

A small black boy in white velvet—looking like a pocket edition of the big negro—was asleep on the high leather chair in the hall. Velvet touched his arm.

"Let me out," he said.

The boy sat up. "Yes, miss," he said, quietly, and opened the door.

Velvet's cab was waiting outside, and Howard was asleep in one corner of it.

III.

"My letters?" said Velvet, extending pink fingers from the black and gold curtains of his bed.

Howard brought them—three. Velvet opened the first with a little laugh; it was from Sue.

"Dear George (I call you George because it is a nice, manly name. I always think of you as a nice, English George. What on earth does 'Velvet' mean, after all? It is stupid): I have made up my mind to do an exceedingly wild and wicked thing. It is the first really bad thing in my life. I am going to the French ball!

"That is not all. I want to go with you! I know it is outrageous, and that Dick would go into a blue rage if I told him, but I have made up my mind to be wild for once; and I will go, and with you. I know you will appreciate the honor—no! that is not the word. I mean, what trust I put in you, to ask you to take me to such a place. After all, you are a sort of bohemian, being on the stage, and all that; and different from the many brother brings home. Although I am sure of some of them, even if they are leader writers and art critics—but that has nothing to do with it. In return for this trust and confidence on my part, I want you to do me a favor. Be just as much of a man on Wednesday night as you can. Dress as severely and squarely and correctly as possible. Please, no rings. And have your hair cut. And I wish you would grow a mustache; but, of course, you cannot by Wednesday. (By the way, Dick says that rum, petroleum and castor oil is a great thing to make a mustache grow. You rub it on in the evening. It smells rather bad.)

"I will come to your theatre on Wednesday night so that we do not make it too late for the ball. Take your evening clothes with you and get ready directly after your turn. I have taken a box—No. 18 R., second row—and shall wait there until you come out. Do not make it late, Dear George. As I am going to be wicked I might as well have as much of the wickedness as I can get. I shall dress in white, very pretty, with lilies of the valley. Your little friend. SUE."

"I shall take Mary with me to the theatre. She will not tell."

Velvet picked up the next letter, written on pale yellow coroneted note-paper. He opened it with a little sigh; it was from Lalia.

"Ma Fifiue cherie!

"To reward you—oh! not for your goodness, or kindness, or tender-heartedness, mechante que tu es!—but to reward you for the gracious fact of your existence, for the shadow of your eyes and the light of your smile, and for the divine possibilities of your tantalizing beauty. I will escort you—if you are very meek and very pretty—to the French ball on Wednesday.

"Yes, of all my friends and—friends (what a stupid word it is in English) I choose you, oh, mystery! problem! torment! you, Velvet, you!

"In recompense of such favor all I ask is that you shall wear the shortest, the most fluffy, the most girlish of your feminine flounces. Put on all your paints and powders. Wear all your diamonds and all your affections. I will escort you understand.

"Adieu, ma belle amie; I kiss your beautiful, lazy hands. LALIA.

"I shall wait for you in my box after the performance, you know, No. 14 L."

The letter fluttered out of his hand like a tried butterfly, and he picked up the third. It was a gentlemanly scrawl, and Velvet neither laughed nor sighed as he opened it. He bent his curled head and read:

"Dear Boy: What do you say to going to the French ball? Will wait for you in my box after the show. If you want me to come around for you to the dressing room, send Howard.

"I vote for no fancy costume or mask. Come as you really are, Velvet. Good-by. TOM."

IV.

"Somebody's eyes are my only light," sang Velvet, stepping in floating radiance on the stage, and turning a slow, delicate gaze up to Lalia's box.

Lalia, dressed in a scarlet frock with white satin shirt front and huge diamond studs, her hair curled and parted on one side like a boy's, gave a little gasp of pleasure as her eyes met his; then she paled away, weakly, helplessly. Of the three men in her box, two bent over to each other and laughed; the third looked exceedingly angry and turned his back with a shrug of disgust to the stage.

Somebody's love has turrel my night into an ever perfect day.

warbled Velvet, with a quick, gleaming smile in the direction of box 18 R, where

Sue, in fluttering white and tremulous lilies, sat half hidden behind the curtains. She blushed up like a rose, from her timid neck to her mild forehead, where the fair locks rippled blandly. Opposite her in the box sat her maid, in black, with a round straw hat and poppies.

"Say, sweetheart, is that somebody you?" sang Velvet, looking straight before him at an empty box. Empty, except that a man—a tall, handsome man of about forty—sat quiet at the back of it, twirling his heavy mustache.

Velvet took the last high note—a pianissimo—as softly, as lightly, as thinly as if it had been the point of a needle, and held it like a thread.

The applause followed loud and uproarious. Velvet was encored and whistled at and yelled at until the comic Irishman rolled onto the stage and made the public change its mind.

The program was continued and ended.

The fire curtain was let down, the crowds left the boxes, filed out of the seats, pushed out of the gallery. Lights were turned out and attendants went around turning up the seats.

Lalia, in her scarlet frock and white satin shirt front, sat in box No. 14 L. She was alone; she had sent the gentlemen away, and they had gone, sneering and offended, to talk about this latest freak of hers.

Opposite her, in box No. 18 R, second row, sat Sue, in her muslin and lilies,

frightened and ashamed. She had sent her maid home and was wishing that she had gone, too, and that she had never come.

In a box facing the stage a man with a heavy mustache was lighting a cigar.

At last a door leading from the stage behind the lower boxes closed noisily. Quick, soft steps along the carpeted aisle, and some one appeared in the auditorium of the theatre.

It was not George, in correct evening dress and manly shirt front; square of shoulder, short of hair, and English of demeanor.

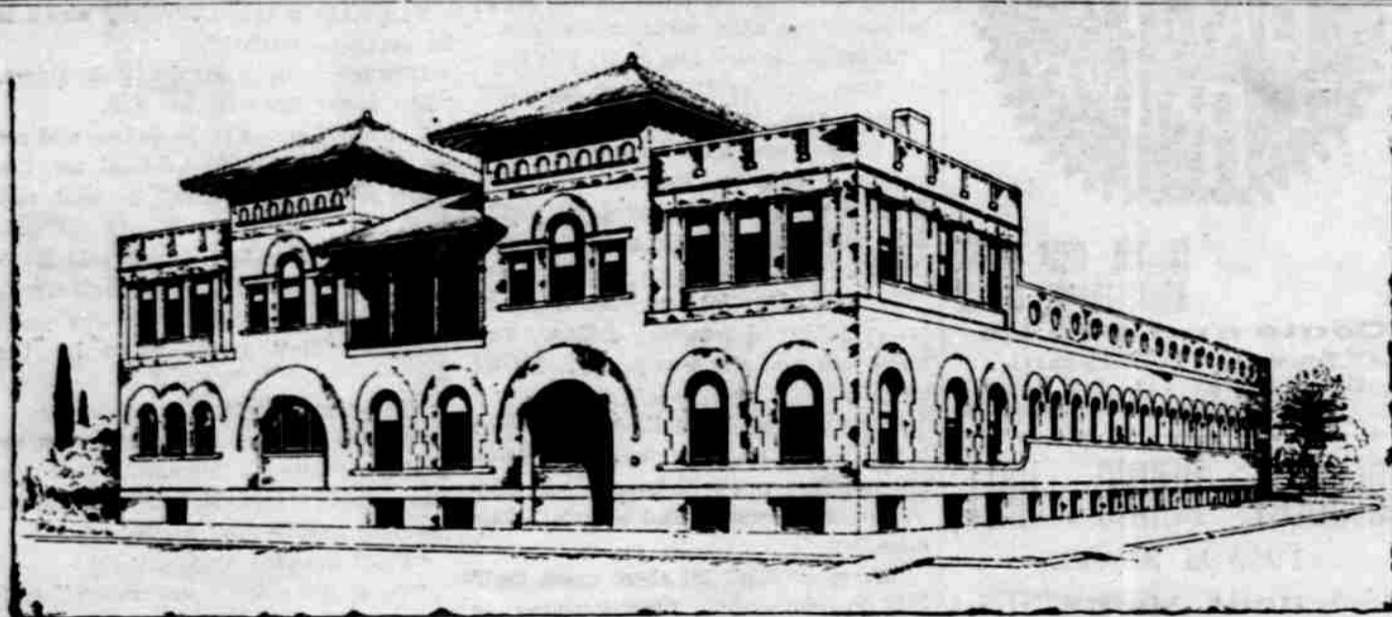
Nor was it Fifiue, in the shortest of fluffy skirts, the barest of naughty shoulders, the toothpickiest of satin shoes.

It was Velvet. It was a boy; very young, very charming and very pale. He wore a lavender-colored suit, that showed the droop of his shoulders and the lightness of his waist; a light-blue satin tie, cream-tinted kid gloves, and high-heeled, patent leather shoes. A small, very shiny high hat was perched on his clustering curls, and he carried an absurd little cane with a gold knob on it.

He walked along the center aisle of the theatre, and half way down he stopped.

"Ladith," he said, in a frail, treble voice, looking up first at one and then at the other, and speaking with a curious little lisp that was evidently part of his make-up, "I am very thorry. I whith you had not come. I whith you would not teathe me the. I am going to the ball with my father."

The ladies went home alone. —The Cosmopolite.



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