

Written for THE QUEEN'S Prize Story Competition.



"THE fact of the matter is Lepping, things are deplorably out of joint in this world."

The two men were sitting in a prominent club house in Chicago smoking, or rather one was smoking, and the other chewing savagely at the end of his cigar, without apparent comfort from the weed.

"Why, Leighton, what ails you of late? You're gloomy as the face of nature before a thunderstorm. I haven't heard you express a decided opinion on anything before in a month, and now when you do make a remark, it is nothing but the essence of pessimism. What's gone wrong, old fellow?"

The man addressed as Leighton sat moodily looking at the carpet in front of him as if he had not heard his friend speak. The latter eyed him curiously for a moment, and seeing no suggestion of a reply continued:

"Well! this is interesting. You always were an intense sort of a fellow, but this is a new phase of your intensity. What's the matter? If you weren't a married man I should say that there must be some love affair at the bottom of it. But you know—" wishing to turn the conversation into a humorous vein with the hope of bringing Leighton out of his mood—"they say getting married always cures a man of falling in love."

The remark acted as an electric spark on Leighton. He straightened up and, looking savagely at his friend, burst out more impetuously than before.

"Seems to me you're extremely philosophical all at once. I'd like to ask what you know about—excuse me Lepping, I'm rather irritable to-night. I was merely going to remark that I'd like to know what relation marriage had to—to—" He faltered, leaving the sentence unfinished, and after looking abstractedly out of the window a moment to avoid the scrutinizing gaze of his friend, he suddenly left his seat, with the remark that he thought it must be time to go home.

"Well, I should rather think it was," observed the surprised Lepping to himself, as his friend bolted through the club house door. "When a man begins to talk like that, I don't know of any place he *ought* to go unless it is home."

But Leighton did not go home—at least not immediately. He

hailed a hansom cab, and, jumping in, slammed the door without giving the driver any orders. The latter sat perched up behind the vehicle a few moments waiting directions, and not receiving any, finally lifted the little lid at the top, and peering down upon his peculiar passenger, asked him where he should like to go.

"Anywhere you like; drive anywhere—only drive *fast*. Land me at the corner of Monroe and Dearborn streets in an hour."

But the driver in picking his way among hurrying vehicles, in between street cars, and across busy corners, made such slow progress that, before he had gone two blocks, Leighton stopped him and alighted from the cab with the muttered remark, that it was "too slow." He gave the driver a fare and started off at a brisk walk.

Where he went we may not follow—it is not necessary; at last he went home.

CHAPTER II.

Lepping sat in the club-house musing over the strange demeanor of his companion, when a mutual friend of the two entered.

"Did you meet Leighton as you came in?" Lepping asked.

"No, why?"

"Well, that fellow is acting very strangely of late, and I hardly know what to make of him."

"Acting strangely? How?"

"Oh, I don't know exactly; only he seems out of sorts with affairs generally."

"Well, I don't know as that's anything very new with him," said the friend carelessly; and then added with more interest in the case: "But let me give you a little ancient history about Charlie Leighton. I used to know him when he was as bright and cheery as any member of the club. I tell you he isn't a bad sort of fellow when you know him well."

"That may be," said Lepping, "but I'd hate to be as pessimistic as he is."

"Probably you would be, however, if you were in his place," said the other in a meaning tone.