The Wrongdoing of Edwin Dell

Richard Connell

"One, two, three, four," counted Aunt Charity as she put the hard-boiled eggs into the shoebox beside the bananas, and twisted a little cornucopia from the sheep-dip advertisement in the Crosby Corners' News to hold the pepper and salt. "Do you think four will be enough, Edwin?"

"Four what, Aunt Charity?" asked Edwin Dell, looking up from his book; it was Jeremy Taylor's "Holy Living and Holy Dying."

"These," she said, pointing a long, pale forefinger. She never mentioned the word egg. To her there was a suggestion of the improper about an egg.

Edwin Dell looked at them, blushed, turned his head away.

"I think so, Aunt Charity," he murmured.

She cut slices of bread from the home-made loaf and swaddled each slice in tissue paper.

"You'll be careful what victuals you eat in New York, Edwin," she said; it was half question, half command.

"Oh, yes, Aunt Charity," promised the young man. "I'm always most particular about my victuals."

"Sit up straight, Edwin. And be sure to allow plenty of time to get to the station. The New York train leaves at three-twenty-four. What is it Emerson says about punctuality?"

"Punctuality," Edwin quoted, "is one of the legs of the table of Success." He knew his Emerson.

"And Edwin——"

"Yes, Aunt Charity?"

"Don't forget what I said about women."

"Indeed I shan't, aunt," he said, earnestly. "I shall eschew them. Indeed I shall eschew them, Aunt Charity."

"You'd better," said his aunt, grimly. She was a geometric woman, all angles, corners, tangents

and plane surfaces. The one man who might have loved her was Euclid. She had come to Crosby Corners, Connecticut, from Louisburg Square, Boston, to bring up her infant nephew, Edwin Dell, an orphan whose parents had been called away when lightning struck the village church during Wednesday prayer meeting. After Edwin was one year old she always called the gardener in to give Edwin his bath. She had conducted an exclusive school for girls in Boston, and so was able to bring the child up carefully and well. He had not been permitted to go to school; that would have brought him in contact with gauche persons. Any young man would have envied him his ability to read Latin at sight and his considerable knowledge of ecclesiastical history. The malady of the time—ingrown worldliness—had never tainted him. At twenty-one he had conversed with practically no one but his aunt, and the Rev. Vernon Stickney Entwistle, who came to tea on alternate Tuesdays, and Palumbo, the Italian gardener, whose remarks, by Aunt Charity's strict orders were confined to agricultural subjects, such as "Theesa punk" and "Theesa cab." It took Edwin some years to discover that Palumbo was saying "This is a pumpkin" and "This is a cabbage."

Aunt Charity's library consisted of the following books: The Book of Common Prayer, Young's Night Thoughts, Fox's Book of Martyrs, Holy Living and Holy Dying, the Sermons of Bishop Amos Pratt, the Sermons of the Rev. Hosea Ballou (in eleven volumes), the Sermons of John Wesley Tweedy, D.D., the Collected Prayers of the Rev. Nathaniel Beasley, the Sermons (one volume each) of the Revs. Snellgrove, Tetter, Peabody, Kinsolving, Struthers, Kipp, Manning, Pinkney, and Dodd, and The Genealogical History of the Tillotson Family. Aunt Charity was a Boston Tillotson. Young Edwin had free access to this library, and, being by nature bookish, he read all the volumes so assiduously that his aunt had to renew the chintz slip-covers three distinct times.

And now Edwin Dell was going to New York to seek his fortune. It was his first visit to that great city. In its libraries he planned to find material to finish the work on which he was engaged, a scholarly and exhaustive treatise on The History of the Dogma of Infant Damnation in New England between 1800 and 1830. It was to fill six large volumes, possibly ten. It would make something of a stir in the more thoughtful literary circles, he expected, in all modesty. He was a modest young man; he could not tolerate mirrors in his bathroom.

His heart beat fast as he took his seat in the train to New York. There he sat, waiting for the train to start, his ticket and the address of his boarding house clutched in one hand, his lunch box, with the four hard-boiled blanks, clutched in the other. His first week's allowance was pinned to his union suit by two safety pins.

Passengers, even hardened traveling salesmen, turned to look twice at Edwin Dell; he was so young, so fresh. His light blue eyes were large, round, wondering; they looked at the world so candidly, so trustingly. He had the tall, well-proportioned body of the Tillotsons and the frank, boyish features of the Dells. Not a million mud-baths could have given him

those cheeks, to which the color came easily; they were Nature's reward for clean living, early retiring, and waking with the lark. Electricity had had nothing to do with that wave in his blond hair; that, too, was Nature's gift. He was quietly dressed in a pepper and salt suit; his necktie was blue with white polka dots.

"Edwin," his aunt called through the window, "are you sure you packed"—she looked about to be sure no one overheard her—"your woolens?"

"Yes, Aunt Charity."

"And the goose-grease?"

"Yes, Aunt Charity."

"When you feel a cold coming on," she said, "be sure to rub the goose-grease on your——self."

He knew she meant "chest". He was glad she didn't say the word in front of all those strangers, but, of course, he reflected, there was not the slightest danger of Aunt Charity committing an indelicacy; she tacitly admitted the existence of Edwin from chin to ankles, but never mentioned it.

"Edwin?"

"Yes, aunt."

"Remember what I said."

"About what, aunt?"

"About women."

"Have no apprehension," he said. "I shall eschew them."

The engine tooted, the train creaked, and he was off to New York.

General Grant, it is likely, never stayed at the boarding house of Miss Hetty Venable in West 13th street. But the mark of his régime was on it, particularly in its interior decorations. In Edwin Dell's room on the second floor, rear, hung heavy velvet portières that still smelled faintly, from the campaign cigar some roomer had smoked there during the Hayes-Tilden

election. The furniture was massive and glum; the marble mantel was covered with a cloth with yellow tassels; in the bathtub were painted purple and green tulips of decalcomaniac tendencies; the gas jets suffered from chronic asthma and halitosis. The view from the window embraced four back-yards as similar as pocket-dictionaries, with frescoes of clothes-lines, and a liberal sprinkling of ash-barrels, elderly shoes and used cats. Edwin rubbed his hands with satisfaction; it seemed to him an ideal place to write his kind of book.

Four days after Edwin Dell came to New York and to West 13th Street, Miss Venable's cook left to accept a position in the moving pictures, and Edwin, who had had his meals in his rooms till then, was now forced to seek his nourishment outside. Was it he who impersonated a serpent in a garden some eons ago who led Edwin Dell to select for his meals the Scarlet Hyena Tea Room, dinner eighty five cents, with soup or salad, one dollar; chicken Sundays? He thought he chose it because it lay on his route to the Greenwich Village branch of the public library.

It was during his second dinner there that Edwin Dell, looking up from page 512 of Bishop Groody's masterly defense of the theory of infant damnation, saw the girl. He had been aware that there were many girls in New York, but he had ignored them. This girl was hard to ignore. She was looking at him, looking directly and smiling a slight, shameless smile. Edwin frowned, dropped his eyes to his book, and felt uncomfortable. In his confusion he salted his cocoa, and, on tasting it, sputtered. He heard her only partly suppressed titter. He knew that he was flushing. He tried to look up without meeting her eye but he ran straight into her gaze; she was smiling most provocatively. He gulped down his cocoa, salt and all, and fled from the restaurant.

How fresh and pure seemed the air of Seventh Avenue as he crossed it! How reassuring the presence of the traffic policeman! Edwin picked his way along through the crisp December evening. The sound of steps on the sidewalk behind him made him glance over his shoulder. His heart fluttered. Somebody was following him.

Under the arc light he could see her unmistakable dress, an unrestrained maroon batik affair besprint with ochre fish pursuing mauve worms. It was she, the one who had smiled. Edwin Dell's backward glance was hasty, but hasty as it was, it saw her smile, and her wink. Something close akin to panic gripped him and he lengthened his strides; from the lap, lap, lap of her sandals he knew she too had increased her pace. With anxious eyes he glanced at the numbers; he had forty houses to go before he reached Miss Venable's. His breath began to come jerkily. Thirty numbers more. She was gaining on him, and was clearing her throat with a loud "Ahem" that even to his inexperienced ears sounded manufactured. Twenty more numbers; and the girl drew nearer, nearer. Edwin broke into a species of canter; lap, lap, lap, lap—she was cantering, too. Just in time he reached the brown stone steps of Miss Venable's house; with two leaps he reached the door and miraculously hit the key-hole the first stab. He slammed the door shut behind him, and sank down, almost fainting on the

derby hats of the other roomers on the hall hat-rack.

Next day before Edwin Dell went forth, he stood for a long time looking at a steel engraving he had brought with him from his home in the country and had tacked to the rose-dappled wall-paper. It was a picture of Ralph Waldo Emerson. New courage rushed into his system like air into a tire as he gazed into the wise, kind, understanding eyes. He ate a push-cart apple for breakfast and another for lunch, and entrenched himself in the library behind the bulwark of Bishop Groody's ponderous tome. It was past seven that evening when Edwin Dell had intimations that he had a grosser side and must appease it with food. He set forth to do so.

Edwin Dell's acquaintance with Freud was as limited as Freud's acquaintance with Edwin Dell. Edwin Dell knew no more of the theory of the subconscious than a trout does of trigonometry. Little did the country lad realize that he was an iceberg with one-third of him projecting above the surface of consciousness, and the other two-thirds plunged deep down in the murky realms of the subconscious. So, with the utmost innocence of intention (ah, little did he reck of the tricks of the subconscious!) he found himself well into the fried atmosphere of the Scarlet Hyena before he remembered that he had resolved never to set foot in that place again. He wheeled about to leave, but a vigilant waiter herded him into a seat in a corner and affixed him there with a napkin, a glass of water and butter. Edwin peered round, and saw no cause for alarm. The girl was not there. Her bobbed red head was nowhere visible in the forest of black, brown, yellow and brindle bobbed heads. With a relieved sigh he ordered chicken liver omelet and weak tea.

He was seeking for vestiges of chicken liver with one eye and reading Groody's epoch-making chapter, "Have Babies Adult-sized Souls?" with the other, when he became aware that someone had taken the vacant seat across the table from him. Of course he did not look up; he hadn't the slightest interest in knowing who it was. But the person addressed him.

"I beg your pardon, but will you give me a light," the voice said. He had to look up then. It was she.

He wished to leave at once, but he was too well-bred, so he said, with impersonal politeness:

"I'm sorry, but I have no matches."

"Ah," she laughed, "I'll bet your aunt won't let you carry them."

Surprise made him exclaim:

"My aunt? How do you know I have an aunt?"

The girl laughed again.

“You would,” was all she said. “Have a cigaret?”

“Thank you, I never smoke.”

“I do,” she said, and taking a box of matches from her hand-bag she lit a long Russian cigaret.

“Then you did have matches all the time!” cried Edwin.

She looked at the box in her hand, and said, as if she were the most astonished person in the world:

“Why, so I did.” Then she added, “My name is Valerie Keat.”

Edwin had it drawn forcibly to his attention that this woman was outrageously pretty in a bold, obvious way. She had adventurous green eyes and an insinuating mouth; her lips were a vivid carmine. Red, thought Edwin, the sign of danger; a person to be eschewed.

With a brief prayer that his tapioca pudding would be brought soon, he took up his book and sought safety in the prose of Bishop Groody. But the book had changed to some foreign tongue; its pages seemed blurred and its words hieroglyphics; had the Bishop lapsed into Czech? His table companion laughed.

“Do you always read upside down?” she inquired.

He turned his book right side up and looked at her with what for Edwin was a glare.

“No,” said he, stiffly.

“You’re from the country?”

He nodded. Why didn’t that wretch of a waiter hurry with the pudding?

“You’ve just come to New York?”

Again Edwin nodded.

“Ever been kissed?”

He straightened up in his chair as if a pin had been abruptly inserted in him.

“Really, now——” he began.

“Call me Val,” she said. “What shall I call you?”

His mind was too beside itself to be on the defensive.

“My name,” he said, “is Edwin Tillotson Dell.”

“I’ll call you ‘Ned!’□ ” she said. “I’m an artist. How do you cheat the wolf, Ned?”

“I beg your pardon?”

“What field of endeavor do you decorate?”

“Me? Oh, I’m an—author.”

“How interesting your work must be!” Was she sincere, or was she putting it all on? “What do you author?”

It occurred to him as an inspiration that he might be able to swamp and daze her with technical theological terms till his pudding came, so he began to quote his book, beginning on page one. He did not, however, get far.

“You can tell me all that when you come to see me,” the girl interrupted.

“When I come to see you?”

“Certainly. You’ll come, won’t you? Or shall I come to see you?”

He thought of the eyes of Emerson—wise, kind, understanding. His resolute teeth closed on a bit of chicken liver.

“Neither,” he said.

This, he thought, should abash her, but it did nothing of the sort. Instead, she gave him a playful wink.

“Ned,” she said, “I used to belong to the Northwestern Mounted Police and you know their motto.”

“I do not.”

“Get your man,” said Miss Keat.

He buried embarrassed eyes in the tapioca pudding which that moment providentially arrived.

“I hope,” he said, his eyes still on his plate, “that nothing in my manner has encouraged you to venture on such familiarity.”

It was impossible to rebuff this woman with the adventurous eyes and the carmine lips. Rebuffs rebounded from her.

“What are you doing this evening, Ned?” she asked.

Intuitively he sensed his peril.

“I am going to my room,” he said, “to think.”

He picked up book, coat, hat.

“You’re not mad, Ned?” she called after him.

“No, not mad,” he said, simply. “Only hurt, terribly hurt.”

He did go to his room as swiftly as if he had been tapped for Skull and Bones. He locked the door. He tried not to think of her, of those eyes, those lips. He looked hard at the picture of Emerson, and tried to think of him.

Valerie Keat lived in a reformed haymow over a converted stable in a redeemed alley in Greenwich Village. She had nineteen pairs of jade earrings, black, georgette underwear, and the following books: the Droll Tales, Jurgen, Mlle. de Maupin, The Rainbow, the collected writings of Havelock Ellis, the Decameron, the works of Rabelais, Ulysses, The Genius, Many Marriages, The Memoirs of Casanova, Sappho, Leaves of Grass, and an array of books in French, beginning with Volupte by Sainte-Beuve and Fleurs de Mal by Baudelaire and ending with La Garconne by Victor Margueritte. She had divorced one husband, had been divorced by a second, and kept a little red leather note-book full of names and telephone numbers. She was not a good girl.

Her haymow studio was large, with several square yards of north-light sky-light and a

balcony from which were draped bright Spanish shawls. On the walls hung a dozen of her own paintings, most of them guilty of grand or petty nudity. Her gold bed stood on a platform reached by four purple steps and it was snowed under by twenty-four fat, odd-shaped cushions, each a different color, vermilion, heliotrope, claret, taupe, wisteria, tan, orchid, bisque, chrome yellow, bice, russet, carnation, cream, periwinkle, cherry, azure, citrine, jet, bister, salmon, maize, cinnabar, flame and flesh. She had invested some of her alimony in Chinese screens, Japanese prints, Russian brasses, Czecho-Slovakian china, East Indian hand-printed curtains, French futuristic furniture, a brocaded Bengal howdah to house her telephone, tall, white, wicked-eyed Copenhagen porcelain cats, Viennese statuettes, Florentine candle-sticks, carved ivory cigarette boxes from Egypt, and a profusion of thick, soft, Oriental rugs—Cabistans, Hamadan Mosouls, Namazis-Kanepas, Zaronims, Dozar-Namazis, Noborans, Ispahans, and a priceless Anatolian prayer-rug. But this last she never used; Valerie Keat was the sort of woman who never prays. Soft lights with strange shades by Bakst, Urban and Alice O'Neill filled the room with a sensuous glow. In one corner a green bronze cobra made by Javanese natives emitted subtle chypre incense from its eyes. At the end of the room stood the model stand, covered with black velvet. Beside it was a crimson baize screen behind which the models undressed. Before the fireplace lay a tiger-skin rug. Such was the place to which Valerie Keat had sought to lure Edwin Dell.

At the very moment that night when Valerie Keat in écru satin pajamas, sank down on her twenty-four cushions, lit a Persian narghil, and opened a French novel by Gyp, Edwin Dell, in his unpretentious white muslin nightshirt, was lying on his plain iron cot; was rereading a sentence from a letter he had just received from his aunt. Half aloud he read the words in Aunt Charity's precise, virginal script:

"Some people New York ennobles; others, it drags straight down to H——."

With his eyes resting on the picture of Emerson, Edwin Dell said the word "Fortitude." He repeated the word—"Fortitude, fortitude, fortitude, fortitude, fortitude," until the gentle, dreamless sleep of innocence wrapped him in its platonic embrace. Valerie Keat dreamed of wild horses, rushing water, satyrs. . . .

For his frugal dinner next evening Edwin Dell avoided the Scarlet Hyena and went instead to the Esoteric Pussy-Cat, in a damp, artistic basement on Washington Square, South. It was so full of young men and older women eating the dollar dinner and discussing intimate problems that only one seat was left and that was in the window, where Edwin, perforce, had to eat his dinner in the most distressingly public fashion, while rude passers-by stopped to stare at him, presumably under the impression that he was advertising a dyspepsia cure. One passerby stopped much longer than the rest and pressed a retroussé nose against the window-pane. Edwin Dell's heart began to knock like a poor motor taking a high hill.

Valerie Keat, for she it was, came bounding into the restaurant and greeted him like an old friend. She conjured up a chair and drew it to his table, uninvited. He looked appealingly at the other diners, seeking in all that throng one wise, kind, understanding face. He sought in vain. The faces of New Yorkers are hard, hard.

“Still damnationing the infants?” asked Valerie Keat, breezily.

“Levity on that subject is most unbecoming,” he said.

Unexpectedly her face grew sober under its film of cosmetics.

“You are right, Edwin,” said Valerie Keat. “I am too facetious. Perhaps you think I take nothing in life seriously. But I do, I assure you I do.”

“Ah, do you?” he said, hoping to convey the idea that it didn’t in the least matter to him. Then, to his surprise, he found himself adding the word “What?”

Her green eyes bored into his light blue eyes.

“Love,” she said, in a low, poignant voice.

Edwin beckoned the Japanese waiter.

“My bill, please, at once,” he directed.

“Vellygoo,” said the waiter, and brought it, discreetly folded, as all restaurant bills are, as if they were illicit billet doux. Edwin put his hand inside his coat pocket. Alarm and dismay congealed him. He had no money. Caring naught, as he did, for worldly goods, he had entirely forgotten that he had given away his allowance to the poor, and Aunt Charity had forgotten to send him a fresh supply of money. Doubtless she had sent it to the missionaries; so much of her income went there. He looked up, and there stood the waiter, suspicion in his oblique Nipponese eyes. Valerie Keat was quick to sense the situation.

“Broke?” she asked.

He nodded.

She bent over and from somewhere took a five dollar bill, which she tossed to the waiter. He came back with four dollars in change. Nonchalantly, Valerie Keat waved the money away.

“Keep the change, Ito,” she said. The waiter bowed himself back to the kitchen and fainted.

“I seldom tip more than two dollars,” the woman explained, “but Ito has a wife and nine kiddies. Don’t you just love kiddies, Ned?”

Had he misjudged the woman, Edwin Dell wondered?

“Besides,” went on Valerie Keat, and her voice broke a little, “he reminds me of my father.”

Clouds seemed to lift from Edwin Dell. Surely it was not possible to suspect the honorableness of the intentions of a woman who spoke like that about her father.

“Will you stop at my studio?” he heard Valerie Keat saying. “I want to give you a book I think you should read.”

“I only read books on ecclesiastical and theological subjects,” he said.

“That’s just what this book is,” she assured him.

But when they reached the door of her studio, something (was it his guardian angel?) made Edwin hesitate.

“Come on up,” she said, urgently.

“It’s rather late,” objected Edwin.

“Nonsense! It’s only nine. Come on.”

Mystery was in her smile; or was it mystery?

For one second, two seconds, possibly three seconds he wavered. Then on the wall of the building opposite he seemed to see written in fiery letters the warning words of his aunt.

SOME PEOPLE NEW YORK ENNOBLES; OTHERS IT DRAGS STRAIGHT DOWN TO H ——.

His soul was a battle-field of conflicting emotions. What, he asked himself, would Emerson have done in a case like this? That thought steadied him.

“No,” he said. “A thousand nevers. I’ll wait here.”

Pain showed in the green eyes of Valerie Keat.

“Don’t you trust me?” she asked.

“I trust everyone,” said Edwin Dell, gently. “But then I am so very young.”

“It was your youth that attracted me,” she said; then added hastily, “Don’t misunderstand me. I am speaking purely in a professional sense. I am an artist, you know. I want you for a model.”

Edwin Dell shrank from her.

“Me?” he said. “A model?”

“Yes, why not?” Her manner was most reassuring. “I want to paint a Galahad or maybe a Parsifal. You’d be perfect. I suppose you know”—here she lowered her voice and her eyes were full of meaning—“that you are very handsome.”

“You must not say such things to me,” said Edwin Dell.

“Forgive me,” she murmured, “but I forgot myself.” Then, very businesslike, “But you will pose for me, won’t you?”

Edwin Dell drew back.

“You’ve been kind to me, Miss Keat,” he said, “but please don’t ask this thing of me. Ask anything, but not that.”

Her tone was hurt as she said:

“I only want to help you. I know you’re hard up. I pay some of my models ten dollars an hour.”

Remembering how she had spoken of her father, Edwin felt that he had been a brute, and he said:

“I’m very sorry. I don’t wish to seem ungrateful. Perhaps it is foolish of me to care about . . . some things; but I do. I think you’d better not stand out here any longer; it’s beginning to snow; you’ll catch your death of cold.”

Her eyes lingered on his.

“Would you care?” she asked.

“Yes,” he said. “After all, you are a human being.”

He thought there was hardness in her laugh.

“Thanks,” she said. “Then you won’t come?”

“I cannot,” he said.

“Very well. Another time, perhaps. I’ll get that book.”

She brought down to him a thick, much-thumbed volume.

“Are you sure it is theological?” he asked.

“Oh, yes, indeed,” she said. “It’s by the Rev. Mr. Rabelais. Well, bring it back when you’re finished and I’ll lend you Leaves of Grass. Good night, Ned.”

She held out a small hand; he found it warm.

“Remember,” she said, pressing his hand, “about my offer. Ten dollars an hour. I usually paint at night.”

Her eyes were like emeralds held before lighted candles.

Miss Venable met Edwin in the hall of his house. She was a lady whose face appeared to have been pickled, and she was pessimistic by nature and experience. Her faith in human nature had been erased by a life of running a rooming house; her roomers were always using her gas to terminate their lives. Briefly she informed Edwin that his rent was overdue. She would trouble him, etc. Always the soul of frankness, Edwin told her he had no money, but that he would be in funds in a day or two. He even tried to laugh a little to show her how unwarranted her fears about his solvency were. Under her freezing eyes and skeptic nose the laugh was hollow on both ends and cracked in the middle.

“I want ten dollars,” she said, “not promises. I must have my money by midnight or . . .”

“Or?”

In pantomime she indicated an exit.

“But, Miss Venable, you can’t mean . . .”

“What can’t I mean, young man?”

Edwin blanched.

“The streets,” he said.

One look at her stony countenance told him that the streets were precisely what she did mean.

He stumbled up to his room, dropped into a chair, and tried to collect his thoughts. In the rural calm of his sheltered life he had never felt the raw edge of existence before. This was stark life. He would read a bit to compose his mind, he decided. He opened the book Valerie Keat had given him.

Some words he knew, some he did not know, some he suspected. A hot flush of shame began to mantle his brow. At Chapter Four, he threw the book from him. He dare not lift his eyes to Emerson’s. Hardly knowing what he was doing, he marched down-stairs, holding the book at arm’s length before him. One idea was uppermost in his mind: he must take back the book to its owner.

He knocked with the gargoyle knocker, and Valerie Keat came to her studio door in a Chinese mandarin coat, thrown hurriedly about her.

“Ah,” she said, “it’s Infant Damnation himself! So you have come.”

“Yes,” he said, “I have come.”

“Well, step in. Don’t stand in the hall and wake the neighbors.”

He found himself inside the studio; the incense, the mellow lights, the warmth, the magnificence of it all left him incapable of speech. Then he remembered why he had come and thrust the book out at her.

“I could not sleep in the same house with this thing,” he said. She shrugged her shoulders and carelessly dropped the book on the tiger-skin rug. A Swiss cuckoo clock proclaimed that it was ten. Edwin shuddered; two hours to midnight . . . and the streets.

“Well, let’s begin,” said Valerie Keat, picking up a palette.

“Begin to what?” he asked, tremulously.

“I to paint,” she answered; “you to pose.”

“But, merciful Heavens, Miss Keat, you don’t think I came here for . . . that?”

“Then what did you come for?” Her eyes narrowed.

“To bring back that dreadful book.”

Her sardonic laugh jarred on his ear-drums.

“A man doesn’t come to a woman’s studio late at night to bring back a book,” she said.

“I must go, really I must,” declared Edwin, wondering, as he spoke, where to.

He put his hand on the door-knob; the door seemed to be locked.

“Please reconsider your decision,” said Valerie Keat. She turned on her most pathetic look. “If I could paint you it would mean everything to me; everything, do you understand? You have my artistic career at your mercy. Won’t you help me?”

He hesitated. To one so good at heart as he, such an appeal could not go unanswered.

“I’d like to,” he began, “but Emerson says——”

“Besides,” she broke in, “think of the ten dollars.”

Had she read his inmost thoughts?

“What possible harm could it do?” she argued. “Can’t you see I respect you? Won’t you trust me?”

“Let me think,” begged Edwin Dell. “Give me five minutes for quiet thought.”

Valerie Keat went to the buhlwork cabinet and took out a square bottle and a glass.

“Here,” she said. “This will help you think.”

“I never drink.”

“This is only juniper-berry juice and water. It’s a soft drink,” she told him.

Her eyes were so friendly, and he remembered how she had spoken of her father, so he

poured half a glass of the pellucid drink down his dry throat. An agreeable sensation of warmth and well-being filled him. He emptied the glass. How bright the lights were!

He stood up and said:

“I have arrived at a decision.”

“Yes? What?” she asked, eagerly.

“I will be your model,” said Edwin Dell.

He sank back into his chair; there was a singing in his ears, a dancing before his eyes.

“Go ahead, paint me,” he said, almost with sang froid.

She came close to him and fastened on him intense eyes.

“You say you’ll be my model?” she asked.

“Yes.”

“You know what that means.”

“I think so.”

“You’ll pose for the head?”

He nodded.

“You’ll pose for the shoulders?”

He gulped, but nodded. He felt his breath coming in short, cold pants; his brow was icy damp. He heard her low voice say:

“You’ll pose for . . . the figure?”

The room swam before his eyes; his cheeks were conflagrations; he drew in his breath with an effort, and gulped again.

“I’ll do . . . whatever models do,” he said.

Her eyes ran over him like flies over a cake; beneath them he trembled. How his heart

throbbed! In a nightmare, he heard her say.

“Good! Go behind that screen.”

To Edwin Dell the lights were blurred now; the singing in his ears was frenzied. His pallid face was set. Walking like an automaton, he went behind the crimson screen. Slowly his quivering fingers fumbled with his polka-dot tie; his shoe lace seared his finger-tips. . . .

“Come, get a wiggle on. Don’t take all night. I’m waiting,” he heard the woman say. Her voice sounded, somehow, tense.

His teeth bit his bloodless lips; his nails dug into the palms of his hands.

“Fortitude,” whispered Edwin Dell.

Then he stepped out on the tiger-skin rug.

Came morn to the bedroom of Edwin Dell. Dully he opened his eyes. Had it all been a terrible dream?

He went to the window and scooped up a handful of snow and held it to his fevered brow. No, it had not all been a terrible dream. He dressed with leaden fingers. A letter had been slipped under his door and he opened it without interest. What could letters mean to him . . . now?

It was a note from his aunt. She told him to come home for Christmas, and enclosed a ticket to Crosby Corners, and a check. The check fluttered to the floor; the crooked smile of irony twisted his lips.

“Too late,” he said “too late.”

More like a machine than a man, he began to pack his straw suit-case. The last thing he did before leaving the room was to take down the picture of Emerson; Edwin did not look into those wise, kind, understanding eyes; he tore the picture into small pieces. Then, with bowed head, a wan, worn caricature of what had been Edwin Dell went slowly out into the snow-garbed metropolis.

It was Christmas eve in Crosby Corners. Thick snow was falling heavily and the wind whistled like a drunken demon; it was cold, bitter cold. Edwin Dell rapped with mittened hand on the door of the cozy farm-house and Aunt Charity opened it.

“Well, aunt,” he said, “I’ve come back.”

“For pity’s sake, close the door,” she said. “Hang up your coat and put your goloshes in the golosh-box.”

He did so. He sat there, silent, ashen.

“Why, Edwin Dell, what ails you? What is the matter?” she asked, sharply.

“Oh, nothing, nothing,” he faltered.

“Then why do you sigh?”

“It was the wind,” he replied. “Only the wind in the pines.”

“Fiddlesticks! I know a sigh. Stop moping, Edwin. This is Christmas eve.”

“It’s Christmas eve for some folks,” he said; “but just night for me.”

“What do you mean?” his aunt asked, fixing on him needle-pointed eyes.

He poked the glowing logs and made no reply.

“Edwin!”

“Yes, aunt.”

“Has anything happened?”

He poked the logs.

“Speak to me, Edwin. Tell me all.”

He poked the logs.

Aunt Charity put down her knitting, strode to him, placed her hands on his shoulders and bent a face lined with foreboding toward his.

“Edwin Dell,” she questioned, hoarsely; “what has New York done to you?”

He tried to avoid her alarmed eyes.

“Edwin Dell,” she cried, “I conjure you to answer me one question.”

“What?” His parched lips framed the word.

“Tell me, Edwin Dell, are you a . . . good boy?”

He made no answer.

“It can’t be,” cried his aunt. “Look me in the eye and I’ll know it isn’t so. Can you look me in the eye, Edwin Dell?”

He couldn’t.

She pushed him fiercely from her.

“My God,” she screamed. “Not that, not that?”

“Yes, Aunt Charity,” he groaned, “that.”

“Heaven give me strength in this dark hour,” she prayed. “That this thing should happen—and you a Tillotson. Tell me everything, I command you.”

“I was young,” was all he could say. “Nobody told me; I didn’t know.”

“Faugh,” she sneered, towering above him, her face working with wrath. “You might have guessed.”

“But she spoke so respectfully of her father,” sobbed Edwin Dell. “It was . . . that . . . or . . . the streets.”

His aunt scorched him with her outraged eyes.

“Which would Emerson have chosen?” she demanded.

“I was drugged,” he wept.

“Faugh! A likely story! Edwin Dell, put on your goloshes and leave this house.”

He cowered in his chair.

“Tonight? In this blizzard?” he quavered. “Where could I go?”

“Go to her,” said his aunt, and held the front door open.

Edwin Dell reached the studio of Valerie Keat late Christmas night. Inside he could hear the sounds of revelry—unrestrained laughter, bursts of song, a jazzing phonograph, the bursting of toy balloons, the popping of corks. Valerie Keat was holding high carnival. His heart was no bigger than a pea as he knocked. The door opened and a wave of hot air laden with confetti, tobacco smoke, incense and the fumes of alcohol rushed out and engulfed him. Inside he saw a mad whirlpool of gala-dressed dancers. Valerie Keat herself had opened the door; she stood there in an artful evening gown of shimmering silver, with no back whatsoever.

“Well?” she snapped.

“It is I. Edwin. Ned,” he said.

“So I see. What of it.” Her voice was icy.

“Where shall I put my goloshes?” he asked.

She pointed down the stairs behind him.

“That way. One after another,” she said.

He staggered as if from a blow.

“But you don’t mean . . . you can’t mean . . . Auntie has turned me out.”

“So do I. That makes it unanimous,” she said, puffing mockingly her cigaret.

“But it was because of . . . you,” he stammered. “Have you forgotten . . . so soon.”

“I’ve a poor memory,” she said unconcernedly.

“But you don’t mean . . . you can’t mean . . . Oh, think of your promises. . . .”

“Bah,” said Valerie Keat.

“Have you no compassion?”

“Not a bit.”

“No honor?”

“Nope.”

“Valerie Keat, think of your father!”

She flushed beneath her painted mask.

“You keep his name out of this,” she flashed. “Run along now to your damnation infants.”

“You say this to me?” His voice was wild. “To me? After my sacrifice?”

“Your sacrifice?” she jeered. “Do you tell all the others that?”

He reeled.

“The others?” he exclaimed aghast, “it’s a lie, a shameful lie, I tell you.”

“They all pull that one,” she gibed.

“All? All? Then there have been others, Valerie Keat? Then I was naught but the plaything of an idle hour?”

“Naught,” she replied.

“And you would fling me aside like a discarded glove?”

“That is just what I would fling you aside like,” she answered, unmoved.

“I see it all now,” said Edwin Dell, his voice the voice of one utterly crushed. “The veil lifts from my eyes. I’m just a man girls forget. You have drained the cup of pleasure, but it is I . . . I . . . who must pay . . . and pay.”

“Fair enough,” said Valerie Keat, in a voice like a file rasping steel. “Pay away. Good night.”

“Then you would have me go . . . out of your life . . . forever?”

“Or longer,” she said. “Shut the outside door after you.”

He did. The wind screamed down the alley; whirling snow dervishes danced round him. Ten thousand bright-lit windows bespoke the Christmas cheer within. Some people were happy. But on the once boyish face of Edwin Dell tiny hard pellets of ice formed; they were frozen tears. On he wandered through the night, he knew not whither. In time he reached a large building, and tottered in; it was a railroad station, a place where one bought tickets to go away. To go away? His brain caught at the idea.

He would go away. He went to the ticket window, and put down all his money, twenty-four dollars and seventy cents.

“Give me a ticket,” he said.

“Where to?” the ticket seller asked.

“I don’t care,” said Edwin Dell. “Anywhere. I want to go away . . . away from it all . . . away from this City of Broken Vows.”

The man sold him a ticket to Granville, Ohio.

“Oh, Pa! Oh, Pa!”

“What is it, Mary?”

“There’s a man lying in our wood-shed.”

“Fetch him in, daughter, fetch him in,” said Peter Wood, known in Granville and for miles around as “Big-hearted Peter.”

Presently Mary Wood returned carrying the unconscious form of Edwin Dell in her big strong arms. She was a Greek goddess of a girl, with the brow of Diana, the nose of Minerva, the chin of Venus and the shoulders of Juno. Tenderly she laid Edwin down beside the kitchen stove.

“He’ll be all right when he thaws out,” said the farmer.

“What lovely eyelashes he has,” said Mary Wood.

She was bending over him with a steaming cup of coffee when Edwin Dell slowly opened his eyes.

“Am I in Heaven?” he asked, faintly.

“Gracious sakes, no,” said Mary in her kind, contralto voice. “What makes you think so?”

“Because you look like an angel,” he answered.

Love was born in that minute.

Came spring to the world, and to Granville, and it brought back the color to the cheeks of Edwin Dell. He was strong enough to help Mary with the spring cleaning. They talked.

One evening, as the sun was sinking to rest in a cloudy bed of strawberries and oranges, Mary said:

“Edwin, let’s take a little walk.”

They walked together through the spring-scented eventide; on the peach trees blossoms were burgeoning; the vesper songs of mating birds could be heard.

“Let’s sit down with our backs to the silo,” suggested Mary. They sat. She turned her great, gray, honest eyes to him.

“Edwin,” she said, “folks are beginning to talk about us.”

“About us, Mary? What are they saying?”

She took a sudden interest in the toe of her shoe.

“Can’t you guess?” she said, softly.

“Yes,” he said, “I can guess. But, oh, Mary, I’m afraid that there are some dreams that can never come true.”

“I don’t understand, Edwin.”

“Mary, I must go away from here.”

“From Granville? From . . . from me?”

He nodded. She searched his face with her ardent eyes.

“Then,” she said, “you do not . . . care?”

“Do you, Mary?”

She laid her hand on his.

“Tremendously,” she said.

“Ah, if it could only be,” he sighed.

“Would June 14th at half past two be convenient for you?” asked Mary. “They’ll have finished painting the church by then.”

He turned grief-struck eyes to hers.

“Mary,” he said, “it cannot be.”

“Oh, Edwin, what do you mean?”

He spoke as if each word he muttered were a stab.

“There’s a reason,” he said, “why we can never be more than”—emotion nearly strangled him, but he finished—“friends.”

“Reason? What reason? Speak, Edwin, speak.”

“Simply this, Mary,” he answered, gravely. “I am unworthy of your love.”

“You unworthy, Edwin? No, no. You jest.”

“I never jest,” said Edwin Dell.

“Edwin,” she cried, “I cannot endure this suspense. Tell me, is there another?”

He hung his head.

“There was,” he said, “another.”

“You don’t mean . . . ?” she said in an anguished whisper.

“Yes,” he said, “I mean . . .”

Her grip on his hand tightened.

“Poor boy,” said Mary Wood, “poor boy.”

“I was young,” he said, brokenly, “and I was alone . . . alone in New York. Ah, New York, New York!”

He picked up his hat.

“Well,” he said, “I guess I’d better be running along now.”

“Stop!” cried Mary Wood.

He did not know how it happened but they found themselves in each other’s arms.

“The past,” he heard Mary Wood saying, close to his ear, “is past. The future lies ahead. I care not what you have been, Edwin Dell. It is what you are that I love.”

“Oh, Mary,” was all he could say. “Oh, Mary.”

“True love,” she whispered, “conquers all.”

And so, together, hand in hand, like little children, Edwin Dell and Mary Wood set out upon the shining road toward the bright promise of a new world.