

***ROBERT
W. CHAMBERS***



***THE STREETS
OF ASCALON***

Robert W. Chambers

The Streets of Ascalon

**Episodes in the Unfinished Career of Richard
Quarren, Esqre**

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CHAPTER I

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It being rent day, and Saturday, the staff of the "Irish Legation," with the exception of Westguard, began to migrate uptown for the monthly conference, returning one by one from that mysterious financial jungle popularly known as "Downtown." As for Westguard, he had been in his apartment all day as usual. He worked where he resided.

A little before five o'clock John Desmond Lacy, Jr., came in, went directly to his rooms on the top floor, fished out a check-book, and tried to persuade himself that he had a pleasing balance at the bank—not because he was likely to have any balance either there or in his youthful brain, but because he *had* to have one somewhere. God being good to the Irish he found he had not overdrawn his account.

Roger O'Hara knocked on his door, later, and receiving no response called out: "Are you in there, Jack?"

"No," said Lacy, scratching away with his pen in passionate hopes of discovering a still bigger balance.

"Sportin' your oak, old Skeezecks?" inquired O'Hara, affectionately, delivering a kick at the door.

"Let me alone, you wild Irishman!" shouted Lacy. "If I can't dig out an extra hundred somewhere the State Superintendent is likely to sport my oak for keeps!"

A big, lumbering, broad-shouldered young fellow was coming up the stairs behind O'Hara, a blank book and some papers tucked under his arm, and O'Hara nodded to him and opened Mr. Lacy's door without further parleying.

"Here's Westguard, now," he said; "and as we can't shoot landlords in the close season we'll have to make arrangements to pay for bed and board, Jack."

Lacy glanced up from the sheet of figures before him, then waved his guests to seats and lighted a cigarette.

"Hooray," he remarked to Westguard; "I can draw you a check, Karl, and live to tell the tale." And he rose and gave his place at the desk to the man addressed, who seated himself heavily, as though tired.

"Before we go over the accounts," he began, "I want to say a word or two——"

"Hadn't you better wait till Quarren comes in?" interrupted O'Hara, smoking and stretching out his long legs.

"No; I want to talk to you two fellows first. And I'll tell you at once what's the matter: Quarren's check came back marked 'no funds.' This is the third time; and one of us ought to talk to him."

"It's only a slip," said Lacy—"it's the tendency in him that considers the lilies of the field——"

"It isn't square," said Westguard doggedly.

"Nonsense, Karl, Rix means to be square——"

"That's all right, too, but he isn't succeeding. It humiliates me; it hurts like hell to have to call his attention to such oversights."

"Oh, he's the gay tra-la-la," said O'Hara, indulgently; "do you think he bothers his elegant noddle about such trifles as checks? Besides he's almost as Irish as I am—God bless his mother and damn all landlords, Lester Caldera included."

"What does Quarren do with all his money, then?" mused Lacy—"soaking the public in Tappan-Zee Park and sitting up so close and snug to the rich and great!"

"It's his business," said Westguard, "to see that any check he draws is properly covered. Overdrafts may be funny in a woman, and in novels, but once is too often for any man. And this makes three times for Rix."

"Ah, thin, lave the poor la-ad be! ye could-blooded Sassenach!" said Lacy, pretending to the brogue. "Phwat the divil!—'tis the cashier ye should blame whin Rix tells him to pay, an' he refuses to projuice the long-green wad!"

But Westguard, unsmiling, consulted his memoranda, then, holding up his sheet of figures:

"There's a quorum here," he said. "Rix can read this over when he comes in, if he likes. Here's the situation." And he read off the items of liabilities and assets, showing exactly, and to a penny, how the house had been run for the past month.

Everything was there, rent, servants' wages, repairs, provisions, bills for heating and lighting, extras, incidentals—all disbursements and receipts; then, pausing for comments, and hearing none, he closed the ledger with a sharp slap.

"The roof's leakin'," observed O'Hara without particular interest.

"Write to the landlord," said Lacy—"the stingy millionaire."

"He won't fix it," returned the other. "Did you ever hear of Lester Caldera spendin' a cent?"

"On himself, yes."

"That's not spendin'; it all goes inside or outside of him somewhere." He stretched his legs, crossed them, sucked on his empty pipe, and looked around at Westguard, who was still fussing over the figures.

"Are you goin' to the Wycherlys', Karl?"

"I think so."

"What costume?"

"None of your business," retorted Westguard pleasantly.

"I'm going as the family Banshee," observed Lacy.

"Did you ever hear me screech, Karl?" And, pointing his nose skyward and ruffling up his auburn hair he emitted a yell so unendurable that it brought Westguard to his feet, protesting.

"Shut up!" he said. "Do you want to have this house pinched, you crazy Milesian?"

"Get out of my rooms if you don't like it," said Lacy. "If I'm going to a masked dance as a Banshee I've got to practice screaming, haven't I?"

"I," said O'Hara, "am goin' as a bingle."

"What's a bingle?"

"Nobody knows. Neither do I; and it's killin' me to think up a costume.... Dick Quarren's goin', isn't he?"

"Does he ever miss anything?" said Lacy.

"He's missing most of his life," said Westguard so sharply that the others opened their eyes.

A flush had settled under Westguard's cheek-bones; he was still jotting down figures with a flat silver pencil, but presently he looked up.

"It's the cold and uncomplimentary truth about Ricky," he said. "That set he runs with is making an utter fool of him."

"That set," repeated Lacy, grinning. "Why, we all have wealthy relatives in it—wealthy, charming, and respectable—h'm!"

"Which is why we're at liberty to curse it out," observed O'Hara, complacently. "We all know what it is. Karl is right. If a man is goin' to make anythin' of himself he can't run with that expensive pack. One may venture to visit the kennels now and then, and look over the new litters—perhaps do a little huntin' once in a while—just enough—so that the M. F. H. recognises your coat tails when you come a cropper. But nix for wire or water! Me for the gate, please. Ah, do you think a *man* can stand what the papers call 'the realm of society' very long?"

"Rix is doing well."

Westguard said: "They've gradually been getting a strangle-hold on him. Women are crazy about that sort of man—with his good looks and good humour and his infernally easy way of obliging a hundred people at once.... Look back a few years! Before he joined that whipper-snapper junior club he was full of decent ambition, full of go, unspoiled, fresh from college and as promising a youngster as anybody ever met. Where is his ambition now? What future has he?—except possibly to marry a million at forty-five and settle down with a comfortable grunt in the trough. It's coming, I tell you. Look what he was four years ago—a boy with clear eyes and a clear skin, frank, clean set, clean minded. Look at him now—sallow, wiry, unprofitably wise, rangé, disillusioned—oh, hell! they've mauled him to a shadow of a rag!"

Lacy lighted another cigarette and winked at O'Hara. "Karl's off again," he said. "Now we're going to get the Bible and the Sword for fair!"

"Doesn't everybody need them both!" said Westguard, smiling. Then his heavy features altered: "I care a good deal for Dick Quarren," he said. "That's why his loose and careless financial methods make me mad—that's why this loose and careless transformation of a decent, sincere, innocent boy into an experienced, easy-going, cynical man makes me tired. I've got to stand for it, I suppose, but I don't want to. He's a gifted, clever, lovable fellow, but he hasn't any money and any right to leisure, and these people are turning him into one of those dancing things that leads cotillions and arranges tableaux, and plays social diplomat and forgets secrets and has his pockets full of boudoir keys—good Lord! I hate to say it, but they're making a tame cat of him—they're using him ignobly, I tell you—and that's the truth—if he had a friend with courage enough to tell him! I've tried, but I can't talk this way to him."

There was a silence: then O'Hara crossed one lank leg over the other, gingerly, and contemplated his left shoe.

"Karl," he said, "character never really changes; it only develops. What's born in the cradle is lowered into the grave, as some Russian guy said. You're a writer, and you know what I say is true."

"Granted. But Quarren's character isn't developing; it's being stifled, strangled. He could have been a professional man—a lawyer, and a brilliant one—or an engineer, or a physician—any old thing. He's in real estate—if you can call it that. All right; why doesn't he *do* something in it? I'll tell

you why," he added, angrily answering his own question; "these silly women are turning Quarren's ambition into laziness, his ideals into mockery, his convictions into cynicism——"

He stopped short. The door opened, and Quarren sauntered in.

"Couldn't help hearing part of your sermon, Karl," he said laughing. "Go ahead; I don't mind the Bible and the Sword—it's good for Jack Lacy, too—and that scoundrel O'Hara. Hit us again, old Ironsides. We're no good." And he sat down on the edge of Lacy's bed, and presently stretched out on it, gracefully, arms under his blond head.

"You've been catchin' it, Ricky," said O'Hara with a grin. "Karl says that fashionable society is a bally wampire a-gorgin' of hisself at the expense of bright young men like you. What's the come-back to that, sonny?"

"Thanks old fellow," said Quarren laughing and slightly lifting his head to look across at Westguard. "Go ahead and talk hell and brimstone. A fight is the only free luxury in the Irish Legation. I'll swat you with a pillow when I get mad enough."

Westguard bent his heavy head and looked down at the yellow check on the table.

"Rix," he said, "I've got to tell you that you have forgotten to make a deposit at your bank."

"Oh, Lord!" exclaimed Quarren with weary but amiable vexation—"that is the third time. What are you fellows going to do? Put me out of the Legation?"

"Why the devil are you so careless?" growled Westguard.

"I honestly don't know. I didn't suppose I was so short. I thought I had a balance."

"Rot! The minute a man begins to *think* he has a balance he knows damn well that he hasn't! I don't care, Rix—but, take it from me, you'll have a mortifying experience one of these days."

"I guess that's right," said Quarren with a kind of careless contrition. "I never seem to be more than a lap or two ahead of old lady Ruin. And I break the speed-laws, too."

"No youngster ever beat that old woman in a foot-race," observed Lacy. "Pay up and give her enough carfare to travel the other way; that's your only chance, Ricky."

"Oh, certainly. No fellow need be in debt if he pays up, you Hibernian idiot!"

"Do you want some money?" asked Westguard bluntly.

"Sure, Karl, oodles of it! But not from you, old chap."

"You know you can have it from me, too, don't you?" said O'Hara.

Quarren nodded cordially: "I'll get it; no fear. I'm terribly sorry about that check. But it will be all right to-morrow, Karl."

Lacy thought to himself with a grin: "He'll kill somebody at Auction to square himself—that's what Ricky means to do. God be good to the wealthy this winter night!"

O'Hara, lank, carefully scrubbed, carefully turned out as one of his own hunters, stood up with a yawn and glanced at his watch.

"Didn't somebody say somebody was comin' in to tea?" he asked generally.

"My cousin, Mrs. Wycherly," said Westguard—"and a friend of hers—I've forgotten——"

"Mrs. Leeds," observed Lacy. "And she is reputed to be a radiant peach. Did any of you fellows ever meet her in the old days?"

Nobody there had ever seen her.

"Did Mrs. Wycherly say she is a looker?" asked O'Hara, sceptically.

Westguard shrugged: "You know what to expect when one woman tells you that another woman is good-looking. Probably she has a face that would kill a caterpillar."

Quarren laughed lazily from the bed:

"I hear she's pretty. She's come out of the West. You know, of course, who she was."

"Reggie Leeds's wife," said O'Hara, slowly.

There was a silence. Perhaps the men were thinking of the late Reginald Leeds, and of the deep damnation of his taking off.

"Have you never seen her?" asked Lacy.

"Nobody ever has. She's never before been here," said Quarren, yawning.

"Then come down and set the kettle on, Ricky. She may be the peachiest kind of a peach in a special crate directed to your address and marked 'Perishable! Rush! With care!' So we'll have to be very careful in rushing her——"

"Oh, for Heaven's sake stop that lady-patter," protested O'Hara, linking his arm in Lacy's and sauntering toward the door. "That sort of conversation is Ricky's line of tea-talk. You'll reduce him to a pitiable silence if you take away his only asset."

Westguard gathered up his papers, pausing a moment at the doorway:

"Coming?" he asked briefly of Quarren who was laughing.

"Certainly he's coming," said Lacy returning and attempting to drag him from the bed. "Come on, you tea-cup-rattling, macaroon-crunching, caste-smitten, fashion-bitten Arbiter Elegantiarum!"

They fought for a moment, then Lacy staggered back under repeated wallops from one of his own pillows, and presently retired to his bath-room to brush his thick red hair. This hair was his pride and sorrow: it defied him in a brilliant cowlick until plastered flat with water. However, well soaked, his hair darkened to what he considered a chestnut colour. And that made him very proud.

When he had soaked and subdued his ruddy locks he came out to where Westguard still stood.

"Are you coming, Rix?" demanded the latter again.

"Not unless you particularly want me," returned Quarren, yawning amiably. "I could take a nap if that red-headed Mick would get out of here."

Westguard said: "Suit yourself," and followed Lacy and O'Hara down the stairs.

The two latter young fellows turned aside into O'Hara's apartments to further remake a killing and deadly toilet. Westguard continued on to the first floor which he inhabited, and where he found a Japanese servant already preparing the tea paraphernalia. A few minutes later Mrs. Wycherly arrived with Mrs. Leeds.

All women, experienced or otherwise, never quite lose their curiosity concerning a bachelor's quarters. The haunts

of men interest woman, fascinating the married as well as the unwedded. Deep in their gentle souls they know that the most luxurious masculine abode could easily be made twice as comfortable by the kindly advice of any woman. Toleration, curiosity, sympathy are the emotions which stir feminine hearts when inspecting the solitary lair of the human male.

"So these are the new rooms," said Molly Wycherly, patronisingly, after O'Hara and Lacy had appeared and everybody had been presented to everybody else. "Strelsa, do look at those early Edwards prints! It's utterly impossible to find any of them now for sale anywhere."

Strelsa Leeds looked up at the Botticelli Madonna and at Madame Royale; and the three men looked at her as though hypnotised.

So this was Reginald Leeds's wife—this distractingly pretty woman—even yet scarcely more than a girl—with her delicate colour and vivid lips and unspoiled eyes—dark eyes—a kind of purplish gray, very purely and exquisitely shaped. But in their grayish-violet depths there was murder. And the assassination of Lacy and O'Hara had already been accomplished.

Her hat, gown, gloves, furs were black—as though the tragic shadow of two years ago still fell across her slender body.

She looked around at the room; Molly Wycherly, pouring tea, nodded to Westguard, and he handed the cup to Mrs. Leeds.

She said, smilingly: "And—do you three unprotected men live in this big house all by yourselves?"

"There are four of us in the Legation," said Lacy, "and several servants to beat off the suffragettes who become enamoured of us."

"The—*legation*?" she repeated, amused at the term.

"Our friends call this house the Irish Legation," he explained. "We're all Irish by descent except Westguard who's a Sassenach—and Dick Quarren, who is only half Irish."

"And who is Dick Quarren?" she asked innocently.

"Oh, Strelsa!" cautioned Molly Wycherly—"you really mustn't argue yourself unknown."

"But I am unknown," insisted the girl, laughing and looking at the men in turn with an engaging candour that bowled them over again, one by one. "I *don't* know who Mr. Quarren is, so why not admit it? *Is* he such a very wonderful personage, Mr. Lacy?"

"Not at all, Mrs. Leeds. He and I share the top floor of the Legation. We are, as a matter of record, the two financial wrecks of this establishment, so naturally we go to the garret. Poverty is my only distinction; Mr. Quarren, however, also leads the grand march at Lyric Hall now and then I believe——"

"What is Lyric Hall? Ought I to know?"

Everybody was laughing, and Molly Wycherly said:

"Richard Quarren, known variously as Rix, Ricky, and Dick Quarren, is an exceedingly popular and indispensable young man in this town. You'll meet him, Strelsa, and probably adore him. We all do."

"Must I wait very long?" asked Strelsa, laughing. "I'd like to have the adoration begin."

Lacy said to O'Hara: "Go up and pull that pitiable dub off the bed, Roger. The lady wishes to inspect him."

"That's not very civil of Rix," said Mrs. Wycherly; "but I fancy I know why he requires slumber." She added, glancing around mischievously at the three men who were all looking languishingly at Mrs. Leeds: "He'll be sorry when you three gentlemen describe Strelsa to him. I can prophesy that much."

"Certainly," said Lacy, airily; "we're all at Mrs. Leeds's feet! Even the blind bat of Drumgool could see that! So why deny it?"

"You're not denying it, Mr. Lacy," said Strelsa, laughing. "But I realise perfectly that I am in the Irish Legation. So I shall carefully salt everything you say to me."

"If you think I've kissed the blessed pebble you ought to listen to that other bankrupt upstairs," said Lacy.

"As far as pretty speeches are concerned you seem to be perfectly solvent," said Strelsa gaily, looking around her at the various adornments of this masculine abode. "I wonder where you dine," she added with curiosity unabashed.

"We've a fine dining-room below," he said proudly, "haven't we, Roger? And as soon as Dick Quarren and I are sufficiently solvent to warrant it, the Legation is going to give a series of brilliant banquets; will you come, Mrs. Leeds?"

"When you are solvent, perhaps," said Strelsa, smiling.

"Westguard and I will give you a banquet at an hour's notice," said O'Hara, eagerly. "Will you accept?"

"Such overwhelming offers of hospitality!" she protested. "I had believed the contrary about New Yorkers. You see I've

just emerged from the West, and I don't really know what to think of such bewildering cordiality."

"Karl," said Mrs. Wycherly, "are you going to show us over the house? If you are we must hurry, as Strelsa and I are to decorate the Calderas' box this evening, and it takes me an hour to paint my face." She turned a fresh, winsome countenance to Westguard, who laughed, rose, and took his pretty cousin by the hand.

Under triple escort Mrs. Wycherly and Mrs. Leeds examined the Legation from kitchen to garret—and Strelsa, inadvertently glancing in at a room just as Westguard started to close the door, caught sight of a recumbent shape on a bed—just a glimpse of a blond, symmetrical head and a well-coupled figure, graceful even in the careless relaxation of sleep.

Westguard asked her pardon: "That's Quarren. He was probably up till daylight."

"He was," said Molly Wycherly; "and by the same token so was I. Thank you so much, Karl.... Thank you, Mr. O'Hara—and you, too, Jack!"—offering her hand—"We've had a splendid party.... Strelsa, we really ought to go at once——"

"Will you come again?"

"We will come again if you ask us," said Strelsa; "we're perfectly fascinated by the Legation."

"And its personnel?" hinted Lacy. "Do you like us, Mrs. Leeds?"

"I've only seen three of you," parried Strelsa, much amused.

"We refuse to commit ourselves," said Molly. "Good-bye. I suppose you all are coming to my house-warming."

They all looked at Mrs. Leeds and said that they were coming—said so fervently.

Molly laughed: she had no envy in her make-up, perhaps because she was too pretty herself.

"Oh, yes," she said, replying to their unasked questions, "Mrs. Leeds will be there—and I plainly see *my* miserable fate. But what can a wretched woman expect from the Irish? Not constancy. Strelsa, take warning. They loved me once!"

After Westguard had put them in their limousine, he came back to find Quarren in his sitting-room, wearing a dressing-gown, and Lacy madly detailing to him the charms of Strelsa Leeds:

"Take it from me, Dicky, she's some queen! You didn't miss a thing but the prettiest woman in town! And there's a *something* about her—a kind of a sort of a something——"

"You appear to be in love, dear friend," observed Quarren kindly.

"I am. So's every man here who met her. We don't deny it! We glory in our fall! What was that costume of hers, Karl? Mourning?"

"Fancy a glorious creature like her wearin' black for that nasty little cad," observed O'Hara disgustedly.

"It's probably fashion, not grief," remarked Westguard.

"I guess it's nix for the weeps," said O'Hara—"after all she probably went through with Reggie Leeds, I fancy she had no tears left over."

"I want to talk," cried Lacy; "I want to tell Rix what he missed. I'd got as far as her gown, I think——"

"Go on," smiled Quarren.

"Anyway," said Lacy, "she wore a sort of mourning as far as her veil went, and her furs and gown and gloves were black, and her purse was gun-metal and black opals—rather brisk? Yes?—And all the dingles on her were gun-metal—everything black and sober—and that ruddy gold head—and—those eyes!—a kind of a purple-gray, Ricky, slanting a little, with long black lashes—I noticed 'em—and her lips were very vivid—not paint, but a kind of noticeably healthy scarlet—and that straight nose—and the fresh fragrant youth of her——"

"For Heaven's sake, Jack——"

"Sure. I'm through with 'em all. I'm wise to the sex. That was merely a word picture. I'm talking like a writer, that's all. That's how you boobs talk, isn't it, Karl?"

"Always," said Westguard gravely.

"Me for Mrs. Leeds," remarked O'Hara frankly. "I'd ask her to marry me on the drop of a hat."

"Well, I'll drop no hat for *you*!" said Lacy. "And there'll be plenty of lunatics in this town who'll go madder than you or me before they forget Mrs. Leeds. Wait! Town is going to sit up and take notice when this new planet swims into its social ken. How's that epigram, Karl?"

Westguard said thoughtfully: "There'll be notoriety, too, I'm afraid. If nobody knows her everybody knows about that wretched boy she married."

Quarren added: "I have always understood that the girl did not want to marry him. It was her mother's doings."

O'Hara scowled. "I also have heard that the mother engineered it.... What was Mrs. Leeds's name? I forget——"

"Strelsa Lanark," said Quarren who never forgot anything.

"Ugh," grunted Westguard. "Fancy a mother throwing her daughter at the head of a boy like Reggie Leeds!—as vicious and unclean a little whelp as ever—Oh, what's the use?—and *de mortuis nihil*—et cetera, cock-a-doodle-do!"

"That poor girl had two entire years of him," observed Lacy. "She doesn't look more than twenty now—and he's been in—been dead two years. Good Heavens! What a child she must have been when she married him!"

Westguard nodded: "She had two years of him—and I suppose he seldom drew a perfectly sober breath.... He dragged her all over the world with him—she standing for his rotten behaviour, trying to play the game with the cards hopelessly stacked against her. Vincent Wier met them in Naples; Mallison ran across them in Egypt; so did Lydon in Vienna. They said it was heartbreaking to see her trying to keep up appearances—trying to smile under his nagging or his drunken insults in public places. Lydon told me that she behaved like a brick—stuck to Reggie, tried to shield him, excuse him, make something out of the miserable pup who was doing his best to drag her to his own level and deprave her. But I guess she was too young or too unhappy or something, because there's no depravity in the girl who was here a few minutes ago. I'll swear to that."

After a moment Lacy said: "Well, he got his at last!"

"What was comin' to him," added O'Hara, with satisfaction.

Lacy added, curiously: "*How* can a man misbehave when he has such a woman for a wife?"

"I wonder," observed Quarren, "how many solid citizens read the account in the papers and remained scared longer than six weeks?"

"Lord help the wives of men," growled Westguard.... "If any of you fellows are dressing for dinner you'd better be about it.... Wait a moment, Rix!"—as Quarren, the last to leave, was already passing the threshold.

The young fellow turned, smiling: the others went on; Westguard stood silent for a moment, then:

"You're about the only man I care for very much," he said bluntly. "If I am continually giving you the Bible and the Sword it's the best I have to give."

Quarren replied laughingly.

"Don't worry, old fellow. I take what you say all right. And I really mean to cut out a lot of fussing and begin to hustle.... Only, isn't it a wise thing to keep next to possible clients?"

"The people you train with don't buy lots in Tappan-Zee Park."

"But I may induce them to go into more fashionable enterprises——"

"Not they! The eagle yells on every dollar they finger. If there's any bleeding to be done they'll do it, my son."

"Lester Caldera has already asked me about acreage in Westchester."

"Did he do more than ask?"

"No."

"Did you charge him for the consultation?"

"Of course not."

"Then he got your professional opinion for nothing."

"But he, or others, may try to assemble several farms
——"

"Why don't they then?—instead of dragging you about at their heels from house to house, from card-room to ball-room, from café to opera, from one week-end to the next!—robbing you of time, of leisure, of opportunity, of ambition—spoiling you—making a bally monkey of you! You're always in some fat woman's opera box or on some fat man's yacht or coach, or doing some damn thing—with your name figuring in everything from Newport to Hot Springs—and—and how can you ever turn into anything except a tame cat!"

Quarren's face reddened slightly.

"I'd be perfectly willing to sit in an office all day and all night if anybody would give me any business. But what's the use of chewing pencils and watching traffic on Forty-second Street?"

"Then go into another business!"

"I haven't any money."

"I'll lend it to you!"

"I can't risk *your* money, Karl. I'm too uncertain of myself. If anybody else offered to stake me I'd try the gamble." ... He looked up at Westguard, ashamed, troubled, and showing it like a boy. "I'm afraid I don't amount to anything, Karl. I'm afraid I'm no good except in the kind of thing I seem to have a talent for."

"Fetching and carrying for the fashionable and wealthy," sneered Westguard.

Quarren's face flushed again: "I suppose that's it."

Westguard glared at him: "I wish I could shake it out of you!"

"I guess the poison's there," said Quarren in a low voice. "The worst of it is I like it—except when I understand your contempt."

"You *like* to fetch and carry and go about with your pocket full of boudoir keys!"

"People give me as much as I give them."

"They don't!" said the other angrily. "They've taken a decent fellow and put him in livery!"

Quarren bit his lip as the blood leaped to his face.

"Don't talk that way, Karl," he said quietly. "Even you have no business to take that tone with me."

There was a silence. After a few moments Westguard came over and held out his hand. Quarren took it, looked at him.

"I tell you," he said, "there's nothing to me. It's your kindness, Karl, that sees in me possibilities that never were."

"They're there. I'll do my duty almost to the point of breaking our friendship. But—I'll have to stop short of that point."

A quick smile came over Quarren's face, gay, affectionate:

"You couldn't do that, Karl.... And don't worry. I'll cut out a lot of frills and try to do things that are worth while. I mean it, really. Don't worry, old fellow."

"All right," said Westguard, smiling.

CHAPTER II

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A masked dance, which for so long has been out of fashion in the world that pretends to it, was the experiment selected by Molly Wycherly for the warming up of her new house on Park Avenue.

The snowy avenue for blocks was a mass of motors and carriages; a platoon of police took charge of the vehicular mess. Outside of the storm-coated lines the penniless world of shreds and patches craned a thousand necks as the glittering costumes passed from brougham and limousine under the awnings into the great house.

Already in the new ball-room, along the edges of the whirl, masqueraders in tumultuous throngs were crowding forward to watch the dancers or drifting into the eddies and set-backs where ranks of overloaded gilt chairs creaked under jewelled dowagers, and where rickety old beaux impersonated tinselled courtiers on wavering but devoted legs.

Aloft in their rococo sky gallery a popular orchestra fiddled frenziedly; the great curtains of living green set with thousands of gardenias swayed in the air currents like Chinese tapestries; a harmonious tumult swept the big new ball-room from end to end—a composite uproar in which were mingled the rushing noise of silk, clatter of sole and heel, laughter and cries of capering maskers gathered from the four quarters of fashionable Gath to grace the opening of the House of Wycherly. They were all there, dowager, matron, débutante, old beaux, young gallant, dancing,

laughing, coquetting, flirting. Young eyes mocked the masked eyes that wooed them; adolescence tormented maturity; the toothless ogled the toothsome. Unmasking alone could set right this topsy-turvy world of carnival.

A sinuous Harlequin, his skin-tight lozenge-patterned dress shimmering like the red and gold skin of a Malay snake, came weaving his way through the edges of the maelstrom, his eyes under the black half-mask glittering maliciously at the victims of his lathe-sword. With it he recklessly slapped whatever tempted him, patting gently the rounded arms and shoulders of nymph and shepherdess, using more vigour on the plump contours of fat and elderly courtiers, spinning on the points of his pump-toes, his limber lathe-sword curved in both hands above his head, leaping lithely over a chair here and there, and landing always as lightly as a cat on silent feet—a wiry, symmetrical figure under the rakish bi-corne, instinct with mischief and grace infernal.

Encountering a burly masker dressed like one of Cromwell's ponderous Ironsides, he hit him a resounding whack over his aluminum cuirass, and whispered:

"That Ironside rig doesn't conceal you: it reveals you, Karl! Out with your Bible and your Sword and preach the wrath to come!"

"It will come all right," said Westguard. "Do you know how many hundred thousand dollars are wasted here tonight?... And yesterday a woman died of hunger in Carmine Street. Don't worry about the wrath of God as long as people die of cold and hunger in the streets of Ascalon."

"That's not as bad as dying of inanition—which would happen to the majority here if they didn't have things like this to amuse 'em. For decency's sake, Karl, pity the perplexities of the rich for a change!"

Westguard grunted something under his casque; then, adjusting his aluminum mask:

"Are you having a good time, Dicky? I suppose you are."

"Oh, *I'm* gay enough," returned the Harlequin airily—"but there's never much genuine gaiety among the overfed." And he slapped a passing gallant with his wooden sword, spun around on his toes, bent over gracefully and stood on his hands, legs twinkling above him in the air. Then, with a bound he was on his nimble feet again, and, linking his arm in the arm of the Cromwellian trooper, strolled along the ranks of fanning dowagers, glancing amiably into their masked faces.

"Same old battle-line," he observed to his companion—"their jewels give them away. Same old tiaras, same old ladies—all fat, all fifty, all fanning away like the damned. Your aunt has on about a ton of emeralds. I think she does it for the purpose of banting, don't you, Karl——"

The uproar drowned his voice: Westguard, colossal in his armour, gazed gloomily around at the gorgeous spectacle for which his cousin Molly Wycherly was responsible.



"Westguard, colossal in his armour, gazed gloomily around at the gorgeous spectacle."

"It's monkey-shines like this that breed anarchists," he growled. "Did you notice that rubbering crowd outside the police lines in the snow? Molly and Jim ought to see it."

"Oh, cut it out, Karl," retorted the Harlequin gaily; "there'll be rich and poor in the world as long as the bally old show runs—there'll be reserved seats and gallery seats and standing room only, and ninety-nine percent of the world cooling its shabby heels outside."

"I don't care to discuss the problem with *you*," observed Westguard. After a moment he added: "I'm going to dance once or twice and get out.... I suppose you'll flit about doing the agreeable and fashionable until daylight."

"I suppose so," said the Harlequin, tranquilly. "Why not? Also *you* ought to find material here for one of your novels."

"A man doesn't have to hunt for material. It's in his bedroom when he wakes; it's all around him all day long. There's no more here than there is outside in the snow; and no less.... But dancing all night isn't going to help *your* business, Ricky."

"It won't hurt any business I'm likely to do."

"Isn't your Tappan-Zee Park panning out?"

"Fizzling out. Nobody's bought any building sites."

"Why not?"

"How the deuce do I know, Karl! I don't want to talk business, here——"

He ceased speaking as three or four white masked Bacchantes in fluttering raiment came dancing by to the wild music of Philemon and Baucis. Shaking their be-ribboned tambourines, flowery garlands and lynx-skins flying from their shoulders, they sped away on fleet little feet, hotly pursued by adorers.

"Come on," said the Harlequin briskly; "I think one of those skylarkers ought to prove amusing! Shall I catch you one?"

But he found no encouragement in the swift courtship he attempted; for the Bacchantes, loudly protesting at his interference, banged him over his head and shoulders with their resounding tambourines and danced away unheeding his blandishments.

"Flappers," observed a painted and powdered clown whose voice betrayed him as O'Hara; "this town is overstocked with fudge-fed broilers. They're always playin'

about under foot, spoilin' your huntin'; and if you touch 'em they ki-yi no end."

"I suppose you're looking for Mrs. Leeds," said Westguard, smiling.

"I fancy every man here is doin' the same thing," replied the clown. "What's her costume? Do you know, Ironsides?"

"I wouldn't tell you if I did," said Westguard frankly.

The Harlequin shrugged.

"This world," he remarked, "is principally encumbered with women, and naturally a man supposes the choice is unlimited. But as you live to drift from girl to girl you'll discover that there are just two kinds; the kind you can kiss and the kind you can't. So finally you marry the latter. Does Mrs. Leeds flirt?"

"Will a fish swim?" rejoined the clown. "You bet she will flirt. Haven't you met her?"

"I? No," said the Harlequin carelessly. Which secretly amused both Westguard and O'Hara, for it had been whispered about that the new beauty not only had taken no pains to meet Quarren, but had pointedly ignored an opportunity when the choice lay with her, remarking that dancing men were one of the social necessities which everybody took for granted—like flowers and champagne. And the comment had been carried straight to Quarren, who had laughed at the time—and had never forgotten it, nor the apparently causeless contempt that evidently had inspired it.

The clown brandished his bunch of toy balloons, and gazed about him:

"Anybody who likes can go and tell Mrs. Leeds that I'm her declared suitor. I don't care who knows it. I'm foolish about her. She's different from any woman I ever saw. And if I don't find her pretty soon I'll smash every balloon over your head, Ricky!"

The Harlequin laughed. "Women," he said, "are cut out in various and amusing patterns like animal crackers, but the fundamental paste never varies, and the same pastry cook seasoned it."

"That's a sickly and degenerate sentiment," observed Westguard.

"You might say that about the unfledged," added O'Hara—"like those kittenish Bacchantes. Winifred Miller and the youngest Vernon girl were two of those Flappers, I think. But there's no real jollity among the satiated," he added despondently. "A mask, a hungry stomach, and empty pockets are the proper ingredients for gaiety—take it from me, Karl." And he wandered off, beating everybody with his bunch of toy balloons.

Quarren leaped to the seat of a chair and squatted there drawing his shimmering legs up under him like a great jewelled spider.

"Bet you ten that the voluminous domino yonder envelops my aunt, Mrs. Sprowl," whispered Westguard.

"You're betting on a certainty and a fat ankle."

"Sure. I've seen her ankles going upstairs too often.... What the devil is the old lady wearing under that domino?"

"Wait till you see her later," said Quarren, delightedly. "She has come as Brunhilda."