

Thanksgiving Number—November, 1919

CENTURY





Porcelain Cups

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"Oho, you virtuous pretty ladies! What all you value is such matters as those cups!"



H, but they are beyond all praise," said Cynthia Allonby, enraptured, "and certainly you should have presented them to the queen."

"Her Majesty already possesses a cup of that ware," replied Lord Pevensey. "It was one of her New Year's gifts from Robert Cecil. Hers is, I believe, not quite so fine as either of yours; but, then, they tell me, there is not the like of this pair in England, nor indeed on the hither side of Cataia."

He set the two pieces of Chinese pottery upon the shelves in the south corner of the room. These cups were of that sea-green tint called celadon, with a very wonderful glow and radiance. Such oddities were the last vogue at court in this year of grace 1593, and Cynthia could not but speculate as to what monstrous sum Lord Pevensey had paid for this, his latest gift to her.

Now he turned, smiling, a really superb creature in his blue and gold.

"I had to-day another message from the queen."

"George," Cynthia said, with fond concern, "it frightens me to see you thus foolhardy in tempting alike the queen's anger and the plague."

"Eh, as goes the plague, it spares nine out of ten," he answered lightly. "The queen, I grant you, is another pair of sleeves, for an irritated Tudor spares nobody."

But Cynthia Allonby kept silence and did not exactly smile while she appraised her famous young kinsman. She was flattered by, and a little afraid of, the gay self-confidence which led anybody to take such chances. Two

weeks ago it was that the painted, terrible old queen had named Lord Pevensey to go straightway into France, where, rumor had it, King Henry was preparing to renounce the reformed religion and making his peace with the pope; and for two weeks Pevensey had lingered, on one pretense or another, at his house in London, with the plague creeping about the city like an invisible, incalculable flame, and the queen asking questions at Windsor. Every day Pevensey came to the Marquis of Falmouth's lodging at Deptford, and every day Lord Pevensey pointed out to the marquis's daughter that Pevensey did not intend to go into France, for nobody could foretell how long a stay, as a bachelor. Certainly it was all very flattering.

"Yes, and you would be an excellent match," said Cynthia, aloud, "if that were all. And yet, what must I reasonably expect in marrying, sir, the famous Earl of Pevensey?"

"A great deal of love and petting, my dear. And if there were anything else to which you had a fancy, I would get it for you."

Her glance went to those lovely cups and lingered fondly.

"Yes, dear Master Generosity, if it could be purchased or manufactured, you would get it for me."

"If it exists, I will get it for you," he declared.

"I think that it exists, but I am not learned enough to know what it is. George, if I married you, I would have money and fine clothes and soft hours, and many lackeys to wait on me, and honor from all men. And you would be kind to me, I know, when you re-

turned from the day's work at Windsor or Holyrood or the Louvre. But do you not see that I would always be to you only a rather costly luxury, like those cups, which the queen's minister could afford to keep for his hours of leisure?"

He answered:

"You are all in all to me. You know it. Oh, very well do you know and abuse your power, you adorable and lovely baggage, who have kept me dancing attendance for a fortnight without ever giving me an honest yes or no. Yet I may no longer shirk the queen's business; no, not even to amuse you, my dear."

"You said you had heard from her—again?"

"I had this morning my orders, under Gloriana's own fair hand, either to depart to-morrow into France or else to come to-morrow to Windsor. I need not say that in the circumstances I consider France the more wholesome."

Now the girl's voice was hurt and wistful.

"So for the thousandth time is it proven the queen's business means more to you than I do. Yes, certainly it is just as I said, George."

He observed, unruffled:

"My dear, I scent unreason. This is a high matter. If the French King compounds with Rome, it means war for Protestant England. Even you must see that."

She replied sadly:

"Yes, even I! Oh, certainly, my Lord, even a half-witted child of seventeen can perceive as much as that."

"I was not speaking of half-witted persons, as I remember. Well, it chances that I am honored by the friendship of our gallant Béarnais, and am supposed to have some claim upon him, thanks to my good fortune last year in saving his life from the assassin Barrière. It chances that I may perhaps become, under Providence, the instrument of preserving my fellow-countrymen from much grief and trumpet-sounding and throat-cutting. Instead of pursuing that chance two weeks ago as was my duty, I have dangled at your apron-strings in the vain hope of softening the most variable and hardest heart in the world.

Now, clearly, I have not the right to do that any longer."

She admired the ennobled, the slightly rapt look which, she knew, denoted that George Bulmer was doing his duty as he saw it, even in her disappointment.

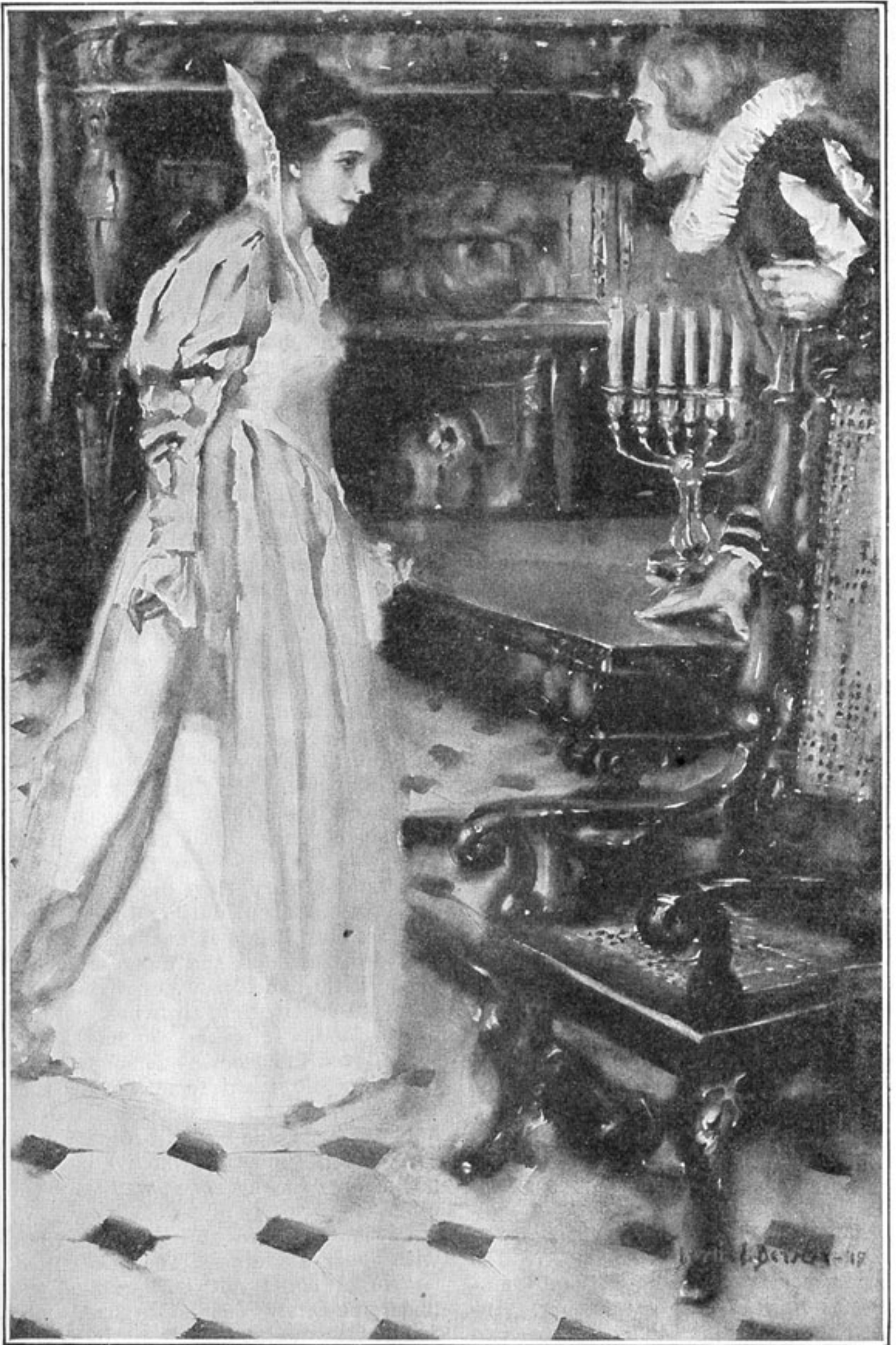
"No, you have not the right. You are wedded to your statecraft, to your patriotism, to your self-advancement, or christen it what you will. You are wedded, at all events, to your man's business. You have not the time for such trifles as giving a maid that foolish and lovely sort of wooing to which every maid looks forward in her heart of hearts. Indeed, for you to take a wife at all would be a kind of infidelity. Why, do you not see, George, even now, that the woman you marry will always come second to your real love?"

"In my heart, dear sophist, you will always come first. But it is not permitted that any loyal gentleman devote every hour of his life to sighing and making sonnets, and to the general solacing of a maid's loneliness in this dull little Deptford. Nor would you, I am sure, desire me to do so."

"I hardly know what I desire," she told him, ruefully. "But I know that when you talk of your man's business, I am lonely and chilled and far away from you. And I know that I cannot understand more than half your fine, high notions about duty and patriotism and serving England and so on," the girl declared, and she flung wide her lovely little hands in a despairing gesture. "I admire you, sir, when you talk of England. It makes you handsomer—yes, even handsomer—somehow. But all the while I am remembering that England is just an ordinary island inhabitate by a number of ordinary persons, for the most of whom I have no particular feeling one way or the other."

Pevensey looked at her for a while with queer tenderness. Then he smiled.

"No, I could not quite make you understand, my dear. But, ah, why fuddle that quaint little brain by trying to understand such matters as lie without your realm? For a woman's kingdom is the home, my dear, and her throne is in the heart of her husband."



"'I admire you, sir, when you talk of England' "

"All this is but another way of saying your lordship would have us cups upon a shelf," she pointed out, "in readiness for your leisure."

He shrugged, said "Nonsense!" and began more lightly to talk of other matters. Thus and thus he would do in France, such and such trinkets he would fetch back, "as toys for the most whimsical, the loveliest, and the most obstinate child in all the world," he phrased it. And they would be married, Pevensey declared, in September; nor, he gaily said, did he propose to have any further argument about it. Children should be seen—the proverb was dusty, but it particularly applied to pretty children.

Cynthia let him talk. She was just a little afraid of his self-confidence, and of this tall nobleman's habit of getting what he wanted in the end; but she dispiritedly felt that Pevensey had failed her. He treated her as a silly infant, and his want of her even in that capacity was a secondary matter; he was going into France, for all his petting talk, and was leaving her to shift as she best might until he could spare the time to resume his love-making.

Now, when Pevensey had gone, the room seemed darkened by the withdrawal of so much magnificence. Cynthia watched from the window as the tall earl rode away with three handsomely clad retainers. The sunset turned the dust raised by their horses' hoofs into a sort of golden haze. Yes, George was very fine and admirable; no doubt of it: even so, there was relief in the reflection that for a month or two she was rid of him.

Turning, she faced a lean, disheveled man, who stood by the Magdalen tapestry scratching his chin. He had unquiet, bright eyes, this out-at-elbows poet whom a marquis's daughter was pleased to patronize, and his red hair to-day was unpardonably touzled. Nor were his manners beyond reproach, for now, without saying anything, he, too, went to the window. He dragged one foot a little as he walked.

"So my Lord Pevensey departs!" he said. "Oho! and hark to Deptford! Now all the oafs in the corn-market are

cheering this bulwark of Protestant England, this rising young hero of a people with no nonsense about them."

"And Master Marlowe is pleased to return, after a five-days' round of taverns and bad women! Oh, but I have heard tales of you!" And Cynthia raised a reproving forefinger.

"True tales, no doubt." He shrugged, then sprawled in the high leather-covered chair which Pevensey had just vacated. "Lacking the moon he vainly cried for, the child learns to content himself with a penny whistle."

"Ah, but," the girl said, smiling, "the moon is very far away, too far to hear the sound of human crying; and besides, as I remember it, the moon was never a very amorous goddess."

"Just so," he answered. "Also she was called Cynthia, and she, too, was beautiful."

"Yet is it the heart that cries to me, my poet," she asked him softly, "or just the lips?"

"Oh, both of them, most beautiful and inaccessible of goddesses." Then Marlowe leaned toward her, laughing, and shaking that disreputable red head. "Still, you are very foolish in your latest incarnation to be wasting your rays upon carpet earls who will not outwear a century. Were modesty not my failing, I could name somebody who will last longer. Yes, and, if but I lacked that plaguy virtue, I would advise you to go a gipsying with that nameless somebody, so that two manikins might snatch their little share of the big things that are eternal, just as the butterfly fares intrepidly and joyously, with the sun for his torch-boy, through a universe wherein thought cannot estimate the unimportance of a butterfly, and wherein not even the chaste moon is very important. Yes, certainly I would advise you to have done with this vanity of courts and masques, of satins and fans and fiddles, this dallying with tinsels and bright vapors; and very movingly I would exhort you to seek out Arcadia, traveling hand in hand with that still nameless somebody—" And of a sudden Kit Marlowe began to sing:

"Come live with me and be my love,
And we will all the pleasures prove

That hills and valleys, dales and fields,
Woods or steepy mountain yields.

"And we will sit upon the rocks,
And see the shepherds feed their flocks
By shallow rivers, to whose falls
Melodious birds sing madrigals."

But the girl shook her small, wise head, decisively.

"That is all very fine, but, as it happens, there is no such place as this Arcadia, where people can frolic in perpetual sunlight the year round and find their food and clothing miraculously provided. No, nor can you, I am afraid, give me what all maids really, in their heart of hearts, desire far more than any sugar-candy Arcadia. Oh, as I have so often told you, Kit, I think you love no woman. You love words. And your seraglio is tenanted by very beautiful words, I grant you, though there is no longer any Sestos builded of agate and crystal, either, Kit Marlowe. For, as you may perceive, sir, I have read all that lovely poem you left with me last Thursday."

She saw how interested he was, saw how he almost smirked.

"Aha, so you think it not quite bad, eh, the conclusion of my 'Hero and Leander'?"

"It is your best. And your middlemost, my poet, is better than aught else in English," she said politely, and knowing how much he delighted to hear such remarks.

"Come, I retract my charge of foolishness, for you are plainly a wench of rare discrimination. And yet you say I do not love you! Cynthia, you are beautiful, you are perfect in all things. You are that heavenly Helen of whom I wrote, some persons say, acceptably enough. How strange it was I did not know that Helen was dark-haired and pale! For certainly yours is that immortal loveliness which must be served by poets in life and death."

"And I wonder how much of these ardors," she thought, "is kindled by my praise of his verses?" She bit her lip, and she regarded him with a hint of sadness. She said, aloud:

"But I did not, after all, speak to Lord Pevensey concerning the printing

of your poem. Instead, I burned your 'Hero and Leander,' Kit Marlowe."

She saw him jump as under a whip-lash. Then he smiled again in that wry fashion of his.

"I lament the loss to letters, for it was my only copy. Hoh, and for what reason did you burn it, may one ask?"

"I thought you loved it more than you loved me. It was my rival, I thought." The girl was aware of remorse, and yet it was remorse commingled with a mounting joy.

"And so you thought a jingle scribbled upon a bit of paper could be your rival with me!"

Then Cynthia no longer doubted, but gave a joyous little sobbing laugh, for the love of her disreputable dear poet was sustaining the stringent testing she had devised. She touched his freckled hand caressingly, and her face was as no man had ever seen it; and her voice, too, caressed him.

"Ah, you have made me the happiest of women, Kit! Kit, I am almost disappointed in you, though, that you do not grieve more for the loss of that beautiful poem."

His smiling did not waver, yet he stayed motionless.

"Do I appear perturbed?" he said. "Why, but see how lightly I take the destruction of my life-work in this my masterpiece! For I can assure you it was a masterpiece, the fruit of two years' toil and much loving repolishment."

"Ah, but you love me better than such matters, do you not?" she asked him, tenderly. "Kit Marlowe, I adore you. Sweetheart, do you not understand that a woman wants to be loved utterly and entirely? She wants no rivals, not even paper rivals. And so often when you talked of poetry I have felt lonely and chilled and far away from you, and I have been half-envious, dear, of your *Heros* and your *Helens* and your other good-for-nothing Greek minxes. But now I do not mind them at all. And I will make amends, quite prodigal amends, for my naughty jealousy; and my poet shall write me some more lovely poems, so he shall."

He said:

"You fool!"



"'Oh, oh,' said Marlowe, 'that ever a poet should love a woman!'"

And she drew away from him, for this man was no longer smiling.

"You burned my 'Hero and Leander'! You, you big-eyed fool! You lisping idiot! You wriggling, cuddling worm! You silken bag of food, had not even you the wit to perceive it was immortal beauty which would have lived long after you and I were dirt? And you, a half-witted animal, a shining, chattering parrot, lay claws to it!" Marlowe had risen in a sort of seizure, in a condition which was really quite unreasonable when one considered that only a poem was at stake, even a rather long poem.

And Cynthia began to smile, with tremulous, hurt-looking young lips.

"So my poet's love is very much the same as Pevensey's love! And I was right, after all."

"Oh, oh," said Marlowe, "that ever a poet should love a woman! What jokes does the lewd flesh contrive!" Of a sudden he was calmer, and then rage fell from him like a dropped cloak, and he viewed her as with respectful wonder. "Why, but you sitting there, with goggling, innocent, bright eyes, are an allegory of all that is most droll and tragic. Yes, and indeed there is no reason to blame you. It is not your fault that every now and then is born a man who serves an idea which is to him the most important thing in the world. It is not your fault that this man perforce inhabits a body to which the most important thing in the world is a woman. Certainly it is not your fault that this compost makes yet another jumble of his two desires, and persuades himself that the two are somehow allied. The woman inspires, the woman uplifts, the woman strengthens him for his high work, saith he! Well, well, perhaps there are such women, but by land and sea I have encountered none of them."

All this was said while Marlowe shuffled about the room, with bent shoulders, and nodding his touzled, red head, and limping as he walked. Now Marlowe turned, futile and lean and shabby-looking, just where Pevensey had loomed resplendent a while since. Again she saw the poet's queer, twisted, jeering smile.

"What do you care for my ideals,

what do you care for the ideals of that tall earl whom you have held from his proper business for a fortnight or for the ideals of any man alive? Why, not one thread of that dark hair, not one snap of those white, little fingers, except when ideals irritate you by distracting a man's attention from Cynthia Allonby. Otherwise, he is welcome enough to play with his incomprehensible toys."

He jerked a thumb toward the shelves behind him.

"Oho, you virtuous pretty ladies! What all you value is such matters as those cups. They please the eye, they are worth sound money, and people envy you the possession of them. So you cherish your shiny mud cups, and you burn my 'Hero and Leander'; and I declaim all this dull nonsense over the ashes of my ruined dreams, thinking at the bottom of how pretty you are and of how much I would like to kiss you. That is the real tragedy, the immortal tragedy, that I should still hanker after you, my Cynthia."

His voice dwelt tenderly upon her name. His fever-haunted eyes were tender, too, for just a moment. Then he grimaced.

"No, I am wrong; the tragedy strikes deeper. The root of it is that there is in you and in all your glittering kind no malice, no will to do harm or to hurt anything, but just a bland and invincible and, upon the whole, a well-meaning stupidity, informing a bright and soft and delicately scented animal. So you work ruin among those men who serve ideals, not foreplanning ruin, not desiring to ruin anything, not even having sufficient wit to perceive the ruin when it is accomplished. You are, when all is done, not even detestable, not even a worthy peg whereon to hang denunciatory sonnets, you shallow-pated pretty creatures whom poets—oh, and in youth all men are poets!—whom poets now and always are doomed to hanker after, to the detriment of their poesy. No, I concede it; you kill without premeditation, and without ever suspecting your hands to be anything but stainless. So in logic I should retract all my harsh words, and I must, without any hint of reproach, endeavor

to bid you a somewhat more civil farewell."

She had regarded him throughout this preposterous and uncalled-for harangue with sad composure, with a forgiving pity. Now she asked him, very quietly:

"Where are you going, Kit?"

"To the Golden Hind, O gentle, patient, and unjustly persecuted virgin martyr," he answered, with an exaggerated bow, "since that is the part in which you now elect to posture."

"Not to that low, vile place again!"

"But certainly I intend in that tavern to get tipsy as quickly as possible; for then the first woman I see will for the time become the woman whom I desire, and who exists nowhere." And with that the red-haired man departed, limping and singing as he went to look for a trull in a pot-house.

Sang Marlowe:

"And I will make her beds of roses
And a thousand fragrant posies;
A cap of flowers, and a kirtle
Embroidered all with leaves of myrtle.

"A gown made of the finest wool
Which from our pretty lambs we pull;
Fair-lined slippers for the cold,
With buckles of the purest gold."

She sat quite still when Marlowe had gone.

"He will get drunk again," she thought despondently. "Well, and why should it matter to me if he does, after all that outrageous ranting? He has been unforgivably insulting. Oh, but none the less, I do not want to have him babbling of the roses and gold of that impossible fairy world, which the poor frantic child really believes in, to some painted woman of the town who will laugh at him. I loathe the thought of her laughing at him—and kissing him! His notions are wild foolishness; but I at least wish that they were not foolishness, and that hateful woman will not care one way or the other."

So Cynthia sighed, and to comfort her forlorn condition fetched a hand-mirror from the shelves whereon glowed her green cups. She touched each cup caressingly in passing, and that which

she found in the mirror, too, she regarded not unappreciatively from varying angles. Yes, after all, dark hair and a pale skin had their advantages at a court where pink-and-yellow women were so much the fashion as to be common. Men remembered you more distinctively, though nobody cared for men, in view of their unreasonable behavior and their absolute self-centeredness. Oh, it was pitiable, it was grotesque, she reflected sadly, how Pevensy and Kit Marlowe had both failed her after so many pretty speeches!

Still, there was a queer pleasure in being wooed by Kit; his insane notions went to one's head like wine. She would send Meg for him again to-morrow. And Pevensy was, of course, the best match imaginable. No, it would be too heartless to dismiss George Bulmer outright. It was unreasonable of him to desert her because a Gascon threatened to go to mass; but, after all, she would probably marry George in the end. He was really almost unendurably silly, though, about England and freedom and religion and right and wrong and things like that. Yes, it would be tedious to have a husband who often talked to you as though he were addressing a public meeting. However, he was very handsome, particularly in his high-flown and most tedious moments; and her dear old father would be profoundly delighted by the marriage of his daughter to a man whose wife could have at will a dozen caledon cups and anything else she chose to ask for.

But now the sun had set, and the room was growing quite dark. So Cynthia replaced the mirror upon the shelves, propping it upright with those wonderful green cups, which had anew reminded her of Pevensy's wealth and generosity.

THE door opened. Stalwart young Captain Edward Musgrave came with a lighted candle, which he placed carefully upon the table in the room's center. He said:

"They told me you were here. I come from London. I bring news for you."

"You bring no pleasant tidings, I fear."

"As Lord Pevensy rode through the

Strand this afternoon, on his way home, the plague smote him. That is my sad news. I grieve to bring such news, for your cousin was a worthy gentleman and universally respected."

"Ah," Cynthia said very quietly, "so Pevensey is dead. But the plague kills quickly."

"Yes, yes, that is a comfort, certainly. Yes, he turned quite black in the face, they report, and before his men could reach him had fallen from his horse. It was all over almost instantly. I saw him afterward, hardly a pleasant sight. I came to you as soon as I could. I was vexatiously detained."

"So George Bulmer is dead in a London gutter! It seems strange, because he was here, befriended by monarchs, and very strong and handsome and self-confident, hardly two hours ago. Is that his blood upon your sleeve?"

"But of course not. I told you I was vexatiously detained, almost at your gates. Yes, I had the ill luck to blunder into a disgusting business. The two rascals tumbled out of a doorway under my horse's very nose, egad! It was a near thing I did not ride them down. So I stopped, naturally. Afterward I regretted stopping, for I was too late to be of help. It was at the Golden Hind, of course. Something really ought to be done about that place. Yes, and that rogue Marler bled all over a new doublet, as you see. And the Deptford constables held me, with their foolish interrogatories—"

"So one of the fighting men was named Marlowe? Is he dead, too, dead in another gutter?"

"Marlowe or Marler, or something of the sort, wrote plays and sonnets and such stuff, they tell me. I do not know anything about him, though, I give you my word now, those greasy constables treated me as though I were a noted frequenter of pot-houses. That sort of thing is most annoying. At all events, he was drunk as David's sow, and squabbling over, saving your presence, a woman of the sort one looks to find in that hole. And so, as I was saying, this other rascal dug a knife into him."

But now, to Captain Musgrave's discomfort, Cynthia Allonby had begun to weep heartbrokenly.

So he cleared his throat, and he patted the back of her hand.

"It is a great shock to you, naturally, oh, most naturally, and does you infinite credit. But come now, Pevensey is gone, as we must all go some day, and our tears cannot bring him back, my dear. We can but hope he is better off, poor fellow, and look on it as a mysterious dispensation and that sort of thing, my dear."

"O Ned, but people are so cruel! People will be saying that it was I who kept poor Cousin George in London this past two weeks, and that but for me he would have been in France long ago! And then the queen, Ned! Why, that pig-headed old woman will be blaming it on me that there is nobody to prevent that detestable French King from turning Catholic and dragging England into new wars, and I shall not be able to go to any of the court dances! Nor to the masques," sobbed Cynthia, "nor anywhere!"

"Now you talk tender-hearted and angelic nonsense. It is noble of you to feel that way, of course; but Pevensey did not take proper care of himself, and that is all there is to it. Now, I have remained in London since the plague's outbreak. I stayed with my regiment, naturally. We have had a few deaths, of course; people die everywhere. But the plague has never bothered me. And why has it never bothered me? Simply because I was sensible, took the pains to consult an astrologer, and by his advice wear about my neck night and day a bag of dried toad's blood and powdered cinnamon. It is an infallible specific for men born in February. No, not for a moment do I wish to speak harshly of the dead, but sensible persons cannot but consider Lord Pevensey's death to have been caused by his own carelessness."

"Now certainly that is true," the girl said, brightening. "It was really his own carelessness and his dear lovable rashness. And somebody could explain it to the queen. Besides, I often think that wars are good for the public spirit of a nation and bring out its true manhood. But, then, it upset me, too, a little, Ned, to hear about this Marlowe, for I must tell you that I knew the poor

man very slightly. So I happen to know that to-day he flung off in a rage, and began drinking, because somebody, almost by pure accident, had burned a packet of his verses."

Thereupon Captain Musgrave raised heavy eyebrows, and guffawed so heartily that the candle flickered.

"To think of the fellow's putting it on that plea, when he could so easily have written some more verses! That is the trouble with these poets, if you ask me; they are not practical even in their ordinary every-day lying. No, no, the truth of it was that the rogue wanted a pretext for making a beast of himself, and seized the first that came to hand. It is a daily practice with these poets. They hardly draw a sober breath. Everybody knows that."

Cynthia was looking at him in the half-lit room with very flattering admiration. Seen thus, with her scarlet lips a little parted, disclosing pearls, and with her naïve, dark eyes aglow, she was quite incredibly pretty and caressable. She had almost forgotten until now that this stalwart soldier, too, was in love with her. But now her spirits were rising venturously, and she knew that she liked Ned Musgrave. He had sensible notions; he saw things as they really were, and with him there would never be any nonsense about top-lofty ideas. Then, too, her dear old white-haired father would be pleased, because there was a very fair estate. So Cynthia said:

"I believe you are right, Ned. I often wonder how they can be so lacking in self-respect. Oh, I am certain you must be right, for it is just what I felt without being able quite to express it. You will stay for supper with us, of course. Yes, but you must, because it is always a great comfort for me to talk with really sensible persons. I do not wonder that you are not very eager to stay, though, for I am probably a fright, with my eyes red, and with my hair all tumbling down, like an old witch's. Well, let us see what can be done about it, sir. There was a hand-mirror—"

And thus speaking, she tripped, with very much the reputed grace of a fairy, toward the far end of the room, and, standing a-tiptoe, groped at the obscure shelves, with a resultant crash of the falling china.

"Oh, but my lovely cups!" said Cynthia in dismay. "I have smashed both of them in looking for my mirror, sir, and trying to prettify myself for you. And I had so fancied them, because they had not their like in England, I have been told!"

She looked at the fragments and then at Musgrave, with wide, innocent, hurt eyes. She was honestly grieved by the loss of her quaint toys. But Musgrave, in his sturdy common-sense way, only laughed at her seriousness over such kickshaws.

"I am for an honest earthenware tankard myself," he said as the two went in to supper.

