

THE SMART SET

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THE STORY OF STELLA

By James Branch Cabell

THEY named her Stella, I fancy, because her eyes were so like stars. It is a mere detail that there do not happen to be any blue stars. I am inclined to think that Nature subsequently observed this omission, and created Stella's eyes to make up for it; at any rate, if you can imagine Aldebaran or Arcturus polished up a bit, and set in a speedwell-cup, you will have a very fair idea of one of them. You cannot, however, picture to yourself the effect of the pair of them, as the human mind is limited.

Really, though, their effect was somewhat curious. You noticed them casually, let us say; then, without warning, you ceased to notice anything. You simply grew foolish and gasped like a newly-hooked trout, and went suddenly mad and babbled as meaninglessly as a silly little rustic brook trotting under a bridge. I have seen the thing happen any number of times. And, strangely enough, you liked it. Numbers of men would venture into the same room with those disconcerting eyes the very next evening, even appearing to seek them out, to court their perils, as it were—men who must have known perfectly well, either by report or experience, the unavoidable result of such conduct. For eventually it always ended in Stella's being deeply surprised and grieved—in somebody's Winter-garden, for choice—never having dreamed of such a thing, of course, and regarding you only as a dear, dear friend. Oh, she did it well, did Stella, and bore these frequent griefs

and surprises with, I must protest, a most exemplary patience.

But we appear to digress. Let us go back to the very beginning of the story—that is, to the place where I come into it. And, in advance, I warn you it is neither very humorous nor very pathetic; I fear it is not even especially interesting; for it treats of no stolen will, no rightful heir, no persecuted innocence nor of any such delectable matters. It is, indeed, a very paltry drama, written and staged by Destiny, that somewhat uninventive playwright. And my part therein is an unutterable minor one. I am only the chorus who comes in at intervals to make—I trust—sufficiently moral reflections on what the others are doing.

When I first knew Stella she was fifteen—an unattractive age. There were a startling number of corners to her then, and she had but vague notions as to the management of her hands and feet. In consequence, they were perpetually turning up in unexpected places and surprising her by their size and number. Yes, she was very hopelessly fifteen; she laughed unnecessarily, in a nervous fashion that was exactly three keys higher than her natural voice, and patted down her skirts six times to the minute. It seems queer now to think that Cleopatra and Stella and Helen of Troy—all the famous fair ones of history—were like that at one time—hopelessly, unattractively fifteen.

As for myself, I was at this period very old—much older than it is ever permitted any one to be afterward. I had the most optimistic ideas as to my mustache, and was wont to encourage it in secret places with the manicure-scissors. I still entertained the belief that girls were rather unnecessary nuisances, but I was beginning to perceive the expediency of concealing this opinion—even in private converse with my dearest chum, where, in our joyous interchange of various heresies, we touched upon this point very lightly, and, as I now suspect, somewhat consciously.

All this was at a certain Summer resort, of which the name is neither here nor there. Stella and I and others of our age attended the hotel hops in the evening with religious punctuality, for our well-meaning elders insisted that it amused us, and it was easier to go than to argue the point with them. At least, that was the viewpoint of the boys.

Stella has since sworn the girls liked it. I suspect in this statement a certain parsimony as to the truth. They giggled too much and were never entirely free from that haunting anxiety concerning their skirts. I honestly believe we were all miserable in unison.

We danced together, Stella and I. We conversed, meanwhile, with careful disregard of the amenities of life. Each of us, you see, feared lest the other might suspect in some common courtesy an attempt at—there is really no other word—spooning. And spooning was absurd.

Heigho! one lives and learns.

I asked Stella to sit out a dance. I did this because I had heard a man with waxed mustachios and an absolutely piratical amount of whiskers make the same request of a young lady pink-gowned and pinched-in in the proper places and—er—expansive in the proper places. It was evident to my crescent intellect that such whiskers could do no wrong.

Stella, I believe, was not uninfluenced by the example of the pinched-

in and shouldered person. As I have said, her corners were multitudinous; and it is probable that those two queer little knobs I remember at the base of her throat would be apt to render their owner uncomfortable and envious of—let us say—more ample charms. At any rate, Stella giggled and consented, and I accordingly conducted her to the third piazza of the hotel.

There we found a world that was new to us.

It was a world of sweet odors and strange lights, flooded with a kindly silence that was, somehow, composed of many lisplings and trepidations and thin echoes. The night was warm, the sky all transparency. If the comparison were not manifestly absurd, I would liken its pale color to that of blue plush rubbed against the nap. And in its radiance the stars bathed, large and bright and intimate, yet blurred somewhat, like shop-lights seen through a frosted pane; and the moon floated on it, crisp and clear as a new-minted coin. It was a Mid-summer moon, grave and glorious, that compelled the eye; and its shield was faintly marked, as though some Titan had breathed on its chill surface. Its light suffused the heavens and lay upon the earth beneath us in broad splashes; and the foliage about us was dappled with its splendor, save in the open east, where the low, undulant hills wore it as a mantle.

For the trees, mostly maples of slight stature, clustered thickly about the hotel, and their branches mingled in a restless pattern of black and silver and dim green, that mimicked the laughter of the sea under an April wind. Looking down from the piazza, above the tree-tops, it was strangely like the sea, and it gave one, somehow, much the same sense of remote, unbounded spaces and of a beauty that was a little cruel. At times, whip-poorwills called to one another, eerie and shrill; but the distant music was a mere vibration in the night air, heavy with the scent of bruised grow-

ing things and filled with the cool, healing magic of the moonlight.

Taking it all in all, we had blundered upon a very beautiful place. And there we sat for a while and talked in an aimless fashion.

Then, moved by some queer impulse, I stared over the railing for a little at this great, wonderful, ambiguous world, and said, solemnly:

"It is good."

"Yes," said Stella, in a curious, quiet little voice; "it—it's very large, isn't it?" She looked out for a moment over the tree-tops. "It dwarfs one, rather," she said, at length. "The stars are so big, and so—so uninterested." Stella paused for an interval and then spoke with an uncertain laugh. "I—I think I'm rather afraid."

"Afraid?" I echoed.

"Yes," she said, vaguely; "of—of everything."

I understood, I think. Even then I knew something of the frequent insufficiency of words.

"It's a big world," I said.

"It's all before us," she went on. I think she had forgotten my existence. "It's bringing us so many things—and we don't know what any of them are. But we've got to take them—got to take them, whether we want to or not. It seems a little unfair, somehow. We've got to—got to grow up and—and marry and—die, whether we want to or not. We've no choice. And it may not matter, after all. Everything will go on as before, and the stars won't care, and what we've done and suffered may count for nothing—nothing!"

As you justly observe, a highly improbable speech for a girl of fifteen. I grant you that for an ordinary girl. In this case, we are speaking of Stella.

Candor compels me to admit that both Stella and I were unusual children—much the sort of children, perhaps, that you were at fifteen. If you are quite honest, you will acknowledge that at that age you were a prodigy of some sort. We all were. And it is precisely this belief that now leads you to question the probability of what I

am writing, and to deny to fifteen the power of thinking for itself. And why, pray? You weren't an absolute fool at fifteen, you know; you were aware of quite a number of things, if you will remember; and there were dry-throated times when the idea of death appalled you. But, of course, you were a very unusual child. Other children are different.

The point which I wish to make is that they are not.

"Are you afraid to die?" Stella asked, suddenly.

"Rather," I admitted. I really don't know why I told the truth.

"And yet we've got to—got to! Oh, I don't see how people can go on living contentedly when that's always drawing nearer—when they know they must die some day. Yet they dance and picnic and amuse themselves as if they were going to live forever. I—oh, I don't understand!"

Upon my word, I believe we were both a little insane on this occasion. Otherwise, we would scarcely have grappled with precisely this topic.

"They get accustomed to the idea, I suppose"—after a futile pause. "We're rather like rats in a trap," I suggested, poetically. "We can bite the wires and go mad, if we like, or we can eat the cheese and make the best of it; either way, there's no getting out till they come in the morning to kill us."

"Yes," sighed Stella; "I suppose we must make the best of it."

"It's the only thing to do," said I, dolefully.

"Yet—yet it's all so big and indifferent!" she cried, after a little. "And we don't know—we can't know!—what it has in store for us!"

"We'll make the best of that, too," I protested, stubbornly.

Stella sighed again. "Yes," she assented; "still, I'm afraid."

"I think I am—rather," I conceded after reflection.

There was a very long pause, now. Pitiful, ridiculous infants that we were, we were pondering, somewhat vaguely, but very solemnly, over certain mys-

teries of life and death we have since learned to accept with stolidity. We were very young, you see; to us the miracle of life was still a little impressive, and we had not yet learned to regard the universe as a more or less comfortable place thoughtfully constructed for us to reside in.

Therefore, we sat close together, Stella and I, and were deeply miserable over the *Weltschmerz*. After a little, a distant whippoorwill woke me from a chaos of reverie, and I turned to Stella. I had a vague sense that we were the only people left in the world, and I was very, very fond of her.

Stella's head was leaned backward. Her lips were parted a little, and the moonlight glinted in her eyes. . . .

"Don't!" said Stella, faintly.

I did.

Upon my soul, it simply happened! It was a matter out of my volition, out of my planning. And, oh, the wonder and sweetness and sacredness of it! and, oh, the pity that there is no second happening like that in all one's life!

Stella was not angry, as I had half expected. "That was dear of you," she said, impulsively, "but—but don't try to do it again." There was the wisdom of all the centuries in this mandate of Stella's as she rose to her feet. The spell was broken, utterly. "I think," said Stella, in the voice of a girl of fifteen, "I think we'd better go and dance now."

In the crude morning, I approached Stella, with a fatuous smile. She apparently both perceived and resented this—which was queer, as she never once looked at me. There was something of great interest in the distance; she was flushed and indignant, and her eyes wouldn't, couldn't, didn't turn for an instant in my direction.

I fidgeted.

"If," said she, impersonally, "if you believe it was because of you, you are very much mistaken. It would have been the same with anybody—anybody! You don't understand, and I don't, either. I hate you! Go away!" And she stamped her foot in a fine rage.

For the moment, I entertained a most un-Christian desire that Stella had been born a boy. In that case, I felt I really should have enjoyed sitting upon the back of her head, and grinding her nose into the dust and otherwise persuading her to cry "'Nough!" This pleasure being denied me, I sought comfort in discourteous speech.

"Umph—huh!" said I, "you think yourself so smart! Umph—huh!"

Thereupon, I wisely went away.

"Dear me!" said Stella, wonderingly, when I at last came back; "I should never have known you in the world! You've grown so fa—I mean, you're so well built. I've grown? Nonsense!—and, besides, what do you expect me to do in six years?—and, moreover, it's very rude of you to speak of me in that manner—quite as if I were a debt or a taste for strong drink! It's really only French heels and a pompadour, and, of course, you can't have this dance. It's promised, and I hop, you know, frightfully. Of course, I haven't forgotten—how could I?—when you were the most disagreeable boy I ever knew."

I ventured a suggestion that caused Stella to turn an attractive pink, and laugh. "No," said she, demurely; "I shall never—never—sit out another dance with you." Subsequently: "Our steps suit perfectly—heavens! you're the fifth man who's said that to-night, and I'm sure it would be very silly and very tiresome to dance through life with anybody. Men are so absurd! Oh, yes, I tell them all—every one of them—that our steps suit—even when they have just ripped off a yard or so of founce in an attempt to walk up the front of my dress. It makes them happy, poor things! and injures nobody. You liked it, you know; you grinned like a pleased cat. I—I like cats, don't you?"

Later: "That's nonsense, you know," said Stella, critically. "Do you always get red in the face when you make love? You've no idea how queer it makes you look."

Still later: "I—I don't think I'm go-

ing anywhere to-morrow afternoon," said Stella.

Shortly afterward, I asked Stella to marry me. Pretty much every fellow I knew had done this, you understand, and it is always a mistake to appear unnecessarily reserved or exclusive. She declined—with a fluency, by the way, that bespoke considerable practice—and subsequently, as the story-books have it, was wedded to another.

I have never quite understood why Harry asked me to be best man. However, it at least enabled me to see this episode of Stella's life from the inside, and to find it—oh, quite like other weddings!

Something like this:

"Look here!" he protested, at the last moment, as we lurked in the gloomy vestry; "look here, Henderson hasn't blacked the soles of these da—blessed shoes! I'll look like an ass when it comes to the kneeling part—like an ass, I tell you! Good heavens, they'll look like tombstones!"

"If you funk now," I said, severely, "I'll never help you get married again. Oh, sainted Moses in heaven! what have I done with that ring? There's the organ! Good God, Harry, look at her!—simply look at her, man! Oh, you lucky devil! you lucky devil!"

I spoke enviously, you understand, simply to encourage him.

Followed a glaring of lights; a swishing of fans and the hum of dense, expectant humanity; a blare of music; then Stella, an incredible, immaculate vision, with glad, shamed eyes.

"—so long as ye both may live?" ended the bishop.

"I will," he quavered—with obvious uncertainty.

Stella's eyes were filled with unutterable happiness and fear, but her voice was level. I found time to wonder at its steadiness, even though just about this time I resonantly burst a button off one of my gloves. I fancy they must have been rather tight.

"—and thereto," said Stella, calmly, "I give thee my troth."

And subsequently they were Mendels-

sohned out of church, to the satisfaction of a large and critical audience. I came down the aisle with an agreeable pink-haired cousin of Stella's who had a mission in life—I forget what sort—and freckles. She proved very entertaining later in the evening.

Yes, it was quite like other weddings—oh, quite like! I wonder I remember it so well.

Stella is making tea for me.

"You're quite by way of being a gentleman," had been her greeting. Then, of a sudden, she rested both hands upon my breast. When she did that you tingled all over, in an absurdly agreeable fashion. "It was uncommonly decent of you to remember," said this impulsive young woman. "It was dear of you! And the flowers were lovely."

"They ought to have been immortelles, of course," I apologized, "but the florist was out of them." I sat down, and sighed, pensively. "Dear, dear!" said I, "to think it was five years ago I buried my dearest hopes and aspirations and—er—all that sort of thing."

"Nonsense!" said Stella, and selected a blue cup with dragons on it. "At any rate," she continued, "it's very disagreeable of you to come here and—and prate like a death's-head on my wedding anniversary."

"Dear me!" said I, with a fine surprise, "so it's an anniversary with you, too?" She was absorbed in the sugar-bowl. "What a coincidence!" I suggested, pleasantly.

I paused. The fire crackled. I sighed.

"You're such poor company nowadays," Stella reflected. "You—you really ought to do something to enliven yourself." After a little, she brightened as to the eyes, and concentrated them upon the tea-making, and ventured a suggestion. "Why not fall in love?" said Stella. The minx!

"I am," I confided, venturing on sigh number two.

"I don't mean—anything silly," said she, untruthfully. "Why," she con-

tinued, with some lack of relevance, "why not fall in love with somebody else?" Thereupon, I regret to say, her glance strayed toward the mirror. Oh, she was vain—I grant you that. But I must protest she had a perfect right to be.

"Yes," said I, "that's the reason."

"Nonsense!" said Stella, and tossed her head. She now assumed her most matronly air, and did mysterious things with a perforated silver ball. I was given to understand I had offended by a severe compression of her lips, which, however, was not as effective as it might have been. They twitched mutinously.

Stella was all in pink, with gold things sparkling in unexpected places. I presume the gown was tucked and ruched and appliquéd, and had been subjected to other processes past the comprehension of trousered humanity; it was certainly becoming. I think there was an eighteenth-century flavor about it—it smacked, somehow, of a patched, mendacious, dainty womanhood, and its artfulness was of a gallant sort that scorned to deceive. It defied you, it allured you, it conquered you at a glance. It might have been the last cry from the court of an innocent Louis Quinze. It was inimitable. Ah, if I were only a milliner, I would describe that gown for you in fitting fashion! As it is, set Beer and Paquin to dredge the dictionary, and they will still fail, as I have done. For, after all, its greatest charm was that Stella wore it.

Yet, it made of her—let us say, a marquise—a marquise out of Watteau or Fragonard. Upon my word, Stella in this gown seemed out of place save upon a high-backed stone bench—set in an *allée* of lime-trees, of course, and under a violet sky—with a sleek *abbé* or two for company and with be-ribboned gentlemen tinkling on their mandolins about her. I had really no choice but to regard her as an agreeable anachronism as she chatted with me and mixed hot water and sugar and lemon into ostensible tea. She seemed quite out of place—and yet, somehow, I entertained no special desire to have her

different, or, indeed, otherwise than in this warm, colorful room, that consisted mostly of dim vistas where brass things blinked in the firelight. We had voted it cozier without lamps or candles; this odorous half-light was far more companionable. Odorous, I say, for there were a great number of pink roses about. I fancy some one must have sent them in honor of her fifth wedding anniversary.

"Harry says you talk to everybody that way," quoth she—resentfully and after a pause.

"Oh!" said I. It was really no affair of Harry's.

"Harry's getting fat," I announced, presently.

Stella looked witheringly toward the region where my waist used to be. "He isn't!" said she, indignant.

"Quite like a pig," I continued, with relish. She objected to people being well-built.

Silence. I stirred my tea.

"Dear Harry!" said she. Then—oh, you know what happened, then! I protest that unless a woman is able to exercise a proper control over her countenance, she has no right to discuss her husband with his bachelor friends. It only makes them feel like social outcasts and lumbering brutes and Peeping Toms. If they know the husband well, it positively awes them; for, after all, it is a bit overwhelming, this sudden vision of the simplicity, the credulity, the merciful blindness of women in certain matters. A bachelor has no business to know such things; it merely makes him envious and uncomfortable.

Accordingly, "Stella," said I, with firmness, "if you flaunt your connubial felicity in my face like that I shall go home."

She was utterly deaf to my righteous rebuke. "Harry's in Boston," she went on, looking absently into the fire. "I had planned a little dinner for to-day, but he was compelled to go—business, you know. He's doing so well nowadays," she said, after a little, "that I'm quite proud of him. I intend for him to be a great lawyer—oh,

much the greatest in America. I sha'n't be content till then."

"H'm!" said I. "H'm" seemed fairly non-committal and safe.

"Sometimes," Stella declared, irrelevantly, "I almost wish I had been born a man."

"I wish you had been," quoth I, in gallant wise. "There are so few really attractive men!"

Stella looked up with a smile that was half sad.

"I'm just a little butterfly-woman, aren't I?" she asked.

"You are," I asserted, with conviction, "a butterfly out of a queen's garden—a marvelous pink-and-gold butterfly such as one sees only in dreams and—er—in a London pantomime. You are a decided ornament to the garden," I continued, handsomely, "and the roses bow down in admiration as you pass—er—at least, the masculine ones do," I added, lamely.

"Yes—we butterflies don't love one another over-much, do we? Ah, well, it scarcely matters! We weren't meant to be taken seriously, you know—only to play in the sunlight, and lend an air to the garden and—amuse the roses, of course. After all," Stella summed it up, "our duties are very simple; first, we're expected to pass through a certain number of cotillons and—and a certain number of various happenings in various Winter-gardens; then to make a suitable match—so as to enable the agreeable detrimentials to make love to us, in a faded, half-hearted fashion, with perfect safety—as you were doing just now, for instance. After that, we develop into bulbous chaperons, and may aspire eventually to a kindly quarter of a column in the papers, and, possibly, the honor of having as many as two dinners put off on account of our death. Yes, it's very simple. But, in heaven's name," cried Stella, with a sudden lift of speech, "how can any woman—for, after all, a woman is presumably a reasoning animal—be content with such a life! Yet that's everything—everything!—this big world offers us shallow-minded butterfly-women!"

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Personally, I disapprove of this morbid, hysterical talk outside of a problem novel; there, I approve of it heartily, on account of the considerable and harmless pleasure that is always to be derived from throwing the book into the fireplace. And, coming from Stella, this farrago astounded me. She was talking grave nonsense now, whereas Nature had, beyond doubt, planned her to discuss only the lighter sort. It was absurd, little Stella talking in this fashion—Stella, who, as we all knew, was only meant to be petted and flattered and flirted with. Stella—why, as she herself had said, it was impossible to take Stella seriously! Such a thing was never intended. Such a thing was unthinkable. I had half a mind to laugh outright.

I fancied, however, she was feeling a bit pulled down on this occasion; or, perhaps, staring at the fire had hypnotized her into an unwholesome, morbid state; or—well, at any rate, she was very grave and very queer, and I didn't like it. I preferred her chattering more breezy nonsense, and standing proverbs on their heads.

Therefore, "Stella," I admonished, "you've been reading something indigestible." I set down my teacup, and clasped my hands. "Don't—don't tell me," I pleaded, "that you want to vote!"

She was absurdly grave. "The trouble is," said she, judicially, "that I am not really a butterfly, for all my tinsel wings. I am an ant."

"Oh," said I, shamelessly, "I hadn't heard! Niece or nephew?"

The pun was bad, I admit. It failed to win a smile or even a reproof from the morbid young person opposite. "My grandfather," said she, in meditation, "began as a clerk in a country-store. Oh, of course, we've discovered since that his ancestors came over with William the Conqueror, and that he was descended from any number of potentates. But he worked—really worked, and was a success; and I fancy I'm prouder of him than I am of any of the emperors and things that make such a fine show in the family tree. For

I am like him. And I want my life to count, too—a hundred years from now I want to be something more than a name on a tombstone. I—oh, I dare say it's only vanity," she ended, with a shrug and her usual quick smile—a smile not always free from insolence, but entirely pleasing, somehow.

"It's late hours," I warned her, with uplifted forefinger, "late hours and too much bridge and too many sweetmeats and too much bothering over silly New Woman ideas. What's the good of a woman's being useful," I demanded, conclusively, "when it's so much easier and so much more agreeable all around for her to be adorable?"

She pouted. "Yes," she assented, "that's my career—to be adorable. It's my one accomplishment," she declared, unblushingly—yet, with some appearance of reason. After a little, though, her gravity returned. "When I was a girl—oh, I dreamed of accomplishing all sorts of beautiful, impossible things! But, you see, there was really nothing I could do. Music, painting, writing—I tried them all, and the results were utterly hopeless. Besides, the women who succeed—the women with any personal achievement to their credit—are always so—so queer-looking. I—I couldn't be expected to give up my complexion for a career, you know, or to wear my hair like a golf-caddy's. At any rate, I couldn't make a success by myself. But there was one thing I could do—I could make a success of Harry. And so," said Stella, calmly, "I did it."

I said nothing. It seemed expedient.

"You know, he was a little——"

"Yes," I assented, hastily. Harry had gone the pace notoriously, of course, but there was no need of raking that up. That was done with, long ago.

"Well, he isn't the least bit dissipated now. You know he isn't. That's the first big thing I've done." Stella checked it off with a pink-tipped finger. "Then—oh, I've helped him in lots of ways. He is doing splendidly in consequence, and—and it's my part to see that the proper people are treated prop-

erly." Stella reflected a moment. "There was that last appointment, for instance. I found that the awarding of it lay with that funny old Judge Willoughby, with the wart on his nose, and I asked him for it—not the wart, you understand—and got it. We simply had him to dinner, and I was specially butterfly; I fluttered airily about, was as silly as I knew how to be, looked helpless and wore my best gown. He thought me a pretty little fool, and gave Harry the appointment. That's only an instance, but it shows how I help." Stella regarded me uncertainly. "You—you understand?"

Of a sudden, I understood a number of things—things that had puzzled me. This was the meaning of Stella's queer dinners, for instance; this was the explanation of those impossible men and of the women condensed in red satin and plastered with gems who frequented the house. Stella, incapable by nature of two consecutive ideas, was determined to become a person of influence, to manipulate unseen wires. Upon my soul, it would have been laughable had her earnestness not been pathetic! It was Columbine mimicking Semiramis, Stella posing to herself as an arbitress of fate.

Yet—yet it was true that Harry had made tremendous strides in his profession, of late years. For a moment, I wondered—then I looked at this butterfly young person opposite and frowned. "I don't like it," said I, decisively. "It's a bit cold-blooded. It—it isn't worthy of you, Stella."

"It's my career," she flouted me, with shrugging shoulders. "It's the one career the world—our world—has left me. And—and I'm doing it for Harry."

The absurd look that I objected to—on principle, understand—returned at this point in the conversation. I arose, resolutely. I was really unable to put up with such folly. Yet, somehow, I was suggesting, idiotically:

"You love him?"

"Of course," she said; "why?"

And—ah, well, it was very easy to see that she did.

"Oh, nothing—nothing in the world," said I, brilliantly. "I—I just thought I would ask, that's all."

Whereupon, I went away.

Stella drove on fine afternoons, under the protection of a trim and preternaturally grave tiger. The next afternoon was fine. As they passed me, I remember wondering in a vague fashion if the boy's lot was not rather enviable. There might well be less attractive professions than to whirl through life behind Stella. One would rarely see her face, of course, but there would be compensations—the sense of her presence, the faint odor of her hair at times, blown scraps of her laughter, shreds of her talk, and, almost always, the piping of the sweet voice that was still so rare. Perhaps the conscienceless tiger listened when she was "seeing that the proper people were treated properly"? Yes, one would. Perhaps he ground his teeth? Well, one would, I fear. Perhaps—?

There was a nod of recognition from Stella, and I lifted my hat as they bowled by toward the Park. I went down the Avenue, mildly resentful that she had not offered me a lift.

A vagrant puff of wind was abroad in the Park that afternoon. It paused for a while to amuse itself with a stray bit of paper. At last, it grew tired of its plaything, and tossed it into the eyes of a sorrel horse. Prince lurched and bolted; and Rex, always a vicious brute, followed his mate. I fancy the vagabond wind must have laughed over that which ensued.

After a little, it returned and lifted the bit of paper from the roadway—with a new respect, perhaps—and frolicked with it over the close-shaven turf. It was a merry game they played there in the Spring sunlight. The paper fluttered a little, whirled over and over, and scampered off through the grass; then, with a gust of mirth, the wind was after it, gained upon it, lost ground in eddying about a tree, made up for it in the open, and at last chuckled over its playmate pinned to

the earth and flapping sharp, indignant protests. Then *da capo*. Oh, it was a merry game—a tireless game that lasted till the angry April sunset had flashed its last palpitant lance through the tree-trunks farther down the roadway. There were people there and broken wheels and shafts, and men were lifting a limp, white heap from among them.

They played half-heartedly in the twilight until the night had grown too chilly for their sport. There was no more murder to be done; and so, the vagrant wind puffed out into nothingness, and the bit of paper was left alone, and the stars—the incurious stars—peered forth one by one.

It was Stella's aunt who sent for me that night. A wheezy hand-organ ground out its jiggling tune below as her brief note told me what the casual wind had brought about. It was a despairing, hopeless, insistent air that shrilled and piped across the way. It seemed very fitting.

The doctors feared—ah, well, telegrams had failed to reach Harry in Boston. Harry was not in Boston, had not been in Boston. He could not be found. Did I think—?

No, I thought none of the things that Stella's aunt suggested. Of a sudden, I knew. I stood silent for a little and heard that damned, clutching tune cough and choke and end; I heard the renewed babblement of children; and I heard the organ clatter down the street, and set up a faint jingling in the distance. And I knew with an unreasoning surety. I pitied Stella now ineffably—not for the maiming and crippling of her body, for the spoiling of that tender miracle, that white flower of flesh—but for the falling of her air-castle, the brave air-castle that to her meant everything. I knew what had happened.

Later, I found Harry—no matter where. The French have a saying of infinite wisdom in their *Qui a bu boira*. The old vice had gripped him irresistibly, and he had stolen off to gratify it in secret—more grossly

worded, he had not been sober for a week. He was on the verge of collapse even when I told him—oh, with deliberate cruelty, I grant you—what had happened that afternoon.

Then, swiftly, the collapse came. I could not—could not for very shame—bring this shivering, weeping imbecile to the bedside of Stella, who was perhaps to die that night. That was the news I brought to Stella's aunt, through desolate streets already blanching in the dawn.

Stella was calling for Harry. We manufactured explanations.

Nice customs curtesy to death. I am standing at Stella's bedside, and the white-capped nurse has gone. There are dim lights about the room, and heavy carts lumber by in the dawn without. A petulant sparrow is cheeping somewhere.

"Tell me the truth," says Stella, pleadingly. Her face, showing over billows of bed-clothes, is as pale as they. But beautiful—exceedingly beautiful is Stella's face now that she is come to die.

It heartened me to lie to her. Harry had been retained in the great Western Railroad case. He had been called to Denver, San Francisco—I forget where. He had kept it as a surprise for her. He was hurrying back now. He would arrive in two days. I showed her telegrams from him—clumsy forgeries I had concocted in the last half-hour.

Oh, the story ran lamely, I grant you. But, vanity apart, I told it convincingly. Stella must and should die in content. My thoughts were strangely nimble, there was a devilish fluency in my speech, and lie after lie fitted somehow into an entity that surprised even me as it took plausible form. And I had my reward. Little by little, the doubt died from her eyes as I lied stubbornly in the hushed silence; little by little, her cheeks flushed brighter, ever brighter, as I dilated on this wonderful success that had come to Harry, till at last her face was all aflame with hap-

piness. Ah, she knew! She had dreamed of this, had worked for this for months past. But she had hardly dared hope for this much; she could not be certain even now whether it was the soup or her blue silk that had influenced Musgrave most potently. Both had been planned to wheedle him, to gain this glorious chance for Harry. Dear Harry!

"You—you are sure you're not lying?" said Stella, and smiled as she spoke. She believed me infinitely.

"Stella, before God, it's true!" I lied, with fervor. "On my word of honor, it's as I tell you!" And my heart was sick within me as I thought of the stuttering brute, the painted female, the stench of liquor in the room— Ah, well, the God I called to witness strengthened me to smile back at Stella.

"I believe you," she said, simply. "I—I'm glad. It's a big thing for Harry." Her eyes widened in wonder and pride, and she dreamed for a moment of his brave future. But, of a sudden, her face fell. "Dear, dear!" said Stella, petulantly; "I forgot. I shall be dead by then."

"Stella! Stella!" I cried, hoarsely; "why—why, nonsense, child! The doctor says—he is sure—" I had a horrible desire to laugh. It all seemed so grotesque.

"Ah, I know," she interrupted me. "I—I'm a little afraid to die," she went on, reflectively. "If one only knew—" Stella paused for a moment; then she smiled. "After all," she said, "it isn't as if I hadn't accomplished anything. I—I've made Harry. The ball's at his feet now; he has only to kick it. And—and I helped."

"Yes," said I. Oh, I grant you, my voice was shaken, broken out of all control. "You've helped. Why, you've done it all, Stella! There isn't a young man in America with his prospects. In five years, he'll be one of our greatest lawyers—everybody says so—everybody! And you've done it all, Stella—every bit of it! You've made a man of him, I tell you!

Look at what he was!—look at what he is! And—and you talk of leaving him now! Why, it's preposterous! Harry needs you, I tell you—needs you to cajole the proper people and keep him steady and—and— Why, you artful young woman, how could he possibly get on without you, do you think? How—how could any of us get on without you? You *must* get well, I tell you! In—in a month, you'll be right as a trivet. You die! Why—why, nonsense!" I laughed. I feared I would never have done with laughing over the idea of Stella's dying.

"I've done all I could. He doesn't need me now." Stella thought for a moment. "I think I shall know when he does anything especially big," she went on, after consideration. "God would be sure to tell me, you see, because He understands how much it means to me. And I shall be proud—ah, yes, wherever I am, I shall be proud of Harry. You see, he didn't really care about being a success. But I'm such a vain little cat—so bent on making a noise in the world—that, I think, he did it more to please my vanity than anything else. I nagged him, frightfully, you know," Stella confessed, with frankness, "but he was always patient. And he has never failed me—not once, though I know at times it was very hard for him—" Stella sighed, and then laughed. "Yes," said she, "I think I'm satisfied with my life altogether. Somehow, I am sure I shall know when he's a power in the world—a power for good, as he will be—and then I shall know my life counted for something. For I shall have helped. So I ought to sing *Nunc Dimittis*, oughtn't I? Yes—I think I'm quite satisfied," Stella ended, judicially, and laughed again.

I? Oh, yes, I was making an ass of myself. I have half a mind to do so now as I think of Stella and how gaily she went to meet her death.

"Good-bye," said she, after a little, in a tired voice.

"Good-bye, Stella," said I. And I kissed her for the second time.

A woman in mourning—mourning fluffed and furbelowed and jettied in a pleasing fashion that seemed mutely to beseech consolation of all marriageable males—viewed me with a roving eye this morning as I heaped daffodils on Stella's grave. I fancy she thought me sanctioned by church and law in what I had done—viewed me in my supposed recent bereavement and gauged my potentialities—viewed me, in short, with the glance of resigned and adventurous widowhood.

My faith, if she had known!—if I had spoken my thought to her!

"Madame"—let us imagine me, my hat raised, my voice grave—"the woman who lies here was a stranger to me. I did not know her. I knew that her eyes were very blue, that her hair was sunlight, that her voice had certain pleasing modulations; but I did not know the woman. And she cared nothing for me. I have brought her daffodils, because of all flowers she loved them chiefly, and because there is no one else who remembers this. It is the flower of Spring, and Stella—for that was her name, madame—died in the Spring of the year, in the Spring of her life; and daffodils, madame, are all white and gold, even as that handful of dust beneath us was when we buried it with a great flourish of crêpe and lamentation, just two years since. Yet the dust here was tender flesh at one time, and it clad a brave heart; but we thought of it—I among the rest—as only a costly plaything with which some lucky man might while away his leisure hours. I believe now that it was something more. I believe—ah, well, my *credo* is of little consequence. But whatever this woman may have been, I did not know her."

I should like to do it. I can imagine the stare, the squawk, the rustling furbelows, as madame flees from this grave madman. She would probably have me arrested.

You see, I have come to think differently of Stella. At times, I remember her childish vanity, her childish, morbid views, her childish gusts of petulance and anger and mirth; and I smile—tenderly, yet I smile.

Then comes the memory of Stella and myself in that ancient moonlight and our first talk of death—two infants peering into infinity, somewhat afraid, somewhat puzzled; of Stella making tea in the firelight, and prattling of her heart's secrets, half-seriously, half in fun; of Stella striving to lift a very worthless man to a higher level and succeeding—yes, for the time, succeeding; of Stella dying with a light heart, elate with vain dreams of Harry's future and of "a life that counted"; and, irrationally enough, perhaps, there seems a sequence somewhere—a whiff of tragedy, faint yet pungent. And I picture her, a foiled, wistful little wraith, very lonely in eternity, regretful of the world she loved and of its absurd men, unhappy—for she could never be entirely happy without Harry—and, I fear, indignant; for Stella desired very heartily to be remembered—she was very vain, you know—and we have all forgotten. Yes, I am quite sure that even as a wraith, Stella would be indignant, for she had a fine sense of her own merits.

"But I'm just a little butterfly-woman," she would say, sadly; then, with a quick smile, "aren't I?" And her eyes would be like stars—like big, blue stars—and afterward, her teeth would glint of a sudden, and innumerable dimples would come into being, and I would know she was never meant to be taken seriously.

Heigho! let us avoid all sickly sentiment.

You see, the world has advanced

since Stella died—twice around the sun, from solstice to solstice, from Spring to Winter and back again, traveling through I forget how many millions of miles; and there have been wars and scandals and a host of débutantes and any number of dinners; and, after all, the world is for the living. So we agreed unanimously that it was very sad; and the next week Emily Van Orden ran away with Tom Whately; and a few days later Alicia Wade's husband died, and we debated whether or no Teddy Anstruther would do the proper thing; and, in due course, we forgot Stella, just as Stella would have forgotten us.

And I? Well, I was very fond of Stella. It would be good to have her back—to have her back to jeer at me, to make me feel red and uncomfortable and ridiculous, to say rude things about my waist, to bedevil me in divers ways. Yes, it would be good. But, upon the whole, I am not sorry that Stella is gone.

For there is Harry to be considered. We can all agree that Harry is a good fellow, that he is making the most of Stella's money while it lasts, and that he is nobody's enemy but his own; but, I fancy, we have forgotten the time when we expected him to become a great lawyer. We don't expect that of Harry now; and we say, some of us, that he is nearing the end of his tether. At any rate, Harry is now in England, where his infatuation for Paquita—you may recall her as the dancer who boxed a royal ear not long ago—is tolerably notorious. And as Stella loved him—

Well, as it was, I took the daffodils to Stella. She was always vain, was Stella; it would have grieved her, had no one remembered.



SHE OWED HER ONE

MISS PASSÉE—I should like to see a young man try to kiss me.

MISS YOUNG—You cruel thing!