

The Swastika

By Robert W. Chambers

This is rather a curious story—not nearly as artistic as if it were fiction. Fact seldom is artistic.

One thing is certain: Hildreth had never before heard of a swastika; he had heard of Judge Grey, one of the Mixed Tribunal, and he knew that the Sarna came from that magistrate as a wedding gift to his father; but he never for one moment connected anything that ever happened in the Orient with his stenographer and private secretary. Nor did he suspect—but this story is running away from me backward.

Reclining in his uncle's emblazoned armchair, the tips of his fingers joined, young Hildreth gazed meditatively at the ceiling through the drifting haze of his cigar. On the ceiling several delicately tinted Cupids were attempting to asphyxiate one another with piles of roses. The room and its furniture also were gayly ornamental after the style popularly imputed to Louis XIV, that monarch being in no condition to deny the accusation. There was a view through one door into a rococo library, through another into a breakfast room, and through the windows into a snow-storm at Thirtieth Street and Fifth Avenue. However, the ensemble did not appear illogical if you turned your back to the window; besides, there was the stenographer to look at. But Hildreth was gazing fixedly at the ceiling through the stratified mist from his cigar.

The youthful stenographer, dimpled chin on hand, drummed softly with her pencil tip and watched him sidewise out of two very beautiful eyes. Her cuffs were as immaculate as her cool, white skin; her head, with its thick, bright hair, harmonized with other pretty things; and I do not think that Louis XIV would have repudiated her, at any rate.

Hildreth blew ring after ring of smoke at the ceiling, passing his hand, at intervals, through his hair, which was rather short and inclined to curl.

"Miss Grey," he said, "can't you think of anything else that rhymes with 'tin'?"

"Gin, din, thin," suggested the stenographer, referring to a rhyming dictionary. "We've used 'din' and 'thin' already in the second verse; don't you remember? And we can't use 'gin' in any combination whatever; I've tried it. Isn't there anything else you can think of?"

"Sin?" she inquired demurely.

"'Sin,' " he repeated. "'Sin' sounds interesting. We need something to flavor the poem. Do you believe that you and I could make any proper use of 'sin'?"

She appeared doubtful.

"Let us see, anyway. Read what you've taken," he said, composing himself to listen to his own lines with the modest resignation of the true poet.

And the girl sorted her notes and read softly:

"Behold them packed so snug within
Their air-tight box of shining tin—
Hildreth's Honey Wafers!

"Ready for breakfast, lunch or din-
Ner; crisp and fresh and sweet and thin—
Hildreth's Honey Wafers!"

She raised her blue eyes, looking at him inquiringly over the penciled sheets of manuscript.

“There ought to be another verse,” he mused. “Don’t you think so?”

“I think two verses of this kind are sufficient, Mr. Hildreth.”

“You are mistaken; the poem is still incomplete. The first verse, you see, is an impression—a sort of word-picture of the tin box—a kind of prologue to prepare people for what is inside the box in the second verse. In the second I explain that Hildreth’s Honey Wafers are all ready to eat, and I excite people’s appetites. Now, the third verse must gratify them. Don’t you see?”

“Is it not good advertising to break off abruptly and leave the public hungry?”

“No; that’s only good literature; but in advertising you must not leave your public discontented. People like to look at pictures of other people who are enjoying something to repletion—pitching into a generous trough of breakfast food, or pausing to savor the delicious after-effects of a nerve tonic. Besides,” he added moodily, puffing his cigar, “my uncle requires three verses, and that settles it. What was that rhyme you suggested?”

“I—I ventured to suggest ‘sin.’ ”

“ ‘Sin,’ ” he repeated thoughtfully, pinching his chin and staring at the snowy roofs across Thirtieth Street. “Well, how would this do for the third verse?”

“They invigorate the hair and clear the skin,
And promote happiness in this world of sin—
Hildreth’s Honey Wa—”

“But you have the meter all wrong again,” she expostulated. “You never pay any attention to the meter.”

“Oh, you can fix that as you fixed the other verses!”

“Besides, is it really true that Hildreth’s Honey Wafers do all those things?”

He began an elaborate argument to prove that falling hair and poor complexion were caused by improper nourishment, and that the wafers were proper nourishment; but presently his voice dwindled to a grumble. He relighted his cigar, looking at her askance.

“We might say,” he resumed, “using poetic license:

“Into this world of crime and sin
Like an angel above was wafted the box of tin;
Hildreth’s Ho—”

She shook her head.

“Why not?” he asked.

“You can’t compare a tin box to an angel above—and you can’t waft a tin box, you know—”

“Yes, I can. Poets’ license—”

“That is one of the troubles with your verses, Mr. Hildreth—there is so much license and so little—”

“You are rather rough on me,” he said, coloring up.

“I don’t mean to be; I only try to help you.”

“I know it; you are very kind—very amiable. I am perfectly aware that a stenographer’s duties do not include literary criticism. I ought to be ashamed to ask your aid, but if I don’t have it I’m done for.”

“But I give it most freely, Mr. Hildreth.”

“I know you do, and I’m also aware that I am imposing. on you most shamefully. After this week we’ll let my verses go as I compose them. It will probably put me out of business, but I can’t help that.”

“Mr. Hildreth, we simply cannot let your verses go unedited.”

He looked at her for a moment in silence. “Can’t you stand my verses?” he inquired. And, as she made no reply: “If you can’t—if they are really as bad as that, why, the public is going to recoil, too, and I’ll doubtless ruin the business for my uncle. He has no more idea of good poetry than I have. I’ll ruin him; and our rivals, The Bunsen’s Baby Biscuit Company, will call me blessed!”

“Your uncle writes you that he likes the advertising verses you send him,” she interrupted cheerily. “He tells you that the verses have made the wafers worth a fortune.”

“Yes, but you always have revised my verses, and he doesn’t know that. Every poem I’ve done for the Honey Wafers Company you’ve revised. It is you who have made them sell all over this continent.”

“What of it?” she answered, amused, “as long as your uncle is satisfied. I don’t mind the trouble of editing your verses—truly I don’t.” She rested her cheek on her wrist, playing the while with her pencil. “I am very happy to do what I can, Mr. Hildreth. Shall we try once more?”

She seemed to grow more disturbingly pretty every day; he permitted himself to look at her long enough to remember that he had something else to do. “Din, pin, gin, sin,” he repeated sullenly. “What the mischief am I to write, anyway?”

“I don’t think we can use ‘sin,’ do you?” she asked, lifting her blue eyes.

Perhaps he found inspiration in them; he looked at them hard; an inward struggle set his mouth in an uncompromising line. And this is what he evolved:

“Bright as blue eyes that are innocent of sin
Is the box of tin they’re packed in—
Hildreth’s Honey W—”

“You *can’t* compare a tin box to blue eyes, Mr. Hildreth! You surely must admit that.”

“Tin is bright, isn’t it? Blue eyes are bright, aren’t they? Well, if one’s bright and the others are——”

She shook her head slowly; her eyes had softened to a violet tint. He noticed that phenomenon, but he did not know that he had noticed it. His brows met in a frown of intense intellectual concentration; for five full minutes he remained rigid in the agony of composition, then, with a long breath, he delivered himself of another verse:

“Soft as the color of blue violets that grow in
The woods, is perfume from the box of tin!
Hil——”

“Oh, dear!” said the stenographer with a sudden little indrawing of her breath.

“If you want to laugh,” he said, flushing, “go ahead. I’m not sensitive.”

“I had no desire to laugh, Mr. Hildreth; it’s far beyond a laughing matter.”

He regarded her gloomily, relighted his cigar, and gazed out of the frosty window. After a moment a smile twitched his mouth.

“I suppose it’s not good—that last idea about ingrowing violets——”

She laughed: she could not help it; he laughed, too.

“How long have we been working together?” he asked, leaning back in his chair. He knew, but he wanted to know whether *she* knew.

She knew, but she pretended to think very hard before answering, laying her pencil thoughtfully across her lips, immersed in calculation.

“It must be nearly a month, Mr. Hildreth.”

“Impossible!” he exclaimed, pretending surprise.

“Almost,” she insisted. “Let me see; I came to you on the fifth—”

“The ninth,” he said quickly. He was easily beguiled.

“*Was* it the ninth?” she asked wonderingly—though what there was to wonder at is not clear, the date signaling nothing in particular except the day they first laid eyes on one another. “I believe it was the ninth, after all. That would make it almost a month—”

“Exactly a month,” he said triumphantly. “This is our first anniversary—and *you* didn’t know it!”

He stopped; he hadn’t meant to use words of that sort. People employ such expressions for other matters, not to commemorate the date of a purely business engagement.

“What you mean to say, Mr. Hildreth, is that I have been in your employment exactly a month,” she said with amiable indifference.

“Exactly,” he repeated, opening the inlaid cover of a rococo desk and bringing forth a package. Then he rose to his feet and made her a bow, full of the charm of good breeding: “May I venture to offer a little gift in memory of the fortunate event?”

She stood up, surprised, quiet, a trifle perplexed.

“What fortunate event, Mr. Hildreth?”

“The annivers—the—pleasant occasion—” He floundered, and she let him. It irritated him to flounder, for his intentions were above reproach.

“What I mean to say is simple enough,” he snapped. “You’ve practically written my poems for me, and you didn’t have to, but if you hadn’t I either should have ruined my uncle’s business or lost my job, and I’m grateful, and I wanted to give you something to show it—these books—”

She took them, a trifle uncertain, but guided by inherited instinct. She looked at the beautifully bound and dreadfully expensive volumes. The constraint lasted only a second; she thanked him, glanced at the title-page, where he had written the date and her name, but not his own. His good taste appealing to her, she smiled at him in a delightfully friendly fashion; and the charm of the transfiguration so occupied him that, finding himself staring, he neutralized the rudeness by closing his eyes with a wise look as though intent on pursuing elusive rhymes for commercial purposes.

She seated herself at her little flyaway gilded desk once more; he relapsed into his chair and sat there drumming with his fingers on the golden foliations of the carved arms.

She had, instinctively, picked up her pencil and pad, ready for dictation when the sacred fire should blaze up in him. The fire, however, appeared to be out. There was not a sputter.

“And in all this time,” he mused, continuing his cogitations aloud, “you have never asked me why, in the name of common decency, I insisted on trying to be a poet!”

As she made no reply:

“Have you?” he repeated.

“Of *course* I haven’t—”

“Is it because you are too civil to hurt a man’s feelings?”

“It is because I am employed by you, Mr. Hildreth

“Because you are employed by me? Nonsense! That’s no reason why I should torture a cultivated ear with unspeakable rhymes. I wonder, Miss Grey, what you really think of me?”

She could have told him that she didn’t think of him at all except in a business sense, which would have been an untruth, but the proper answer for him. She thought of several answers, all reserved, indifferent, discouraging the faintest hint of intimacy, and therefore suitable. Then she said: “Would it interest you to know what your stenographer thinks about you?”

He said it would interest him excessively, and he desired information.

“I think,” she said, not looking at him but at her pencil, with which she was tracing arabesques on the pad, “I think that you could do some things much better than—others. Oh, dear! that sounds like Tupper—but it’s true.”

“You mean I’d make a better bandit, for example, than I do a poet?”

“I don’t know what qualification you have for the career you suggest,” she replied demurely.

“I understand you,” he said; “it’s as simple as those profound lines:

“ ‘A fool is bent upon a twig, but wise men shun a bandit;
Which is really very clever if you only understand it.’ ”

That’s what you intended to say, wasn’t it?”

They were both laughing, she with more reserve than he.

“If a bandit’s life is not a happy one, what must a poet’s life resemble?” he demanded. “Why, it’s a perfect—but the word is inadequate, Miss Grey. Did you ever for one mad moment suppose that I wrote rhymes for the pleasure it gave me?”

No,” she said, “I didn’t.”

“Or did you imagine I was infatuated with the notion that my rhymes gave pleasure to others?”

She laughed such a care-free laugh—so sweet, so entirely gay and innocent—that he said impulsively: “I wish you’d let me tell you how it is. I do so hate to appear a fool to you.”

Something checked her mirth, yet it scarcely could be what he said, for his speech and manner were quite free from offense.

“May I tell you?” he asked, conscious of the shadow of constraint between them.

There was something in her silent acquiescence which hinted: “My time is yours, Mr. Hildreth; but, considering the strictly business footing of our relations, hadn’t you better begin to make your third verse?” And no doubt the slight impatient movement of his shoulders meant: “No, I won’t begin my third verse; I desire to unburden to you a soul too long misunderstood.” But the interpretation of her silence and his shrug are purely speculative on my part.

“I’d quit this verse making in a moment if I could,” he said; “but it’s my livelihood. I always loathed poetry, even my own; but I’ve simply got to earn my living.”

“Surely,” she said, with an instinctive glance around the exceedingly ornate apartment, “it would be silly for you to give up making advertising verses for your uncle as long as—as—”

“As long as it permits me to live like this? Do you suppose that this is *my* apartment?—that anything in it belongs to me?—that my income from my wafer poetry would even pay for a single week’s rent here? There’s the ghastly mockery of it. Why, my salary is just twice what yours is: in other words, I divide with you every week.”

She regarded him with amazement.

“Apartment, servants—everything belongs to my uncle. My uncle has views,” he said, waving his hand. “Unfortunately, one of his views is how to bring up his only nephew. Just fancy a man

fresh from Harvard flung neck and heels into his uncle's wafer business on thirty dollars a week!"

"Dreadful," she motioned with her lips.

"Neck and heels! He said I was to find no favors, no privileges; that I must begin at the lowest rung of the ladder, and, as he knew of nothing lower than poetry, he set me to work writing Honey Wafer ads. I'm to be promoted next year to be the artist that draws pictures for the ads. After that I shall advance through the baking, packing, and truck departments until I become a traveling salesman. Meanwhile, I've emerged from my cheap boarding house to keep his servants busy till he returns."

She sat very still, watching him with her beautiful, serious young eyes.

"Then, some day, I'm to be taken into the concern and become a partner if—"

"If?"

"If I don't marry."

"Oh!" she said faintly.

"But if I *do*—"

There was an ominous pause; then she repeated calmly:

"If you *do*?"

"I'm down and out, and he leaves about five millions to the Society for Psychical Research. A nice position for me if I should ever fall in love, isn't it?"

The pause was longer this time.

"The Society for Psychical Research," she repeated under her breath.

"Yes. You know—they investigate spooks, and tip tables, and go into trances, and see blond gentlemen coming over the ocean to marry you, and dark ladies hiding around the corner."

"Is he interested in such things—your uncle?"

"Mad about them. He's up at his country place now with a bunch of Columbia professors and Sixth Avenue clairvoyants, engaged in crystal-gazing experiments. Later he's going to lecture about 'em at Columbia University."

"What is crystal gazing?" she asked innocently.

"To tell you the truth, I don't know exactly. My uncle and a fat clairvoyant in a pink teagown sit at a table and squint into a big globe made of rock crystal; and he tells me that he can sit in his chair up there at Adrintha Lodge and see, in the crystal, everything that he wants to see—including how I'm behaving myself down here in town. He told me that if I ever—ever kissed anybody he'd see it and discharge me."

"Does he say he can see *you*?"

"He does."

"And everything you are doing?"

"Every blessed thing."

"Do you believe it?" she asked anxiously.

"No, of course not. But I let him think he has me scared to death."

She leaned forward on the table, clasping both hands under her chin.

"Is that what keeps you on your best behavior?"

It was rather a curious thing to say.

"Suppose," she added, "that your uncle was looking into his crystal at this very minute. I think, if you please, we'd better stop talking and begin our work. . . . Don't you? I think we ought at least to *look* as though we were busy."

"*You* don't believe that he could see us, do you?" demanded Hildreth.

“No; . . . but suppose he could? Don’t you think I’d better copy your verses—or be doing something—”

She hastily placed a sheet of paper in the machine, slid it into place, and struck several keys. It was quite unconscious on her part, but when, a moment later, she turned the sheet over she found that she had written his name about sixty times. The portent of this, however, did not then strike her.

Somewhere in the room little silvery chimes sounded the hour.

“Can it be two o’clock already?” she exclaimed.

He examined his watch in assumed surprise. “Why, we are just in time!” he said hazily.

“Yes, Mr. Hildreth—in time for what?”

“You—you won’t be offended—where anything but offense is meant—will you?”

She had risen to face him; he, rather red about the ears, began by making a mess of what he was saying; and when she had grasped the import of it she let him go on making a mess until his irritation straightened out matters.

“It’s only that you’ve been so kind to help me do all that advertising poetry, and I’m so tremendously grateful, and it’s our first annivers—our—er—the occasion—You know what I mean. So please stay to luncheon. Will you?”

“Please don’t ask me, Mr. Hildreth—”

“Yes, I will! You simply can’t be offended; you simply cannot mistake my attitude, my meaning—”

“I am not offended. You are very thoughtful—amiable—but I think I ought to go—”

“Our anni—the date, you know—just to celebrate a purely business arrangement which has been so delight—so profitable to me, I mean—”

“No, I could not stay, Mr. Hildreth—”

“But it’s partly for business purposes,” he explained anxiously. “Why, you must know, Miss Grey, that more business is transacted at luncheon than before or after. That’s what great financiers do; they say to the head of a department: ‘Lunch with me, Mr. So-and-so.’ And Mr. So—and—so understands at once.”

“Does that great financier ever say: ‘Lunch with me, *Miss* So-and-so’?”

“Yes, often and often. And *she* understands!”

“Are you sure she does?”

“I am. Please let me be sure.”

“Mr. Hildreth, I should—should like to—there,

I admit it! But it is not *convenable*. I know it; you know it; it is *not* the thing for us to do. I have no business here except as your stenographer. I could not accept.”

“Because you are a stenographer?”

“If I were not in your employment I should not be here with you. You know that.”

“But I should perhaps be at your house if—”

“You are speculating in impossibilities.” She bent her head, smiling across the table at him, and dropping her hand on the books he had given her. “Your kindness must have some bounds; let it end in these bindings; I—I shall remember it with each leaf I turn.” And as he said nothing, but looked rather miserable, she added: “Won’t you?”

There was another interval of silence; she considered his face anew. The unhappiness in it was evident.

“Do you really want me . . . to talk business?”

“I want you to stay. Will you?”

She did not answer, though a little tremor touched her lips.

“That’s jolly!” he said gayly, and touched an electric button behind him. And a moment later a maid in cap and apron respectfully piloted her out of sight.

About half past two a Japanese butler served them in the colonial breakfast room, and she laughed at the little silver trifle she found beside her plate—a tiny type-machine made to hold scents in microscopic crystal vials. Her initials were engraved upon it.

“You see,” he said, “I do not regard our poetical partnership lightly, even if you do. What you have done for me is going to enable me to enter the firm one day—aided by your editing my verses.”

“I never before understood,” she admitted, “why you advertised for a stenographer who was a graduate of Barnard College. And—when I applied to you I was perfectly astonished when you asked me so anxiously whether I could rhyme and draw pictures.”

He examined his grape fruit and extracted a minted cherry with great care. Presently he swallowed it.

“I knew from the first instant I saw you that my chance in life had come,” he observed.

“You didn’t know it before you questioned me.”

“Yes, I did.”

“How?”

He looked up at her: “I don’t know *how* I knew it.” She was apparently interested in the aroma of her wine. “But I knew it,” he ended.

The vintage was doubtless worthy of the serious attention she gave it.

“Do you know what wine that is?” he asked, amused.

“Yes; it is Sarna,” she said simply.

“How did you know?” he exclaimed in amazement.

She lifted the glass with a pretty gesture: “Are you so astonished that your stenographer knows the rarest wine in the world—and the legend concerning it? A most inappropriate wine for such a luncheon, Mr. Hildreth—”

“You are a constant series of endless astonishments to me,” he said. “Where on earth you ever heard of Sarna—and how you should have known it when you saw it—this wine so rare that but one in ten thousand experts ever heard of it—”

“Why did you have it served?” she asked directly. “Do you know what this wine of Sarna signifies? Do you know every drop is worth ten times its weight in gold? Do you know there are not three other bottles of it known in the world?”

“I knew all that. I believed that Sarna alone was worthy of—of”—he met her level gaze—“of our first anniversary.”

“No; it is inappropriate,” she replied steadily. “Do you not know the legend?”

“It is the only wine not forbidden by the Koran. Is that what you mean? Or do you mean—” He hesitated.

“Yes, that. The last Khedive emptied the last glass of the last but three bottles remaining in all the world while his bride’s lips were still wet with the dew of Sarna. It is the custom of Emperors and Sultans—ask me for how long, and my answer is: as long as the saros; compute it, oh, Heaven-born!” She crossed her pretty hands below her throat, a smile, half gay, half tender, parting her lips.

“How did *you* know such things?” he asked.

“My father was a judge of the Mixed Tribunal,” she answered gravely. “My mother was married there; I was born in Cairo.”

“Fate!” he said excitedly—“sheer Fate! My father was the ex-Confederate, Hildreth Pasha, of the Khedival Court! The Sarna—that bottle cradled there—came from a judge of the Mixed Tribunal! Shall not their children touch the same glass?”

They both were excited, flushed, a little bewildered.

“Do you know the custom?” he asked recklessly.

“Y-es.” She held up one slender finger; her mother’s betrothal ring, set with the diamond scarab, sparkled on the white skin; and she drew the thin circlet from her finger and held it suspended over the glass of golden Sarna. The single brilliant flashed and flashed as though the sacred beetle were struggling to be free.

“Shall I?”

“Try it,” he laughed. “Who knows what sign of fortune the dead Sultans may send?”

“They—they only send a sign to—to brides—”

“I know it. Try!”

“But the mechanism is unknown to me; it is not possible that a bath of this scented wine could start it—”

“Try!”

There was a glimmer, a little clinking splash in the slim wineglass. They inspected the ring lying in the amber wine; they glanced at one another rather foolishly. Then, looking at him, she raised the glass, tasted, passed it to him. He tasted, his eyes on her, and set the half-empty glass before her.

“I—I believe there’s something happening to that ring,” said Hildreth suddenly, rising and passing around the table to her side.

Breathless, they bent over the glass, heads close together.

“Doesn’t it look to you as though that diamond scarab were moving?” he said in a low voice.

“Yes; but it can’t be—*how* can it—”

“Look!”

“Oh—h!” she whispered—“see! It—it’s alive! It is unfolding arms and legs like a crab.”

“What on earth—” he stammered, but got no further, for the girl caught him by the arm: “Look! Look! *The swastika!* It means fortune! It means—it means—”

His hand shook as he lifted the glass and reversed it. A shower of perfumed wine sprinkled the lace centerpiece; the mystic swastika, glittering, magnificent, fell heavily upon the mahogany—a dull, gem-incrusted lump of purest gold.

“What is it?” he gasped. “I thought it was alive, like one of those jeweled Egyptian beetles! I thought those things were legs!”

“It is the swastika,” she whispered, laying it in her pink palm. “Who wears it shall always—” She stopped short, hesitated, then the color in her face deepened, and she looked up over her shoulder at him. “Will you do something for me?” she asked.

“Yes.”

“Wear this. Will you?” She drew her tiny handkerchief from her sleeve, tore a shred of cambric from it, passed it through the swastika, and, before he knew what she meant to do, had tied it to his lapel.

“Just to see what happens,” she said, laughing almost hysterically. If there was the slightest chance of any luck in the world she wished it to be his. It was all she had to give.

“You resign your chance of fortune to me?” he asked curiously—and, as she only nodded: “There is but one happiness Fortune can bring me. Are you willing to trust it to me?”

Before she could reply a maid appeared with a telegram; he asked her pardon, and opened it. Twice he read it, read it again, nodded a dazed dismissal to the maid, read it again very carefully, and finally, with a smile that was somewhat sickly, handed it across the table to her.

What she read was this:

ADRINTHA LODGE,
Mohawk County New York.

JOHN HILDRETH: I know what you're up to, and you had better stop.

PETER HILDRETH.

"Peter Hildreth," she repeated blankly.

"My uncle."

"But—but what does he mean?"

"That's what I'd like to know," said the young fellow uneasily.

"Is he in the habit of telegraphing you?"

"No, he isn't; he never did such a thing."

She turned the yellow leaf of paper over and over thoughtfully. Then he suddenly encountered her disturbed gaze.

"He says that he knows what you're up to, and you'd better stop," she said. "What *are* you up to, Mr. Hildreth?"

"Up to? Absolutely nothing! I'm fairly tingling with the consciousness of innocence, righteousness, and good intentions. *I* don't know what that old crank means—any more than you know."

"I—I am dreadfully afraid that *I* know what he means."

"What?"

"I think he means me."

"You! Why?"

"Because I'm here—here lunching with you. He might draw—dreadful conclusions."

"What on earth do you mean, Miss Grey? He never even heard of you. How can he know you are here?"

"Suppose—suppose he is—is looking into his crystal!"

A sudden silence fell, lasting until the coffee was served.

"It is nonsense to suppose that people can do such things," said Hildreth abruptly.

"What things?" she asked, watching him set fire to a cigarette.

"Such things as looking into crystals and seeing nephews. Anyway, what is there to see?" He waved his hands as though scattering suspicion to the four winds. "What is there to see except a future financier and his principal chief of department at a purely business luncheon—"

"With silver souvenirs and Sarna," she murmured.

They laughed, feeling the constraint subsiding once more.

"Please let us talk a little business—for form's sake, if nothing else," she said.

"All right; your salary is to be increased—"

"Mr. Hildreth, you cannot afford any extravagances, and you know it."

"I am not going to let you write my verses, and profit by it to your exclusion! Besides, this swastika is going to enable me to afford anything, I understand."

"But you already divide your salary with me. You can't do more!"

"Yes, I can."

“No, no, no! Wait until you are promoted to be the advertising artist. Wait until the swastika begins to help us—you.”

“No; because then you’ll have to draw all my pictures for me, and your salary must be increased again.”

“At that rate,” she said, laughing, “I’ll be half partner when you are.”

“Full partner—if the swastika knows its business. I—I—wish he didn’t have that crystal up there at Adrintha. I’ve a mind to buy a rabbit’s foot. With a rabbit’s foot and a swastika we ought to checkmate any crystal-gazing, pink-eyed clairvoyants.”

“But—what have they to do with us?” she asked gently.

What he was about to say he only half divined—for she was bewilderingly pretty—and perhaps she dimly foresaw it, too, for they both flushed with a sudden constraint that was abruptly broken by the entrance of the maid with another telegram.

“What the deuce—” stammered Hildreth, tearing open the yellow envelope; and he read:

ADRINTHA LODGE.

JOHN HILDRETH: I’m watching you in my crystal. If you want the Society for Psychical Research to become my heirs, do exactly what you’re doing with that girl.

PETER HILDRETH.

“Is—is it anything alarming?” asked the pretty stenographer as he crumpled the paper.

“Alarming? I don’t know—no! What the mischief has got into that uncle of mine?”

“Is it from *him*?” she asked, turning pale.

“Yes—it *is*. But if he thinks he can make me believe that he sees me in his dinky little crystal—”

“Oh, don’t talk that way,” she pleaded; “there *may* be things that we don’t understand happening all the while—”

“There can’t be!”

For a while she was dumb, mutely refusing to be reassured, and presently, rising from the table, they passed into the gay little room where her desk stood.

The fire was glowing very brightly in the carved fireplace of golden and pearl-tinted onyx. He drew up his uncle’s great chair for her; she shook her head and looked meaningly at her pad and pencil, but after a silent struggle with indecision and inclination she seated herself by the gilt fender, pretty hands folded in acquiescence.

“Now,” he said, “let us speak of those things that *have* come true.”

“What has come true, Mr. Hildreth?”

“You.”

The slightest of rose tints touched her cheeks.

“Did you believe me unreal?” she asked.

He was leaning forward, looking up into her face, which reflected the pink light of the fire.

And what he started to say Heaven alone knows, for his voice was dreadfully unsteady. However, it ceased quickly enough when the maid knocked rather loudly and presented a third telegram to her disconcerted master; and this was what he read:

ADRINTHA LODGE.

JOHN HILDRETH: If you kiss that girl you’re talking to I’ll disinherit you.

PETER HILDRETH.

Stunned, the young man sat for a moment, vacant eyes fixed on the writing that alternately blurred and sprang into dreadful distinctness under his gaze. Presently he heard a voice not much like his own saying: "It's nonsense; things like this don't happen in 1907 in the borough of Manhattan. Why, that's Fifth Avenue out there, and there's Thirtieth Street, too; besides, the town's full of police; and they pinch star-readers and astrologers these days. Anyway, we have the swastika, and it will put any Sixth Avenue astrologer out of business

"I—I don't think I quite understand you," faltered the girl.

He looked at her; the scared expression died out.

"I'll get my uncle on the long-distance 'phone in a moment," he said irritably. "Then we'll clear up this business. Meanwhile—" He twisted up the telegram as though to cast it on the coals.

"Let me see it," she said calmly.

"I—it is—no—I can't—"

"Then it concerns *me*?"

He was silent.

"Very well," she said. "Don't burn it; leave it for a moment."

He laid the telegram on the arm of his chair. "It's more crystal-gazing," he said, trying to laugh easily, and failing. "It is rather extraordinary, too. But—see here, Miss Grey, it's utter nonsense to believe that my uncle can actually see us here in this room!

"I concede that it is rather odd, even, perhaps, exceedingly remarkable," he added slowly; "but I cannot believe that *my* uncle, two hundred miles north of us, can see you and me in his confounded crystal. My explanation of his telegrams is this: he has merely taken the precaution, at intervals, to try to frighten me, assuming that I am in mischief. It's coincidence—"

"Mr. Hildreth!"

"Not that I admit for one moment that you and I *are* in mischief!" he explained hastily.

"But *I* admit it. It is all wrong, and we both know it. If I am not here officially I ought not to be here at all."

"Can't I talk to you except on business?"

"Why should you?"

"Because I want to—because it is pleasant—because it's the pleasantest thing that has ever come into my life!"

"That cannot be," she said, paling. "You know many people, you go everywhere—everywhere that I do not—"

"If I were not an advertising poet at thirty dollars a week," he said, "I'd not care where my uncle left his millions. I'd do what I pleased—what I ought to do—what any man with a grain of sense would do."

"What would you do, Mr. Hildreth?"

"Make love to the girl I love, and not be scared away like a rabbit!"

She was still paler when she said: "Are you—in love, then?"

"Yes; but I can't tell her."

She was silent, staring into the fire.

"I can't tell her, can I? I have nothing to offer—nothing except a prospect of losing my expectations. A man can't tell a girl that he loves her under such circumstances, can he?"

"I—don't know."

"Do you suppose a—a girl like that would wait for him—until he got into the firm?"

"If she loved him," said Miss Grey in a low voice, "there is absolutely no telling what that girl might do."

"Suppose," he said carelessly, "for the sake of illustration, that I was, at this moment, with that girl. For example"—he waved his hand airily—"for example, suppose you were that girl. Now, suppose that I told her I loved her; do you imagine that uncle of mine could see what I was about—if I worked the swastika on him vigorously?"

"I don't know," she said, staring at the fire, "how to work the swastika."

"If you—if you would consent to aid me—just a little," he ventured, "I could soon prove whether it was safe to speak to the—the other girl."

"How, Mr. Hildreth?"

"By just—just pretending that you were that other girl."

"You mean that you might practice a declaration—test it—on me? Just to see how it might affect your uncle?"

"Yes," he said eagerly, "and if my uncle doesn't telegraph again that he disowns me, why, I'll know that his other telegrams were merely coincidences!"

"And if he *does* telegraph that he has seen—everything—in his crystal?"

"Why—we'll have to wait—"

"The *other* girl and you? I see. You and I can truthfully deny our apparent guilt, can't we? . . . I will do what I can, Mr. Hildreth."

She stood up, one little hand on the back of the chair. He hesitated, then picked up the last telegram, opened it, and handed it to her, reading it again over her shoulder:

"If you kiss that girl you're talking to I'll disinherit you."

A bright blush stained her skin.

"It is only—only to test his power," he managed to say, but the thumping of his heart jarred his speech and scared him into silence.

"You—is it necessary to kiss me?"

"Yes—absolutely."

She met his gaze, standing erect, one hand on the chair. Then she drew a long breath as he lifted her hand; her eyes closed. He said: "I love you—I loved you the moment I saw you—a month ago!" This was no doubt a mistake; he was mixing the two girls. "What do I care for a crystal-squinting uncle, or for those accursed Honey Wafer verses? If he's looking at us now let us convince him; shall we—sweetheart?"

She unclosed her eyes. "Am I to play my part when you speak to me like that? I don't know how—"

"Do what I do," he stammered; and he encircled her slender waist and kissed her until, cheeks aflame, she swayed a moment in his arms, freed herself, and sank breathless into the chair, covering her face. And he knelt beside her by the gilt fender, his lips to her fingers, stammering words that almost stunned her and left her faint with their passion and sweetness:

"You must have known that it was you I loved—that *you* were that *other* girl. You must have seen it a thousand times!"

She was crying silently; she could not speak, but one arm tightened around his neck in tremulous assent.

The telephone bell had been ringing for some time in their ears, deaf to all sounds except each other's whispers; but at length he stumbled to his feet, cleared his eyes of enchantment, and made his way across the room to the receiver.

"What the deuce is the matter?"

* * *

“Who?”

* * *

“Oh, is that you, Uncle Peter?”

* * *

“Yes, I did get your telegrams, but I thought—”

* * *

“You mean to say you can *see us now*?”

* * *

“No, I don’t deny it; I did kiss her.”

* * *

“Because I love her!”

* * *

“I can’t help it; you can do as you please. And I may as well tell you that I’m not afraid of your professors, or clairvoyants, or your crystals, because I’ve got a swastika—”

* * *

“Yes, a swastika!”

* * *

“You don’t know what a swastika is? Well, let me tell you it’s about five thousand times more powerful than a rabbit’s foot. . . . What? . Yes, I’ll hold the wire till you look it up in the dictionary.”

A throbbing silence. Then:

“Yes, Uncle Peter, I’m here.”

* * *

“Very well; I’m sorry you’re angry, and I regret that you’re not afraid of the swastika. I am quite willing to trust to it; the swastika gave me the girl I love. And, by the way, Uncle Peter, didn’t you write me that my advertising poems made a fortune for you out of your wafers? . . . All right; I only wanted to confess that she, not I, wrote them.”

* * *

“Don’t believe it? Why, I could no more write those charming verses than *you* could!”

* * *

“You may imagine that with her talent and mine, and the swastika working away for us, we are not going to starve—”

* * *

“That’s just what we intend to do. Bunsen’s Baby Biscuit Company will appreciate our talents. Besides, she can draw—”

* * *

“You can call it blackmail if you choose. But what do you offer us to refuse advances from Bunsen?”

* * *

“No, I won’t consider it. My price is full partnership in the Hildreth’s Honey Wafer Company, a cordial blessing from you, use of your apartments for a year, and the same old cozy place in your testament.”

* * *

“Yes, in return we will write your poetry and draw your pictures for you. And, besides, we’ll name after you our first—”

“Jack!” she exclaimed, aghast.

“Dearest, for Heaven’s sake let me deal with him!” whispered Hildreth; then he shouted through the transmitter:

“Is it all right, Uncle Peter?”

* * *

“I promise you—we promise you name him Peter! If you don’t, by name him Bunsen—”

* * *

“That’s all right, but we’re desperate. Peter or Bunsen; take your choice!”

* * *

“Yes; and I’ll have his photograph taken for Bunsen, and under it I’ll print: ‘A Bunsen’s Baby Biscuit Boy!’”

* * *

“Don’t use such language; they’ll cut us off!”

* * *

“What?”

* * *

“Good! All right, Uncle Peter, you’re a brick. But—just one thing more; please put that crystal away for an hour or two—”

* * *

“Because we’d like a little privacy!”

* * *

“Of course I shall. Long engagements are foolish—”

“Jack!”

“Dearest, you know they are,” he said, turning toward her. “Shall I tell him in a week?”

Her blue eyes filled; again the little tremor of acquiescence set her red mouth quivering.

“In a week, Uncle Peter!” he shouted.

* * *

“What? I’ll ask her. Hold the wire.”

And to her he said: “Sweetheart, our kind Uncle Peter desires to say something civil to you. I—I think it may be something about a check. Will you speak to him?”

She rose and came toward him; he handed her the receiver; she raised her head, and he bent his. They kissed—while his uncle waited.

Then she raised the receiver to her pretty ear, and said, very softly:

“Hello! Hello, Uncle Peter!”