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A Lesson in Love

By Paul Eldridge

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To
SYLVETTE
of the Golden Net

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By Paul Eldridge

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Summer chanted its swan song and the trees expired in flaming glory. As if to accompany the dirge, the hurdy-gurdy ground a Neapolitan *canzonetta* of love's fragility and the children on the sidewalk improvised and clowned steps in tune.

"Fall is as punctual as a train this year. You can feel it, smell it, touch it almost," Walter Baxter said, inhaling noisily. "The twenty-third of September in the glorious year of Our Lord nineteen hundred and twelve! What lucky dogs to be alive—young—and Americans—in this century, the most miraculous, the most astounding, the most colossal in the history of mankind! And speaking of dogs," his apostrophic tone suddenly changed to a growl, as he turned to the portrait of himself, still wet, on an easel, "I insist it's a bulldog—mustachioed and spectacled, but nevertheless a bulldog! And that is how Walter Baxter," he struck his chest haughtily with his fist, "famous producer of plays, appears to his friend, Roger Powells." He stabbed the air accusingly with his forefinger. "Future Rembrandt of these United States!"

"You are as you are," Roger said laconically, continuing to work on a canvas in the opposite angle of the studio.

"Meaning, I presume, that this—this hound—ferociously glaring at me is even more the true image of my soul than of my face?"

"Precisely. And all complaints should be addressed directly to your Maker—or Unmaker—"

"Complaints?" Walter proudly straightened out, thus adding inches to his rather short stature and flattening a bit his rotundity which was becoming conspicuous lately. "Complaints? Halleluiahs! Halleluiahs!" He waved his arm like a revivalist. "In a world inhabited chiefly by poodles and mice—not to mention rats—it's something to be a bulldog—pure breed—pure breed," he insisted.

Roger nodded vaguely.

Walter clipped the tip of a cigar with a gold cutter which hung from a heavy chain encircling his checkered silk vest with wide lapels, and lit it. As soon as the first rim of ashes had gathered at its circumference, he took it out of his mouth and sniffed voluptuously. "Mm-mm—I know of nothing under the sun as fragrant as a see-gar—that is if it's Havana—pure breed—and—" he added, placing it into a gold-rimmed meerschau holder, "nothing that proclaims such aristocratic distinction. Say, couldn't I ever persuade you to discard the pipe—stinking symbol of democracy?"

Roger shook his head.

"Not even if I provided you—at my expense—with the best of Cuba's weed for the rest of your mortal life?"

Roger's reply was a volley of smoke shot out of his cornucop pipe which he held defiantly between his front teeth.

Walter thrust his hands into his trousers pockets opening over his stomach instead of on the sides as the latest style decreed. That, and the tall, stiff collar, the wide cravat studded with a diamond horseshoe and the gray flat-topped derby irrevocably discarded a generation previously, he persisted in wearing until the end of his life, when they seemed the trappings of an age as incredible as that of the unicorn and the minotaur. With his theatrical instinct he had ordered inscribed upon his tombstone:

"The *first* he could not be—
So the *last* was he."

intriguing thus all the "gentle passers-by" who like to browse in cemeteries to mourn or derive consolation from the frangibility of life and the vagary of fame.

What share taste, habit, defiance of convention, publicity had in Baxter's obstinacy of attire would be impossible to tell, for in all other matters he was rabidly modern.

"You were wise moving out of the Village, Roger," he said. "Once upon a time, I grant you, that place was chic. All the big turnips lived there. But what is it now—a ridiculous and pathetic imitation of the Paris Latin Quarter—which, by the way, is itself not much more than a ghost of itself kept alive for gaping Americans with lots of dough. Riverside Drive isn't the street I would have recommended for a painter out for fame and fortune and the gentle dust of museums called immortality, but it'll do. You've got good light and beautiful scenery to make up for class—so essential to success—"

Roger made an equine noise with his lips.

"That's what you think," Baxter said, "but take it from me, the humble inherit nothing but the Earth—six feet of it, and in Heaven get nothing but justice. The shrewd ones get privileges here and hereafter. And I'm willing to stake my opinion against any theologian's." He waited for some remark from his friend, but the latter continued his work unconcerned and unimpressed.

Baxter bent out of the window. He watched the Hudson—yachts gliding gracefully; small motor boats, noses in water and tails in the air, speeding away, their engines ticking like maniacal clocks; ponderous barges filled with coal or cement, dragged as in sleep by asthmatic trawlers; ferries, their great wheels churning the water, plying between Manhattan and the Jersey palisades.

"Do you realize, Roger," Walter said nostalgically, "that there are a thousand stories in those hills across and then thousand on and at the bottom of this river? Do you know that maybe forty or fifty million years ago, there were great glaciers here—miles high and miles thick—and a canyon so deep that man has never beheld the likes of it?" He sighed. "I certainly would have wanted to be on that wonderful boat, *De Holve Maene*, which came from Holland, captained by the incomparable skipper, Hendrick Hudson. Can't you see those poor devils—the Indians—scared and awed at that great bird that had flown down from Heaven and all the pale gods coming ashore? I would have been a god, too, for once. And I should have wanted to be in the company of that one-legged growler, Mijnheer Petrus Stuyvesant, and make love to the young vrows who came over from Amsterdam." He relit his cigar, which, neglected, had sadly expired. "Do you believe in the transmigration of souls? I think the Hindus have it all over us. We die and we either go to Heaven or to Hell, and we burn forever or flap our wings, but those turbaned fellows give you so many chances to be on Earth—"

"Not all that's turbaned is Hindu," Roger interrupted. Walter cocked his ear. "And not all that sits on tacks is Yogi," Roger continued. "But all that gazes into crystal balls is faker," he concluded.

Walter applauded. "Good for you! Bravo!"

In the silence that ensued, Walter turned his attention again to the river. "Do you think that New Yorkers could be taught to love the Hudson (which certainly deserves all affection) as the French love the Seine, the Germans the Rhine, the Austrians the Danube, the Russians the Volga? By the way, do you happen to know if the Russians really love the Volga?"

"I know they really love the vodka."

Walter burst into laughter, his hands tapping his belly.

"Dammit!" Roger suddenly hurled his brush against the wall.

"Dammit!"

"Jimminy crickets!" Walter caught his breath. "I thought it was the Frisco earthquake breaking out in New York!"

"Why the devil does a man slap chunks of colored mud on bits of rags when all he has to do is to open his eyes and see all the colors of the rainbow blended magically together?" Roger pointed to the sun-rays streaming into the room. "Compete with this! Outwit Nature! Vain imbeciles! That's what artists are, vain imbeciles!"

"Agreed!" Walter jubilated.

"Oh, shut up!" Roger dropped into a chair. Stretching forth his long legs, he drummed nervously with the edges of his heels, while his fingers raked his black, wayward hair which fell over his broad forehead.

Walter toyed with his mustache, eyeing his friend obliquely. Conscious that he was watched and probably weighed, Roger quickly turned his head away. It had always been his desire to be impervious to people's gaze, precisely because everyone expected an artist to be a barometer of emotions, a vivisector's slab in full view to marvel at, envy or scowl in moral indignation. The greater his efforts at inscrutability, however, the more transparent he became, for they only fixed upon his face more rigidly, the crease, the frown, the shadows of the conflict raging within him. Indeed, his lips alone, full and deeply indented at the corners, even if the remainder of his sensitive, longish features and his mobile gray eyes were discounted, sufficed to reveal him.

"Roger." Walter placed his stubby hand upon his friend's shoulder. "Your nerves are on edge. I've been watching you—"

Was he trying to "pump" him? Roger thought. Did he guess? At any rate, he would not confess—he would not ask help or advice or sympathy! Never!

"There's no better cure for whatever ails you than dropping everything and running off," Walter finished his idea.

Roger wished no cure. He cherished his torment—his priceless treasure! Some day—yes—he *would* run off—to a far-away place—China maybe—and spend his days painting his visions and yearnings on endless sheets of silk.

"That's what I do when my prima donnas get too pesky or the critics too nasty," Walter continued. "I hop into my tin Lizzie and dash about. By the time I return everything is O.K. again. The troubles which had been thundering at me like ogres—now peep-peep like mice. By the way, you haven't seen my new car—got it the day before yesterday—a peacherino!" He kissed his fingertips noisily. "Self-starter and all—makes thirty miles an hour—a bird in flight." He waited a moment. "Well, what do you say? Coming out? I haven't a thing to do for the rest of the day or evening. Don't have to return to the theater. Everything is ship-shape. The whole world agrees that I have the finest show in town. And as for my leading lady—tell me, is there another actress in these United States who can compete with her? Is there? I claim that Leda Larensen—"

Roger jumped up. "Don't you go imagining now that there's something terribly wrong with me! It's nothing, nothing, I tell you! An artist's mental cramp—that's all—that's all!" He pulled at his fingers in an unconscious demonstration of his meaning in physical terms. Kicking a chair which stood in his way, he walked to the window.

"Cramp—guts—spleen—bladder—liver—I still insist that locomotion is the cure."

He mentioned all the vital organs, Roger mused, except the heart. On purpose—or by accident?

"And for locomotion," Walter continued, "there's nothing to equal my machine. As witness, I refer you to Leda." He watched Roger slyly. "Do you know what she said?" Walter resumed cautiously. "She said—the swans in her country don't glide more gracefully and with greater dignity—and you know what a high regard she has for swans. And there's no denying that they are gorgeous creatures. Imagine a parade of them on this river," he pointed outside. "White swans—black swans—red-beaked swans—what a picture that would make—particularly for an artist. An idea!" He snapped his fingers noisily. "I'll get my publicity man to organize a city-wide—maybe a nation-wide—Leda

Larensen Swan Club to supply all lakes and reservoirs in New York—and other centers—with that queen of fowls! Surprise Leda on her birthday! What do you say to that, Roger, old boy? By the way, would you be willing to make an appropriate drawing for me—a card showing swans and Leda among them—their patron goddess, you know—it may become your masterpiece—just your forte—” He continued to describe in a crescendo of enthusiasm the swans, their goddess, the Hudson and his friend’s talent.

Roger made no answer. He drummed the windowsill with his knuckles—a tomtom, wilder and wilder as if summoning desperately to his aid those hidden forces which each carries in the depths of his being—the ancestral army of survival.

Walter switched from the grace of swans to the magic of automobiles, but retained as an ever-recurring refrain the virtues and opinions of Leda Larensen.

“Let’s go!” Roger exclaimed suddenly. “Locomotion! Locomotion!” He threw his smock gaily to the floor.

It was an explosion of fictitious cheer—a mountebank’s mask plastered *a l’improviste* over a tragedian’s face—awry and ludicrous like a boy’s blackening of chin and lips to simulate mustache and beard on women’s faces on posters.

Walter instantly countered with noisier cheer. He pushed his hat onto the nape of his neck, placed his gold knobbed cane aslant on his shoulder, and burst into the current musical hit:

“Everybody works but father, and he sits around all day,
Feet in front of fire, smoking his pipe of clay—”

Singing at the top of their voices, the men descended the four flights of stairs into the street.

2

Walter tooted his horn full blast. It was the clarion and the cymbals proclaiming his victory. He had been a poor boy and knew the tremendous effort (and the luck) required “to arrive.” Well, he had “arrived”—so why not let the whole world take due cognizance thereof? He chuckled to see frenzied ladies, clutching at their trailing skirts, dash across the street, and irate gentlemen shake fists and canes at him. He even dared to ignore with impunity the policeman’s raised club, for was he not the modern Wizard riding on the magic carpet?

In the congested districts, however, his triumphal march was impeded by trucks drawn gravely by massively rumped horses, by hansoms, their drivers cracking noisily their long whips, by landaus with moth-eaten lackeys and denaturalized animals prancing and quadrilling their way.

“Horses!” Walter sneered. “Animals as antediluvian as dinosaurs and as immodest and cynical asimps. How can a sensitive man ride in one of those open vehicles with a timid virgin, and speak of love to her, when every few minutes that four-footed monster makes himself conspicuous in one way or another? But the automobile—the automobile is destined to become the boudoir of the civilized world—mark my word, Roger!”

They had driven for some hours. The five- and six-story houses of the Metropolis had long been left behind. Empty lots were becoming more and more frequent, and instead of ladies and gentlemen disputing their passageway, now were terrified animals—hens and cows and goats, cackling and mooing and bleating, and dogs trying to snap at the wheels as they had snapped at forelegs for countless generations. “Twenty-three skidoo—you pups!” Walter shouted at them. “And you’d better become modern—presto, or out you go the way of the Great Lizard!”

They had skirted Westchester, reached the woods, and presently found themselves in a blind alley dotted with muddy puddles, glittering falsely with the gold of the setting sun.

"I haven't the slightest idea where we are," Walter said. "I don't know how the hell I got to this dead end and there isn't, as far as I can see, any trace of a road. Might as well be in the heart of the African jungle. Civilized communities!" he hissed.

"I see a house," Roger said.

"Where?"

"There—to your right—in the woods."

"I guess I can crawl through this forest primeval. Let's go!"

When they reached the house, Walter blew his horn. A man came out leisurely. He was thin, tall, wore a milky white Van Dyke that curled outward as if he had the habit of winding it on his fingers, and long white hair rippling over the nape of his neck. Dressed in blue baggy velvet trousers and coat to match, a soft silk shirt with a broad turnover collar and a black flowing tie, he was a man resurrected from another world and another age. Bowing low and courtly, he said, in a voice harmonious with his appearance, "Welcome, gentlemen!"

"We're sorry to intrude upon you, sir," Walter said, "but the fact is that we are lost."

"Lost?" the man repeated, smiling. "Then—if the wise men of the Orient are right—you are fortunate indeed, for only as a man is lost, does he find his true self."

"Alas, for our true selves!" Walter instantly caught the spirit and the manner of the man, accustomed as he was in directing all types of actors. "It is but our bodies which are lost. Therefore, we should be very grateful to you, sir, if you directed us to New York or to the nearest town."

"That is more difficult than it may seem to you, gentlemen. My place is not charted on any map. I am near some town or other, no doubt, but I have lost contact with the outer world, and places change their topography and even their very names so rapidly nowadays. However, if you should take the trouble to come in, you could study a map which I have, and which would give you far more precise information than I am able to," and with seigniorial grace, he gestured to the men to precede him.

They entered a large room, austere in its simplicity, with a balcony giving it the appearance of a chapel. In the center was a square table covered with a velvet cloth from which hung innumerable tassels. Upon it stood a tall bronze lamp surmounted by a dome-like globe painted with sylvan scenes—satyrs dancing lasciviously with maidens, and old men playing on pipes, and in the background centaurs galloping with stolen brides. Six ponderous chairs surrounded the table. In a corner, the massive pendulum of a grandfather's clock, conscious of its venerable importance, hammered warningly the passing seconds—"Hearken—hearken—hearken—hearken."

"Excuse me, I beg you," the man said, "while I look for the map." He entered an adjoining room separated by a swinging door.

Roger walked slowly from one painting to another hanging on the wall, appraising them critically. Walter, behind him, spoke in a cautious voice. "What do you think of them?"

"Damn good."

"The old fellow must be the artist, don't you think?"

Roger nodded.

"He certainly looks the part. Wish you'd raise a goatee like that, Roger."

"What for?"

"You'd become famous as the Knight of the Brush-and-Broom—and you'd entangle dowagers with dotting eyes, virgins with puckered lips, in-betweens with false bosoms. On each hair a victim. No spider web could boast of as many flies—"

Roger screwed up his nose in exaggerated disgust.

"Of course, if you feel that way about it," Walter said, "then keep your chin shaved and shave also your head—never wash—eat locusts—and you'd be sure to appeal to wooden lady saints. Under such conditions, however, I would suggest that you lock yourself up in a cell. But I warn you that you can't escape the scorned female of the species. She pursues you in one shape or another—and her ghost torments you worse than her brute matter might have done—"

Why had Walter veered the conversation into that channel, Roger wondered. Was his brain a glass house and any one who so desired could peer inside? He must buy heavy black shades. Stupid! His thoughts jumped about like crazy goats butting his skull.

"He didn't even take the trouble to sign his paintings," Walter said, his nose grazing the canvas. "Queer duck—"

"I finally discovered it, gentlemen." The old man returned, waving triumphantly a frail yellow sheet. "It's rather ancient, I'm afraid, but I hope it will serve your purposes. Once upon a time all roads led to Rome for fifteen centuries, but the same road hardly leads to the same town for two years in succession in our blessed country in this—incredible century."

"Incredible and magnificent," Walter said, taking the paper.

"Perhaps. But will it bring happiness to mankind? That's the question! Will it be said of *this* century as of none other that man has found peace at last?"

"Without doubt, sir," Walter answered enthusiastically. "The armies and navies of the world will be scrapped before very long. Swords shall be beaten into ploughshares, and lions and lambs shall lie down together." Unconsciously he assumed a nasal, priestly tone.

"Let us pray it will be lions and *living* lambs," the old man smiled sadly. "The wise teachers of India say: 'Each generation breathlessly awaits the birth-cry of the millennium, while Time broods upon a marble egg and Prophets crow.'"

"Excellent work," Roger addressed the host, pointing to the paintings. "I presume it's yours, sir?"

"It is. Thank you."

"That's more than a pretty compliment," Walter said. "My friend is a merciless critic and a first-class painter himself. You must certainly have seen his work in various exhibitions—Roger Powells—"

"I regret—no, I've been out of touch with—civilization—for many, many years—more, without doubt, than Mr. Powells has been an inhabitant upon this revolving ball of mud, flame, and illusion—"

"You have, of course, exhibited yourself, Mr.—Mr.—"

The old man smiled wanly. "You will excuse me, gentlemen, if I do not disclose my identity. I should prefer to be like an ancient tombstone upon which one sees inscribed the words—'Here lieth'—while all the rest is obliterated."

"And you're willing to accept anonymity in the history of art?" Walter asked incredulously.

"Should the river demand of the sea into which it flows that it remember all the sweet water it contributes? Should time clamor of eternity that it keep a record of all the golden minutes it ticks into its ear?" Thus ask the poets of India. Ah, gentlemen, you are still so young that every trumpet call is a reveille to glory. As for me, I await—not without impatience—the final taps. And so, you will forgive me—won't you, gentlemen—if I insist upon remaining nameless?"

"Forgive us, rather," Roger said earnestly. He understood perfectly, he was certain, this man's passion for anonymity. In a sense, that was what he yearned for also—to forget and be forgotten. No, not to forget. To remember always! To let the cross carve itself deeply into his heart. Walter was right—he *was* something of a monk, invoking always symbols of martyrdom. Would he really end in a cell illuminating the Bible? And would he be tortured forever by—a ghost—a ghost floating in the dazzling light of beauty? He had been walking restlessly about the room, and now, startled, found himself in front of

a portrait of an old woman. She was dressed in ragged fineries. Her eyes and cheeks were swollen by debauchery and sorrow, yet the traits as if by sorcery retained their beauty, and the smile a pristine freshness. The hoof of time had stamped hard but had not crushed completely. "Is this the portrait of a living model or an allegory—the grandeur and misery of the human soul?" he asked excitedly.

The old painter curled his beard around his fingers nervously and muttered something.

Walter approached and, fixing his gold-rimmed pince-nez, attached to a heavy ribbon, more firmly upon his short nose, exclaimed: "Remarkable indeed! Did you say it was a person, or—?"

The old man did not answer. His hands clasped upon his back, his head lowered, he strode up and down with military step. Finally, he said in a tense voice: "That's the Goddess!"

"The goddess—of what?" Walter asked.

"*The Goddess!* Not a mythological superstition! *The Goddess!*" he stressed with controlled irritability.

"Is there *the Goddess* as there is—well—*the God?*" Walter ventured.

"Were I speaking to men double your age, they would surely know whom I mean. Unless—indeed—men's memories are sieves in which only the dross remains, while all the jewels drop into the abyss of oblivion, as the Grand Lama says."

"Would you deprive us, sir, of the pleasure of that knowledge—just because of our—tender age?" Walter coaxed.

Roger added his pleas.

The old man stood in front of the painting, his eyes closed, his hands intertwined as if in supplication.

"So be it!" he exclaimed at last. "I shall tell you!" His stern look melted gradually into one of indulgence. "But first have a drink with me." He opened an ancient cupboard that moaned like an Oriental professional mourner, and brought out bottle and glasses which he filled and offered with punctilio.

Facing the painting, he toasted: "To the Goddess!" The young men followed suit: "To the Goddess!"

The three seated themselves. Roger lit his pipe and Walter a cigar. They waited in patient silence until their host finally pulled the right thread from the tangled spool of his memory, and unwound

THE STORY OF THE GODDESS

3

Hollandam had only its nose above the sea, but that day Vrouw Schuiling's own nose—a good, solid Dutch nose—was so high in the air that only an elephant's trunk trumpeting his magnificence to the world, could be taken as a measure of comparison.

Who was Vrouw Schuiling, and why was she so proud that Friday in the year of Our Lord eighteen hundred and sixty-six—a day when the sea was as unwrinkled as a child's bottom and the sky was as blue as a forget-me-not?

Vrouw Schuiling was the owner of a souvenir shop chiefly catering to foreigners who, after having visited the gay capitals of Europe, including Amsterdam, city of diamonds and canals and tulips more precious than rubies, would betake themselves for a few hours to Hollandam. There men wore baggy trousers, short coats and small upturned hats, all of glistening black broadcloth, and women wore full skirts, tight bodices and sleeves and lace caps, while children were the precise replicas of their progenitors down to the last ruffle, the last gold button on their trousers and the last silver one on their coats. And all—men, women and children—sporting wooden shoes which beat like drums and rocked like boats. A nymph-like town was Hollandam, red-

olent of wind and salt—a heady town stoutly defending its traditions—a shrewd town thriving on the seduction which quaint, coy places have for the sophisticated.

Vrouw Schuiling was medium-sized, had China-blue eyes and hair so yellow you might have believed she had crept from under a haystack and a mass of golden wisps had stuck to her head. The rest of her features were those of the good vrouws dancing on the canvases of Dutch masters, except that she lacked the rosy cheeks and the massiveness. She was, as a matter of fact, rather delicate. Not that she had started life in that way. As a child and as a young woman she was as hardy as anyone could be. But after her husband's death, something had snapped in her, and although ten years had already elapsed, Vrouw Schuiling had never fully recovered. Oh, how she had loved Jan! As children, they had been neighbors, living in the trim little houses on the wharf, playing on the sand hills which stretched all along Holland's coast, and running in and out of the clumsy barges of the canals. Already their roots had begun to twine together like her own tightly drawn pigtailed which Jan liked so to wind around his neck, and pull, pull until she'd say—"I love Jan better than everyone except papa and mama." (Later, she would say, without being coaxed, that she loved Jan only a little less than God Himself.) As soon as they had reached that fragile interim between childhood and youth, it became clear to all that Jan and Maria were destined for each other—a warning to the envious and the jealous and the old who had forgotten the meaning and power of love, not to interfere. When Jan was twenty-one and Maria twenty, they were married, and for eight years thereafter they were as happy as human beings could be. They owned their home, joint gift of their parents, and with his savings Jan bought an excellent fishing boat, thus being his own master, selling his catch directly to the markets on the larger islands of the Zuider Zee. But that was only a modest beginning, for in time Jan would have a fleet of boats and a squadron of sailors, while he would be an admiral, commanding and obeyed. He would make enough money to buy one of the new homes in the modern quarter of the town, become an important personage, and Maria a lady.

Jan was a daring sailor, and why not, seeing that the Schuiling had ridden the high seas since the days when Holland was undisputed mistress of the oceans and even attempted the invasion of the City of London? The family claimed (but it was never substantiated by any documents) that there had been high officers and even one vice-admiral among the Schuiling. The indubitable fact, however, was that for the last four or five generations they had been good, honest, law-abiding fishermen, and that is an acceptable record, as any decent citizen of Hollandam or any other part of the Earth would attest.

Jan braved winds and storms and no season daunted him. At first Maria trembled with anxiety and fear every time he set foot on the boat, for her people had been parsons and tradesmen, and she was unaccustomed to a fisherman's life. Gradually, however, she gained confidence in his ability to fight and conquer the elements, and with that came the assurance that nothing untoward could happen to him.

Then, one day, the neighbors, hats off and heads lowered, brought in the body of Jan Schuiling, drowned and washed ashore. Maria would certainly have drowned herself as well, despite her religious upbringing, but there was her eight-year-old daughter, Gloria, tugging desperately at her skirts—and at her heart.

Gloria had her mother's blue eyes and her father's blond hair delicately tinted with burnished gold and gently rippling as a lake into which a pebble is cast. The rest of her features were her own and so winsome and so adorable that everyone called her Engelin. This appellation became so firmly established that later, when she went to school, she signed her name indiscriminately "Engelin Schuiling—Gloria Schuiling" without any awareness of vainglory, and the teachers themselves had both names in their record books.

However, it was not only for her looks that the inhabitants of Hollandam cherished Gloria. For even at the age when most children still lisp and stumble over ordinary words and blush and suck their thumbs and rotate on their heels when they recite a Mother Goose doggerel, Gloria could declaim from the Dutch classics with perfect diction and remarkable grace and poise. She had, besides, an astonishing memory which made it possible for her to acquire in a few years a repertoire that even Mijnheer Baltus Van der Rover, Headmaster (red-nosed, but not due to drink; stout, but not due to overindulgence; stone bald, but not due to age—futile martyr to futile purposes), author of *Everybody's Handbook of Recitation* (which nobody bought), envied.

"That young Engelin will soon know more than this old Develin," he said wittily, at a gathering, winking and milking his side-beards hanging like udders over his neck. His remark, however, had a more serious purpose. It was a protective armor he was donning for possible future taunts by his fellow Hollandamians, since he believed that an avowed defect was equal to watering your enemy's powder.

How could Maria forsake such a child, even though her yearning for Jan tore at her vitals as a pack of famished wolves? How could she deliberately turn an angel into an orphaned ragamuffin begging charity in all the homes? God in His infinite mercy would not, could not, forgive her in all eternity, and she would nevermore meet her Jan in Heaven who was anxiously awaiting her, she was certain.

As soon as proprieties permitted, several suitors asked Maria's hand in marriage. There was Noack who had always secretly adored her; Huygers who fell in love with her when he saw how sincerely she mourned; Kranendonk who had always mistrusted women, but who said to himself that if a woman made such a good wife to one man, it was in her blood to make an equally good wife to another; Reinaert who thought that what with the house and Jan's boat and customers, he could make a new and better start in life.

She refused them all categorically. As far as she was concerned—just as there was only one God, so there was only one husband allotted to each woman—that is, if a woman was lucky enough to find the right husband—and she had found him, and he would be hers again when time merged with Eternity and Earth blended with Heaven.

She sold the boat and the house, and with the money opened a souvenir shop on the main thoroughfare.

At the beginning there was a good deal of grumbling on the part of her competitors and even open manifestations of disapproval.

"She has no right to set shop directly facing mine!" Peter Neck struck his small, bony fist on the counter of the Wijnhaus at the *Red Grapes*, meeting place of the merchants of the town. Dipping his thumb and forefinger into his wooden snuffbox, he snatched a pinch of tobacco, filled his nostrils and breathed in furiously. For the first time in years, the snuff made him sneeze—six times in succession. Indignant that he might be taken as a novice "snuffer," he rubbed punitively his tilted nose with a large red kerchief, then wiped the perspiration running over the nape of his neck and studding his forehead, deeply sunken at the temples, as if two powerful thumbs had pressed into them. "There ought to be a law against such—such—robbery. I call it robbery, plain and simple, for if a customer buys from that woman, and not from me, I am robbed of my profit, am I not?"

"Ja, ja, Mijnheer," the bartender agreed.

"Another beer! I shall see the Burgemeester about it."

"The Burgemeester is a very clever man—he—"

"Personally, I think he is an ass," Neck interrupted.

"Oh, ja, ja—as for that," the bartender smiled sheepishly, "you are no doubt right—"

"But he's in authority and he shall do something about this—"

"That is precisely what I meant, Mijnheer—an ass who carries our load well." The bartender rubbed his hands gleefully.

Juffrouw Seiffardt buttonholed Pastor Kranendonk as he passed

by her shop on the way to church. "It is a sin, Parson, a sin against our Lord," she shouted into his ascetic face, after an interminable tirade against Vrouw Schuiling.

"I would not allow myself to say such a thing," he answered, scandalized. "It is not sinful for a woman to try to make a living for herself and her child—an angel—as you must acknowledge—"

"It is sinful, Parson, though, for a woman to refuse marriage. They say there were as many as a dozen men—"

"Oh, that—that," Pastor Kranendonk stammered, "why, that—" He was a bachelor, not long out of the seminary, and flustered easily when marriage and particularly related matters were under discussion.

"Yes, that," Juffrouw Seijffardt repeated emphatically, "that—that—"

"It is for a woman to decide, I should think," he finally said gravely. "Always after communing with God, of course. And I am certain that Maria, who is a good Christian woman, communed with God, and God gave her permission to reject the offer of all those men—"

"And why, my dear Parson," Juffrouw Seijffardt shirred her thin lips, while her long chin trembled, "why do men bother about a widow—with a child—and neglect—virgins? Why?" she demanded stentoriously.

"Oh, that—that—" His ears and nape of the neck were now on fire. "That must be God's will." (He always found refuge in God's vast lap.) "God's will," he repeated with assurance, while appraising out of the corner of his eye the Juffrouw's scant feminine treasures. "And," he added, "the way of Nature and of man."

The owners of *Hollandam Art Souvenir Shop*, largest and most prosperous in town, were particularly bitter against the widow, because now they were constrained to replenish their shop with new merchandise, although they were already overstocked, since it was quite evident that she would get goods in the latest style. "It's a double loss," they complained angrily, "loss of money—and of customers."

However, the great majority of the Hollandamians were on the side of Vrouw Schuiling and Engeline, and the competitors had to accept the inevitable. But as if to reimburse them, that year and every year up to the day in which Vrouw Schuiling's nose rose so high above the level of the sea, the number of visitors continued steadily to amount, so that there was enough business and profits for all.

And why was Widow Schuiling's nose so proudly raised? Well, you should have stopped in front of the Stadhuis, that great bulk of a building festooned with delicate traceries of stone and snug niches in which stood solemn sentinels of virtue, respectability and changelessness, the former lords and ladies of the realm. You should have read on the bulletin board the special announcement:

"I take pleasure in announcing a recital by our talented Juffrouw Gloria Schuiling. Under the town's official sponsorship, the recital will take place in the Royal Chamber of the Stadhuis on Friday, August 30, 1866, at 8 p. m. Tickets are obtainable in all souvenir shops, and all proceeds will go to the Charity Chest.

"Harrold Laurentius Van Deuren,
Burgemeester."

4

The Royal Chamber was a large rectangular hall used for the town's gala occasions. It received its lofty appellation because its walls were covered with the portraits of the monarchs who had ruled the nation and because William the Silent, Father of his country, for labyrinthic reasons (in which many a local savant lost his own), had spent a night there. The relics of the bed in which he slept could furnish sufficient timber to build a new navy and sufficient eiderdown

to make quilts and pillows for the trousseaux of all the brides in the Koninkrijk der Nederlanden.

On the semi-circular platform squatted, with self-conscious importance, a throne-like armchair reserved for the Burgemeester or the chief guest (if illustrious enough), flanked by smaller chairs for lesser luminaries. The table in the center, covered with a shawl three centuries old, had upon it a carafe of water, glasses and a bowl of lump sugar to ease the throats of the orators, a wooden mallet to call for order when the meeting proved too stormy and a silver bell to announce the beginning and the end of the session. These paraphernalia, however, had been removed that evening and an immense silk embroidered screen embraced the platform to create the illusion of a curtain.

The first six rows had plush-covered seats, the remainder leather, except for three long wooden benches in the rear. There were also on both sides loges, each containing a dozen gilded chairs with straw bottoms. Sufficient gradation of station and wealth, therefore, to satisfy the natural vanity of the Hollandamians, modest in envy and greed.

Pieter, the lamplighter, hunchback but agile as a monkey, climbed the ladder, removed the great globe of the gilded lamp which hung from the center of the ceiling and tapped the wick with his torch until all the shimmering points united into one single, steady flame. Caressingly, he wiped the huge globe, replaced it, and with the tip of his scissors struck each crystal pendant, whistling in tune tunelessly. Suddenly aware that he had lingered too long, he pressed the ladder tightly against his back (futile gesture to conceal his deformity) and dashed out. This was the signal for the public to enter.

The first to rush in were the "hard-bench sitters"—chiefly young fishermen and apprentices, since it was gratis. Then, less precipitously, but still hurriedly—for the places were not reserved—those who occupied leather seats. These in turn were followed with grave dignity by the owners of numbered tickets for the plush chairs.

The attire, too, varied with the location of the occupants. The "wooden sitters" hadn't bothered to change their working clothes. The "leather sitters"—particularly the women—had something fresh to show: a skirt, a blouse, a scarf, a piece of headgear. The "plush patrons" displayed fineries: ancient shawls, amber necklaces, velvet bodices, silk kerchiefs, embroidered waistcoats, silver and gold chains.

When sufficient time elapsed, the town's dignitaries arrived: the Burgemeester, the Judge, the Pastor, the Headmaster, the Notary, each with his spouse.

As they walked to their loges, there was glitter of gold and diamonds, swishing of silk and taffeta, wafting of perfume and pomade, while through the hall rippled that peculiar susuration which always and everywhere registers the respect, the envy, the admiration and the contempt people bear their superiors.

Hardly were they seated, however, when something far more exciting and intriguing attracted the attention of all: a man in Continental evening attire, such as most of them had only seen on fashion plates or as illustrations to elegant novels—frock-coat, diamond-studded shirt, silk vest with mother-of-pearl buttons, lacquered shoes, chapeaubras, black cloak with dazzling red lining, kid gloves, gold-knobbed cane—and all so becoming to that tall figure and that serious face, terminating in a Van Dyke of silken blond hair.

The usher showed him to his place, and returned, eyes blazing, face on fire. "A whole gulden as a tip!" She showed the gold coin glittering on her trembling palm to all the rest at the door. "And a whole loge to himself."

After the first moments of stupor, there started a highly tensioned buzzing in the audience, including the town's dignitaries. Each, in his own image, recreated the stranger, his nationality, social importance, financial status, intellectual capacity, moral sense, physical prowess, spiritual condition—fictitious Fates weaving futile patterns on looms of breath.

Behind the screen, there was equal animation. "Come here—come here," Pieter, the lamplighter, transformed now into the stagehand, whispered excitedly to Vrouw Schuiling who, in the wings, was putting the finishing touches to Gloria's hair. "Look! Look!" She peeked through the crevice between the panels. "Oh!" she exclaimed admiringly. "Who do you think he is, Pieter?"

"I shouldn't wonder that he is—what do they call the man who engages actors for the theater and the opera?"

"An impresario?"

"That's it—impresario—"

Vrouw Schuiling signaled to Gloria to approach. "Look, dear—here—here. Pieter says he's an impresario."

"Yes, an impresario." Pieter was now quite positive.

"But why—why should an impresario come to listen to me?" Gloria asked, her voice tense.

"That's what they do." Pieter spoke with authority. "They hear about hidden talent, and they come to find it." His blue eyes twinkled joyously, as if they had captured the light of the little flames he brought to life every evening. "And so, Miss Engelin, rub your hands on my hump—and you'll have the greatest luck imaginable—"

Gloria was preoccupied and reluctant.

"Go ahead, lieveling," Vrouw Schuiling urged. "It does bring luck; everybody says so."

"Luck? Why, do you know, Vrouw Schuiling, that if I wanted to go to Monte Carlo—and allowed the roulette players to rub my hump, I could make a neat little fortune? But I say if God has given me this affliction, it wasn't because He wanted me to profit by it, but to be humble and suffer."

"You'll certainly be rewarded in Heaven for the cross you bear on Earth," Vrouw Schuiling consoled.

"But I'm sure God won't mind if an *Angel*—" he laughed, breathing hard and jutting his nut-cracker jaw forward. "If an *Angel*," he repeated, to make sure his cleverness was fully appreciated, "rubs my hump and gets a lot of luck. Go ahead—" He turned his back to Gloria, who passed her hand fastidiously over it.

"You must do it harder, and with both hands. That's it. That's the way. You know, I've been praying all the time," he addressed the mother, when Gloria stopped.

"Thank you, Pieter," Vrouw Schuiling said. "God bless you."

"Miss Gloria, tell me the truth." He lifted his eyes to her pleadingly. "Would you say that my bump is—very—big?"

Gloria, in whose palms the topography of the misshapen back stung like clinging brambles, no longer felt the resentment for having been coaxed to touch him, and answered, her voice mellow with tenderness: "Why, Pieter, you know what I said to myself just now? I said—'I'm not so sure he'll bring me luck, after all, because his back is—well—just a little round—but not enough—'"

"There's enough for that, enough for luck for you!" he exclaimed, his face burning with joy.

"Pieter, Pieter, let's hurry!" Vrouw Schuiling said with sudden impatience. "It's nearly half past eight!" She pointed to the watch pinned to her waist.

Pieter spat into his cupped palms, rubbed his hands vigorously, puffed his cheeks, threw his pigeon chest still farther out, and as if finally properly wound, spoke swiftly, without breathing. "Go in there, in the wings, both of you. You, Vrouw Schuiling, strike the gavel on the table—three times—slowly—like this, one—two—three. As soon as you finish, I fold the screen and run out with it into this other wing. When I wave to you, you strike the gavel once again as hard as you can. That's the signal for you, Miss Gloria, to appear on the stage. We must do everything properly like they do in Amsterdam and even in Paris, though I've never been in a theater in Amsterdam and I've never seen

Paris. But I've got inside information, and I could make a good stage-hand in any theater in our country—and even in Paris, if I only knew a little French." As he talked, he waddled on one spot like a heavy bottomed toy which can be pressed down in any direction, but never upset.

Gloria bowed, the public applauded, delighted by this sudden vision in white. "She needs only wings to be a real angel," many whispered, while some more factual-minded complained that she had not actually pasted wings to her shoulders, at least for the first number—the recitation of a poem invoking all living things and even those inanimate objects which show some manifestation of life—running waters, blowing winds, dust dancing in the streaming sunrays, clouds tumbling like silken shawls over the great shoulders of mountains—invoking all to do homage to God, Master of Nature!

Then came a ballad by Reinaert, humorous verses by Bilderijk, a dramatization of Hans Christian Andersen's *The Ugly Duckling*, and scenes from the great tragedies of Vondel, the Dutch Shakespeare.

Though apathetic and not given to manifestations of emotions, this evening, however, swayed by the performer's magic, the Hollandamians became as tumultuous in their applause as a Parisian audience. They clapped hands, rocked feet, shouted: "Bravo, Engelin! Zeer goed! Bravo! Bravo! Bravo!"

Pursuing his plan to do things in grand style as in the theaters of the great capitals, Pieter unfolded the screen each time Gloria walked into the wings and folded it again as she came out to take her bows. "Two curtains—three—four—five—six—ten—" he counted excitedly.

The Burgemeester left his loge and climbed the steps to the platform with the studied dignity of a politician who follows the hearse of his erstwhile opponent. He planted himself in the center, his short, fat legs at an angle which most comfortably supported his massive belly crossed from one end to the other by a cable-like chain of gold to which was imprisoned a silver watch protruding from his pocket like a tumor.

"Heeren en Dames," he began, after three neighing coughs, "never in the memory of anyone here, and perhaps never at all, has this great hall reverberated with such magnificent sounds!"

"Zeer goed! Bravo! Zeer goed!"

"Never before has there been such deep appreciation among our citizens!"

"Bravo!"

He continued in a crescendo of exalted panegyrics in which more and more he identified himself with the subject of his praises, and swallowed the applause not meant for him as a fire-eater swallows false flames.

His beard bristling, his lips extended as if ready for cupping, he implanted a kiss upon Gloria's forehead with the vigor and solemnity of a royal seal, officially terminating the session.

Thereupon, Pieter definitely unfolded the screen to its limits, and the people began to leave. To make their exit less lingering, and also from a sense of duty to the town's treasury whose motto was: "Sow a pfennig, reap a gulden," he extinguished the lights with excited quickness.

5

Vrouw Schulling was undoing Gloria's dress—a slow process, for the tiny buttons were held tightly in the minute holes and were strung along her entire back like a spinal cord of mother-of-pearl. The girl sobbed quietly, tears trickling across her finely chiseled nose, over her perfectly shaped lips and hanging precariously on her soft, round chin.

"Not once did he applaud—I watched him—not once—" her voice trembled.

"But, lieveling, he's probably a foreigner and doesn't understand a word of Dutch," the mother tried to console her as she had been doing since reaching home.

"Why did he come then?"

"He just dropped in, no doubt. You could see by the way he was dressed that he never meant to come to a modest place like that. Why, he was fit for a royal box in the opera at Amsterdam or Paris."

"He certainly is fit for the best place in the world."

"Now, daughter, you mustn't judge men by their appearances." Vrouw Schuiling considered it important at this juncture to inject a parenthetical warning of the generic dangers inherent in the male of the species. "You must be very, very careful about men, lieveling. They never are what they seem or pretend to be. Do you know," she added with an air of mystery, "that there are among them snakes parading in dove's wings?"

Gloria made an effort at laughter, as she wiped her tears with the back of her hand. "Mother, your zoology would have made even Noah roar. A snake parading in dove's wings! A snake parading, and a company of worms hissing a royal march on snails' horns, I suppose—and the snake cooing while his wings flap like an elephant's ears—"

At any other time, Vrouw Schuiling would have been indignant, for she was sensitive about her maternal prerogatives, but now she was glad to grasp the occasion to laugh and dispel her daughter's mood. "Well, anyway, everybody said you were wonderful. Never in all my life did I hear such applause, and to think that even the Burgemeester, who is so very proud and serious—"

"I wish they hadn't been so darn enthusiastic—and the Burgemeester hadn't scratched my forehead with his mustache—"

"Why, Gloria—how can you say such things!" The mother was scandalized.

"It must have seemed so ridiculous—grotesque—to a man like him—"

"Again—that man?" Vrouw Schuiling untied angrily the laces of the small corset which was a tribute to style, but served no purpose to so lithe a body as Gloria's.

"I must have looked like a typical village star—without a bit of talent—the kind they make fun of in comedies—a quacking ugly duckling posing as a swan—and that's what I really am—a quacking ugly duckling." She bit her knuckles in self-abasement.

"I won't let you talk this way, Gloria," the mother shook her forefinger. "I won't!"

"And that fool of a Pieter," Gloria continued despite the maternal threat, "a regular Punch with a lump as big as a hill—"

"Poor man—he certainly meant well—and everybody meant well—and you haven't the right to insult any of our people. They are good, honest folk—ten times better and more honest, without doubt, than—that—that man—who had no business coming here in the first place." Vrouw Schuiling stamped her foot.

"You're right, mother," Gloria sighed, repentant. "I have been acting like a silly girl dazzled by fineries—"

"That's the way I want you to talk." Vrouw Schuiling kissed her cheek. "Be the engelin that you always are—"

"An engeline—flapping her duck wings." Gloria waved her limp hands.

"You are a queer little duck, dear," Vrouw Schuiling laughed. "But such a beautiful one!" She looked admiringly at her naked, fresh body, supple as a young tree. The flames in the oven cast a golden reflection and her ruby-tipped virginal breasts were caught in amber nets.

"Oh, if your sainted father could only have seen you this way!" Vrouw Schuiling sighed deeply.

"Ach! Goed hemel, moeder," the girl exclaimed giggling, instinctively concealing with arms and hands the cardinal points of her femininity.

"I mean grown-up," Vrouw Schuiling explained quickly, "and so beautiful and talented—and loved and admired by everyone—who really counts," she added warily. She took out of the cedar trunk with massive iron locks a chemise of fine spun linen embroidered by herself (she had already prepared a goodly part of her daughter's trousseau) and, drawing it over Gloria's head and arms, as she used to when she was a helpless baby, she let it slide over the gently rounded hips and vibrant legs.

"I *am* an ungrateful little wretch, am I not, mother?" Gloria threw her arms around her neck. "But I really do appreciate—I mean deep in my heart—everything and everyone—even including our Burgeester, the pin-cushion, and Pieter, Aladdin's lamp."

"I was so proud and happy," Vrouw Schuiling wept softly.

"And I messed things up, didn't I? I'm terribly sorry—"

"It wasn't our fault. That man had no business—"

"Let's forget about him—forever—shall we?"

Vrouw Schuiling nodded vigorously. "Forever—"

"And now," Gloria said, "you must go to bed, dear. You look worn out."

"And you, too. It was a great strain on you. And you were really wonderful—"

"Goeden nacht, Engelin."

Gloria did not go to sleep. She stood at the open window. The fishermen in their boats mistook her for the magnificent reflection of the Milky Way, but there was no Milky Way in her heavily clouded soul.

Emerging from the chrysalis of girlhood, a turbulent sap had begun to surge within her. Secretly she scorned the honor of being the town's prodigy. Her mind wove a far more gorgeous pattern: she would become Holland's greatest actress! On the surface, she pretended perfect bliss (after all, wasn't she an actress?) but within her she identified herself with all the neglected, disdained characters of fairy-tales, who one day, to the great astonishment of all, throw off their rags and appear as princes and heroes!

Then came her recital. She had condescended to accept it, since thus she would show the world—at least the world that knew her—that she was not a callow, untutored performer, but a full-fledged artist! It was to be the farewell to childish things. After that, she was determined to inform her mother that she would seek her fortune in Amsterdam and The Hague, and her mother would have to allow her to go. Oh, she would return to Hollandam as often as possible, and write regularly (she would never hurt or forget her poor, dear mother!) but go she would!

And then this terrible fiasco—that had the appearance of a colossal success! For what was the applause, the bravos of all those people, compared to one tiny handclap from him—from that strange personage who represented culture, urbanity, the world she would have to please in order to be acclaimed as a great actress? Strange, that he should have come! Had God sent him purposely to warn her that she was a vain fool, that she belonged, not in the world's grand hall of fame, but in the souvenir shop of the little town of Hollandam?

It was not only his beautiful clothes which gave him distinction, but his thoughtful face, his aristocratic bearing, his fine, sad smile. But why was he so cruel? For politeness' sake, for mercy's sake, he could have applauded a little. No, not a man like him. He was too sincere, too kind to encourage someone who was predestined to failure! And she was grateful to him for the quick, sharp stab in the heart! The mortal stab to her ambitions!

Was he really an impresario, as Pieter said? Strange, how natu-

rally her mother took to the idea that he might be in search for talent! Had she, too, secretly, dreamed of a glorious career for her daughter? And how hard the poor soul had tried afterward to convince her that he was a foreigner who understood not a word of what she recited! But even if he had not understood one single word, he could have judged her mimicry, her histrionic abilities. After all, it was not so much the matter, as the manner. She was not an author, she was an actress.

There was deep silence, save for the *Zuider Zee*, pendulum to the moon, striking morosely in vast metallic tongue against the shore. Hollandam was at peace with God and the world and its simple, unambitious inhabitants slept. The very houses, red, gray and yellow with steeped gables and green shutters, leaning upon one another's shoulders, slumbered and even the restive windmills rocked themselves gently into stupor. Gloria alone, clawed by the monster *Vanity*, had no peace with God or the world or herself. She alone demanded of the Fates what they had not spun for her. What an ingrate she was! *She* was that snake with a dove's wings that her poor mother spoke about, for she despised her people, was ready to disown the town in which her ancestors had been born and lived and died, and yearned for the admiration of strangers, who wore gloves in theaters and whose very applause was false, neither from the warm hand nor from the warm heart. Strangers like that snob who came to be amused by the decent efforts of good, loyal folk, and never even deigned to strike fingertips against fingertips, fearful that a little show of appreciation would soil them.

But that was over! Things had become clear to her. She had matured swiftly, like a fruit in the sun. She would be loyal to Hollandam and would continue to give fully of her talent to her own people. (And pray, was not reciting for charity as laudable as for fame?) She would marry a fisherman—there never was a better and more faithful husband than a fisherman, although, at present, she knew of no youth whom she cared for. This, however, was due to her conceit, conjuring (ever since she was old enough to know that Nature paired male and female) only princes for her love!

Her thoughts began to drag themselves across her mind, wearily, like a tattered army in retreat. Her eyes were laden. She yawned interminably. She shuffled her feet, shod in red velvet slippers trimmed with beads, to her immense, canopied bed. It had been made to order by her grandmother as part of her daughter's trousseau, for she claimed that a bed should reckon on two grown-ups, and one or two children who kicked like mules.

Gloria dropped her head on the eiderdown cushion that lay on top of the large goose-feathered pillow and mustered all her strength to pull the satin-covered, hand-checked quilt up to her throat. Sleep, wisest of leeches, spread instantly a healing poultice over the aching heart.

6

Gloria opened her eyes and what she beheld upon the table made her certain that she was dreaming. She would, therefore, have closed them again, if her mother, waiting at the door for precisely that moment, had not exclaimed: "Look! Look!" pointing to a basket of roses, red as blood.

Gloria sat up, rubbed her eyes, then muttered with mock pomposity: "I, *Mijnheer Van Deuren*, *Burgemeester* of Hollandam, in the name of the citizens and with the approval of the Treasury, send *Jufvrouw Gloria Schuiling*—"

The mother laughed. "*Burgemeester*? He'd have to levy another tax on the town before he could buy such flowers at this time of the year. Here—" *Vrouw Schuiling* handed her a visiting card on which

Gloria read over and over again to herself and aloud: "To the queenly Swan in a world of ugly ducks. From Mister Robert Russell Lowell, who was too entranced to applaud."

Vrouw Schulling wiped her eyes with the edge of her apron. "Wipe mine, too," Gloria sniffled.

"I told you he was a foreigner," the mother said, "didn't I?"

"But you said he didn't understand a word of what I recited. He writes such a beautiful Dutch—and has such a beautiful name—Meester Roobert Roosel Loovel—"

"An Englishman," the mother added her admiration. "The English are wonderful. They never bargain with you. Of course, you charge them more than you would the French or the Italians, let alone our own Hollanders—but you treat them with proper deference and consideration, and that is certainly worth something extra, isn't it?"

Gloria buried her face in the flowers.

"They come from Amsterdam," the mother explained. "You can't expect to find such roses in Hollandam."

"He never wrote his address where I could send him a letter of thanks," Gloria sighed.

"I know his address," Vrouw Schulling said.

"You do? What is it? Tell it to me, quick, so that I could write at once. He'll think I have no manners—"

"You don't need to write, lieveling, because—" she breathed deeply and proudly, "he will be here in person this afternoon—"

"Here? Will be here?" Gloria jumped off the bed.

"Yes, here—here—"

"Tell me all about it, moeder! Goede hemel, don't keep me in suspense!" the girl implored.

"The messenger was Mijnheer Boumdernoot himself, owner of the Hotel der Nederlanden, so you understand how important it all is—"

"Yes—yes—go on—"

"You should have seen how low he bowed, the stinkpot, who never even takes the trouble to raise his hat when he sees you on the street, barely touches it with the tip of his finger—just because once the Prince of Orange put up at his place for one night—was caught in the storm, that's why, and then, out of mere courtesy, sent him a signed photograph of himself—"

"Mother, please—please go on—"

"Well, Boumdernoot gave me the flowers and the note—and waited still as a mouse until I finished reading it a few times because I couldn't believe my own eyes. Then he said, ever so sweetly, as if he had just swallowed a spoonful of fresh honey—'The Meester asks Miss Gloria whether she would allow him to come this afternoon at four o'clock to present personally his respects?' I answered with the appropriate dignity, you may rest assured, although bells were ringing in my ears with excitement. 'Miss Gloria,' I said, 'is still asleep.' 'A quarter after eleven o'clock and still asleep?' he grinned with his black and green teeth from smoking that awful pipe, a yard long, which he never takes out of his mouth. 'Actresses—after very successful performances—have a right to rest and recuperate, Mijnheer Boumdernoot.' 'Of course, of course, and I regret very much not having gone to the Town Hall last night, but we were so busy, so busy. There was in the first place the Meester, then a Prussian official—and you know how exacting Prussian officials are—and of course our usual large clientele.' But, I thought, you didn't come, you miser, because you would not spend a penny for charity. He must have guessed what went on in my head, because his flat face turned as red as a scalded lobster. 'So, shall I wait until Miss Gloria rises?' he mumbled humbly. 'Neen,' I said. 'You may go, and tell the Meester that Miss Gloria—and her mother—would be much honored to receive him this afternoon, at four o'clock.'"

Gloria was tossed by a storm of emotions, and she heard nothing further of what her mother related. Truth to tell, however, it was of

no real consequence, for Vrouw Schuiling only repeated the incident in a variety of keys—a maternal symphony of pride, pleasure, anxiety and vigilance.

"And what time is it now?" Gloria, finally mastering herself, asked. Vrouw Schuiling had no need to answer, for at that very instant came the reply from the Town Hall clock, masterpiece of the illustrious horologer, Pieter Van Cruysen (1703-1759), whose statue stood in the midst of the forgotten debris in the former market-place, noseless, handless, corroded, as if to translate into all tongues the terrible meaning of the classic proverb carved upon the pedestal—*Tempus fugit*.

Angel Gabriel in a long robe and pointed wings flew out of Heaven which crowned the clock, blew his trumpet four times to indicate the quarters of the hour, and vanished. Immediately followed the twelve Apostles, as Dutch fishermen, halos encircling their heads. Each struck a mighty hammer upon the Anvil of the Hours, while Father Time swung his great scythe back and forth, symbol of the fragility and futility of all things.

The gate of Heaven shut again, and it was noon in Hollandam.

"Is he coming to the shop?" Gloria asked.

"Certainly not, my dear. I'll close the door downstairs and attach the bell, so that I can hear when a customer comes in, but we shall receive the Meester properly—in our parlor—"

"Then let's hurry and fix it up—"

"There's nothing to fix up, Engelin. I was in there a while ago and opened the windows for a little sun and air. It's swept clean as a pin, not a bit of dust on anything. Luckily, we've had no visitors since Easter and the new shutters are certainly good and tight."

"But, mother, do you think our parlor's elegant enough?" Gloria asked anxiously.

"It surely is, daughter. The Meester is not coming to pay his respects to a famous Parisian prima donna, but to a talented child in Hollandam. You *are* a swan, lieveling, but you sail in a small pool, and as long as you don't pretend it's the Ocean—"

Gloria threw her arms around her mother's neck. "You're a regular philosopher—and I'm so happy, so happy, that I am very, very sad—"

"That's because you haven't had your breakfast—"

"Breakfast?" she made a wry face. "I'm not at all hungry."

"Just a cup of cocoa and bread and butter and maybe some Edam cheese or a filet of herring."

"No. I think I'd better start to dress—"

"Food is also dress, dear. It puts color in your cheeks and light in your eyes."

Gloria applauded. "Not only a philosopher but a poetess as well!"

The parlor was directly over the shop. It was frescoed with nude, massive-bottomed angels flying in all directions. One wall was dedicated to the fireplace and mantelpiece, over which hung an oval mirror. Three heavily-curtained windows occupied another wall, while the remaining two were covered with framed and glazed daguerreotypes of relatives dead and living, and miniature fishing boats of all types, made of wood, glass, ivory and lead. In one angle there was a spinning wheel; in another a very tall lamp supported by brass mermaids; in a third a marble-topped stand on which blossomed the basket of roses received that morning, but normally the habitat of an harmonicon, long tuneless, and now relegated to the attic. Against the wall facing the fireplace was a large table covered with a thick velvet cloth modestly concealing every part of it, save the rapacious claws of the lion's legs which supported it. Chairs, velvet-backed and straw-seated, placed at well-calculated distances, allowed free circulation. The floor was strewn with hand-woven rugs, round, square and lozenge.

The Apostles struck three o'clock and Vrouw Schuiling set her watch, but, mistrusting both Angel Gabriel's quarter trumpet calls and

the cricket-like voice of the tiny chronologer pinned to Vrouw Schuiling's heart, Gloria kept peeping through the trellies of the Venetian blinds, listening to footsteps on the staircase, opening cautiously the door. Then, tired, she would drop into a chair, and take her book, while her mother resumed her embroidery, for that had been decided upon as the most alluring picture for masculine eyes.

Gloria was dressed in a green velvet bodice, black taffeta skirt, and red-lacquered shoes, birthday gift of her godfather, old Willem, who carved them for her with the same punctilious care and tenderness that he carved the crucifixes, the madonnas and the saints for his Catholic customers. A white silk bow fluttered like the wings of a butterfly, pinioned to the back of her head by a giant tortoiseshell comb. An amber necklace shimmered over her neck and pulsed over her breasts—mischievous prisoners pressing their tiny pink noses against the velvet gate.

Vrouw Schuiling, too, was dressed in her holiday apparel, for the background must lend beauty to the ensemble, she explained, making Gloria laugh, since she had long ago learned that there was no time or circumstance which did not serve as an excellent excuse for every woman's primal need for primping.

7

Mister Robert Russell Lowell was not as awe-inspiring in his afternoon attire as he had been in his evening dress, although he had lost nothing of his aristocratic glamor. He kissed Vrouw Schuiling's hand, but as Gloria curtsied he stared at her in silence for a long time, while her blood flamed her cheeks and beat marches in her ears.

"Now I know!" he exclaimed jubilantly. "Now I know! During your entire performance last night, I racked my brain to recall where I had seen you before, for I was certain I had seen you—"

"Seen *me*, Mijnheer?" Gloria smiled, "how is that possible?"

"You are my grandmother!" he kissed her hand reverently.

"Your grandmother?" Gloria did not know whether to laugh, be indignant or frightened.

"I am certain that she was dressed like you, curtsied like you, spoke like you, lived in such a room, surrounded by such things." His hand traveled slowly, pointing to the objects caressingly.

"Forgive the bewilderment I am causing you, mesdames, I beg you, but just as last night I was mute with admiration, so today my mind is a cauldron of memories—not only personally experienced, but, if I may say so, racially—"

"You are still holding your hat and cane, in your hand, Mijnheer," Vrouw Schuiling said. "Permit me to relieve you of them, and won't you please take a seat?" She indicated the most comfortable armchair which she had destined for him.

Lowell snapped open his cigarette case. "Do you allow me, mesdames?"

The women nodded.

"They say that women are smoking in England, although Queen Victoria objects to it. Is that true, Mijnheer?" Vrouw Schuiling asked.

"I don't know the customs of the English ladies. I've never been in England."

"Never been in England? Aren't you English?"

"I am an American."

"An American?" Vrouw Schuiling's mouth remained opened in astonishment.

"American?" Gloria was startled from her reverie.

Lowell laughed. "Not such a rare bird. There are thirty million more like me at home, you know."

"And do they speak—Dutch—in America, Mijnheer?"

"Moeder, you know that the Americans speak English now. They used to speak Dutch when America belonged to Holland, but that's centuries ago," Gloria explained.

"But Mijneer speaks Dutch like a native," Vrouw Schuiling said, "except for a little accent—"

"Thank you, madame. The reason for my speaking Dutch is—" he bowed in the direction of Gloria—"my grandmother—who was a Hollander and who came to America at about your present age. My parents died when I was a child, and my grandmother raised me. She taught me the language, and when I grew older I read the poems and the classics which you recited last night with such consummate art."

"Our country should be dear to you, then, Mijneer," Gloria said.

"Your country has always been dear to me, for I loved my grandmother as others love their mothers, maybe more," he sighed, "but now my affection for it has doubled."

Gloria lowered her eyes.

"I have visited every inch of Amsterdam, my grandmother's birthplace, and every spot in all of Holland that I had read about in history and literature. I have said 'Hail;' and now I shall say 'Vaarwel!'"

He rose suddenly, as if he meant to leave at once, but it was only a gesture of nervousness, and to the great relief of the women, he resealed himself.

"Is it true that in America the streets are paved with gold?" Vrouw Schuiling asked.

"What an idea, moeder!" Gloria said.

"That's what I heard," Vrouw Schuiling excused herself.

"No, not gold." Lowell shook his head slowly, and that same tragic smile that Gloria had noticed while he was watching her act, once more clamped itself upon his lips. "Blood—blood paved and flooded the streets of America—her highways, her fields, her homes—blood of brother mingling with blood of brother—blood of father mingling with blood of son—four terrible years of slaughter—four horrible years of hate—" He covered his face with his hands.

The women exchanged looks of pained embarrassment. "We did hear that there was some sort of trouble in America," Vrouw Schuiling finally ventured, "but never suspected that it was as serious as you say, Mijneer."

"Trouble?" Lowell repeated bitterly. "The most ferocious war in modern history, madame. Hundreds of thousands of us killed and maimed, and half of our country scorched earth."

"How dreadful!" Vrouw Schuiling exclaimed.

"You see, Mijneer," Gloria said apologetically, "we in Hollandam live securely—as in a crib, so to say, in the kind embrace of the Ocean. We rarely read newspapers—hardly even take the trouble to glance at the bulletins of the Stadhuis, and they are only vague echos at best. Of course, people from all over the Earth come to us, but they are all in holiday mood. They buy souvenirs, laugh, stroll about for a few hours, and go away again. They don't talk to us about the serious things which happen in the world. They are here to forget them. As a matter of fact, they want us to remain a simple-minded folk, and to continue to act and dress in our ancient way—and we do it, both because it pleases us—and—" She smiled the sagacious smile of an ancient race. "Because it is good business."

"Fortunate people!" Lowell exclaimed.

"But the war is over, isn't it, Mijneer?" Vrouw Schuiling said.

"Is any war ever over?" Lowell asked with profound melancholy. "Is it over for the women who have lost their husbands and sons? Is it over for the orphans who have lost their fathers? Is it over for the crippled? Is it over for the defeated?"

"I hope your side won, Mijneer—"

"Yes—my part of the country won," he answered, his mood unspelled. "But we lost—all of us lost—our great Captain. The fools—they

killed their good friend, their kind father. They murdered the one man who could have saved them from the disaster of the peace of the conquered."

"Mijnheer means the American President, mother. I can't recall his name—who was shot in a theater. I always remember things connected with the stage, you know," she addressed Lowell.

"But he was only a President," Vrouw Schuiling said, making a gesture with her hand to indicate unimportance. "Presidents aren't rulers for life, anyway, are they? Now, if our king or queen were assassinated, God forbid—"

"America—the whole world—has never seen and will never again see a man like him," Lowell said with deep conviction.

Gloria, steeped as she was in the legends of the mighty deeds of her country's heroes, made an involuntary gesture of dissent. Granted that the American President *was* a great man, a great soldier, or indeed a great anything, she could easily name a dozen Hollanders who had surpassed him. Still, being the hostess, since she could not agree with her guest, she must at least nod politely, which she did.

"But for my grandmother—the war is definitely over," Lowell said, after a lull in the conversation. "And it was I who killed her," he added, sighing.

Vrouw Schuiling caught her breath.

"Not with my own hands," he smiled reassuringly. "I was wounded, and—"

"You were in the war, Mijnheer?" Gloria asked in a tone heavily tinged with solicitude.

"I was a colonel in the cavalry, madame."

"A colonel—and so young?" Vrouw Schuiling said admiringly.

"I was twenty-three at the start of the war—but being an excellent horseman, an almost perfect shot and a good swordsman—I was offered a lieutenancy. Having taken part in several important engagements, and having proved himself not too cowardly and not too stupid, I was promoted—"

"You must have been *very* brave—" Vrouw Schuiling said emphatically as if to contradict the modesty of his recital of achievements.

"And you were wounded?" Gloria continued her tone of concern.

"I had escaped without a scratch until the last three months of the war. Then when the fighting was practically over and my regiment—or what was left of it—believed itself safe enough to bask in the sun and wait demobilization, we were taken by surprise and decimated. My wounds were painful, but not grave, and I could leave the hospital when peace was concluded. Only when I reached home, did I discover that my poor grandmother had been buried for weeks. The hospital authorities had purposely withheld the news from me."

"But you said that you—killed—" Vrouw Schuiling reluctantly reminded him.

"The army headquarters by mistake informed my grandmother that I was killed in action. That letter was a gun aimed at her heart, and she dropped dead instantly."

"Oh!" Gloria and her mother exclaimed in unison. Their hands upon their chests.

The bell tinkled.

"Excuse me, Mijnheer," Vrouw Schuiling said. "A customer—"

Lowell rose, bowed, then reseated himself. He lit a cigarette, smoked a while in silence, then continued: "It was a terrible blow to me, for my grandmother had always been my haven, and now more than ever I needed a haven. I returned to the social set where I was considered a brilliant young member, but all the gaiety and the excitement and the glitter which once had intoxicated me, now left but a taste of gall in my mouth, and even New York which I had loved with a profound filial love, bored me. But worse than all, I could not resume my painting—something that I had yearned for—lived for—all those four long years of war. My mind was a slaughter-house, my blood

was poisoned with pestilential fumes, and my hand refused to paint anything but shrieking flesh. In helpless fury, I tore canvas after canvas, until my studio was littered with horrible, mangled beings, dripping with the red and black paint—a battlefield seen in a nightmare—”

Gloria said nothing, but Lowell beheld in her face such depth of sympathy, that his nerves were soothed and caressed. “However, I haven’t come here to recount my tribulations, but to tell you what a delight your recital was to me. Just imagine—my last day on the Continent—in a sense my last day in the Western—shall we call it—civilization—and my eyes and my ears were offered a royal feast.”

“Are you going back to America, Mijnheer?” Gloria asked anxiously, neglecting to thank him for his compliments.

“Not to America, madame. To India—”

“But that’s even farther away—” Gloria clutched at the amber beads until they left their imprint on the nape of her neck and in her fist.

“Very much farther, for I am going deep into the interior—perhaps to Tibet,” Lowell said, “to become a monk—”

“A monk, Mijnheer?” Gloria gasped.

“A Buddhist monk,” he nodded. “I shall spend the rest of my life among those good people to whom all living things are sacred, for they know that in each one of them, however lowly, there is a soul which some day, even though it takes ten thousand years, will achieve at last—peace—peace with itself and the Universe.” His voice assumed a Messianic tone, as he continued to expound the Buddhist theory, and his hope, that by obeying faithfully the precepts of Guatama, the Enlightened One, he would be able to shorten his soul’s predestined career in time and space and be granted—Nirvana.

Gloria was not impressed by what he said, for she belonged to a people who preferred drab reason to glowing mysticism (for which they were accused as stolid), and did not consider anything profound simply because they could not understand it. But she *was* impressed by his determination, and her heart pressed sharply, as if spiked, against her chest.

“Once again I went off at a tangent, didn’t I?” Lowell said contritely. “But I promise not to bore you any more with my past or my future—”

“Bore me, Mijnheer?” Gloria looked at him reproachfully.

“Are you making the stage your career, Juffrouw Schulling?” he asked, determined to turn the corner.

“I had planned to do so—but—I am no longer interested,” she answered, her mind still making the forced detour.

“I am sorry to hear that, for you have extraordinary talent, believe me. I shall never forget your interpretation of Hans Christian Andersen’s story of the Swan and the Ducks. It was magnificent! You were indeed the Queen of the Waters, and those ducks and drakes splashing at your feet—what mean, cackling fowls they were! Memorable!”

Gloria felt the sting of the artist’s joy, and since one compliment but whets the appetite creating a clamorous hunger for more, Gloria asked him his opinion of each piece she had recited, devouring his praise and plaudits until, at last, her whole being replenished, she shut her eyes in measureless satisfaction. Oh, how often, later, in triumph and in misery, with laughter in her eyes or tears in her throat, did she return to this precious jug cached in her memory to sip again of its honey, forever fresh and perfumed!

“And to think that I might never have seen you, except for my peculiar mania—” Lowell said.

“Mania?”

“I have the hardest time to pull myself away from any placard or sign until I have devoured every letter on it. I missed my stagecoach, and having nothing to do until the morning, I thought I would indulge

in my—mania to my heart's content. Well, I began walking about the town, slowly, reading the names of all your merchants, their goods, their prices, city ordinances, and all such invaluable information. Finally, I reached the Town Hall, and there amid the announcements of the trinity of man's career—birth, marriage and death—I caught sight of a notice that a local talent would perform in the evening. You will forgive me if I say that it did not look too promising—”

Gloria smiled. Twenty-four hours previously, the very words “local talent” would have cut to the quick, but now it only heightened her merits. The beggar's rags had been cast off, and the princess was recognized and hailed!

“Shall I go? Shall I not go? Shall I go? Shall I not go?” I debated with myself, and finally decided to have recourse to that most ancient and infallible method of consulting fate—tossing a coin—heads I go—tails I don't. It was heads—and my good luck—”

“Mine, too,” Gloria said. “But many hours had to elapse first—a long, long night—until I awoke to see those glorious flowers—for which, by the way, I have not as yet thanked you, Mijnheer.” She rose and curtsied. “Please forgive me. My poor head has been in a turmoil—”

“I fear I've been partially the cause of it,” Lowell said regretfully.

“Entirely, Mijnheer—”

He raised his eyebrow inquisitively.

“Imagine a gentleman, dressed in wonderful evening fineries such as we had never seen except on pictures, appear in our own humble hall—” Gloria played with her beads.

“Oh—” Lowell smiled. “It was my farewell to the empty trappings of an empty life, but I presume it must have caused a little sensation—”

“A little sensation, Mijnheer?” And she recounted what had transpired behind the screen, her excitement, her hopes, her eagerness to please him, all of which had given her the impetus to put her very soul into her performance. Then, the great disillusion, the long heart-breaking vigil and the final decision to give up all ambition. But, oh—afterward—the awakening—his promised visit—the end of the nightmare—

Lowell listened, motionless, his hands tightly clasped upon his lap, his eyes riveted upon her. Presently she was no longer Gloria Schuiling, no longer a beautiful girl with historic abilities. She had receded (as if he looked at her with the smaller end of an opera glass) into an alcove, glowing with jewels. Her words were incense serpentine about her, while at her feet humanity knelt and worshiped.

She stopped, tapped her hair with her fingertips, settled more deeply into her chair, pulled down her skirt, leaving only the tips of her shoes in evidence, mocking tongues to masculine curiosity. She counted slowly her luscious amber beads—an unconscious atavistic gesture of telling rosaries indulged in by pious, long-forgotten ancestors in the days when the Netherlanders bent knee to the Vatican and filled its coffers with guilders.

Lowell jumped up suddenly. His hands upon his back, he walked to and fro, then remained standing at the window. While his mind churned, his eyes caught with photographic precision the details of the street life of Hollandam (which never dimmed throughout his life)—the small cafes with round tables in the setting sun at which men sat stiffly, drinking beer and smoking pipes; fishermen with live fish in iron containers hanging from yokes across their shoulders; teams of oxen or horses pulling wagons with hoods draped with tulips' heads strung on strings; carts dragged by goats, driven by solidly-hipped matrons calling out: “Geiten milk! Fresh geiten milk!”

Lowell's ears were funnels into which poured clatter of shoes, clangor of hoofs, rattling of windmills, guttural mumblings of human voices; his nostrils were cornucopia of odors—cheese, fish, sulphur, coffee, ordure.

“An impresario—an impresario,” he muttered to himself. “Yes!”

He struck his fist against his open palm. The unexpected explosion startled Gloria. "Yes! Yes! I *shall* be your impresario, I *shall*!"

"But, Mijnheer—will you, please, explain?" Gloria begged.

"Not now. It's beyond words. Later on, perhaps—" he spoke excitedly. "You shall be the greatest actress of the generation—I promise you—"

"I am very grateful to you, Mijnheer, for the confidence you have in my ability." Gloria, with feminine instinct of self-defense, spoke warily. "But, after all, you are not really an impresario—"

"I have friends in the theater world—actors, producers, playwrights. When we arrive in New York," he made a motion which included Gloria and himself, "we shall consult them, engage their services, and—"

"New York, Mijnheer?" Gloria asked, uncertain whether she had heard correctly. "New York?"

"Not in Hollandam, of course," he made a deprecating gesture toward the window.

"Not in Hollandam," she agreed, although, piqued, "but Amsterdam, Rotterdam, The Hague—"

"No, madame, no. One cannot become the greatest actress of her generation in any city of Holland," Lowell said with a trace of impatience.

"But, Mijnheer, I am a Hollander. My language is Dutch," she retorted.

"You shall become an American, and your language will be English." He spoke with an officer's authoritativeness.

Gloria had heard that Americans were a fantastic, unpredictable race, but she had always taken such accounts with a large dose of salt. Here, however, in her own home, standing before her was a specimen of that strange, incredible people—a man who starts by coming to a small town recital dressed as for a royal ball, does not applaud when he likes the performance, sends roses the price of a boat, greets you as his grandmother, is a colonel, a hero, a painter, quits his country to go to India to become a monk so that his Christian soul might enter the Hindu Paradise—and suddenly, decides to be your impresario and make you the greatest actress of your generation, in a language of which the only word you know is "Meester!"

Gloria burst into laughter—a laughter compounded of mirth, irony, sagaciousness, innocence, affection. "Forgive me, please, Mijnheer. I can't help it—forgive me!" She pressed her handkerchief to her mouth. "It's too funny! Too American!"

"Laugh on—laugh on—" he begged, listening enraptured. "It's glorious!"

"Do I sound, perchance, like your—dear grandmother, Mijnheer?" She hid her head in the crook of her arm.

"You sound like the bells of a Hindu Temple. No," he shook his head, "no bells can ever sound half as magical—"

Vrouw Schuiling, out of breath for running up the stairs, dropped into a chair. "They kept me down all this time for one doll as tiny as this," she measured her forefinger.

Gloria continued to laugh.

"How easily girls laugh, Mijnheer!" Vrouw said confidentially. "Everything is grist for their mills."

"Madame," Lowell said after a silence, "America may not be paved with gold, as you imagined, but it is the country of golden opportunity. The bootblack there becomes the bank magnate, the cowboy owns fabulous gold mines, a log cabin is the cradle of the greatest of our Presidents." He continued to enumerate the legendary successes of the lowly in the New World.

"Is this what amused you, Gloria?" Vrouw Schuiling scolded a little. "I'm sure it's the truth. Doesn't everybody say 'rich American'? You never hear anybody say—'poor American'—or even just 'plain American.' So, I was right, after all, when I said that the streets were paved with gold," she added triumphantly.

"We're not barbarians, madame!" Lowell exclaimed proudly. "It isn't only gold that we cherish! We have spiritual riches!"

"Mijnheer believes that a Dutch actress could become the greatest American actress—and therefore, the greatest actress in the world," Gloria said, banter in her voice, but gravity in her eyes.

"I am certain of it, madame! There is not enough room in Holland for genius, madame!"

"Holland is not a very big country," Vrouw Schuiling conceded.

"Holland is a corset, if I may be allowed to say so."

The woman smiled coyly. "We are not prudes, Mijnheer."

"It will stifle her—stifle her!" Lowell warned prophetically.

"Whom, Mijnheer, if I may ask?" Vrouw Schuiling ventured.

"Mijnheer means me, mother," Gloria informed, mischief and seriousness mingling in her voice.

Vrouw Schuiling's mouth opened and closed like one of her mechanical dolls, emitting no sound.

"Mijnheer wishes to take me to New York—"

"New York?"

"As my impresario—"

"Impresario?"

"Fantastic, isn't it, mother?" Gloria's words now were tentacles testing the ground.

"On the contrary, madame, the most practical thing in the world," Lowell interposed stoutly. Eloquently, he pursued—a cavalcade of arguments, relentless, bent upon victory.

Vrouw Schuiling sought refuge in the fortress of hospitality. "Just now," she barricaded firmly, "the most practical thing in the world is a cup of cocoa and speculaas which I baked myself—an East Indies recipe: almonds and honey and sesame seeds. I hope Mijnheer has a sweet tooth—"

Hollandam, now profoundly asleep, resounded with the clarity of Messiah's horn on Judgment Day, for Angel Gabriel of the Town Hall clock blew his trumpet, and the Saints hammered twelve. Thereupon, Lowell took leave of his hostesses, who, despite all their efforts, for some time now had begun to nod even when they definitely wished to shake their heads.

8

"Alles wel! Alles wel!" Pieter, the hunchback, called out, swinging his lantern while continuing his quick short step. He was making the third round of the town, when suddenly, he heard footsteps turning the corner. "Halt! Halt!" he commanded. "Halt!" he whipped his pistol, a ponderous bit of machinery, out of its leather pouch. As he turned the corner himself, he was confronted with Lowell.

"Oh, Mijnheer, Mijnheer, I beg a thousand pardons—" he stammered. "Your shoes, Mijnheer, are so feathery," he said admiringly, "it sounded like someone walking barefooted and stealthily, and so, I became suspicious—"

"Perfectly all right—"

"I am Pieter Jhr, town lamplighter and watchman, at your orders," he lifted his hat ceremoniously.

"And I am—"

"Oh, I know very well, Mijnheer. You are Meester Roobert Roosel Loovel." Pieter pronounced the words with the gusto of a butler announcing the guests at a royal banquet. "There's not a man, woman or child in Hollandam, Mijnheer, who doesn't know your name as well as their own."

"I've certainly become famous—overnight," Lowell smiled.

"The tongue flies faster than the crow, I say. Oh, I am still aiming my gun at you, Mijnheer, forgive me." He replaced it quickly into the pouch. "It's a habit of mine," he explained, "for, I say that if there's

steel in your fist your words are of solid gold and everybody listens to them with great respect, but an empty hand makes for noisy argument and disobedience. Not that I expect to ever use it, mind you, because our people are not a bad lot. Some might drink a little more than is good for them and have a brawl, or a jealous fisherman might try to damage a neighbor's boat or cut it loose from the landing post, or maybe—and that's what happens most often," he winked in a pathetic effort at worldliness, "a girl who should be at home tucked in bed finds herself instead in a forsaken barn tucked in the arms of a man—or sometimes even desecrating a tomb in the cemetery, the Lord help us! Our people are cold on the surface, but inside they are all flame—like bullets," he grinned. "Anyway, all they need is a good scare, and they take to their heels. Alles wel! Alles wel!" He thrust his scrawny neck forward like a cock proclaiming the advent of day.

"Which way are you walking, Pieter?" Lowell asked.

"This way, Mijnheer—"

"I shall go along with you—"

"Oh, Mijnheer," Pieter recoiled, "that is too great an honor for a poor creature like me."

"We are all poor creatures, Pieter."

"Oh, neen, neen, a colonel—a hero—like yourself—"

"So you know that, too, Pieter?" Lowell laughed.

"I know even more, Mijnheer, much more—"

"And how did you learn all that, since the only people I talked to were the Schuiling ladies—and I left them but a few hours ago?"

"You see, Mijnheer, a lamplighter lingers here and lingers there, and while he pours oil into lamps, passersby pour words into his ears," he bent his head one way and the other, "which words the lamplighter pours into other ears along the road—"

"I see—telegraph *without* wires!" Lowell smiled. "Beats Professor Morse!"

From the general Pieter went to the particular, exposing the fountainhead of the night's information. "You see, Mijnheer," he recounted, "the bell tinkles in the comfortable parlor where Mijnheer and Vrouw and Juffrouw Schuiling sip perfumed cocoa and munch speculass—the most delicious in all Holland, I vouch for it. Gentle Vrouw Schuiling excuses herself and rushes down into the shop. There are a few foreign customers, to be sure, but more and more it's only kind neighbors and friends who drop in to say good evening—how are you?—or praise the weather—finest in years. Now, Vrouw Schuiling is like a bee that's been flying around a clover field so full of honey that it spills out of her—not gossip, Mijnheer, because there isn't a bit of poison in it—all flowers and sunshine and sweetness. Anyway, Vrouw Schuiling says excitedly: 'I have a great visitor upstairs—an American—with a beautiful name—Meester Roobert Roosel Loovel—and can you imagine, mijn vriend, the American Meester is—so and so—and he says—so and so—and he will do—so and so—' Each friend and neighbor quickly gathers the honey and rushes out to share it with others like good Christians. And so, it happens that they begin clustering around my lampposts and fill my ears—and my ears, Mijnheer, are funnels which empty into my mouth, and—"

"No wonder they say a secret dies during the tiny journey between mouth and ear," Lowell laughed.

Pieter further explained some of the mechanics of the distribution and—the subtle embellishments—he had to admit—of news in Hollandam. "I told Gloria last night on the stage," he said, "I was the stage manager, you know," he added proudly. "I told her, 'Rub my hump, Angel, and you'll have the greatest luck imaginable.' It was what I may call sheer prophecy, Mijnheer, and it has been fulfilled—that is, if she grasps the opportunity and goes to America—"

"Then you agree with me, Pieter!" Lowell rejoiced.

"All Hollandam agrees—"

"Hollandam?" Definitely Lowell would have to change his opinion about the Dutch. They certainly were not tortoises, slow and ponderous, but veritable greyhounds.

"We Hollandamians are not a quarrelsome people, Mijnheer." Pieter said, "but each one of us has his own opinion on—well—everything—and clings to it like a barnacle to the bottom of a boat—and so discussions that may sound like disputes go on forever—like the churning of the sea—but today, Mijnheer, the sea froze—completely—family squabbles, political feuds, religious arguments, business controversies—everything stopped. There was only one question: 'Should Gloria Schuling go to America with the American Meester to become the greatest actress in the world?' And miracle of miracles, Mijnheer, the answer was yes! All agreed! Except a bitter tongue and a sour heart, here and there, of course, who'd mistrust the Good Lord Himself—like that little nasty group of spinsters headed by Juffrouw Hasselaer, who claim that the reason there are so many bastards in the world is because God is a Man! And still, they are more devout than a flock of bishops. They spend the day in church and the night in the rectory. They're only of service when there's a wake in the family. They take care of everything, and if it's a widow that's left behind, they make her feel that she won a lottery prize by losing a man."

Pieter mentioned a few other dissenters—the butcher who was a vegetarian; the shoemaker's wife who walked barefooted to spite her husband; the carpenter who found the root of all evil in the fact that people lived in houses. They were the eternal no-sayers. "Now, of course, if Mijnheer were not an American, and if your sainted grandmother hadn't been one of us, and if she hadn't resembled Gloria, then all Hollandam would have been up in arms—the spirit of William the Silent is still with us!" he said defiantly. "But we are sure that all things considered, you would never harm our child, for Gloria is Hollandam's precious child, Mijnheer."

"Never!" Lowell pressed his hand upon his heart.

"And we're also sure that Gloria will learn English quicker than even you imagine, because she has an eye like a photographer's camera and an ear like a harmonicon. Once she sees something or hears something, she never forgets it. As for acting, have you ever seen, Mijnheer, a young person of her age do so wonderfully well without a day's instruction? Gloria is not like any other girl—not like any other girl—"

"Do you think so, Pieter? Lowell grasped his shoulder. "Do you?"

"Indeed I do," Pieter answered with great earnestness. "Ever since she was a tot—that high—there was something about her—that—that—" He sought for words to clarify his idea.

"Would you call it possessing divine light—prompting you—to worship her?" Lowell's face was tense, his eyes blazed.

"Yes—yes—that's it—that's it! We called her Angel—and still do. Do you know, Mijnheer," Pieter added with an air of profound mystery, "that when she touched my back, my hump disappeared. I was tall and straight. I shouldn't wonder she has the gift of healing—if properly guided—"

They walked slowly along the wharf, Lowell swinging his stick and Pieter his lantern, their shadows mingling grotesquely, so that at moments the Dutchman's hump would rise from the American's back, or the American's feet would trample upon the Dutchman's head. Pieter grinned, and swung his lantern in various directions, trying to obtain more and more startling combinations.

"Do you believe the shadow is the earthly manifestation of man's soul?" Lowell asked, watching the hunchback's maneuvers.

"I shouldn't wonder, because if you lose your shadow it means that you've sold your soul to the devil. They say that once upon a time a Hollandamian did walk around without a shadow and even his coffin when they carried it to the grave didn't cast any. Besides, he had barrels of gulden, which is always a matter of grave suspicion with us," he

chuckled. "But that was long, long ago, and there hasn't been a real rich Hollandamian since—except maybe Aunt Geertrulda, the miser, who lives on charity, but we don't care because she has no relatives, and when she dies all the money will go to the town treasury. And she has a shadow, longer and thinner than any of my lampposts." His voice suddenly changed, and all the merriment was squeezed out of it. "As far as I'm concerned, I'm ready at this moment—this very moment—to sell *my* soul to the devil—"

"You're jesting, aren't you, Pieter?"

"No, Mijneer, I'm not," he said determinedly. "And I'm sorry the devil doesn't seem to be in business—the buying part—any more."

"Don't you prize your immortal soul, my friend?" Lowell asked, concerned.

"I prize my immortal soul, Mijneer, but look—" He pointed his long thumb in the direction of his back.

"Oh, that—that—you ought to cherish it—"

"Cherish it?"

"Very likely it's a divine gift."

The hunchback looked at him quizzically.

"You see, Pieter," Lowell explained, "according to the Hindus who are a very wise, very old race, every animal has a soul—a former *human* soul that sinned and therefore had to return to a lower rank of existence, depending upon the type and the gravity of its crime—a bothersome insect or a useful domestic creature or a wild beast of the jungle. Gradually, as it climbs back step by step the ladder of life, the soul becomes purified, as water, for instance, becomes purified running through rocks and sand. Finally the day comes when it may enter a human body again, in the hope that this time it will be wiser and gentler and purer—"

"Ja, ja," Pieter nodded politely.

"Now, my friend, it is likely that your soul, punished who knows how many centuries ago for some evil it had committed, had reached at last a state of goodness which entitled it to enter a camel. As it was about to do so, however, the great god Vishnu had mercy upon it and allowed it to enter instead directly into a human body, skipping thus who knows how many generations of degradation. Still, to remind it that it was only an act of divine grace, Vishnu placed the hump destined for the camel upon the back of the man. And now tell me, Pieter, shouldn't you give thanks that instead of being a beast of burden in the hot sands of some African desert, you are the light-bringer to the charming town of Hollandam and its guardian angel?"

"I curse that Hindu god," Pieter said bitterly, "that is if he really had anything to do with making me a man with a camel's back. I would have preferred a thousand times to be an out-and-out camel, and also all the other necessary creatures, provided at last I could have become a real man—a man with a tall, handsome body—"

"Body!" Lowell's face twitched in disgust, "it's nothing but dung and stench—foul prison of the soul! Body!" he repeated, his face assuming the austerity of the ascetic. "You don't know, my poor Pieter, what the body is until you've witnessed a battlefield—"

"I agree with you, Mijneer, that it's but dung and stench on the battlefield, but in bed—the body—the female body—how delicious, how sweet, how perfumed it must be! Mijneer," he whimpered, "I am thirty and still a virgin—and to top it all—desperately in love. Can you imagine a more terrible tragedy? Luckily, nobody guesses what's in my heart. How they'd mock the hunchback! How they'd taunt him if he dared assert his manhood!"

They were now in front of the wijnhaus *At the Anchor and the Rope*, whose sign, rusty with time and salt, creaked overhead. In the window a lantern blinked and a great red cat dozed in a glass boat.

Lowell peered in. *At the Anchor and the Rope* was a Dutch master's canvas come to life: an old sailor with flowing hair played the fiddle,

while a dozen young fishermen, their long, porcelain pipes hanging from their mouths, danced gravely in a circle, in the center of which a woman, arms akimbo, head high, stamped her feet in proud defiance. "If only one could capture this," Lowell muttered, "and by some magic keep it—color and pulse and sound—and transfer it to the canvas—alive—alive—"

"That's the woman—that's the woman—I love," Pieter pointed his finger to the dancer. "Her name is Rosa—and isn't she as gorgeous as a rose, Mijnheer?"

There was, indeed, something of the full-blown flower about her, with her opulent curves, her glowing cheeks, her heavy lips, and the triple wreath of titian hair wound about her head.

"She's with me day and night," Pieter continued. "Each lamp I light bursts into her shape. I wipe a globe and before long I feel something warm and smooth underneath my hand—it's her breast. I swing my lantern—but it isn't the road I see—I see *her* preceding me, following me, brushing against my sides. I go to bed, but she's already there. My sleep is a feverish tossing from one side of the pillow to the other. And I'm ashamed to tell you, Mijnheer," he lowered his head, "but I never see her, as you, no doubt, dressed becomingly and dancing modestly. I always see her stark naked and in postures which drive me insane with desire. I am a wild tiger springing upon her, but I clutch only air and shadows." He wiped his face and neck dripping with perspiration. "I would sell my soul to the devil forever, if I could have Rosa," he mumbled.

Lowell recalled his own amorous experiences—one a flower too fragile to survive the night; one an oak struck by the lightning of a cruel word; one born in laughter and dead in tears; one filling the heart with the perfume of nostalgia; one choking the throat with ashes and dust. Suddenly, all images vanished from his mind, and Gloria appeared. She was naked, but it was not her body. It was her naked soul, the soul of a goddess, radiant, incorruptible, eternal.

Was Gloria really to be his India, his Tibet? He had gone in search of peace and an altar at which to worship. Had he reached his terminus, his goal? Had his good grandmother directed his footsteps, determined his life in the same mysterious and irrevocable manner in which the invisible roots determine the shape and the color and the texture of the tree's topmost leaf?

"Hey there, Pieter, is this the way you're taking care of our town?" several fishermen, hauling a great net glittering with herrings, called out.

"Thieves are rushing in hordes like Pied Piper's rats, and you're gaping at the pretty widow shaking her buttocks!"

"Get after the loving couples all along the wharf, Pieter! You step on them like on gasping, dying fish!"

"Ghosts are howling! Listen, Pieter, Hoo-hoo-hoo!"

"Devils have broken loose from hell and witches are riding on broomsticks over the roofs! Look, Pieter! Listen, Pieter!"

A flock of storks clattered overhead.

In unison, like a hauling rhythm, the fishermen sang: "Alles well! Alles well! Alles well!" Then roared with laughter.

Embarrassed, Pieter grinned, and waved his lantern. "I must be going, Mijnheer," he sighed deeply, slowly, as if lifting a full bucket out of a well.

"I'm going with you."

"Mijnheer," Peter said, as they turned into the main street, "if the Hindus are so kind to all animals, would they also be kind to a man like me? Would they recognize the soul which had atoned for its sins even before its time, so that their god was especially merciful to it, as you said, or would they, like the Christians, see only an ugly man with dangling arms and spindle legs and a camel's back?"

"I don't know, Pieter, but if the Hindus are the wise race I believe

them to be, they *would* see your soul, and the pain you've endured would be as a magic glass through which they'd behold a man, tall, and straight, and perfect, as this tree." He pointed to an elm.

Pieter looked into the American's eyes. "My soul is rotting in me because of my secret sin, and if the Hindu idea is right, it won't deserve a better place after I die than a swine's body. On the other hand, if our own religion is right, I will surely roast in hell forever—"

"I don't believe many people go to hell any more, Pieter. Civilized man excuses the kind of sin you're guilty of much more readily than he used to, so, why not God, who is a thousand times more civilized? As for the Hindu divinities, I am sure they take everything into consideration, and may even have a special reward for it. After all, my friend, what do we poor mortals know of the meaning of good and evil?" He realized, however, that he had been speaking smugly as a well-fed man to one who was starving, a healthy man to one writhing in agony. "Excuse me, Pieter, I didn't intend to take your pains lightly. I have seen—and felt—the agony of the flesh. Many a night, I still shout in terror, trapped in a nightmare of the true hell—the battlefield. It's for this very reason that I'm trying to get at the soul—where bullets and bayonets can't reach, where human cruelty and folly and meanness can't attack. But, I'm only groping, Pieter—"

"In all my life no one ever spoke to me as you have done, Mijnheer, and I never dared open my heart to any one as I did to you. But when you are gone, I shall be again the loneliest man in the world." Tears rilled his gaunt cheeks. "I wish, I, too, could go away," he added pathetically.

"Come along, Pieter," Lowell said impulsively, and instantly regretted it. America, worshiper of strength and hater of all things different, would be no haven for this poor creature.

Pieter, as if reading Lowell's thoughts, said emphatically, "Neen, neen, Mijnheer, not America. To India, that's where I should like to go. Ever since you mentioned that country, something or someone—maybe it's that god who made me half camel," he smiled drearily, "has been saying—or rather shouting inside of me: 'You belong to India, Pieter! India is your real home! India! India, Pieter!'"

Lowell was silent for a long time, his forehead knit in thought. Strange indeed was the pattern Fate was weaving for him. He could only catch vague glimpses of the bare outlines, but already he could discern that Gloria and this unhappy man were warp and woof of it.

"I am being tossed on a boat in a storm, Mijnheer," Pieter said excitedly. "The wind howls in my ears: 'To India, Pieter! To India, Pieter!'"

Pieter rubbed his forehead. "I swear I'm seasick—with due respect to you, Mijnheer." He made an instinctive gesture of bending over a rail. "The ship is zigzagging in all directions." He grasped Lowell's arm. "Excuse me—I got a bit dizzy—poor sea legs—as always," he laughed drearily. "That's what comes from letting your mind fly out of its cage. It certainly has the wings of an eagle and the tricks of a monkey."

As for himself, Lowell felt that he was traveling in a funicular train—one car mounting, the other descending, but he was both mounting and descending at the same time—in both cars—or was it Pieter—or parts of both—like the shadows which had merged? "There's more to it than that, Pieter—more than just your imagination running wild, as you believe—"

"What is it, then? What is it?" Pieter asked, agitated.

"I don't know precisely. I only know that something Pieter beyond our understanding is taking shape—at this very moment—"

"There's mad shuttlecocking inside of me, Mijnheer," Pieter said breathlessly, his long arms making weaving gestures.

Driven by an incomprehensible but inexorable urge, the two men dashed from one end of the town to the other—back and forth—talking feverishly—Lowell lapsing frequently into English, Pieter into a dialect

he had not spoken since childhood. By some miraculous telepathy, all that Lowell had read and studied and pondered about India and the Hindu philosophy, Pieter suddenly knew—knew naturally, without mystification.

Was it telepathy? Was it some intimate bond which had united them in a previous incarnation—an umbilical cord that still fed both souls from an identical source? Was it, Lowell continued to muse, the universal reservoir of common human knowledge, accessible to all who dared to clamber over the mountainous rubble of quotidian existence?

He had heard evangelists speak of sudden conversion. He had read of mystics beholding in a flash of spiritual lightning the mystery of life and death. He knew of St. Paul's divine Vision confronting him and demanding: Quo vadis—where art thou going? But all this had always seemed to him far beyond his powers and deserts, and if he was to achieve an understanding of the immortal phenomena, it would be by slow and painful climbing the measureless walls of ignorance, mundane blindness and self-adoration.

Yet—here—in this little town—where he had stopped over by the mere accident of having missed by a few minutes the stagecoach—here—thousands of miles away from home and thousands more from his destination—here—he had witnessed one of the miracles of the Concealed Truth. It was, to be sure, less a comprehension than a feeling—still without definite form, still escaping a precise name—but, nevertheless, a hope, a promise even—that achievement was possible.

And it seemed to him that the symbols of the Manifestation were propitious: eternal purity in the shape of woman, eternal humility in the deformation of the body of man—beauty and the cross in Christian terms, or goodness and sorrow in the Hindu—the path to Nirvana.

Dawn, the roseate bud of Day, tinted the horizon. The two men talked—no longer to discover each other's thoughts, for that they knew without words but to try to fathom the will and the purpose of the Power fashioning their destiny. Their words, divested of their daily and transitory values (fluctuating currency in a bankrupt world), assumed their pristine connotations. They were not mere tokens, but realities—the wax upon which the matrices of the original ideas had been imprinted—virgin words excavated from the caverns of the soul, where their significances had been buried tier upon tier like forgotten cities in the dust and the mud of the ages.

"He's a crafty Fisherman," Pieter pointed to the sun as it lifted its head above the waters. "He captures the Earth and all the seas in his silver and golden nets, but Vishnu, the Great Preserver, is a mighty Spider and he devours him like a dancing firefly."

But Lowell did not see the sun. He saw the luminous body of Gloria—goddess of the white fire. He bent his head and patted his hands in adoration, and as in a trance, he said: "You will go to India, Pieter. You will go to India."

9

One afternoon three weeks later Zeestraat, the main thoroughfare of Hollandam, had the air of festivity—a somber and pensive festivity, in which one felt that much of the laughter and the conversation were mere antidotes for tears, and which made Klaas Wijk, cynic and hen-peck (which antedated the other was not known) declare that "even funerals have their moments."

"How about weddings, Klaas?" some one asked.

"To all rules there are exceptions which prove them."

Some in fineries, others in workaday clothes ready to return to their jobs, men, women and children, in wagons and on foot, were wending their way to *The Golden Doll Souvenir Shop*—Widow Maria Schilling, Proprietress; in front of which three teams of beribboned and beflowered

mares, hitched to a stagecoach, were pawing impatiently, striking sparks from shivering and scarred cobblestones.

"The roof is already piled higher than the coach itself, as you well see, Mevrouw," said the coachman, whose face was a roguish moon on which sprouted a rat's mustache. "I call it a miracle of architecture, Mevrouw, and I wager there isn't another coachman in all Holland—perhaps in the whole world—who could put half as much in that space, and guarantee as I do, its safe arrival to the boat, considering the conditions of the roads—what with the mud because of recent rains—and all the other natural obstacles—put on purpose and by acts of God, to pester and torment man and beast."

"It's my daughter's trousseau," Vrouw Schulling explained, "and the Meester's luggage, and even Pieter has a couple of bags. Then there are the gifts of friends." She pointed proudly to the people who pressed around the coach and filled the courtyard to the brim. "Everything you can think of, my good man—cheese and cocoa and shawls and kitchen utensils, the kind they don't have in America, in spite of what the Meester says and with all due respect to him—since he's only a man—and he can't know about such matters. After all," she whispered all around, "America is a very big country and a very rich one—you've no idea how rich. Bootblacks own banks and cowherds gold mines—yes—yes, my friends," she insisted, when some made gestures of disbelief. "Still, considering other things—America is a little on this side of—" She looked about to see if Lowell was within hearing distance. "Barbarism," she ventured.

"I shouldn't wonder," the coachman agreed. "Do you know that there are no more stagecoaches in America? Only trains. Trains." He made a grimace of utter contempt. "The devil's own vehicle! Fire and brimstone direct from hell, that's what an engine is—nothing human—like my fine horses, neighing good morning, licking the hand that feeds them, finding their way to the stable without the need of—rails to guide them," he sneered.

The others joined in the discussion of "Amerika." They were geographers and historians and economists and linguists—creating even more than Columbus a new world—fantastic, lovable, frightening, magnificent, insignificant—but withal worthy of its existence because of the Meester who was going to make Gloria the greatest actress in the world.

"You can put some packages inside, too," Vrouw Schulling told the coachman, "since only three travelers will go with you. Nobody else, not even myself—not even as far as the first halting station." She bit her lips and stopped breathing, so that the imprisoned sobs might not break their chains and escape her shivering body.

"That's the right way, Mevrouw," the coachman said in a comforting tone. "I always say—once the horses start pulling forward, let no one pull backward!"

"That's right," many agreed.

"As for ocean traveling," Vrouw Schulling said, with an effort at jesting, "well—once I took a trip to Enkhuisen—and ach goede heme!" She made a wry face which caused a universal explosion of laughter. "And that took only a few hours—but three weeks—never—never! The Meester wants to take me along—but—never—never! Gloria—that's different. She's as good a sailor as her sainted father was. The higher the wave, the louder she sings. He did, too."

"He sure did," a few said.

"Great sailor and great fisherman, Jan was," one fisherman said.

"None better," another added.

"But you can take no chances," an old woman changed the subject, "are they taking herring along? The only cure for seasickness."

"Are they taking herring? A whole barrel—the gift of the fishermen who drink at the *Anchor and the Rope*."

Gloria emerged from the store. The women with a cry of admiration surrounded her and began discussing each item of her attire—all im-

ported from Amsterdam—garnet cheviot dress and cape, high lacquered leather shoes with mother-of-pearl buttons and Louis Quinze heels, red embroidered gloves, saucy hat with aigrette plumes, and pressing closely together so that no masculine eye might desecrate, they lifted her skirt to examine and appraise the petticoats froufrouing and shimmering, and the pantalets, thrice lace-edged, blossoming above her ankles.

"A princess!" was the general verdict.

Meanwhile, Pieter, in a black frock-coat and white turban (he considered himself already partially Hindu), discoursed gravely the problem of transmigration of souls to a multitude of men who wondered whether it was their eyes, their ears, or their minds which played tricks upon them.

"Will you light lamps in India, Pieter?"

"I shall light the lamp of my soul."

"Will you use kerosene?"

"I shall use the flame of eternal truth."

"Will you also be a town watchman, Pieter, and call out: 'Alles wel! Alles wel!'"

"I shall be the watchman of my soul, and when it is cleared of its impurities and I can start on my road to Nirvana, I shall exclaim: 'Alles wel! Alles wel!'" His voice had a prophetic gravity which awed the hearers and froze their mood of mockery.

"Goddank!" The coachman climbed to his seat and placing his horn to his lips with a flourish, blew a long note.

As if in response to the fanfare, Mijnheer the Burgemeester and Mevrouw the Burgemeestersvrouw, accompanied by Mijnheer de Rover, Headmaster, arrived at a gallop in an open carriage with purple cushions and a leopard's skin lap robe (moth-eaten), driven clamorously by a cabby in top hat and green velvet jacket (moth-eaten).

The two gentlemen waved their hats while the lady nodded and smiled to all and sundry.

"The beast certainly senses the vast importance of his personages. See how magnificently he draws!" Klaas pointed to the piebald and rheumatic horse. "Listen to his magisterial neighing! Regard his roving eyes! Watch his tail rise—and rise—and rise—and—now the harmony and the incense!" he exulted, tightening his nostrils.

Some one reminded him that he had run for burgemeester himself and was not elected, and that no sun was hot enough to sweeten "sour grapes."

"Welkom! Welkom!" Vrouw Schuiling ran to meet her distinguished guests.

"Welkom! Welkom!" the people added.

"Ah!" the Burgemeestersvrouw exclaimed as she beheld Gloria, and rushed to embrace her. "Admirable, lieveling! Admirable!" She shook hands with Lowell, and tried to say in English how wonderful he, too, looked, and how admirable it all was. Since it was broken Dutch, the people believed it was good English, and exclamations of admiration shot forth like fireworks. The Burgemeestersvrouw was petite, had black eyes and white teeth, and was fifteen years younger than her spouse. And how it happened that the Burgemeester had never seen or heard what transpired between her and the sailors of the royal navy on furlough can only be explained by the divine miracle of the horns and the intervention of Saint Cuculus who draws blinders over the eyes and fills with wax the ears of afflicted husbands.

Now Gloria, Lowell and Pieter formed a cluster which the Burgemeester addressed. First he spoke in general terms about the importance of the occasion (in which *he* played the chief role), then addressed each separately. "Mijnheer Loovel, the town of Hollandam shall eternally be proud that you had been its guest and henceforth, he who says 'Hollandam' shall, ipso facto, hear the words 'Amerika—Meester Loovel!' And thus the Old World and the New World shall be merged into One World! And now, I, Harrold Laurentius Van Deuren, Burgemeester in the name

of my city and its citizens, bid you Godspeed!" He shook Lowell's hand with great vigor and continuously, thus giving the people the opportunity to applaud and exclaim several times: "Long live Meester Loovel! Long live our Burgemeester!"

Turning to Pieter, the Burgemeester said: "Pieter Jhr, you were a decent citizen and we shall all miss you. Why you are going to India, we do not understand, but should you ever wish to return, your job is always open for you. Tell the Hindus that the hump upon your back is the horn of plenty filled with the good wishes of all Hollandamians." As he spoke, he patted his shoulder, letting his hand wander, as if unconsciously, over Pieter's back. "Good luck!" he ended, revealing his real intention.

"Gloria," the Burgemeester remained standing silent in front of her as if in long prayer. "Gloria," he repeated, "choicest jewel of our crown, dearest image of our hearts, you are not really leaving us. Your roots are with us always—only the magnificent flower is going. Gloria Schulling—Engelin—be our good ambassador—our angelic messenger! Shed your sweet light over the New World as you have shed over the little Old World of Hollandam! Return the greatest actress in the world, and as we came to say goodbye to you, we shall come to say: 'Welcome home!' God bless you, Engelin!" He kissed her cheeks and wet them with his tears.

The coachman now blew his horn twice.

Mijnheer Baltus Van der Rover, Headmaster, his nose blazing with anxiety and perspiration, milked his right sidebeard and after a grand clearing of his throat, began to read a paper which he held in his left hand, while the people, unaware of his efforts, wept and chattered and smothered the three voyagers with affectionate gestures.

"Hollandam—Hollandam—" the Headmaster resumed again and again, his voice changing from mere oratory to exhortation, to denunciation, to plea, but no one heard. "Hollandam! Hollandam! Hollandam!" Was the town but a mirage and its inhabitants false echoes, and was he invoking the treacherous desert? And yet he *had* been invited as special guest and speaker, and yet Hollandam *had* listened in rapt attention to the platitudinous and prosaic remarks of *that* individual, of *that* imbecile, of *that* vain ass whose geese were all swans! And they would not listen to the beautiful piece he had written—mostly in verse—as magnificent as any classic. Was he not the Headmaster, graduate (almost) of the University?

And as it always happened in moments of frustration, Mijnheer Baltus Van der Rover began questioning Divinity, not only about the unfairness of the immediate trouble, but about his entire life—why, for instance, did he have a red nose although he never drank; why was he bald when he was not old; why was he fat when he ate no more than a bird; why did not his great textbook on which he had spent a lifetime of labor and a libraryfull of knowledge, sell even as many as fifty copies? Why? Why?

There was never an answer! Never!

He crushed the paper in his fist, and there was enough hatred and passion in his gesture to crush the Universe had his hand been able to encompass it.

The coachman blew his horn with solemn deliberateness—once—twice—thrice.

Lowell bade the people once more adieu—vowing to take greater care of their beloved jewel than of his own eyes. Vrouw Schulling pressed Gloria to her chest, but not too strongly (how her heart yearned to crush her!) for fear of rumpling her dress. "How beautiful she is, Mijnheer!" she explained to Lowell. "So beautiful—mijn lieveling—mijn lieveling—"

"Moeder—" Gloria hugged her with absolute disregard of her fineries, and many women caught their breaths—the recklessness of youth!

The three voyagers entered the coach. The people rushed to the doors, keeping them open, some addressing Gloria, some Pieter, some Lowell—a lost word of endearment—a jest—an advice.

The coachman finally succeeded in closing the doors, and climbing to his seat, cracked his long, many colored whip. "Wulla! Wulla! he urged his mares. "Raise your hoofs, you lazy hussies or I'll barter you for an American train! Wulla! Wulla!"

"Vaarwel! Vaarwel! Vaarwel!"

10

The curtain had already dropped more than twenty times, but the applause, the bravos, the stamping of canes continued as ear-splitting as when Gloria, in her bridal gown, had risen from her chilly tomb, bowing and curtsying in all directions.

"Speech Speech! Speech!"

"What shall I do, Robert? What shall I do?" Gloria took refuge in the wings. "Do you hear them? I'm scared to death! In fact, this time I shall die for good!"

"Speech! Speech!"

"I'm going to run away!"

"No, you will not!" Lowell said authoritatively.

"Oh, take me home, I beg you!"

"Speech! Speech!"

He pressed her hands. "Go back and speak to the people! Gloria, please!"

"But what shall I say? What shall I say?"

"Whatever is in your heart. Go ahead." He pushed her gently forward.

"Ladies and gentlemen," Gloria finally began, "I think Shakespeare was cruel not writing some verses for a curtain speech for scared actors. I was on the point of running away, but my friend—in the wings—stopped me. He told me to say whatever is in my heart, and I'm grateful to him for mentioning the heart, because it is only from my heart that I can speak to you tonight. My head, ladies and gentlemen, has not the tiniest idea or thought in it. It is, in fact, only a giddy balloon bumping against the stars in Heaven. My heart, on the other hand, is very heavy, because it is a great big cornucopia filled with all the sweets imaginable, which, please let me offer to every one of you!"

"Go ahead! Throw!" The public clamored. "Throw! Throw!"

Gloria flung kisses to all parts of the theater until her arms fell limp at her sides. "No more! No more!" She addressed the spectators like spoiled children. "No more, see?" She showed empty hands and ran off into the wings. The curtain fell with a noisy thump—a period to any further demonstration of enthusiasm. So, Gloria believed, but when leaning on Lowell's arm, she opened the stage door, she was confronted by a crowd overflowing the sidewalk and filling the street, drowning with their clamor all normal noises, even the piercing cries of oystermen and sweet-corn sellers.

In vain did the drivers of coaches and drays and omnibuses crack their whips and clank their bells and shout at the top of their voices: "Gangway! Make room there! Look out! Stand aside!" Nobody paid attention to them or seemed to fear the restive hoofs of the nervous horses.

However, by gentle and persistent pressure, Lowell finally succeeded in reaching his basket-phaeton, but found the mare unharnessed and tied to an iron post and the carriage surrounded by a dozen young men who approached and reverently raising Gloria, seated her in it.

"Forward march!" the leader commanded. The others lifted the vehicle high, and began walking in military step. Lowell untied the mare, mounted her, and led the cheering cortege. Never had New York wit-

nessed such a miracle. Broadway—the cynical, the tough-hearted, the self-centered—turned tender gallant to a girl who only some hours previously had been considered a presumptuous foreigner daring to play the most delicate, the most beloved character in the repertoire of the world's peerless dramatist. It was a fresher and a more fabulous version of Cinderella and the Prince.

Shutters and windows were flung open and heads in various nocturnal conditions—ruffed, in caps, in paper curlers, bald (which during the day were weighted with resplendent chevelures defying nature to imitate art), in clusters, in pairs, or single, bent out, anxious or entertained, laughing or grumbling against the awful new ways of the new and awful generation.

Dashing out of saloons, the doors swinging wildly, men raised their glasses and toasted to anything and everything, and hailed the ever increasing original crowd.

The young men carrying Gloria sang snatches from operas and musical comedies and recited from Shakespeare, and at regular intervals exclaimed like a litany to some ancient Roman divinity: "Gloria! Gloria! Gloria!"

When Gloria's home in Washington Square was reached, the leader commanded to halt, and the young men deposited their burden on the marble stoop with the infinite care of a fragile vessel of priceless value. Each kissed her hand and mentioned his name—all of them scions of Gotham's best and oldest families.

"Thank you, gentlemen, thank you! Thank you, everybody! Good night all!" She ran quickly into the house, but the people clamored until she appeared on the balcony and recited the magic verses to her lover. The full moon, emerging from the clouds, transformed the spot into that ancient city where youth defied parental hate and authority, and death gave love eternal life.

Caught by the spirit, several would-be Romeos responded more or less lamely. Amid the laughter and the banter, Gloria closed the window, and found at last surcease from glory.

Careful not to offer tongues the occasion to wag, Lowell had meanwhile harnessed his horse and driven off. Only after the crowd had completely dispersed, did he return. He rapped the bronze knocker at the door (the shape of a swan) three times, his personal code.

Gloria rushed to open. "I was terribly afraid you would not return, Robert. I began to feel miserable—utterly miserable—just like that time in Hollandam when everybody applauded, but you—"

"As a matter of fact, had I been in the audience, I would have been again too stunned to applaud."

"Was I really so good, Robert?" Gloria clasped her palms.

"Marvelous! Simply marvelous!"

"Oh!" she uttered a cry of joy, and made a gesture of throwing her arms about him, but suddenly desisted. "Thank you, Robert. Now I am really happy," she said. A vague undercurrent of sadness trailed after her voice which Lowell attributed to fatigue.

"I think I ought to say good night, and give you a chance to rest, Gloria."

"But I'm not a bit tired—not a bit," Gloria said. "I couldn't possibly sleep. I'm too excited. So, please, let me have your hat and cane—and do not leave—until—until dawn, the tattler, peeps in at the window."

"At your command!" He bowed gallantly.

"Mrs. Hofdyk is asleep in the rocker in her room—snores like a company of wood sawyers," Gloria laughed. "The poor thing seems to have drunk a whole pitcherful of coffee to keep awake, but Morpheus proved mightier than Caffein. And so much the better, for tonight I wish to be alone with you, Robert. And I'm glad you didn't plan a dinner with your friends—or something—"

"I was reluctant to do that, Gloria—"

"I might have been a flop, hmm?" Gloria smiled sadly.

"I didn't trust our public. Would they recognize genius?"

"Oh, Robert, you're such a flatterer!"

"But you see that they did—and so, we shall have a banquet—a royal one—whenever you desire it."

"I don't desire it, Robert," she answered very earnestly. "I don't aspire to be the darling of Broadway. Frankly, I felt very uneasy (not to say very uncomfortable) riding over the heads of the people. It's not for me, Robert. I'm still the girl of Hollandam, and yearn to remain that way. Of course, I should like my work to be praised—and I'll try to do better and better; but, personally, I hope to be let alone. I guess it's going to be hard, but you will help me, won't you, Robert, please?" she pleaded.

Gloria was standing now in the center of the room under the chandelier whose shining gas jets made a pulsing halo about her head.

Lowell watched her in adoration. The years which had elapsed since he had brought her to America had further enhanced that indefinable quality which made her more than human. How anxious he had been about the effect applause and adulation might have upon her! Would she succumb? Would the strong wine of fame transmute her into a woman—a glamorous woman, to be sure, but still only a woman? Joy and gratitude now overbrimmed his heart. Gloria would never cast off her invisible nimbus for a human crown, however resplendent!

"You are indeed a goddess!" Lowell exclaimed, kissing her hand. "A goddess!"

Gloria sighed, and in a mock heroic voice declaimed: "Let us hie into the dining hall, oh, mortal! My tummy is growling like a chained mastiff—grr—grr—grr—in anticipation of that magnificent cold duckling awaiting it." She crooked her arm under his. "You see, it isn't always the vulgar duck who sacrifices the royal swan. This time the swan has sacrificed the duck. Am I still the Swan of Hollandam, Robert?" she asked, her voice heavy with nostalgia.

"Forever!"

"Oh! I am so happy!"

"You are a swan and a goddess—and beginning with tonight a star of the first magnitude."

"I'm not excited any more. My hands won't tremble when I open the papers to read the reviews. Why is it, Robert?"

"Is the sun dazzled by the flames of the candles lighted in his honor?"

"It's beautiful, Robert, but not true. I am the candle—a tiny one—trying to illumine the world. Before long a passing wind will make—pff—pff—and out it will go forever!"

"Forever it will shine!"

"I feel very, very humble tonight."

"Humility becomes a goddess—"

11

As they ate, they reminisced. "It's already more than five years, do you realize it, since you looked at me—like this—and said: 'You are my grandmother!' Do I still remind you of her?"

"Absolutely—my grandmother—sanctified—"

"But still—your grandmother?" she sighed.

"Than which there is no greater compliment—"

"Another piece?"

"H'm, h'm, it's awfully good," Lowell smacked his lips. "That Mrs. Hofdyk is certainly a remarkable cook."

"She is. But this time, you are eating of my own personal efforts, if you please," she paid proudly.

"I've been saying to myself all along—this isn't mortal food—it's divine pabulum." Raising the bottle of wine, he added: "Some more—nectar?"

"Please. I don't mind if I get drunk tonight—like a goddess," she giggled. "My cheeks must be blazing!"

"I shall remember them this way when I make another portrait of you."

"Will it be soon?"

"As soon as you're available."

"Don't you ever tire of the same model?"

"Did the artists of the Middle Ages tire of the same model—the gentle Madonna—for centuries? There are infinite facets to your soul, Gloria," he added ecstatically. "A whole lifetime will not suffice to capture them upon canvas."

"And my—body?" she asked tentatively. "Is it of any—consequence?"

"Your body is the portal to your soul."

"A beautiful portal—I hope?"

"Magnificent—carved by the Great Sculptor Himself."

"Any dilapidation since I performed in the Royal Chamber of Hollandam?"

"More perfect than ever—every separate detail—as well as the ensemble." And suddenly he saw her luminously naked, as he had seen her fashioned from the rising sun that dawn when Pieter and he were discussing the mysteries of Buddha and Vishnu. "Divine perfection!" he exulted.

"Have you ever heard from Pieter?" Gloria asked, serving the dessert.

Strange, Lowell mused, that she should mention Pieter at this particular instant, as if she had been in his mind watching the parade of his memories. Somewhat embarrassed, he answered without raising his head: "Only once when he landed in India. I presume he has gone deep into the interior and has become a monk—as he had vowed he would."

"That's what you wished to do—remember, Robert?"

He nodded.

"And instead—you've become my—impresario. Aren't you sorry?" she asked pityingly.

"Not at all. I have obeyed the Great Will."

"Maybe Pieter is fulfilling *your* destiny."

"Do you believe it, Gloria? Do you?" Lowell asked anxiously.

"Oh, I don't know," Gloria answered, her hand making a motion as if to dismiss the matter. "It just occurred to me. I don't understand these occult things."

"Precisely for that reason a remark like that carries far greater weight. It comes from the unconscious part of you—from beyond the portal," Lowell said excitedly. "There is something—something that binds Pieter to me—and to you—a strange trinity whose roots merge and emerge somewhere in infinity. So far I've been unable to fathom its significance, although I ponder and pray over it every day. But some day—it will surely become clear to all of us—" Lowell's forehead was cut by deep, horizontal frowns.

"Dear me," Gloria pretended to crouch. "How awesome!"

"A bad habit of mine—but, you know, I'm quite harmless." His forehead slowly smoothed itself like a rubber ball that had lost something of its elasticity.

"A lamb," she said tenderly.

"As harmless as all that?" he laughed. "Couldn't I be—a *dog*—watching over the *lamb* while the wolves howl?"

"A shepherd—a good shepherd," Gloria corrected. "And speaking of wolves—and the like—do you remember, Robert, how mortally scared I was when I arrived in America? I would hang onto your arm for very life. Everything was so big and powerful and ferocious. But soon after, I began to realize that despite their terrifying wild jungle ways, the Americans are quite domesticated."

"Domesticated?"

"They dash madly about, money-crazed, power-crazed, but they are—how shall I say—incredibly sentimental, and although crass material-

ists, amusingly superstitious. In Hollandam, for instance, only ignorant, ancient fisherwomen believe in ghosts and palm reading. Here nearly everybody believes in them, including the Captains of Industry, as you call them. And the hundred and one different religions—some of them so queer and childish! And everybody is so naively optimistic! What is that book which everybody reads and quotes? Let's see—*Sunbeams and Shadows and Buds and Blossoms*—or *Leaves From Aunt Minnie's Portfolio*! What a title!" she breathed deeply.

"What a book!" Lowell added in the same vein.

"What ails your people, Robert?" she asked, her mood entirely changed. "What are Americans running away from? What evil spirits do they try to appease? They are able to laugh, to be sure, but I seldom see anybody smile. Don't you think the smile is the true mark of the civilized man?"

Lowell did not answer.

She continued to ferret out the foibles and extravagances of the Americans of that period. Lowell had, on occasions, taken her on trips throughout the country, and she conveyed her impressions now by concrete images. Boston, she called, a molting peacock; Philadelphia, a gossipy schoolgirl blushing all over; New York, an overgrown adolescent with a crackling voice; New Orleans, an old hag parading her moth-eaten fineries; Chicago, a walrus trying to dance on her head.

Her voice transformed him once again into a lad of a quarter of a century earlier, his head buried in the sweet warm lap of his grandmother, listening, entranced, to the strange, whimsical tales of another world, always peppered with moral lessons and salted with grains of wisdom.

"I'm not hurting your sensibilities, I hope?" Gloria asked concerned.

"Not a bit. Not a bit." Lowell wanted her to go on indefinitely.

"Because, you know," she placed her hand over his, "I love America—"

"I'm very glad you do."

"And it's because I love America and I'm happy here that I can poke fun at her. If you are unhappy and you hate something, you don't laugh at its shortcomings and foibles, you swear at its merits, you shout against its powers. Now take my mother, for instance. I adored her. Poor dear, I can never quite accept the terrible fact that she's been dead for nearly three years already. Do you think, Robert, that my going away had anything to do with it?"

"Of course not. She was even more enthusiastic about it than you yourself, don't you remember? Certainly it was not your absence from Hollandam that brought to that poor city the epidemic which killed so many. What good souls they were, too, in spite of their shortcomings—the Burgemeester and his flirtatious wife—the red-beaked Headmaster—Klaas the sentimental cynic—"

"And what a vast amount of courage and self-whipping all of them required to let their darling Engelin travel unchaperoned with a young and charming stranger!"

Robert bowed acknowledgement.

"All those rigid zealots of convention turning traitors to the most ancient of customs! What confidence they had in you, Robert! And all so richly deserved, too!"

"And what greater confidence in you, Gloria! And so much more richly deserved!"

"And now that we've balanced the Ledger of Flattery—let's return to the argument about my dear mother. Why did I love her? Because she was so good to me, so faithful, so unselfish? All that I took for granted. I loved her, because of her little idiosyncrasies which I could poke fun at. And *did* I poke fun at them! I would hug her and laugh and laugh and—" Tears pulsed in her throat and she was compelled to remain silent.

Lowell pulled his watch out of his pocket and snapped open the case.

"In another hour, all the papers of the Metropolis will carry long columns about the loveliest Juliet that ever graced an English-speaking stage. They will say that never in the history of the theater had such a miracle taken place—that a foreign young lady in so short a time so mastered the glorious tongue of the Immortal Bard, and so wonderfully grasped his soul, that she has no peer upon any stage in the vast English-speaking world!"

"Bravo!" she applauded. "Magnificent! Why, my Romeo has not such abandon and such diction! Poor Romeo," she added with compassion. "I hope he isn't too much hurt because the people made so much fuss over me and so little over him. He deserved it just as much as I. He is an excellent actor, don't you think?"

"He is," Robert agreed unemotionally.

"And I believe," she lowered her voice mysteriously, "that he is very much infatuated with me. He—"

"That's why he is not as effectual on the stage as he might be," Robert interrupted, his voice tinged with irritability.

Gloria smiled cunningly. "Oh, I don't know about that. By adding his own flame to that of Romeo's, the conflagration of passion mounts—"

"No! No!" Robert insisted. "The actor must obliterate himself, must not butt in—"

Gloria laughed. "You mean—like a goat—?"

"Precisely."

"The American slang is so picturesque. But one must be a native to use it properly and convincingly. A foreigner, like me, is condemned to the classic usage of the language. We are your repositories of perfection. Poor Tom! His butting will avail him not at all. His horns will break. The portals of a goddess are made of indestructible, cold marble—"

Robert's face brightened. He twirled his Van Dyke around his fingers.

"Any more?" Gloria pointed to the cake.

"No, I'm full to the gills. I shall smoke another cigar though, if you allow me?"

"Of course. Do you remember poor mother asking you whether it was true that the women of England were smoking despite Queen Victoria's orders?"

"And when I said I was an American," he laughed, "both of you stared at me as if I had fallen from Mars." Suddenly his eyes assumed a painful, faraway look. "Mars," he muttered, "once more on the rampage! And now it is poor France—under the heels of the Prussians—the eternal barbarians! That vain nincompoop of a Napoleon the Little bringing his nation to such a pass—"

"How marvelous Paris was, do you remember, Robert?" Gloria tried to change the conversation. "It was so good of you to take me there before sailing for America. A lovely gift like—like the first bouquet you sent me in Hollandam. Robert," she pressed his hand. "You've been so wonderful to me, so wonderful! Outside of fairy-tales, there has never been anything like it. And how much trouble I've given you!"

Lowell shook his head vehemently. "Never!"

"From the very first day!" she nodded emphatically.

"You relinquished this lovely house to me, because you did not wish any one to gossip, and moved into that dreary studio of yours—"

"It isn't dreary, Gloria—"

"Perhaps not dreary, but how does it compare with this charming place? Then you discovered Mrs. Hofdyk, the nearest thing to a true mother this side of Heaven—half Dutch, half American—a bridge which I could cross back and forth, so that I might not be too lonesome and yet learn the intricate ways of my new country. Then the teachers—I'm sure in the whole world you could not find their equal—"

"That's what they said about their pupil—"

"And the one thousand and one kindnesses. Oh, Robert, what can I ever do to repay you?"

"Repay me?" he asked astonished. "I am repaying you—the sacrificial tribute of a mortal to his goddess."

"I don't understand that," she said perplexed. "How can I—a mere woman—be a goddess?"

"We believe in justice, truth, honor, beauty, but how do they exist except in incarnate symbols? A flag, a statue, a church, a hero. I am the most fortunate of all mortals for I found divinity made flesh in beauty and loveliness. I am your eternal debtor!" Reverently he kissed her hand. Her tear which fell upon it, he considered as divine benediction. Benediction? In what laboratory shall one test the chemistry of a tear? How break its elements—the sorrow, the joy, the pain, the hate, the laughter, the anger, the helpless resignation?

12

The critics saluted in Gloria the most luminous star on the Thespian firmament. Their imagination fevered, they re-created her into a mysterious being with a mysterious background, put "Van" in front of Schuiling, and made her the scion of an illustrious family. Later they added that she belonged to the Dutch royalty and finally whispered, that she was even related to Queen Victoria herself.

"Please, Robert," Gloria pleaded, "tell them to stop lying about me. If at least they said that I belonged to a family of great actors, but what has royalty to do with the theater? What children you Americans are! You boast about your democratic spirit, but go crazy with excitement if a third-rate princeling deigns to pay you a visit. Why don't you grant titles yourselves and be done with it? But you *will* tell the editors to stop printing lies about me, won't you, please, Robert? I beg you."

"You are making your public happy, Gloria, so why not let them indulge in fairyland dreams—for that's what kings and queens and princes really are—inhabitants of fairylands? Who better than you should understand this—you—the most magnificent of them all?"

"You flatter me into dumbness, Robert," she smiled. "I know you are wrong, but I don't know what to answer. Still, I wish you'd tell them to limit themselves to 'Van' and to that noble family of Holland, because after all, my parents *were* noble—as all honest, decent people are—"

"Which is an excellent lesson in practical democracy," Lowell laughed.

Lowell, however, not only refrained from asking the critics to desist from lying about Gloria, but with every occasion, subtly injected miraculous elements. He hinted at the cure of a hunchback. As a child, all Holland (he merely eliminated the syllable "dam"), called her "angel," not only because of her beauty and sweetness, but because of an awareness of an aura about her which was not terrestrial. Moreover, how could a foreigner (since foreigners in the opinion of most Americans were inferior creatures) possess such transcendent talent, if not endowed with *divine* gifts?

It was perfectly natural, then, that after the sensational creations of Ophelia and Lady Macbeth, critics and public alike should hail Gloria—the Goddess! Whether to them it meant the culmination of genius, or, indeed, one endowed with supernal powers, it served Lowell's purposes well. Awed by the very word, people dared not molest her or intrude upon her private life, and their vociferous enthusiasm (which never diminished to the last day of her career) ended with the dropping of the curtain.

Helpless, Gloria, suspecting perhaps the source, could only warn cryptically: "When angels fall, they devils become." Or, "Wherever Heaven is, Hell is not far off." Or, "Weavers of immaculate robes will find much dust and mud on the road." Or, "Every crown becomes a crown of thorns."

Lowell applauded her wit and wisdom; which but further proved that people had a shrewd insight into her nature—an intuitive understanding supernally nurtured.

Lowell found his soul. The horrors of the battlefield and their nightmares, the shock of the futile death of his beloved grandmother, the artistic paralysis—all had steadily become attenuated, receded into the background, dropped beyond the horizon. He dwelt now upon the mountains of India, steeped in the light of Guatama Sakyamuni, the last and wisest of the Great Incarnations. His days flowed through the iridescent valley of Gloria, to join the endless River of Eternity. He had not achieved sainthood, to be sure, and would not even approximate it in this incarnation, but he *had* withdrawn as much as was possible for his nature, from the ignorance and the decay of the visible world. Ardent, he prayed that in time he might be anointed with the delectable balsam—forgetfulness of self.

His studio he turned into a mixture of Buddhist temple and Christian church. Spiced incense curled perennially out of a censer hanging from the ceiling. Over an altar richly decorated hung a painting of Gloria set in a golden frame. There were alcoves and prie-dieus and praying-wheels and crucifixes, and a throne for the Goddess in the flesh.

"Robert," Gloria resenting the apotheosis, argued, "really, it was treason enough to belong to the family of good Queen Victoria, but to be related to Jove and Buddha and the other immortals—it's blasphemy, to say the least—"

"It's not blasphemy, Gloria, and if this were an age of true religion, you would rank high in the hierarchy of the divinities. How many millions worship the Holy Virgin, for instance, and yet was she not but a woman—symbol of motherhood?"

"What am I the symbol of, Robert?"

"You are the symbol of the purity of the soul," Lowell answered exultantly.

"Why don't you go about the world, proselytizing?"

"Because I fear too many would worship you, Gloria, and I am jealous. I want you completely to myself," he spoke with intense earnestness. "Do you mind?"

"Not in the least. I, too, am fastidious."

Having finally accepted her role, she played it magnificently. No god ever walked upon Earth with finer grace than she walked about the studio temple; no one radiated more loveliness, more wisdom, more charity.

Backstage, at home, everywhere else, however, Gloria continued to be "the little girl of Hollandam," unpretentious, kindly, mischievous. The world never suspected their secret relationship. In the presence of others, their attitude was one of passionless friendship, he acting with brotherly solicitude, she with coyness punctuated with cojology. It was all so natural, so correct, so comfortable—so solidly rooted!

Solidly—eternally rooted—so Lowell believed, for so he wished it to be, since he had at last achieved in his life that exquisite and precarious point of perfect balance which all things—living and inanimate—seek.

One evening as Lowell opened the door of his studio, he remained petrified. The floor was littered with his canvases, all stamped upon, torn, slashed. The altar, the throne, the censer, from which a thread of smoke still rose stiffly upward like a fakir's rope, lay crashed, broken, disemboweled, each according to its nature.

He walked among the pathetic debris, as he had walked among the dead and the wounded on battlefields, years ago, bewildered and embittered, trying to fathom the root of the disaster. Thieves stole, earthquakes did not limit themselves to one single room in the entire city, envious artists would not vent their spleen upon works so jealously guarded from the sight of man. Why this holocaust then? Why? Why?

"Gloria! Gloria!" he invoked fervently. "Behold the sacrilege! Avenge the desecration of your temple! Gloria!"

As if in response, he suddenly noticed an envelope dangling from one of the gas jets in the wall. The address was in Gloria's handwriting. A messenger from Heaven! As he broke the seal, his heart exulted in a paean of joy, but having read the letter, his heart froze. If in the many years of utter loneliness which followed, it now and then did muster the strength and the courage to do more than merely pulse, it would beat a dirge of universal disaster. For in the cosmic sorrow only could Lowell find a measure of surcease for his personal tragedy. In the cosmic folly, too, he sought refuge from his own. Solely because of the vanity of all things, could he accept the vanity of his own personal existence.

How often Lowell read and re-read the letter before he fully grasped the meaning of its contents, he never remembered, but when he again looked at himself in the mirror, he faced a stranger many years older. He understood then the words of the poet: "What clock shall measure sorrow? What calendar record it?"

"Dear Robert,

The havoc you are witnessing is the revenge of the *woman* against the *goddess*—the pent-up fury of the disinherited and the ignored.

Robert, even the princesses in fairy-tales that you always associated me with were awakened some time or other from their virginal sleep into the sweet realities of the flesh. Even the Holy Virgin herself experienced the joys of motherhood. Why, then, did you condemn *me* to the monstrous martyrdom of eternal chastity? Why, Robert, why?

How I loved you—loved you from the instant I caught the first glimpse of you from the stage of Hollandam—centuries ago—loved you, soul, body—all of me—all, Robert! No other man in all eternity could have supplanted you. Had you disappeared then, had I never even discovered your name, I should still have loved only you—a wraith, a vision, a dream—no matter—only you! But you, with the careless cruelty of the bigot, with the lofty disregard of one who watches the Earth and its tragic sufferers from a royal box in Heaven, you tore me apart—kneit before my soul, but cast away my body.

Why did you not choose your divinity among the dead—your grandmother, for example—(how I hate her!)—not bring quivering flesh to sacrifice upon your altar?

Womanly pride and modesty forbade me from telling you this, but you must be deaf than stone not to have heard my tortured heart cry out to you—blinder than night not to have seen the supplication in my eyes! You rhapsodized about divine union, while I clamored desperately for human love, Robert, *human* love! What were all your beautiful paintings, incense, genuflections, but meaningless tribute, the mockery of the Midas touch transmuting living kisses into golden icons!

Robert, do you recall the nightmares of battlefields that devoured you? As terrible were my nightmares—nightmares fed by unfulfilled desires, by strangled passion, by a hunger forever unsatisfied, by the cruel Fata Morgana of a never-ending desert!

How you will hate and despise me, Robert! At one time I should have preferred a hundred deaths to that, but now it no longer matters, for the deeper truth is not only that the woman killed the goddess, but that even the woman's soul died in the struggle. I am only body now, Robert—mud, dust, abomination, whatever in your disgust you will call me. Dead and buried forever is not only the goddess, but the actress, the swan, Gloria Schuiling—all!

Farewell!"

New York was stunned and intrigued by the disappearance of its idol. The police worked with feverish energy, suspecting kidnapping and perhaps murder. Rivers were dredged, morgues were combed, suspects were questioned. There were also those who considered the matter a publicity stunt and a hoax. Lowell offered no explanation. He would be taken for a madman and Gloria's letter would be parodied into obscenity by some and by others into pompous preachment. Thus by vilification, he thought acridly, they would all arise from their ashes of dupery and immortality—phoenixes of purity and wisdom.

Meanwhile, the dimmer stars of the stage, no longer eclipsed, began to shimmer joyously, deprecating the incomparable art and personality of her whose very name they had uttered in awe. In the deep bitterness of his heart, Lowell learned that every misfortune was but the long-awaited opportunity of some one. But even this had greater validity, showed more respect for beauty and genius than what followed in an incredibly short time—complete oblivion.

Years previously, Lowell had sought surcease from the meanness and cruelty of mankind by going in search of a god. Now more profoundly wounded by his own blindness and folly, he went in search of a woman. Contrary to Gloria's belief that he would despise her for having destroyed her divinity, he felt even a greater reverence for her as a human being, and the body she thought he would consider as abomination, he yearned for now with an intensity which devoured his entrails. He no longer saw it merely as a magnificent portal opening into her soul—the glowing valley leading to Nirvana—but the beginning and end of all desire, more precious than the jewel of non-existence. The goddess had died and the actress and the swan, but they had been only the glittering shells. Now he beheld the kernel, the sweet, the perfumed fruit, the manna without which he would be famished in all eternity.

Lowell began his wretched itinerary—from city to city—from country to country—in all the backstages of all theaters. "Her name is Gloria Schuiling," everywhere he repeated his endless litany of sorrow. "And here's her picture. Have you seen her? Have you seen her? Gloria Schuiling—have you seen her? Have you seen Gloria Schuiling?"

Impatient, some turned their backs upon him. Some laughed. Some, frightened, ran away. Some winked lasciviously. "A beautiful woman—to be sure—but there are so many beautiful women—in complete readiness for the gentleman, if the gentleman should but deign—"

He became a legend—pitiable and ludicrous—and a moral fable. But the passion for Gloria was fangs of fire that nothing could quench or assuage. Not even sleep, for every dream, too, became a sardonic labyrinth through which, battered and bruised, he groped desperately until he awakened into the maze of reality.

The years began overlapping: ten, twenty, a quarter of a century. Lowell no longer planned his trips. Whipped by a maniacal, Cain-like urge, he wandered without fixed purpose or destination.

One evening, as he was about to board ship in Marseilles, he felt a tug at his sleeve. "Forgive, sir, my rudeness," a Hindu, dressed in his native garb, bowed and said in perfect English, "but I am bringing you greetings from the Grand Lama of the Lamasery of Tibet."

"You are addressing the wrong man, sir," Lowell answered. "I know no such exalted personage."

"He is your eternal debtor, sir, for once he was Pieter of Hollandam."

"Pieter!" Lowell exclaimed.

The man nodded.

"A Grand Lama?"

"The most cherished and the most holy of our holy men. I am one of his monks, his carrier-pigeon."

Lowell had been in every country of the world—again and again—except India. As the Wandering Jew shunned the Place of Skulls in

Jerusalem, so had he avoided the land of Buddha, the Enlightened One. Had he hated India as the symbol of his torment? Had he feared her as the symbol of his defeat? And Pieter, whenever his image crossed his mind, he would sponge it off instantly. Why? Was he afraid to face him? Was it a mirror reflecting himself—a spiritual hunchback?

"It is good indeed to know that my friend, Pieter, is a Grand Lama," Lowell said, "and I am grateful to you, sir, for bringing me his greetings. When you return to your country, I beg you to give him my deepest respects, and say that his kindness cancels all debts."

"The Grand Lama does not wish to cancel them, and they are far greater than you believe, sir. All India is your debtor—"

"All India?"

"You taught the Grand Lama when he was the humble lamplighter of Hollandam, the meaning of human dignity and equality. You walked at his side as his equal and your shadows, the outward symbols of your souls, mingled. It is this dignity and equality which the Grand Lama teaches his numberless followers. They come to him—from all creeds and all casts and all races. Their shadows mingle and they eat and drink out of the same bowls. From the loins of your words, sir, generations of ideas have sprung—freedom, equality, brotherhood, the new yoga of our Grand Lama—which says: By what bizarre impertinence does one man claim mastery over another? Is he born by different means? Does he breathe, feed, sleep differently? Has he discovered the elixir of eternal youth and eternal escape from pain? Can he avoid death? By what strange aberration from logic does he proclaim that the pigmentation of his skin gives him the right to trample upon those whose skins are variously tinted, or whose noses or lips or eyes are differently shaped? By what colossal hypocrisy does he interpret the Fatherhood of God and the Brotherhood of Man which he pronounces from all his altars, to mean that only *his* faith, only *his* dogmas, only *his* prayers are acceptable to the Divine Spirit, and that therefore he has the right to destroy all other temples and trample upon all other worshipers? What race, what nation, has received the mandate from Nature to announce itself the superior nation, the superior race? And by what monstrous philosophy has it come to interpret superiority not as privilege to serve, but freedom to crush? Nature mocks and confounds and despises the snob. The sun enters the pariah's hut and squats alongside of him. The rain washes all faces, of all colors, those shrunken with hunger and those plethoric with satiety. The wind reddens all noses, the disdainful and the pinched and whistles into all ears. In the bowels of the Earth all flesh turns to water and all bones are ground and mingled together and empires sleep tier upon tier in their common shroud of dust. There is no slave shrub, no master tree; no slave worm, no master beast; no slave planet, no master star. All men are created equal. All blood is pumped from one central heart. All breath is drawn from one central mouth. What fool trumpets his vanity? What nation is great without being humble?"

The monk's black eyes glowed like coals aflame. "India shall be liberated by the new yoga of the Grand Lama—and after India, the whole world!" He raised his arms prophetically. "The Grand Lama remains your eternal debtor, sir—such is his will!"

"I am happy that I have been of service to your country and to my ancient friend. And let us hope the new yoga will indeed free man. Now, I must say farewell to you," he pointed to the landing ladder which was being lifted, "or I shall be left behind," he smiled sadly.

The monk placed his hand upon his heart. "I have further good news to deliver. No longer does the seeker need to seek, for the lost jewel has been found—"

"Please speak more—matter-of-factly," Lowell said impatiently. "As an American I am unaccustomed to the poetic language of the Orient."

"Gloria—"

"Gloria?"

The monk nodded.

"Where is she? Where? Speak! Quickly! Speak!" He shook the man's arm unceremoniously.

"Come along, I beg you," the Hindu bowed. "My Master has instructed me to tell you that he had known of your search since the beginning and also of Gloria's whereabouts—"

"Then why didn't he inform me sooner?" Lowell asked angrily. "The time was not ripe."

"All these years of misery that I've endured—"

"And Gloria also—" the monk added.

"Then Pieter's crime is double!" Lowell shouted.

"The Grand Lama," the monk retorted proudly, "is incapable of committing a crime! The time was not ripe!"

"How does he know when the time is ripe?" Lowell demanded.

"He holds Time in his hand as you hold Time's imperfect recorder—the watch—in yours."

Lowell looked at him quizzically incredulous.

"Once you would have understood," the monk said reprovingly.

"Forgive me, I am much perturbed."

The monk smiled graciously. "The Grand Lama foresaw this, and forgave you in advance. He instructed me to tell you also that he knows the reason why you never visited India, and that you, too, will know it, when the time is ripe. But come along."

They turned the corner, and were confronted by a wine-shop whose sign, *At the Anchor and the Rope*, creaked lazily in the breeze. In the window a red cat slept in a glass boat. Dazed, Lowell propped upon his cane, his eyes tightly shut. Where had he seen this before—exactly so? In Hollandam. But where was he now? Had all that happened been a dream? Had he never left that town? "Pieter, Pieter," he whispered, and turned cautiously around. Would the hunchback, lantern in hand, be there, bewailing his fate as the unrequited lover of Rosa, the widow? Would Gloria, more beautiful than an angel, wait for him at *The Golden Doll Souvenir Shop*, laugh like the golden bells of a temple at his Americanisms?

"The time is ripe," the Hindu smiled slyly. "It has completed the first circle—as you see, Mr. Lowell." He clasped his hands together in salutation. "And now I bid you adieu."

"Where is Gloria?" Lowell called after him desperately. "Where is Gloria? Gloria?"

The monk pointed his forefinger to the wine-shop.

Lowell quickly opened the door. His heart transfixed, he remained upon the threshold.

Amid a crowd of carousing British sailors, Gloria recited the scenes which once had made her the greatest and loveliest of Juliets.

It was Gloria. Through her cracked voice still glittered particles of the ancient gold. The worm-eaten wand of her art was still studded with a few jewels. Instinctively aware of this, the toughened seamen listened with rapt attention.

Like a drowning man, Lowell's mind was ablaze with memories—a magical cavalcade of triumph and disaster. Long ago, passion and desire had been quenched. Only loneliness remained—loneliness like a boundless desert without oasis, even without a mirage and its illusive consolation.

But here was Gloria! It was not true that her body had completely conquered her soul, for despite her rags, despite the merciless havoc of the years, there still foated about her the tattered aura of divinity. Gloria—martyred goddess in a desecrated temple!

"Gloria—Goddess—" Lowell murmured.

Gloria stopped instantly. Slowly she turned her head and fixed her gaze upon him. For a long while, they stood there, motionless, breathless, eyes streaming with tears—the dismal tears of the old and the forlorn.

The sailors lowered their glasses in silence and watched the pathetic pantomime, sensing the fulfillment of a keen and grievous tragedy. Gathering her skirts like a royal pall, Gloria approached Lowell with sceptered steps and silently took his arm.

"I swear it by God," the Captain whispered awed, "it's Romeo and Juliet arisen from the dead."

And some of the sailors crossed themselves.

14

Thus endeth the story of the Goddess," the old man sighed, emptying his glass.

After a silence, Walter ventured, "Did Gloria tell Lowell what had happened to her during the years of their separation?"

"Was there any need to do so? Is not everything indelibly carved upon her face for all who have eyes and souls to read?" He pointed to the painting.

"Is she still alive?"

"She died three days after Lowell had found her—just as he finished painting her portrait."

"What happened to Pieter?"

"Every few years one of the Grand Lama's emissaries brings Lowell greetings. They will both die at the same instant, so the Grand Lama foretells, and Lowell is certain that the holy man really holds Time in his hand, and knows when it is ripe. Lowell has not been able to solve the mystery of the relationship between himself and the hunchback of Hollandam, but the Grand Lama knows, although he will not reveal it until they meet—until all three meet—in the presence of the Enlightened One."

"And—Lowell?"

"Lowell—has withdrawn to this—mausoleum—to wait the ripening of Time—"

Although the two friends had, as the story of Gloria unfolded itself, suspected Lowell's identity, nevertheless they made an involuntary gesture of surprise, when the old man actually confirmed it.

"I take it, gentlemen," Lowell said, "that my name and the story of the Goddess remain buried here."

The men reassured him.

"And now, if you care, my friends, I shall show you the altar where for hours daily I kneel and pray to the Goddess—for after Gloria died she became once more the Goddess, the magnificent valley through which my freed soul hopes to achieve Nirvana—"

They climbed to the balcony.

"This is the only portrait which she had not destroyed on the day when she rebelled against her divinity. It is now her holy image," the old man said as he reverently pulled aside a velvet curtain.

"Why, that's *my* painting!" Roger cried out. "My painting of Leda Larensen! *My* painting!" He made a motion to snatch it off the wall.

The old man drew quickly back the curtain. "Desecrated! My altar desecrated!" he trembled with fury.

"Let me have it! Let me have it!" Roger tried to push him away.

"If you dare touch anything, I'll shoot you like a dog!" Lowell whipped a gun out of his pocket and pointed it at his head. "Get out! Get out!"

After a violent tug-of-war, Walter finally succeeded in dragging Roger down the steps. "Come away, for God's sake! Can't you see he'll kill you? Come on! Come on!"

"It's *my* painting! *My* painting! I have a right to it! *My* painting!" Roger persisted.

"Get out! Get out!"

Baxter pushed his friend into the car, and dashed into the road.

"You saw it was my work, Walter, didn't you? Didn't you?" Roger insisted.

"I can only say that it looked like it, but I didn't have a good view from where I was standing."

"You stood right in front of it."

"Did I? I don't remember, so you realize to what extent that maniac scared the wits out of me. Never did I see a man look as wild outside of an insane asylum—or maybe in a melodrama down on the Bowery—"

"That painting should be fifty years old, according to his story. Shouldn't it?" Roger demanded stentoriously.

"I guess so," Baxter replied reluctantly.

"But the paint was hardly dry—"

"A man like him probably varnishes it daily. He really worships it like the image of the Holy Virgin."

"That was my painting of Leda Larensen, I tell you!" Roger clenched his teeth furiously.

"I grant you that it did look like Leda Larensen, but then Leda is Norwegian and Gloria was Dutch, and the Dutch and the Swedes and the Norwegians resemble one another like peas. I can never tell them apart, as I can't tell the difference between a Chinaman and a Jap, except that the Chink wears his queue, but that's to give the angel a chance to hoist him into Heaven after he dies. Dammit, I forgot to take that maniac's map. It certainly looked antediluvian, though. I shouldn't wonder that it really was a bit of parchment taken out of the tomb of some Pharaoh. By the way, did they use parchment in Egypt, do you happen to know, Roger?"

"Oh, shut up!"

"Now, look here, old man, snap out of it! You can easily find out whether it's your painting or not. When we get to town call up Leda Larensen and ask her if she still has it on her wall. If it was stolen, as you seem to believe, we can come back here with a squad of armed cops and force that wild Indian to return it. But you must have guns to deal with him."

Roger made no reply. A little later, Walter said: "Would you consider a Grand Lama in the nature of a god or merely a priest of a high degree—such as a bishop or a cardinal? Of course, if a Grand Lama can really foretell events, he must have some divine—or diabolic—attribute. Pieter did say that he was ready to sell his soul to the devil, remember? Perhaps that's what happened, after all." Roger said nothing. "Anyway," Walter continued, "Bobby Burns was dead wrong. He should have said: 'A woman's a woman for a' that and a' that,' not a man. A man may be anything but a man when he's in love. And if he happens to be an artist—and a shy cavalier—without a bit of the caveman about him like that guy Roobert Roosel Loovel—then the Lord help him!"

Roger had been thinking at a mad pace. He had not heard a word of Walter's monologue until the last remark, which echoed and re-echoed in his mind like bells. What was its true meaning? Roger wondered. What was back of the whole affair, for that matter? How did Walter get lost in the woods? He had driven with him dozens of times before, and nothing like this had ever happened. Walter often boasted that he had an ant's sense of direction. Then too that house—it seemed more like a theatrical set than a solid building where one waited for "time to ripen." And the old ham himself—was he really so ancient? His eyes were too clear, his teeth too strong. He had hardly a crow's foot or a wrinkle on his face, and how nimble of legs he was!

Roger lit his pipe, drew a few breaths, then said casually, "Walter, that man should be in his middle seventies, according to his story—"

"I presume so."

"Didn't he seem to you a good deal younger?"

"Unusually well preserved—"

"And that—*mausoleum* of his, isn't it kind of new?"

"Well-kept, I should say. But after all, it's his tomb, isn't it? Just imagine how wonderful any cemetery would look, if every one of its inhabitants were allowed to take care of his own coffin and monument and plot? Why, it would be a model lesson to the living in civic pride and accomplishment."

"That story of his is a lie of whole cloth!" Roger blurted out.

"What makes you say so?" Walter asked naively.

"No man speaks so smoothly. Why, it was like a tale read out of a book."

"Oh, that!" Walter made light of it. "A man like him living alone for years must do a lot of talking to himself—repeating the highlights of his career a thousand times over, polishing them like a book, indeed. Moreover, he belongs to a generation that was proud of its speech, not like ours uttering sounds only one degree more refined than the chatter of monkeys and the shrieks of parrots."

"If Gloria Schuiling was so great an actress that she was known as 'the Goddess,' don't you think that something of her glory would have trickled down to our own day? Have you heard of her—even you who are in the theatrical business?"

"I can't say I did. But, Roger, you don't realize what a short-lived thing fame is, particularly in the theater. Shakespeare would have been even more accurate had he said instead of, 'Frailty—thy name's woman,' 'Frailty—thy name's the actor's glory.' A painter like Rembrandt, for instance, or yourself (in spite of your manners), may have your work exhibited hundreds of years after your death; a composer like Mozart may have his piece played generations after his poor body has rotted in Potter's field; an author like Chaucer may be read even after the language he wrote in is understood only by university book-worms, but an actor—an actor is forever dead the minute the applause ceases, and must be resurrected with every performance. Let him quit the stage and presto, his very name mingles with the dust of ages. There is no attic for discarded mummies, only the sewer. Now take Leda Larensen," Walter continued, after lighting a cigar. "I believe she is the country's greatest actress. Maybe I'm exaggerating a bit, seeing that she's been acting in my plays, and I have a habit of considering everything that's mine the best in the world, including, for no good reason whatever, my friends—" He poked his elbow into Roger's ribs. "Anyhow, she is wonderful, and her name is known to hundreds of thousands—to millions, perhaps. Still, supposing she vanished tomorrow, how long, do you think, it would take before—?"

"You see Leda Larensen very often, don't you?" Roger interrupted.

"Almost every evening. I believe in watching over my plays like a guardian angel. A hit can degenerate so quickly that—"

"What do you know of Leda's childhood and early youth?"

"Well, she was born in Sweden—some little town with a formidable name—was quite bright—evinced talent very early—was discovered by somebody or other—brought to America—where I rediscovered her—and now the whole world has re-discovered her. Every artist has many Columbuses, you know," he laughed. "There, to be sure, are only the highlights. The details which are always far more interesting, I don't know. I don't even dare ask her, any more, she gets so exasperated. She's a peculiar duck—a swan, rather, seeing how lovely she is. But didn't she ever speak to *you* about the details, while sitting for her portrait? That's the time, if ever, for confession."

Roger shook his head.

"Then," Walter sighed, "the world will only conjecture, gossip, create legends about her—taller and taller ones, as she becomes more and more famous."

"Maybe—some day—she will even be—a goddess?" Roger bombarded the ceiling of the car with his smoke.

"I see no reason why she couldn't reach that ultimate rung of the ladder of success," Walter answered casually.

"And some Grand Lama of Tibet may even make love to her?"

"Do they marry—the Grand Lamas, do you know, or are they celibates?" Walter countered unemotionally.

Roger snickered.

"I must read up on the subject. I've always been interested in India. Some day I even plan to go there—not for religious purposes, you may be sure," he laughed. "To get me a harem—for practice, you know, in the various phases of the art in which the Hindus are great teachers and practitioners. Maybe I can even eventually master the unendurable pleasure indefinitely prolonged." He twisted roughly his mustache. "You didn't know that side of my life, did you, friend Roger?"

"Didn't I?"

"I never told you about it—"

"Didn't you?" Roger chuckled. "There is no perfect crime, Walter Baxter!"

"Then I'm not as good an actor as I imagined," Walter sighed.

"Not by a long shot—not by a long shot," Roger repeated, pointedly, while continuing to ruminate on the strange old man and his stranger story. Finally, he was certain he had unraveled the meaning, the heavily underscored purpose. Good old Walter Baxter trying to save him from the impending doom, showed him in concrete form the tragedy which awaited him if he did not wrench Leda's image out of mind and heart! Like all the rest, Walter considered painters helpless infants, incapable of abstract ideas, illiterates, able only to decipher pictures. But what an elaborate cock-and-bull story he considered necessary to concoct—including other lands and continents, gods and religions, Grand Lamas and monks, and the inevitable hunchback—the darling of sentimental producers turned playwrights! And to top it all, that Symbol of Purity, changed into a forlorn lady of joy, performing Shakespeare—Juliet—for drunken sailors—three days before her demise—giving the artist just enough time to paint her final portrait!

But, then, had he himself been a better actor than Walter, since it was so easy, evidently, for Walter, perhaps for any one who took the trouble, to read his mind and heart? Walter must have known the state of affairs for a long while, from the very first day, to have had the time required to plan and execute that farce—discover the old charlatan—gather the canvases (borrowed, no doubt, from some talented, but obscure painter), build that house in that forsaken forest—rehearse. Yes, Walter knew—but not fully—not how deeply rooted was his love for Leda! How could any one know? He himself, had he the genius to ever translate it into words or upon canvas? A wound, he had often thought, no—not a wound—a glorious cancer involving every atom of his being! Cut into any part of it ever so faintly, and you cut into living tissue! Tear it, and you tear nerves and arteries! However, he was grateful to Walter for not attempting to make him confess, sensing that his love must remain forever mute, hiding the unattainable underneath a triple veil of sanctity. If any one *was* a goddess, beyond human reach and worthy of worship, it *was* Leda Larensen—that Walter knew as well as himself, and to that extent the comedy he had invented had full validity. But if he believed that a bit of mummery could, like a witch doctor's incantation, drive out the spirit that wrought the madness in his soul, how much more childish was Walter than Walter thought a painter must be!

Yet, it was madness, but a madness that he would not exchange for all the sanity in the world, nay, not even for the eternal peace of Nirvana! Still, it was very considerate, a true friend's gesture, for Walter to have attempted a heroic cure by heroic means.

"Walter," Roger said affectionately, "there's no denying that you are a bulldog—face and soul—"

"Funny, I was thinking this very minute that for the sake of history (because I think that portrait you made of me is good enough to hang in the Metropolitan Museum of Arts, and surely will), I ought

to have a tablet nailed to the frame, in Latin, so that its full import is appreciated in all eternity: "The artist creates in his own image—"

"Excellent epigram, and a half-truth worthy of that other theatrical quack—what's his name? George Bernard Shaw. But what I was going to say is this—that bulldogs are the cream of all canines—the smartest, the gentlest, the most lovable—"

"And I am—the exception which proves the rule?" Walter ventured timidly.

"On the contrary, you are the finest specimen which gives authenticity to the rule—"

"Well, well," Walter stammered, delighted. "Thank you, thank you for myself and for all those pug-nosed, heavy-chinned creatures inhabiting homes, kennels and backyards. But, but," Walter added suspiciously, "to what do I owe this sudden, and hardly expected, outburst of amicability?"

"To many things, but in particular to this lovely ride—I mean the round trip, of course—so replete with excitement and wisdom—"

"I deeply regret that I have no tail to wag to demonstrate my joy and gratitude," Walter said with exaggerated affability.

Roger gripped his shoulder. "I mean it, Walter."

"Thanks." And there was in that curt word as much affection for a friend as American men of those days, trained in rugged individualism, dared express—when sober.

"Look, we're on the state road again!" Walter exclaimed. "I didn't need that antediluvian map, after all."

"Of course not," Roger said with gentle irony. "You've always been the perfect chauffeur—and since you are—well—sort of related to the Hindus, I should guess that in your next incarnation you will be a carrier-pigeon."

"Oh, darlin', let me be your carrier-pigeon," Walter sang at the top of his voice. "And bring your message of my love!" His voice cracked.

"Not a carrier-pigeon—a crow." Roger stuffed his ears.

15

At last a sign," Walter pointed. "Thirty miles to Broadway, New York. Shall we stop at an inn for the night, or drive straight to the Scarlet City?"

"To the Scarlet City!" Roger exclaimed.

Why was he cheerful, Roger asked himself? Why was his heart light? After all, nothing had changed. His love for Leda was as hopeless as ever. What did the future hold for him, save eternal yearning, as futile a search in time as Lowell's search in space? And in the end—a dilapidated hut to await "the ripeness of time"—a polite word for death? He had seen his fate parading before his eyes—and yet—he was cheerful. Why? Was it due to the intellectual satisfaction of having solved a riddle—the detective's reward? Was it the culmination of despair, where sorrow meets joy, thus canceling each other?

He closed his eyes and enjoyed the beatific luxury of a brain that had sponged its complicated tapestries and reverted to mere sensations. For a short while only, however, for his mind once more began reconstructing critically, minutely, what had transpired. What a good actor the old fellow was! How well he knew the value of suspense and timing! How cleverly he imitated the speech and gestures of the characters! There must have been a good deal of improvisation, no doubt, but one could not detect the seams. The plot, too, had its charm, and if Walter was responsible for it, he possessed greater creative talent than he had given him credit for. Still, Walter made a cardinal error. Since it was his aim to teach him a lesson, the story should have ended with the old man's last starkly tragic words of withdrawal into the mausoleum, becoming the living corpse. Why the codicil, the spurious epilogue? Walter, the master showman, should have understood the power

of suggestion and understatement. Did he not realize how deeply people resented the schoolmarm's technique—the pointer stuck into the eye?

How had Walter got hold of the portrait? Stolen it? Preposterous. Borrowed it? On what pretext? Leda seemed to prize it highly. Accustomed to the stage, when he finished it, she clapped her hands to show her appreciation. "Bravo! Bravo!" In return he stammered something about divine happiness. Divine—he must have used that word many times in connection with Leda, and that was how Walter probably got the idea of the "goddess." Divine happiness—but had he been divinely happy or divinely miserable? He only remembered in his throat. Such was always his reaction in Leda's presence, and the marvel was that he had even been able to hold the brush in his hand—professional training, no doubt—like a surgeon who, despite tragic news, so masters himself, that he can finish the most delicate operation.

Suddenly Roger remained breathless, rigid, in his seat. The loom of his brain shuttled feverishly. Sensations changed into words, words became things more real than flesh. He had been all wrong in his first supposition. *Now* he knew—*now* he understood fully!

Yes! Yes! He was certain of it! Not only was Leda Gloria, but Leda was the true author, or at least the co-author, of the fable! Indubitably, it was she who had tagged on the moral lesson—no longer a blemish now, but an essential and integral part of the story—the resurrection after the crucifixion, anti-climatic only if serving no purpose. But it served an immense purpose. It said: behold the tragedy of Robert Russell Lowell, who hiding behind the armor of chivalry created a goddess and lost a woman! But you, you are Roger Powells, alive and young, and here—here is the image, not of Gloria Schuiling, but of Leda Larensen—as she is today—as you, yourself, have recreated her from the depths of your own soul! And the old man's maniacal, insistent shouting of "get out—get out!" do you not understand what it means, Roger Powells? It means: destroy the false altar upon which you have immolated yourself—and Leda! Leave the stifling temple! Come forth into the sun! Be bold! Every cavalier must be something of a cave-man, too! Remember what Walter said? Good old Walter!

"What a masterly fairy tale!" Roger mused with sincere admiration. "A princess, suffering from great loneliness because she is forced to live among commoners who dare not love her—ugly ducklings, awed by the majesty of the Swan who sails alone, glowing and indifferent as the moon! They themselves to quack their compliments and flap their wings in wonderment and adoration, but never would they dare break the magic circle. One day, however, the Princess sends a message, couched in mystic symbols (would so modest and pure a maiden use the brazen language of reality?) in which she tells the artist, Roger Powells, that he is not considered as a commoner by her, but a prince, who may love her as an equal, not as a spellbound visionary worshipping a goddess! In all the annals of prose or poetry, has ever a woman taught her lover a lesson as exquisitely, as shrewdly? Has ever a man been as fortunate? Has ever a man—"

But even as he was about to further enumerate the reasons for his pride and bliss, his heart dropped—dropped as into an abyss.

He caught his breath.

"Some bump, hey?" Walter said, half-laughingly, half-indignantly. "The stuffed shirts at the head of our government still don't realize that the automobile is here not only to stay, but to become the most important industry of the country. More than that—to transform our nation into the mightiest and richest in the world! What made Rome a great empire? Good roads! Good roads will make America a great empire!" He blew his horn defiantly, triumphantly.

"It's madness—presumptuous madness," Roger thought, his forehead burning under a blanket of cold perspiration. "I am no better than the Gypsy faker who reads fortunes in the dregs of coffee. Leda Larensen the co-author of that preposterous bit of mummery! What non-

sense! Leda Larsen making love to me—what stupendous impudence! How deftly I tore the veils, revealing the truth! The truth! The very dovetailing, so machine-like perfect, should have warned me that it was mere tomfoolery, the desperate chase after shadows, the will-o'-the-wisp of an idiot! Leda Larsen is indeed the princess of fairy-tales, a goddess, but I—I—am nothing but a mental hunchback—who should hide in his cell and cleanse his soul of impurity and impertinence—that's the sermon!"

"Roger, do you know what I've been thinking?" Walter said as they reached Highbridge. "We'll get to Broadway just about the time the curtain drops on my play. What do you say to a visit backstage, for the purpose of asking Leda to join us in a little intimate supper? I imagine you must be as starved as I am—that is, if your conscience is clear?"

Roger's heart began crawling back from the abyss like a lizard, still wary, but no longer paralyzed with terror. This was the first time that Walter had ever suggested a social call upon Leda. Why? Had he been right after all? And what did Walter mean by "a clear conscience"? Was he aware of the hectic moral drama being enacted in his mind?

"Well, what do you say?" Walter asked.

"Oh—oh—oh—"

"Oh, what? Can't you talk?"

"Don't you think—it would seem—sort of impertinent—dropping in unexpectedly—I mean for me? You, of course, are—the impresario—I mean the producer—"

"She'll be a damn lot gladder to see you than to see me—"

"Do you think so? Do you think so?"

"Crowing like a rooster!"

"You're a swell fellow, swell, Walter! In fact you are a saint. Some day, you'll turn into a bishop—I mean—a Grand Lama of the lamasery of Tibet—"

"Are you going completely loco?"

"I *am* a bit mixed up, I grant you."

"What's bothering you? Is it the portrait?"

"The portrait?"

"Yes, Leda's. When we get there, you can ask her whether she still has it. And if not—"

"No, no, we won't mention it," Roger said. "Why embarrass anybody?" he added with a trace of irony. "One thing may lead to another, you know—"

Walter did not answer. Roger was not certain whether his friend had heard his remark, since the latter at that particular instant was very busy tooting his horn and swearing at a flock of bicyclists impeding his way. "Bicycles for two," he growled, "the last legs of the Centipede of the Dark Ages. We'll chop them off!"

When order was re-established on the road once more, Baxter said: "As a matter of fact, I think it would do Leda good to come out of her shell. That poor girl leads the life of a—of a—"

"Goddess?" Roger offered tentatively.

"H'm, h'm. But after all, she's only human. She needs relaxation. And there's something that I want you to keep under your hat—strictly confidential. It would be disastrous if it ever got into the papers. My opinion is that her art will begin to suffer sooner or later if she doesn't become—well—more woman. She's magnificent now, of course, but a little too heavy on the lofty side, you understand. Playfulness—that's what Leda needs—and it must start in her own life, before she can transfer it to the public—"

"So that's what it really is—a good investment, Mr. Walter Baxter-Shylock," Roger mused. "Make sure that your business does not degenerate—"

"In my opinion," Walter said, "everything has two sides—"

"And everyone is double-faced?" Roger added.

"It all depends on the objective, that's what I say."

"The objective is excellent—most excellent," Roger said, rubbing Walter's back.

"Have you turned masseur?" Walter asked.

"For good luck—for good luck, Grand Lama!"

What did the Burgemeester tell Pieter? Be the horn of plenty! That was the meaning of the hunchback in the story—the horn of plenty—magnificent symbolism! How many facets to that story! No use denying—the authors had talent—and the actor—actors—for Walter must have "fed" the old man surreptitiously—the actors had ability!

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The nearer they approached their destination, the uneasier Roger became. "Do you really think, Walter, that Miss Larensen would like the idea of our—of my intrusion?"

"Yep," Walter barked, and that vulgarization of affirmation gave Roger more comfort and courage than a whole dissertation on etiquette.

Roger wondered why his friend found it necessary to rap at Leda's door, since it seemed to him that the rapping of his own heart against his ribs must reverberate throughout the empty, darkened theater like a drummer's mad rataplan.

"Oh!" Leda exclaimed. "I am so glad you came, Walter! And you brought Roger Powells," she added tenderly. "How sweet of you! I really needed company badly. I didn't do so well tonight—"

"What was the trouble?" Walter asked anxiously.

"I don't know," she sighed, as she tapped the cork of her perfume bottle behind her ears. "The applause was as clamorous as ever, but—"

"Thank God!" Walter said relieved.

"That's all he's interested in," Leda addressed Roger, "applause—applause."

Their eyes became entangled like antlers of playful, young deer.

"Applause is not the clapping of hands, my good Leda," Walter said with mock gravity. "Applause is the clashing of golden cymbals—inside the box-office."

"Mercenary, that's what you are." Leda pulled her eyes away from Roger's, and faced Walter. "Money! Money! Money! Typical American! No, no, that isn't true," she turned to Roger again, "Walter is really an angel—"

"I prophesy that before long he'll become the Grand Lama of Tibet—" Roger said.

"Oh, good!" she applauded. "The Grand Lama of Tibet!"

How easily she took to the notion, Roger mused. After all, "Lama" was not a common household word. He himself had never heard it before that day, but she seemed to be as familiar with it as with the word "cat" or "chair."

"He will hold the world in the palm of his hand," Roger added slyly, "and read the fate of his friends—"

"Yes, yes!" Leda agreed enthusiastically. "You must become a Grand Lama, Walter, and tell us our fortune!"

"Will you stop disposing of me in your own sweet fashion, my dear murderers! A little more and I shall die of hunger and thirst, as it is—" he winked to Roger, and made a gesture with his thumb that he do the inviting. Roger returned in kind.

The pantomime, which became more and more vigorous, was fully witnessed by Leda whose lithe, tall figure wavered upon the cheval glass slanting under the weight of the jars of make-up. She eased her hair, deeply golden, which had been flattened under the wig she had worn on the stage, and from the multitude of dresses and knickknacks strewn about her, gingerly raised her hat surmounted by a great sheaf of shimmering aigrettes. As she stuck the long rapier-like pin through

it, she said with punctilio: "Will the gentlemen do me the honor of supping with me tonight?"

Like boys caught at mischief, the men stammered:

"Why, we—it was we who—"

"Yes, we planned—"

"On the way—"

"We hoped that you—"

"Well?" Leda asked, facing them squarely.

"The fact is, Leda," Walter said, "that we were hoping you would be our guest tonight. It was Roger's gracious idea—"

She looked at Roger, and there was in her blue eyes that strange wistfulness which he had found so difficult—impossible—to translate upon canvas.

"Please—" Roger begged, accepting Walter's white lie.

"Isn't it marvelous? We each invited the others. It must be sincerely meant, to say the least," Leda said.

"Very sincerely." Roger unconsciously pressed his hand against his heart.

"And where are you going to take me?" Leda asked.

"How about the Waldorf?" Walter suggested.

"Oh, no," Leda's face assumed a tragic expression.

"Of course not," Roger looked reprimandingly at his friend. "Let's go to an out-of-the-way joint—a backwash—with sailors and—"

"Oh, yes, yes!" Leda clapped her hands. "You do understand me, Roger Powells—"

Of course he understood her, Roger chuckled. What she desired was to impersonate Gloria Schuiling, experience vicariously the exquisite sensation of a great sorrow that she hoped would never be hers—purge her soul from that which it feared most. Perhaps, too, it was a tribute to Nemesis. Behold, I, Leda Larensen, am submitting to the ignominy of Gloria Schuiling's tragic fate, O jealous gods! Now let Leda Larensen be, as she is—young and beautiful!

"Your whim is my command," Walter accepted.

Leda pulled his ear and burst into laughter. Roger had never heard her laugh. He had often succumbed to the witchcraft of her smile, but this magic music of crystal bells—if he could only capture it on his canvas—make it pulse in her throat—dance in her eyes—!

"What's the great idea?" Walter asked.

"You mean—my laughter?"

"Precisely."

"Must there be any great idea—any idea at all, for that matter? You know what the trouble is with you, Walter Baxter? You don't laugh often enough. Your work will eventually suffer because of it. Confidentially, don't you think so, Roger? May I call you Roger?"

"Oh, I beg you—do—do—please—"

"And will you call me Leda?"

"Leda—"

"That's wonderful. Now I should really laugh, and for an excellent reason—for joy, but I can't. It's all your fault, Mr. Walter Baxter. You broke the charm. But come on, let's go!" She took the men's arms, pulling them gently out of the dressing room, through the fantastic forest of properties, across the narrow, circuitous courtyard, to the groaning stage door, and out.

"Oh, thank the Lord," Leda sighed deeply, "no one waiting to stare at me or ask me for my autograph! What a relief!"

Puffing and spitting and whirring and rattling—an antediluvian monster in mortal combat—the automobile finally started in a screen of steam and smoke and sparks.

"Roger," Leda said, "you must do another portrait of me."

"Delighted!" he answered. "I was right! I was right!" he jubilated inwardly. "It was my painting!"

"Something very simple—a woman—rather than—what shall I call it—a—a—?"

"A goddess?" he helped.

"Maybe not a goddess," she smiled. "After all, ours is not an age of gods and goddesses. Anyway, this one should be something more terrestrial. Not that I don't love the other you made of me. It's magnificent—"

"Thank you," he smiled shrewdly.

"But this evening as I looked at it—"

"This evening—?"

"Yes, before I left for the theater—"

Was she trying to convince him that the painting had never been taken off the wall? If he drove to her home now, would it be there? Had the old man taken it back meanwhile? Was it really her portrait that he had seen—or a mirage? Had his heart projected her image upon that canvas as it did upon all things? Had his feverish mind beheld a vision?

"I was frightened, Roger—"

"Frightened—?"

"Not by the painting," she smiled, "but by myself, by my own soul. I presume it is my soul that you painted." She watched him obliquely.

"You always paint souls, don't you, Roger?"

"Yes," he answered absent-mindedly.

"It's the soul of tragedy, Roger. You are probably right, because being a great artist, you are clairvoyant. But I am sure I have another soul, or perhaps my soul has two faces. And I should like you to paint—well—my other soul—or the other face—"

"I shall paint you as the spirit of laughter, Leda—the elfin spirit of innocent mischief."

She clapped her hands. "Bravo, Roger! How I shall love that painting! 'The elfin spirit of innocent mischief!' But maybe just 'mischief' without 'innocent'?"

"Perhaps—but not without 'elfin'!"

"My mother used to call me—mischievous angel—" she sighed. "Everybody called me that."

"I know—"

"You know? How do you know?" she asked, concerned.

"Well—I—I guessed as much."

"Oh," she said, relieved.

"Be more circumspect, old boy," Roger said to himself. "More subtle."

"I guess I must have been a sort of devil and angel combined—one horn and one wing," she laughed. "Do you think people ever change, Roger?" And without waiting for a reply, she added, "I don't believe it. 'The root determines the fruit,' our pastor used to tell us."

They were driving now under the Elevated structure of the Bowery. "Oh, I'm so glad we're going this way, Walter," Leda said. "I adore the Bowery. How wonderful it must have been when His Mightiest Petrus Stuvvesant used to stamp his proud wooden leg on the cobblestones on Bouwerie Lane and all the gentlemen raised their plumed hats and the ladies made deep curtsies! I wish I could have lived in New Amsterdam—"

Roger recalled that Walter, too, had spoken of the Dutch and Stuyvesant. "They must have read up on the early history of the City. Amsterdam, Holland, New Amsterdam, America, to get the spirit of the play," he chuckled to himself.

"But I love the Bowery even as it is now—with all its tramps and rebels against work. Rebels against bosses, too, Mr. Walter Baxter!" Leda teased defiantly.

"Right around here was a rock which the Dutch called Schreyers' Hook," Leda pointed at the Custom House. "Schreyers means weepers in Dutch, you know," she explained. "The homesick vrouws used to watch from here the boats go back to the old country—with their husbands and sons for business or war."

"What do you say to this dump?" Walter put the brakes on suddenly, making a noise as if a regiment of ghosts were shaking their chains in an impassioned harangue against celestial injustice.

It was a saloon near Battery Park with a swinging sign—*At the Anchor and the Rope*.

"Wonderful!" Leda exclaimed, as they descended.

"What! No red cat in a glass boat!" Roger eyed Walter, who was locking the door of the automobile, pretending not to understand, if, indeed, he had even heard him.

"That's right—the red cat in a glass boat is missing. That's the way I remember the wineshops in—Sweden."

"And in—Holland—I presume?" Roger added mischievously.

"Is the place—vile enough, mademoiselle?" Walter asked.

"Adorable!" Leda clapped her hands.

The raucous sounds of a phonograph record, punctured by the laughter and the shouting of men and women, catapulted the street.

"What a lot of sailors!" Leda looked over the swinging door. "Wonderful!"

"Even drunken ones," Roger added.

"I wonder if this is really a place for you, Leda," Walter said solicitously.

"Of course it is, of course it is." She pushed the door open and entered, followed by the men.

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They zigzagged around the dancing couples and finally found a vacant table in a corner.

"The royal box!" Leda exclaimed.

"Caviar and champagne!" Walter ordered.

"Aye, aye, skipper!" the waiter saluted and returned with ham sandwiches and schooners of beer.

"Just what I've been wanting for ever so long!" Leda said, her mouth dipped into the milky foam. "Mm-mm—good!" She raised her glass and clinked it against the others. "Skoal!" She rubbed her stomach. "Wonderful! Why does everybody think that I must be fed on tongues of nightingales and nectar as angels? I am not an angel! I hate angels! And why does everybody think that I must go only to stuffy old places where everything is made of gold and plush and where as soon as I enter they begin whispering to one another? That's why I never leave the house. And it's all your fault, Walter Baxter!"

"My fault?"

"You and your publicity—making a mysterious unapproachable woman of me."

"You know what the public expects of you—"

"To the devil with the public! One of these days I shall run away—and that will be the end of Leda Larensen. I shall become a stowaway and act for sailors on boats and in wineshops and saloons like this one in all the ports of the world! That's what I will do, I warn you!"

"Perfect," Roger murmured.

"Do you really wish me to run away?" Leda asked pathetically.

"No, no, no!" Roger exclaimed. "But, he reconsidered, "if she is Gloria, would she make it so evident? Or *would* she?"

.... "And I am through being a swan! I hate those long-necked things. I want to be an ordinary duck—wallowing in the mud."

"It's pigs that wallow in the mud, not ducks," Walter corrected.

"Well, then, I shall be a pig-duck—"

"Does a pig-duck have a snout and wings or a beak and a tail?" Walter sneered.

"Roger, you are a great artist, please describe the new Leda," she pleaded.

"Only a god knows the difference between truth and coincidence, and only a god possesses the language fit to describe you, Leda."

"Will you stop talking of gods and goddesses! Have you turned Roman and Pagan?" she said irritably. "Let a *man* speak! A *man*!" She struck her glass against the table.

Roger jumped up determinedly. "A *man* commands: 'Dance with me!'"

"Delighted!" answers a *woman* obediently."

As they meandered among the other couples, Roger whispered: "I love you, Leda."

She answered: "I love you, Roger."

"Will you marry me, Leda?"

"Yes, Roger."

"Tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow."

Roger propped himself against the wall. "I am dizzy."

"So am I—dizzy with joy."

"How simple it all was, Leda!"

"Yes, Roger, so simple and so beautiful. I love you, Leda—I love you, Roger. Will you marry me, Leda? Yes, Roger. Tomorrow? Tomorrow. The most glorious poem in the whole world. Why do playwrights make lovers declaim such long pieces? It's false! False! False!" she exclaimed as, holding hands, they returned to the table.

"What's false?" Walter asked defensively.

"The way they propose on the stage. You must change all that, Walter! I shall never again make or allow my lovers to make those silly, long speeches! Only—I love you, Leda—I love you, Roger—Will you marry me, Leda? Yes, Roger. Tomorrow? Tomorrow."

"What did you say?"

"We are getting married tomorrow—"

"Tomorrow," Roger added.

"What!" Walter jumped up.

"Married—tomorrow—the two of us," Leda repeated.

"Don't pretend such total surprise, old man," Roger thought. "Your acting is *too* good—or am I mad?"

"Wonderful— isn't it?" Leda said ecstatically. "Even if a little unexpected—"

"Wonderful, perhaps—unexpected, certainly. But not tomorrow. — not yet—please," Walter pleaded.

"Tomorrow!" Leda commanded. Once more she was the grand dame of the stage, the queen, who must be obeyed.

"And what about—our play?" Walter stammered.

"My understudy will get her chance at last! She has been waiting for this for a year and a half, poor girl!"

"Look here, Leda, I won't have it! I won't!" Walter, his mustache shivering and his spectacles swinging on the cord.

"I shall tell the audience from the stage that you are a monster, Mr. Walter Baxter, forcing your actresses to lead the unnatural lives of spinsters—and worse! I shall! I shall!"

"O. K. Marry tomorrow, but continue your work until say—New Year's—and then—I'll take the play off—and—"

"No!" she thundered. "We marry tomorrow and go on a long honeymoon."

"You bit more than you can chew, you good old rascal, Walter," Roger thought, "that is, if you *did* bite—"

"Don't we, darling?"

"A long, long honeymoon," Roger emphasized.

"And when I come back—all humanized—I start rehearsing a new play," Leda spoke coaxingly, "and I promise you to be so good in it that the people will carry me on their shoulders through Broadway!"

"Just as they did with Gloria—" Roger said triumphantly.

"Who is *Gloria*?" Leda asked with disarming simplicity.

"An—actress—of ancient times—" Roger answered guiltily.

"This is a devil's trick—a devil's trick," Walter shook his forefinger at Leda.

"I've been everything—swan, angel, goddess, and now that I am about to become a woman at long last, you call me a devil! For shame!" Leda accused.

"Come on, Walt, be a sport," Roger slapped his shoulder, "congratulate us, and give us your benediction, holy Lama."

"Oh, please, your benediction, holy Lama," Leda repeated. Since Walter did not answer, she continued, "Or would you rather that we eloped—tonight—for the sake of publicity, Mr. Baxter?" she added ironically.

"I bless you—I bless you! No scandal, please, no scandal! This is America, not Paris," Walter wiped his forehead itching with perspiration.

"Paris!" Leda clapped her hands. "Let's go to Paris, darling!"

"By all means—Paris! Paris!" Roger exclaimed.

"Is there a boat sailing for Europe tomorrow?" Leda addressed Walter. "Is there?" she persisted.

He nodded reluctantly.

"He knows everything," Leda said admiringly.

"Of course he knows everything—past—present and future," Roger agreed.

"I know nothing, nothing at all!" Walter shouted.

"At what time does the boat leave?" Leda asked, ignoring his remark.

"At noon," he answered pathetically.

"Is it a French boat?"

"No, Dutch—stops at Rotterdam—"

"Oh, good, good!" Leda applauded. "First we shall visit Holland. I was there as a child. Mother bought me a Dutch dress and red wooden shoes. It was such fun! I looked just like a fairy out of Hans Christian Andersen's stories—"

"I know," Roger said.

"How do you know?" Leda looked startled.

"I mean—I know that if you went to Holland as a child, your mother certainly must have bought you wooden shoes. And as for looking as a fairy—you still do—and always will—the loveliest fairy in all creation."

"Flatterer, I adore you!" She threw her arms about his neck and kissed him ardently. "And I love you, too, Walter Baxter. Don't look so glum." She pecked at his cheek.

Walter emitted an indefinable growl.

"What did he say, darling? I can't understand."

"It's Canine, but I got the gist of it. He said that he will accept the dictates of Fate, and whatever is not clear now will be clarified when we face—the three of us—the Enlightened One."

"He said all that?" Leda laughed.

"You know how concise Canine is—one bowwow—and a philosopher has enough material for a book."

Walter growled again.

"And what does he say now?"

"Now he says that sensible man accepts the gift of the gods—and goddesses—reverently, gratefully, never asking stubbornly, 'Am I the ensnared cavalier or the victorious caveman?'"

"Wonderful! You should always speak in Canine, Walter. And you should always be his interpreter, dearest!"

"This time it was not Canine, beloved," Roger said. "It was a paragraph from the new yoga from the Grand Lamasery of Tibet." And bowing low, his hands clasped together, Roger addressed Walter: "Your grateful disciple, O Infallible Master, Holder of Time—until Time is ripe!" Turning to Leda, his hand upon his heart, he continued: "And your eternal slave, glorious Mistress of my body and soul!"

Was it the light of triumph which he caught in the look exchanged between Walter and Leda, Roger wondered, or the blaze of his own joy enveloping them?





