

Un Peu d'Amour

By Robert W. Chambers

When I returned to the plateau from my investigation of the crater, I realized that I had descended the grassy pit as far as any human being could descend. No living creature could pass that barrier of flame and vapour. Of that I was convinced.

Now, not only the crater but its steaming effluvia was utterly unlike anything I had even before beheld. There was no trace of lava to be seen, no of pumice, ashes, no of volcanic rejecta in any form whatever. There were no sulphuric odours, no pungent fumes, nothing to teach the olfactory nerves what might be the nature of the silvery steam rising from the crater incessantly in a vast circle, ringing its circumference halfway down the slope.

Under this thin curtain of steam a ring of pale yellow flames played and sparkled, completely encircling the slope.

The crater was about half a mile deep; the sides sloped gently to the bottom.

But the odd feature of the entire phenomenon was this: the bottom of the crater seemed to be entirely free from fire and vapour. It was disk-shaped, sandy, and flat, about a quarter of a mile in diameter. Through my field-glasses I could see patches of grass and wild flowers growing in the sand here and there, and the sparkle of water, and a crow or two, feeding and walking about.

I looked at the girl who was standing beside me, then cast a glance around at the very unusual landscape.

We were standing on the summit of a mountain some two thousand feet high, looking into a cup-shaped depression on crater, on the edges of which we stood.

This low, flat-topped mountain, as I say, was grassy and quite treeless, although it rose like a truncated sugar-cone out of a wilderness of trees which stretched for miles below us, north, south, east, and west, bordered on the horizon by towering blue mountains, their distant ranges enclosing the forests as in a vast amphitheatre.

From the centre of this enormous green floor of foliage rose our grassy hill, and it appeared to be the only irregularity which broke the level wilderness as far as the base of the dim blue ranges encircling the horizon.

Except for the log bungalow of Mr. Blythe on the eastern edge of this grassy plateau, there was not a human habitation in sight, nor a trace of man's devastating presence in the wilderness around us.

Again I looked questioningly at the girl beside me and she looked back at me rather seriously.

"Shall we seat ourselves here in the sun?" she asked. I nodded.

"Very gravely we settled down side by side on the thick green grass.

"Now," she said, "I shall tell you why I wrote you to come out here. Shall I?"

"By all means, Miss Blythe."

Sitting cross-legged, she gathered her ankles into her hands, settling herself as snugly on the grass as a bird settles on its nest.

"The phenomena of nature," she said, "have always interested me intensely, not only from the artistic angle but from the scientific point of view.

"It is different with father. He is a painter; he canes only for the artistic aspects of nature. Phenomena of a scientific nature bore him. Also, you may have noticed that he is of a—a slightly

impatient disposition.” I had noticed it. He had been anything but civil to me when I arrived the night before, after a five-hundred mile trip on a mule, from the nearest railroad—a journey performed entirely alone and by compass, there being no trail after the first fifty miles.

To characterize Blythe as slightly impatient was letting him down easy. He was a selfish, bad-tempered old pig.

“Yes,” I said, answering her, “I did notice a negligible trace of impatience about your father.”

She flushed.

“You see I did not inform my father that I had written to you. He doesn’t like strangers; he doesn’t like scientists. I did not dare tell him that I had asked you to come out here. It was entirely my own idea. I felt that I *must* write you because I am positive that what is happening in this wilderness is of vital scientific importance.”

“How did you get a letter out of this distant and desolate place?” I asked.

“Every two months the storekeeper at Windflower Station sends in a man and a string of mules with staples for us. The man takes our further orders and our letters back to civilization.”

I nodded.

“He took my letter to you—among one or two others I sent—”

A charming colour came into her cheeks. She was really extremely pretty. I liked that girl. When a girl blushes when she speaks to a man he immediately accepts her heightened colour as a personal tribute. This is not vanity: it is merely a proper sense of personal worthiness.

She said thoughtfully:

“The mail bag which that man brought to us last week contained a letter which, had I received it earlier, would have made my invitation to you unnecessary. I’m sorry I disturbed you.”

“I am not,” said I, looking into her beautiful eyes.

I twisted my mustache into two attractive points, shot my cuffs, and glanced at her again, receptively.

She had a fan-away expression in her eyes. I straightened my necktie. A man, without being vain, ought to be conscious of his own worth.

“And now,” she continued, “I am going to tell you the various reasons why I asked so celebrated a scientist as yourself to come here.”

I thanked her for her encomium.

“Ever since my father retired from Boston to purchase this hill and the wilderness surrounding it,” she went on, “ever since he came here to live a hermit’s life—a life devoted solely to painting landscapes—I also have lived here all alone with him.

“That is three years, now. And from the very beginning—from the very first day of our arrival, somehow on other I was conscious that there was something abnormal about this corner of the world.”

She bent forward, lowering her voice a trifle:

“Have you noticed,” she asked, “that so many things seem to be *circular* out here?”

“Circular?” I repeated, surprised.

“Yes. That crater is circular; so is the bottom of it; so is this plateau, and the hill; and the forests surrounding us; and the mountain ranges on the horizon.”

“But all this is natural.”

“Perhaps. But in those woods, down there, there are, here and there, great circles of crumbling soil—*perfect* circles a mile in diameter.” “Mounds built by prehistoric man, no doubt.”

She shook her head:

“These are not prehistoric mounds.”

“Why not?”

“Because they have been freshly made.”

“How do you know?”

“The earth is freshly upheaved; great trees, partly uprooted, slant at every angle from the sides of the enormous piles of newly upturned earth; sand and stones are still sliding from the raw ridges.”

She leaned nearer and dropped her voice still lower:

“More than that,” she said, “my father and I both have seen one of these huge circles *in the making!*”

“What!” I exclaimed, incredulously.

“It is true. We have seen several. And it enrages father.”

“Enrages?”

“Yes, because it upsets the trees where he is painting landscapes, and tilts them in every direction. Which, of course, ruins his picture; and he is obliged to start another, which vexes him dreadfully.”

I think I must have gaped at her in sheer astonishment.

“But there is something more singular than that for you to investigate,” she said calmly. “Look down at that circle of steam which makes a perfect ring around the bowl of the crater, halfway down. Do you see the flicker of fine under the vapour?”

“Yes.”

She leaned so near and spoke in such a low voice that her fragrant breath fell upon my cheek:

“In the fine, under the vapours, there are little animals.”

“What!?”

“Little beasts live in the fire—slim, furry creatures, smaller than a weasel. I’ve seen them peep out of the fire and scurry back into it. . . . *Now* are you sorry that I wrote you to come? And will you forgive me for bringing you out here?”

An indescribable excitement seized me, endowing me with a fluency and eloquence unusual:

“I thank you from the bottom of my heart!” I cried; “—from the depths of a heart the emotions of which are entirely and exclusively of scientific origin!”

In the impulse of the moment I held out my hand; she laid hers in it with charming diffidence.

“Yours is the discovery,” I said. “Yours shall be the glory. Fame shall crown you; and perhaps if there remains any reflected light in the form of a by-product, some modest and negligible little ray may chance to illuminate me.

Surprised and deeply moved by my eloquence, I bent over her hand and saluted it with my lips.

She thanked me. Her pretty face was rosy.

It appeared that she had three cows to milk, new-laid eggs to gather, and the construction of some fresh butter to be accomplished.

At the bars of the grassy pasture slope she dropped me a curtsy, declining very shyly to let me carry her lacteal paraphernalia.

So I continued on to the bungalow garden, where Blythe sat on a camp stool under a green umbrella, painting a picture of something or other.

“Mr. Blythe!” I cried, striving to subdue my enthusiasm. “The eyes of the scientific world are now open upon this house! The searchlight of Fame is about to be turned upon you—”

“I prefer privacy,” he interrupted. “That’s why I came here. I’ll be obliged if you’ll turn off that searchlight.”

“But, my dear Mr. Blythe—”

“I want to be let alone,” he repeated irritably. “I came out here to paint and to enjoy privately my own paintings.”

If what stood on his easel was a sample of his pictures, nobody was likely to share his enjoyment.

“Your work,” said I, politely, “is—is—”

“Is what!” he snapped. “*What* is it—if you think you know?”

“It is entirely, so to speak, *per se*—by itself—”

“What the devil do you mean by that?” I looked at his picture, appalled. The entire canvas was one monotonous vermilion conflagration. I examined it with my head on one side, then on the other side; I made a funnel with both hands and peered intently through it at the picture. A menacing murmuring sound came from him.

“Satisfying—exquisitely satisfying,” I concluded. “I have often seen such sunsets—”

“What!”

“I mean such prairie fires—”

“Damnation!” he exclaimed. “I’m painting a bowl of nasturtiums!”

“I was speaking purely in metaphor,” said I with a sickly smile. “To me a nasturtium by the river brink is more than a simple flower. It is a broader, grander, more magnificent, more stupendous symbol. It may mean anything, everything—such as sunsets and conflagrations and Götterdämmerungs! Or—” and my voice was subtly modulated to an appealing and persuasive softness—it may mean nothing at all—chaos, void, vacuum, negation, the exquisite annihilation of what has never even existed.”

He glared at me over his shoulder. If he was infected by Cubist tendencies he evidently had not understood what I said.

“If you won’t talk about my pictures I don’t mind your investigating this district,” he grunted, dabbing at his palette and plastering a wad of vermilion upon his canvas; “but I object to any public invasion of my artistic privacy until I am ready for it.”

“When will that be?”

He pointed with one vermilion-soaked brush toward a long, low, log building.

“In that structure,” he said, “are packed one thousand and ninety-five paintings—all signed by me. I have executed one on two every day since I came here. When I have painted exactly ten thousand pictures, no more, no less, I shall erect here a gallery large enough to contain them all.

“Only real lovers of art will even come here to study them. It is five hundred miles from the railroad. Therefore, I shall never have to endure the praises of the dilettante, the patronage of the idler, the vapid rhapsodies of the vulgar. Only those who understand will care to make the pilgrimage.”

He waved his brushes at me:

“The conservation of national resources is all well enough—the setting aside of timber reserves, game preserves, bird refuges, all these projects are very good in a way. But I have dedicated this wilderness as a last and only refuge in all the world for true Art! Because true Art, except for my pictures, is, I believe, now practically extinct! . . . You’re in my way. Would you mind getting out?”

I had sidled around between him and his bowl of nasturtiums, and I hastily stepped aside. He squinted at the flowers, mixed up a flamboyant mess of colour on his palette, and daubed away with unfeigned satisfaction, no longer noticing me until I started to go. Then:

“What is it you’re here for, anyway?” he demanded abruptly. I said with dignity:

"I am here to investigate those huge rings of earth thrown up in the forest as by a gigantic mole." He continued to paint for a few moments:

"Well, go and investigate 'em," he snapped. "I'm not infatuated with your society."

"What do you think they are?" I asked, mildly ignoring his wretched manners.

"I don't know and I don't care, except, that sometimes when I begin to paint several trees, the very trees I'm painting are suddenly heaved up and tilted in every direction, and all my work goes for nothing. *That* makes me mad! Otherwise, the matter has no interest for me."

"But what in the world could cause—"

"I don't know and I don't care!" he shouted, waving palette and brushes angrily. "Maybe it's an army of moles working all together under the ground; maybe it's some species of circular earthquake. I don't know! I don't care! But it annoys me. And if you can devise any scientific means to stop it, I'll be much obliged to you. Otherwise, to be perfectly frank, you bore me."

"The mission of Science," said I solemnly, "is to alleviate the inconveniences of mundane existence. Science, therefore, shall extend a helping hand to her frailer sister, Art—"

"Science can't patronize Art while I'm around!" he retorted. "I won't have it!"

"But, my dear Mr. Blythe—"

"I won't dispute with you, either! I don't like to dispute!" he shouted.

"Don't try to make me. Don't attempt to inveigle me into discussion! I know all I want to know. I don't want to know anything you want me to know, either!"

I looked at the old pig in haughty silence, nauseated by his conceit. After he had plastered a few more tubes of vermilion over his canvas he quieted down, and presently gave me an oblique glance over his shoulder. "Well," he said, "what else are you intending to investigate?"

"Those little animals that live in the crater fires," I said bluntly.

"Yes," he nodded, indifferently, "there are creatures which live somewhere in the fires of that crater."

"Do you realize what an astounding statement you are making?" I asked.

"It doesn't astound *me*. What do I care whether it astounds you or anybody else? Nothing interests me except Art."

"But—"

"I tell you nothing interests me except Art!" he yelled. "Don't dispute it! Don't answer me! Don't irritate me! I don't care whether anything lives in the fire or not! Let it live there!"

"But have you actually seen live creatures in the flames?"

"Plenty! *Plenty!* What of it? What about it? Let 'em live there, for all I care. I've painted pictures of 'em, too. That's all that interests me.

"What do they look like, Mr. Blythe?"

"Look like? *I* don't know! They look like weasels or rats or bats or cats or—stop asking me questions! It irritates me! It depresses me! Don't ask any more! Why don't you go in to lunch? And—tell my daughter to bring me a bowl of salad out here. *I've* no time to stuff myself Some people have. *I* haven't. You'd better go in to lunch. . . . And tell my daughter to bring me seven tubes of Chinese vermilion with my salad!"

"You don't mean to mix—" I began, then checked myself before his fury.

"I'd rather eat vermilion paint on my salad than sit here talking to *you!*" he shouted.

I cast a pitying glance at this impossible man, and went into the house. After all, he was *her* father. I *had* to endure him.

* * *

After Miss Blythe had carried to her father a large bucket of lettuce leaves, she returned to the veranda of the bungalow.

A delightful luncheon awaited us; I seated her, then took the chair opposite.

A delicious omelette, fresh biscuit, salad, and strawberry preserves, and a tall tumbler of iced tea imbued me with a sort of mild exhilaration.

Out of the corner of my eye I could see Blythe down in the garden, munching his lettuce leaves like an ill-tempered rabbit, and daubing away at his picture while he munched.

“Your father,” said I politely, “is something of a genius.

“I am so glad you think so,” she said gratefully. “But don’t tell him so. He has been surfeited with praise in Boston. That is why we came out here.”

“Art,” said I, “is like science, or tobacco, or tooth-wash. Every man to his own brand. Personally, I don’t care for his kind. But who can say which is the best kind of anything? Only the consumer. Your father is his own consumer. He is the best judge of what he likes. And that is the only true test of art, on anything else.”

“How delightfully you reason!” she said. “How logically, how generously!”

“Reason is the handmaid of Science, Miss Blythe.”

She seemed to understand me. Her quick intelligence surprised me, because I myself was not perfectly sure whether I had emitted piffle or an epigram.

As we ate our strawberry preserves we discussed ways and means of capturing a specimen of the little fine creatures which, as she explained, so frequently peeped out at her from the crater fines, and, at her slightest movement, scurried back again into the flames. Of course I believed that this was only her imagination. Yet, for years I had entertained a theory that fire supported certain unknown forms of life.

“I have long believed,” said I, “that fire is inhabited by living organisms which require the elements and temperature of active combustion for their existence—microorganisms, but not,” I added smilingly, “any higher type of life.”

“In the fireplace,” she ventured diffidently, “I sometime see curious things—dragons and snakes and creatures of grotesque and peculiar shapes.”

I smiled indulgently, charmed by this innocently offered contribution to science. Then she rose, and I rose and took her hand in mine, and we wandered over the grass toward the crater, while I explained to her the difference between what we imagine we see in the glowing coals of a grate fire and my own theory that fire is the abode of living animalculae.

On the grassy edge of the crater we paused and looked down the slope, where the circle of steam rose, partly veiling the pale flash of fire underneath.

“How near can we go?” I inquired.

“Quite near. Come; I’ll guide you.”

Leading me by the hand, she stepped over the brink and we began to descend the easy grass slope together.

There was no difficulty about it at all. Down we went, nearer and nearer to the wall of steam, until at last, when but fifteen feet away from it, I felt the heat from the flames which sparkled below the wall of vapour.

Here we seated ourselves upon the grass, and I knitted my brows and fixed my eyes upon this curious phenomenon, striving to discover some reason for it.

Except for the vapour and the fires, there was nothing whatever volcanic about this spectacle, on in the surroundings.

From where I sat I could see that the bed of fire which encircled the crater, and the wall of vapour which crowned the flames, were about three hundred feet wide. Of course this barrier was absolutely impassable. There was no way of getting through it into the bottom of the crater.

A slight pressure from Miss Blythe's fingers engaged my attention; I turned toward her, and she said:

"There is one more thing about which I have not told you. I feel a little guilty, because *that* is the real reason I asked you to come here."

"What is it?"

"I think there are emeralds on the floor of that crater."

"Emeralds!"

"I *think* so." She felt in the ruffled pocket of her apron, drew out a fragment of mineral, and passed it to me.

I screwed a jeweler's glass into my eye and examined it in astonished silence. It was an emerald; a fine, large, immensely valuable stone, if my experience counted for anything. One side of it was thickly coated with vermilion paint.

"Where did this come from?" I asked in an agitated voice.

"From the floor of the crater. Is it *really* an emerald?"

I lifted my head and stared at the girl incredulously.

"It happened this way," she said excitedly. "Father was painting a picture up there by the edge of the crater. He left his palette on the grass to go to the bungalow for some more tubes of colour. While he was in the house, hunting for the colours which he wanted, I stepped out on the veranda, and I saw some crows alight near the palette and begin to stalk about in the grass. One bird walked over his wet palette; I stepped out and waved my sun-bonnet to frighten him off, but he had both feet in a sticky mass of Chinese vermilion, and for a moment was unable to free himself

"I almost caught him, but he flapped away over the edge of the crater, high above the wall of vapour, sailed down onto the crater floor, and alighted.

"But his feet bothered him; he kept hopping about on the bottom of the crater, half running, half flying; and finally he took wing and rose up over the hill.

"As he flew above me, and while I was looking up at his vermilion feet, something dropped from his claws and nearly struck me. It was that emerald."

When I had recovered sufficient composure to speak steadily, I took her beautiful little hand in mine.

"This," said I, "is the most exciting locality I have even visited for purposes of scientific research. Within this crater may lie millions of value in emeralds. You are probably, today, the wealthiest heiress upon the face of the globe!"

I gave her a winning glance. She smiled, shyly, and blushing withdrew her hand.

For several exquisite minutes I sat there beside her in a sort of heavenly trance. How beautiful she was! How engaging—how sweet—how modestly appreciative of the man beside her, who had little beside his scientific learning, his fame, and a kind heart to appeal to such youth and loveliness as hers!

There was something about her that delicately appealed to me. Sometimes I pondered what this might be; sometimes I wondered how many emeralds lay on that floor of sandy gravel below us.

Yes, I loved her. I realised it now. I could even endure her father for her sake. I should make a good husband. I was quite certain of that.

I turned and gazed upon her, meltingly. But I did not wish to startle her, so I remained silent, permitting the chaste language of my eyes to interpret for her what my lips had not yet murmured. It was a brief but beautiful moment in my life.

“The way to do,” said I, “is to trap several dozen crows, smear their feet with glue, tie a ball of Indian twine to the ankle of every bird, then liberate them. Some are certain to fly into the crater and try to scrape the glue off in the sand. Then,” I added, triumphantly, “all we have to do is to haul in our binds and detach the wealth of Midas from their sticky claws!”

“That is an excellent suggestion,” she said gratefully, “but I can do that after you have gone. All I wanted you to tell me was whether the stone as a genuine emerald.”

I gazed at her blankly.

“You are here for purposes of scientific investigation,” she added, sweetly. “I should not think of taking your time for the mere sake of accumulating wealth for my father and me.”

There didn’t seem to be anything for me to say at that moment. Chilled, I gazed at the flashing ring of fire.

And, as I gazed, suddenly I became aware of a little, pointed muzzle, two pricked-up ears, and two ruby-red eyes gazing intently out at me from the mass of flames.

The girl beside me saw it, too.

“Don’t move!” she whispered. “That is one of the flame creatures. It may venture out if you keep perfectly still.”

Rigid with amazement, I sat like a stone image, staring at the most astounding sight I had ever beheld.

For several minutes the ferret-like creature never stirred from where it crouched in the crater fire; the alert head remained pointed toward us; I could even see that its thick fur must have possessed the qualities of asbestos, because here and there a hair or two glimmered incandescent; and its eyes, nose, and whiskers glowed and glowed as the flames pulsated around it.

After a long while it began to move out of the fire, slowly, cautiously, cunning eyes fixed on us—a small, slim, wiry, weasel-like creature on which the sunlight fell with a vitreous glitter as it crept forward into the grass.

Then, from the fire behind, another creature of the same sort appeared, another, others, then dozens of eager, lithe, little animals appeared everywhere from the flames and began to frisk and play and run about in the grass and nibble the fresh, green, succulent herbage with a snipping sound quite audible to us.

One came so near my feet that I could examine it minutely.

Its fur and whiskers seemed heavy and dense and like asbestos fibre, yet so fine as to appear silky. Its eyes, nose, and claws were scarlet, and seemed to possess a glassy surface.

I waited my opportunity, and when the little thing came nosing along within reach, I seized it.

Instantly it emitted a bewildering series of whistling shrieks, and twisted around to bite me. Its body was icy.

“Don’t let it bite!” cried the girl. “Be careful, Mr. Smith!”

But its jaws were toothless; only soft, cold gums pinched me, and I held it twisting and writhing, while the icy temperature of its body began to benumb my fingers and creep up my wrist, paralyzing my arm; and its incessant shrieks deafened me.

In vain I transferred it to the other hand, and then passed it from one hand to the other, as one shifts a lump of ice or a hot potato, in an attempt to endure the temperature: it shrieked and squirmed and doubled, and finally wriggled out of my stiffened and useless hands, and scuttled away into the fire.

It was an overwhelming disappointment. For a moment it seemed unendurable.

“Never mind,” I said, huskily, “if I caught one in my hands, I can surely catch another in a trap.”

“I am so sorry for your disappointment,” she said, pitifully.

“Do *you* care, Miss Blythe?” I asked.

She blushed.

“Of course I care,” she murmured.

My hands were too badly frost-nipped to become eloquent. I merely sighed and thrust them into my pockets. Even my arm was too stiff to encircle her shapeful waist. Devotion to Science had temporarily crippled me. Love must wait. But, as we ascended the grassy slope together, I promised myself that I would make her a good husband, and that I should spend at least part of every day of my life in trapping crows and smearing their claws with glue.

That evening I was seated on the veranda beside Wilna—Miss Blythe’s name was Wilna—and what with gazing at her and fitting together some of the folding box-traps which I always carried with me—and what with trying to realise the pecuniary magnificence of our future existence together, I was exceedingly busy when Blythe came in to display, as I supposed, his most recent daub to me.

The canvas he carried presented a series of crimson speckles, out of which burst an eruption of green streaks—and it made me think of stepping on a caterpillar.

My instinct was to placate this impossible man. He was *her* father. I meant to honour him if I had to assault him to do it.

“Supremely satisfying!” I nodded, chary of naming the subject. “It is a stride beyond the ant of the future: it is a flying leap out of the Not Yet into the Possibly Perhaps! I thank you for enlightening me, Mr. Blythe. I am your debtor.”

He fairly snarled at me:

“What are *you* talking about!” he demanded.

I remained modestly mute.

To Wilna he said, pointing passionately at his canvas:

“The crows have been walking all over it again! I’m going to paint in the woods after this, earthquakes or no earthquakes. Have the trees been heaved up anywhere recently?”

“Not since last week,” she said, soothingly. “It usually happens after a rain.

“I think I’ll risk it then—although it did rain early this morning. I’ll do a moonlight down there this evening.” And, turning to me: “If you know as much about science as you do about art you won’t have to remain here long—I trust.”

“What?” said I, very red.

He laughed a highly disagreeable laugh, and marched into the house. Presently he bawled for dinner, and Wilna went away. For her sake I had remained calm and dignified, but presently I went out and kicked up the turf two or three times; and, having fozzled my wrath, I went back to dinner, realising that I might as well begin to accustom myself to my future father-in-law.

It seemed that he had a mania for prunes, and that’s all he permitted anybody to have for dinner.

Disgusted, I attempted to swallow the loathly stewed fruit, watching Blythe askance as he hurriedly stuffed himself, using a tablespoon, with every symptom of relish.

“Now,” he cried, shoving back his chair, “I’m going to paint a moonlight by moonlight. Wilna, if Billy arrives, make him comfortable, and tell him I’ll return by midnight.” And

without taking the trouble to notice me at all, he strode away toward the veranda, chewing vigorously upon his last prune.

“Your father,” said I, “is eccentric. Genius usually is. But he is a most interesting and estimable man. I revere him.”

“It is kind of you to say so, said the girl, in a low voice.

I thought deeply for a few moments, then:

“Who is ‘Billy’?” I inquired, casually.

I couldn’t tell whether it was a sudden gleam of sunset light on her face, or whether she blushed.

“Billy,” she said softly, “is a friend of father’s. His name is William Green.”

“Oh.”

“He is coming out here to visit—father—I believe.”

“Oh. An artist; and doubtless of mature years.

“He is a mineralogist by profession,” she said, “—and somewhat young.”

“Oh.”

“Twenty-four years old,” she added. Upon her pretty face was an absent expression, vaguely pleasant. Her blue eyes became dreamy and exquisitely remote.

I pondered deeply for a while:

“Wilna?” I said.

“Yes, Mr. Smith?” as though aroused from agreeable meditation.

But I didn’t know exactly what to say, and I remained uneasily silent, thinking about that man Green and his twenty-four years, and his profession, and the bottom of the crater, and Wilna-and striving to satisfy myself that there was no logical connection between any of these.

“I think,” said I, “that I’ll take a bucket of salad to your father.”

Why I should have so suddenly determined to ingratiate myself with the old grouch I scarcely understood: for the construction of a salad was my very best accomplishment.

Wilna looked at me in a peculiar manner, almost as though she were controlling a sudden and not unpleasant inward desire to laugh.

Evidently the finer and more delicate instincts of a woman were divining my motive and sympathizing with my mental and sentimental perplexity.

So when she said: “I don’t think you had better go near my father,” I was convinced of her gentle solicitude in my behalf.

“With a bucket of salad,” I whispered softly, “much may be accomplished, Wilna.” And I took her little hand and pressed it gently and respectfully. “Trust all to me,” I murmured.

She stood with her head turned away from me, her slim hand nesting limply in mine. From the slight tremor of her shoulders I became aware how deeply her emotion was now swaying her. Evidently she was nearly ready to become mine.

But I remained calm and alert. The time was not yet. Her father had had his prunes, in which he delighted. And when pleasantly approached with a bucket of salad he could not listen otherwise than politely to what I had to say to him. Quick action was necessary—quick but diplomatic action in view of the imminence of this young man Green, who evidently was *persona grata* at the bungalow of this irritable old dodo.

Tenderly pressing the pretty hand which I held, and saluting the finger-tips with a gesture which was, perhaps, not wholly ungraceful, I stepped into the kitchen, washed out several heads of lettuce, deftly chopped up some youthful onions, constructed a seductive French dressing,

and, stirring together the crisp ingredients, set the savoury masterpiece away in the icebox, after tasting it. It was delicious enough to draw sobs from any pig.

When I went out to the veranda, Wilna had disappeared. So I unfolded and set up some more box-traps, determined to lose no time.

Sunset still lingered beyond the chain of western mountains as I went out across the grassy plateau to the cornfield.

Here I set and baited several dozen aluminium crow-traps, padding the jaws so that no injury could be done to the binds when the springs snapped on their legs.

Then I went over to the crater and descended its gentle, grassy slope. And there, all along the borders of the vapoury wall, I set box-traps for the lithe little denizens of the fine, baiting every trap with a handful of fresh, sweet cloven which I had pulled up from the pasture beyond the cornfield.

My task ended, I ascended the slope again, and for a while stood there immersed in pleasurable premonitions.

Everything had been accomplished swiftly and methodically within the few hours in which I had first set eyes upon this extraordinary place—everything!—love at first sight, the delightfully lightning-like wooing and winning of an incomparable maiden and heiress; the discovery of the fire creatures; the solving of the emerald problem.

And now everything was ready, crow-traps, fire-traps, a bucket of irresistible salad for Blythe, a modest and tremulous avowal for Wilna as soon as her father tasted the salad and I had pleasantly notified him of my intentions concerning his lovely offspring.

Daylight faded from nose to lilac; already the mountains were growing fairy-like under that vague, diffuse lustre which heralds the rise of the full moon. It rose, enormous, yellow, unreal, becoming imperceptibly silvery as it climbed the sky and hung aloft like a stupendous arc-light flooding the world with a radiance so white and clean that I could very easily have written verses by it, if I wrote verses.

Down on the edge of the forest I could see Blythe on his camp-stool, madly besmearing his moonlit canvas, but I could not see Wilna anywhere. Maybe she had shyly retired somewhere by herself to think of me.

So I went back to the house, filled a bucket with my salad, and started toward the edge of the woods, singing happily as I sped on feet so light and frolicsome that they seemed to skim the ground. How wonderful is the power of love!

When I approached Blythe he heard me coming and turned around.

“What the devil do *you* want?” he asked with characteristic civility.

“I have brought you,” said I gaily, “a bucket of salad.”

“I don’t want any salad!”

“W-what?”

“I never eat it at night.”

I said confidently:

“Mr. Blythe, if you will taste this salad I am sure you will not regret it.” And with hideous cunning I set the bucket beside him on the grass and seated myself near it. The old dodo grunted and continued to daub the canvas; but presently, as though forgetfully, and from sheer instinct, he reached down into the bucket, pulled out a leaf of lettuce, and shoved it into his mouth.

My heart leaped exultantly. I had him!

“Mr. Blythe,” I began in a winningly modulated voice, and, at the same instant, he sprang from his camp-chair, his face distorted.

“There are onions in this salad!” he yelled. “What the devil do you mean! Are you trying to poison me! What are you following me about for, anyway? Why are you running about under foot every minute!”

“My dear Mr. Blythe,” I protested—but he banked at me, kicked over the bucket of salad, and began to dance with rage.

“What’s the matter with you, anyway!” he bawled. “Why are you trying to feed me? What do you mean by trying to be attentive to me!”

“I—I admire and revere you—”

“No you don’t!” he shouted. “I don’t want you to admire me! I don’t desire to be revered! I don’t like attention and politeness! Do you hear! It’s artificial—out of date—ridiculous! The only thing that recommends a man to me is his bad manners, bad temper, and violent habits. There’s some meaning to such a man, none at all to men like you!”

He ran at the salad bucket and kicked it again.

“They all fawned on me in Boston!” he panted. “They ran about under foot! They bought my pictures! And they made me sick! I came out here to be rid of ’em!”

I nose from the grass, pale and determined.

“You listen to me, you old grouch!” I hissed. “I’ll go. But before I go I’ll tell you why I’ve been civil to you. There’s only one reason in the world: I want to marry your daughter! And I’m going to do it!”

I stepped nearer him, menacing him with outstretched hand:

‘As for you, you pitiable old dodo, with your bad manners and your worse pictures, and your degraded mania for prunes, you are a necessary evil, that’s all, and I haven’t the slightest respect for either you or your art!’

“Is that true?” he said in an altered voice.

“True?” I laughed bitterly. “Of course it’s true, you miserable dauber!”

“D-dauber!” he stammered.

“Certainly! I *said* ‘dauber,’ and I mean it. Why, your work would shame the pictures on a child’s slate!”

“Smith,” he said unsteadily, “I believe I have utterly misjudged you. I believe you are a good deal of a man, after all—”

“I’m man enough,” said I, fiercely, “to go Sack, saddle my mule, kidnap your daughter, and start for home. And I’m going to do it!”

“Wait!” he cried. “I don’t want you to go. If you’ll remain I’ll be very glad. I’ll do anything you like. I’ll quarrel with you, and you can insult my pictures. It will agreeably stimulate us both. Don’t go, Smith—”

“If I stay, may I marry Wilna?”

“If you ask me I won’t let you!”

“Very well!” I retorted, angrily. “Then I’ll marry her anyway!”

“That’s the way to talk! Don’t go, Smith. I’m really beginning to like you. And when Billy Green arrives you and he will have a delightfully violent scene—”

“What!”

He rubbed his hands gleefully.

“He’s in love with Wilna. You and he won’t get on. It is going to be very stimulating for me—I can see that! You and he are going to behave most disagreeably to each other. And I shall be exceedingly unpleasant to you both! Come, Smith, promise me that you’ll stay!”

Profoundly worried, I stood staring at him in the moonlight, gnawing my mustache.

“Very well,” I said, “I’ll remain if—”

Something checked me, I did not quite know what for a moment.

Blythe, too, was staring at me in an odd, apprehensive way. Suddenly I realised that under my feet the ground was stirring.

“Look out!” I cried; but speech froze on my lips as beneath me the solid earth began to rock and crack and billow up into a high, crumbling ridge, moving continually, as the sod cracks, heaves up, and crumbles above the subterranean progress of a mole.

Up into the air we were slowly pushed on the ever-growing ridge; and with us were carried rocks and bushes and sod, and even forest trees.

I could hear their tap-roots pant with pistol-like reports; see great pines and hemlocks and oaks moving, slanting, settling, tilting crazily in every direction as they were heaved upward in this gigantic disturbance.

Blythe caught me by the arm; we clutched each other, balancing on the crest of the steadily rising mound.

“W-what is it?” he stammered. “Look! It’s circular. The woods are rising in a huge circle. What’s happening? Do you know?”

Oven me crept a horrible certainty that *something living* was moving under us through the depths of the earth—something that, as it progressed, was heaping up the surface of the world above its unseen and burrowing course—something dreadful, enormous, sinister, and *alive!*

“Look out!” screamed Blythe; and at the same instant the crumbling summit of the ridge opened under our feet and a fissure hundreds of yards long yawned ahead of us.

And along it, shining slimily in the moonlight, a vast, viscous, ringed surface was moving, retracting, undulating, elongating, writhing, squirming, shuddering.

“It’s a worm!” shrieked Blythe. “Oh, God! It’s a mile long

As in a nightmare we clutched each other, struggling frantically to avoid the fissure; but the soft earth slid and gave way under us, and we fell heavily upon that ghastly, living surface.

Instantly a violent convulsion hurled us upward; we fell on it again, rebounding from the rubbery thing, strove to regain our feet and scramble up the edges of the fissure, strove madly while the mammoth worm slid more rapidly through the rocking forests, carrying us forward with a speed increasing.

Through the forest we tore, reeling about on the slippery back of the thing, as though riding on a plowshare, while trees clashed and tilted and fell from the enormous furrow on every side; then, suddenly out of the woods into the moonlight, fan ahead of us we could see the grassy upland heave up, cake, break, and crumble above the burrowing course of the monster.

“It’s making for the crater!” gasped Blythe; and horror spurred us on, and we scrambled and slipped and clawed the billowing sides of the furrow until we gained the heaving top of it.

As one runs in a bad dream, heavily, half-paralyzed, so ran Blythe and I, toiling over the undulating, tumbling upheaval until, half-fainting, we fell and rolled down the shifting slope onto solid and unvexed sod on the very edges of the crater.

Below us we saw, with sickened eyes, the entire circumference of the crater agitated, saw it rise and fall as avalanches of rock and earth slid into it, tons and thousands of tons rushing down the slope, blotting from our sight the flickering ring of flame, and extinguishing the last filmy jet of vapour.

Suddenly the entire crater caved in and filled up under my anguished eyes, quenching for all eternity the vapour wall, the fine, and burying the little denizens of the flames, and perhaps a billion dollars’ worth of emeralds under as many billion tons of earth.

Quieter and quieter grew the earth as the gigantic worm bored straight down into depths immeasurable. And at last the moon shone upon a world that lay without a tremor in its milky lustre.

“I shall name it *Verma gigantea*,” said I, with a hysterical sob; “but nobody will ever believe me when I tell this story!”

Still terribly shaken, we turned toward the house. And as we approached the lamplit veranda, I saw a horse standing there and a young man hastily dismounting.

And then a terrible thing occurred; for, before I could even shriek, Wilna had put both arms around that young man’s neck, and both of his arms were clasping her waist.

Blythe was kind to me. He took me around the back way and put me to bed.

And there I lay through the most awful night I even experienced, listening to the piano below, where Wilna and William Green were singing, “Un Peu d’Amour.”