

***EDGAR
SALTUS***

***MR. INCOUL'S
MISADVENTURE***

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER I. MR. INCOUL.

CHAPTER II. MISS BARHYTE AGREES TO CHANGE HER NAME.

CHAPTER III. AFTER DARKNESS.

CHAPTER IV. AN EVENING CALL.

CHAPTER V. A YELLOW ENVELOPE.

CHAPTER VI. BIARRITZ

CHAPTER VII. WHAT MAY BE SEEN FROM A PALCO.

CHAPTER VIII. AN UNEXPECTED GUEST.

CHAPTER IX. MR. INCOUL DINES IN SPAIN.

CHAPTER X. THE POINT OF VIEW.

CHAPTER XI. THE HOUSE IN THE PARC MONCEAU.

CHAPTER XII. MR. INCOUL IS PREOCCUPIED.

CHAPTER XIII. WHAT MAY BE HEARD IN A GREENROOM.

CHAPTER XIV. KARL GROWS A MOUSTACHE.

CHAPTER XV. MAY EXPOSTULATES.

CHAPTER XVI. THE BARE BODKIN.

CHAPTER XVII. MAIDA'S NUPTIALS.

CHAPTER XVIII. MR. INCOUL GOES OVER THE ACCOUNTS.

CHAPTER I.

MR. INCOUL.

[Table of Contents](#)

When Harmon Incoul's wife died, the world in which he lived said that he would not marry again. The bereavement which he had suffered was known to be bitter, and it was reported that he might betake himself to some foreign land. There was, for that matter, nothing to keep him at home. He was childless, his tastes were too simple to make it necessary for him to reside as he had, hitherto, in New York, and, moreover, he was a man whose wealth was proverbial. Had he so chosen, he had little else to do than to purchase a ticket and journey wheresoever he listed, and the knowledge of this ability may have been to him not without its consolations. Yet, if he attempted to map some plan, and think which spot he would prefer, he probably reflected that whatever place he might choose, he would, in the end, be not unlike the invalid who turns over in his bed, and then turns back again on finding the second position no better than the first. However fair another sky might be, it would not make his sorrow less acute.

He was then one of those men whose age is difficult to determine. He had married when quite young, and at the time of his widowerhood he must have been nearly forty, but years had treated him kindly. His hair, it is true, was inclined to scantiness, and his skin was etiolated, but he was not stout, his teeth were sound, he held himself well, and his eyes had not lost their lustre. At a distance, one might have thought him in the thirties, but in conversation

his speech was so measured, and about his lips there was a compression such that the ordinary observer fancied him older than he really was.

His position was unexceptionable. He had inherited a mile of real estate in a populous part of New York, together with an accumulation of securities sufficient for the pay and maintenance of a small army. The foundations of this wealth had been laid by an ancestor, materially increased by his grandfather, and consolidated by his father, who had married a Miss Van Tromp, the ultimate descendant of the Dutch admiral.

His boyhood had not been happy. His father had been a lean, taciturn, unlovable man, rigid in principles, stern in manner, and unyielding in his adherence to the narrowest tenets of Presbyterianism. His mother had died while he was yet in the nursery, and, in the absence of any softening influence, the angles of his earliest nature were left in the rough.

At school, he manifested a vindictiveness of disposition which made him feared and disliked. One day, a comrade raised the lid of a desk adjoining his own. The raising of the lid was abrupt and possibly intentional. It jarred him in a task. The boy was dragged from him senseless and bleeding. In college, he became aggrieved at a tutor. For three weeks he had him shadowed, then, having discovered an irregularity in his private life, he caused to be laid before the faculty sufficient evidence to insure his removal. Meanwhile, acting presumably on the principle that an avowed hatred is powerless, he treated the tutor as though the grievance had been forgotten. A little later, owing to

some act of riotous insubordination, he was himself expelled, and the expulsion seemed to have done him good. He went to Paris and listened decorously to lectures at the Sorbonne, after which he strayed to Heidelberg, where he sat out five semesters without fighting a duel or making himself ill with beer. In his fourth summer abroad, he met the young lady who became his wife. His father died, he returned to New York, and thereafter led a model existence.

He was proud of his wife and indulgent to her every wish. During the years that they lived together, there was no sign or rumor of the slightest disagreement. She was of a sweet and benevolent disposition, and though beyond a furtive coin he gave little to the poor, he encouraged her to donate liberally to the charities which she was solicited to assist. She was a woman with a quick sense of the beautiful, and in spite of the simplicity of his own tastes, he had a house on Madison avenue rebuilt and furnished in such a fashion that it was pointed out to strangers as one of the chief palaces of the city. She liked, moreover, to have her friends about her, and while he cared as much for society as he did for the negro minstrels, he insisted that she should give entertainments and fill the house with guests. In the winter succeeding the fifteenth anniversary of their marriage, Mrs. Incoul caught a chill, took to her bed and died, forty-eight hours later, of pneumonia.

It was then that the world said that he would not marry again. For two years he gave the world no reason to say otherwise, and for two years time hung heavy on his hands. He was an excellent chess-player, and interested in archæological pursuits, but beyond that his resources were

limited. He was too energetic to be a dilettante, he had no taste for horseflesh, the game of speculation did not interest him, and his artistic tendencies were few. Now and then, a Mr. Blydenburg, a florid, talkative man, a widower like himself, came to him of an evening, and the chess-board was prepared. But practically his life was one of solitude, and the solitude grew irksome to him.

Meanwhile his wound healed as wounds do. The cicatrix perhaps was ineffaceable, but at least the smart had subsided, and in its subsidence he found that the great house in which he lived had taken on the silence of a tomb. Soon he began to go out a little. He was seen at meetings of the Archæological Society and of an afternoon he was visible in the Park. He even attended a reception given to an English thinker, and one night applauded Salvini.

At first he went about with something of that uncertainty which visits one who passes from a dark room to a bright one, but in a little while his early constraint fell from him, and he found that he could mingle again with his fellows.

At some entertainment he met a delicious young girl, Miss Maida Barhyte by name, whom for the moment he admired impersonally, as he might have admired a flower, and until he saw her again, forgot her very existence. It so happened, however, that he saw her frequently. One evening he sat next to her at a dinner and learning from her that she was to be present at a certain reception, made a point of being present himself.

This reception was given by Mrs. Bachelor, a lady, well known in society, who kept an unrevised list, and at stated intervals issued invitations to the dead, divorced and

defaulted. When she threw her house open, she liked to have it filled, and to her discredit it must be said that in that she invariably succeeded. On the evening that Mr. Incoul crossed her vestibule, he was met by a hum of voices, broken by the rhythm of a waltz. The air was heavy, and in the hall was a smell of flowers and of food. The rooms were crowded. His friend Blydenburg was present and with him his daughter. The Wainwarings, whom he had always known, were also there, and there were other people by whom he had not been forgotten, and with whom he exchanged a word, but for Miss Barhyte he looked at first in vain.

He would have gone, a crowd was as irksome to him as solitude, but in passing an outer room elaborately supplied with paintings and bric-à-brac, he caught a glimpse of the girl talking with a young man whom he vaguely remembered to have seen in earlier days at his own home.

He walked in: Miss Barhyte greeted him as an old friend: there were other people near her, and the young man with whom she had been talking turned and joined them, and presently passed with them into another room.

Mr. Incoul found a seat beside the girl, and, after a little unimportant conversation asked her a question at which she started. But Mr. Incoul was not in haste for an answer, he told her that with her permission, he would do himself the honor of calling on her later, and, as the room was then invaded by some of her friends, he left her to them, and went his way.

CHAPTER II.

MISS BARHYTE AGREES TO CHANGE HER NAME.

[Table of Contents](#)

A day or two after Mrs. Bachelor's reception, Mr. Incoul walked down Madison avenue, turned into one of the adjacent streets and rang the bell of a private boarding-house.

As he stood on the steps waiting for the door to be opened, a butcher-boy passed, whistling shrilly. Across the way a nurse-maid was idling with a perambulator, a slim-figured girl hurried by, a well-dressed woman descended from a carriage and a young man with a flower in his button-hole issued from a neighboring house. The nurse-maid stayed the perambulator and scrutinized the folds of the woman's gown; the young man eyed the hurrying girl; from the end of the street came the whistle of the retreating butcher, and as it fused into the rumble of Fifth avenue, Mr. Incoul heard the door opening behind him.

"Is Miss Barhyte at home?" he asked.

The servant, a negro, answered that she was.

"Then be good enough," said Mr. Incoul, "to take her this card."

The drawing-room, long and narrow, as is usual in many New York houses, was furnished in that fashion which is suggestive of a sheriff's sale, and best calculated to jar the nerves. Mr. Incoul did not wince. He gave the appointments one cursory, reluctant glance, and then went to the window. Across the way the nurse-maid still idled, the young man with a flower was drawing on a red glove, stitched with

black, and as he looked out at them he heard a rustle, and turning, saw Miss Barhyte.

"I have come for an answer," he said simply.

"I am glad to see you," she answered, "very glad; I have thought much about what you said."

"Favorably, I hope."

"That must depend on you." She went to a bell and touched it. "Archibald," she said, when the negro appeared, "I am out. If any visitors come take them into the other room. Should any one want to come in here before I ring, say the parlor is being swept."

The man bowed and withdrew. He would have stood on his head for her. There were few servants that she did not affect in much the same manner. She seemed to win willingness naturally.

She seated herself on a sofa, and opposite to her Mr. Incoul found a chair. Her dress he noticed was of some dark material, tailor-made, and unrelieved save by a high white collar and the momentary glisten of a button. The cut and sobriety of her costume made her look like a handsome boy, a young Olympian as it were, one who had strayed from the games and been arrayed in modern guise. Indeed, her features suggested that combination of beauty and sensitiveness which was peculiar to the Greek lad, but her eyes were not dark—they were the blue victorious eyes of the Norseman—and her hair was red, the red of old gold, that red which partakes both of orange and of flame.

"I hope—" Mr. Incoul began, but she interrupted him.

"Wait," she said, "I have much to tell you of which the telling is difficult. Will you bear with me a moment?"

"Surely," he answered.

"It is this: It is needless for me to say I esteem you; it is unnecessary for me to say that I respect you, but it is because I do both that I feel I may speak frankly. My mother wishes me to marry you, but I do not. Let me tell you, first, that when my father died he left very little, but the little that he left seems to have disappeared, I do not know how or where. I know merely that we have next to nothing, and that we are in debt beside. Something, of course, has had to be done. I have found a position. Where do you suppose?" she asked, with a sudden smile and a complete change of key.

But Mr. Incoul had no surmises.

"In San Francisco! The MacDermotts, you know, the Bonanza people, want me to return with them and teach their daughter how to hold herself, and what not to say. It has been arranged that I am to go next week. Since the other night, however, my mother has told me to give up the MacDermotts and accept your offer. But that, of course, I cannot do."

"And why not?"

To this Miss Barhyte made no answer.

"You do not care for me, I know; there is slight reason why you should. Yet, might you not, perhaps, in time?"

The girl raised her eyebrows ever so slightly. "So you see," she continued, "I shall have to go to San Francisco."

Mr. Incoul remained silent a moment. "If," he said, at last, "if you will do me the honor to become my wife, in time you will care. It is painful for me to think of you accepting a position which at best is but a shade better than that of a servant, particularly so when I am able—nay, anxious," he

added, pensively—"to surround you with everything which can make life pleasant. I am not old," he went on to say, "at least not so old that a marriage between us should seem incongruous. I find that I am sincerely attached to you—unselfishly, perhaps, would be the better word—and, if the privilege could be mine, the endeavor to make you happy would be to me more grateful than a second youth. Can you not accept me?"

He had been speaking less to her than to the hat which he held in his hand. The phrases had come from him haltingly, one by one, as though he had sought to weigh each mentally before dowering it with the wings of utterance, but, as he addressed this question he looked up at her. "Can you not?" he repeated.

Miss Barhyte raised a handkerchief to her lips and bit the shred of cambric with the *disinvoltura* of an heiress.

"Why is it," she queried, "why is it that marriage ever was invented? Why cannot a girl accept help from a man without becoming his wife?"

Mr. Incoul was about to reply that many do, but he felt that such a reply would be misplaced, and he called a platitude to his rescue. "There are wives and wives," he said.

"That is it," the girl returned, the color mounting to her cheeks; "if I could but be to you one of the latter."

He stared at her wonderingly, almost hopefully. "What do you mean?" he asked.

"Did you ever read 'Eugénie Grandet'?"

"No," he answered, "I never have."

“Well, I read it years ago. It is, I believe, the only one of Balzac’s novels that young girls are supposed to read. It is tiresome indeed; I had almost forgotten it, but yesterday I remembered enough of the story to help me to come to some decision. In thinking the matter over and over again as I have done ever since I last saw you it has seemed that I could not become your wife unless you were willing to make the same agreement with me that Eugénie Grandet’s husband made with her.”

“What was the nature of that agreement?”

“It was that, though married, they were to live as though they were not married—as might brother and sister.”

“Always?”

“Yes.”

“No,” Mr. Incoul answered, “to such an agreement I could not consent. Did I do so, I would be untrue to myself, unmanly to you. But if you will give me the right to aid you and yours, I will—according to my lights—leave nothing undone to make you contented; and if I succeed in so doing, if you are happy, then the agreement which you have suggested would fall of itself. Would it not?” he continued. “Would it not be baseless? See—” he added, and he made a vague gesture, but before he could finish the phrase, the girl’s hands were before her face and he knew that she was weeping.

Mr. Incoul was not tender-hearted. He felt toward Miss Barhyte as were she some poem in flesh that it would be pleasant to make his own. In her carriage as in her looks, he had seen that stamp of breeding which is coercive even to the dissolute. In her eyes he had discerned that promise of

delight which it is said the lost goddesses could convey; and at whose conveyance, the legend says, the minds of men were enraptured. It was in this wise that he felt to her. Such exhilaration as she may have brought him was of the spirit, and being cold by nature and undemonstrative, her tears annoyed him. He would have had her impassive, as befitted her beauty. Beside, he was annoyed at his own attitude. Why should there be sorrow where he had sought to bring smiles? But he had barely time to formulate his annoyance into a thing even as volatile as thought—the girl had risen and was leaving the room.

As she moved to the door Mr. Incoul hastened to open it for her, but she reached it before him and passed out unassisted.

When she had gone he noticed that the sun was setting and that the room was even more hideous than before. He went again to the window wondering how to act. The entire scene was a surprise to him. He had come knowing nothing of the girl's circumstances, and suddenly he learned that she was in indigence, unable perhaps to pay her board bills and worried by small tradesmen. He had come prepared to be refused and she had almost accepted him. But what an acceptance! In the nature of it his thoughts roamed curiously: he was to be a little more than kin, a little less than kind. She would accept him as a husband for out-of-door purposes, for the world's sake she would bear his name—at arm's length. According to the terms of her proposition were she ever really his wife it would be tantamount to a seduction. He was to be with her, and yet, until she so willed it, unable to call her his own. And did he

refuse these terms, she was off, no one knew whither. But he had not refused, he told himself, he had indeed not refused, he had merely suggested an amendment which turned an impossibility into an allurements. What pleasanter thing could there be than the winning of one's own wife? The idea was so novel it delighted him. For the moment he preferred it to any other; beside it his former experience seemed humdrum indeed. But why had she wept? Her reasons, however, he had then no chance to elucidate. Miss Barhyte returned as abruptly as she had departed.

"Forgive me," she said, advancing to where he stood, "it was stupid of me to act as I did. I am sorry—are we still friends?" Her eyes were clear as had she never wept, but there were circles about them, and her face was colorless.

"Friends," he answered, "yes, and more—" He hesitated a moment, and then hastily added, "It is agreed, then, is it not, you will be my wife?"

"I will be your wife?"

"As Balzac's heroine was to her husband?"

"You have said it."

"But not always. If there come a time when you care for me, then I may ask you to give me your heart as to-day I have asked for your hand?"

"When that day comes, believe me," she said, and her delicious face took on a richer hue, "when that day comes there will be neither asking nor giving, we shall have come into our own."

With this assurance Mr. Incoul was fain to be content, and, after another word or two, he took his leave.