

AT CROSS-PURPOSES.

(Continued.)

More and more figures appeared on the street, and the lowering dawn broadened into a murky day. New York was awakening. Paul turned from the window and proceeded to get into his boots and overcoat. The Rubens might be open by this time. Still, he did not like to leave his room where he had waited so long. Suppose even now, by some unforeseen chance, Charley should come and find him absent. He would stay at his post to the end. Then his eye brightened a little as he hit on a simple expedient.

CHAPTER XIII.

MR. PAUL STUYVESANT SPEAKS HIS MIND.

Stuyvesant stepped out into the little vestibule of his apartment and rang the District Messenger call which was fixed at one side of the door. Then he returned to his room and sat down to his desk. He wrote a very urgent letter to Charley. It was a relief to him to write it; it seemed to give him an assurance that his friend was still in the land of the living. He asked if his note of the night before had not been received, and begged Charley, if he was at home, to come over without losing an instant. "It is of the greatest importance," he wrote, and he signed himself "Ever your friend, Paul Stuyvesant." If Charley were there to read it, he hoped that he would understand that *ever* as conveying an assurance that Paul would stand by him to the end.

In due course the messenger-boy arrived, and the note was committed to him, with an injunction to be as quick as possible and to bring back an answer. Then Paul sat down, to undergo a severer trial than any the long night had inflicted.

It was then about twenty-five minutes before eight, and it seemed as if the next half hour was made up of centuries instead of minutes. Every possible and impossible contingency was weighed over and over again in Paul's mind. Would the messenger succeed in gaining admission to the studio? He scarcely hoped that Charley would be found, but very likely Barney might be there, and some news might be obtained. At all events, there was nothing to do but wait.

Eight o'clock struck at last. A key grated in the lock, and Paul sprung to his feet, white and desperate. It was only the old woman who was accustomed to come and arrange and dust his sitting-room before he appeared in the morning. She withdrew, with an apology, when she found Mr. Stuyvesant already astir and in possession, depositing the *Gotham Gazette* in the place where Paul had been accustomed to find it every morning, without ever troubling his head to inquire how it got there.

He was left alone again, with the consciousness that his nerves were in a very unsatisfactory condition. They were soon subjected to a further trial.

A sharp rap was heard at the door; the messenger-boy had returned. Paul's ashen lips could hardly falter out the monosyllable "Well?" for he knew that the doubts and fears which had possessed him during fourteen hours of a mental strain, such as he had never before undergone, were to be resolved now,—for better, it might be, it could scarcely be for worse. But the boy seemed unconcerned enough.

"Gen'lman was in bed," he said, and he handed Paul a note.

"In bed?" echoed Stuyvesant, as he reeled into a seat, with the unopened letter in his hand. "In bed?" he repeated. "When did he get home?"

"Dunno," answered the boy, with a grin, and then Paul realized that the best thing he could do would be to read the answer, which was addressed in Charley's handwriting. He tore open the envelope and read the following, written in pencil on the back of his own note.

DEAR OLD POST SCRIPT,—

Of course I found your note last night when I got home, but as it was after midnight then, I never thought you would expect me till the morning by the bright light. I'd have been around right off if I had supposed you would let me in. I hope you haven't been getting into trouble with the police and want me to bail you out? You can count on me every time. You can even count on me this time, as soon as I can hustle myself into a few garments. I trust your business is not serious. Though I fear it is, since you rouse me out of my beauty sleep so recklessly. When you have said your say, I've something to tell you about myself which may interest you. I think it will—and I know it will surprise you.

Yours in the bath tub, C. V.

Paul dismissed the messenger with a nod and stared at the letter in his hand as if it were a cryptogram. What could it mean? It was couched in the writer's habitual tone of careless raillery. There was nothing mysterious or morbid or melodramatic about it, it was just such a note as the boy might have written if there were no Zalinski in the world, and if the Mary Magdalen still rested in its proper frame. Could he have been dreaming? Stuyvesant asked himself if it was nothing but a nightmare springing from the hideous watch he had kept. He found no solace in this idea, he knew his head was all right, even if his nerves were shaken, and he turned to the letter again with a profound bewilderment. "I've something to tell you about myself which may interest you. I think it will—and I know it will surprise you." This was the only sentence that seemed in the least out of the common. These were the only words that even hinted at a mystery. But that Charley would refer to a matter of such gravity in such a bantering strain, was impossible.

Paul read the letter for the third time. So his long night's vigil had been wasted. Charley had returned home at midnight, and then had

thought it too late to come around. Paul grew angry as he recollected how many wakeful hours he had spent since twelve o'clock, and how there had not been one of them in which Charley's appearance would not have been hailed as a relief. But Charley had been in bed and asleep all the time, and he grumbled now because he had been disturbed an hour too early in the morning.

Paul's wrath waxed hotter and hotter, and it was not far from the boiling point when the door opened and Charley walked in.

He was neat, spruce, and well dressed as ever, rosy from cold water and the January air. About him there were no traces of a sleepless night and no signs of a hurried toilet. Everything was in place, even to a little hot house flower in his button-hole, which might have been culled that moment, so fresh and fragrant did it look.

He came in jauntily with his dripping umbrella in his hand and deposited it carelessly in the corner. The water ran down and collected in a little pool on the carpet.

"Morning, morning," he said. "Halloo! what's up? You look as if you had been sitting up all night with your own corpse."

"I have not been to bed," answered Paul. He could not go on. The young fellow's appearance was in too sharp a contrast to the fears that had been torturing him.

"Disipating, eh?" continued Charley, lightly, and then, noticing the other's continued gravity, "What are you looking so cross about? Oh, I see! I've left my umbrella dripping! Well, I never can remember." He took it up and stood it in the rack. "I won't be guilty again. Now, tell me, what's the row?"

"Charley," said Paul, with an effort, "I have something very serious to talk about; but you mentioned in your note that you had something to tell me. Perhaps it is the same thing. Go on. You may tell me everything."

Charley stared at him in unfeigned amazement. "I don't see how it can be the same thing," he said. "You don't know anything about it, unless you are a sharper fellow than I take you for."

"Perhaps I am sharper than you take me for, and clues have come to my hand which you never could have dreamed of. So go on, let me hear all about it."

"Let's hear what's worrying you first, old fellow," said Charley, with real concern. "Something has happened; I can see that; you look as white as a ghost with the dyspepsia. You haven't been sitting up all night and sending off for me at cock-crow for nothing. What's the matter? Anything about Kitty?"

Paul fired up at once. "Don't dare to mention her name," he said, hotly.

"Come, that's cool," rejoined Charley. "Pray, why mayn't I mention my own sister's name? She isn't yours yet, and I doubt if she ever would be if she heard you talk to me like that."

"No trifling," retorted Stuyvesant, "I know all."

Charley's eyes opened wider, and the corners of his mouth seemed twitching with a desire to laugh, but he only said,—

"The deuce you do! What a lot you must know, then!"

Paul had hard work to keep his temper. To him this cavalier way of treating a serious matter was incomprehensible. Steadying his voice with an effort, he said,—

"I am deeply pained to see you approach this subject in so flippant a spirit. I was in your studio yesterday."

"Yes, and you left a note there. I got it. What's that to do with it?"

"While in your studio, I looked round among the pictures; I searched everywhere—"

"Cool of you, but, considering who you are, I'll forgive you this time," said Charley, who was engaged in lighting a cigarette.

"In the farthest angle under the gallery I came on the Mary Magdalen"

Charley's lips were puckered into a whistle.

"Now, do you know," he said, finally, "I'm sorry you found that, old man. I hadn't intended you to see it,—at least not yet. I meant to have—Well, no matter; it's none the worse, I suppose."

Paul's astonishment at this reception of his information was well nigh ludicrous. He almost gasped for breath, and he stared at Charley as if the artist were a being of some new and undescribed species.

"How did you gain access to Mr. Sargent's apartments?" he at last found voice to ask.

"With a silver key. I never met an incorruptible concierge in my life," answered the young fellow, with a light laugh.

"And can you speak of it in that tone? Do you not realize what you have done? Do you make no account of your mother and sister,—the shame and misery you may bring on them—"

"Come, come, Stuyvesant," said Charley, quickly; "that's pitching it rather too strong."

"I can't speak half as strongly as I feel," answered Paul, hotly. "I think the whole transaction as mean and despicable as anything I ever heard of. I—"

"Look here, Mr. Stuyvesant," interrupted the young man, rising and standing before him, "you are going too far. I would bear more from you than from any other man, and I would knock my own brother's teeth down his throat—if I had one—for saying half what you have said. So just put up short where you are, will you?"

"What did you come here to tell me?" asked Paul. "Be candid and above board now, and I'll do what I can for you?"

"What I came here to tell you is purely my own business," answered Charley, stiffly. "I should have been very glad to tell you about it, but I don't think it would possess the interest for you now that once I had fancied it would. At any rate, after the words you have used to me, I should have no pleasure in telling it."