QUIDDLERS THREE

George Barr McCutcheon

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CHAPTER I. THE THREE VAN WINKLES

It was not because Mr. Van Winkle had no love for his sons that he turned the three of them out of his house and home, but because he loved them well. There was Courtney Van Winkle—nicknamed "Corky" by his irrepressible brothers—and, besides him, the twins, Jefferson and Ripley. Courtney was thirty, the twins twenty−six. Jeff and Rip were big, breezy fellows who had rowed on their college crew and rowed with the professors through five or six irksome and no doubt valueless years; Courtney was their opposite in every particular except breeziness. But he was not breezy in the same way. He was the typical society butterfly, chatty to the point of blissfulness and as full of energy as a pint bottle of champagne. You could never by any stretch of the fancy liken him to anything so magnificent as a quart. Dapper, arrogant, snobbish, superior was he, and a very handy man to have about if one wanted to debate the question: Should spats be worn this year the same as last, or why WILL the common herd!

He had never done a stroke of work in his life. Nor, for that matter, had his towering, able−bodied brothers. They took the not unnatural stand that it wasn't necessary. Were they not the sons of the very rich Mr. Van Winkle? Wasn't he accountable for their coming into the world and wasn't he therefore responsible for them up to the very banks of the Jordan? Of course, he was. No one will pretend to deny it. Work is intended only for those who long for a holiday, not for him who begins a vacation the day he is born. Such was the attitude of the Van Winkle boys, if not their argument.

For years old Bleecker Van Winkle had paid for their automobiles, their polo ponies, their pony ballets, their lobsters and other glorifications, and he had finally reached the conclusion that while it was practically impossible for him to part with his money, he was nevertheless a fool. So he sat him down to think. As the result of his cogitations—long−drawn−out—he turned over a leaf in the Van Winkle family history.

"Boys," said he, at the end of a rather stupefying half−hour for them, "you've heard what I have to say. You know that I love you all. You will agree that I have been a fond, foolish and over−indulgent father. As I've said before, it is my fault entirely that you are triflers and spendthrifts. I should have done better by you. You are college men. At least, you are CALLED college men, because, with the unceasing aid of well−paid tutors you managed to get your degrees. I regret, however, to say that you are not educated men. You are socially cultivated, but that's all. I am to be blamed for all this. Now I am paying the penalty. What I have just disclosed to you is the result of painful deliberation and with your welfare in mind, not my own. You have agreed at last to my proposition, not, I fear, willingly, but because there is no alternative. I have given Jeff and Ripley an excellent education in baseball, swimming, golf and Broadway. No doubt either of you could get a job as a professional baseball player. Courtney has been thoroughly polished by contact with society. He should have no trouble at all in earning quite a decent living by teaching the nouveau riche how to behave in polite society. If, in ten years, you all come to me and convince me that you have actually acquired something of a fortune without any assistance from me, I shall be happy to kill the fatted calf and divide it with you. Please bear in mind the little statement in regard to my last will and testament. Get it into your heads clearly. At my death my fortune goes to the three of you, share and share alike, but it is to be held in trust for ten years thereafter, principal AND INCOME intact. Note that, please: and income. It is possible, even probable that I may alter the will later on, but now it stands in just that way."

They looked at each other blankly for a long time after the old gentleman left the room. The expression in Courtney's cock−a−doodle face was beyond description. The world had come to an end! The twins were unable to lounge with their accustomed ease and elegance. They sat bolt upright for perhaps the first time in their lives. To them, the world was just beginning, and it was a hard, cold, unfriendly world that lay before them.

In exactly one week from that day the three of them were to start out in the world to make men of themselves. Each was to have two thousand dollars in money and each was to start the journey free from debt. Mr. Van Winkle agreed to square up every pecuniary debt of honour and every debt of folly. They

were to shift for themselves, and they were to have a fair start. For at least three years they were to absent themselves from his home, support themselves without assistance from him, and report progress whenever they felt inclined to do so. He did not even require them to do that much unless they wished, but he assured them that he would be proud and happy if they could report PROGRESS.

"I don't ask you to get rich in ten years. You couldn't do it honestly, my lads. All I ask is that you support yourselves honourably and be as respectable as possible in this day and age. Don't try to be too respectable. People will discredit you. They always do. Be square." He had said this to them in the course of the amazing monologue.

"I can't live more than a month on two thousand dollars," whimpered Courtney, long after the old man had closed the door behind him. "Why, he hasn't the remotest idea what it costs to keep up one's end in society here in New York. I—"

"Shut up, Corky," growled Ripley. "We want to think."

"Don't call me Corky," snarled his brother. "You know I detest it, even when I'm feeling cheerful, and God knows I don't want to be spoken of lightly today."

"Do you mean that as a joke?"

"A joke? Oh, I see. I suppose you connect 'cork' and 'light' in your effort to—"

"Thank Heaven," broke in Jefferson, a shadow of relief crossing his doleful face, "we are spared one thing."

"What's that?" said Ripley.

"The pleasure of lending money to Corky."

Courtney's face fell. He had intended to ask his brothers for a small loan, and was ready to argue that they, being strong, healthy beasts, would survive as long on fifteen hundred dollars as he could possibly hope to exist on three thousand.

"I'm not asking for alms, confound you."

"By Jove!" exclaimed Ripley, with a gleam of joy in his eyes. "Didn't the governor say he'd settle all of our debts, giving us a clean bill to start with?"

"He did, bless his heart," said Jeff.

"Precious little good that will do me," lamented Courtney.

"Well, it may do me a lot of good. In settling your debts, Corky, it occurs to me he'll have to fork over that twenty−seven hundred dollars you owe me."

"Clever head, Rippy," shouted Jeff. "He owes me a matter of fifteen or sixteen hundred. Fine work. The old gentleman can't go back on the debts of honour. He'll have to settle for Corky's—"

"You go to thunder," grated Corky. "Do you suppose I'm going to see the governor stung by you two vampires? In the first place, it was HIS money I borrowed from you. In the second place—"

"Right you are, Corky," agreed Rip. "It WAS his money. We absolve him but not you. If the time ever comes when you are able to pay it back to me, out of your own pocket, I'll be pleased to collect. We'll let it go at that."

"I expect to starve to death inside of—"

"Oh, no, you won't. Neither of us will go so far as that." It was Jefferson who spoke. He arose and stretched his long, muscular frame. "Do you know, I think the pater is absolutely right in this thing. He—"

"RIGHT?" shrieked Courtney.

"Yes, right. We ARE loafers. We waste time over trifles. He wants to be proud of us if such a thing is possible. I don't blame him. If I ever have a son I'll know how to bring him up."

"This is no time to be sentimental, Jeff," said Courtney, with deep irony in his voice. "We are confronted by a catastrophe. Unlike most catastrophes, it awaits our pleasure. We are expected to walk up and shake hands with it and say, 'I'm glad to meet you, old chap,' or something of the sort."

"It IS a pretty howdy−do, I'll admit," said Rip thoughtfully. "Still, I agree with Jeff. The governor's right."

"You always agree with each other," said Courtney, pacing the floor in his despair.

"Don't pull your hair like that, Corky," cautioned Jeff, with a good− humoured grin. "You've got to be very saving from now on."

"A miserable pittance, a bagatelle," groaned Courtney.

"It IS getting thin," commented Rip.

"Eh? I'm not talking about hair, damn it!"

"Be a man, Corky," cried Jeff cheerfully.

"I asked you not to call me 'Corky,' didn't I?" He glared at his big brother. "How can you stand there grinning like an imbecile with all this hanging over you?"

Jefferson's smile expanded. "If dad can make men of all three of his sons, he won't have to die to go to heaven. He'll BE there."

"And you fellows could have married those awful Sickler girls without half trying last winter," groaned Courtney. "A million apiece in their own right! My Lord, if you could only have looked ahead!"

"We did!" cried the twins in unison.

A cunning gleam leaped into Courtney's watery eyes. He drew a long breath.

"I wonder—" he began, and then stopped.

"No," said Jeff, divining his thoughts. "You proposed to both of 'em, Corky. It's no use. You are NOT the Van Winkle twins."

After a time, they fell into a discussion of plans and possibilities. Their father had not left a loophole through which they could fire at random. His sentence was clean−cut. They could not fall back upon him for support, help or advice. It was all very clearly set forth. They were to find their own road and travel it to the bitter end.

"I'm willing to work," said Jeff. "The trouble with me is I don't know what to tackle first."

"That's my fix," said his twin.

"Well, I know the first thing I'm going to do," said Courtney, springing to his feet. And he did it an hour later. He succeeded in borrowing ten thousand dollars from a millionaire who had come to New York from Cleveland to live and die a Gothamite. With sublime disregard for the thing called conscience, Courtney included this new debt in the list to be prepared for his father, and permitted the old gentleman to settle without so much as a qualm of self−reproach. He considered it high finance, I believe. His brothers lived up to his estimate of their astuteness by never even thinking of a ruse so clever. Corky congratulated himself on getting a long start over them. Moreover, he had something else in mind. It will be disclosed later on.

A week later Mr. Van Winkle said good−bye to his sons, and they set out upon their travels somewhat after the fashion laid down by those amiable gentlemen who conceived fables and fairy tales and called them the Arabian Nights. You may recall the Three Sons of the Merchant, and the Three Princes, and the Three Woodmen, not to speak of innumerable trios who served Messrs. Grimm and Andersen with such literary fidelity.

The Van Winkle brothers started out rather late in life to make men of themselves. Inasmuch as they elected to start in separate and distinct grooves and as their courses were not what you might call parallel, we are likely to gain time and satisfaction by taking them up one at a time. We must not lose sight of the fact that they set out to acquire three separate and distinct fortunes.

Courtney set sail almost immediately for a land where "Corky" was an unheard−of appellation—or epithet as he was wont to regard it—and where fortunes hung on bushes, if one may be allowed to use the colloquialism. He went to France. It may seem ridiculous to seek fortunes in France, but he was not looking for French fortunes. He was much too clever a chap for that. He was after American money, and he knew of no place where it was easier to get it than in France. By France, he meant Paris. If one is really smart, one can find a great many American dollars in Paris. For that matter, if one is a good bridge player and has the proper letters—not of credit but of introduction—he can make a splendid living in any land where civilisation has gained a substantial foothold. Nothing is so amiable as civilisation. It actually yearns for trouble, and it will have it at any cost. It is never so happy as when it is being skilfully abused. As a society parasite, Corky had learned that it is easier to fool a man who has brains than it is to fool one who hasn't any at all. He had come in contact with both varieties, and he knew. And as for women, one can always fool them by looking pensive. They cannot bear it.

Possessed of a natural wit, a stunted conscience and an indefatigable ego, he had no fear that his

twelve thousand, slightly reduced by this time, would see him well along on his journey toward affluence.

Corky was well known in Paris. He had spent many a day and many a dollar there. At this season of the year, the capital was filled with New York, Philadelphia and Boston people whom he knew and with whom he might have fraternised if he had felt inclined. But he aimed higher. He hitched his wagon to the setting sun and was swept into the society of Middle and Far Western tourists; people with money they did not know how to spend; people who needed expert advice; people who hankered for places at Newport but had to be satisfied with Sugar Hills. His New York acquaintances knew him too well, but no better than he knew them. They had no money to waste on education. They needed all they could scrape together to keep the wolf out of Wall Street. He had no use in this direful emergency for frugal society leaders; he was after the prodigal climber.

Before he had been in Paris a week he was accepting invitations to dine with solid gentlemen from Des Moines and Minneapolis and having himself looked up to with unquestioned ardour by the wives thereof. Was he not the gay Mr. Van Winkle, of New York? Was he not the plus− ultra representative of the most exclusive society in the United States? Was he not hand in glove with fabled ladies whose names were household words wherever the English language is broken? Yes! He was THE Van Winkle! The son of A Van Winkle! And what a WONDERFUL game of bridge he played! It was a pleasure to lose money to him.

He soon found, however, to his discomfiture, that the daughters of these excellent westerners were engaged to be married to young gentlemen who were at work like himself in getting a fortune, but along different lines. So far as he could find out, they were so busy making headway in the commercial world that they wouldn't be able to afford a trip to Europe until they were somewhere in the neighbourhood of fifty−five or sixty. Their sweethearts were taking it while they could.

If Courtney had been as good−looking as either of his brothers—or as both of them, for that matter, because there wasn't much choice between them—he might have played havoc with the chances of more than one man at home, but he was no Adonis. To be perfectly candid, he was what a brawny Westerner would call a "shrimp." There is no call to describe him more minutely than that.

Most of his new friends wanted to have supper at Maxim's or to go to the Bal Tabarin. They wouldn't believe him when he insisted that these places were not what they used to be, and that Montmartre was now the fashionable roistering ground. So he took them to Maxim's and was glad of it afterwards. There wasn't a New Yorker in sight.

One night, after a rather productive game in the apartments of a family from Cedar Rapids, he proposed a supper at Maxim's. His host not only fell in with the proposition, but insisted on giving the supper himself. Corky was very polite. He took into consideration the fact that Mr. Riggles was a much older man than himself, and allowed him to have his own way.

It was at Maxim's that he first saw the Grand Duchess. She wasn't really a lady of title, but she looked the part so completely that he spoke of her as the "Grand Duchess" the instant his shifty gaze fell upon her. That is to say, she was painted, bewrinkled, bewigged, begowned, bejewelled and—(I was about to say be−dabbed)—for all the world like a real duchess, and she smoked a long cigarette in a still longer holder, and blew smoke through her nostrils with great APLOMB and but very few coughs.

His companions bowed to her. She waved her hand in amiable response.

"Who is she?" demanded Corky of his hostess. He almost whispered it.

"Oh, she's a silly old thing from Wisconsin. Did you ever see such a get−up?"

"It's marvellous. I thought she was a grand duchess."

"That's what SHE thinks, if airs count for anything. I think she's a freak."

"I suppose she was good−looking in her day," remarked his hostess's husband, appraising the grande dame with calculating eyes.

"Do you think they're real?" asked Corky, and his hostess said she thought they were. He did not give a name to them, but they were so overpoweringly prominent that she knew what he meant. It was almost impossible to see anything but pearls when one looked in the direction of the Grand Duchess. Corky couldn't help thinking how dangerous it was for the lady to wear such a fortune at Maxim's.

He listened with keen ears to the story of the "silly old thing from Wisconsin." She was a widow of

sixty−five and she had been traversing Europe from end to end for several years in quest of a coronet. Many millions in gold had she, but even the most impecunious of noblemen had given them a wide berth,—reluctantly, perhaps. Reversing the order of things, she was not seeing Europe; she was letting Europe see her.

No one in Maxim's so gay and kittenish and coy as she! She was the essence of youth. Her hair was as yellow as gold and so thick and undulating that one could not help wondering how far down her back it would drop if released. Her lips were red with the rich, warm blood of youth and her cheeks bore the bloom of the peach. The Grand Duchess was a creation. To make sure that every one knew she was present, she chattered in a high, shrill voice in Malapropian French, and giggled at everything.

"She is amazing," said Corky for the third time during supper. "And no one will marry her?"

"Not recently," said his host. "What do you mean?"

"I mean no one has married her in the last forty years. There WAS one, of course, but he died a few years back. That's why she wears a pearl mourning wreath around her neck, and a cloth−of−gold gown. He was in trade, as the English would say."

"She IS amazing," said Corky for the fourth time. "By Jove, do you know I'd like to meet her."

"Nothing so easy," said the other. "Come along now. I'll present you. She'll be tickled to death to meet a real Van Winkle."

Five minutes later Corky was drinking his own health in the presence of the Grand Duchess from Wisconsin.

"I have heard so much of you, Mr. Van Winkle," she said. "Is it true that you are a descendant of that aristocratic old Rip?"

Corky couldn't help blushing. He begged her not to get her Van Winkles mixed, and she tapped him on the knuckles with her pearl−studded fan.

At five o'clock that morning, Corky stood before the mirror in his bed−chamber and stared very intently at his somewhat wavering features. Notwithstanding the champagne, he recognised a very stern resolve in the reflection.

"I'm going to marry that woman," he said with grave precision.

CHAPTER II. THE GRAND DUCHESS

He went about it deliberately. According to report, the Grand Duchess was worth fifteen millions. Corky was not satisfied to accept rumour as fact, so he undertook an investigation on his own account. From reliable sources, he soon learned that she possessed but ten millions, but, he argued, it was better to know it in the beginning than to wait until she died to find out that her fortune had undergone the customary shrinkage. Moreover, he ascertained that she frequented half the baths in Europe in the effort to prolong a fast declining sense of humour—on the principle, no doubt, that life is a joke and death is not. She had a family of grown children in the States, but even that did not alarm Corky. He felt sure there would be enough to go around. Of course, it wasn't the nicest thing in the world being married to a woman more than twice one's age, but if everything went as he hoped, it might not be so very long before he could begin looking about for a wife half as old as himself. One sickening fear troubled him, however. She might insist on a house at Newport and a seat in the Inner Circle. She had that look about her.

He had the shrewdness to treat her with the disdain that his social position warranted. It was part of his plan of action to make her long for the opportunity to look down upon people instead of forever staring up at them from a grovelling attitude. He knew her kind as he knew the first three letters of the alphabet. On the other hand, he was politely attentive, incomparably epigrammatic, and as full of exquisite mannerisms as the famous Brummel himself. In a word, he was THE Van Winkle, and she but a passer−by.

By day he schemed, by night he lifted orisons to the gods and dreamed of the fruits thereof. Something seemed to tell him that if he didn't get her before she was sixty−six the quest would be hopeless. Experience had shown him that women see themselves as they really are after they are past sixty−five. Moreover, they become absolutely insane on the subject of self−preservation so far as money is concerned. They seem to feel that their rainy day is imminent, if not actually at hand. No matter how many millions they may possess, they lurk in the shadow of the poor−house. Men at sixty−five become podagrical and sour, perhaps, but they are not as much worried by thoughts of the poorhouse as they are by visions of the play−house.

Corky was to be seen everywhere with the Grand Duchess. (We may as well continue to speak of her as the Grand Duchess since every one in Paris was calling her that, now that she had been so aptly dubbed by the clever Mr. Van Winkle.) He drove in the Bois with her, and he drove without shame or embarrassment. He was the life of her big and little feasts at Pre Catalin and D'Armenonville. He sat in her box at the Opera; he translated the conspicuously unspeakable passages in all of the lively but naive comedies; he ordered her champagnes and invented hors d'oeuvres so neoterical in character that even the Frenchmen applauded his genius. And, through all, he was managing very nicely to keep his twelve thousand snugly to himself.

There were times when he could have cursed his own father—and perhaps did—but that is not relevant to this narrative.

In proper sequence he led the Grand Duchess through all the reflected phases of society and came at last to the juncture where his own adroitness told him it was time to speak of the glories of Newport and the wonders of New York as seen only from the centre of the inner Circle. There was a vast difference between the Outer Rim and the Inner Circle; he did not say it in so many words, but she had no trouble in divining it for herself. She was dazzled. She was beginning to understand that a palace in Fifth Avenue was no more than a social sepulchre unless it could be filled day and night with the Kings and Queens of Gotham. She felt very small, coming out of the Middle West.

It wasn't very difficult for him to secure for her an invitation to the American Ambassador's ball, or to the pacific functions ordered by the French President, but it was not so easy to bring about introductions to the New York women of fashion who happened to be in Paris from time to time during the summer. The Grand Duchess read the newspapers. She always knew when New York notables were in the city, and she was not slow to express a desire to meet them. He could arrange it, of course. And then, on

meeting them, she would at once insist on giving a dinner or a supper at Pre Catalin, or, on finding that they couldn't scrape up a spare evening,—to make it afternoon tea. Poor Corky shrivelled at such times.

"If she wasn't so DAMNED girlish!" he used to say to himself.

"Tell me," she said to him late one afternoon as they were driving home through the Champs Elysees; "is it true that servants' wages are lower in New York City than any place else in the country? I've always heard so."

She was looking at people through her magnificent lorgnon, and people undeniably were looking at her. There were many wonderful women in the Bois that day, but none so worthy of a stare as she.

Corky pricked up his ears. It looked like a "feeler."

"Perceptibly lower," he said.

"And food is higher, they say."

"Ah," said he, "but so are the buildings."

"How much do you think I could live on per year in New York!"

"Why do you enquire?"

"For instance," said she. It grated on his nerves when she used such expressions as "for instance."

"Well, it depends on how well you intend to live."

"I want to live as well as anybody else."

"Then I should say that you couldn't very well manage on less than ten thousand a year." He knew he was equivocating but was fearful that if he said a hundred thousand she would take alarm.

"That isn't very much," she said, with a perplexed frown. "I had an idea that if I wanted to live in style it would cost somewhere around seventy−five or a hundred thousand. I know a woman from Iowa who lives at the Ritz−Carlton and goes about some—although not in the real smart set—and she says it costs five or six thousand a month, just puttering. Maybe you've met her out in society. Her name is Bliggs."

"Bliggs? Um! Name's not familiar. Of course, you CAN spend a hundred thousand easily in New York if you get into the right set," he said.

"That's just the point," said she. "If I get into the right set. I've got ample means, Mr. Van Winkle, if—"

"They scorn money," said he flatly.

She drew in her breath quickly. "I suppose they do," she sighed. "Sometimes I really believe it's a handicap to have a lot of money."

"I know a good many charming Western women who have married into the smart set," he said slowly.

"And did they stick?" she enquired.

"Stick?" he gasped.

"I mean, did they make good—that is, were they PERMANENTLY received?"

"Oh, yes! Some of them have become leaders. It's really only a matter of marrying the right man."

She was silent as they drove across the Place de la Concorde.

"I suppose it's almost out of the question unless one does marry into it," she said finally.

"Or UP to it," he suggested. His sordid little heart was beating rather jerkily.

"Won't you stop in and have tea with me?" she asked suddenly.

He thought rapidly. "I'm sorry. I'm having tea with some New York people at the Ritz. Awfully sorry. People I shouldn't like to offend or I'd send an excuse. You understand, I hope."

Her jaws were set. He shot a furtive glance at the thickly plastered face and inwardly pitied himself while outwardly rejoicing.

"Some of the people who entertain baboons at dinner, I suppose," she said through compressed lips.

He smiled. "And poodles," he supplemented with perfect amiability and more truth than he knew. She sniffed. "I'm afraid you don't approve of our little larks. We've got to have something new once in a while or we'd die of ennui."

"Umph!" was her simple response, but he noted the pensive, wistful look in her eyes.

She set him down at his hotel. "Can't you dine with me at half past eight? I sha'n't ask any one else. I'm terribly blue today. You WILL come and cheer me up, won't you?"

"With pleasure," he said, bowing very low over her gloved hand, which was amazingly lumpy with

invisible rubies and diamonds. "So good of you."

While dressing for dinner he repeated the oft−repeated process of reducing the Grand Duchess to a tangible result. Supposing she had as many as fifteen years longer to live, and supposing her income to be only $400,000 a year, there was still compensation in the calculation that he would be but forty−five and that no matter how extravagant she might become there was small likelihood of the principal ever being disturbed. (On one point he meant to be very rigid: she should be kept out of Wall Street.) Furthermore, allowing for the shares that would go to her three grown daughters and their husbands (if they had them), he could be reasonably certain of at least three million dollars. Fifteen into three million goes two hundred thousand times, according to long division. Two hundred thousand dollars a year is what it came to in round numbers. He figured it as a rather handsome salary, more than he could earn at anything else. Of course, if it should happen to be but twelve years, the remuneration, so to speak, would be $250,000; eleven years $272,727 and a fraction; ten years $300,000; nine—well, he even figured it down to the unlikely term of two years. And all this without taking into consideration the certainty that her fortune would increase rather than diminish with the years to come.

On another point he meant to be firm, even adamant. If they were to be married at all, it would have to be without the least delay, In fact, he would advise making rather a secret of it until after the ceremony. Two weeks at the outside for the engagement period, he should say. Something told him that if her daughters got wind of the affair they would have the Grand Duchess locked up in a sanitarium for the remainder of her days. Besides, the suspense would be terrific.

They dined tete−a−tete. She had gorgeous apartments in the Elysee Palace Hotel; a private dining−room and a beautiful view of the great avenue. The evening was warm. The windows were open and from the outside came the noises of a Parisian night. A soft July moon lent radiance to an otherwise garish world, and a billion stars twinkled merrily. It seemed to Corky, as he looked up into the mellow dome, that he had never known the stars to twinkle so madly as they twinkled on this fateful night. There were moments of illusion when he was sure that the moon itself was twinkling. He laid it to his liver.

The little gold clock on the mantelpiece was striking ten when he began clearing his throat for action. He always remembered that it was precisely ten o'clock, because he had to look intently at the diminutive face of the thing to make sure that it wasn't striking twenty or thirty. It seemed to go on forever. They were still in the dining−room and quite alone. For some uncanny reason the Grand Duchess had not giggled once since the coffee was served. She was ominously patient.

"I've been thinking about what you said this afternoon," said Corky irrelevantly. She had just mentioned the weather.

"Indeed?"

"Yes. You put an idea into my head. Now, please don't say it! It's such a beastly banal joke, don't you know, that one about ideas. Would you mind answering a few questions?"

She began fanning herself. "If possible, Mr. Van Winkle," she said. "But I can tell you in advance that I never tell any one my age."

"Quite right," said he in a matter−of−fact tone. "It's nobody's business." He appeared to be thinking.

"Well, go ahead and ask," said she.

"I don't know just how to begin."

"What is it you want to know?" she enquired encouragingly.

"How old are your daughters?"

"Oh!" she exclaimed, leaning back in her chair in a sort of collapse. "What do you want to know that for?"

"Well, I'm leading up to something else, if you must know."

She brightened up a bit. "They're rather young, of course."

"Naturally," said he. "But HOW young?"

"Mary is—let me see—I can't just recollect—"

"You needn't be afraid to tell me the truth," he said graciously. "It won't make the least difference."

"Well, Mary is thirty−three. She's the married one. Edith—"

"Is one of 'em married?" he exclaimed, his face clouding.

"She's divorced at present. She married a scamp in the East who wanted her for her money, and—"

"Never mind," interrupted Corky hastily. "I don't care to hear the family scandal. Where does she live?"

"New York City, most of the time. You may have seen her. She goes out a great deal, I hear: I'm not certain whether she's gone back to her maiden name or retains her ex−husband's. His name is Smith." "I see," said Corky, abstractedly. "Good looking?"

"Mary? Yes, indeed. Stunning. I'm sure you'll admire her, Mr. Van Winkle."

"I wish you'd call me Courtney."

"I suppose I might just as well begin," she said resignedly. He started, and was silent for a moment.

"The others: are they married?"

"No. Edith is twenty−five and Gwendolyn twenty−three. They're at home."

"Why don't they travel with you?"

She looked positively aggrieved. "They are really very domestic in their tastes," said she. "They were over with me three years ago, but prefer America."

"Are they engaged?"

"Not to my knowledge."

"They'd tell you if they were, wouldn't they?"

"If they thought it was any of my business," she said sharply. Corky was in no condition to flush. It was a pallid hour for him.

"I suppose they have ample means of their own," he ventured.

"They manage pretty well."

"Was nothing left to them outright?"

"Some real estate."

"I see. Everything else went to you?"

"Oh, dear, no. He left $10,000 to his only sister. I sued to get it back, but lost. I always hated her."

"There was considerably more than $10,000 in the estate, of course," he said quickly.

She smiled and closed one eye very slowly. "I should rather think so," she said. He was silent, pondering deeply. "Can you think of anything more to ask?"

"I'm trying to think if there is," he replied frankly. She gave him a few minutes. "I can't recall anything more at this moment," he announced. "Oh, just a moment! Was there anything mentioned in the will about your never marrying again?"

"Not a word," said she triumphantly.

"Good!" said he, and arose somewhat unsteadily from his chair.

The Grand Duchess held up her hand to check the words on his lips.

"Sit down," she said brusquely. "I've got a few questions I'd like to ask of you, Corky."

"Corky! Good Lord, don't call me THAT. Where did you hear that name—"

"I saw it in the Herald. It's the only thing I have against you. I can't help thinking of you as a sort of monument to my poor dead husband. Have I never told you that he had a cork leg? Well, he had. He lost a real leg at Gettysburg. My husband was a big, brave man, Courtney. He wasn't a polished society chap and he didn't know much about grammar, but he was as fine and honest and noble as any man who ever lived. But this is no time to discuss the qualifications of a man as big and grand as my husband. It—it seems like sacrilege. What I want to know is this: how old is your father?"

"What?"

"What is his age?"

"My fa—What's that got to do with it?"

"To do with what?" sharply.

He stammered. "Why,—er—with the qualifications of your husband."

"Nothing at all."

"Well, he's about sixty."

"Vigorous?"

"Good Lord! Certainly."

"And very rich, as I'm informed."

"All this is very distasteful to me."

"And your brothers? Are they worthy young men?"

"Of course," angrily.

"Don't flare up, please. And now, what is your income?"

"MY income? Why, this is positively outrageous! I—"

"Maybe I should have said 'allowance.'"

Corky swallowed hard. "I'm not a rich man, if that's what you want to know. I'll be perfectly honest with you. I'm horribly poor."

Her face brightened. "Now you are talking like a man. You must not forget I am from the West. We like frankness. And yet, in spite of your poverty, you really are received in the Smart Set? How do you manage it?"

"Men are always in demand," admitted Corky, making a wretched error in diplomacy. He was thankful to see that it went unnoticed. "That is, men who are worth while."

The Grand Duchess settled back in her chair, and softly patted her coiffure, choosing to stroke the curls immediately above her ears.

"Well?" she invited, calmly, deliberately.

"I'd like to marry you," said Corky.

"Do you expect me to say 'yes'?"

"I do."

"Well, I'll let you know in the morning."

"I prefer to have my answer now."

"I've got to think it over."

"Haven't you been thinking it over for some time?" he demanded impatiently.

"I'll admit that I am in love with you," she said coyly.

He shuffled his feet uneasily. "And you also will admit that I am in love with you, won't you?"

"Are you?"

"How can you ask?"

"Well, prove it."

"Won't I be proving it beyond all question if I marry you?"

She sighed. "That isn't the way I was wooed years ago."

"You forget that it was long before my time. Custom changes, my dear. I love you in the present, up−to−date fashion, not as they did in the unsettled West."

She pondered. "How much of an allowance will you expect?"

"Whatever you choose to settle upon me, I shall be happy to divide equally with you. That's the only way we can carry on our social campaign."

"Well, I'll marry you, Corky."

He blinked his eyes two or three times. "When?" he enquired, and absently looked at his watch.

"Next Saturday," she said.

"Good!" said he.

When he got back to his hotel he found awaiting him there a letter from his brother Ripley. The news it brought caused him to thank his lucky stars that his fortune would be safe on Saturday.

Jefferson and Ripley were making their fortunes in a middle−west city, following the ancient and honourable pursuit of the golf−ball as instructors in rival country clubs. They seemed to be a bit uncertain as to what they would follow during the winter, but both of them were thinking rather seriously of getting married.

The news that caused Gorky's eyes to bulge came in the last casual paragraph of the letter. "Oh, by the way," wrote Rip, "the governor has just been married. I suppose you haven't heard of it. He had his appendix out six weeks ago and married his night nurse as soon as he was up. Well, so long. I'm giving a lesson at 10:30. Good luck."

CHAPTER III. THE TWINS

The twins went fortune−seeking in a more complaisant way. They were big and hardy and the world had no real terrors for them. As twins should go, they fared forth together in quest of the road to wealth. They had been told that it lay toward the West and that it grew broader as one drew nearer the land of the setting sun. The West was the place for young men with ambitions. That expression had been ding−donged into their ears by college mates from Los Angeles and Seattle ever since they had learned that these two towns were something more than mere dots on the map.

They had heard so much of the two cities that they decided to try Omaha or some other place of that character before definitely putting their strength against the incomprehensibly sagacious gentlemen who were responsible for the supremacy of Seattle and Los Angeles over all other towns on the continent.

As was their wont, they went about the thing casually and without worry. They could not buckle down to work until after the wedding of a friend in Chicago, a classmate at college. He had asked them to act as ushers. The twins were especially well−qualified to serve as ushers. Since graduating they had performed that service for no fewer than twenty members of the class and were past−masters at the trade. It was only fair and right that they should usher for old Charley Whistler, although the name was not quite as familiar as it ought to have been. They couldn't quite place him, but so long as he had done them the honour to ask them to take part in his wedding, they were reasonably secure in the belief that he was all right. Before leaving New York, they spent several hundred dollars on a joint wedding present, a habit acquired when they first came out of college and which clung to them through many marriages, no doubt because of the popularity of the phrase: "Know all men by these presents, etc."

They were somewhat surprised on reaching Chicago to learn that Charley Whistler did not live there at all, but in W——, a thriving city not far removed from the Illinois metropolis. They could not have been expected to know that dear old Charley lived in W—— when they didn't even know there was such a place as W—— to live in. They heard all about the place from Charley, however. It seemed to be a city of distilleries. Everybody there was rich because everybody owned a distillery.

"Come out and visit us," said Charley after he had told them what a wonderful place it was. "I'm so busy I can't take more than two weeks for a honeymoon. Any time after the first of June will be convenient, boys. I'll show you a REAL town."

"There's only one real town," said Jefferson, his mind drifting back to Manhattan Island.

"Only one," said Ripley.

"Bosh! Say, how many distilleries has New York got? Answer that, will you?"

"I don't know, but I'll bet ten dollars we could drink up in three months all the whiskey you can make in W—— in a whole year."

Charley was silenced. He could only remark: "Well, there's more money in making it than there is in drinking it." The twins assented. "Anyhow, I wish you fellows could come out and see what we've got there. I'd like to get some of the Van Winkle millions interested in our village."

The twins exchanged glances. "The Van Winkle money is pretty well tied up," said Jeff.

"Well, it won't be forever, will it? I want to get you young fellows interested. And say, I can introduce you to some of the finest girls this side of Paradise. The burg is full of 'em. Why, I've heard New Yorkers say that they'd never seen so many pretty women or better dressed ones than we've got right there in—"

"I know," interrupted Rip. "That's what you hear in every city in America, big or little. And it's always the poor, impressionable New Yorker who says it, the fellow who has to put up with the depressing homeliness and dowdiness of Fifth Avenue. Give us a rest, Charley."

"Have you got a baseball team there?" demanded Jeff sarcastically.

"Sure! A peach, too. We're leading the league."

"What league?"

"The Peewee Valley League, of course. Two country clubs, too, with brand new golf courses. Oh, we're getting to the front, let me tell—"

"Why two?"

Charley stared. "Great Scott! Haven't you heard? It's been in all the papers. The row in the Wayside Country Club? It's only two years old, but, by George, they've had enough quarrels to last a New York club a century. There was a split last fall, and a new club was formed—the Elite Country Club. All the nicest people in town belong to the Elite. Lot of muckers run the Wayside. If you—−"

"Which one has the distilleries?" asked Pip. "Both. The whiskey people can't very well discriminate, don't you see? Same as the breweries. It's good business for them to support both clubs. Good Lord, it's six o'clock. You fellows will have to be at the church at seven sharp, you know. Better dress pretty soon. So long. See you later."

The long and short of it was that the Van Winkle twins DID go out to W——. They remained in Chicago for three weeks looking for work at teas, bridge−parties, theatre−parties and luncheons at all of the country clubs. They played golf and tennis when not engaged in looking for work. Their joint four thousand dollars, pooled, had dwindled to barely half that amount, but they were cheerful. Their only prayer was that no one else in the class of '08 would decide to get married before the summer was over.

W—— is a thriving, bustling, aggressive town in the Mississippi Valley. It is not necessary to describe it in detail. The Van Winkles were put up at the Commercial Club, the W—— Club and the two country clubs. Charley Whistler attended to that. He was so proud of his two distinguished ushers that he sadly neglected his bride in showing them off to acquaintances during the first week of their stay.

Almost the first thing he did was to introduce them to the Barrows sisters, treasured by W—— as her "fairest daughters." Every one in town, including the editors, spoke of them familiarly as "Toots" and "Beppy" Barrows, applying nicknames that had grown up with them and had no connection whatever with the names they received when christened. They were young, rich, lovely and apparently heart−whole. Charley Whistler, being newly−wedded, wanted every one else in the world to get married. He was continually saying that there was "nothing like it," and resented some of the ironic rejoinders of men who had been married all their lives, to hear them talk about it. So he made haste to introduce the twins to the beautiful Barrows girls.

With a perfectly beautiful fidelity to the fitness of things, the two Van Winkles fell prostrate before the charms of the two young ladies, and spent nearly a month looking for work in their delightful company. It was not until they realised that their funds were reduced to almost nothing that they came down to earth with a thud. They had less than one hundred dollars between them and destitution.

Sitting in the shade of a huge old oak near the first tee on the Elite Club course, awaiting the appearance of the young women with whom they were to play a mixed foursome, the twins fell to discussing a subject they had dreaded to contemplate much less to broach.

"Jeff," said Rip, poking a dandelion with the head of his mashie, "lend me fifty till next week."

"Fifty what?" enquired Jeff gloomily.

"Cents, of course," said Rip. "But I'll take it in dollars if you happen to have them."

"We're up against it, old boy," said his brother, lighting a fresh cigarette. "What's to be done?"

"I suppose we'll have to clear out," sighed Rip. "We can't go on in this way. They are the finest, best girls I've ever known, and it's a bloody shame to—to go on."

"Right−o! We've just got to clear out while our credit is good. I hate to do it, though. I—I don't mind confessing that I'm heels over head in love with her. It's a damned shame, isn't it?"

"You're no worse off than I am," groaned Rip. "We are a nice pair of Romeos, aren't we? Good Lord, what will they think of us when they find us out?"

"Well," mused Jeff, "they're sensible darlings. Maybe they'll understand."

"Never! These western girls are not brought up to understand such blighters as we are. We are a species known only to the effete East. No; they will not understand. God knows I'm willing to work. The trouble is, I haven't time."

"Well, we'll have to work, steal or starve."

"I can't steal and I won't starve. I'm afraid we'll have to move on farther west. Cow−punching isn't bad if one—Here they come. Not a word, old boy. We'll talk it over tonight. It's my notion we'd better move on tomorrow while we've got the wherewithal. I'm not mean enough to borrow money from Whistler and

I haven't the face to ask Uncle George to help us out. Darn him, I think he's the one who put it into father's head to do this—"

"Sh!" hissed the other, coming to his feet as the trim, trig figures of the Barrows girls drew near.

"Sorry to keep you waiting," said Toots, the elder of the two. "Mrs. Garvin was telling a story in the locker room." Toots was an exquisite blonde, tall, slender and lithesome.

"I've been slicing horribly of late, Mr. Van Winkle," said Beppy, frowning prettily. "Can you straighten me out? What am I doing that's wrong?" She was dark and brilliant, and quite as tall as her sister. One would go miles to find two more comely maids than these.

"Standing too far away from the ball," said Jeff, to whom the remark was addressed.

"I don't see why the club doesn't hire a professional," complained she. "He could get rich showing the members how to play the sort of golf they needn't be ashamed of."

"Three fourths of them don't know the difference between a mashie and a mid−iron," said Toots. "We learned in England, you know."

"By Jove!" exclaimed Rip, apropos of nothing. A great light beamed in his face.

"By Jove!" repeated Jeff, divining his thought.

Then, just to prove that they understood each other, they drove at least two hundred and fifty yards off the first tee, straight down the course. Jeff showed Beppy how to overcome the slice. She got a hundred and fifty yard ball.

"For heaven's sake!" she exclaimed, surprised by her own prowess. "How wonderful! And how easy, when you know how."

With singular coincidence of purpose, the two Van Winkles set about to teach their partners how to play better golf than they had ever played before. By the time they were playing the long eighth hole, the young men were so exercised over the discovery of a vocation that they sliced badly into the rough. Trudging side by side through the tall grass, looking for balls which the caddies had lost, they addressed each other in excited undertones.

"Nothing could suit me better," said Jeff.

"It's like finding money. Lessons at three dollars an hour and the privilege of selling all the golf balls to the players. How's that? Shall we tackle it?"

Jeff experienced a momentary pang of doubt. "Of course we'd lose our standing as amateurs. We'd be professionals, you know."

"What's the odds? Even amateurs have to live, old son."

"What will the girls think of us?" dolefully.

"They can't blame us for earning an honest dollar."

"A Van Winkle earning an honest dollar!" scoffed Jeff, with a short laugh. "It's incredible. No one will believe it."

"Here's what I think," said Rip seriously. "We ought to make a clean breast of everything those girls. Tell 'em just how we stand. I'll stake my head they'll stand for it."

"Tell 'em we've been kicked out by the governor?" gasped Jeff.

"Sure. A rich man's sons earning their daily bread by the sweat of their brow. Horrible ogre of a father, d'ye see? Romance of the highest order. By ginger, Jeff, I'm strong for it. It's honest work and I'm not ashamed of it."

The Barrows girls witnessed the strange spectacle of two brothers in quest of golf−balls shaking hands with each other in the centre of a wire−grass swamp, and blinked their beautiful eyes in amazement.

At the "nineteenth hole," over tea and highballs, the Van Winkle twins made humble confession to the high priestesses of W——. They did not spare themselves. On the contrary, they confessed their utter worthlessness and paid homage to the father who had sent them out in the world to retrieve themselves.

"And what do you think of the scheme?" asked Rip at the end of a lengthy and comprehensive explanation of the project in mind.

"Fine!" cried the two girls in a breath. "Then, the first thing to do is to convince the club that it needs a professional," said Jeff eagerly. He was looking into Beppy's big brown eyes.

"But it doesn't need TWO," spoke Toots.

The four faces fell. "I never thought of that," murmured Jeff.

"The Wayside Club has no instructor," cried Rip, grasping at a straw.

"But no one thinks of going to Wayside," protested Toots. "They are perfectly dreadful."

"Still they could be taught how to play golf," said Rip. "In any event, beggars can't be choosers. We both want to stay in W——."

"Well, there's only one way out of it," said Beppy quickly. "You, Ripley, apply to the Wayside for the position. Jefferson has already spoken for the place here."

"He has not!" exclaimed Toots indignantly.

"He has! I am on the golf committee, so that settles it. I'll call a meeting of the committee tomorrow—"

"I don't see why Ripley should be sacrificed—"

"Wait, girls," broke in Ripley with a laugh. "It's very flattering to us, but please don't quarrel on our account. We can settle it nicely by flipping a coin."

"Heads," said Jefferson without hesitation. He won. "Sorry, old chap."

"We shall have to join Wayside," lamented Toots. "Oh, how I hate it."

"I wouldn't join until you see whether I land the place," advised Ripley. "I suppose I COULD go to some other city."

Both girls uttered such a harmonious protest against that alternative, that he said he wouldn't consider leaving his brother for anything in the world.

"I know the president of Wayside," said Beppy consolingly. "He used to be in business with father. I'll see him tomorrow and tell him—−"

"See him TODAY," advised Toots firmly.

"You are adorable," whispered Rip as he walked beside her toward the automobile. "I wish I could do something to show how much I appreciate your—your friendship." Her response was a most enchanting smile. Under his breath he said: "Gad, I'd like to kiss you!" It is barely possible that thoughts speak louder than words and that she heard him, for she said something in reply under her own breath that would have made it a very simple matter for him to kiss her if he had been acquainted with the silent tongue.

The Van Winkle twins, in anticipation of success crowning their efforts to become professional instructors in the two country clubs, outlined a splendid and cunning campaign for themselves. By inspiring a fierce rivalry between the would−be golfers of the two clubs, they could build up a thriving practice in their chosen profession. The rivalry was already bitter along other lines. If they could get the men of the clubs into a fighting humour over the golf situation, there would be no end to the lessons they would demand of their instructors. By using a little strategy, the twins figured they could keep the clubs in a state of perpetual tournament. The results would be far− reaching and gratifying.

Before the end of the week, the redoubtable sons of old Bleecker Van Winkle, "leaders of cotillions in the Four Hundred and idols of Newport and Bar Harbor," (according to the local press), were installed as instructors in the rival clubs. Everybody in town, except the conspiring Barrows girls, regarded the situation as a huge joke. The fashionable young "bloods" were merely doing it for the "fun of the thing." That was the consensus of opinion. The news was telegraphed to the New York papers and the headlines in Gotham were worth seeing. The twins winked at each other and—played golf.

Be it said to their credit, they were soon earning twenty−five or thirty dollars a day—and saving half of it!

So intense was the golf fever in W—— that the middle of July found the links of both clubs so crowded that it was almost impossible to play with anything except a putter. Nearly every foursome had a gallery following it and no one spoke above a whisper after he entered the club grounds, so eager were the members to respect the proprieties of golf. Men who had but lately scoffed at the little white ball now talked of stymies and lies and devits as if they had known them all their lives. Hooks, tops and slices were on every man's tongue, and you might have been pardoned for thinking that Bunker Hill was smack in the centre of W——, and that Col. Bogie had come there to be beaten to death in preference to being executed in any other city in the world.

The merry Van Winkles, good fellows and good sports that they were, thrived with the game, and

kept straight down the course of true love as well.

"Jeffy," said Rip one evening after returning from a rather protracted call on Toots Barrows, "I have asked her to marry me."

"So have I," said Jeff, who had returned with him from the Barrows home. "I wonder what the governor will say?"

"I'm not worrying about him. I'm wondering what the girls' mother will say."

"No one will say we are marrying them for their money, that's positive. Everybody here thinks we've got millions and millions."

"Oh, by the way, did she accept you!"

"Certainly. Did she accept you?"

"Of course. Another thing, did she say anything to you about hurrying the thing along a bit, so as to have it over with before her mother gets wind of it?"

"By George, she did. That's odd, isn't it? She's afraid her mother will object to her marrying a New Yorker. Got some silly prejudice against the Four Hundred. I said it couldn't happen any too soon for me. We had a sort of a notion next week would be about right."

"It suits me," said the other. They shook hands. "I want to say, here and now, that I love her with all my heart and soul, and I'll never let her rue the day she married me. I love her, old son."

"Not a blamed bit more than I do," said Jeff fervently. "She's the best ever!"

The next morning they saw by the newspaper that their father had married his night nurse in the hospital and was going up into Maine to recover!

That same day, on the seventh tee of the Elite course, Toots promised to marry Ripley two weeks from Wednesday. At Wayside Beppy told Jefferson she would marry him at the same time, but I think it was on the ninth green.

"Mother will be wild when we cable the news to her," said she.

CHAPTER IV. ALL VAN WINKLES

The fortnight between that fateful day on the links and the Wednesday aforesaid, was full of surprising complications for the Van Winkle and Barrows families.

The two girls went into fits of hysteria on receipt of a cablegram from their mother in Paris announcing her marriage to Mr. Courtney Van Winkle, of New York. They were still more prostrated on learning from their wide−eyed sweethearts that not only was Courtney their step− father but he was on the point of becoming their brother−in−law as well. A still greater shock came the day of their own double wedding which took place in the Barrows mansion on Ardmore Avenue in the presence of a small company of guests. It developed that the Mrs. Smith who nursed old Mr. Van Winkle and afterwards married him was their divorced sister, Mary, who had not only grown tired of a husband but of nursing other women's husbands as well. The situation was unique.

"Good heavens," said Rip, after the ceremony which linked the entire Barrows family to the Van Winkles, "what relation are we to each other?"

"Well," said his wife, "for one thing, you are my uncle by marriage."

"And I am my father's brother−in−law. By the same argument, the governor becomes his own son's son−in−law. Can you beat it?"

"Your brother becomes your father, and my mother is my sister. Now, let's see what else—"

"And your sister is now your mother−in−law. By the way, has she any children?"

"Two little girls," said Toots.

"That makes poor old Corky a grandfather," groaned Rip.

Pretty much the same conversation took place between Jeff and Beppy.

"Corky is my father−brother," said Jeff, summing it all up.

On the high seas, Mr. and Mrs. Courtney Van Winkle threshed out the amazing situation, and in the mists of the Maine coast, the flabbergasted father of the three young men who fared forth to make men of themselves agonised over the result of their efforts.

"When I am quite strong again, my dear," said he to the comely ex− nurse—who, by the way, had engaged a male attendant to take her place in looking after the convalescent gentleman, "we must have a family gathering in New York. What is your mother like?"

"She is like all women who marry at her age," said she without hesitation—and without rancour. "She's very silly. What sort of a person is your son?"

"I don't know," said Mr. Van Winkle with conviction.

We will permit three months to slip by. No honeymoon should be shorter than that. It is meet that we should grant our quiddlers three and their excellent parent the supreme felicity of enjoying the period without being spied upon by a mercenary story−teller. But all interests, as well as all roads, lead to a common centre. The centre in this case was New York City.

It goes without saying that the Barrows girls, Edith and Gwendolyn, preferred New York to W—— as a place of residence. They married New Yorkers and it was only right and proper that they should love New York. Possessing a full third of the enormous fortune left by their distilling father, they maintained that they could afford to live in New York, even though their husbands remained out of employment for the rest of their natural lives. We already know that Mrs. Corky Van Winkle longed for a seat among the lofty, and that Mrs. Bleecker Van Winkle had married at least two gentlemen of Gotham in the struggle to feel at home there. Therefore, we are permitted to announce that Jefferson and Ripley Van Winkle resigned their positions as golf− instructors the instant the wedding bells began to ring, and went upon the retired list with the record of an honourable, even distinguished career behind them. They said something about going into "the Street," and their amiable and beautiful wives exclaimed that it would be perfectly lovely of them. But, they added, there was really no excuse for hurrying.

We come now to the family gathering in the palatial home of Mr. Courtney Van Winkle, just off Fifth Avenue (on the near east side), and it is December. Corky's wife bought the place, furnished. He couldn't stop her. The only flaw in the whole arrangement, according to the ambitious Grand Duchess, was the deplorable accident that

admitted a trained nurse into the family circle. It would be very hard to live down. She never could understand why Mr. Van Winkle did it!

The twins and their brides were occupying enormous suites at one of the big hotels, pending the completion of a new and exclusive apartment building in Fifth Avenue. They had been in town but a week when Courtney and the Grand Duchess returned from Virginia Hot Springs, where they had spent November. Old Mr. Van Winkle was just out of the hospital after a second operation: an adhesion. He was really unfit for the trip up town from the old Van Winkle mansion; nevertheless, he made it rather than disappoint his new—(I use the word provisionally)—daughter−in−law, who had set her heart upon having the family see what she had bought. I am not quite certain that she didn't include Corky in the exhibit.

There were introductions all around. Mr. Van Winkle, senior, was presented to his mother−in−law and to his sisters, and, somewhat facetiously, to his father−in−law, his brothers, his sons and his daughters. Corky had the pleasure of meeting his three sons−in−law, his three daughters−in−law, his two sisters, his brothers, his father and his granddaughters−in−law. The twins—but why continue? Puzzles of this character provide pleasure for those who choose to work them out for themselves, and no doubt many who have followed the course of this narrative are to be classed among them.

Of course, in his own home Corky sat at the head of the table, but it is not to be assumed that he was the undisputed head of the family, although he may have advanced claims to the distinction because of his position as father−in−law to every one else of the name. Mr. Van Winkle, pere, jocosely offered to relinquish the honour to his son, and the twins vociferously shouted their approval.

"You are the oldest member of the family by marriage, Corky," said Jeff, and was rewarded by a venomous stare from his joint mother−and− sister−in−law.

"How you talk!" said the Grand Duchess, suddenly remembering her lorgnette. The stare became intensified. "Isn't the house attractive, Mr. Van Winkle?" she asked, turning to the old gentleman, with a mirthless smile.

"Are you addressing me, my dear, as your son−in−law or as your father− in−law?" enquired Mr. Van Winkle.

"Why do you ask?" she demanded.

"Because if you are speaking to me as your son, I prefer to be called Bleecker."

"Stuff and nonsense, Mr. Van Winkle! Why, I scarcely know you."

"Won't you tell me your Christian name? I can't very well go about calling my daughter MISSIS Van Winkle."

"Minervy—I mean Minerva. Of course, I shall expect you to call me Minerva. I—I suppose it is only right that I should call you Bleecker. Isn't it an odd situation?"

"I should say so," put in Rip. "I'll have to give up calling you father, Bleecker. You are my brother now."

"I don't think we should carry a joke too far," said his father severely.

"It's no joke," said Kip. "Is it, Father Corky?"

"See here, confound you, don't get funny," snapped Corky from the head of the table. "You forget the servants."

"I'm not ashamed to have them hear me call you father, Corky," protested Rip. "I'll shout it from the house top if you think there's any doubt about my sincerity."

"Don't tease, Ripley," said Toots. "Your poor brother is dreadfully embarrassed."

"You must go with me to the dressmaker's tomorrow, girls," said the Grand Duchess, effectually putting a stop to the discussion. "I shall be there all day trying on gowns, and I want your opinions."

"Didn't you have anything made in Paris, Mother?" cried Toots and Beppy in unison.

"She did," said Corky emphatically. "We paid duty on seventy−three gowns, to say nothing of other things."

"But they are all out of fashion by this time," said Mrs. Corky, joyously. "They are at least three months old. I'm getting everything new. The season promises to be an unusually brilliant one, doesn't it, dear?"

Every one waited for Gorky's reply. He appeared to have swallowed something the wrong way. It was just like them to wait, CONFOUND them, thought he resentfully.

"Yes," said he, so succinctly that the four ladies were bitterly disappointed. For them, the topic called for the most elaborate treatment. "I shall give a big ball right after the holidays," said the Grand Duchess, determined to keep the subject going. "Corky and I have been going over the list of invitations this week. We mean to make it very select. On a rough estimate, we figure that the affair won't cost a cent less than fifty thousand—"

"My dear!" cried Corky, rapping violently on the table with his fork in his agitation.

"That's a pearl−handled fork," his wife reminded him, going very red under her rouge.

At this juncture Jefferson arose and, clearing his throat, began a toast to the brides.

"On your feet, gentlemen! Here's to the four Mrs. Van Winkles, the fourest of the fair—I mean the fairest of the four—ouch!—the fairest—of—the—fair. May they never know an hour of remorse! May their hearts always beat time to the tune of love we shall sing into their lovely ears, and may they be kind enough to forgive us our transgressions while they listen to our eternal and everlasting song! Drink, gentlemen!"

As the four gentlemen drained their glasses, the four ladies applauded the eloquent Jeff.

"You must write that out for Corky, Jefferson," cried his mother−in− law. "He may have an opportunity to spring it—"

"Ahem!" barked Corky, quite viciously.

"I am sure we shall all love one another and be happy to the end of our days," cried Mrs. Bleecker Van Winkle, an extremely handsome woman of thirty−three.

"Good for you, Mother!" shouted Rip, with enthusiasm and every one laughed, Corky the loudest of all.

Beppy rose half way out of her seat and peered down the table in the direction of her sister Mary.

"Stop holding hands, you silly things!" she cried, shaking her finger at Bleecker Van Winkle and his wife.

"I'm not holding hands," cried Mary.

"She was feeling my pulse," explained the old gentleman hastily.

As a matter of fact, when Mary undertook to bestow upon her husband the caress known as "holding hands" she invariably took his wrist between her thumb and forefinger and absent−mindedly counted ten or twelve before realising her mistake.

The father of the three young men took this particular moment to revoke, in a very diplomatic way, the sentence he had declared a few months earlier in the year. Without saying it in so many words, he gave them to understand that he considered their fortunes made and warmly congratulated them upon the successful issue of their endeavours. He made so bold as to state that he took upon his own shoulders all of the trivial mistakes they may have made during years of adolescence, and gave to them the glory of achieving success when failure might have been their lot because of the foolish adoration of a doting parent. It was a very pretty speech, but the boys noticed that he carefully refrained from acknowledging that they had made men of themselves.

"And now," said he, in conclusion, "permit me to paraphrase the toast of that amiable ancestor whom fiction has given to us, the ancient Rip whose days will be longer than ours, whose life will run smoothly through centuries to come: 'May we all live long—and prosper'!"

They drank it standing.

The Grand Duchess beamed. "So that dear old gentleman WAS your ancestor after all. How glad I am to know it!"

"Yes, my dear daughter," said her venerable son−in−law, running his fingers through his niveous thatch, "he was the first of the time− wasting Van Winkles."