

Eggs of the Silver Moon

By Robert W. Chambers
Illustrated by Herman Pfeifer

In the new white marble Administration Building at Bronx Park, my private office separated the offices of Dr. Silas Quint and Professor Boomly; and it had been arranged so on purpose, because of the increasingly frequent personal misunderstandings between those two eminent entomologists. It was very plain to me that a crisis in this quarrel was rapidly approaching.

A bitter animosity had for some months existed on both sides, born of the most intense professional jealousy. They had been friends for years. No unseemly rivalry disturbed this friendship as long as it was merely a question of collecting, preparing, and mounting for exhibition the vast numbers of butterflies and moths which haunt this insectiferous earth. Even their zeal in the eternal hunt for new and undescribed species had not made them enemies.

I am afraid that my suggestion for the construction of a great glass flying-cage for *living* specimens of moths and butterflies started the trouble between these hitherto godly and middle-aged men. That, and the Carnegie Educational Medal were the causes which began this deplorable affair.

Various field collectors, employed by both Quint and Boomly, were always out all over the world foraging for specimens; also, they were constantly returning with spoils from every quarter of the globe.

Now, to secure rare and beautiful living specimens of butterflies and moths for the crystal flying-cage was a serious and delicate job. Such tropical insects could not survive the journey of several months from the wilds of Australia, India, Asia, Africa, or the jungles of South America—nor could semi-tropical species endure the captivity of a few weeks or even days, when captured in the West Indies, Mexico or Florida.

Only our duller-colored, smaller, and harder native species tolerated capture and exhibition.

Therefore, the mode of procedure which I suggested was for our field expeditions to obtain males and females of the same species of butterfly or moth, mate them, and, as soon as any female deposited her eggs, place the tiny pearl-like eggs in cold storage to retard their hatching, which normally occurs, in the majority of species, within ten days or two weeks.

This now was the usual mode of procedure followed by the field-collectors employed by Dr. Quint and Professor Boomly. And not only were the eggs of various butterflies and moths so packed for transportation, but a sufficient store of their various native food-plants was also preserved, where such food-plants could not be procured in the United States. So when the eggs arrived at Bronx Park, and were hatched there in due time, the young caterpillars had plenty of nourishment ready for them in cold storage.

Might I not, legitimately, have expected the Carnegie Educational Medal for all this? I have never received it. I say this without indignation— even without sorrow. I merely make the statement.

Yet, my system was really a very beautiful system; a tiny batch of eggs would arrive from Ceylon, or Sumatra, or Africa; when taken from cold storage and placed in the herbarium they would presently hatch. The caterpillars were fed with their accustomed food-plant—a few leaves being taken from cold storage every day for them—they would pass through their three or four moulted periods, cease feeding in due time, transform into the chrysalis stage, and finally appear in all the splendor and magnificence of butterfly or moth.

The great glass flying-cage was now alive with superb moths and butterflies, fitting, darting, fluttering among the flowering bushes or feeding along the sandy bank of the brook which flowed through the flying-cage, bordered by thickets of scented flowers. And it was like looking at a meteoric shower of winged jewels, where the huge metallic-blue *Morpho* from South

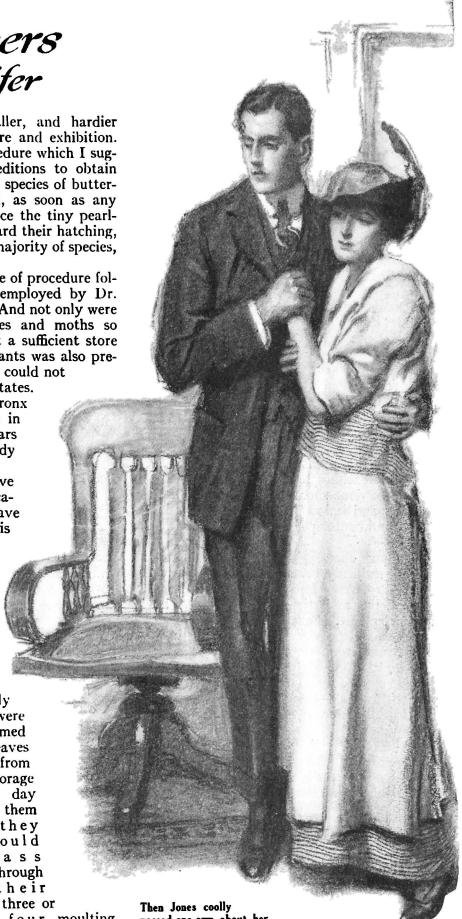
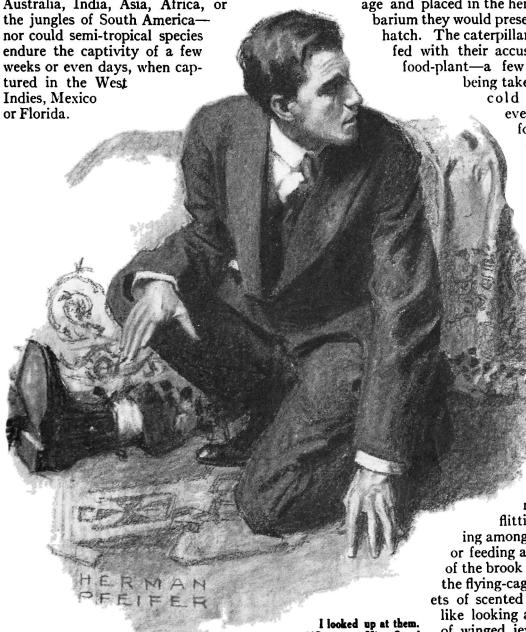
Then Jones coolly passed one arm about her waist and, "Try not to faint, Mildred," he said. "It might muss your hair."

America flapped and sailed, and the orange and gold and green *Ornithoptera* from Borneo pursued their majestic, bird-like flight—where big, glittering *Papilionidae* flashed through the bushes or alighted nervously to feed for a few moments on jasmin and phlox, and where the slowly flapping *Heliconians* winged their way amid the denser tangles of tropical vegetation.

Nothing like this flying-cage had ever before been seen in New York; thousands and thousands of men, women, and children thronged the lawn about the flying-cage all day long.

By night, also, the effect was wonderful; the electric lights among the foliage broke out. The great downy-winged moths, which had been asleep all day while the butterflies fitted through the sunshine, now came out to display their crimson or peacock-spotted wings, and the butterflies folded their wings and went to bed for the night.

The public was enchanted, the authorities of the Bronx proud and delighted; all apparently was happiness and harmony. Except that nobody offered me the Carnegie medal.



I was sitting one morning in my office, which, as I have said, separated the offices of Dr. Quint and Professor Boomly, when there came a loud rapping on my door, and, at my invitation, Dr. Quint bustled in—a little, meager, excitable, nearsighted man.

"Last week," he began angrily, "young Jones arrived from Singapore bringing me the eggs of *Erebia astare*, the great Silver Moon butterfly. Attempts to destroy them have been made. Last night I left them in a breeding cage on my desk. Has anybody been in there?"

"I don't know," I said. "What has happened?"

"I found an ichneumon fly in the cage yesterday!" he shouted, "and this morning the eggs have either shrunk to half their size or else the eggs of another species have been secretly substituted for them and the Silver Moon eggs stolen! Has *he* been in there?"

"Who?" I asked, pretending to misunderstand.

"*He!*" demanded Quint fiercely. "If he has I'll kill him some day."

He meant his one-time friend, Dr. Boomly. Alas!

"For heaven's sake, why are you two perpetually squabbling?" I asked wearily. "You used to be inseparable friends. Why can't you make up?"

"Because I've come to know him. That's why! I have unmasked this—this *Borgia*—this *Machiavelli*—this monster of duplicity! Matters are approaching a point where something has got to be done short of murder. I've stood all his envy and jealousy and cheap imputations, and hints and contemptible innuendoes that I'm going to—"

He stopped short, glaring at the doorway, which had suddenly been darkened by the vast bulk of Professor Boomly—a figure largely abdominal, but majestic—like the massive butt end of an elephant. For the rest, he had a rather insignificant and peevish face and a melancholy mustache that usually looked damp.

"Mr. Smith," he said to me, in his thin, high, sarcastic voice—a voice incongruously at variance with his bulk—"has anybody had the infernal impudence to enter my room and nose about my desk?"

"Yes, I have!" replied Quint excitedly. "I've been in your room. What of it? What about it?"

Boomly permitted his heavy-lidded eyes to rest on Quint for a moment, then, turning to me, "I want a patent lock put on my door. Will you speak to Professor Farrago?"

"I want one put on mine, too!" cried Quint. "I want a lock put on my door which will keep envious, dull-minded, mentally broken-down, impertinent, and lat people out of my office!"

Boomly flushed heavily, "Fat?" he repeated, glaring at Quint. "Did you say 'fat'?"

"Yes, *fat*—intellectually and corporally fat! I want that kind of individual kept out. I don't trust them. I'm afraid of them. Their minds are atrophied. They are unmoral, possibly even criminal! I don't want them in my room snooping about to see what I have and what I'm doing. I don't want them to sneak in, eaten up with jealousy and envy, and try to damage the eggs of the Silver Moon butterfly because the honor and glory of hatching them would probably procure for me the Carnegie Educational Medal—"

"Why, you little, dried-up, protoplasmic atom!" burst out Boomly, his face suffused with passion. "Are you insinuating that I have any designs on your batch of eggs?"

"It's my belief," shouted Quint, "that you want that medal yourself, and that you put an ichneumon fly in my breeding cage in hopes it would sting the eggs of the Silver Moon."

"If you found an ichneumon fly there," retorted Boomly, "you probably hatched it in mistake for a butterfly!" And he burst into a peal of contemptuous laughter, but his little, pig-like eyes under the heavy lids were furious.

"I now believe," said Quint, trembling with rage, "that you have criminally substituted a

batch of common *Flexitarsus* eggs for the Silver Moon eggs I had in my breeding cage! I believe you are sufficiently abandoned to do it!" "Ha! Ha!" retorted Boomly scornfully. "I don't believe you ever had anything in your breeding cage except a few clothes moths and cockroaches!"

Quint began to dance. "You *did* take them!" he yelled, "and you left me a bunch of milkweed butterflies' eggs! Give me my eggs or I shall violently assault you!"

"Assault your grandmother!" remarked Boomly, with unscientific brevity. "What do you suppose I want of your ridiculous eggs? Haven't I enough eggs of *Heliconius Salome* hatching to give me the Carnegie medal if I want it?"

"The Silver Moon eggs are unique!" cried Quint. "You know it! You know that if they hatch, pupate, and become perfect insects that I shall certainly be awarded—"

"You'll be awarded the Matteawan medal," remarked Boomly with venom.

Quint ran at him with a half-suppressed howl, his momentum carrying him half-way up Professor Boomly's person. Then, losing foothold, he fell to the floor and began to kick in the general direction of Professor Boomly. It was a sorrowful sight to see these two celebrated scientists panting, mauiling, scuffling, and punching each other around the room, tables and chairs and scrap-baskets flying in every direction, and I mounted on the window-sill horrified, speechless, trying to keep clear of the revolving storm center.

"Where are my Silver Moon eggs?" screamed Dr. Quint. "Where are my eggs that Jones brought me from Singapore—you entomological robber! You've got 'em somewhere! If you don't give 'em up I'll find means to destroy you!"

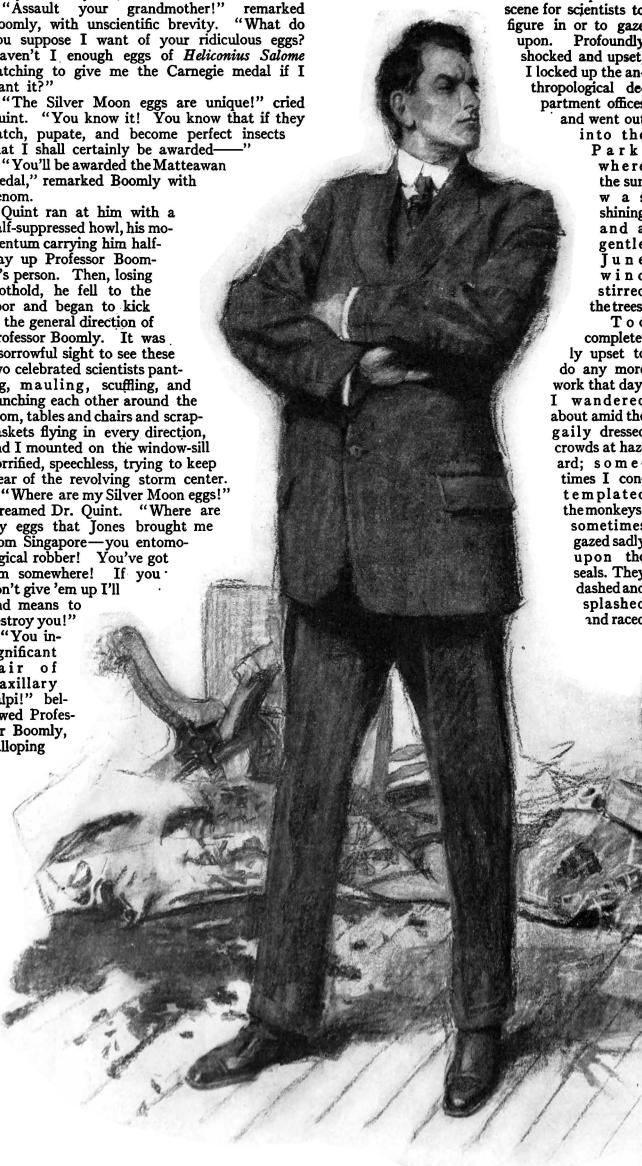
"You insignificant pair of maxillary papillae!" belittled Professor Boomly, galloping

after Dr. Quint as he dodged around my desk. "I'll pull off those antennae you call whiskers if I can get hold of 'em—"

Dr. Quint's threatened mustaches bristled as he fled before the elephantine charge of Professor Boomly—once again around my desk, then out into the hall, where I heard the door of his office slam, and Boomly, gasping, panting, breathing vengeance outside, and vowing to leave Quint quite whiskerless when he caught him.

It was a painful scene for scientists to figure in or to gaze upon. Profoundly shocked and upset, I locked up the anthropological department offices and went out into the Park, where the sun was shining and a gentle June wind stirred the trees.

To completely upset to do any more work that day, I wandered about amid the gaily dressed crowds at hazard; sometimes I contemplated the monkeys; sometimes gazed sadly upon the seals. They dashed and splashed and raced



'round and 'round their tank, or crawled up on the rocks, craned their wet, sleek necks, and barked—"houp! houp! houp!"—until I understood very clearly that they liked the ladies best.

Well, it was a chivalrous preference. Had the opportunity been mine, perhaps—but let it pass.

For luncheon I went over to the Rolling-Stone Restaurant. There was a very pretty girl there—an unusually pretty girl—or perhaps it was one of those days on which every girl looked unusually pretty to me. There are such days.

Her voice was exquisite when she spoke. She said, "We have, to-day, corned-beef hash, fried ham and eggs, liver and bacon—" but let that pass, too.

I took my tea very weak; by that time I learned the her name was Mildred Case; that she had been a private detective employed in a department store, and that her duties had been to nab wealthy ladies who forgot to pay for objects usually

discovered in their reticules, bosoms, and sometimes in their stockings.

But the confinement of indoor work had been too much for Mildred Case, and the only outdoor job she could find was the position of lady waitress in the rustic Rolling-Stone Inn.

She was very, very beautiful, or perhaps it was one of those days—but let that pass, too.

"You are the great Mr. Percy Smith, Curator of the Anthropological Department, are you not?" she asked shyly.

"Yes," I said modestly; and, to slightly rebuke any superfluous pride in me, I added with becoming humility, pointing upward: "but remember, Mildred, there is One greater than I."

"Mr. Carnegie?" she nodded innocently. That was true, too. I let it go at that.

We chatted; she mentioned Professor Boomly and Dr. Quint, gently deplored the rupture of their friendship. Both gentlemen, in common with the majority of the administration personnel, were daily customers at the Rolling-Stone Inn. I usually took my lunch from my boarding-house to my office, being too busy to go out for mere nourishment.

That is why I had hitherto missed Mildred Case.

"Mildred," I said, "I do not believe it can be wholesome for a man to eat sandwiches while taking minute measurements of delinquent monkeys. Also, it is not a fragrant pastime. Hereafter I shall lunch here."

"It will be a pleasure to serve you," said that unusually—there I go again! It was an unusually beautiful day in June. Which careful, exact, and scientific statement, I think ought to cover the subject under consideration.

After luncheon I sadly selected an expensive five-cent cigar; and, as I hesitated, lingering over the glass case, undecided still whether to give full rein to this contemplated extravagance, I looked up and found her beautiful gray eyes gazing into mine.

"What gentle thoughts are yours, Mildred?" I said softly.

"The cigar you have selected," she murmured, "is fly-specked."

Deeply touched that this young girl should have cared—that she should have expressed her solicitude so modestly, so sweetly, concerning the maculicolous condition of my cigar, I thanked her and purchased, for the same sum, a packet of cigarettes.

That was going somewhat far for me. I had never in all my life even dreamed of smoking a cigar. To a reserved, thoughtful, and scientific mind there is, about a packet of cigarettes, something undignified, something vaguely frolicsome.

When I paid her for them I felt as though, for the first time in my life, I had let myself go.

Oddly enough, in this uneasy feeling of gaiety and abandon a curious sensation of exhilaration persisted.

We had quite a merry little contretemps when I tried to light my cigaret and the match went out, and then she struck another match, and we both laughed, and that match was extinguished by her breath.

Instantly I quoted: "Her breath was like the new-mown hay—"

"Mr. Smith!" she said, flushing slightly.

"Her eyes," I quoted, "were like the stars at even!"

"You don't mean my eyes, do you?"

I took a puff at my unlighted cigaret. I felt that I was slipping my cables and heading toward an unknown and tempestuous sea.

"What time are you free, Mildred?" I asked, scarcely recognizing my own voice in such reckless apropos.

She shyly informed me.

I struck a match, lighted my cigaret, and took one puff. That was sufficient; I was adrift. I realized it, trembled internally, took another puff.

"If," said I carelessly, "on your way home you should chance to stroll along the path beyond the path that leads to the path which—"

I paused, checked by her bewildered eyes. We both blushed.

"Which way do you usually go home?" I asked, my ears afire.

She told me. It was a suitably unrequent path.

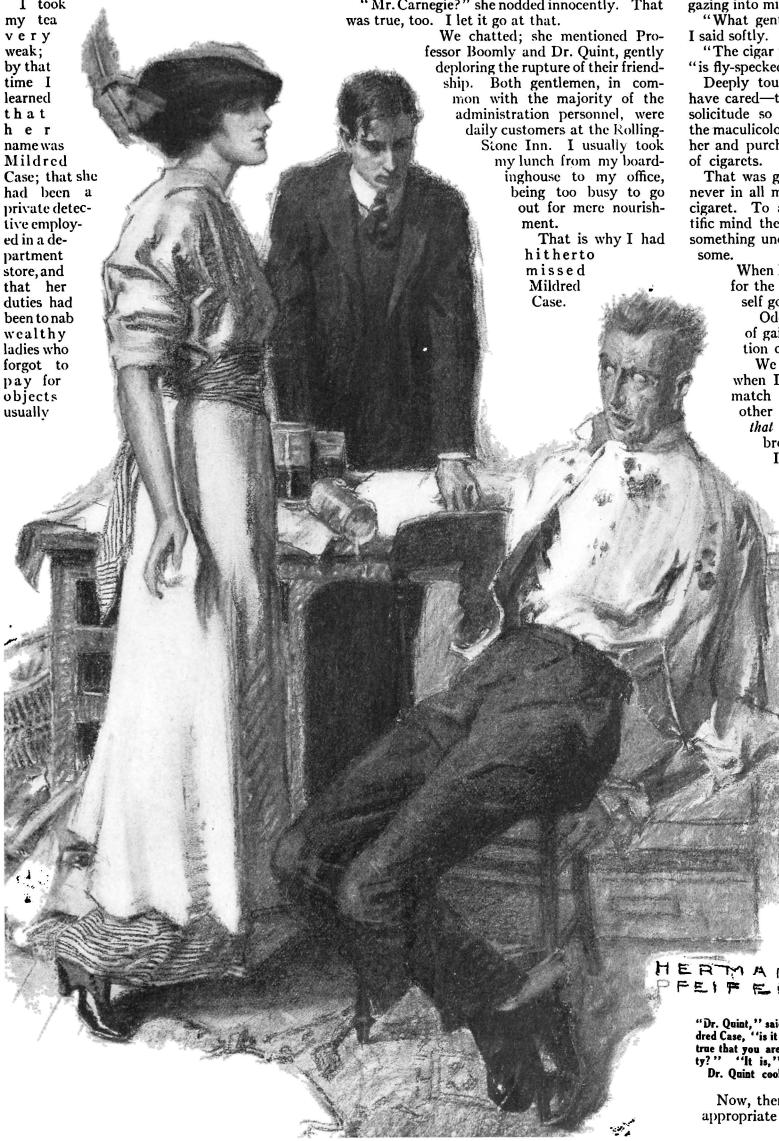
So presently I strolled thither; and seated myself under the trees in a bosky dell.

Now, there is a quality in boskiness not inappropriate to romantic thoughts. Boskiness,

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HERMAN
PFEIFFER

"Dr. Quint," said Mildred Case, "is it really true that you are guilty?" "I am," said Dr. Quint coolly.



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cigarettes, a soft afternoon in June, the hum of bees, and the distant barking of the seals, seeming to reiterate evulantly all these fearless preference for the ladies—all these were delicately blending to inspire in me a sentiment bashfully corroborating the avowal of the seals.

There was an unaccustomed and sportive lightness in my step when I rose to meet Mildred, who was now loitering along the shadow-dappled path.

She seemed surprised to see me.

She thought it rather late to sit down, but she seated herself. I talked to her enthusingly about anthropology.

Warmed to the heart by her eager and sympathetic interest in the noble science so precious, so dear to me, I took her little hand to soothe and quiet her.

She had not been long seated when she

seemed a little tired. I decided to give adequate material support to her spinal process. It seemed to rest and soothe her. I don't remember that she said anything except: "Mr. Smith!"

After a while—quite a while—some little time in point of accurate fact—she detected the sound of approaching footsteps.

I knew that she was seeing the approach of the last, rather feverish, occupant of her hat and her hair, when young Jones came hastily along the path, caught sight of us, halted, turned violently red—being a shy young man—but instead of taking himself off, he seemed to recover from a momentary paralysis.

"Mr. Smith!" he said sharply. "Professor Boomly has disappeared; there's a pool of blood on his desk; one of his ankles and feet are lying on the floor, the room is a wreck, and Dr. Quint is in there tearing up the carpet and behaving like a madman. We think he suddenly went insane and murdered Professor Boomly."

Preoccupied, and confused by the shock of this terrible news, I looked at Jones and at Mildred; and they were staring rather oddly at each other.

I said: "If this affair turns out to be as ghastly as it seems to promise, we'll have to call in a detective. I'll go back immediately."

"Why, not take me, also?" asked Mildred Case, quietly.

"What?" I asked, looking at her.

"Why not, Mr. Smith? I was once a private detective."

Surprised at the suggestion, I hesitated. As for young Jones, he looked at her steadily in that odd, chilling manner, which finally annoyed me. There was no need of him being snobbish because this very lovely and intelligent young girl happened to be a private detective.

"Come," I said unsteadily, again a prey to terrifying emotions; "let us go to the Administration Building and learn how matters stand."

We were soon entering the Administration Building, almost running; and as soon as we came to the closed door of Dr. Quint's room, I could hear a commotion inside.

I trapped in the door. No notice taken. I rapped and knocked and called in a low, distinct voice.

Suddenly I recollect I had a general pass-key on my ring which unlocked any door in the building. I nodded to Jones and to Mildred to stand aside, then, gently fitting the key, I suddenly pushed out the key which remained on the inside, turned the lock, and flung open the door.

It was terrible sight to see itself, Dr. Quint, hair out, and both mustaches pulled out, shirt, cuffs, and white waistcoat smeared with blood, knolt amid the general wreckage on the floor, in the act of ripping up the carpet.

"Doctor!" I cried in a trembling voice. "What have you done to Professor Boomly?"

He paused in his carpet ripping and looked around at us with a terrifying laugh.

"I've settled him!" he said. "If you

don't want to get all over dust you'd better keep out."

Such cold-blooded calmness infuriated me. I sprang at Quint, seized him, and shouted to Jones to tie his hands behind him with the blood-soaked handkerchief which lay on the floor.

"Wait!" I cried. Quint, struggling to get off the chair, whither I had pushed him, but with my handkerchief we tied his ankles to the rung of the chair, heedless of his attempts to kick us, and sprang back out of range.

"Now," I said, "who have you done

with the poor victim of your fury? Where is he? Where is all that remains of Professor Boomly?"

"Boomly? I don't know where he is. How the devil should I know?"

A light touch on my arm interrupted me, a trifle irritated, as any man might be when pestered in the full flow of eloquence, I turned to find Mildred at my elbow.

"Let me talk to him," she said in a quiet voice. "Perhaps I may not irritate him as you seem to."

"Very well," I said. "Jones and I are here as witnesses." And I folded my arms in an attitude not particularly picturesque.

"Dr. Quint," said Mildred in her soft, agreeable voice, and actually smiling slightly at the self-confessed murderer, "is it really true that you are guilty of shedding the blood of Professor Boomly?"

"It is," said Quint, coolly.

She seemed rather taken aback at that; but presently recovered her equanimity.

"Why?" she asked gently.

"I'll tell you. I received the Carnegie medal, and he knew it would be given to me if I could incubate and hatch my batch of Silver Moon butterflies' eggs. He realized well enough that his Heliconian eggs were not as valuable as my Silver Moon eggs. So first he sneaked in here and put an ichneumon fly in my breeding cage. And next he stole the Silver Moon eggs and left them place some common *Plexippus* eggs, that he knew because they were very similar. I would not notice the subterfuge."

"I did notice it! I charged him with that cataclysmic outrage. He laughed. We came into personal collision. He chased me into my room." Quint glared at me for a moment. Then jerked his head toward Mildred. "As soon as he went to luncheon—Boomly, I mean—I climbed over that transom and dropped into the room. And had been here ten minutes before I found the Silver Moon eggs hidden under the carpet. So I pocketed them, climbed back over the transom, and went to my room."

He paused dramatically, staring from one to another of us.

"Boomly was there!" he said slowly. "Where?" asked Mildred with a shudder. "In my room. He had picked the lock. I told him to get out. He went. I shouted after him that I had recovered the Silver Moon eggs, and he would certainly be awarded the Carnegie medal."

"Then that monster in human form laughed a horrible laugh, avowing himself guilty of a crime still more hideous than the theft of the Silver Moon eggs! Do you know what he had done?"

"W-what?" faltered Mildred. "He had stolen from cold storage and he concealed the leaves of the Bimba bush, brought from Singapore to the Silver Moon caterpillar. That's what Boomly had done! *'And my Silver Moon eggs had already begun to hatch!! And my caterpillars would starve!!!!'*"

Mildred went to the infuriated entomologist and laid a firm hand on his shoulder. "Listen," she said, "how do you know that Professor Boomly had not concealed these Bimba leaves in his own pocket?"

Quint's face turned contorted and gaped at her. "I never thought of that," he said. "What have you done with him?" she asked, very pale.

"I tell you, I don't know."

"You must know what you did with him," she insisted.

"My caterpillars are starving," he began again. "I haven't anything else they'll eat. They feed on the leaves of the Bimba bush. They won't eat anything else. It's a well-known fact that they won't. Why, in Johore where they came from, they'll travel miles over the ground to find a Bimba bush—"

"What!" exclaimed Mildred.

"Certainly—miles! They'd starve sooner than eat anything except Bimba leaves. If there's a bush within twenty miles they'll find it."

"Wait," said Mildred quietly. "Where are these starving caterpillars?"

"In a glass jar in my pocket—here! What the devil are you doing?" For the girl had dexterously slipped the slim glass jar from his coat pocket and was holding it up to the light.

Inside it were several dozen tiny, dark caterpillars, some resting disconsolately on the bottom, some hungrily traveling over the bottom in pitiful and hopeless quest of nourishment.

Heedless of the shouts and threats of Dr. Quint, the girl calmly uncurled the jar,

took on her slender forefinger a single little caterpillar, replaced the cork, and, kneeling down, gently disengaged the caterpillar. It dropped upon the floor, remained motionless for a moment, then, turning, began to trundle rapidly toward the doorway behind us.

"Not now," said "if" papa. Professor Boomly really is concealed in the Bimba leaves upon his own person, this little caterpillar, according to Dr. Quint, is certain to find those leaves."

Overcome with excitement and admiration for this intelligent and unusually beautiful girl, I seized her hands and congratulated her.

"I'll tell you," said I to the miserable Quint, "that infant caterpillar should lead us to that dark and secret spot where you had hoped to conceal the horrid evidence of your guilt. Three things have undone you—a caterpillar replete with mysterious instinct, a humble bunch of Bimba leaves, and the marvelous intelligence of this young and lovely girl. Madman, your hour has struck!"

He looked at me in a dazed sort of way, as though astonishment had left him unable to articulate. But I had become tired of his violence and his shouts and yell, so I asked Jones for his handkerchief, and, before Quint knew what I was up to I had tied it over his mouth.

He became a brilliant purple, but all he could utter was a furious humming, buzzing noise.

But when Jones had opened the door, the little caterpillar, followed by Mildred and myself, continued to hustle along as though he knew quite well where he was going.

Down the hallway he went in undulating haste, past my door, we three following in silent excitement as we discovered that, parallel to the caterpillar's course ran a gruesome trail of blood drops.

And when the little creature turned and made straight for the door of Professor Farrago's our revered chief, the excitement among us was terrific.

Instantly the caterpillar crossed the threshold, wriggling forward at top speed. We followed, peering fearfully around us. Nobody was visible.

Could Quint have dragged his victim here? By Heaven, he had! For the caterpillar was traveling straight under the door upon which Professor Farrago was accustomed to repose after dinner, dropping on one knee, I saw a fat foot partly protruding from under the shirred edges of the fringed drapery.

"He's there!" I whispered, in an awed voice to the others. "Courage, Miss Casel. Try not to faint."

Jones turned and looked at her with that same odd expression; then he went over to where the caterpillar and I lay on the floor around her waist. "Try not to faint, Mildred," he said. "It might mangle your hair."

It was a strange thing to say, but I had no time then to analyze it, for I had seized the fat foot which partly protruded from under the sofa, clad in a low-cut congress garter and a white sock.

And then I nearly fainted, for instead of the crudité, inert remains of lifeless clay, the foot wriggled and tried to kill me.

"Help!" I cried in a thin and muffled voice. "Help! Help, in the name of Heaven!"

"Boomly!" I cried, scarcely believing my ears.

"Professor Boomly!" cried Mildred excitedly. "Have you any Bimba leaves concealed about your person?"

"Yes, I have," he said sulkily. There came a hitch of the fat foot, a heavy scuffing sound, fat packing, and then, skittering out across the floor came a fat, sealed parcel.

"There you are," he said; "now, let me alone until that fiend has gone home."

"He won't attack you again," I said. "Come out."

But Professor Boomly flatly declined to stir.

He looked at the parcel, it was marked: "Bimba leaves, Johore."

With a sigh of unutterable relief, I picked up the ravenous little caterpillar, placed him on the parcel, and turned to go. And didn't.

For what I caught a glimpse of, just outside the door in the hallway, was Jones kissing Mildred Casel. And being shyly indemnified for his trouble with a gentle return kiss, both his arms were around her waist; both her hands rested upon his shoulders; and, as I looked—I let it pass!—let it pass!

Deliberately I fished in my pocket, found my pack of cigarettes, lit one.

Tabaco lacitif cor hominist

Another Chambers story next month—better than ever.