

"You could listen fast enough if you'd forgotten." Which shot went home, and Yvette winced. "You're afraid," he said, "that I can make you care again."

"I am afraid of nothing," said Yvette. But she would not look at him.

"Yvette," he said, with sudden passion, "it's like a flame consuming me, for all I thought myself so strong. I've forgotten all the other women I ever knew, and they've been more than two or three. You cared once—you've got to care again."

His hand shook while he said it, and it was true that Yvette had cared—once. There you have the markings of a very probable *da capo*, but time passed without a climax, and it came to be the night of the little dinner which Whiting was having for Yvette. He had it in his bachelor apartments, with Mrs. de la Fuente, an imposing evidence of propriety at the head of the table.

In the centre of the table which was lit with rosy-shaded candles was a bank of pale orchids, and around the table—it was rather small—were Whiting, Yvette and Hays. I have said that Mrs. de la Fuente presided.

"But Tony," said Yvette, a little nervously perhaps, "are we your only guests?"

"Why, there's a camaraderie, I think, about these little dinners," said Whiting.

There was, however, small camaraderie about that little dinner. Mrs. de la Fuente alone talked determinedly and lightly on many subjects. Yvette ate little, and laughed a good deal. For the two men, Whiting was cheerfully silent, and Hays taciturn. The courses came and went, and eventually dinner was over. When the coffee cups were empty, Whiting led the way to his library.

"There's a fire," he said, "an open fire, which I find is always first aid to sociability."

About a quarter of an hour later he appealed to Mrs. de la Fuente.

"I have been hoping all day that you would play for us."

Mrs. de la Fuente rose with a pleased flutter.

"Ah, but I am old-fashioned," she protested, "I have not the music of to-day."

"I don't know your equal," said Whiting, "for 'Lucia' and 'Aida' and 'Trovatore'—all the real tunes."

He led her to the grand piano which occupied almost all of the room adjoining the library, and then came back to the fire.

"Celeste Aida" followed him, sighing upon the air.

"Well!" said Whiting, pleasantly conversational. He stood with his back to the fire, one hand in the pocket of his trousers, and looked from Yvette to Hays.

"Well, what, Tony?" said Yvette.

Hays crossed his legs, and looked at the fire.

"What have you decided?" asked Whiting.

"I!" said Yvette. She said it sharply, being startled.

"And Hays," said Whiting. He spoke quietly, beneath the music.

Then Hays looked at Yvette.

"What d'you mean?" he inquired, "I don't quite get you, my dear fellow. Is it a joke?"

"Shall I explain?" asked Whiting.

"If you please," said Yvette, her chin lifting proudly.

"I fancy," said Whiting, after a considering pause, "it won't be any too easy. Still, I've arranged this little dinner with a view to explanations, where two or three are gathered together, y'know—Yvette, have you ever found me unreasonable?"

"No," said Yvette.

"Or exacting?"

"No."

"Or unfair?"

"No—no!" She answered vehemently.

"Then you will answer a question if I ask it?"

"I will answer any question," said Yvette, "you choose to ask me."

"Thanks," said Whiting. He turned curtly to Hays.

"Never knew me to be anything but square, did you?"

"So far as I know," said Hays, with the barest trace of a sneer.

"Then you will answer a question?"

"Concerning whom?"

"Concerning us three," said Whiting, quietly. He added, lifting his voice a trifle, "Ah, don't stop, Mrs. de la Fuente! Give us the immortal sextet."

"I will answer any question," said Hays to Yvette, "that you wish me to answer."

"Good!" said Whiting, cheerfully. "Now, then—here's the thing in a nutshell." He spoke swiftly, but rather low. "Do either or both of you wish me to release Yvette from her promise to marry me?"

The fire of seasoned logs crackled like thorns beneath a pot, and the immortal sextet flooded the room with melody. Otherwise ensued a silence.

"You're pretty frank, aren't you?" said Hays, at length.

Yvette said nothing, only looked.

"It would hardly escape me," said Whiting, still with the same pleasant quiet, "that is a triangle. Your firm sent you here, Hays, a couple of weeks ago. I had heard of you before you came. Gossip dies hard. I had heard that you were once extremely attentive to Miss de la Fuente. You're young, you're interesting, you have it on me every way but one. I wanted to be absolutely fair to the lady who had done me the honour to accept me, so I saw that she met you again—I saw that she met you rather frequently. I gave you every chance. I knew that old affairs sometimes rejuvenate themselves. You'll admit you've had fair play?"

He looked from Hays to Yvette, and back again. Yvette sat very still, all her delicate colour faded, her dark eyes fixed on Whiting's face.

And in the other room, Mrs. de la Fuente began on "Trovatore."

"A blind man couldn't help but see," said Whiting, coolly, "that there was something—am I in the way, Yvette? My dear, it's your happiness I'm considering."

"Do you ask me," said Hays, all at once, "if you are in the way—is that your question?"

"I do not," said Whiting, slowly, and for the first time the steel in his quiet eyes showed through, "because I am not considering you at all, unless it happens that she wants you."

Yvette locked her two hands tightly together in her lap, and kept silent. Doubtless die *erste Liebe* stirred in its grave, and doubtless the heart in her

breast leaped with the old exultant urge of the skin-clad woman who beheld from an upper ledge two men belabouring each other upon her cave-step.

Woman is the one element the ages cannot altogether refine.

While she waited:

"Yvette!" said Hays, hoarsely. (And here is the hinge of the story—so far as it was in the man, he really loved her.)

But Whiting, without speaking, moved a peacock-embroidered screen a little forward to shield her face from the blaze.

Then Yvette drew a long breath. She lifted dark, glorious eyes to Whiting's waiting look, and her lip trembled.

She said:

"Do not be silly, Tony." That was all. Apparently, however, it was enough.

"Then that's settled," said Whiting, and he also drew a long breath. He had been under something of a strain.

"I fancy you'll forgive me if I leave early," said Hays. He went, with distinctly more dignity than might have been expected. He had come back, and he had not come back—which is an engaging paradox.

Then Whiting sat upon the arm of Yvette's big chair, a thing not every lover of forty years can do with grace, and laid his arm about Yvette's proud shoulders. It is pre-eminently the gesture of ownership.

"I was afraid, Yvette," he said, softly. "My dear, I was damnably afraid."

And Yvette—even as you and I—Yvette stood in the line of direct descent from Eve—"Ah, Tony," she said, "you might have had more—how do you say?—more faith in me!"

And what is stranger yet, she meant it.

THE CHARWOMAN'S CHANGE

"CHARWOMAN" or "Charlady"—which are we to call them?—surely it doesn't matter so long as you have one.

But, ah! that's where the question comes—have you got one?

What a difference two years can make in the natural order of things and people. I remember that before the war (what a lot of things date from "before the war!") they were to be had for the asking—and now to anyone who is fortunate to have one they have become as priceless jewels.

Well, supposing Mrs. Penocle (they all have high faluting names like that for some unknown reason or other) does use up a whole bar of soap so quickly; does wear the scrubbing-brush out in no time, and is rather inclined to push the door back to the wall and wash by it instead of closing the door and washing behind it as Mrs. King (that Queen of "Charwomen" did) isn't it lovely when you go to bed on Monday night to think that Mrs. Penocle will be there on Tuesday?

Tuesday morning—what music there is in the knock on the kitchen door and with what a smile you greet her as she stands on the step—face rugged and scrubbed until it is shining so much that you wonder why you do not see your reflection in it. You treat her with the respect which her position as the "only charwoman for miles round" demands and tell her—as you told her last week and will probably tell her next week—just where she can find the bucket, brooms, and are even going to point out where the tap is in your effort to please, when she boldly marches to it, having by now removed her hat and coat and hung her string bag on the hook. Yes, she always brings a string bag, and somehow or other you manage to find something to put in it and send home to the children—you must keep this treasure somehow!

When evening comes and you have closed the door behind her and taken a look round to see just how many little things she has missed, your thoughts return once more to Mrs. King. By this time you have placed her on a throne as a Queen (of Charwomen, of course!) a rank most befitting to the consort of a King. What matter if he was a road mender, was he not King? and so in the natural order of things she must be his Queen—and now she is set up as yours, too, and seems as far removed as a Queen usually is.

The first day you saw her—d'you remember how you laughed? A quaint little thing, wasn't she?

She was short—shorter than anyone you had ever seen—so short, in fact, that it seemed hardly necessary for her to get down on her knees to scrub the floor, she must be able to reach it without that! Always—always she wore the same brown skirt that

had stretched while she shrunk, so that when she pinned it over at the back it made a tail and was so

full it reminded you of a bustle. Her blouse had worn thin, but was so very clean. It always was, as were her aprons. But her face—a little thin face all brown and lined; a thin, pointed chin and a straight, thin nose, which seemed to be made for digging into dark corners, and her little bright eyes just looked straight down this straight, thin nose with a triumphant look at any little bit of dust she found in the corner. Her hair—that which is supposed to be a woman's crowning glory—was scratched back off her face and screwed into a little knob on top of her head through which three hairpins were pushed.

But, oh! she was quick and so good—at least you realize it now, and you think with a deep drawn sigh that a good friend, like good health, is never missed until gone. "A good friend!—friend indeed—a charwoman a good friend!" Well—you miss her, don't you? and after all she was a friend. You did not, of course, drink your afternoon cup of tea with her, but you always gave her a cup of your pot, and would have been disappointed had you not heard her always say, "Oh, pray! is it got that late?"

"Oh pray!" how that tickled your fancy and how strange it was that instead of feeling disposed to praying at the numerous requests she made during the day, you found it suddenly necessary to blow your nose or cough. What a joke it was that day you were making custard for lunch, and Mrs. King stood by the stove, arms folded, talking to you. You were stirring gently, taking such care that the spoon went all around the sides of the saucepan so as not to burn the custard, and made a remark to Mrs. King, when she exclaimed, "Oh pray! just fancy that now!" There was a puzzle for you. Were you to leave the custard to burn, and pray, or were you to keep on stirring and so make the custard a success? Of course, you could pray and put in a petition that the custard would not burn—but by the time you have decided you find the custard done; Mrs. King has begun to set her corner of the kitchen table and probably forgotten that she asked you to do so, and somehow you do not feel disposed to get down on the hard floor (which is still damp from being washed) and pray. And now Mrs. King has gone, and big, shiny faced Mrs. Penocle is in her stead—so matter of fact and so ordinary. There is nothing odd about either her make-up or expression—

No! Mrs. King did not die—you meet her occasionally carrying a silver-topped umbrella; wearing a new skirt—a whole suit in fact; a new hat—such a flower garden—a hat worthy of Mrs. King, and you realize that she is making money instead of answering to the name of "Charwoman," or even to that of "Charlady"—she is a "Munition Worker!"