martha McCulloch Williams.

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MAJ. THORNLEY had spent the last quarter of an hour pacing between his easy chair and the high window which opened upon the street. At perhaps the twentieth look through it his face brightened, though a fretful line drew in about the mouth.

"Cornelia is late," he said, glancing at the clock. "I must speak to her, though it is hardly likely my daughter fails to understand that a lady, if she is forced into business, does not linger in places of business."

Then he sat down, rigidly upright, with his eyes fixed upon the outer door of the apartment. It was a gray day and raw, with mists blowing in from the sea. Although it was only 4 o'clock of a November afternoon, the flare of gas and electric lights already made paths of dim radiance athwart stone and asphalt. Within the wan daylight seemed to catch a new duskiness from the flickering gleams of a low fire. Fuel in plenty lay ready to his hand, yet it had not occurred to Maj. Thornley to replenish the grate.

He was thin and stooped and old, very much older than his years. They might have been sixty, yet his hair was whiter and thinner than his father's had been as he lay in his coffin, aged eighty years old.

Illness had to answer for some part of that. He walked slowly and painfully, his right arm was drawn, his right hand knotted, and writhen till the fingers could grasp nothing. Notwithstanding Maj. Thornley kept an air of force and authority. His sound hand clasped and unclasped itself masterfully upon the arm of his chair; his ear was alert for steps on the stairway outside.

They did not come as quickly as he knew they should. Cornelia had lingered reprehensibly to pat the head of the small lad on the first floor. That delayed her upward progress, and she was not sorry of it in spite of being cold and wet and very, very tired.

A figure of contradictions, with no youth in her face, but a certain elastic springiness of motion, she went on to her own door. In the dim rays filtering through the skylight you saw that she was slight, but well knit, with shadowed eyes and a mouth whose curves were richly humorous and withal faintly cynical. A brave face hers, that of one who under crushing weight faced it down with a laugh. Just now there was no mirth in it; it was too tensely weary. A half sigh struggled over her lips as she set her key in the lock, but as the door swung inward she called cheerily:

"How late am I, governor? I know you have been looking for me at least five minutes."

"Half an hour, you mean! Why did you stay?" Maj. Thornley said with a complaining accent. "You must have known I would be anxious to hear about—everything. Sit down! I cannot listen while you fidget so."

Cornelia had slipped off her damp outer garment and knelt in front of the fire, stirring it to a blaze. She seated herself beside it and turned her face toward her father. Her fingers were drawn with cold, her feet soaked, her wet skirts clung depressingly about her ankles, yet she said with just the least hard breath, "I am sorry to be so late, pappy, but what can one do but wait when one goes for money and finds the cashier out?"

"They must be very slack in their business methods. Syndicates are poor things anyway. I am sure it would be ever so much better for us if you confined yourself to the magazines—and—well—say the comic papers," Maj. Thornley said complainingly.

"Nothing would please me better if only you will show me how to bring it about," Cornelia said with a smile, stretching her numb fingers toward the reddening fire. Her father's head went up.

"You should certainly know how, after all these years of experience," he said, "but what did McCullom say to the work you took him to-day? I hope he was pleased with it."

"I think he will be when he looks at the sketches. He had not time to do more than run over the titles," Cornelia said, then for the first time averting her eyes. "But when he read them he said: 'That's a various lot. Really, Miss Thornley, you're getting quite a reputation.'"

"Ah!" Sharp interest beamed in the major's eye. "Then I hope he paid you better than formerly. Of course if your work attracts attention——"

"No; just the usual rate," Cornelia broke in abruptly. "And I did not get what I expected, either. One of my articles was crowded out—will not be used till next week."

"Did you go to the Bugle office? Maybe they have used——" Maj. Thornley in turn interrupted, stopping with a tentative, wistful look his daughter found it infinitely hard to bear.

Yes, I went, but there was nothing for me. Mr. Blake said he did not know when the little story he asked for would get in," she said. "But, never mind, pappy, the McCullom money will answer."

She had opened her purse and now thrust a thin roll of bills into her father's hand. He took them, gravely unrolled and scrutinized each one, then folded them over a thinner roll from his inner pocket. Cornelia made to rise and leave him, but he stopped her with an imperious gesture, and said:

"What was McCullom's word, daughter? That you were——"

"That I was really getting quite a reputation, pappy," Cornelia answered, sitting back obediently in her chair. "And Mr. Blake told me," she went on cheerfully, "that after Christmas it was likely he could take something from me almost every week."

"It is very strange," the old man said musingly. "As much, as good work as you have done, we do not seem to get forward. I think perhaps, Cornelia, you are too shy and sensitive to let people know what you have done."

"Pshaw, of course I can't go about proclaiming myself a genius. You would not have me—I know you would not," Cornelia said, a faint flush coming to her cheek. "Remember, when you think how slow my progress is, that I am almost unknown—except to a few editors. There is nobody to look at what I do and say to his next neighbor, 'Awfully clever thing—that of Miss Thornley's in this month's Metropolis, or 'Jolly story that Thornley woman has written for the last Blush of Innocence.' Such things count. They get one into the literary gossip which makes up so many people's minds for them. Yet I don't know but I am rather glad not to have them. Climbing alone may be tiresome, still it gives a sure foot and a head not easily turned."

"Still it would be better if you were not so secluded," Maj. Thornley protested. "I wonder often why you do not go more about with Alice Gilchrist. She knows all these influential people. I have heard her mention them familiarly a hundred times."

Cornelia got up decidedly. "My dear gossip must excuse me now," she said. "Unless he does—well, we will have no supper—and that is the one catastrophe that would completely upset me."

Yet she ate sparingly an hour later, when she had spread the round table at her father's elbow with delicate old china, attenuated family silver and served there a meal as appetizing as it was simple. Cornelia led him on to tell his three best stories, laughing over them as though they were quite new. Then she brought his pipe, filled and lighted it and drew away his chair, saying with a light stroking of the hair: "Mind now, pappy, no nodding while I'm at the clearing away. I want to hear some more Virginia tales before you go to bed."

"You shall hear them—you must learn all my stories—to tell them, I mean," he said, putting out his hand to detain her. "I am in earnest about Alice Gilchrist," he went on. "You must go there more, and it is quite an accomplishment to know just how a good story should be told."

"Pappy, pappy! Don't you know what dinners here mean? Gowns with tails to them and cabs and diamonds and all that sort of thing," Cornelia protested. "We can never afford that, not under five years. When I'm a famous person, though, what frocks I shall wear! I see myself now in gray velvet, the shade grandmother called 'ashes of roses,' with a train three yards long and lined with pink silk and the open neck filled in with point lace and pink chiffon. I'll have a diamond crescent for luck and a star for my hair. I would not for the world wear one of those big, vulgar sunbursts. Now, by way of achieving that splendor you must let me get my dishes washed. I have some things in my head that must be written down."

"What are they?" the major asked eagerly. Cornelia shook her finger at him and said as she went through the door:

"I'll show you in the morning. One who holds the responsible office of critic must not be allowed to shirk his duty."

When she came back half an hour after, her slim hands were red and shriveled through intimate contact with hot suds. Her father eyed them disapprovingly. "If only I could do a man's work," he said, "my daughter should have what belongs to her name and birth. Instead she drudges and slaves for a helpless burden."

"And asks nothing better," Cornelia said, rising and standing behind his chair. "Governor, how many times must I tell you that you are really and truly the governor which keeps this establishment in the way of going on?"

Caresses were rare between these two, yet now she bent and kissed his forehead, then whisked out a pack of cards and challenged him to a game. At half past eight he arose, wished her a cheery good night, and went smilingly away to bed. Cornelia smiled back at him until the door shut between them, then flung her arms above her head and heaved a sigh.

Next minute, though, she smiled again—a soft, whimsical smile. "If I begin to take myself seriously, I fear I should degenerate into a professional humorist," she said half aloud, as she fetched out pen and paper. "It is quite sad enough to be an unprofessional one. Let's see—what was the first joke I evolved upon the L road this afternoon? I should not make jokes at all, except as an amateur, but one must do something between City Hall place and 150th street. Joke-making passes the time and occasionally puts money in the purse."

Very shortly there were several sparsely written sheets upon the table beside her. Then she got up and stretched both arms high above her head. The fire was red and clear, yet she could feel that the room had grown colder. Outside a sleety rain beat heavily upon pane and roof. Now and again came the whistles of river craft, hoarse and thin through the shivering of the gale. Cornelia looked about her room, bare and dull though it was, with a heart-warm sense of gratitude.

"It is home, no matter how poor," she said under her breath. Then she drew a long inspiration and shivered faintly. Lighting a candle, she slipped noiselessly into her father's room. He was sleeping peacefully, with his sound hand beside his face. For a second she stood looking at him shading the candle with one hand. Something rose in her throat. Her eyes grew suddenly dim. As softly as night falls she crept back to the other room. There she stopped and said to the fire, her sole confidant:

"Dear old governor! I wonder if it would not break his heart to know that what McCullom said was, 'You are getting quite a reputation—as a hack writer!'"

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Although Miss Thornley had a fine conscience for truth, thought of that piece of disingenuousness did not keep her awake. It was not the first time she had changed the spirit while keeping to the letter in repeating to her father things from the outside. He was all in all to her and hope the only medicine for his broken spirit. Once bravest of the brave, manly, masterful, it touched her to infinite pity, to infinite tenderness, to know how he clung to her, how he built upon this saving belief in her genius.

"If only you were my son!" he had said in rebellious bitterness when first trouble came to them. Her heart had echoed the saying, yet she laughed as she answered:

"That would never, never do, governor. Who could live up to being the son of the handsomest man in Virginia? I should infallibly be forced to marry a million and sink to the position of my wife's husband."

A poor jest, but it had served its turn. The sick man had laughed feebly, then after a little fallen asleep. Before his waking Cornelia had chosen her career; she would be a free lance of the pen. To one knowing the profession of letters it would have appeared the most desperate choice. In the strength of ignorance she fought and won a faint measure of success. She must have failed had she ever realized when she was beaten. It was the ineffaceable stay of the thoroughbred which had carried her through her ten years of precarious breadwinning.

They had been full of surprises—of friends unexpectedly raised up in the unlikelist places, of friends falling away in the unlikeliest fashion. Throughout Cornelia had been learning the heights and depths of human nature, the touch and temper of her time; beyond all, a fine and subtle mastery of what was within herself. In usufruct there was a book which had been haltingly accepted by a great publishing house, one of the greatest in the trade. Yet this house had so impressed Cornelia with the hazard of the undertaking she felt almost guilty in thinking over it. Her utmost aspiring hope was that it should at least pay for itself. Otherwise she must feel always like a schemer who had tempted men of genial impulses into a bad investment.

Nobody save her father knew of her book. Nobody would know it for hers until she chose to claim it. If "John Desmond" was unknown, he could not be set down as a hack writer, neither as a newspaper person ratable at so much the column. Some touch of pride had moved her to that decision. Now that the last proofs were out of hand she felt that she had best put the whole thing out of mind and go sedulously to work along her accustomed lines.

"I'll do a lot of valentine stuff," she thought when her head was on the pillow. "After that I don't know. There is not much chance for anything until all this Christmas and New Year stuff is out of the way."

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Three months later Cornelia and her father sat listening nervously for the postman's morning ring. They had made a pretense of breakfasting an hour before, though both were too anxious to do more than pretend. Things had gone contrary with them for quite a month. Cornelia had sold late and early the winter through, yet it had been impossible to do more than meet current expenses. For one thing, the major had been ill. Medicine, wine, and warmth for him had cost a pretty penny. So they were now at the very bottom of the common purse.

Even the faithful McCullom had now for three weeks left her out of his schedules. Other intermittent sources of income had likewise suddenly dried up. Still she was not without hope. There was the story sent a month back to the Blush of Innocence. Always theretofore that great publication had returned such paper argosies of hers within the week. Delay was hopeful, and if the story came back as a check it would be big enough to put them beyond any present anxiety.

Other checks might come, too. Somehow the morning mail seemed always to give color to the day. If it were fruitful or yielded even so much as a friendly letter, the hours were not so weary as when, in sportsman's parlance, it drew blank. Whatever it brought, Maj. Thornley had always the first look at it.

"There, he has come! I don't ring. Tommy Ashton met him coming bringing up the mail," Cornelia called from the window. The major hobbled to the door, upon which there came a resounding thump and through which Tommy cried in the raucous glee of 13:

"Two slim ones and a fat one for Miss Nelyer; reckon that must be from her sweetheart!"

Cornelia's lips parted in a little shivery sigh. She reached for the fat letter and tossed it aside. It was MS.—but not the MS.—and there, plain to view in her father's hand, she saw the imprint of the Blush of Innocence in the corner of an envelope. Impulsively she held out her hand for it. Maj. Thornley waved her away. With tremulous, clutching fingers he slowly opened it, unfolded and ran his eye down the page, then sank back in his chair with a little whimpering sob.

"They—they—won't have—your beautiful story. The editor writes to say he is sorry, and you will get it back by messenger. Daughter, what can we do? What will become of us? Must we starve—we who are so ready to work?"

"No, we shall not starve, Pappy, pappy! Don't cry. You break my heart!" Cornelia said, stooping over him and pressing her lips to his forehead. "Do believe in me a little longer. I shall do something—just what I do not know—but something—depend on that."

"We have no money—nothing—and the rent coming due. How are we to live?" the old man moaned. Cornelia stroked his hair. She was very white, and her eyes burned, but her voice was sweet and even as she said:

"Oh, what a tragic pappy! Dearest, I shall find a way through. I have done it many times before. Now let me make you comfortable, then I must go away. When I come back, I give you my word our affairs shall wear a more satisfactory complexion."

"But how will you do it?" the old man persisted. Cornelia drew a hard breath, then said, still in that even voice, "Governor, I don't just know how, but I do know that I shall do it."

Some little time after she sat tremulously facing Maj. Fyfer, head of the publishing firm. John Desmond's book had been out two months, but a certain shy pride had held the writer of it from making a single inquiry as to its progress. It had given her a turn in fact—the seeing of posters at the L stations. But to her mind that argued nothing—everything had its poster nowadays. Still, she was glad of the sight. By this time it must be somewhat shown, whether or not the thing had any vitality, and that was all important to her, who had come intent upon asking Fyfer & Co. to buy it outright.

"If they will give me a hundred dollars," she was saying to herself as she answered Maj. Fyfer's inquiry for her father. "But, no—that sounds extortionate—maybe I had better say fifty—we could barely squeeze through on fifty—but, oh, if only I was not forced to ask!"

"You are just in time, Miss Thornley. We were on the point of sending up to you several letters which came in this morning for John Desmond," Maj. Fyfer said, with a genial smile.

"They must be from very good people who have found 'A Rope of Sand' wicked. I did not see the wickedness. Did you, Maj. Fyfer?" Cornelia said, lightly, though her breath came short.

"No, I did not find it wicked, but readers may be different. We have sold two editions of it and have a third of 5,000 in press," Maj. Fyfer returned, with twinkling eyes. "I want to congratulate you heartily upon your success, which is, I may tell you, the success of the season."

For a full minute Cornelia could not speak. Things danced before her in the maddest whirl. Maj. Fyfer looked at her keenly—so keenly he could not help but note the faded decency of her gentlewoman's figure. Perhaps he read there a story of poverty, trim and well brushed, but poverty none the less. He looked carefully over her head, and said, offhandedly:

"Sorry the major has been ill; sickness is a great worry—expensive, too. If you need any money, Miss Thornley, we shall be happy to advance——"

"Oh, might I have a hundred dollars right now?" Cornelia said, and for the first time that day her eyes were misty.

"Five hundred if you want it," Maj. Fyfer returned, smiling. "We must treat you beautifully, you know, or you will be going off and making the fortune of our rivals."

The rest was like a dream to her until she was safe upon the L train, her purse bulging with notes and gold pieces. Then it occurred to her to break the seals of the three letters she had found in waiting. When she had read them she had much ado to keep from her old tomboy's trick of whistling aloud. But she did refrain, and when the train had got partly up town she left it and betook herself to the offices of McCullom—McCullom, who had helped her around so many hard corners.

Once she had defined McCullom to her father as "an etheric vibration in a business suit." He had a compelling jaw, a hay-colored mustache and blue eyes, as kindly as they were keen. Neither mortal nor mugwump had ever seen him completely quiescent. It was popularly believed, indeed, that he slept with one ear open to hear the faintest murmur of an editor, and the other yet more keenly attent to catch the name of the newest literary idol.

"Come in, Miss Thornley. Began to think you were dead—that you had drowned yourself in sheer envy because you are not John Desmond," he called, looking up from a bunch of clippings over which he was poring. "Lord, but that fellow has got there with both feet! Who is he, anyway? English—I'll bet fourpence on that. We don't have his sort this side the herring pond."

Between every word he had been apparently reading a paragraph. Now he tossed the clippings to Cornelia, saying with the kindest accent: "Why don't you Americans give us something a little approaching that fellow? If only you could—well, you'd make your everlasting fortune—mine too."

"Not if you paid us the same rate you have offered him," Cornelia said with dancing eyes. McCullom, who had risen and walked the room's length, sprang back at least a foot crying:

"How do you know? You must know him. Say, Miss Thornley, if you'll get me an interview before the rest can find him out, you shall have a year's engagement right straight through."

"Thank you for nothing. I am above bribes. Now I have no need of them," Cornelia said merrily, shaking her full purse in his face. McCullom eyed it critically.

"If that was my wife's, I'd say, 'Samples,'" he retorted, "but you—it must be money, unless it is manuscript."

"The terms are interchangeable, according to McCullom," Cornelia said, thrusting a letter in his eyes. "They gave me that just now at Fyfer's," she went on. "It is addressed to John Desmond, but they appeared to think I had a right it."

For the first time within recorded knowledge McCullom was speechless a full half minute, yet he caught both Cornelia's hands, and wrung them hard and heartily, then as his voice came back he shouted to his stenographer: "Miss Bliss! I say, Miss Bliss! Take this letter to our subscribers and see that it goes at once:

Dear Sir: I am happy to announce, on behalf of the Literary Press, that there will appear in its regular service at the earliest possible dates six short stories by John Desmord, the famous new novelist.

"Oh, thank you!" Cornelia said with her best courtesy. "Excuse the interruption, but you have only five of my stories in hand. However, I can send you another—one that was not good enough for the Blush of Innocence—if you will take it."

"Take it! I'll take whatever you'll let me have. So will those Blush idiots—when they find out who you are," McCullom said with an elevation of his thin, flexible nostrils. Cornelia laughed softly.

"Maybe you are right," she said. "At any rate, Quiller himself"—Quiller was the Blush's chief editor—"has written to John Desmond praising the 'strength, delicacy, and originality of his work—its deep inner and spiritual significance'—and asking to be favored with contributions, of whatever sort and size it may please John Desmond to send. Of course I can't let him have back the thing he has just returned, but how if I exchanged with you for the story or mine you care least about?"

McCullom gave her a reproachful look. "As if you didn't know that all your stories are superlative—now!" he said. "No, no, Miss Thornley! You cannot get back a line from us. The Blush may wait until you choose to write something especially for it, but I hope you won't do it. I want to control your work exclusively."

Cornelia shook her head. Her smile this time was an obstinate one. McCullom whistled two notes of a popular air, each decidedly out of key; then burst out: "Of course we'll pay what those stories are worth. You don't doubt that, I hope?"

"You will pay the exact rate they were worth when I brought them to you," Cornelia said, rising to go; then over her shoulder as she went through the door: "I am not so young as I might be, still I think I shall live long enough to get out of you full value for the bubble reputation."

McCullom looked after her, whistling more crankily than ever. He had put on his hat to go out. Suddenly he lifted it and said to the man at the next desk:

"Confound it! We've been employing genius unawares, and now she is showing me that those impossible high-toned people she is so fond of putting in her stories are not impossible after all. Come to think of it, that letter had best go as a dispatch, and add that the author's name is Miss Cornelia Vance Thornley. Be sure to say, too, subscribers must publish it in big type in next Sunday's papers. It is a piece of news worth printing—a clear literary scoop on the literary papers themselves."

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McCullom spoke of knowledge without foresight. He overlooked the presence of a slim, alert young fellow, carefully but not foppishly dressed. He had come up in the elevator with Miss Thornley and might even have preceded her into McCullom's presence but that something in her face had made him do what he seldom did, put himself aside for a woman neither young nor beautiful. While she talked he stood in vacuous quiet, then as she went away he hurried after her. But he missed the car that took her down, and when he reached the street level she was out of sight.

"I've lost her, but I won't lose my story. I'll go and call on Mrs. Gilchrist. Maybe she has heard of her," he said.

Twenty minutes later he was threading his way through the scented intricacies of Mrs. Gilchrist's morning room. A wood fire snapped and sparkled in the grate. There was a great bowl of roses upon the inlaid table at one side, and everywhere the fire shine flashed back from bronze and gilding and polished wood. Mrs. Gilchrist was the despair of gift-makers. Already she had so near everything it was a matter of six months' thought to find anything she could accept with a decent show of civility.

"What is it you want now, Charlie?" she called to her visitor. "Wretched boy, you know you never do come near me except when you want something."

"I know it. I have come to balance accounts by telling you something you are wild to know," Charlier said, bowing over her hand. She was tall, very blonde, with a classic face, and a figure full of richly gracious curves. She sat in a high carved chair beside an open desk. The top of it was strewn with unsealed notes in dainty envelopes. A Turkish cigarette half consumed and still smoking lay among them.

"Have one. You are never decently entertaining except when you smoke," she said, extending a full cigarette case to her caller. "These are nice," she went on, "but if you want something stronger you will find cheroots on the library table—my husband's, of course, they are, but he won't miss one if you are careful to shut the box right."

"Thank you; this does excellently," Charlier said. "I am so full of my news I must tell it. John Desmond, author of 'A Rope of Sand,' is one Miss Thornley. Do you happen to know anything about her?"

"What? Oh, you are joking or somebody has imposed on you dreadfully! Cornelia Thornley! Why, I know everything about her, and it is utterly impossible she can have written that book. Why, I actually read it instead of skimming, as I do most things."

"But she did write it—I can't be mistaken—so tell me all you know. Hope there are at least three columns of it," Charlier returned. Mrs. Gilchrist drew a long breath, then shook her head at him, with a pretended frown.

"So that's what brought you," she said. "I believe you are romancing. But this is part of Cornelia Thornley's story: She's Southern—Virginia—but we finished together at Mme. Campan's. Maj. Thornley was a rich railroad man then. No, she was not a belle, for all she was an heiress. The Thornleys were called the handsomest family in Virginia, but she was different—thin and slight, with the coloring of a faded rose. Then she had a sort of measuring look most men found it hard to face if they began talking sentiment. Her grandmother brought her up. It was not until his mother died that Maj. Thornley came to New York and began his Wall street career. He had a year of dazzling success there; then at the supreme minute he was stricken down. In a week he was beggared. The newspapers will tell you all about that. Cornelia nursed him back to life. Then the two of them insisted upon giving up all they had to pay dollar for dollar of debts. The creditors ought to have given him back at least a few thousands, but nobody thought of it in time. Perhaps they did not know that all the Thornleys had left was a couple of hundreds.

"It simply struck me dumb when Cornelia said she meant to live by writing. I was sure they would be starving in less than six months. To think she should be famous! Are you sure, Charlier, there is no mistake? Don't deceive me. It might put me in a dreadful position."

Charlier told her what he knew. His pencil had been flying throughout the recital. Already he felt sure of his three-column Sunday story. And he would make the Bugle play roundly for it. Come to think of it, he remembered having seen in the Bugle office this woman whose step was so young and whose eyes were so old. Something more of detail he must have. It would not do to trust too far to imagination, however facile. Looking up at Mrs. Gilchrist, he said:

"Of course, you have been her friend straight through. How sorry I am I have not been lucky enough to meet her here."

"Oh, yes, she comes here, but not when there are people. My dear boy, she has not had a decent frock in ten years. Of course you don't want frights in your drawing-room, not unless they happen to be heathen gods or Chinese images or geniuses," Mrs. Gilchrist said. She prided herself upon her frankness, albeit it was a somewhat intermittent quality. "That is why I must be certain," she went on. "As you see, I'm sending out cards for a luncheon. Since you gave me your word for this, I shall write upon them all, 'To meet John Desmond.' The other women will be wild, but they ought to know by this time that it is my privilege to have all sorts of celebrities before they do."

"You will let me come, too?" Charlier said in his most pleading accent. Mrs. Gilchrist shook her head. "Impossible," she said. "There should never be men in any company unless there are enough to go round."

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"It is simply beyond belief," the major said, folding and unfolding a hundred dollar bill. "Our hard time over, little girl! To think you have a genius like the genii of the lamp in that head of yours."

"You are Aladdin and shall summon it at will. Remember, though, geniuses of all sorts must work," said Cornelia, taking up her pen as there came a knock at the door, a light, well-bred rap that made her spring to her feet and say:

"There is Alice Gilchrist, pappy. Not a word to her."

"You dear, obliging creature, to blossom out as a celebrity in Lent just as we were dying for something new to talk about!" Mrs. Gilchrist said breathlessly, holding Cornelia at arm's length and looking her critically over. "No, I am not going to congratulate you," she ran on. "All my felicitations are for the major. Dear Major Thornley, can you sleep of nights for pride in this girl, this naughty girl, who must not be allowed longer to hide her light under a bushel?"

"I am no more proud of her now than I was on the day she was born," Major Thornley said. "You forget that she is her mother's daughter."

"And her father's, too," Mrs. Gilchrist said, suavely. "Major, I know a drive will help you. My carriage is at the door. Do let it take you for a spin over the boulevard."

The major went, asking himself, "What did Alice want that she sends me out of the way?"

Cornelia had known intuitively Alice had a passion for celebrities, particularly fine new ones. In her own mind she had often debated the point whether or not Mrs. Gilchrist would not pay liberally to make a collection of them, as she collected other curios. The puzzling thing was how Alice had thus early found out the identity of John Desmond. Though she herself did not care to remain unknown, she had not meant to reveal herself ahead of McCullom's announcement.

"There is no need for me to say I am pleased—you know it without," Mrs. Gilchrist ran on. "But do, dear Cornelia, tell me all about it, how you wrote the book and why and all that. Charlier, of the Bugle, is simply wild over it. I had told him something of your life, and he said that explained so much in the book—that you were like champagne frappe—this colorless life of yours had driven in your soul emotions and aspirations until they were all concentrated in that book like the soul of the wine."

"Thank him for nothing. That is the tritest, most well worn simile," Cornelia said with a laugh. "Truly, Alice, you have been dreadfully imposed on. I'm not famous. All there is to it is that 'A Rope of Sand' has sold rather well, and because readers like it other publishers want my work."

"And that is what being famous means, you precious humbug!" Mrs. Gilchrist retorted. "And you are coming to lunch with me and meet the very cream of my set a week from Saturday. You must. The cards went the very minute I knew. I shall so enjoy introducing you. Every woman of them has read your book."

Cornelia laughed softly. Then she shook her head.

"I am awfully sorry, Alice," she said, "but your invitation is not in time."

"Oh, if you have an engagement, break it," Mrs. Gilchrist said imperiously. "I simply can't do without you. Remember, I told you the people had been asked to meet you."

"You will have to do without me notwithstanding," Cornelia said, good-humoredly. "Let us be honest, Alice; we always have been that. I have no engagement of any sort, but your invitation is too late by just ten years. Oh, I know I could not have accepted it then, but you might have trusted to my discretion not to make you ashamed. While I hope we shall often see each other, it must be in the old, informal way."

"You don't mean that you intend to cut the whole world, do you?" Mrs. Gilchrist asked, her cheeks very hot. "Unless you do, give me leave to tell you other people would have treated you the same as I have done, only worse."

"Very likely," Cornelia said, "but you see, Alice, I don't know it, so can give myself the benefit of the doubt without entirely losing my self-respect."

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When, by help of McCullom and Charlier many times repeated, Cornelia had been six months a rising literary star, some inkling of the fact trickled into the minds of her father's some-time friends and financial associates. They were in large part Southern like himself, so rustled with mild gratification, saying one to another that blood would tell. They had from the beginning known the major for a thoroughbred; really it was not so astonishing that girl of his had done so well. Too bad that she had had so much of an uphill fight! And one of them would have been glad to help if only she had let it be known help was needed. Pity, too, about the old place, Thornhill!

Maj. Thornley and his daughter were shortly asked to dine at the Swelldorf as guests of admiring and representative Southerners domiciled in New York. The major was for declining, but Cornelia insisted upon going. She was very busy, very happy, now. Something of youth had crept into her eyes. She had fresh, stylish frocks, too, though still the gray velvet and the diamond star were at least at year beyond reach.

In good fortune or ill she was alike graciously brave. "A bank account obliges one not to put on frills, don't you think so, governor?" she had said upon the memorable day when the major had gone in state to make his first deposit. The change had wrought no separateness in the two. He knew all her plans and purposes, read each line she wrote, and still inspected her letters, though he allowed her the first reading of something like half of them.

"If you were not known as the occasion of it, this dinner would unsettle the street," Charlier whispered to Cornelia as the feast drew toward a close. "Maybe you don't know it," he went on, "but there are thirty millons at least around this table and three thousand on it, not counting the wine. Worse still, the bullion is here cheek by jowl with the lamb-like bear."

"Hush!" Cornelia said imperatively. "You chatter so I have lost the taste of at least four years in my wine. Besides, I want to listen to that red-faced man over there. He looks as though he had something on his mind—something that must be told—though he would rather not tell it."

Charlier laughed softly. "So you don't really know it?" he murmured. Cornelia did not heed. She was absorbed in contemplating the red-faced man. He had struggled to his feet and stood at her father's elbow pawing the air with one hand, while with the other he clutched a chair post.

"Ladies and gentlemen, Maj. Thornley, Miss Thornley," he began, "esteemed friends, I should say, we are—we are met to admire the tribute of genius—to pay tribute to admiring genius, I mean—to—to Maj. Thornley we are all proud of you as—as your daughter's father—and—and a fellow Southerner. We know your career—we honor you, sir—we—we wish to—to express better than in words our great admiration to Southern genius"—with a deep bow toward Cornelia, who was staring open-mouthed—"so we have—er—er decided to give—to—er—er—ask, I mean to say—her acceptance of this paper, the deed to Thornhill, your old home."

"Three cheers!" Charlier cried, springing to his feet. The rest looked a trifle blank. Cornelia's cheeks were flaming. She looked across at her father—proudly, with no apprehension. He, too, had risen and stood with difficulty, but without tremor, facing the company.

"Friends all—true friends! I thank you in my daughter's name and mine," he said, "thank you more than words can convey, though what you ask is impossible. But we will meet you half way. My child is working, striving, to buy back—Thornhill"—a little hard breath over the name. "So we will take it—joyfully—not as a gift, but as something for which we may pay you leisurely and in our own good time." Cheers broke out spontaneously here. Half the women were sobbing. Charlier felt his own eyes grow moist as he looked at Cornelia's face, white, but illumined, under a rain of happy tears.

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The next week two happy people sat in a south bound train as it steamed and panted across the jersey meadows. They held each other's hand under cover of their wraps and looked sedulously out of the windows for at least a half hour. Then the woman said, with a happy, long breath: "Thornhill! To think of seeing it again!"

"And seeing it our own, thank God!" the man said reverently. "Daughter, I have a confession to make before we reach our home. In the dark time I tried to believe in you, but I could not always. You won your way so slowly I could not help but lose faith. Can you pardon me, dear daughter? It seems now to have been such cowardly treachery to the bravest comrade a man ever had."

"There is nothing to forgive, governor," Cornelia said, with a laugh, a laugh that was very close to tears. "Contrariwise, your confession relieves me mightly. I have felt so over having to deceive you. Yes, I did deceive you, for in those days I did not much believe in myself."

"So you won, carrying double weight," Maj. Thornley said, patting her fingers. Cornelia smiled a soft, dewy smile. The train swept on swift and sure, bearing them ever nearer to the home of their love.

HIS UNCLE'S WILL.

BY SARAH BRAUMONT KENNEDY.

The funeral was over, the will had been read, and John Gibson came out of the close room into the rose-scented garden. His handsome face was flushed, and his eyes bright with a flame that had in it a glint of anger. He stood a moment by the fountain and let his gaze wander over the surrounding gardens. Everything told of taste and careful attention. The house on the terrace, though not very large, was modern in construction and appointments. The young man ground his teeth.

"Mine—my home, but on what a condition. My uncle might as well have ticketed me 'for sale' at once as to put that clause in his will: 'My home place I give and bequeath to my nephew, John Gibson, on condition that within three months he marries his second cousin, my ward, Harriett Brown.' I remember Harriet as a child of eight—long-limbed, freckled faced, gum-chewing; in fact a hoyden with big dark eyes. A fine wife for a fellow like me; why, I'd sooner marry a—a——" But a suitable comparison failed him, and he bit revengefully at the end of his cigar.

The weeks went by and he was still living at the old place, which had always been his home, for his uncle had raised him. But he was restless, with a feeling almost of wrong doing; for the home was his only on that stern condition, the filling of which lost none of its repugnance. It was ten years since he had seen his cousin, and he hoped it would be as long again before they met. But one morning the post brought him a letter from Harriet's step-mother saying they would be in town for shopping purposes on a certain day, and hoping it would be convenient for him to receive them for a short visit. John was more horrified than he cared to confess even to himself. He was not surprised at the older woman, whom he had long disliked, and who would be glad, so he believed, to be rid of her step-daughter, but that the girl, who knew the condition of that will, should be willing to thrust herself thus upon his notice seemed monstrous. An intense dislike of her took possession of him; a marriage with her now would be doubly impossible, and he resolved to so inform the executors of his uncle's will as soon as the stated time had expired. But in the mean time something must be done about his aunt's letter; so he wrote her politely that his house would be at her disposal, but that he himself was called away to a distant city on important business; and the morning of the day set for the arrival of the ladies he hastily packed a valise and fled. It was not until he stood at the railway ticket office that he determined on his destination. His school chum, Dick Madders, lived on his plantation just this side of the city. He had long been promising Dick a visit; now was the time to pay it; so to Dick he went. On the porch that afternoon he sat and talked with his friend, taking now and then a long breath like a man who had run a race and reached his goal safely.

Just as the dusk began to fall there was a clatter of hoofs on the driveway and a little cavalcade swept up to the steps. Four girls and a young man drew rein and began to dismount. Two of the girls took their turn decorously at the horse-block; the third one was lifted down by her escort, but the fourth, with the skill of a practiced horsewoman, sprang unaided to the ground and tossed her bridle to a waiting servant. Dick, who had hastened down the steps, returned with the handsomest of the quartet, a tall, black-eyed girl, with a superb figure. John knew at a glance who had Dick's fickle heart in present keeping. He arose as the group came to the porch.

"Here, Sis—here, Bess," said Dick. "This is my old friend, Jack Gibson, of whom you have heard me speak." And the two blonde girls in the group came forward with the air of hostesses and welcomed their brother's friend.

Miss Brown, let me present Mr. Gibson," and the tall girl bent her queenly head. Miss Brown again, Mr. Gibson," and the lithe, straight girl, who had leaped from her horse, nodded carelessly and went into the house.

"You could not have come at a better time," Dick confided to him later on. "The girls have these friends for a visit. Say, old man, can't you look after the little one a bit and leave me a chance with the dark goddess?"

"Oh, I suppose so," yawned John. "Are they sisters?"

"No kin; just happened to have the same name. Isn't that tall one simply great?"

"Rather first-class," answered John indifferently, for just now he cared nothing about any girl. The next day, however, remembering his promise, he began to try to make himself agreeable to the younger Miss Brown, whom her companions called "Cricket." But somehow his efforts were unavailing; the girl decidedly withdrew from him, and it was only under Dick's importunities that he continued his attentions. Then the novelty of his repulse made him study the girl closely, and the more he studied her the more interested he became. She was not beautiful like her tall friend, but she had a face that sparkled and a smile that ran all to dimples, only she did not smile at him very often. She was so blithe and cheery that it was quite easy to see how she won her odd nickname. A week went by, and what he had undertaken as a kindness to his host became the most absorbing interest of his life. He had never sued so earnestly for any woman's favor, never returned so persistently after each repulse. About the middle of the second week he sent, through his lawyer in the neighboring city, a telegram to his step-aunt telling her his stay would be indefinitely prolonged, but that she must continue to make use of his house as it pleased her. He was quite resolved that when the end of the month came he would turn the place over to the trustees; he would not have a house he could not offer to his merry tease, this odd mixture of coldness and sunny smiles. He began to dream dreams of a new life, to build castles in which she was always the chatelaine. He waited for her at the foot of the stair in the morning, rode beside her in the afternoon, and took the chair next to hers on the moonlit veranda. A man of twenty-six, he was yet as sentimental as a lad of sixteen, for everything she touched or used took on for him a new individuality.

The end of the second week brought her a letter which seemingly cost her much perplexity. Presently John, looking up from his own papers found her eyes fixed on him with a puzzled, questioning gaze.

"What is it?" he asked, drawing his chair toward her.

"Oh, nothing."

"You looked at me as though you doubted my identity."

"I—I was just noticing the—the shape of your nose," she said with merry evasion. But from that day she was kinder to him, avoiding him less, smiling at him more, so that his hopes rose. He began to let his eyes tell the story of his heart. Thus it was that the whole month went by, and but one week intervened between him and the resignation of his old home; but the thought brought him now no poignant sorrow. He would have counted the whole world well lost if so he could have those soft eyes to watch for his coming and going the rest of his life.

One evening on the star-lit porch he told the story of his orphaned childhood, his uncle's care of him, of the will, and its bitter condition.

"And what are you going to do about it?" she asked out of the shadow into which she had tipped her chair.

"Can you ask that?" he answered, with a tender accent on the pronoun. "I would not marry Harriet Brown though she brought me the mines of Golconda. The woman I wed must be something very different."

Here Bessie Madders interrupted them with some hospitable attention, and the conversation was not resumed. The next morning John reckoned up his time. Only two days were left to him before meeting the executors, just time enough to reach home and move out of the old house. He dressed himself with unusual care that morning, and went down stairs two steps at a time. The night train would carry him away, but he meant first to know what that little witch with dark eyes meant to do with his heart. But she was not at the breakfast table, and it was not until the middle of the morning that, dressed for traveling, she came into the parlor, where he