ARGOSY

ALL-STORY WEEKLY

MAY 21

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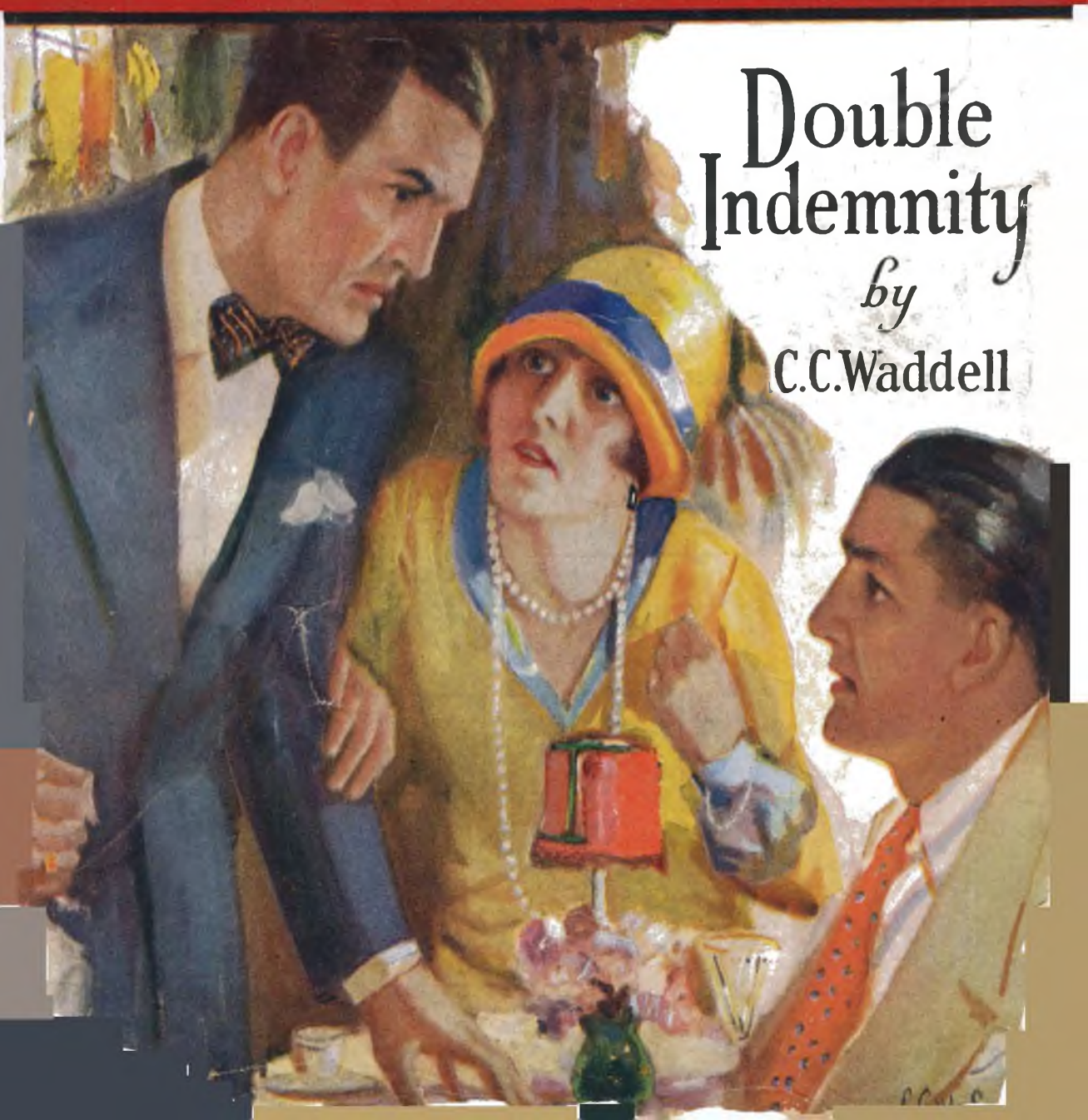

Double Indemnity

by

C.C.Waddell

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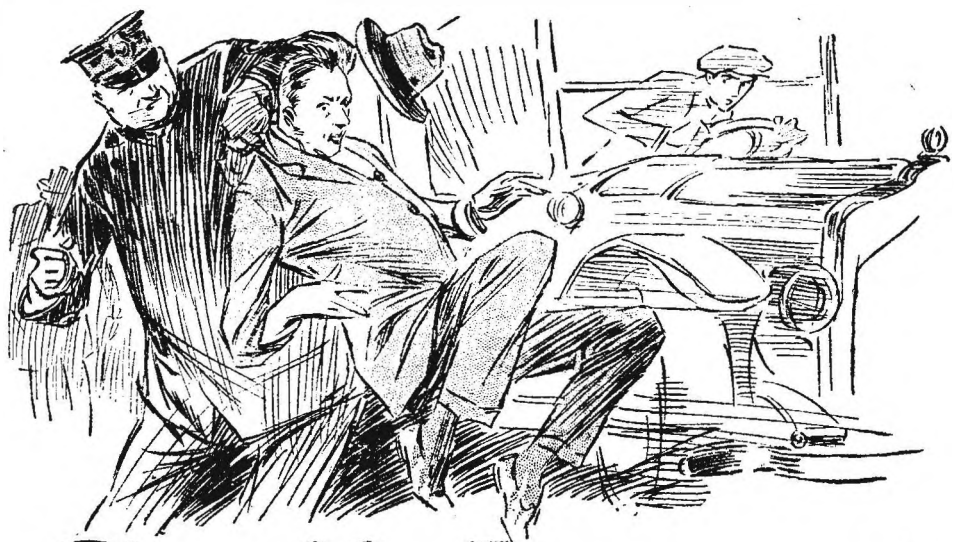


Double Indemnity

By C. C. WADDELL

Author of "Adventure's Price," "Midnight to High Noon," etc.

CHAPTER I.

WHAT PRICE—DEAD?

MISSED!

Ed Bell, hurrying up Broadway to keep a luncheon appointment, stopped at a startled cry of warning, as a heavy iron beam hurtled from high up on a building in course of construction, and crashed to the ground not six inches in front of him.

Had he kept on, he would almost inevitably have been hit, and this chronicle of his adventures would have ended then and there.

Most people would have shown more or less agitation over such a narrow escape. Bell was sprayed with dust and splinters from the impact of the beam against the temporary board sidewalk; and the noise it made was like an explosion of dynamite.

But, except for that brief pause when the thing struck, Bell did not stay his steps, or even look up to determine the cause of the accident.

A dozen spectators who had seen the beam fall, but had been in no danger from it, seemed far more upset than he. He merely hurdled the still quivering piece of iron where it lay across his path; and,

swinging back into his stride, breezed on up the street.

"Gosh!" muttered an actor who had witnessed the episode from the door of a theatrical agency across the way. "Give that guy a few warts, and he could star as a dill pickle. Me, I'd have been scared out of a year's growth."

Yet Bell was no more phlegmatic or self-controlled than the average mortal. Ordinarily, he would have flinched back from the crash, goggling and white-faced, even as you and I.

But he had to a considerable extent what is known as a one-track mind, and just at present his faculties were all centered on that luncheon engagement to which he was hastening.

Maybe you or I might have been as dreamily indifferent to a rain of structural iron, if we had as recently become engaged, and especially if the brand-new fiancée we were rushing to meet were such a Georgia peach as Helen Lincoln.

Oh, boy! No shad-like, 1927-model flapper with a Broadway paint-job, but an armful of real girl with the delicate blush of a Cherokee rose in her cheeks and lips like the fresh, velvety petals of a scarlet geranium. She had wavy, midnight hair, eyes of deepest brown, languid, Southern speech, about her the vivid glow of perfume of a Fort Valley orchard in the springtime.

Bell and she had danced together all evening the night before at a Long Island country club; and then as he drove her home in his roadster, they had stopped to watch the ocean in the moonlight, and huskily he had told her how much he cared for her.

Ten hours now—ten centuries, rather—since he had left her. And she would be waiting for him at the Hotel Poinsett, where they had arranged to meet and have luncheon together, and discuss anew this wonderful thing that had happened to them, and how it had all come about.

Bell had the ring in his vest-pocket which he had spent that entire morning in selecting. His mind was a hubbub of happy anticipations. A whole building might have crashed down across his path; and in his present entranced state he would have taken no notice.

He dived recklessly into the surge of traffic at Forty-Second Street, weaved his way across through charging trucks and motor cars, and reached the hotel to find Helen waiting for him just inside the lobby.

Instantly, the eddying, noonday crowd about them—shoppers and tourists and badge-covered delegates to various conventions, buyers, bankers, butter-and-egg men, the colonel's lady and Judy O'Grady, shrill-voiced pages and porters with mops and dustpans—became individually and collectively his enemy.

He wanted to take Helen in his arms, and smother her with kisses. But how could he, under the eyes of that cynical gallery? Might as well stage a petting party at the Polo Grounds, he thought.

Instead, he had to hold himself down to a mere clasp of the hand, and a murmured: "You darling!" as he guided her swiftly out of the crush, and off toward the dining room on the second floor.

There they would at least be alone, he comforted himself; for he had reserved a table for them in a secluded corner—one of those intimate corner-tables, where the shaded lights are dim, and the waiter discreetly looks the other way.

But Lady Luck is notoriously a fickle jane. As if she thought she had done enough for Bell when she shunted the falling beam away from his dome, she now deliberately turned her back on him. No sooner were he and Helen settled, and their order given than a squat, heavy-set young man with a broad, good-humored face bore down upon them.

"Hello, Mr. Bell!" he panted jerkily. "You sure do set a speedy clip. Whew! A plump guy like me's got no more chance chasing you, than if I was hitched."

Bell, ignoring the cushiony, perspiring hand extended to him, eyed the intruder distantly. But he might as well have tried to high-hat a friendly hippopotamus.

"You ain't forgot me, have you?" The fat man grinned unabashed. "I'm Binoff, the insurance broker that Mr. Rossiter got for you; and I've brought around those two ten thousand dollar policies." He slapped

down a couple of bulky documents on the table. "They've been allowed all right. But the company's kinda holding back on that one for fifty thousand dollars. They say—"

"Never mind!" Bell interrupted hastily. There were reasons why he didn't want to discuss in front of Helen the hesitation of the insurance company in regard to granting that policy. "Er—I can't go into that now. Come to see me at the office."

"But look here, Mr. Bell—" Binoff slid uninvited into a chair, and leaned argumentatively across the table—"things like this oughtn't to be put off. Ain't that close call you just had no warning to you?

"I wasn't more'n half a block behind you and, believe me, it brought my heart right up into my mouth. You never thought when you started up here, that maybe you was walking into your grave. And yet, if—"

Helen looked up with a startled expression.

"What on earth is he talking about, Edward?" she broke in solicitously. "What close call have you had?"

"Oh, it was nothing. Nothing at all," Ed protested. "He's making a mountain out of a molehill."

"He calls it nothing!" Binoff rolled up his eyes. "Next thing he'll be telling you, missus, it was only a feather that came floating down at him off'n the new Unity Building, and not no half-ton chunk of iron what, if it had hit him, would have flattened him, same as a pancake."

Helen turned white, and gave a little gasp.

"And you never even spoke of it!" she exclaimed shakily, laying her hand quickly over Bell's where it rested on the table.

Ed, scowling at Binoff, repeated defensively that the thing wasn't worth making a fuss about. The insurance man exaggerated the danger, he said. He didn't believe Binoff had been anywhere near the occurrence.

"Is that so?" challenged the broker. "Ask Mr. Rossiter. He'll tell you I wasn't fifty feet away from where—like the newspapers say—cross marks the position of the body."

"Rossiter?" Bell repeated with a touch of surprise. "Was he there?"

"Sure he was. You see, it was this way. I had these two policies ready to deliver; but when I telephoned to your office about it, Mr. Rossiter answered and said you weren't there.

"Then he asked me about the policies; were they all right, and were you absolutely covered in case anything should happen to you? And when I told him yes, he said that I could probably catch you at the Hotel Poinsett about noon.

"So, as it was then five minutes to twelve," he continued. "I started up this way; and there right ahead of me, I seen you, Mr. Bell. Then somebody hollered; and—zowie!—down came that big beam smashing to the sidewalk. It didn't seem to faze you none, Mr. Bell; you kept straight on.

"But it stopped me, and turned me kinda sick for a minute. Then when I started after you again, I run into Mr. Rossiter just coming out of the doorway of the building. Funny I hadn't sighted him before; but he told me that he'd seen the accident, too, and had dived right into the building to find out what caused it."

"Johnny on the spot, eh?" Bell gave a half-annoyed laugh. "I might have known it, though. Nothing ever happens to me, but that bird manages to butt into it, somehow. And I suppose he's got it all doped out now, just how the beam came to fall, and who's to blame, and all about it?"

"No." Binoff shook his head. "He says it's a mystery to him. There wasn't no workmen, nor nobody else on the eighth floor where the beam tumbled from, and the foreman told him it had been fastened secure with a rope, and the rope was still there all right. What he thought, it must somehow have slipped out of the loop that held it.

"But that ain't the point." He turned to Helen. "What I'm getting at is that fifty thousand dollar policy. Here's Mr. Bell putting it off, and yet, only for luck, he'd be a mess of remains right now.

"In New York here, where stuff like that is happening every hour, along with shootings, and holdups, and explosions,

and traffic accidents, and what not, no one oughtn't to delay a minute fixing himself with all the insurance he can carry.

"I tell you, he's flirting with death every time he steps out o' doors, Mrs. Bell; and it ain't fair to yourself, nor yet to the kiddies—"

Helen gave another gasp, but this time it was one of confusion; and her face which had paled at the description of Ed's narrow escape was now suffused with crimson.

Bell, scarcely less embarrassed than she, sprang to his feet.

"We're not married, you big clown!" he exploded. "Beat it now, do you hear me? When you want to talk insurance, come to my office, instead of pestering two people who are trying to have a quiet luncheon. Beat it, I tell you!"

He accompanied the injunction with so threatening a gesture, that Binoff—whose persistence was usually equal to his fat—deemed it wise to take him at his word, and with remarkable agility for one of his size scuttled out of reach.

But as Bell started to sit down again, his eye fell on the two insurance policies lying on the table, and a sudden thought popped into his mind, prompted in part by the broker's unlucky blunder.

"Hey, you!" he called; and as Binoff now three tables away turned to look, he beckoned to him. A bit uncertainly the insurance man came back.

"Have those two policies changed," Ed pushed them toward him, "so as to make Miss Helen Lincoln the beneficiary, in case anything happens to me."

"Good." Binoff made a note of the name. "And now, in regard to this fifty thousand dollar policy, I think maybe if you write a letter and explain just how you came to be in that scrape with—"

The baleful glitter in Bell's eye halted him, and he skipped back a couple of steps; but paused there, hesitating whether to keep on or not.

"Don't stop!" And there was that in Ed's voice which decided the question for him. "Two is company, Binoff; and three, if you stick on, is going to be—murder. Choose your exit now, and walk or run as you please. Fade!"

And Binoff, hurriedly stuffing the two insurance policies into his pocket, faded.

But that solitude of two, for which Bell had planned, was still denied the lovers. The waiter almost instantly appeared with their order; and by the time he had finished serving it and was about to withdraw, a lithe, slender chap with hair like a raven's wing, and a dark, hawk-like profile, entered the dining room, and after a glance around, came swiftly toward their table.

Bell, whose gaze was bent upon Helen, did not see the fellow until he reached the corner where they sat. But Helen had noted him from the moment he appeared in the doorway; and she was not alone in this respect. Every feminine eye there followed him in his progress across the room. He was the sort of man that women involuntarily look at.

And to them all, matron and maid alike, he was not merely a personable young man in a blue serge business suit and carrying a straw hat, but a movie hero, a figure of romance.

They saw him in the turban and flowing robes of a young sheik, or in gypsy garb with a scarlet kerchief over his sleek, black hair, or in the white, ruffled shirt of a lightning duelist, his rapier flashing in the moonlight.

As he made his way gracefully among the tables, he carried about him an atmosphere of mystery and adventure; one felt that, for all his youth, he had seen many lands and known many experiences.

Bell looked up with a start as the newcomer paused beside him, and dropped a hand lightly on his shoulder. Then his brows contracted in a not altogether pleased recognition.

"Oh, hello, Rossiter! Something you wanted to see me about?"

But the other, oblivious to Ed's frown and the slightly frosty edge on his greeting, was gazing across in undisguised admiration at Helen.

"Nothing special," he answered without deflecting that bold stare. "Just thought I'd see how you felt after the narrow shave you had with that beam. I went right into the building to investigate, but wasn't able to find out much."

"Yes, so Binoff told me."

There was an awkward pause of a moment or two. Ed was hoping that Rossiter would take a hint from his curt speech, and leave them. But Rossiter showed no such intention.

"So you've seen Binoff then?" He laughed. "He was all in a lather to locate you. There's a hitch, he said, in granting that fifty thousand dollar policy."

"Yes, and there can keep on being a hitch," snapped Ed. "I never wanted the darned thing anyhow, and I certainly don't intend to bother myself in regard to it. Let it slide."

"Oh, I say! You can't afford to do that." Rossiter at last pried his eyes loose from the girl to give a quick frown of expostulation. "Why, it's equivalent to putting yourself on a black list; as if you had no defense to their charge of—"

Again Ed had to head off that disclosure which the fates seemed determined should get to his sweetheart's ears.

"Business in business hours, Dick," he admonished sharply. "This is a party, not a conference. And, that reminds me, I haven't introduced you yet to my fiancée, Miss Lincoln. Helen,"—one could hardly blame him for giving a sarcastic rap—"this is my sales manager and self-appointed guardian, Dick Rossiter, or as they call him at the office, the Gypsy King."

He had not intended giving that introduction; and the rankling suspicion that Rossiter had deliberately schemed to force it out of him made him mad all the way through, especially as the fellow seized upon it as an excuse for plumping himself down and joining them at luncheon.

But the sales manager had little chance to exult in his triumph, if he so regarded it; for the female of the species, when she chooses to exert her powers, can make a monkey out of any mere man that walks, and Helen had concluded that Mr. Rossiter needed taking down a peg or two.

He had intrigued her interest as he swung down the room with that lithe, pantherish tread of his; but now on closer inspection she decided that his eyes were set too close together, and that there was a conceited smirk to his lips. She sensed, too, without understanding the cause of it, the little skirmish that had taken place between the two men, and naturally her sympathies aligned themselves on the side of Bell.

Never once departing from the line of perfect courtesy, she yet by her subtle shadings of tone and glance and expression made Rossiter feel that he was an interloper, a cad, and a lout. In spite of himself, his veneer of easy self-assurance crumbled.

His supercilious stare wavered and fell under her coolly appraising gaze. He became conscious of his hands, like a cop with his feet when somebody looks steadily at them.

Inadvertently he made a blunder in the use of his fork, and cursed himself for it. He was like a bull under the expert thrusts of a matador, goaded, furious, but baffled. Finally, in his confusion, he took a swallow of scalding hot coffee, and choked on it.

He could stand no more. Red-faced and spluttering, he pushed his chair back from the table, and mumbling something about a forgotten engagement, fled ingloriously from the field.

Ed didn't comprehend just how it had been accomplished. It seemed to him a sort of intervention of Providence in his behalf.

"Well, at last we are alone." He breathed a deep sigh of relief, as he reached for Helen's hand under the tablecloth.

But she disengaged her fingers from his clasp, and leaned toward him with a serious look on her face.

"I want to ask you something, Edward," she said. "In whose name were those two insurance policies of yours made out, before you had them transferred to me."

"Why, Rossiter's. You see, he and I—"

"I thought so!" she exclaimed. "And that fat man said Rossiter knew they had been allowed. He even asked particularly if it was certain that you were covered in case anything should happen to you."

"Yes, but—"

"Wait a minute. Don't you think it rather odd, that although the fat man saw nothing of Rossiter before that beam fell, he should immediately afterward have come hurrying out of the building,

"In that brief interval he could hardly have had time to get up to the eighth floor and back, much less carry on the investigation he claimed he'd been making."

Ed stared at her, his mouth agape.

"My God, Helen! You don't mean to imply—"

"I only know"—her face hardened—"that Rossiter had a fresh smear of red paint on the under side of his sleeve, as if he'd been shoving at a piece of structural iron."

CHAPTER II.

MISTER "X."

THEY had no opportunity to say more. Their isolation, on which Ed had been congratulating himself only a moment before, was abruptly broken by the descent upon them of a smiling, voluable group made up of the people, a mother and two daughters, whom Helen was visiting down on Long Island.

"Look at them!" teased jolly Mrs. Strickland, her hostess. "Ain't love wonderful? Here they sit, so wrapped up in each other that we practically have to step on them before they know we're around.

"I suppose you're ready to murder me, Ed Bell," she laughed, "but I've got to drag this little girl away now. The car is at the door, and it's 'Boots and saddles' with us. Two hours ought to be long enough for you to have her all to yourself, anyhow." The bitter irony of that!

And she was right; Ed could cheerfully have strangled her for her inopportune appearance, especially as it meant a separation from Helen for almost a week; since the Stricklands were taking her off with them on a motor trip up through the Berkshires and into New Hampshire, and were starting on it that afternoon.

"Come, my dear." Mrs. Strickland touched the girl on the arm. "I know I am cruel, but you'll have to cut your leave-takings short. I want to make Great Barrington for dinner to-night."

So all that Bell could do was to accompany them out to the waiting car, and there in the view of all Broadway exchange a tepid handshake with his lady of dreams by way of farewell.

As they passed out through the crowded hotel lobby, however, she had the chance for a whispered word or two with him.

"You'll be careful while I'm away, won't you, Edward," she pleaded, "and not take any unnecessary risks. And listen; promise me that you'll let this Rossiter man know immediately he is no longer the beneficiary of those two policies."

He had only time for a nod of acquiescence; for by this time they had reached the sidewalk, and the Stricklands were seizing upon her and hurrying her to the car.

Then the party started off, and he was left alone in the jostling sidewalk throngs. Through a gap in the traffic he caught for a moment a glimpse of the big Strickland limousine, and of Helen looking back and waving a good-by to him.

The sight of her ungloved hand fluttering out at the window of the car recalled to him all at once the ring in his vest-pocket, which, owing to the misadventures at the luncheon table, he had forgotten to slip on her slender finger; and on a hare-brained impulse, he plunged out from the curb in pursuit.

The bellowing blast of a horn and a chorus of warning shouts from the sidewalk brought him to himself. Out of the corner of his eye he saw a motor car right on top of him, and realized that there was no chance to evade it. He was bound to be hit.

Then a brawny hand seized him by the back of the collar, and jerked him back to safety; and he turned to find himself facing a cop who, passing along by good fortune at the moment, had grabbed him just in the nick of time.

Bell started to stammer out his thanks; but his rescuer letting go of him with an angry exclamation, sprang out into the street again, and leaping to the running-board of the car which had so nearly run Ed down, ordered its driver to pull in beside the sidewalk.

With a gasp of surprise, Ed recognized the machine as his own roadster, and the man at the wheel as Rossiter.

"I know your kind!" The cop was

storming at him, as Bell edged into the crowd quickly gathering about the two. "You're one of those birds that run over somebody, and then speed off. Why didn't you slow up when you saw that guy starting to cross in front of you? Haven't you got any brakes?"

Rossiter made the mistake of attempting to argue the question, a thing entirely contrary to his usual custom. Ed had seen him in run-ins with the police before, and on every such occasion he had been deferential, apologetic, ready with the soft answer that turneth away wrath.

But now he seemed put out over something, so black with pique as to be indifferent to consequences.

"I had the right of way," he snapped defiantly. "And anyhow, I didn't have a chance to slow up. He dived right out in front of me."

"Don't try to pull anything like that on me." The cop glared at him. "I saw the whole thing. You had at least fifteen feet to stop in. 'Stead of that, you kept right on; and I ain't certain but what you stepped on her a bit and edged over toward him. Looked to me almost like you were trying to 'get' him.

"Tell me you had the right of way, will you?" he repeated caustically. "The right of way for you is over to the station house for reckless driving, and that's where I've got a good mind to take you."

And the altercation might have ended in just that way, if Ed hadn't pushed forward to address the cop in a more placating tone.

"I guess I'm the person that ought really to be arrested, officer," he laughed, "for doing such a stupid piece of jay-walking. When a man jumps right in front of his own car, it's about time to have a guardian appointed for him; and you can hardly blame the friend who is driving it for losing his head."

"You say that this is your car?" the cop frowned.

For answer, Bell showed his license card.

"And this guy is a friend of yours, eh?"

"My sales manager," Ed nodded.

"Well"—the cop scratched his head reflectively—"there's an old saying, 'Lord, deliver me from my friends.' Still, if you're satisfied, I don't know why I should kick up a row. Just the same, though," he scowled at Rossiter, "you be more careful, young fellow, the next time some boob goes cutting across in front of you. Having the right of way is all very nice; but a manslaughter charge is something else yet. And that's what you'd have had against you if it hadn't been for me."

With this parting shot he strolled majestically on; and as the crowd that had gathered about them began to disperse Bell and Rossiter were left alone.

Rossiter, who by this time had recovered his usual jaunty poise, broke into an amused grin.

"By golly!" he chuckled. "It was a lucky thing for me that bull didn't know I stood to win twenty grand on you being bumped off. He'd have nailed me sure."

"Twenty grand?" repeated Ed questioningly. "How do you make that out?"

"Why, the insurance, of course. Those two ten-thousand-dollar policies. Some joke on the insurance company, I'll say, to have you kick out so soon."

"No," Bell grinned in turn, "the joke would have been rather on you, I think, because you'd have been suspected of running me down for the insurance, and yet couldn't have collected one red cent. You see, Dick, I've had those policies changed so as to make Miss Lincoln the beneficiary instead of you."

"Oh?" Rossiter was plainly taken aback for a moment. "Oh, I see," he said slowly.

Then he quickly pulled himself together. "Well, of course that was the proper thing to do," he agreed affably. "But listen. How about the arrangement between us? When you got me to take out twenty thousand dollars insurance in your favor so as to protect you, in case anything should happen to me, you said you didn't object to doing the same thing for me."

The compact to which he referred had been made between them about two months before, and had resulted in large measure from the muddle into which the affairs of a firm Bell did business with had been thrown by the sudden death of one of its members.

This had suggested to Ed the idea of protecting himself from similar difficulties, and he had therefore proposed to his chief executives that they should insure themselves in his favor.

All complied willingly enough; but a day or two later, when Bell and he were alone, Rossiter brought up the question for further discussion.

"Look here," he said, "you stand to rake in quite a bunch of jack in case I go west. But suppose it's you that takes the trip, where do I get off? This is a one-man business that would probably be wound up in short order; and then I'd be out on the sidewalk looking for a job, with nothing to show for the licks I've put in here. That's hardly fair, is it? Seems to me, what's sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander, too."

Bell considered the point for a moment or two.

"There's something in what you say," he conceded, "but you're forgetting that I pay the premiums on these policies. Is it your notion that I should make a further charge against the business just to let you chaps feel easy over my possible demise?"

"Oh, I'd stand the expense of a policy on you," Rossiter broke in eagerly.

"No." Ed shook his head. "I've got a better scheme than that. There'll be a rather sizable bonus coming to each of the staff on our last six months' business. Suppose, instead of paying it over in cash, I apply it to insuring myself for the benefit of the bunch of you?"

But when he submitted the proposition to his office family, Rossiter was the only one to take him up on it. The others all seemed more inclined toward the bird in the hand, especially when the chance of realizing on those in the bush depended on the shuffling off of any one so healthy and vigorous as their employer.

Rossiter, however, held out for the gamble; and Ed accordingly agreed to take out those two ten-thousand-dollar policies, and name him as the beneficiary.

And then another complication arose. Ed passed his physical examination with flying colors; but when it came to issuing the policies, the insurance company held back, and intimated that it didn't regard Mr. Bell as an altogether desirable moral risk.

Ed was thunderstruck. He had thought the affair the insurance people held against him dead and buried years before. What had happened was the suicide of a woman in a flat taken in Bell's name, but which was really paid for by the man for whom he was then working.

There was some suspicion of murder in connection with the case, and for a day or two Ed was subjected to very unpleasant notoriety—especially as loyalty to his employer kept him silent—but in the end the true facts became known, and the authorities, satisfied that nothing was wrong, had dropped further investigation.

Bell had never been arrested or actually charged with crime. The evidence at the coroner's inquest showed that he had not even been acquainted with the woman who committed suicide.

All that really stood against him was an array of sensational headlines and some misleading insinuations in the newspapers of seven years previous. And since then he had gone into business for himself, and had made a name and success for himself in the building line.

Not only that, but he had been paying steadily each year the premiums on a twenty-thousand-dollar endowment policy, which he had taken out prior to the unfortunate affair. These circumstances, it seemed to him, ought to establish his responsibility.

Yet now the ancient scandal raised itself unexpectedly to stand as a bar to his application; and the agent to whom he had given it offered little hope of a more favorable consideration.

"When a man's rated as undesirable," he said, "it takes almost an earthquake to unravel the red tape and get them to accept him."

Ed somewhat shamefacedly reported the difficulty to Rossiter.

"Bunk!" scoffed the sales manager. "That agent you've got is simply no good, a weak-kneed quitter. Let me put a palookah I know, named Binoff, on the job. He's got teeth on him like a bulldog.

When he goes after a thing, he never lets go until he gets it.

"Tell you," he suggested brightly, "just to make it an object to him and call out his best form, we'll hand him an extra application for fifty thousand dollars. That 'll start him going good."

"You're crazy!" Ed protested vehemently. "Who do you think I am, Henry Ford or John D. Rockefeller? I've got no more license to carry a fifty-thousand-dollar policy than a cat has to two tails."

"Who said anything about carrying it?" Rossiter shrugged. "I was only thinking of the effect on Binoff. You can always refuse to take it; say you've changed your mind. And think, too, if by any chance it should be allowed, what a triumph that would be for you."

So, allowing himself to be persuaded, Ed made out an application for a fifty-thousand-dollar policy, and handed it with the two for ten thousand dollars apiece to Binoff.

And now, as has been indicated, the fat broker, true to his reputation as miracle worker, had got the two smaller policies allowed, and even manifested an expectation of landing the fifty-thousand-dollar whale.

It was the allusions of Binoff and Rossiter to this, and to the steps that would have to be taken to secure it, that had kept Ed on pins and needles during the luncheon.

He did not want that fifty-thousand-dollar policy, and did not propose to take it; but to say so would have provoked a a discussion that was bound to enlighten Helen in regard to the old scandal.

He intended to tell her of it himself at a suitable opportunity, but he certainly did not care to have it sprung on her offhand in that way, and without proper preface. Indeed he half suspected that Rossiter had kept harping on the subject chiefly to get his goat and show him up in a bad light.

All these things ran through Bell's mind now, as the sales manager brought up that agreement between them to insure for each other's protection; and there also recurred to him Helen's warning admonition to be careful.

After all, he asked himself, what did he know about Rossiter? Precious little, when one came to count it up, he had to admit —certainly not enough to justify him in making his death a matter of profit to the fellow.

He had taken on Rossiter as an extra salesman less than a year before, asking him few questions because he thought the employment would be merely temporary. But the chap had shown such an aptitude for the business, and had proved himself such a go-getter, that Ed was only too glad to make a place for him on the regular force; and then as he steadily proved his value, had advanced him rapidly to his present position.

Yet Rossiter remained as much an unknown quantity as on the day when he had first sauntered into the office looking for work. He talked a lot, but he told practically nothing whatever about himself or his past.

One gathered from the few revealing hints he gave that he had led a rather adventurous career, and at different times had been associated on terms of intimacy both with persons in high position and leaders of the underworld; and Ed, checking up on these careless allusions, had found that in every case they were supported by the facts.

More than once Bell had endeavored to get the man's history from him, had switched the conversation around to personal lines, had laid pitfalls to induce some disclosure; but Rossiter always had skillfully evaded his efforts, and somehow made it impossible to question him directly. He was likable, straight as a string in all his dealings, and an undoubted asset to the business; yet he continued an enigma, and perhaps, one could not help feeling at times, a sinister one.

This impression was strong upon Ed now, whether as a result of Helen's warning, or owing to the two narrow escapes he had experienced; and he realized the folly of the agreement into which he had been led. Why, it was putting a price on his own head; and that with a man to

whom, for all he knew, murder might be an old story.

Certainly he didn't intend to be caught in such a trap again. Yet he could not deny that he had made a fair-and-square contract with Rossiter on this insurance business; and neither could he offer any very reasonable excuse for getting out of it.

To accuse the sales manager of responsibility for the falling beam, or for his close shave from being run over, would have been silly. There was no evidence to show that Rossiter's connection with either affair had been anything but pure coincidence.

All he could do was to voice a suspicion; and that would mean, of course, Rossiter's resignation from the Bell organization, a thing he was by no means anxious to bring about.

He strove therefore in handling the situation to follow a more diplomatic course.

"Well, you see how it is, Dick," he frowned. "That big cheese of a Binoff came butting in while we were at luncheon, and slammed those two policies right down in front of Helen. Nothing for me to do under the circumstances but make a graceful gesture, and have them changed over to her name.

"So, as I can't offer you any quid pro quo now," he continued, "suppose we call all bets off."

"You might give me a cut on the fifty-thousand-dollar policy," Rossiter suggested. "I'm betting Binoff 'll put that over, too."

"No." Ed shook his head decisively. "As I've already told you, that's out. There isn't going to be any fifty-thousand-dollar policy on me, Binoff or no Binoff. Besides, I've made up my mind that this insurance scheme in the office is a mistake, and I'm going to ditch it."

"You mean you're going to cancel the policies you took out on all of us?" Rossiter glanced at him sharply.

"No; they're paid for, and I'll let them stand. You boys can call it an additional bonus, if you want to. But you'll have to name somebody else as the beneficiary in them. I don't want to be under suspicion, in case any of you happens to croak." He could not resist giving that slight covert thrust.

"Yep." He stepped into the car. "We'll go right down to the office now, and tell them what I've decided. Then I'll call up Blossom, the agent that got those policies for me, and have them made in favor of whatever persons each of you says."

And in spite of Rossiter's disapproving comments, he insisted on carrying the matter through without delay.

Later in the afternoon he set out alone to inspect a block of houses which he was putting up out in the neighborhood of Jamaica, and did not return until well along in the evening.

He was just sitting down to a belated dinner, when there came a call for him on the telephone.

It was from Hudson, his treasurer, and urged him to lose no time in getting to St. Luke's Hospital, as Renault, their chief of construction, was there and not expected to live.

"Not expected to live?" Ed almost dropped the instrument. "What are you talking about? Why, when I left the office this afternoon he was fit as a fiddle."

"Yes, I know," said Hudson. "But he and Rossiter went out to dinner together, and immediately afterward Renault seemed to be taken with some sort of seizure, and fell back unconscious in his chair. It must have been something he ate, I suppose; but the funny thing is that Rossiter was entirely unaffected. You'd better hurry up here, though. The doctors are still working over Renault, but they say he can last only a very short time."

Nevertheless, Bell, gripped by an ominous suggestion, held the wire a second longer.

"Listen, Hudson!" he said. "Do you know who Renault named as beneficiary on that policy when the change was made this afternoon?"

"Why, yes," the treasurer answered a little slowly. "Rossiter and he got to bantering and kidding with each other over the matter, and finally agreed to make their policies in each other's favor. So I guess

Rossiter steps into a pretty easy twenty thousand dollars. Curious how it happened that way, isn't it?"

CHAPTER III.

OUT OF THE FRYING PAN.

POOR Renault died before Bell arrived at the hospital, and it was with considerable misgiving that Ed awaited the results of the autopsy which naturally was ordered under the circumstances.

The report of the surgeons showed, however, that there was no ground for any suspicion of foul play in the matter. The man, they said, had died from perfectly natural causes—a stroke of apoplexy due to a cerebral hemorrhage, which in one of Renault's portly, full-blooded habit was in no way remarkable, and might have happened at any time.

With this verdict the sentiment of the office staff, which had been distinctly adverse toward Rossiter, veered around, and he was restored to his former popular footing.

The insurance company, too, which at the start had manifested a tendency to investigate the affair pretty searchingly, seemed content to drop the inquiry, and settle the loss without quibble or delay.

But Bell could not rid himself of an uneasy suggestion that Renault's death might be less free of question than appeared on the surface.

He had heard of subtle Oriental and South American poisons which, although of deadly power, left absolutely no trace upon the victim. Might it not be that Rossiter, somewhere in his unrevealed roamings, had learned the secret of such a compound, or had secured a sample of it?

And how easy it would have been, if he possessed such a poison, to have distracted Renault's attention for a moment, and slipped a pellet or a grain of it—whatever quantity was required to do the work—into the other's coffee. Men have taken more desperate chances than that for far less than twenty thousand dollars.

Ed wondered if possibly he himself might not have suffered that stroke of apoplexy instead of Renault, had he not been led to substitute the name of Helen for that of Rossiter as the beneficiary of those two ten-thousand-dollar policies.

He had by no means forgotten his narrow escape from the falling beam, nor from being run down by the car. There was no proof, of course, that Rossiter had engineered those things, or deliberately planned to kill him; but such a series of suspicious happenings topped off by this tragic business with Renault made a rather ugly chain of circumstantial evidence.

As a jury of one on the case, Ed could not but admit that there were grounds for a reasonable doubt, yet on the other hand he could not feel justified in voting a full acquittal. The best he could make out of it was a sense of relieved thankfulness that the sales manager had no longer any object or advantage to gain in removing him from the world.

In this unsettled, questioning frame of mind, Bell was glad that a rush of other matters prevented anything except strictly business communications between himself and Rossiter. Had there been opportunity for their ordinary, friendly interchange, he did not believe he could have kept from showing in his tone and manner the doubts that assailed him.

But Ed had his hands too full at the moment to spare any time for side issues. Owing to the death of Renault, he had been obliged to take over, in addition to his own duties, those of the construction department, and as a result, the traditional one-armed paper hanger had things easy by comparison.

The dead executive had been one of those persons who keep details largely in their heads; and now, when Bell essayed to step into his place, he found little to guide him.

The records were so full of gaps as to be practically worthless; and it was only by an exhaustive search through the files, and painstaking examination of the work already accomplished, that one could make out what remained to be done.

Nor was that the worst of it. In his investigation of the department, Ed was appalled to discover that owing to the care-

less, inefficient methods and lack of system with which it had been run, he was facing a loss so heavy that it was bound to cripple him seriously, and possibly bankrupt him.

Does it ever fail to happen that, just when a man becomes engaged to the only girl in the world, and is blissfully contemplating matrimony, some untoward stroke of the sort does not come along to jolt him out of paradise?

It was on the afternoon that Ed had at last figured out how disastrously he was involved, and was gazing ruefully at the red ink figures on the balance sheet he had drawn up, the door of his private office was pushed open, and Binoff, the insurance agent, bumped in.

"There you are, Mr. Bell!" He slapped a bulky envelope down triumphantly on the desk. "That's your fifty-thousand-dollar policy that everybody said couldn't be gotten. I pried it out of 'em though, and made 'em like it."

Ed gasped. Even when he had regarded himself as prosperous, he had felt that a fifty-thousand-dollar policy was several notches above his size; and now, with stark ruin staring him in the face, it was simply unthinkable.

With the necessity of squeezing every penny to the utmost merely to keep afloat, he certainly couldn't load himself down with an expense of that sort.

He was on the point of telling Binoff curtly that he could take the thing back where he got it, and have it canceled, when a sudden warning suggestion gave him pause.

It would never do in his present ticklish situation to have even a whisper get out that he was financially hard pressed. Any rumor of the kind, gathering size like a snowball as it traveled, might have a most disastrous effect on his credit, and bring about the crash he was seeking to avert.

Yet Binoff would naturally construe a refusal to accept the policy as meaning that Bell must have sustained losses which made him unable to carry it, especially since Ed had shown his eagerness for it by putting in an application, although he knew the difficulties in the way of securing it.

Chances were, too, that the insurance man, sore over pulling a dud, would air his grievance wherever he went, and not be at all chary about expressing his opinion as to the reason for it.

Perhaps that was all bugaboo; but just the same, Bell didn't dare run the risk. He was as firmly set as ever against taking on the policy; but he felt that the matter required diplomatic handling. Better stall Binoff along for a few days, until he could think up some satisfactory excuse to let him out.

"Er—" He hurriedly changed his flabbergasted expression for one which he hoped would register as joy. "Oh, yes, the fifty-thousand-dollar policy! So you put it over, eh? Well, well; that's fine. Congratulations, old top.

"But listen!" he frowned regretfully. "I've got a million and one things on hand right now. You won't mind, I know, if I take a day or two to look the policy over. You see, with the death of one of our staff here, and—"

Binoff planted his pudgy hands combatively on the table.

"The policy's just like what you applied for," he broke in grouchily. "You don't think I'd be trying to gyp you, do you, Mr. Bell?"

"No, no," Ed protested soothingly. "Everything's all right, of course; but just as a mere matter of form, I couldn't accept a thing like this without at least reading it over. And I tell you, Binoff, I haven't a second to spare. Be a good fellow, and let me have until Monday on it."

He had the insurance man by the arm now, and was urging him steadily toward the door. "Come around then, and we'll—er—talk it over."

Partly by cajolery, partly by sheer muscular effort, he finally got his bulky, stubborn visitor outside, and dropping back into his chair at the desk, mopped his brow.

"It never rains but it pours," he muttered. "By golly, Rossiter got me into this insurance mess, and he ought to be the one to pry me out."

He hesitated a moment, and then pushed a button along the front of his desk. Two

minutes later the sleek, dark-haired sales manager stepped lightly into the room.

"You want to see me, boss?"

"I want to know what the deuce I'm going to do with this fool thing." Ed tossed the envelope containing the policy disgustedly over to him.

Rossiter drew out the inclosure, scanned the first few lines of it, and then looked up in startled amazement.

"By heck!" he exclaimed. "He actually got it for you? The fifty-thousand baby! You sure have to hand that fat walrus a medal. I never dreamed he could put it over."

"I'd like to hand him a good, hard kick," growled Ed. "Neither did I ever dream he could put it over. But he has; and the question is now, how am I going to get out of taking it?"

"Get out of taking it?" Rossiter stared at him. "Are you nutty? Why, man, there are multimillionaires all over the country that would give their right eye for a policy like that. It's equivalent to a certificate of character.

"Don't you know that, no matter how much money a man has, he can't get insurance in any large amount unless he rates as an A-1 moral risk?

"And believe me, the companies know. They've got the number of every guy in this country who might want a policy; and what isn't on their records already, they'll find out mighty quick through the hundreds of thousands of investigators they can call on. Talk about spy systems during the war, they weren't a patch on the intelligence organization the insurance companies keep up.

"Get out of taking that policy?" he repeated. "After once being on the black list? Don't you realize that landing this is nothing short of a miracle? Instead of grouching here, you ought to be dancing all over the shop at such a piece of luck."

"That may all be." Ed shrugged impatiently. "But just the same, I'm going to pass it up. I—I can't afford it," he confessed reluctantly, "if you must know the truth.

"Look here!" He took the balance sheet on which he had been working, out of a drawer, and passed it over to Rossiter. "That's where I stand. You can see for yourself the hole I'm in.

"And the only way I can ever pull out is by speeding up business, and at the same time cutting down expenses to the last notch. There certainly won't be any spare cash for such personal extravagances as a fifty-thousand-dollar insurance policy."

"I'm sorry, boss." The sales manager's tone was sympathetic as he handed back the discouraging balance sheet. "And I notice, too, that you're not charging up the blame to anybody. That's fine of you; but I guess I know where it belongs all right. I haven't been blind to what was going on for some time in the construction department.

"And it's only fair," he added, leaning persuasively across the desk, "that Renault's insurance money should go toward making up your losses. I'll turn over that twenty thousand dollars I hold on him to you as soon as it's paid in."

"No, no," Ed demurred hurriedly. "That won't be necessary. If you boys will stand by me until this pinch is over, I believe I can pull out all right. All I'll want from you is a stiff selling campaign; say, a twenty-five per cent better showing than we made last year."

"You'll get that all right," Rossiter promised. "But you might as well take the money too. You'd have had it coming to you, you know, if you hadn't been taken with that sudden notion to kick out of the agreement the afternoon Renault died."

But Bell still continued to shake his head.

"It's mighty white of you," he said. "Don't think I fail to appreciate the offer. But I can't help feeling that my own carelessness is chiefly responsible for this jam I'm in, and that it's up to me to sweat my own way out. A matter of pride, you might put it. So much obliged, old man, but I guess I'll play the game as it lays."

He spoke sincerely enough; yet there was another reason for his refusal to which he did not refer. With those doubts of Rossiter still in the back of his mind, he felt a strong aversion to touching a penny of Renault's insurance. For all he knew,

it might be blood money, the price of murder.

Also he couldn't help feeling a shade skeptical in regard to that offer of assistance. He had seen how craftily and by what winding ways Rossiter often worked in putting over a deal, and he had now a perhaps unworthy suspicion that this seemingly generous proposal had a string tied to it somewhere.

At any rate he didn't intend to accept the proffered twenty thousand dollars, or any part of it, and he made the fact plain to his companion.

"Be a mule then, if you want to," laughed Rossiter. "I can't force you to take the dough, of course. And maybe you're right about it at that. A man always feels more satisfaction in winning out off his own bat, and beholden to nobody.

"But about this insurance policy," he went on earnestly, "I know that you are wrong. You need it even more now than if things were rosy. You can't afford to let it be known that you are skating on thin ice. You've got to keep up a front.

"And this fifty-thousand-dollar policy is just about the best window dressing you could have for the purpose. News of it will get around—trust Binoff to see to that—and everybody will say: 'Gee! Bell must be cleaning up better than we thought.'"

"Very nice." Ed gave an ironic sniff. "But don't forget that the insurance company will want its premiums. And what am I going to use for money?" He glanced down ruefully at the balance sheet in front of him. "I certainly don't see much leeway for anything of the sort in this."

Rossiter's mouth pursed up at the reminder, and he stroked his chin reflectively for a moment or two. Then a sudden flash came into his eyes.

"By heck! I believe I've got it!" he cried.

"Listen, boss!" He bent impressively across the table. "Strikes me this is a case for the old 'Three Musketeers' slogan, 'One for all, and all for one.' What I mean, the other boys ought to be put next to the situation, and have it made plain to 'em just what you're up against, so that we can all buckle down to the traces and yank the old wagon out of the mud.

"Suppose," he suggested, "we have a chapel meeting right now, and thresh the whole matter out? It's to our interest as much as to yours to keep the concern on its feet, and in a general discussion of the sort you never can tell how valuable an idea may be hatched out."

He had risen as he spoke, and scarcely waiting for Ed's hesitating nod of assent, was out the door and on his way to round up the other members of the staff.

Within five minutes they were all gathered in Bell's private office, and Rossiter, taking on himself the rôle of spokesman, read off to them the figures on the balance sheet.

"Not so good," he commented. "But, at that, I don't believe I have to sell Bell & Co. to any of you guys. We've all got fine berths here, a boss that's a human being, and a business that, if this slump is only bridged over, is bound to go ahead like a railroad train. A long pull, a strong pull, and a pull all together; and we can put this lay-out back on a firm foundation, and be sitting pretty.

"It 'll mean stiff hustling for two or three months, and mighty little count of hours; but it can be done, if we all put our minds and hearts to it, and our shoulders to the wheel. Remember, too, it's our own jobs we'll be fighting for. Question is then: are we game to give it a whirl?"

Apparently they were, to judge from the hearty expressions of acquiescence they gave to his sentiments.

"All right then," Rossiter went on. "That being settled, the next thing in order is a discussion of ways and means. Hudson," he swung around to the treasurer, "what would you say is the chief consideration to be taken into account?"

"Why, to keep up our credit of course. We are solvent as I figure it, but it will take time to realize on our assets, and in the meanwhile we can't let any impression get out that we are shaky, or we'll have some small creditor, easily scared, starting suit against us and bringing down a whole avalanche of claims to bury us."

"Exactly," Rossiter nodded; probably he had put his question to the treasurer first with the expectation of getting just that answer. "You've put your finger right on our weak spot, and our biggest, perhaps our only danger.

"And the answer is, boys, that we've got to bluff. We've got to make the world believe that we're just about as sound as the Treasury of the United States."

He reached over suddenly and caught up the envelope lying on Bell's desk.

"I have in my hand here," he held it aloft, "a policy for fifty thousand dollars that has been issued to the boss, but which he doesn't feel he can afford under the circumstances to take up.

"Well, you can guess what the result of that will be. Word of it is bound to get out; those things always do. And first thing you know, the whisper will be going around that Ed Bell is so hard pinched for money he can't even pay his insurance premiums.

"Now my proposition is," he urged, glancing around the circle of faces, "that as a first step in the fight for our jobs we relieve the boss of this expense and carry the policy for him. What stronger prop to our credit, what better advertisement of prosperity could we put out?

"News of the boss's taking a policy of that size will be circulated just as quick as would the story of his refusing it. But instead of thinking that he is pinched, everybody will be envying him his good luck."

"I get you!" broke in Slade, the publicity man, eagerly. "And speaking as an expert, I'm for the idea strong. Split up among all of us that way, the expense will hardly be felt; and even at ten times the cost, I don't believe another scheme could be devised that would give such good results."

Winter, the office manager, however, was inclined to be more cautious in his approval.

"Is this to be regarded as a gift from us to the business, or as a loan?" he questioned. "You single men don't need to bother about that, maybe; but I've got a wife and family to support. Seems to me, we ought to have some sort of protection for the money we put up."

"Oh, I wouldn't dream of accepting it as anything except a loan," Bell assured him a trifle stiffly. "If you fellows want to go into this agreement, I shall be very grateful to you, of course; but I shall insist on relieving you of the burden and reimbursing you for whatever sums you have laid out, just as soon as the business gets back on its feet."

"But how about in the meantime?" persisted Winter. "How about these months we are carrying the policy along, and have our money tied up? Don't we get any security to show for it?"

"Why, the policy itself takes care of that," Rossiter spoke up sharply. "Mr. Bell will naturally make us the beneficiaries under it, in proportion to the share which each one has taken in carrying it along. Then, if anything happens to him, we will not only get our money back, but a cut of the fifty thousand dollars according as our interests appear."

Bell felt as if something had suddenly tumbled from the ceiling and hit him on the head. After all his trouble to rid himself of the beneficiary menace, with its possibilities of sudden death, here he was about to be saddled with it again—and not only one beneficiary this time, but five. The chances of falling beams coming his way, and Juggernaut motors, and poisoned cups of coffee, would be quintupled.

Not if he knew it, Ed told himself. An emphatic disclaimer was trembling on his lips. But once more he choked back the too hasty speech.

The staff, he could see, was keen for the arrangement. To turn it down would be nothing short of an insult, showing as it would that he believed them capable of murdering him for profit.

At the very least, it would dull their enthusiasm to have him criticize or boggle at a plan they all so heartily approved. And he needed these boys and their very best efforts, if he was to pull out of the hole he was in.

With much the same feeling as if he were signing his own death warrant, Ed dispatched a note to Binoff instructing him to

change the fifty-thousand-dollar policy so as to make the five its beneficiaries in case of his demise.

CHAPTER IV.

THE MURDER SYNDICATE.

THE five shares by which the policy was taken up were not of equal value, but rated according to the amount which each member of the syndicate felt able or willing to contribute.

Thus Rossiter, in the event of Bell's death, would draw down twenty-five thousand dollars; Hudson and Winter, ten thousand dollars apiece, while Slade and Varney, being smaller salaried men, held the remaining five thousand dollars interest between them.

"Hard luck!" thought Ed lugubriously. "The two I'd be most willing to trust have the least object to make away with me. Believe me, I'll be watching my step any time those other three assassins are around."

It seemed to him almost as if he were listening to his own funeral arrangements, as he heard them talking over the different features of their pool.

"Of course," said Winter, who at one time had practiced law, and was naturally of a cautious temperament, "we've got to be extremely careful.

"With such an amount of money at stake we might readily be suspected if anything should befall Mr. Bell. It would be unfortunate to have another such incident as the death of Renault." He looked pointedly at Rossiter.

But the debonair sales manager did not even turn a hair.

"Accidents will happen," he said carelessly.

"Yes, but the trouble with the Renault affair," returned Winter in his slow, lawyer-like way, "was that it wasn't rated as an accident. If it had been, you'd have collected forty thousand dollars instead of twenty."

"Forty thousand?" repeated Rossiter sharply. "How do you make that out?"

"On the double-indemnity clause. Don't you read your insurance policies over? In case of violent death by accident, the companies agree to pay double the face of the policy.

"Poor Renault was reported to have died from natural causes. Had it been otherwise, you would have got forty thousand dollars on him, or maybe"—half under his breath—"the electric chair."

Again Rossiter let the thrust pass unchallenged. He seemed struck by the information Winter had vouchsafed.

"Double indemnity, eh?" He squinted up his eyes thoughtfully. "Let me get this right. You mean, if the boss were bumped off in any way, it would be worth just double the amount to us to have it appear an accident?"

Winter nodded.

"But mark you," he added significantly, "when I say accident, I mean just that and nothing else.

"If, for instance, you were out on the links with Mr. Bell, and he should be struck and killed by a golf club, you'd want to have witnesses to show that the club had been nowhere near your hand. Otherwise, a different and uglier name might be given to the matter."

"Just so," countered Rossiter good-humoredly. "And if you and the boss were out shooting together, and he should be found filled with buckshot, you'd want to be able to prove that it didn't come from your gun.

"That double-indemnity stuff is sure a great protection to you, boss." He turned to Ed with a chuckle. "If it wasn't for that, I wouldn't give two pins for your life with this gang of highbinders. But they'll be so greedy for that extra rake-off that you can consider yourself reasonably safe."

Ed smiled and shrugged his shoulders, as if he considered the whole discussion merely a bit of horseplay; but as a matter of fact, he was feeling decidedly more easy in his mind as a result of the point that had been raised.

He was secure at least from poison, he thought, or anything which would give the aspect of a natural death; and with four of the crowd, he could guard himself against sanguinary attack. Winter, Hudson, Slade,

and Varney were not wily enough to frame up any accident which he would not suspect as a trap and avoid.

And even the crafty Rossiter, he flattered himself, would have to do some tall scheming to land him. Thanks to double indemnity, he could walk his ways without fear of a treacherous stab in the back, or a Borgian admixture to his food.

Nevertheless, when he reached in his desk for a cigar a few minutes later and found the box empty, and Rossiter noticing his plight, eagerly offered one of his, Ed somewhat hurriedly replied that he didn't believe he wanted to smoke after all. He told himself it was just as wise to take no unnecessary risks.

By this time the conference was over, and the different members of the staff had filtered gradually out of the room, so that Bell and Rossiter were finally left alone.

The sales manager seemed in no hurry to go, but chatted along on indifferent subjects.

Presently the telephone bell rang, and Ed answering the call found it was Binoff eager to tell him that the changes which had been directed in the fifty-thousand-dollar policy had all been made, and that the instrument was now in full force.

"You can see, I don't let no grass grow under my feet, Mr. Bell," the fat man plumed himself. "With life so uncertain as it is nowadays, things can't be let drag along. So, even if you should die to-night, you can feel that you are covered, and that the money'd be paid over without question."

Ed did not disclose this information to his companion, or even tell to whom he had been talking; but he suspected from a glint he had caught in Rossiter's eye, that the latter had gleaned the import of the message.

The telephone instrument was one of those which give out an audible, metallic sound even to one several feet away from the receiver; and Rossiter, as he knew, had extraordinarily sharp ears.

This suspicion was confirmed a little later on, when Rossiter, as if to give him a chance to speak of the matter, reverted casually to the subject.

"When this new policy is all fixed up, you'll be carrying quite a wad of insurance, won't you, boss?" he remarked.

Ed figured mentally for a moment.

"About one hundred and twenty-five thousand dollars' worth," he answered.

"Or two hundred and fifty thousand dollars at double indemnity," grinned Rossiter. "By heck, if one was the sole beneficiary, it would almost be worth while to bump you off at that price. No danger, I suppose of a deal being fixed up by all the parties in interest to do that little thing?"

"Hardly," laughed Ed. "Outside of this fifty-thousand-dollar policy that you boys have taken up, all my insurance is payable to my fiancée, Miss Lincoln.

"I have done that," he explained, "partly as a compliment to her, and also for another stronger reason. You see, I expect to be a rich man some day, and since she, as my wife, will naturally be my heir, I want to fix it while I am young, so that my estate won't be all tied up by inheritance taxes and things of that sort.

"I read in the papers the other day of a rich man's fortune which was almost wiped out by the forced sale of his holdings in order to meet those obligations. If he had only been provided with sufficient insurance, that could all have been obviated."

But Rossiter did not seem so much interested in abstract matters of this sort as in the fact that Helen was the chief beneficiary under Bell's policies.

"By gee!" he murmured. "If you should happen to kick off, Miss Lincoln would be quite a catch, wouldn't she?—especially if the thing could be arranged in any way so as to draw the double indemnity."

But Ed was paying no especial attention to him at the moment. A gust of wind had blown in at the window, disarranging the papers on his desk, and he rose hurriedly to shut it out.

Unwilling, though, to exclude the air entirely, he started to pull down the upper sash from the top before lowering the under one; and while in this position, leaning out over the sill ten stories up in the air, and with nothing to brace himself against, he felt a sudden premonition of danger, and

turned sharply to find Rossiter not two feet behind him.

What had made him turn so opportunely, he never could tell. He had not heard Rossiter stir from his chair; the fellow always moved as silently as a cat. His mind, too, at the moment had been entirely free from suspicion.

Yet he was convinced that if it had not been for that canny sixth sense which had induced him to draw back, another second would have seen him pushed out through the orifice, and plunging in a frightful fall to the sidewalk.

"What the devil do you mean, sneaking up behind me that way?" he demanded unsteadily, scowling at the other, and throwing himself involuntarily into a posture of defense.

But Rossiter only gave an ironic laugh.

"Gee, boss! Your nerves must be getting on edge with all this talk of bumping off, and one thing and another," he said, placatingly. "I saw the sash had stuck, and was only coming to help you get it down. Here, take a smoke, and sit down and pull yourself together." Again he offered one of his cigars.

But Ed as before waved it testily away. It was all he could do to keep from blazing out and telling the chap to clear out of the office, and never show his face around the place again.

But he did not dare go to such lengths as that. Rossiter, fired, could do him too much damage by reporting outside the true condition of the business; and besides, he needed Rossiter's wonderful salesmanship and capacity for nosing out prospects in order to recover his footing.

Nothing for it, he realized, but to hold himself in check, and swallow his resentment, looking to some future date as a day of reckoning.

Fortunately there came an interruption just then in the arrival of the mail, which gave Ed a chance to get back his lost poise while he looked it over.

A letter from Helen caught his eye, and naturally he opened that first. She wrote him that Mrs. Strickland had decided to stop over in North Conway, New Hampshire, for several days, and urged him to come up and spend the week-end with her there.

"Tough luck!" muttered Ed, without realizing that he was speaking out loud. "I'd be off like a shot to join her up there, if it wasn't for this darned mess. What's the use of talking, though? My week-end will be spent drudging right here at my desk."

He laid the letter down, and went on running through the rest of his mail. It did not strike him until afterward that the envelope bearing the picture and letterhead of the hotel at which Helen and the Stricklands were stopping was in easy view of Rossiter where he sat smoking at the side of the desk.

In fact, absorbed in his correspondence, he paid little attention to Rossiter until the latter arose, and stretching himself, said that he guessed he'd be moving along.

"By the way, boss," he added. "I don't believe I'll be around again until Tuesday. There's a bunch down at Asbury Park that have been nibbling at some of our stuff, and I thought, if you didn't mind, I'd go down there and pal around with them over the week-end, and maybe pull off some sales. You've no objection, have you?"

"Not a bit," returned Ed. As a matter of fact, he was glad of the respite from Rossiter's sinister presence. "Go ahead, and enjoy yourself. There's certainly nothing to be done in town during this hot spell, and if you put over any business down there, we're just that much to the good."

Shortly afterward, he, too, left the office; and taking Hudson with him, drove over to inspect how the work was progressing on the block of houses he was putting up out at Jamaica.

By the time they got there, the workmen had all quit for the day; but he and his companion went ahead, nevertheless, on a tour of the unfinished structures.

At one place, they had to cross a bridge of narrow, shaky planks at a considerable height; and Ed before essaying it, had paused to look over a section of wall in course of erection.

Hudson, who had gone ahead and was

on the other side of the gap, called to him impatiently to come ahead, or they would never be through before dark.

But Ed had hardly set his foot on the plank before it gave way beneath him, and he was precipitated out and down.

By a miracle, he managed to clutch at a piece of scaffolding, and saved himself from almost certain destruction; but it was at the cost of a wrenched shoulder, and a still further loss of confidence in the members of his staff.

Hudson, it is true, was most solicitous after Ed had managed to pull himself back to safety, and eagerly offered some clumsy explanation as to the reason for the accident. But Ed had not the slightest doubt, that the treasurer after crossing himself, had slyly pushed the plank off its support.

Still, as with Rossiter, Bell could not say anything; but had to make himself appear as a ninny by agreeing with Hudson that he himself must somehow have kicked the plank or jolted it loose when he started to go out on it.

That ended the tour of inspection, however, and Ed announced a trifle curtly that they would be driving back to town.

Hudson, when they reached the car, offered to take the wheel on account of Ed's injury; but his good offices were declined. A burned child dreads the fire; and although every movement of his wrenched arm caused him excruciating pain, Ed was taking no chances of being run over a bank, or into a wall. While he had the car under his own control, he felt that the likelihood of accident was materially lessened.

When they finally got to the garage, his face was gray and drawn with suffering; but he insisted on Hudson's leaving him, and calling a taxicab, rode alone to the doctor's to have his dislocated shoulder straightened out, and then went directly home to spend the evening alone away from the possible hazards of the streets.

That night he did something before retiring that he had not done since he was a small boy; he looked carefully under the bed and into all the closets to make sure that there was no lurking intruder about.

He decided, also, that he must get stronger locks for his door and windows, and possibly have the place fitted up with burglar alarms.

"By Jove!" he thought as he finally composed himself to sleep. "Life is hardly going to be worth living for me, as long as I have that dog-goned policy hanging over me. I know now how the old-time Czars of Russia used to feel, with a gang of wild-eyed Nihilists snooping around all the time, waiting to toss a bomb at them.

"I've got a good notion to fire the whole crowd in the morning, call all bets off, and let the darned business go to the bow-wows if it wants to. Better get a job as a white-wing and sweep streets, than go around this way, never knowing what's going to hit you next."

By morning, however, he thought better of his resolution. The early mail brought in quite a bunch of checks—wonderful what an effect on the spirits that will have—and there were also some very encouraging reports as to the work in progress.

He could figure that if things kept up this way, it would be only a matter of a few months, perhaps of a few weeks, until he could shake off the danger that hung over him, and indulge in a happy hour of house-cleaning. Not one of those low-down assassins should stay with him, he vowed; every one of them should get his walking papers.

Cheered by this reflection, he sent for Winter, and plunged into a mass of routine business.

It was a broiling hot day, with scarcely a breath of wind stirring; and as they went over various reports and statements, Winter, who was inclined to be corpulent, paused from time to time to mop his perspiring brow.

"Well, it isn't everybody who can have it as soft as our sleek-haired star of the sales department," he grumbled. "Here we are, stewing in the hot city, while he is being fanned by cool mountain breezes."

"Seashore breezes you mean," corrected Ed. "He has gone to Asbury Park."

"Asbury Park, nothing," denied Winter vigorously. "He's gone to the mountains, I know. Didn't I run into him up at

Grand Central Station last night, when I went after my commutation ticket to Scarsdale? I stepped up to speak to him while he was at the window, and I heard him ask for a ticket to North Conway, New Hampshire."

The day which had opened so brightly for Bell became suddenly clouded over.

He hurriedly got rid of Winter, and slumped down in his chair, gnawing at his lower lip, and filled with vengeful thoughts.

"The dirty, double crossing dog!" he stormed in a fury of anger. "I can see his whole putrid scheme now. With the idea that Helen is to be the beneficiary of most of my policies, he has gone up there to get in with her, on the chance that after he has got rid of me, he'll be able to marry her himself.

"The bit that he'd get on the fifty-thousand-dollar policy isn't enough for him. He's figuring that when he does for me, he might as well make the job worth while, and get the whole thing.

"But he's made the mistake of tipping his hand this time." Bell smashed his fist down on the table. "And by gosh, he's going to find out that he's roused up a rattlesnake. Watch my smoke!"

CHAPTER V.

DANGERS THICKEN.

BELL was still fuming over his discovery of Rossiter's duplicity, when Slade, the publicity man, came into the office to talk over some advertising they were planning to put out.

Before he got very far, however, he noticed that he was receiving scant attention, and broke off to ask if Ed wasn't feeling well.

"Why do you say that?" demanded Bell sharply. In the jangled state of his nerves, any expression of the staff regarding his health roused him to quick animosity.

"Well, it may be only the heat," mumbled Slade: "but you look kind of feverish and all in." He hesitated a moment. "You haven't been eating or drinking anything with Rossiter lately, have you, boss?"

Ed shot him a searching look from under down-drawn brows.

"What do you mean by that?" he snapped.

"Nothing. Nothing at all. Only a fellow can't help thinking of Renault." The young man's eyes dropped under the steady gaze Bell bent upon him, and he scowled down uneasily at the rug.

"By gosh! I can't keep quiet," he broke out. "You want to look out for that bird, Mr. Bell. Do you know what he said to me yesterday. He told me, if I'd bump you off so as to make it appear like an accident, he'd give me half of what was coming to him on the double-indemnity arrangement."

"Don't you know he's always kidding?" Bell commented guardedly. He was not unbosoming himself freely to any of the crowd.

"That's what I thought, too, boss. So I asked him, kidding back, why he didn't do the job himself, and save expense.

"But he said, you would be looking out for him and, besides, the insurance company was apt to smell a rat on account of the Renault affair; whereas you would be less careful with me and, owing to my small interest in the policy, nobody would suspect me afterward.

"'You could make out that you wanted to consult him in regard to an electric sign,' he told me, 'and get him up on a high building somewhere. Then, when you had him close to the edge of the roof, you could stumble against him accidentally, and over he'd go. Ten thousand dollars in it for you, kid, in addition to your own bit. Easy money.'

"And, gee, boss!" Slade's eyes rounded, and he gave an expressive shake of the head. "No movie villain ever looked more devilish than he did when he was outlining that scheme to me. No kidding with Rossiter on this. And I don't mean maybe, either."

"H'm!" Ed pushed his cigar box over to Slade, and lighted one himself. "And what answer did you make to his proposition?"

"Well, it struck me cold for a minute, and I was just on the point of turning loose and telling him what I thought of

him. Then the idea came to me that I'd better play him along, so as to find out what he was up to, and I said I'd think it over, and let him know."

"Good head." Bell nodded approvingly. "And you'll let me know, of course, if he brings up the subject again? Yet I still can't believe, Slade, that Rossiter wasn't just joking with you."

This was far from candid, of course. But in the fog of suspicion in which Ed was enveloped, he gave complete trust to nobody.

Slade's disclosure might be on the level; yet on the other hand, it might be only a ruse to sound him out and discover if he had taken any steps to protect himself.

Or it might be an attempt to focus all his vigilance on the sales manager, and so let Slade have a freer hand for his own game. Since the incident with Hudson of the evening before, Ed did not count any of the five as above murdering him.

He did not consider it wise, though, to give any hint of his attitude.

"No," he dissembled, therefore, with a skeptical shake of the head, "I can't believe that Rossiter was really in earnest. He's too shrewd not to see—as all of you must—that in the long run you'll make lots more by sticking to me and helping build up the business, than you could from this insurance policy, even at the double indemnity."

"Huh!" Slade uttered a sort of explosive snort. "You don't realize all that's simmering around in that crook's brain, boss. I put up to him what you've just said, in almost exactly those same words.

"'Yeah,' I said to him, 'and I'd be pushing my job off the roof at the same time I pushed Bell. The little old wad of money you're offering wouldn't begin to pay me for the loss of my prospects here.'

"But he only grinned in that sly way of his. 'Listen, kid,' he said; 'you don't need to fret about your prospects. With Bell out of the way, and this insurance money for capital, I intend to take over the business myself; and I'll look out for you all right.'

"And I guess he would." The publicity man twisted his mouth ironically. "He'd look out for me, and no mistake. With what I'd have on him, my friends might as well begin ordering flowers for my funeral. I'd have just about the same show as one of those rabbits they put in the snakes' cage up at the zoo."

It was all Ed could do to hold himself in his chair, as he listened to this final revelation. The swelling indignation in his throat seemed about to choke him; he saw red.

"The low-down skunk!" he raged inwardly. "Scheming to take my life, my girl, and my business all at once. Well, that's what I get for favoring a tramp who drifted in here from nowhere, with nothing to show for himself but a glib tongue and an ingratiating manner.

"He was ready enough to fawn on me when he was down; but now he's begun to show his teeth."

But by an effort he maintained his air of composure, resolved that he would not betray his feelings to his companion. What was there to gain by blowing up at this time?

He had to use these fellows, Rossiter included, to save his career. When that was reëstablished his hour would come. But in the meanwhile he must play the part of a dull-witted, trustful boob, refusing to believe in the plots against him.

His voice was a little thick as he replied to Slade, but he managed to keep his tone of careless indifference.

"Just as I thought." He gave an easy smile. "That last touch proves conclusively that Rossiter was only kidding. He knows as well as I do that he couldn't carry on this business. He hasn't the experience or the trade acquaintance.

"Thanks for the tip, Slade; and if he springs any more of this—er—loose talk on you, let me know, will you? There's always the possibility, of course, that he may have gone crazy; but unless that's the case, I don't believe I have any reason for fear. I'm convinced he was only fooling."

"All right." The publicity man rose. "I hope for your own sake it turns out that way. Anyhow, I've warned you. My hands are clean, no matter what happens."

"Sure," Bell agreed genially. "And don't think, old man, that I'm not grateful

to you, or that I won't keep it in mind. But until we've got something more definite to go on than mere gab, I'll not take any time from business to bother about it. And I advise you to do the same."

As Slade left the office, however, the forced smile left Ed's face, and he sprung from his chair to pace the floor as an outlet to his seething emotions.

Talk about not bothering! Yet here he was, hemmed around with treachery, crafty dealing, and murder, chained hand and foot, and unable to assert himself.

He had no doubt as to the truth of Slade's report of the conversation with Rossiter; and he had no doubt, either, that Rossiter meant every word he said. He was scheming not only to get hold of the insurance money, but of the business as well.

A hundred circumstances unnoted at the time rose now to confirm the conviction in Ed's mind. This was the reason for Rossiter's persistent curiosity in regard to every feature of office detail, his interest in the work of the other departments, his eagerness to meet and make friends with every one who had dealings of any kind with Bell & Company. He was laying the lines for his own succession.

And still, in spite of all this Judas perfidy, Ed couldn't afford to shake him off.

"Sinbad the Sailor, with his Old Man of the Sea, certainly had nothing on me," he scowled, as he continued to pace the floor. "I've got to carry him and the bunch along with me until I get out of the woods. Otherwise I might as well begin to make out my bankruptcy papers."

He paused and stared out of the window across a vista of New York's towering skyscrapers. It was his ambition some day to build one of those himself—the greatest and mightiest of them all—and have it bear his own name; and in a modest way he had made a start toward the realization of that goal.

He had made his way against odds until he was now a recognized factor in his field. His reputation stood clean and untarnished; his credit was high; he was regarded as a comer. He could not bring himself to chuck all this, and brand himself with the stigma of failure.

"Ruin on the one hand," he growled, "and assassination on the other. A fine choice that bozo has set out for me. Well, it only means that I've got to figure some way to outsmart him."

He turned away from the window, and seated himself again at his desk, resting his head between his hands as he reviewed the situation, and tried to decide how best to handle it.

It seemed to him at first that he might glean a crumb of comfort from Slade's story. Evidently Rossiter was unwilling to be the direct agent in any "accident" that might be framed up, fearing that he might fall under suspicion on account of the Renault affair and was therefore negotiating with the other beneficiaries—Slade had probably not been the only one approached—to pull off the job.

This meant dickering, discussion, and more or less delay, and would seem to argue that Ed was in no immediate danger. But, on the other hand, there had been an unmistakable attack on his life the evening before. The question was: Had Hudson attempted that on his own initiative, or as the result of a bargain with Rossiter?

If the latter, then Rossiter had an additional reason for leaving town. He wanted to establish an absolute alibi for himself; and hence it was now, during his absence, that Ed would have to guard himself most carefully.

Zip!

As if to confirm this conclusion, Bell's meditations were abruptly interrupted at that moment by the sharp whine of a bullet singing by within an inch of his ear.

He ducked hurriedly to the floor and, approaching the window on his hands and knees, succeeded in pulling up the shade of the lower sash without putting himself in range of another shot.

Then he looked about to see what he could make of the matter. There could be no doubt that he had been fired at from a room in an adjoining building. It was idle to try and tell himself that it was imagination; he knew that droning, hornet-like *z-z-z-z* too well from his experience with snipers overseas in 1918.

It was a bullet from a high-powered

rifle, and, coming in at one window of the office, had passed out through the other, Ed's desk being set directly between the two.

And if further proof were required, there was a fresh splotch on a brick wall across from the farther window, showing where it had struck. The absence of any report indicated merely the use of a silencer.

On an impulse, Ed stepped quickly out into the corridor, and walking along it to the office of his chief draftsman pushed open the door and entered.

There was no one there, but in a moment or two Varney came in, breathing hard and with his face flushed as if from hurrying.

At the sight of Bell he gave a slight start, and began stammering excuses for being away from his desk.

"I—I had to run out for a minute," he said. "A friend of mine is sick, and his wife wanted me to report it to his firm. They're only in the next building.

Ed made no comment; and Varney, realizing that there had been no need for apologies, since Bell was not one of those who insist on slavish adherence to the time-clock, became still more flustered.

"S-something you wanted to see me about?" He fidgeted uneasily from one foot to the other.

"Why, yes," said Ed. "I'd like to propose an exchange of offices, if you don't mind. You take mine, and I'll take yours."

Varney stared at him incredulously.

"But, good Lord, boss!" he exclaimed. "This is a dark, inside cubbyhole. And where you are you've got light and air and a view."

"Too much so to suit me," returned Ed dryly. "Don't forget that if I can look out, others can look in on me. I don't like to be under constant surveillance from the adjoining buildings. And stuck right between those two windows," he added, "I don't believe it's healthy. Too many drafts."

Varney started to say something, but evidently reconsidered.

"Well, if you've decided, I suppose there's nothing to be said," he muttered sullenly. "When do you want to make the shift—next week?"

"No—to-day. At once. Get your things together, please; and I'll have some of the boys move the furniture during lunch hour."

He turned as if to leave, but, at the door, swung about and came back.

"You're quite an expert with the rifle, I believe I've heard you say, Varney?"

The draftsman blinked uncertainly at the question, and swallowed once or twice before he answered.

"Er—I've done some shooting—used to, I mean," he quavered. "But why do you ask?"

"Well"—Ed dropped his voice confidentially—"there's a certain person I'd like to get rid of, and I was wondering if possibly you and I couldn't fix up a deal. I'd arrange it, of course, so that you'd never be suspected; and there'd be quite a pot of money in it for you, more I imagine than you could make from—well, from other things you might have on hand."

Varney looked as if he were about to faint; his Adam's apple did a regular Charleston in his throat.

"You're joking, of course, Mr. Bell." He forced a feeble laugh. "Maybe I'm dumb—I guess I am—but I don't get it."

"No? Well, you can't always tell nowadays, Varney, just when a man's joking, and when he's not. Think it over, anyhow; and if you decide I'm in earnest, and feel like taking up the proposition, come to see me. I guess you know who it is I want to be rid of."

"Rossiter?" Varney breathed in a half whisper.

Ed gave an enigmatic shrug.

"I'll tell you that when you let me know that you're ready to handle the proposition. Meantime," he added, "I'm not responsible, you know, for any conclusions you choose to draw."

He left then, and went back to his own office well satisfied with the results he had achieved.

"I didn't commit myself to a thing," he grinned, "but I've got him figuring just the same. And it's a good bet that he won't do any more target practice at me,

with the possibility in his mind of making more out of it by potting the other fellow. I only wonder," he frowned, "was he acting on his own hook, or put up to it by Rossiter?"

Pondering on this, a fresh idea struck him; and by measuring the angle between the height of his head above his desk and that splotch on the wall outside, where the bullet had struck, he decided that the shot must have been fired from a window on the twelfth or thirteenth story of the adjoining building.

The superintendent there was an acquaintance of his, and calling him up, Ed inquired if any new tenants had come to either his twelfth or thirteenth floors.

"No," the superintendent replied. "All our offices on those floors are held by old-timers, under long-term leases. In fact, we have no vacancies at all on the side of the building that faces you. The last one, a single room on the fourteenth floor, was taken yesterday afternoon."

"Yesterday afternoon? And on the fourteenth floor?" repeated Ed sharply. "You couldn't tell me who took it, could you?"

"Why, yes—a young fellow named Rodriguez. A Spaniard, I guess; anyhow, he looked like one—dark, and an easy talker. Said he was in the importing business in a small way, and only wanted temporary quarters, more as a place to get his mail and to serve as an address than for any other reason.

"He wouldn't be around much himself, he told me, but a young chap who was associated with him would have the key and occasionally drop in."

Ed thanked him and rang off. He had learned all he wanted.

"Rodriguez?" he muttered. "Hardly took the trouble to cover up his name, did he? And this shows conclusively that he is the moving spirit of all the skullduggery that's been going on. If he bought up Varney to take a crack at me with that rifle, and was dickering with Slade, the chances are that he's responsible too for the job Hudson pulled last night, and has probably also corrupted Winter, or is trying to corrupt him."

He clenched his fists until his knuckles showed white, and thrust them out before him.

"It's a lucky thing he's out of my reach right now. I wouldn't call in anybody else to do the job for me; I'd twist his rotten neck between my fingers until it snapped like a pipe stem, and take pleasure in doing it.

"Yes," he repeated, "it's a lucky thing, I guess, for both of us, that he's three hundred miles away, and that before I see him again I'll have a chance to pull myself together and get back my diplomacy."

He little dreamed how soon, and under what unexpected circumstances, he and Rossiter would be standing face to face.

CHAPTER VI.

THE MEETING.

"TELEGRAM for you, Mr. Bell."

So engrossed was Ed in his vengeful musings that the girl who brought the message in had to speak twice before he heard her. Then, with a muttered apology, he took the yellow envelope from her hand, and tore it open.

It was from Helen, and read:

> Please come to North Conway at once. Imperative that I should see you without delay.

A moment before, Bell had been debating with himself methods for circumventing the murderous activities directed against him by forsaking all his accustomed routes and regular habits.

As he had shifted his office to-day, he would do so again, he decided, and at uncertain intervals. He would make his hours of work indefinite also, arriving earlier in the morning and leaving later at night, or vice versa.

He would have no set fashion of coming or going, but would use the subway sometimes, and sometimes the elevated, the surface cars, the busses, or a taxi; and he would never enter or leave the building in the same way twice in succession.

He would abjure all his familiar haunts, the restaurants where he was wont to drop

in, the movie houses he frequented; and would seek out new ones. He would even give up his apartment temporarily, and hide himself away at some boarding house in Brooklyn or the Bronx, where no one would ever dream of looking for him.

"I'll keep them guessing, at any rate," he told himself, "and they'll have hard work to dope out any fatal accident for me, while they're continually in doubt as to my movements from day to day, and almost from hour to hour.

"You've got to put your finger on a flea before you can squash him. Not that it 'll be any snap for me, either," he admitted a trifle ruefully. "There are a whole lot of things I'd rather do than play flea. But a live flea is better than a dead lion. Safety first."

Yet now, at a glimpse of this telegram from Helen, all his carefully matured program of precaution went toppling down like a bunch of tenpins.

She must be in trouble, he felt, to have sent him such an urgent summons; and he was not slow to draw a connection between this surmise and the presence of Rossiter at North Conway.

What, he wondered, had that bird of ill omen been up to now? If Helen had been annoyed or frightened by him in any way—

At the suggestion, Ed roused to action.

"Lights! Camera! Go!" as they say in the movie studios.

He dashed helter-skelter through the office, shouting out orders, and advertising to every one within sound of his voice just what he was up to.

When was there a train to North Conway, he wanted to know? And then when he found there was none he could take that would get him to his destination until noon of the next day he was fit to be tied.

Catching at a new idea, he hurriedly called up the garage and gave instructions to have his car sent down ready for the trip; and in the same breath directed that a messenger hustle in a taxi up to his apartment to get his bag.

Dropping the telephone then, he went chasing about from department to department, outlining what was to be done during his absence and attending to necessary details, signing checks, dictating hasty letters, approving reports.

In the midst of it all word was brought that his car was at the door; and he flung down his pen, broke off in the middle of a sentence he was dictating, and, catching up his bag, sprinted out of the door.

He saw the gate of one of the elevators open, and made a dive toward it—to realize just in time that the car was not there, and that if he had kept on he would have gone tumbling down the shaft to the basement.

He jerked back from the peril, the gooseflesh popping out along his spine, and with a flustered exclamation clanged the iron gate shut.

But he did not stop then to inquire into the circumstance or try to find out who had been so criminally careless as to leave the gate open.

A descending car stopped at the moment in the adjoining shaft, and, stepping into it, he was transported to the ground floor.

Two minutes later, the incident almost forgotten, he was at the wheel of his roadster, and weaving his way recklessly through traffic, followed by a chorus of objurgations from his fellow drivers and the outraged stares of every cop he passed.

Somehow though he escaped being stopped, or tendered a "ticket." It was a sweltering day, and possibly the John Laws did not feel like exerting themselves.

So he succeeded in making the tortuous, obstructed journey up through crowded Manhattan and out to the comparative freedom of Pelham Parkway, in what his wrist watch told him was almost record time. Yet, even so, with that anxiety for Helen tugging at his heart strings, it was all too slow for Ed.

He stepped on the gas, and kept stepping. The succession of Westchester towns flashed past him like beads on a string, and he was over the line into Connecticut. Yet still his worried speculations raced faster than his flying wheels.

Why had Helen sent for him? What trouble could she be in that so imperatively demanded his presence or protection? Rossiter was back of it, he was sure; but what could Rossiter have done or threatened,

what situation could he have created, that she and Mrs. Strickland were not able to meet?

A thousand conjectures swarmed through his brain; but none of them struck him as entirely reasonable or in accordance with his fiancée's considerate, well-balanced temperament. She was the last person in the world to give way to an hysterical impulse or to have sent him that S O S without good and sufficient cause.

In his ignorance of the true facts, he could only shake a bewildered head and push the speedometer up another notch in his impatience to reach her.

Greenwich, Stamford, Norwalk, and Bridgeport swam by him; and finally he had to slow down in order to negotiate the busy streets of New Haven.

He lost ten minutes here through taking a wrong turning; but with his error rectified, and out of the town at last, he started to make it up by "setting the concrete afire" on his way to Hartford.

His zeal, however, cost him more than he gained; for he blew out two tires in the next eleven miles, and had to halt fifteen minutes at a wayside garage to have them vulcanized.

It was during this enforced wait, that he realized how intensely sultry the day had become. While in motion, he had got at least a breath of air; but now it was as if the world had become a huge oven.

The fields and hillsides of the fertile country about him which ordinarily look so cool and refreshing, seemed to be burning up. Even the rolling river looked hot; and the sky, overcast with a yellowish glare, seemed closing down like a lid of brass.

It was a relief to be moving again; but he could not blind himself to the evidences of the extreme heat all about him. In the fields, the cattle and horses were huddled disconsolately in such shade as they could find; in the villages that he passed, blinds were drawn and no one was stirring abroad. The quiet and stagnation of everything was like the siesta hour in some broiling Central American town.

Even in Hartford, there was little activity of any kind. The streets were almost empty, and such citizens as he saw were merely standing about, mopping their perspiring brows, and refraining from any sort of activity. A kind of Sabbath somnolence reigned.

"Going far?" drawled the keeper of a filling station, where Ed stopped for gas.

"Up to North Conway in the mountains," he answered. "Hope I'll find it a bit cooler there."

The man cast a dubious eye up toward the murky heavens.

"'F I was you," he remarked, "I think I'd be figgerin' more on findin' cover. This is bound to break in a storm; and when she comes—oh, boy!—it 'll be something more than a drizzle."

"Maybe I'll run out of it?" suggested Ed hopefully. "Perhaps this sultriness will disappear as I go higher."

He crossed the bridge, and proceeded on his way to Springfield; but although the elevation steadily grew higher, there was no improvement in the weather conditions. If anything, it grew hotter and more murky.

At Springfield, where he stopped for supper, the air was so thick and heavy, that one could almost believe himself in the steam room of a Turkish bath; and again he was warned against keeping on.

But stubbornly he held to his determination to push through and, in spite of the remonstrances and shakes of the head of those to whom he spoke, held to the road.

By the time he got to New Hampshire, the sun had not yet set; but it was as dark as midnight, with a thick blanket of heavy clouds over the sky, relieved only by the continual flashes of lightning along the horizon. Louder and louder grew the threatening rumble of the thunder.

Then at last the storm broke—a storm that stands in the calendar of that country like the year of the big wind in Ireland, or the blizzard of March, 1888, in New York—a tempest of rain and wind, and blazing swords of lightning, and peals of thunder that seemed to split the world into fragments.

Any sane person, any one but a lover hastening to the call of his lady would have sought shelter. But Bell merely shut his teeth, and drove on.

The rain beat in at the sides of the car, and drenched him almost as much as if he had been in the open. The road on the slopes was like a roaring river, and in the hollows like turbulent lakes.

The terrific gusts of wind lifted the car bodily out of its course, and kept him constantly fighting the veering wheel. Again and again, he came within an inch of being blown over under those furious blasts.

The incessant lightning blinded him; the air was so thick with rain that even his bright lights could not penetrate it. It almost seemed as if the storm were traveling with him, and he would never get out of it.

" Well, if that fatal accident comes now, I can't say that my beloved beneficiaries had anything to do with framing it up," he reflected. " But I can't quite see Heaven acting as a collection agent for that bunch of skunks."

And at last with the dying mutters of thunder off to the east, it was over; the stars came out, and the wind died down to a fresh, clear breeze.

Ed glanced at his watch. It was two o'clock now, and he had been battling with the terrific upheaval of nature since a little before nine.

He had only thirty-five miles to go before arriving at his destination. Another hour would see him there. But he was all in from his exertions. His shoulder injured the night before was aching like a jumping tooth, and he was stiff and sore all over.

He would have given anything to draw up at the side of the road, and just let himself drop off to sleep; but he steeled his resolution, and kept to the job.

He was nodding, though, in spite of himself. Every few minutes he would rouse up with a start to find himself on the edge of drifting off.

So he made his way through Crawford's Notch, around the bulky shoulder of the Presidential Range, and headed on toward Glen, and Intervale.

The dangers all seemed over now, the nightmare experiences of the night over. He had the road all to himself and easy going all the rest of the way.

Again he nodded off, subconsciously following the windings of the splendid State highway. Then as he struck a bridge crossing a deep ravine, he came to himself.

There was a crash of snapping timbers, and he felt the structure giving way under him, a sickening second as he swung on full power, and tried to win across. Then the thing collapsed, and down it went, carrying him and the car with it.

The fall to the bed of the stream was fully forty feet; but by an almost miraculous contingency, the falling timbers piled themselves up under him so as to support the car in an almost upright position, and practically unhurt. Swaying and lurching there, it hung poised on its precarious perch.

Hurriedly Ed snapped off the power, and leaped out to find a momentary foothold on the grinding, moving pile of planks. The handrail of the bridge, bent but not broken, stretched down to him like a rescue rope, and he clutched eagerly at it.

As he did so, the heaped up ruin of the bridge with his car atop, was swept away by the swollen stream, and he was left dangling in air.

But the handrail held, and it was only a few feet to the bank. Hand over hand, he swarmed up the saving length of iron pipe, and drew himself to safety.

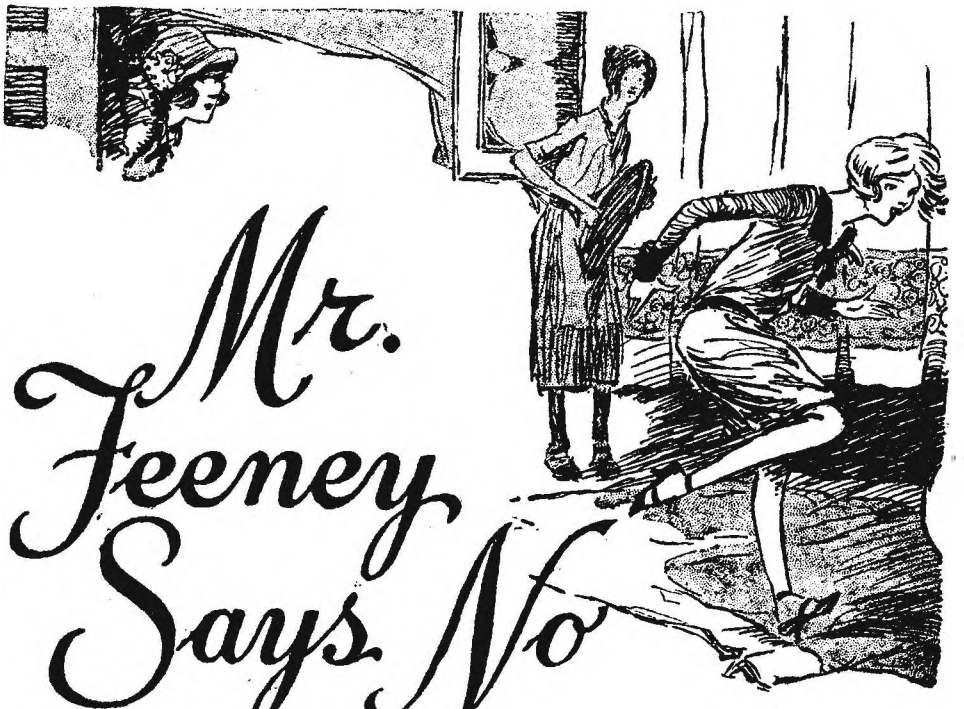
As he clambered over the edge of the ravine, though, and got to the solid roadway, he saw something which brought a tense exclamation from his throat. The stringers of the fallen bridge had not snapped or given away; they had been sawed in two. Human agency was responsible for the occurrence.

Pulling himself up to his hands and knees, he saw a motor truck halted a dozen rods or so beyond the bridge, and three men coming from it toward the ravine.

As they came out from the shadow of the trees and into the open space about the approach to the bridge, their figures became more distinct, and he saw that the foremost of them was a slender fellow with a walk and a jaunty bearing that he would know anywhere on earth.

Impulsively, Ed leaped to his feet in a white heat of fury, and sprang toward him.

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK



Mr. Feeney Says No

By JACK BECHDOLT

Author of "Rolling Dollars," "The Man Time Forgot," etc.

A NOVELETTE—COMPLETE IN THIS ISSUE

"NO," said Fred Feeney. That one word, delivered with an unexpected violence that was slightly grotesque, marks the beginning of this story.

Harvey Griscom paused, aghast.

In his hands Griscom held the entire documentary history of the Pontifex Patents. It made a good armful of typewritten pages, bound in blue legal jackets.

Griscom had been about to dump the armful onto Feeney's desk with instructions to Feeney to take them home and "Get up on this business before to-morrow noon."

Feeney said "No" and glared at Griscom. "I'll be everlastingly blowed if I will," he added. "And that's that."

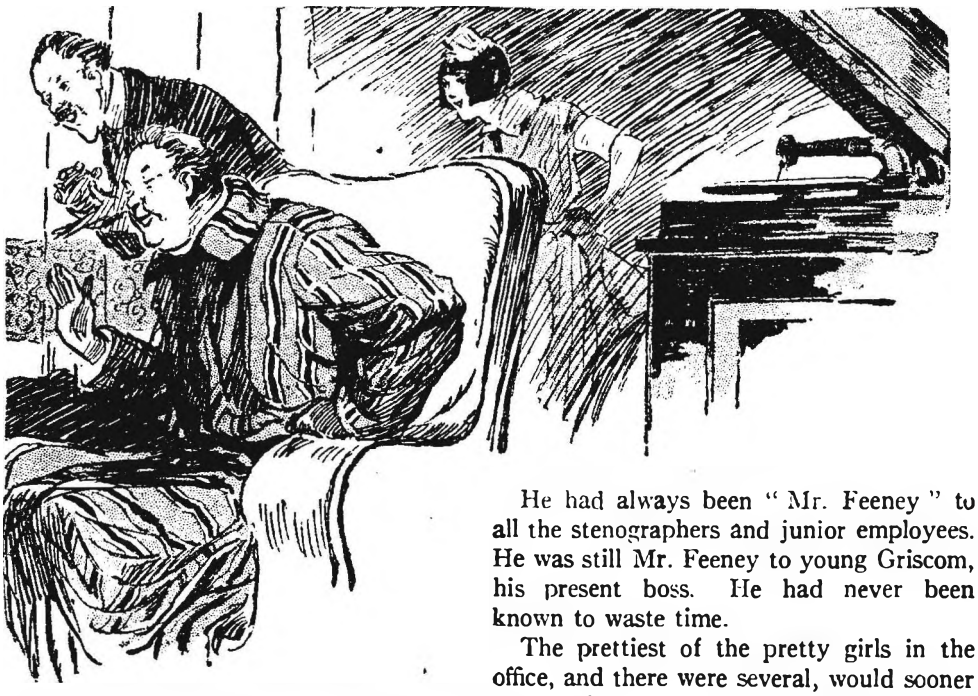
Feeney had heard a fellow worker use this tag recently, and it just fitted his mood.

Having said his bold words, Feeney leaned back in his office chair and discovered that he was turning red with excitement and embarrassment. He began to rub the bald spot on his crown with his left hand. He was not used to being forceful.

Balked by an employee's bold words, Griscom stared at Feeney and clung to the papers.

Griscom was looking at a plump, middle-sized man on the shabby side of forty. Fred Feeney had a mild, round, boyish face, and, usually, an eager, friendly smile. He was rather a shy, serious little devil, but a bear for work, as everybody in the Griscom-Hale-Bidwell Company conceded.

Feeney's face continued round and still boyish in his sudden madness, but it was the face of a boy who had had his cap knocked off, his shins kicked, his schoolbooks scattered in the gutter, and an imaginary chip brushed off his shoulder. Actually there were angry tears in Feeney's mild blue eyes.



Fred Feeney had been at his desk in the Griscom-Hale-Bidwell Company's office promptly at nine o'clock every morning for twenty-five years. Except for Sunday mornings, two weeks vacation every August and the five days in 1914 when he had been home with the grip. Also the half day in 1917 when he had tried to enlist in the army and had been refused.

All the rest of that long time he had appeared promptly wearing his shabby office coat. He sat at that desk all day and moved about seldom. Most of his lunches consisted of a sandwich.

When the rest of the force drifted homeward at five o'clock Feeney still sat, deep in the papers of one case or another, his round face absorbed in seriousness, his left hand absently rubbing away at the growing bald spot on his crown, his watch lying near to remind him not to miss the six-fifteen boat for Jersey.

A good detail man, this Feeney. The elder Griscom, who had retired from the firm, always said there was no one he could better trust to wade through the intricacies of a dozen claims for patent priority and knock out a lucid, accurate digest of the case on short notice.

He had always been "Mr. Feeney" to all the stenographers and junior employees. He was still Mr. Feeney to young Griscom, his present boss. He had never been known to waste time.

The prettiest of the pretty girls in the office, and there were several, would sooner expect the water cooler to smile at her. Nor was he one to stroll away from his desk and show busy employees snapshot pictures of the baby or brag about the birdie he had made on the Van Cortlandt links last Sunday afternoon.

Fred Feeney did not play golf, and if he had any babies he kept the matter dark.

If Fred Feeney had stooped swiftly and bit him in the fleshy part of his leg, Harvey Griscom could not have been more astonished at this moment. But he remembered his dignity as a member of the firm.

"Mr. Feeney, you must be ill!" was all he said.

"I am," Feeney retorted unexpectedly. "I'm sick. I'm sick of being overloaded with other people's work and expect to get it out before noon to-morrow. Let somebody else worry his head about those Pontifex claims." Then he added wildly, "Let George do it."

He had heard that somewhere, and the archaic slang just fitted the case.

"Let George do it," he repeated. "I've been the patsy around here long enough."

"The what?" Griscom gasped. He was too young to know that one.

"I said the patsy. The goat. The fall

guy. The sap, sucker and boob! No. I won't do it. And that's that. Beat it, Griscom. Twenty-three. Skidoo." Feeney clung to the edge of his desk with both hands and glared.

Assuredly the man had gone mad.

Griscom hung on tightly to his dignity. He turned his back and walked away without further comment. He carried the papers in the Pontifex controversy with him, wondering uneasily, if it was possible, he must study them for himself.

What was old Fred Feeney hired for, if it wasn't for detail jobs like that? Getting impudent like that after all these years! The man was utterly without gratitude.

Feeney meantime became aware that he was the center of considerable interest. Fellow clerks and typists in the research department of the patent firm were watching him with looks that mingled awe with amusement.

He jerked forward in his chair and tried to fix his attention on his work. But his left hand continued to rub the bald spot on his crown, sure sign of perturbation.

The details of a patent controversy were not for Feeney that morning. His eyes would not focus on them; his brain could not grasp them.

He was both terrified and elated at what he had done after twenty-five years of placid slavery at that desk in the office of the Griscom-Hale-Bidwell Company. Surely he had gone temporarily mad. Talking like that to young Griscom!

What ailed him? Feeney tried to think it out.

The day had begun like all his days, except that he had caught himself singing a long-forgotten tune while he shaved. Yes, he had been croaking to himself there in the bathroom, muttering what he remembered of "Little Annie Rooney."

He had been quite normal again by breakfast time. Bacon and eggs, it was. This was Tuesday, and he always had bacon and scrambled eggs Tuesdays, Thursdays, Saturdays, and Mondays. With half an orange first.

Over the bacon and eggs he had joked with Louise. Louise was their hired girl—maid, Mrs. Feeney called her, and had taught her to wear black dresses with a white cap and white apron.

Mrs. Feeney had her breakfast later. Her activities of a social sort were many and she needed more rest. Breakfast was a pleasant sort of meal. It left Fred Feeney free to joke with Louise, who had been in their employ since they were first married, twenty-four years ago.

He had joked Louise about that handsome chauffeur who worked for the Enoch Browns. Rather daring, he had been. Louise had blushed and giggled.

At seven fifty-seven he had pushed his chair back, got into his overcoat, the light, spring coat, picked up his bulging brief case, jammed on his hat, kissed Clara—Mrs. Feeney—and started out of the house exactly on schedule as always.

Everything normal so far, unless it was the question of his B. V. D.'s. Could it have been that?

There had been a little argument, quite friendly, the night before. Fred Feeney said the first of May was high time to discard the woollies. Clara said no. They had said the same thing every year for twenty-four years, and Clara had her way. He wore the woollies.

He remembered he had thought of that when he had stepped out into the warm May sunshine. Woollies on May first! Absurd.

The house was new, suburban Georgian with red brick and white pillars. Built just three years ago, and already the porch pillars were cracking.

Feeney stopped long enough to run his finger nail over the cracks and vow again, for the hundredth time, what he would say to the builder. And that had reminded him of the second mortgage. A payment was due next week and he had no idea how he was going to meet it.

The house was more than they could afford. Much more. Clara had insisted on it. Clara had talked brightly and positively, as Clara was wont to do, of a thousand and one small economies she would inaugurate to make up for the strain of meeting second mortgage installments. But somehow they never had the money when it was due.

He had been right about the house; it

cost too much. A man on Fred Feeney's salary had no business living in a house like that. Was it fear of the second mortgage that had driven him mad?

No, because he remembered as he walked briskly down the paved suburban street, past rows of houses like his own, his mind had been taken up with petunias. Time to do something with those two round beds on his lawn. Clara would expect something handsome in the way of petunias this year.

Fred Feeney caught the eight twenty-seven for the city with a minute to spare, as he always did. He wanted to read the morning paper on the way across Jersey, but he read patent papers instead. He always did.

He read himself to Liberty Street and walked to his office as usual. Not a sign of rebellion in his mind.

What else was there unusual about this day? Nothing. Nothing, unless it was that somewhere a window was open and through the open window now and then came a wandering breath of May breeze that made Fred Feeney see white sand beaches and ships at sea, not tugs or steamships or barges or even the Leviathan nosing majestically down the channel, but line of battleships with enormous gilded sterns and carved quarter galleries, line of battleships with blunt, curving bows where the white foam broke.

Fred Feeney sometimes saw these ships on mornings like this one and heard the breeze singing in their maze of rigging, heard the boson's shrill piping, the musical chorus of half-naked sailors tailed onto a tautening sheet, the creak of timbers and splash of swift rushing water and the mocking cry of gulls that swooped about them.

Ships!

Great ships with carved poops.

Ships like castles gone to sea, ships of pomp and circumstance, "The Great Harry," "Sovereign of the Seas," "St. George," "Regent," "Henry Grace à Dieu," "Triumph," "Ark," and "Royal George." Sometimes Fred Feeney saw them on a day like this and the picture came between him and the printed and typed pages of patent controversy, blotting out blue paper jackets, his desk, the office, widening before his eyes like something on a motion picture screen until he was enfolded and borne away and translated into a new world filled with ships.

Fred Feeney sat in his shabby office coat and rubbed his bald spot furiously, his eyes fixed hard on the papers held before him.

Yes, he must be getting queer. He had been seeing ships that morning; was seeing ships when Harvey Griscom shattered the vision by thrusting that armful of papers about the Pontiflex patents at him. And snatched rudely from his vision, he had turned on Griscom and as much as told him to go to the devil!

To do a thing like that was utter madness. It was like resigning. Was resigning—wasn't it now?

He turned ice cold. A prickle of chill perspiration broke out all over him.

Suppose he should be out of a job? A man of his age, out of touch with the world all these years, and the second mortgage installment due next week!

Fred Feeney began making desperate plans. He must go to Griscom at once and apologize. He would have to explain it somehow. He could manage that Pontiflex business along with what he had to do. Even if he sat up all night to get it done.

What was a sleepless night compared to the horror of no work and its drear consequence, no income! He must go to Griscom now.

But decision was taken from his hands.

Across the long room, threading his way between desks with a self-conscious smirk, came a boy from Griscom's office. Typists and clerks and minor executives watched him furtively. And watched Fred Feeney.

To Feeney's desk the boy came directly and bent low to speak the words: "Mr. Griscom would like to see you. In his office. Now."

II.

Fred Feeney walked out of the building where the Griscom-Hale-Bidwell Company was housed and stood at the curb.

The street was crowded. Persons passing continually jostled against him. He was not particularly aware of them. The May sunshine poured over him.

He had walked directly into the one spot thereabout where the sun's beams shot like a gigantic spotlight around the shoulders of big buildings. He was warm and his woollies made his skin prickle, but he did not realize it.

He realized nothing except a highly novel and uncomfortable feeling of being all gone inside. Something had gone out of him, something which had been a part of him for many long years.

It was his job. He had lost it.

Fred Feeney was fired and just beginning to realize that it had happened to him.

Griscom had talked a good deal. Feeney remembered scraps of the talk. Something about " Plainly not being happy with us—" and again, " We have always felt that unless a man can call this office home—" and " In view of these unhappy circumstances."

Griscom talked a lot and very well for a young man. He sounded so kindly and well-meaning and friendly about it that you almost suspected he was about to raise your salary or give you a vacation. But just the same he was fired. Out of a job.

Feeney touched the check in his pocket, tangible evidence that this had happened. A month's pay in lieu of notice. Rather generous.

Then a terrible and unnerving fear came upon him. He realized that he was out of work. Must have work.

Feeney had always worked for the Griscom-Hale-Bidwell Company. Ever since he finished high school.

He started with high ambitions to take up the practice of patent litigation some day. He studied law nights, encouraged by the elder Griscom, Harvey's father.

He was halfway through his law course when he met Clara, fell in love, married, founded a family. One thing and another had made it impossible to complete the law course, but really he had done very well as a detail man in the big patent firm's office.

Only now did he realize that for a lifetime he had shut himself away from the world, like a monk in a cloister. His had been a lifetime of shuttling between Manhattan and a Jersey suburb, coming in with the business day, going home with the last of the toiling millions and carrying with him, usually, work that must be finished by lamplight.

Of the business world, he knew nothing. He scarcely knew the names of other patent firms that employed men like himself. To firms like that he must turn now to save himself.

He would have to find them somehow. And go around to them and make himself talk to strangers, asking if they had work for a man who had been buried alive in the research department of the Griscom-Hale-Bidwell Company. The task must begin at once. A second mortgage depended upon it, a suburban house in the Georgian manner depended upon it, Louise the hired girl depended upon it, and Clara! His very life depended upon it.

Fred Feeney had nobody to turn to for help, nobody but himself.

Nobody? There was Ray. Ray was in Milwaukee this week, or was it St. Louis? Ray had made a new connection only recently. He was selling sales territory for some sort of a super radio, something that worked without batteries and promised to sweep the country like wildfire.

Ray had regarded this as the opportunity of a lifetime. It would put him under the training of super-salesmen, give him a chance to show the stuff he was made of. And the commissions! A man could clean up as much in a month as Fred Feeney earned by great diligence in a year!

Ray had explained all this when he borrowed that last hundred dollars of his father for immediate expenses.

Nobody around the Griscom-Hale-Bidwell Company even remembered that Fred Feeney had a son. Feeney never talked about Ray at the office. But usually when he was called to the telephone, it was Ray at the other end of the wire and if he went out for lunch at noon it was Ray who waited in the lobby of the building to meet him and arrange the little loan that he had telephoned about.

Sometimes, in discouraged moments, Feeney wondered if Ray had any interest in his father save as a source of small loans which were never repaid.

Ray always had been rather difficult.

Willful when he was a boy, a little wild when he became a man. Clara never could get along with Ray and Fred Feeney had little time to give him.

At nineteen he had left home to make his own way in the world and that would have been quite a help if only he would settle down to anything. But Ray had a brilliant mind. It made things difficult.

He had plenty of fine ideas, but he did hate detail work and routine. So he never stayed at any employment long.

Fred Feeney gave up the idea of telegraphing Ray for help. Secretly, he was pretty sure that Ray would have to say no and he wanted to spare himself the disappointment and humiliation of appealing to his only child in vain.

Instead, he went into a cigar store where there were telephones and from the classified directory found the addresses of the firms he must visit in search of a new job.

By that time it was noon. The skyscrapers were vomiting forth thousands of workers. They filled the narrow pavements and overflowed into the streets.

Heads down, they plunged along invisible paths marked out by habit, men and women, boys and girls, all intent on reaching their favorite cafeterias, soda bars, sandwich restaurants, all intent on eating and an hour of relaxation and rushing at it headlong.

Fred Feeney was jostled among them, borne along on the current of this human river.

Shyly he looked into one face and another. They did not seem happy or unhappy. They were merely intent.

But he envied them. They all held jobs, were employed, were needed. He wondered desperately if anybody would ever need him again.

By the mere process of automatically avoiding the denser crowds, without conscious volition on his part, Feeney was shunted along until he found himself nearing the green, wide open space of the Battery.

The salt breeze came to his nostrils distinct above the odor of warm asphalt and masonry and carbon monoxide. The sea spoke to him.

He drifted to a bench like a man in a dream. He sat staring at the ocean, or such part of the ocean as New York harbor may represent. The salt water glittered under the noon sun. The far horizon was soft with a spring haze.

Tugboats passed back and forth, some shunting car barges or strings of canal boats, some hurrying on alone, leaving writhing, serpentine waves behind them.

The tugs had their noses muffled in thick, woolly bumpers of rope netting. Big, square-angled ferryboats, like houses gone adrift, slipped in and out. Two liners came up from quarantine slowly. Several excursion steamers made a commotion at the pier.

Fred Feeney did not see any of them. He was drunk with the odor of the sea and his visions of sailing ships that towered like fortified castles. He discovered with a start of alarm that it had now become two o'clock in the afternoon.

The fear returned and brought with it that awful, all-gone feeling in his middle. He must find a new job.

The first address he visited was a large establishment, larger even than the Griscom-Hale-Bidwell Company's. Feeney gave his name to an information girl diffidently and mentioned that he was seeking a connection with the firm.

Guided by the girl's precise instructions, he filled out a card and the card disappeared somewhere in the hands of a boy. He sat down to wait.

This outer office he sat in was rather large and filled with clerks sitting at desks. Except that the furniture was slightly different, it might have been the familiar office of the Griscom-Hale-Bidwell Company.

As the first strangeness wore off and he sat there waiting, Feeney felt almost as if he had never left his old desk. He felt that he was back again in his cloister and that nothing had happened. But instead of drawing comfort from this, he was strangely upset and nauseated.

Suppose he found employment here, at once? The old life would go on without a change; application, labor, monotony. He didn't want that. It was spring. He had sat in the sun and smelled the sea!

Feeney rose and said to the information girl that he would call another time. He went out into the street like a man escaping from prison, almost afraid that somebody would call him back. Assuredly, he had gone mad to-day, but he no longer cared!

Out in the street, a jobless man, facing immediate bankruptcy, Fred Feeney did the maddest thing he could think of. He took a holiday he had meant to take for several years and never managed.

The daring of it excited him so that he plunged along the pavements blindly, beaming and bumping into people and beaming again as they shouldered him aside. Fred Feeney caught the subway and rode far uptown to the Metropolitan Museum. He spent the entire afternoon looking at admiralty models of old ships in glass cases.

Temporarily he was mad as the fabled March hare. Or the conventional hatter. Completely, absolutely, utterly looney—and he liked it!

III.

FEENEY caught the six fifteen boat, just.

Even the fact that he almost had missed it failed to disturb him greatly. His mind was still intent on the treasures he had seen at the museum, the admiralty models of great ships.

There had been one in particular, the St. George, second rate line of battleship, 1701. Down to the last cunning detail, the model was complete. Feeney's mind was filled with the marvel of it; his eyes still blinded with it.

So carried away was he that he must talk. He spoke of it to a stranger sitting beside him in the ferry cabin, he who was too shy and too preoccupied usually to talk even to men he had met.

"I've been out at the museum looking at ship models," he found himself saying. He beamed as he said it and his eyes shone. "I tell you they've got some great stuff out there! Great stuff!"

The man he addressed, a thick-necked, stout man with glasses that made his eyes bulge belligerently, had his nose buried in the evening newspaper. He looked up with a start. "What say, mister?"

"Ship models," Feeney explained. "At the museum. Detail models of old line of battleships. The real thing. Built for the British admiralty. Exactly to scale in every detail. Why, there's one, the St. George—"

Feeney stopped. The stout man had snorted and moved in on the bench so that he turned his shoulder to Feeney. He held his paper before his near-sighted eyes determinedly.

Feeney felt himself turning red with embarrassment. He rose quietly and changed his seat.

He must be crazy, talking to a stranger about ship models. Why even when he tried to tell Clara—

The same old cracks were in the wooden Georgian porch pillars. Feeney realized it with a start of surprise, pausing to run his finger nail along them. Why, it seemed a lifetime since he had left the house and it was only a few hours!

There it was, the brick and wood suburban dwelling with its burden of second mortgage and all the awful responsibilities that went with it. And here he was—home again—and jobless.

The dread moment was upon him. All day, unconsciously, he had avoided thinking of this, his return home, broken and hopeless. Standing on his own doorstep Fred Feeney was scared, scared and so utterly lonely that he ached.

He wanted somebody to comfort him. He wanted Clara. His key rattled with nervousness as he slipped it into the keyhole.

Louise in her white cap and her apron appeared in the hall as he came in. Louise was big as a grenadier, a strapping woman who towered over everybody. She was single for all these years, but never without beaux. A good humored giantess with a child's heart.

Her grim, non-committal manner did its best to cover her weakness. Louise was very fond of Mr. Feeney. Between them was companionship and understanding of a dumb sort. Unconsciously and inarticulately she was his ally against the world.

Now she said merely: "Mrs. Feeney's upstairs, dressing. She's been asking."

Louise would not presume to put her warning into words. But her manner was meant to tell him something.

The master of the house and servant of a second mortgage scarcely saw her as he moved blindly toward the stairs, intent only on reaching Clara and finding comfort in his misfortune.

Clara had just finished dressing. She laid aside a powder puff as Feeney burst open the door, calling "Clara!"

A woman of medium height, Clara ruled a tendency to stoutness with the iron hand of exercise. She was almost fashionably slender, but you could see it cost her a great effort. She had the look about the mouth and eyes of the over-trained athlete.

Clara's hair was a pretty chestnut and cut short. Secretly, Fred Feeney regretted that. When he married her, her hair rippled below her waist when she let it down. But now nobody wore long hair. Long hair was unthinkable.

Feeney had bowed to the inevitable. Clara's face was quite young for her age and that strap thing she wore at night certainly had done wonders for what had been a double chin.

Clara looked very smart in a cloth-of-gold gown that left her arms bare and a good deal of her pretty shoulders and breast on view. Fred Feeney saw very little of these externals, saw only that this was Clara and stammered her name.

Clara Feeney's reply was brisk and reproachful: "Fred! Why on earth didn't you get the early train?"

"The train? I—why—" His lips were eager and his heart bursting to tell his own news, but old habit made Feeney answer Clara's question. Or try to.

"Never mind. Never mind, now! But hurry and clean up. Dinner's waiting. You can dress after—"

"Dress?"

"Oh, not your dinner suit. Just the blue one. But you certainly don't expect to be host at bridge in that awful rag you wear to the office?"

"Bridge? Oh—"

"You forgot all about it. I knew it!"

"But, my dear, I—there were other things. I want to tell you—"

Clara made gestures as he came near her, holding him off impatiently. "Never mind now! Dinner's waiting. I told you it would be early and you had to forget, Fred, for goodness sake hurry for once."

"But I've got something to tell you!"

Feeney advanced hurriedly. He had his arm about her shoulders before she could stop him. He was pressing her close. "Clara, listen. To-day, at the office—"

"Don't be ridiculous!" She had escaped his embrace, and her hands flew to her hair anxiously. "It took me two hours and cost seven dollars and fifty cents to have my hair done, and you've made a mess of it. Fred Feeney, will you hurry for once—"

"But I've got to tell you! You've got to know!" Feeney stood repulsed, rubbing the bald spot hurriedly. "Listen, Clara; prepare yourself—"

"You're an old silly!" Clara said brightly and not without affection, her kind of affection.

She took him firmly by the shoulders. "Now, don't be stuffy, Fred. In you go."

She shoved him lightly toward the bathroom. She planted a swift, impersonal kiss on his bewildered face. "Hurry, Fred. For once in your life, hurry!" She started to leave the room, and remembered something more.

"And Fred, keep out of that basement to-night. I want you to play bridge, not moon around with your toys in the basement."

Feeney blushed guiltily. Then brightened. "Oh, say, Clara, talking about that, you ought to see the ship models I saw to-day at the museum—"

The bedroom door slammed. Clara was gone.

Feeney went into the bathroom and prepared to wash. He knew and obeyed that mood of Clara's. When she was like that it was no good trying to cross her.

She wore a bright, impenetrable armor. Every weapon glanced aside from it. No getting at the real Clara then; nothing to do but to do as you were told and wait for another chance.

Bridge! Fred Feeney loathed the game. Clara laughed when he said it and argued: "But you are really clever at it, Fred! At

least you could be clever, if you'd only put your mind to it. You've got a really good mind!"

He remembered now that this bridge had been planned and discussed. The last of a series which had made winter hideous for him. One of their major social efforts, at least one of Clara's.

"It pays off a lot of people," Clara argued. "And it doesn't cost much. I should think you'd give me a little credit for trying to save you money!"

Clara would expect him to shave. Feeney sighed and began to strop his razor. He halted in mid-strop, pushed open the bathroom door and looked into the bedroom, horror struck.

That was a new dress Clara had on! There had been something said about it last week, and he had urged her not to buy it, not just now, with an installment on the second mortgage looming.

"Stuff!" Clara said brightly. "We've got credit. What's credit for if not to use? You told me yourself that regular big business is all done on credit. It isn't as if it was vanity, either.

"I'm trying to establish us in this place. There are people we ought to know. Business men, big ones, like the Enoch Browns. Mr. Brown could do anything for a man like you, Fred! But if he doesn't know you, he'll never do anything for you, will he? If you don't expect to grub along a mere clerk all your life, it's time one of us did something about it."

It *was* the new dress!

The evidence was there in the corner—the big paper box it had come from the store in. Fred Feeney looked at the pasted address label. Charged. That one word leaped at him and the blow it struck made him ill.

This sort of thing had got to stop. Now. Of course, it wasn't Clara's fault. He reassured himself of that hastily.

But Clara didn't know, and she must know at once. She must know that her husband had no job and no income.

Razor in hand, half clad, Feeney started for the stairs. He was half way down when he heard Clara's high, clear-cut voice. Clara was saying, "Clear away, Louise. We can't wait for Mr. Feeney. When he comes down he can find a bite of something in the pantry. By the time you're through I'll be ready to help you cut the sandwiches. And don't forget to use *both* percolators to-night. I don't want to run out of coffee."

Feeney realized that he was not yet shaved, and the bridge guests soon due to arrive.

He started back to the bathroom in guilty haste. On the little writing desk in the bedroom he spied a bundle of letters, the day's mail.

He stopped to run through them. Bills, every one. Electricity, telephone, gas, coal, groceries, the department stores, the village taxi garage, a statement from his bank.

He shuddered at that last envelope; he dared not open it.

Something had to be done—something drastic. He clutched the pile of bills in his right hand, and with his left rubbed his bald spot frantically.

An absurd figure in his undershirt, suspenders dangling about his hips, lather drying on his woe-begone, round face. By Heaven, this thing had to stop!

There came from below stairs the sound of furniture being shifted about. Clara and Louise must be moving the davenport in front of the fireplace. They always did for a party.

Feeney gasped, thrust the bills hurriedly into the desk, and dived into the bathroom to shave and cleanse himself.

He came down by the rear stairs. Guests might be arriving at the front door, and he felt the need of coffee before he talked to anybody.

Louise was in the kitchen. She held a long, square sandwich loaf firmly on the bread board with her left hand. With a long, sharp knife her right hand was cutting innumerable thin slices from the loaf.

"The coffee's on the back of the stove, Mr. Feeney. I put your plate in the oven to keep warm. Better sit over here."

Louise cleared a space on the kitchen work-table and whisked a clean napkin down.

Feeney gulped his coffee and pushed his chair back. His eyes turned toward a

door in the kitchen which opened on the basement stairs. His face brightened with keenest interest as he rose.

Louise, busy at her slicing, looked up with a frown of anxiety. "You never touched them chops. They're good."

Feeney sighed and resumed his chair. To please Louise he ate a chop and some mashed potato, but his mind dwelt longingly on his workbench down in the basement. He folded his napkin and smiled at Louise and her sandwiches.

"The show must go on, eh, Louise?"

"What say, Mr. Feeney?"

"I said the show must go on. It's kind of a saying I read some place. About the theater, you know. Even if an actor is dying he must go on and do his part. That's what they say—"

Louise paused, knife suspended, turning a startled face toward him. "Good gracious, Mr. Feeney, is somebody dying?"

"No, no! Nobody's dying. I was just thinking about this party to-night." He sighed solemnly as he rose.

"Well—what a turn you gave me!" Louise resumed her slicing.

Feeney moved quietly toward the basement door. It was his own house. Louise was his servant. He paid her wages. There was no legal obstacle against his going to the basement any time he wanted to.

But Clara didn't like it. Clara said that Fred Feeney wasted hours, days, months of valuable time puttering around in that basement, making toy ships. Clara refused to dignify her husband's work with the term "model." Toy ships, she called them, and her lips always curled a little, even when she indulged his weakness.

"A man of your age, Fred! Playing with *toy ships!* Other men are over at the country club playing golf—or bridge—or dancing—"

"But I don't like those games," Feeney would protest.

"That's not the point. Other men your age may not *like* them either. But it's the people they meet. They rub elbows with bigger men, more successful men. They make connections, Fred. They hear about opportunities to make more money. Don't you ever want to get *anywhere?*"

"Where?" Feeney answered humorously. That always made Clara furious, that simple question.

"You know what I mean very well! We're entitled to as much money as anybody else. And as nice a home. And good times. I should think you'd feel some pride about it. But no, you just stay a routine man, nothing but a glorified clerk in that silly patent concern, and spend your spare time *playing* with toy sailboats!"

"Ship models, Clara. Scale models. Say, if you'd only come out to the museum with me some day! We could look at some real ship models, made for the British admiralty, real works of art, they say. Clara, let's take next Sunday afternoon—"

"No, thank you." That always ended their argument. "If you've got to fiddle away with toy sailboats, do it. But don't expect me to get back to rompers and play with you."

Feeney went down the basement stairs, carrying his conscience like a heavy weight upon his shoulders. Clara would not like this! He snapped on electric lights and his eyes flew to his workbench.

A clean, quiet place, the basement; warm in winter, cool in summer, sunshiny by day and well lighted by night. His workbench was under the west windows.

In the center of it, propped up on blocks, stood his model of a Nantucket whaler, the Nell and Susan. It was unfinished still. Two of her masts were not yet rigged. A lot of minute detail of the the decks remained to be attended to.

Fred Feeney had given the Nell and Susan his loving labors for almost two years now, whatever spare time he had from his office work and the house and Clara. But such as it was, as far as it had gone, it was good. Even Fred Feeney knew that it was good.

What a labor it had been! The calculations and research alone would have floored many a less patient workman. But Feeney loved it all. He felt the thrill of creation when his fingers held woodworking tools.

He felt it again this evening, as he lingered by his bench, holding in his hand the half finished model of a whaleboat. Just a tiny, half carved bit of wood, crude yet,

like a boy's carving. But underneath the crudeness lay the boat about to be born in all its beauty of line and perfection of tiny detail.

Fred Feeney's sensitive carver's fingers could feel that unborn boat, and his mind's eye could see it. He looked on his ship model hungrily and forgot his lost job, the impending second mortgage, Clara, and the bridge party. Down in the basement he really lived.

"Mr. Fee-ee-ney!" That was Louise at the head of the basement stairs.

Feeney dropped the half-carved boat with a guilty start.

"Yes, Louise?"

"It's for you—"

"What?"

"A gentleman."

"Who is it?"

"He asked for you. And Mrs. Feeney wasn't down yet. Mr. Feeney, you *didn't* go forget about the card party!"

Feeney ran up the stairs, pulling down his vest anxiously. He hurried to the front hall.

A substantial-looking, plain-featured man of serious, almost forbidding, mien was waiting for him.

"Rogers is the name," he announced.

Feeney thrust out his hand, and Rogers took it doubtfully.

"Well, well, well!" Feeney exclaimed with hastily summoned cordiality. "I guess you're first to-night, Mr. Rogers. Take your coat and hat? Clara's about somewhere—"

He didn't remember Mr. Rogers, but then Clara's friends were many, and new ones came and went. But Mr. Rogers had a queer look in his eyes. His lips were pressed close and they just moved a little in an attempt to smile. It was a smile of ill omen.

"I guess you're making a mistake, Mr. Feeney. I came on a business matter. Rogers, coal and wood—remember?"

"Oh!" Feeney said. There was an awful sinking feeling where he had just begun to digest his hasty supper. "Oh, yes, yes, yes! Rogers, coal and wood! Sure—er—come in this way, where we can talk, Mr. Rogers."

He looked about hastily and chose the little room at the rear that might have been a library and at least had the advantage of some privacy.

As they went toward the door Clara appeared hastily, her golden gown all aglitter, her head back, hand out, a bright smile on her face.

"Oh, how-do? This is jolly—" Clara began brightly. Her smile remained cordial, but her eyes, searching Mr. Rogers's face, looked baffled.

"Mr. Rogers dropped in to see me—on business," Feeney explained. "You remember, my dear, Mr. Rogers is the—ah, supplies our coal and wood."

"Oh!" Clara lost interest in Mr. Rogers at once. "Don't be long, Fred," she said ominously as the two men went on to the little room.

"Wife giving a party, eh?" said Mr. Rogers. His voice grated unpleasantly.

"Umh—yes, oh, yes," Feeney answered absently.

What was the amount? How much was half of $157.85? He distinctly remembered paying half of that bill last fall. When the coal was put in.

"Sorry to intrude, but I won't be a minute," Mr. Rogers grated on. "I was just passing."

Fred Feeney had thrust a chair at Mr. Rogers, but Mr. Rogers chose to ignore it. He stood solidly, looking down on Feeney with a face like granite. He said no more, just looked.

Feeney, who had sat down, rose uneasily and his hand began rubbing at his bald spot.

"Oh, yes," he murmured vaguely. "That's a first-rate idea. Nice of you to think about it—"

"No," said Mr. Rogers. "Just business. I've been expecting your check, and it did not come. Of course, folks like you are pretty busy, entertaining a lot and all—"

"We don't entertain—much," Feeney protested weakly.

Mr. Rogers sniffed and rolled his eyes toward the door. Plainly he had observed the party preparations; observed Clara's new cloth-of-gold gown.

"Parties cost money," said Mr. Rog-

ers. "I don't give 'em. Why? Can't afford 'em. In the coal and wood business you need every red cent you can collect. I pay cash for my stuff and take my discounts.

"That's why I can give the service and prices I do. But there's folks in this town that *do* give parties. Some of 'em spend a hundred dollars on a night, and don't think anything of it. And they're the folks I have to keep after to collect the few dollars coming to me. Everybody figures the coal man can wait. They figure he's just a sucker."

It was a long speech for Mr. Rogers, evidently. And a bitter one. He went into the silence and looked grimly at Fred Feeney.

Extraordinary how long Mr. Rogers could hold his tongue! He just stood and looked. And he looked so unpleasant! Fred Feeney, who had determined he would let Mr. Rogers do all the talking, felt a wild desire to babble. He just could not hold his tongue. He opened his lips in spite of all resolution, and said:

"How much was that little amount, Mr. Rogers?"

"Seventy-eight ninety-three," Mr. Rogers answered promptly. Nothing more. Just grim silence.

In the silence they heard the doorbell trill, heard the babel of several voices. Guests were arriving.

Mr. Rogers rolled his eyes toward the direction of these sounds. His lips quirked in his sour smile. They repeated, without the necessity of words, his opinion of people who gave parties instead of paying coal bills.

"Just at present—" said Feeney. He stopped to clear his throat. "Just at this time of month I find it a little hard to find ready money. Suppose we let it run a month, eh?"

Feeney smiled and rubbed his hands together, trying to feel sure that the request was perfectly reasonable.

"No," said Mr. Rogers. The word was round, and short. It seemed to block that avenue of escape like a granite wall. He refused to explain or qualify, though Feeney gave him plenty of time.

"Well"—the harassed householder sighed—"well, I suppose we'll have to do something. Enough at least to show our good intentions. Er—half, say?"

"No," said Mr. Rogers again. "Not half."

"I realize," Feeney went on, "that the amount has been due a couple of months—"

"Seven months."

"As long as that! H'm—well—"

"A check will be all right," said Mr. Rogers.

The party noises in the front of the house were increasing. Other guests must have arrived by now. Several women's voices exclaimed together: "Oh, my dear!" There was a burst of laughter. Feeney wiped his brow and found it moist.

"Excuse me a minute, I'll run up and get my check book," he capitulated. He was glad there were two doors to the room, glad he could slip out through the kitchen and go up the rear stairs.

His eyes resolutely ignored the figures of his bank balance while he wrote the check to Rogers, Coal and Wood. He returned downstairs with firmer tread.

Mr. Rogers gave him a pain in the neck! Yes, just that. Who the devil was Rogers, the coal man, to disapprove of Clara's giving a party? It wasn't any of his—his damned business!

Feeney opened the door to the little library rudely.

"Here you are, Rogers," he said. "Just sign that receipt, will you?"

Good Lord, there was another man in the room now! Rogers was no longer alone. The other man was stout, dark-skinned, jovial-looking—and a stranger to Fred Feeney. He remained modestly in the background, contenting himself with a nervous bow to the master of the house.

Rogers, Coal and Wood, took Feeney's check, looked it over critically, nodded and folded it into a pocketbook.

"I'll go out the back way," he said grim to the last. "Don't want to bust up your party. How about it, Mr. Feeney, you'll be wanting the same order for next winter? Better let me put it in early next month. Coal's a dollar a ton less in summer. Slack season."

"I'll let you know," Feeney said, sick at heart. "Good night. Louise will show you the way."

He closed the door and turned to the stranger dubiously.

The stranger bowed again, quickly, from the waist. He thrust a paper at Feeney.

"I wouldn't have come, I give you my word, if I'd known it was a party, Mr. Feeney! But I guess this won't take you a minute, huh?" He rubbed his hands and smiled meekly. The paper was a bill. The letterhead said: "Village Pantatorium and Cleaning, Inc. I. Finkman, Mgr. Personal Valet Service for Gents. Ladies' Dresses our Boast."

The amount was totaled at eighteen dollars and seventy-five cents.

"Some things of the madam's," I. Finkman explained eagerly, almost humbly. "It was last February. I guess she forgot. You know how ladies are!"

Something boiled over inside Fred Feeney. It was his belated rage at Rogers, Coal and Wood.

His round face turned red and he burst out angrily: "What the devil do you mean bringing this to me to-night? You can't come butting in here with your confounded bills. I'm busy."

Almost instantly he regretted his mistake. Who would have thought I. Finkman had such a shrill, high, penetrating voice? A voice that carried like a steam whistle, making light of doors and walls. A voice that cracked with woe and a sense of personal injury.

"So?" cried I. Finkman. "So, that's how it is? You deadbeat! Pay a coal man his hundreds of dollars, but when a poor man like me tries to collect the few measly dollars you owe, you turn on him! Your wife can run up bills for dry cleaning dresses, but a poor man can't come in your house and ask for his money that's overdue without you get insulting right away? Listen, I got as much right—"

But Fred Feeney was listening to something else. At the first words of the shrill outcry a dead silence had come over the bridge guests on the other side of the library door.

They must have heard! And understood. For, a minute later, several voices burst out in concert, intent on covering an awkward situation.

They were talking loudly enough now, but they had heard I. Finkman. They knew all!

To confirm his worst fears the library door opened, admitted Clara and closed rapidly behind her.

"What in the name of goodness—" Clara began. Her eye dwelt coldly on I. Finkman who bowed rapidly and smiled ingratiatingly.

"Fred, what does this man want? Money? Then for heaven's sake let him have it and get him out of here. Do you want to ruin us?"

Clara turned back to her guests without awaiting any answers. When the door closed upon her, she was smiling again the company smile.

"Wait here," Feeney said miserably. "I'll run upstairs and write you a check."

IV.

THE loathsome Finkman was disposed of. Fred Feeney closed the kitchen door, snapped off the porch light and hoped that Mr. Finkman would not fail to fall over the ash can and injure himself painfully.

Why get so mad, now? Why, think of all the firm, bitter, even insulting rejoinders he might have made to Rogers and Finkman? Why stand in the kitchen, his face red, his mild eyes flashing, and in imagination snatch open the door and indicate the outer air to that dunning pair who, also in imagination, humbly bowed to the inevitable and slunk away into the night, unpaid?

Why, in heaven's name why, did Fred Feeney get mad too late!

There it was, his fatal weakness. An index to his weak character, no doubt. Perhaps the reason he had remained a routine man holding a routine job all his life.

He never got mad at the right time or at the right person. Ridiculous. Feeney wiped his red face and managed to laugh at himself a little bitterly.

Oh, Lord, the bridge party! Well, he must face the inevitable. Fred Feeney

looked longingly at the stairs which led to the basement.

The basement was Fred Feeney's escape from life. He looked at the stairs and hesitated. The kitchen door opened. It was Louise.

"Mrs. Feeney said to say they were waiting for you, Mr. Feeney. They want to begin playing."

"That's right!" Feeney exclaimed.

He brushed himself anxiously, straightened his tie and hurried to his guests. That cost him a heroic effort. His face was still red with his recent embarrassment about I. Finkman.

Everybody in that room knew now that Fred Feeney was being dunned for his bills, the ordinary, routine bills of housekeeping. Everybody knew it, and no doubt they smiled behind his back and he had to keep on bowing and smiling and shaking hands with people whose names he could not remember.

There was a twinkle in the eyes of the powerful Enoch Brown as he took his hand and inquired genially: "How's a boy, Fred?"

Laugh at him, would he! Feeney said stiffly that he was fine and bobbed his head at Mrs. Brown.

Cut for partners? Oh yes, sure—cut for deal?

"You play the no trump convention, Mr. Feeney?" It was Mrs. Enoch Brown, challenging his attention with her bright eyes, preternaturally bright, almost terrifying to-night. What? Oh yes—oh sure, the no trump convention!

Good Lord, what was the no trump convention? What was it all about? Here they were, four at the little table. The cards were going around. Five tables in the room, everybody doing the same thing, saying the same thing, or things equally as silly.

Here was himself, Fred Feeney, picking up his cards, staring at them with eyes that saw not, his mind a terrifying blank. It had gone from him, everything about bridge. He burst out in a cold sweat.

Somebody was saying: "Your bid, partner." What? Oh, yes! "I pass," he muttered and continued to mutter that every time they glared at him. Jobless, ruined, ridden by bills, terrified of life he was and he had to sit here and play bridge!

He had to play bridge when his heart ached, his throat burned, his head was splitting. When he longed above all else to lay his head on Clara's shoulder and blurt out the news of all his misfortunes—

What was that? Oh, yes, lay down his hand. Well, thank God, he was dummy. There was some mercy left in heaven.

Louise stood at his elbow. She was murmuring: "You're wanted in the dining room, Mr. Feeney."

"What about?" Feeney whispered, his heart sinking rapidly. Had somebody else, somebody with a bill to collect, got into the house!

"You're wanted," Louise repeated.

She was mysterious about it. Her eyes were bright with excitement. She jerked her head significantly toward the dining room. She favored her employer with a slow, mysterious wink.

"I'll be back in time for the deal—just some little matter," Feeney murmured apologetically, pushing back his chair.

The other three, intent on their game, didn't even hear him. He followed Louise.

"You won't be back for no deal, Mr. Feeney." Louise was smiling.

What was the joke? "Look here, Louise, what's happened in the dining room?"

"Just you go ahead and find out," Louise beamed.

Opening the dining room door, which had been closed, she shoved him in playfully. Then Louise departed toward her own kitchen, giggling, pink of face, almost hysterical.

V.

Fred Feeney stood against the dining room door and stared at two people. One was a young man whose elegant clothes impressed the beholder at once.

He was a handsome youth, almost too good-looking, a little pale, a trifle too sleek, the sort of young man who knows more about parties than he does about hard work. But he was coming forward rapidly, his hand outstretched, and it was Ray! Ray, his own son.

Fred Feeney gasped Ray's name, caught Ray by the shoulders, pressed his hand and beamed upon him. "Why, boy! I thought you were out in St. Louis?"

"Oh, that!" said Ray with an impatient toss of his head. "That's ancient history, pop. I'm not with them any more. I resigned—"

"Quit your job? Ray, that was a good job—"

"It's a long story, pop. But here's the plot of it, right here!" Ray turned about smiling a little anxiously, including the third person. "Pop, I want you to know Effie. Her name was Effie Watson, up to two days ago. It's Feeney now. This is your new daughter, pop. Kiss your father-in-law, Effie."

Ray laughed, looking embarrassed, excited, pleased and anxious all in one.

Feeney had scarcely realized that there was a third person present, he had been so excited at seeing Ray. Now he was so overcome by the news, he could only gape vaguely at the stranger, his mouth opening and shutting like that of a freshly landed fish.

Before his eyes could see, he was enveloped, two arms about his neck, two lips pressed to his cheek, a warm, eager young body close against his. A queer, hoarse voice that startled him by its strangeness was murmuring: "Hello, pop! Promise me you won't bounce a brick off my bean for stealing your boy—gosh, I guess I deserve it, all right! I'm so scared of you, pop, I'm afraid I'm going to make a fool of myself. You see, I never was married before, never in all my life!"

"Why, Ray!" Fred Feeney gasped, disengaging himself anxiously, trying to collect his wits. "Why—Ray!"

"She's my wife," said Ray. He said it proudly and a little defiantly. "It's done, signed, sealed and delivered—"

"Before a J. P. out in St. Loo," the queer, hoarse voice seconded. "Your boy Ray is some fast worker, pop!"

"Forty-eight hours, to the minute," Ray grinned. "Forty-eight hours from the first time we met, wasn't it, lamb?"

"You're married!" Feeney exclaimed. It was beginning to dawn on him.

The queer, hoarse voice of Mrs. Ray Feeney *nee* Effie Watson, broke into laughter and Ray's laugh joined hers. They clung to each other, hilarious, laughing at Fred Feeney whose round face was a perfect picture of astounded comprehension as he stared at them, rubbing his bald spot frantically.

Feeney's eyes began to take stock of this woman who had so unexpectedly become his new daughter-in-law. She was not very big and she looked as young as innocence and as old as experience, all at the same time.

Physically she was little. A mop of light yellow hair fluffed out from under her pert, close-fitting hat. Her eyes were blue and fringed with black lashes and extraordinarily lively.

Her mouth was wide, a mouth made for comedy, its lips vividly portrayed in scarlet against a pallid skin. She was dressed with a smartness rare to Fred Feeney's suburban society, the sort of dress little business girls in the city wore, almost daring in its smartness.

The clothes, those astonishing red lips, the extreme model of her, belied the evident youth of that flat little figure. Something in the eyes, too.

The girl so recently Effie Watson was not a child, but a woman and a woman of the world.

And then she disengaged herself suddenly from her young husband's arms. She flew to Fred Feeney and kissed him again, on the lips.

"Pop!" she exclaimed, "I'm not laughing at *you*. Honest! I'm just laughing at myself—and life. I wouldn't ever laugh at you. I'm going to love you."

"Good Lord!" Feeney said weakly. "I—I'll have to call Clara. Clara's got to know this!"

He tasted something strange on his lips and wiped them. His fingers came away stained with red. That had come off the lips of his new daughter-in-law.

But was this adequate? Was it kind? Ray bringing home a wife. Ray's wife was entitled to their welcome and their love! No matter how astonishing it might be, the situation must be lived up to.

She was a stranger, young, alone. She came to them as she now had a right to come, expecting welcome.

Feeney took his daughter-in-law's hands suddenly and squeezed them. He stammered: "My dear—" The rest of it died in his throat. He tried again. "My dear little girl—" It was too much for him. He choked and broke out rather incoherently: "Ray's wife! Ray's wife. My boy—"

Ray's wife pressed against him, her hands clutching his arm. When Feeney choked on his own emotions her hand smote him between the shoulder blades and the hoarse voice crowed between laughter and tears: "Atta baby, pop! Some speechmaker! Hooray!"

"Clara," Feeney muttered. "Got to tell Clara—just a minute—"

"Hold on, pop," Ray interrupted. He had flushed, somewhat embarrassed, but determined to carry off the situation. "Did I tell you I quit my job, pop?"

"Did you? Yes, I think you did mention it—"

"I quit, anyhow. I wired the New York office I was married and wanted a week's honeymoon. What did those pikers wire back? They said: 'Stick to job. You'll need it now.' Can you beat that!"

"Well, well, Ray. Dear me—"

"Well, I kicked them in the face! I wired right back: 'Is that so? I'm through.' They're a cheap, fly-by-night outfit, anyhow. I never would have got anywhere with them."

"It may be for the best," Feeney said doubtfully. He was rubbing his bald spot again. A horrible premonition of what was coming had seized him.

"We got married just the same," Ray added.

"We had a hundred bucks between us. Boy, how it did fly!" Effie seconded, her lips widening in glee.

"Well, everything costs so much!" Ray exclaimed uncomfortably. "The fact is, we just had enough to pay our fare and take a Pullman drawing room from St. Louis—"

"Ray's trying to tell you that we're flat broke," Effie interrupted. "The last dollar I had I gave the village taxi man for a tip. I never did see any luck in one lonely dollar bill! You ought to have seen his eyes, pop! You could hang your hat on 'em! Now we're busted, so we came home. The prodigal son and wife. Whoops!"

Ray's new wife burst into hysterical giggles and clung recklessly to Ray's arm. Ray grinned fondly down on her, but his own eyes were slightly troubled as they turned back to his father's.

"We don't mean to trouble you—" Ray began uncertainly.

"My boy!" Feeney cried and seized his hand. "My own boy! And my own daughter! Do you think for a minute I'd let you go anywhere but here—your own home? I—I really must tell Clara. She'll be—delighted."

He staggered from the room. He tried loyally to feel happy, to be glad his son had found a wife. He could only remember one awful fact; here were two more mouths to feed, to entertain, to loan money to! Two more burdens added to the day's crushing load. But he must never let them guess. Never!

VI.

CLARA was playing a hand. She rebelled haughtily when Feeney whispered in her ear that she must come to the dining room. She played it through while her husband waited, standing first on one foot, then the other.

"There," she exclaimed at the end. "Down one. It's all your fault, Fred Feeney! A husband who breathes down his wife's neck when she's trying to finesse a queen ought to be boiled in oil."

Clara laughed at her own ill-humor and excused herself hastily. When they were in the hall she burst out: "Have you gone crazy, Fred? We can't *both* leave the party—"

"We've got to—for a minute. You come along and see—"

"If it's any more bills—"

"It isn't."

"Good Lord, don't tell me Louise—"

"Louise is all right. Come along."

Feeney tried to make his tone merry and mysterious. A sense of what the situation demanded actuated him to a ghastly at-

tempt at humorous surprise. "In you go, Clara. Look who's here!"

"Ray!" Clara exclaimed, her voice high. "Well!" But her eyes were on Ray's wife while Ray dutifully kissed her. Her eyes were hostile, contracted with fear.

"And Ray's wife!" Feeney exclaimed heartily. "Your new daughter, Clara. Effie, this is your mother!"

"No!" Clara cried, drawing back. "Fred—Ray—that's ridiculous!"

Clara's outspoken horror was sharp and ugly. Fred Feeney tried to atone for it, echoing: "Ridiculous! You're right. A child like her. Ray, you robbed a cradle—"

"Don't act like an old fool," Clara said to him, venom in her glance. Then she summoned her mechanically sweet smile and her voice grew lighter, confident, slightly humorous. "Now, my dears, what kind of a joke are you trying to put over on two trusting old parents?"

"It's not a joke," Effie said quietly.

Effie had advanced, offering her embrace when Clara was introduced. The offer had been ignored. Effie did not give ground now. She faced Clara quietly, meeting her glance.

"She's my wife, don't forget that—" Ray began angrily.

Effie gave him a sharp look and he subsided. Her smile became fixed as she turned back to her mother-in-law.

"Ray and I were married in St. Louis, Mrs. Feeney. Rather sudden, I'll admit. Sorry to jar you like this."

"*Jar* me, dear child? Oh, yes, I see! You did astonish me, just for a minute. But, my dear—"

Clara advanced on her new daughter-in-law, embraced her swiftly and carefully, kissed her on one cheek and the other with rapid, efficient kisses and held her at arm's length.

"It was sweet of you. You precious child! Ray, really I had no idea your taste was so excellent!"

"I knew what I wanted when I saw Effie," Ray muttered, his manner doubtful and rather sullen.

Effie's eyes were bright and still hostile. She was breathing with some difficulty and her wide lips opened to address Clara. But before she spoke she looked, not at Ray, but at Fred Feeney, who was beaming innocently in the background. Effie altered her intention.

"I want you to like me," she said humbly. "I'll try to make Ray a good wife and—and be a good daughter to you."

"You darling child!" said Clara. Her high voice and rapid enunciation almost made the words a curse. She might as well have said: "You damned brat!"

"Say, how about me?" Feeney exclaimed jocularly. "Going to leave me out of this?"

Effie flung herself on him. "You? I love you, old sugar pie!" She was in Feeney's arms again, and her eyes turned defiantly on Clara.

"My dear children!" Clara exclaimed. "Do you know I'm in the middle of a bridge? And the house is full of people. Some of the very best people in Cranston! Really, I— But you're tired with travel. You'll want to clean up before you meet our friends. You must have our room. Wait here. Oh, Louise! Louise!"

Louise, all smiles and giggles, burst in from the kitchen. Under Clara's efficient management bride and groom were dispatched in a minute. A hurried last embrace between Clara and Effie, Clara's last warning: "You must come right back and meet our friends!" and then Fred Feeney and his wife were alone.

"My God!" Clara said bitterly. She stood very still, her head up, eyes narrowed, holding her emotions in leash, striving to complete her plans with a clear head.

From the stairs they heard Effie's queer, hoarse voice: "Ray, don't let Louise carry that heavy bag! Be the little gent for once. It's your honeymoon, kid!"

Clara rolled her eyes toward the hall and the voice. Her own was ominous: "The fool!"

"What are you talking about?" Feeney burst out.

"Your son. The utter idiot! A girl like that!"

"What's the matter with Effie?"

Clara gave him a burning glance. Her lip curled in frantic contempt.

"*You* ask me! I know you're dumb, but if you can't see what's the matter with

her—well, there's one thing. It won't last long—"

"Why, Clara!"

"Not a chance. Anybody can see the girl is common as dirt. She didn't have to open her mouth before I knew—"

"Clara," Feeney began indignantly, "I don't want to hear anything—"

"Oh, I'm not talking about her morals. They may be all right. But the kind she is. Ugh! A common little gold digger. Obviously she snared Ray because she thinks his people have money. And I could have married him to the Brown girl, if he had listened to me."

Here Clara almost broke down. But she bit her lip and tossed her head defiantly.

"Fred, we've got to get back to that party. Now, listen. We've got to carry this thing off! They'll have to meet our guests. The news will be all over town to-morrow anyway. The thing to do is head off talk by beating everybody to it. Fred Feeney, for once in your life you've got to make good. You've got to make people believe that we're both overwhelmed with joy about Ray and his wife. Remember, joy!"

"But I am!"

"Yes, you would be! Well, come along. Play bridge and don't say a word until they come down. We'll make it a big surprise—"

"Play bridge? I can't play bridge any more. Clara, wait! I've got to tell you all that's happened to-day—"

But Clara would not wait or listen. "You come along," she bade. "You're going to play bridge. And you're going to like it!"

VII.

Fred Feeney didn't have to play bridge very long. Effie and Ray were not tardy in returning and presenting themselves at the party.

Clara, that efficient stage manager, did it very well. She rose as the newlyweds entered and went to them. With her arm about Effie's waist, Clara raised her clear, carrying voice slightly, and instantly had the attention of her guests.

"Dear people," said Clara, "I had the shock of my life a few minutes ago. I find that I have a new daughter. Boys will grow up and insist on giving away their mothers' real ages! If my son Ray hadn't brought me something as sweet as Effie, I never could have forgiven him. As it is I think I can love him for it."

Thus Clara. She was biting her lips when she finished. This was hurting Clara a lot, but she was game. Effie was a fact and must be accepted with the best face possible.

She led her new daughter at once to the Enoch Browns and presented her. Then she held her breath. Effie was going to speak for herself and everybody was staring and listening.

The girl looked well enough, but that voice, that vocabulary! Clara shuddered.

"So glad to know you." Effie smiled and offered her hand. The smile was just right. The gesture was just right. Effie's voice was the same queer, hoarse little voice, but judging by her intonation one would think she was fresh from boarding school.

"Ray has spoken several times of your lovely home," said Effie simply. "I'm just dying to see it."

"My dear, you must!" Mrs. Enoch Brown beamed.

"Rather!" said the great Enoch Brown and shot his hand out at Ray with a growl. "You always could pick 'em, Ray!"

Clara Feeney was having a hard time controlling her breathing. Was this Effie? A few minutes before the girl had been of the gutter guttery, or she was no judge of girls. And now. Why, she acted just like any flapper in Cranston.

Lots of girls had those hoarse, queer voices. Rather a vogue, just now. And even if she did make a few slips into slang, what of it? Good gracious, the way girls talked nowadays, Effie's only danger was that she might use good English and seem queer!

Suddenly Clara felt buoyant and younger, younger by a hundred years, as she led Effie on to other introductions. The Enoch Browns accepted her! Effie would go over.

Clara knew how to catch her luck on the

upward curve. This was the moment for refreshments. She passed the word to Louise. As a bridge the party had not amounted to much, but as an impromptu reception to a new daughter-in-law who might not be such a social error as she had at first supposed, this party might achieve undreamed-of success!

Clara found time even to smile on her husband. Fred Feeney, perceiving something personal and heartening in that smile was grateful almost to the point of tears.

He burst into energetic hospitality and performed prodigies of service with trays of sandwiches, coffee, pastries, and what not. He bowed gallantly above the ladies, uttered compliments and made small jokes. Yes, the party was picking up.

There was a group about Effie. Enoch Brown himself sat on her right after boldly kidnaping a tray from Feeney and presenting it in person. Other husbands pressed about her. Clara, as a mother-in-law, shared the attention. In the background Fred Feeney beamed.

Mrs. Enoch Brown was saying, "A Watson? My dear, not one of the Kansas City Watsons?"

"I was born in Kay-See. Lived there most of my life," said Effie's hoarse little voice. "I guess I must be one of the Kansas City Watsons. What do you think—"

"My dear, I've met some of the Watsons. In Florence, you remember, Enoch?"

"Rather!" Enoch Brown said heartily. "And I shan't forget John Watson's place in Rockhill Park, either. If you're one of John Watson's daughters, Mrs. Feeney—"

"I'm Jerry Watson's daughter," Effie said with a queer little laugh. "One of the stockyard Watsons—"

"Really, my dear?" Mrs. Brown looked puzzled, but impressed. Effie glanced quietly at her beaming mother-in-law before she went on. "Father was connected with the stockyard for years. Until a steer kicked him—"

"A steer, dear!" Clara's voice trembled.

"Mother always told me it was a steer," Effie answered gravely. "I never got the low-down for myself. I was too young to know, then. But I remember that was when the old man quit working permanently. He always said his back was injured. The claim agent allowed us a hundred and fifty dollars, but our lawyer grabbed half of that."

A silence had settled on Effie's hearers. Clara Feeney was turning a sickly hue under her rouge. Effie went on sweetly, unperturbed:

"That was the year I went to work in the five-and-ten. We all had to do something to chip in for the rent of the flat. Mom, my mother, worked nights in an office building, scrubbing floors."

"Say! Bully for you," said Enoch Brown. Several men murmured applause.

Mrs. Brown was saying hastily and clearly: "Well, that can't be the Watsons we met, Enoch. Not the Watsons of Rockhill Park!"

"But I've seen Rockhill Park," Effie answered brightly. "I used to have a beau who took me there—on Sundays. He drove a truck for Swifts."

"Oh, no, dear!" Clara gasped.

"Yes, it was Swifts, darling! I rode with him sometimes and I know."

Then Clara laughed. She laughed so lightly and naturally that she broke a spell of embarrassment that was gripping them all.

"Effie, you're terrible!" Clara cried. "Ray, you'll have to spank this child tonight. Or wash out her mouth with soap. I never heard such tall stories in my life!" It was a joke, then! The conservative élite of Cranston drew a long breath and laughed with Clara. What would this new generation think of next? They had no reverence, none at all! But, after all, it was rather refreshing, wasn't it?

Effie joined in the laugh, thus confirming it. She rose as she laughed and moved away, and the group dissolved itself and formed again into new groups.

Effie went straight to Fred Feeney and linked her small hand in his, pressing close against him. She said in low tones: "It's true, pop, every word of it. I'm a stockyard Watson."

"As if I gave a damn," Feeney whispered back, pressing her hand. "You're my daughter—"

"You sweet old thing!"

"Of course, now, Clara—" Feeney began.

"I won't give it away, if it hurts her, dear. But I don't see why? What's the use of lying about a thing like that? As if it mattered!"

"As if it did!" Feeney echoed, and found his arm about her slender shoulder. He was squeezing her. "Lord," he sighed, "that boy Ray has more luck! Getting you!"

Effie sighed. "Gosh, I don't know! I hope you're right, pop. Listen, darling, do you see an awful lot of this mob of four-flushers out here in Cranston?"

"I'm afraid so, Effie! They're not really such a bad lot, just sort of—of—"

"Stuffy!" Effie grinned her wide, mischievous grin. "Just stuffy. And so damn smug! But I'll try to stand 'em. I'll play the game, pop. And when they get too much for us we'll sneak off to New York together and throw a real party, huh?"

Feeney responded with another hug. But his conscience reproved him. There was something almost immoral about this! Making pacts with his son's wife to escape together from Clara and her friends!

Was that right? Was it loyal to Clara? And how was that little devil who hadn't been in the house two hours, knew all about the way he felt in the depths of his inmost soul? He hadn't breathed a hint of it.

But Ray had edged up to him. "Pop," he was saying, "I hate to come back here busted—"

"Well, it's your home, son—"

"Yeah. I know. Thanks. Say, I was wondering if to-morrow you could slip me another hundred? I thought, being married and all, I'd better look around a little and find a good opening. And I've got to have a little capital to work on. I hate to ask you—"

A hundred! Feeney's round face paled. The terror he had put aside in the excitement of Effie's début flowed over him in icy waves.

His job, the mortgage, the bills, Ray and Effie to take care of! Good Lord, and here he stood in the midst of a fool party of Clara's, a party that was going to make itself memorable in a new flood of bills. And every electric light in the house turned on and doing its bit toward spending his pennies!

Ray was nudging him, whispering: "Talk to you in the morning. Here comes Mrs. Brown."

Mrs. Enoch Brown, plump and assured, came close to Fred Feeney and laid her hand on his arm in the most friendly manner. Her thin, firm lips widened in a cordial smile, and her bright eyes sparkled coquettishly. "Now, Mr. Feeney, don't you think Clara has a wonderful head for business?"

"For business?" Feeney repeated, puzzled and anxious.

"I'll bet you were jealous of her, now weren't you? When she told you about the absolutely fiendish, cold-hearted way she beat me down and drove a bargain, I'll bet you said deep in your heart—"

"I guess I don't quite understand," Feeney protested, rubbing his head. "You were saying that Clara—"

Clara herself had spied the two, and Clara approached, her clear voice raised in a cry half humorous, half reproachful: "My dear! You haven't told him!"

"Haven't you?" Mrs. Brown exclaimed. "Oh, my dear. I'm so sorry I blundered!"

"But what are you telling me?" Feeney exclaimed. "I can't make out anything—"

"Never mind. Not just now, dear," Clara said firmly.

She compressed her lips and slightly shook her head at Mrs. Enoch Brown. Mrs. Brown laughed. "Of course, Clara! Husbands do have to be prepared for these little shocks."

"What shock?" Feeney insisted.

Mrs. Brown shook her head, all radiant mischief. "Never mind, Mr. Inquisitive! I'll bet you something pretty you'll be proud of your Clara when you do hear about it!"

"Clara!" Feeney gasped. "Is it about spending money?"

"Fred, don't be ridiculous—"

"Now, hold on, Clara, if it is about spending money, if you spent any more money—"

"Not now, Fred. Not here." A sharp, quick aside: "Don't make a scene. Don't be a *fool.*"

But something had exploded in Fred Feeney's soul. This was about spending money, and Clara had spent it, or was about to. And he had stood enough for one day—enough and more!

"Tell me what you're talking about," he said jerkily, his hand clutching Clara's arm, his round face red.

The two women saw that this was serious. Together they surrounded him and maneuvered him toward a quiet corner, allies in the perpetual struggle to maintain appearances. Fred Feeney was mad, and getting madder, and a party was no place for a painful scene.

"Fred, be yourself!" Clara muttered darkly.

"Tell me what you did!"

"Really, Mr. Feeney!" said Mrs. Enoch Brown reprovingly, as one might address a boy.

"Then I'll have to ask you to explain, Mrs. Brown."

A quick look between the two women. Mrs. Brown laughed lightly. Her voice and manner were casual.

"It's really nothing at all. Clara picked up rather a wonderful bargain. That little sedan car I've been driving around the village these last two years—"

"You bought an automobile!" Feeney stared wildly at his wife.

"Subject to your approval, of course. Clara wouldn't think of doing it without that," Mrs. Brown murmured hastily. "You see I was about to turn the car in on a trade for a new one. And I wondered why Clara, who *needs* a car to run errands—"

"You bought an automobile!" Feeney exclaimed, his voice rising in tones of horror.

"Certainly I did, Fred." Clara's voice was bitter calm. "It's nothing to shout about—"

"A mere matter of five hundred dollars," Mrs. Brown was saying. "It's practically giving the car away. But I do so want Clara to have it—"

"No!" Feeney cried.

"Fred!" Clara clutched his arm. "For Heaven's sake shut up! Don't act the fool—"

"No!" Feeney exclaimed again. His horrified negative attracted every glance in the room.

"Why, of course, that settles it then," Mrs. Enoch Brown urged pacifically. "There's no harm done, just a little silly talk between your wife and her best friend! Don't worry, Mr. Feeney—"

"Worry!" Feeney fairly shouted it. "Worry!" he repeated, and broke into a bitter laugh.

There was no maneuvering him, no talking him down! The two women tried their best, but Fred Feeney was started, and they could not dam the flood.

His face was red as fire. He was making jerky, absurd gestures with both hands, and his voice rang out suddenly upon a horrified audience.

"Worry? That's good! Worry! Not that I blame you, Mrs. Brown. Not a bit of it. When a man's wife runs around with people like you, buying a house he can't afford in order to live next door to you, going to parties and clubs with you, and spending her husband's money as if he was made of it, why then you've got every reason to think that man is made of money like you are. Well, he isn't.

"I'm telling you, now. I'm not made of money. I haven't got any money. Never had any money, except the salary I earned as a clerk for the Griscom-Hale-Bidwell Company. A clerk, mind you. Just a glorified clerk. On a clerk's salary. If Clara ever told you I was anything else, Clara told what wasn't so.

"I'm just a plain detail man, a clerk and nothing else. And I never earned as much as a hundred dollars in one week in all my life. I got this house. Four-flush! It's got a second mortgage on it and I can't pay it. I can't even pay my coal bill on time. I can hardly pay my wife's clothes cleaning bills.

"And now I can't pay anything any more, because I'm a clerk out of a job. I got fired to-day. Lost my job. I'm broke. Busted. Haven't got fifty dollars in the bank. All I have got is bills, bills, bills!

And a wife that's always running up more bills. And a son that borrows money from me. Well, I don't care who knows it. I'm broke!"

VIII.

THE front door had closed for the last time that night. The last guest was gone. Fred Feeney's "sudden illness"—they spoke of it as that, ended the bridge reception definitely.

Mr. Feeney had been taken to his room by Louise and Ray. After his unexpected outburst that had struck the assembled guests like a bombshell, the harassed little man had been like a lamb. Complete silence overcame him.

He stood quite still, and except that he trembled excessively, he gave no sign of the madness that had smitten him. Ray had been one of the first at his side, and obedient to Clara's whispered direction, led his father out of the room with Louise a willing helper.

The guests took their departure speedily, with murmured solicitations about Mr. Feeney's health, fond kisses for the long-suffering wife of the invalid and a general display of that forgiving, neighborly tact that is to be expected on such occasions.

Clara bore her martyrdom like an early Christian heroine. She accepted their condolences, explained how Mr. Feeney had never spared himself in his devotion to his business, declared her intention of making him take a complete holiday, even talked of a vacation in Bermuda. But the news was out. And Clara knew it was out.

Every guest who left would help to spread the gossip that the Feeneys had lived beyond their small means, had tried to break into Cranston's best circles, and now were bankrupt by their efforts. Clara had no hope, but she carried on according to the best tradition like a real sportsman.

Clara walked into the living room. The tables and chairs stood about in festive arrangement. There were plates with scraps of food adhering, set here and there, ash trays, remains of cigarettes and cigars, trays of candy and salted nuts, glasses. All the still life in the room was having a party by itself, now the guests were gone.

Clara stood in the middle of the floor, looking about her slowly. Her lower lip began to tremble.

Effie had been sitting beside her young husband on the chaise longue, talking earnestly in whispers. Now the bride ran to her mother-in-law and pressed against her, her arm about her shoulders.

"Don't worry, darling," she whispered hoarsely. "It's going to be all right!"

If Clara was aware of the embrace and the consolation she showed no sign. Her head tipped back as her eyes swept the room again.

"It would have to happen to-night!" she murmured bitterly. "To-night, of all nights!"

"Don't feel so ashy, dear! It isn't as if it was a real sickness. He's just tired out."

"He?"

"Mr. Feeney, I mean. All he needs is rest and a little attention—"

"Oh," said Clara. Then, bitterly: "Yes, I dare say that's all *he* needs. Now maybe you can suggest what I need?"

"Oh, no!" Effie exclaimed, drawing away from her in horror. "You don't mean that, dear! It's been awfully hard, I know, but we've got to think of him. He needs us so badly, now—"

Effie clutched Clara's arm sharply, drawing her attention to the door. "He's coming back. Look!"

The door opened. Fred Feeney came in slowly. There was no spring in his step; his knees felt queer. He had taken off coat, vest, collar and shoes, and wore a flapping bathrobe. That much Louise and Ray accomplished when they persuaded him to lie down and rest.

But Feeney didn't want to lie there and rest. He wanted Clara. He wanted to explain things. He wanted to tell Clara that he was sorry he had broken up her party, and then show her how harassed he had been so that she would understand and forgive him.

Well, here was Clara, standing in the middle of the room and looking at him strangely. She let him approach without a word. Effie started toward him, then restrained herself.

That was Clara's place. But Clara was not claiming that right just now. Effie watched them both, her hands at her sides, fists clenched nervously.

Ray, from the chaise longue, stared at them all, somewhat abashed and somewhat sulky. In Ray's opinion this wasn't much of a home-coming for a prodigal son and his bride.

Feeney stood before Clara uncertainly.

"I guess I must have been taken sick," he said with an anxious smile. "I'm awfully sorry, Clara."

"Oh, don't apologize," Clara said with bitter vagueness. "It's perfectly all right with me—of course!" She looked around him and through him. "A public humiliation is nothing! Nothing at all!" she added bitterly.

"I lost my job, Clara. It's pretty near driven me crazy, worrying about that—"

"So, naturally, you felt you must tell the Enoch Browns, and all the rest of Cranston!"

"I wanted to tell you! You wouldn't let me. And I tried to warn you about the bills, again and again. This house is mortgaged for all I can possibly carry, without running up any other expenses. I told you that—"

"You did. I haven't forgotten it!"

"Then, don't you see, dear—"

"I'll tell you what I see," Clara said suddenly. "I see that I married a man without the spunk to put himself over. And most of my life I've been fighting to make a success of him, in spite of himself. I tried to make something out of you, Fred Feeney. I tried to make you a success. I found out the right people and made friends of them. I made you move into this house where we could entertain them properly.

"I tried my best to make you go out and get acquainted with men who could do something to help you along. And what have you done? Spent all your spare time down cellar playing with toy boats. Making toy sailboats! Wasting your opportunities! Acting like a sixteen-year-old boy, sulking in the basement when your wife was scheming and planning to get you a chance of advancement in your business.

"You've had the whole neighborhood talking about you and your silly little boats. And laughing at me for trying to make something of you. And as if that wasn't enough, on top of it all, you break out like a madman and humiliate us both in front of our guests."

"Oh!" Effie cried. "Oh—" She hurried to Ray and threw herself on the chaise longue beside him. She whispered chokingly: "Hang onto me tight, kid! Don't let me go! It's not my fight, but I can't stay out of it if you don't help. Ray, darling, don't let me get started!"

Feeney was slow in answering. He stood before Clara, rubbing his bald spot thoughtfully, a drooping and unheroic figure in the overlarge bathrobe. He said finally: "I guess I'm what I am. Too old to change, Clara. I've worked at a stupid job like a dog, and played with my little boats. A failure, and kind of a ridiculous one, I guess. If you're sorry you married me, I don't blame you—"

"I am," Clara answered, her lips compressed.

Her husband shrugged wearily and turned away. He went slowly toward the door.

Effie sprang from her seat and started toward him. Just then Feeney turned back. His face had gone scarlet. He shouted suddenly, loud enough for the neighbors to hear, if they were listening, "Be sorry, then! I don't give a damn. I make the money you spend. If I don't make enough to suit you, you can—you can—"

He paused, uncertain.

Effie burst out, "Hooray, pop! Say it. Go on, say it. I don't give a whoop whose fight it is, I'm in it on your side."

"I'm through," Feeney said suddenly. "You can all go to the devil."

He meant to turn his back on them, but something happened to his weak knees. Instead he tottered and collapsed in the thin, eager arms of his daughter-in-law.

Effie staggered, but clung to him.

"Ray, a chair," she gasped. "He's gone."

They got him seated. Feeney's face had turned a sickly yellow.

"Water," Effie directed, suddenly calm. "That pitcher on the table, Ray."

Her fingers were busy loosening his clothing.

Clara screamed. Her own face was white as she sprang toward them. It was Effie who waved her back, and Effie's blue eyes were blazing.

"Not you," Effie said bitterly. "You've done plenty. He's sick, do you want to kill him? Now, get out of here and telephone a doctor. That's about all you can do to be useful."

IX.

CLARA was in the kitchen, bossing Louise. Louise was getting one lunch for Clara, Effie and Miss Brown, the trained nurse and, at the same time, making ready a special tray with broth for Mr. Feeney.

Clara was wandering about the room, her critical eye examining everything. She would say, from the butler's pantry: "Louise, when did you polish these dessert spoons last?" Presently it would be, "Louise, you'll have to do this woodwork over. Look here, soot on the wainscot over the door!" And again: "Louise, I told you always to put a fresh paper in the garbage pail before you use it. And those shelf papers in the pantry don't look any too fresh, either."

Louise bore with all this. There were other days when she went into a deep silence that ignored all remarks. Sometimes she muttered to herself and tossed her head so violently that she scared Clara out of the kitchen. To-day she merely repeated, "Yes, Mrs. Feeney," and "Sure, Mrs. Feeney, I'll do that!"

Louise knew Mrs. Feeney was having a tough time of it, and she was sorry for her. That Dr. Parker had told Mrs. Feeney to keep away from her own husband. And he had told the nurse, Miss Brown, to see that she didn't come in the room.

Dr. Parker had said that Mrs. Feeney excited the invalid too much for his own good. Mrs. Ray could see Mr. Feeney, but not Mr. Feeney's own wife. Well, that was pretty rough on Mrs. Feeney, and Louise tried to show her sympathy by not paying any attention to Mrs. Feeney's bossy ways for once.

Clara really looked ghastly. She deserved some sympathy. She hadn't slept all night. Her indignation and anger had vanished, swallowed up by fright. She knew that Fred was really ill. She had tossed through the long hours on her lonely bed in the front room, her conscience busy with the bills she had run up, the schemes she had engineered for their social advancement.

But she had done it all for Fred, she protested to herself over and over again. It wasn't mere vanity. Well, not all of it, anyway! She wanted to see Fred get on in the world, and she had tried to make the sort of connections in a social way that would lead to his advancement. If Fred had played the game like other men—

Then, unaccountably, she got to thinking of the days when she was Clara Winthrop. She had beaus enough then! Some of them men who had amassed fortunes and even fame.

She didn't have to marry Fred Feeney, goodness knew! There had been something nice about Fred, though. Something finer than the other boys.

Was it only because he looked so chubby and absurdly young and in need of her—or that truly she admired some intangible fine temper in the metal of his character, something that made her feel that here was a more worthy lover, a more steadfast and devoted husband, a more desirable father to her children? She gave up other chances for Fred Feeney's love, and that had been romance.

She cried in the gray dawn, mostly because she was sorry for herself, and partly because she was sorry for something that had been forgotten for years. Then she fell into uneasy sleep at last, and when she waked and dressed the house was strangely reorganized because of the sick man.

Ray had vanished. Effie was in consultation with Dr. Parker in the sick room, and only Louise remained to give her coffee and breakfast. Clara had nothing to do but wait for word when those others remembered to tell her? Wait—and boss Louise.

The closing of the front door startled Clara from her self-appointed censorship. Could that be Dr. Parker leaving? He had not even asked for her!

Well, was she Fred Feeney's wife, or wasn't she? Clara went through the intervening rooms with angry impatience. In the hall she met her new daughter-in-law.

Effie looked smaller than ever in a plain blue morning dress. Her pipe-stem arms and legs made you think of a little girl. She was smiling, her wide mouth stretched wider. When she saw Clara she exclaimed cheerily:

"Oh, hello, darling! We all thought you were asleep yet. The doctor just left—"

"Oh?" Clara said icily.

"Everything's jake," Effie beamed. "He hasn't got brain fever, after all. Just a touch. Dr. Parker says he'll be around in a day or so, but of course he'll have to get absolute quiet and rest. He's got to have a vacation—"

"Oh?" said Clara again. "So glad to hear the news."

She was glad, relieved beyond words to express it, but she was bitterly humiliated to learn it from Effie, and she couldn't keep her bitterness out of her manner.

Effie flushed and hesitated. She looked younger than ever as she explained gravely, looking into Clara's face: "The doctor said one thing, dear. He doesn't want you to see him—just yet. That excites him so."

"Oh, certainly," Clara said.

"I'm sorry I didn't know you were down. I'd much rather he'd told you himself. But thinking you were sleeping—and knowing what a hard night we all had, I thought—"

"I'm sure you used your best judgment," Clara said icily. "Don't mind me in the least. After all, I'm only his wife. And you—"

She would have turned away, but Effie planted herself in front of her, blocking her steps. "Look here, you don't like me a damn bit, do you?"

"Really, need you be vulgar about it? Of course, I know you business girls have gone in for everything the men used to have. Everything. Sometimes I envy you, but the swearing—"

"Clara," Effie said, using her name for the first time. "I guess you and I had better have a little talk. Now. Come in here where Louise won't hear."

Effie led the way into the little library and closed the doors. Clara sat down and Effie curled herself in a big wing chair, looking more like a little girl than ever.

Her big eyes never left Clara's face as she talked. Her gaze was direct, almost disconcerting. Before she began she took a cigarette from her pocket case and lighted it thoughtfully. Clara, who did not smoke because it disagreed with her, watched with a disapproving sniff.

"Maybe you think it's a joke for a girl to get married and have a man drag her home among a lot of strangers," Effie began suddenly. "A girl whose folks are dead. That's been knocking around on her own for the last seven years. Maybe you think that's funny."

Clara raised her eyebrows. "I didn't urge the match, dear child. Ray is precious—but rather trying. Men are."

"I'm not kicking about Ray. He's a good kid. Badly spoiled, of course, but that's not all his fault—"

"Really?"

"No. Anyhow, I love him. And he's crazy about me. Maybe it 'll turn out all right. And if it doesn't, why, we can part good friends."

In spite of herself, Clara gasped.

"I think you're a pretty lucky girl!" she declared. "Really, my child, it isn't every girl in your circumstances that can get a husband of good family like Ray—"

"Exactly," Effie interrupted firmly. "Good family. There's the poison in the peach! The first time Ray told me about his folks and his lovely suburban home, I had a hunch. Just like a warning! But I'm such a damn fool when I fall in love! I took him anyhow—good family and all."

"Well, really!" Clara gasped. She was too indignant to find a better retort.

"Yes, really. And let me tell you, not many girls in my circumstances would have done it, even for Ray. Get me right, Clara. A girl in my circumstances doesn't have to marry. Not for any of the reasons a girl in your circumstances gets married. A girl

in my circumstances is her own boss, and don't you forget it. If she doesn't like one home, she can move into another. If she doesn't like her job, there's always another and a better one. She comes and goes as she likes, makes the friends she likes, does just about as she likes.

"But there's one place where we're just like the rest of you fool women, we will get into a serious affair with some slick young sheik, and the first thing we know we've promised to marry him. Well, I did it! I won't kick about it any more. Only I want you to know that you and your lovely suburban home, and your smug, fathead suburban society aren't any treat to a girl in my circumstances—and don't you ever forget it!"

Effie leaned forward and shook her cigarette under Clara's nose. Her round cheeks were pink with indignation. Her blue eyes snapped spitefully.

Clara hadn't any words left. She could only gasp.

"Well, that's off my chest," Effie sighed, and her good-humored smile returned suddenly, impishly. "I took Ray, and I'm going to do the best I can with him. And I inherited you along with him. Ordinarily I'd have been out of your house hours ago. I would have made a nice, friendly little overnight stop. Said how-do-do and beat it, trying always to be the little lady. We wouldn't have had to see each other again more than once a year, say every time a new kid came along or we christened one of the older ones.

"But two things happened, two things I didn't count on. I fell for pop the minute I saw him. I love him, Clara. I think he's about the sweetest, most pathetic, real he-man I've met in all my life. If he wasn't yours, I'd ditch Ray and make him marry me! And the other thing was—well, last night. Now I've got to stick around here until I get you all out of your troubles—"

"Must you, indeed?" Clara began haughtily. Her voice trembled. Never in her life had she listened to such amazing impudence.

"I must, indeed," Effie said gravely. "Because of your husband. He needs a friend, God knows! And what I started to say is, so long as we've got to be together for awhile, why not each of us try to rub along together? I don't expect we'll ever be friends, but—well, you know. We could be ordinarily decent and not be in each other's hair all the time. Huh?"

Clara ignored this last. "And just why did it occur to you that we were so badly in need of help?" she said with poisoned sweetness. "And just how did you suppose you were going to help the Fred Feeneys from going to the poorhouse? Why, my dear girl, of all the outrageous—"

"Wait!" Effie exclaimed. "One at a time. How do I know you need help? Because I had to listen to the whole pitiful story from the one member of this family who knows it. Last night. Pop told me. After the doctor got him fixed up. And let me tell you, that little man has been through hell these last two years!

"You move him into this house and saddle him with a second mortgage that would make the United States Steel Company thoughtful, and on top of that you begin running up bills right and left, trying to live up to the neighbors! I wouldn't go through what he stood for, not for any person alive. I couldn't love anybody that much—"

"Why, what utter nonsense!" Clara laughed airily. "My poor child, taking the ravings of a sick man to heart like that—"

"Ravings?" Effie queried sweetly. "I'd give a lot if they were. But they're not. I checked up everything last night, second mortgage, interest payments, life insurance, installments on furniture, household bills, clothes bills, everything—down to the last cent in your bank balance—"

"That's outrageous! You—you come in here a stranger, a guest—and you dare to—"

"Pop's own orders and the doctor's advice," Effie answered. "If you could see how it cheered him and quieted him to have somebody with business training take charge of his affairs! The poor, old, muddling lamb! What a mess things were in, to be sure—"

"Well, I never!" Clara rolled her eyes to heaven.

"No, you never did. Anybody could see that Fred Feeney hadn't had any help trying to figure out that mess. You attended to the spending end, and left the addition and subtraction to him. Mostly subtraction."

Effie's hoarse voice turned harder.

"Clara, you're broke. I'm not fooling you. Your husband has lost his job. He hasn't any income or any bank balance. The bills you ran up would make a man with twice his salary feel sick. And that second mortgage is due next week. If you don't pay it, you'll be put out in the street. If you think I'm fooling about that, I'll bring everything down here and prove it."

For the moment Clara looked stunned. She knew that her daughter-in-law was telling the truth. Then she remembered a plan of her own, and her dislike of the girl made ammunition out of it.

"Oh, my dear, was it the mortgage that bothered you? I'll attend to that. I meant to do it yesterday, but the party—"

"Oh!" Effie exclaimed, brightening. "I didn't know you had an income of your own. How stupid—"

Clara laughed indulgently.

"Not exactly that, dear girl. But I think I know the right people. Perhaps I have spent money generously, but I've had my plans. It was investment. You see, dear child, Mr. Enoch Brown happens to be president of the company that financed the building. I'll go right down to his office and talk with him. We can fix that all right."

Effie beamed. "Why, Clara, that's splendid! That would take care of the biggest burden, anyway."

"Don't you worry your head any more," Clara laughed her clear, patronizing little laugh, indulging the queer child's humor. "You see, dear, it really isn't going to be as necessary as you thought, your staying with us, is it?"

"I'll make you a promise," Effie said, rising. "You get that mortgage attended to and enough cash to carry on for a few weeks, and I'll be out of here before to-night." Then she looked thoughtful as she added reluctantly: "Unless the doctor thinks I must stay. But I'm sure pop will be all right by to-night. I'll go, Clara, and gladly."

"I'll attend to that mortgage," Clara promised briskly. "Just leave everything to me."

X.

It was half past four o'clock that afternoon when Clara returned to the neat brick suburban house of Georgian architecture. Clara was dressed in the mode. She had been over to the city to call upon Enoch Brown, and she realized the importance of looking her best. She came up the walk at a brisk swing and used her latchkey.

The phonograph was going. She heard it the minute she got the front door open. Strange! Yes, it was the phonograph, and accompanying it was a rhythmic clapping of hands. Then a man's laugh. Who in the world? It sounded like Dr. Parker!

Clara looked into the living room, shocked and curious. The phonograph was blaring jazz, and in the middle of the rug was her own daughter-in-law, a wild, ragamuffin figure, bending, clapping her hands, dancing stiff legged and absurdly—but rather well, too.

Her short yellow hair flew in a cloud. Her round face was pink and earnest. Her short skirts flew disgracefully. It was—yes, that was that new dance, the black bottom! Clara had seen it recently.

And, shades of decorum! What an audience! Fred Feeney himself, in a bathrobe, pillowed in a big chair and beaming like a small boy. He looked pale, shrunken somehow, and pitifully weak, but his eyes shone and he grinned like a fool.

And next him, not sitting sedately as a doctor should, but half squatted down, clapping his hands in time to the music, Dr. Parker. Behind Fred Feeney's chair the nurse, Miss Brown, her dignity forgotten, and in the background Louise, all eyes and wide, wild Irish grins. They had all gone mad together!

Effie paused, shaking the mop of yellow hair out of her eyes. Her hoarse voice crowed: "Whoops! The cigarettes must be getting me, doc! This takes my breath—"

"More, more!" Dr. Parker cried. "Shake 'em up, Mrs. Feeney!"

"Encore, encore, Effie!" Feeney whispered urgently.

"Look, this is the real tough going," Effie announced. "That other strut is just apple sauce, but this—" She caught the rhythm. Her slender body bent, lower and lower, her knees sagging, her head back until the yellow hair brushed the rug. Her hands beat time against the floor, her slim body beat time. Their hands were clapping out the beat, and even Feeney hitched his shoulders jerkily and grinned like mad.

Well, of all things! This was just plain vulgar! Clara closed the door, giving it a spiteful little slam. Opened it again on this announcement of her presence, and walked in.

For a moment Clara just stood near the door, looking them all over coolly, smiling with slight scorn for the antics of an absurd child. Dr. Parker straightened himself abruptly. Louise turned red and stood bolt upright, at attention. The nurse assumed a deeper interest in her patient from whose face the grin vanished abruptly.

Effie sprang erect, shook back her hair and remarked cheerily: "Bless you for coming, darling! They were running me ragged. I'm all out of breath and I know I ripped my dress some place. I heard it give!"

Clara ignored her. "Louise," she remarked. "Don't you think you'd better be looking after dinner?"

"Clara!" Feeney exclaimed, looking at her hungrily. Clara crossed the room and planted a cool kiss on his brow.

"I think you've had enough for one day," Dr. Parker was saying. "You're stepping out pretty fast for a sick man, Fred. Get him upstairs, Miss Brown."

The doctor drew Clara to one side. "He's doing splendidly. You're both very fortunate. He's taken a decided turn to the right—"

"I should imagine he has!" Clara exclaimed, faint irony in her tone.

"I tell you that girl does him a lot of good," the doctor said, his glance on Effie who was standing before a mirror, mending the disarray of her hair. "She's as good as vaudeville and vaudeville is what he needs just now. He needs to laugh and be kidded along. You're pretty lucky to get a girl like that in the family, Mrs. Feeney!"

"Aren't we?" Clara echoed. "Do you blame us for loving the child? Of course, she does things—things that—well, might seem a little unusual. But you know this new generation, doctor! And she's so natural! So vivid!" Thus said Clara sweetly, enthusiastically, and hating Effie with every word.

"I've got to run," Dr. Parker fussed. "I'm twenty minutes late to an appointment, but it was worth it, seeing her dance! Keep him quiet, Mrs. Feeney, and—eh, just don't go near him for another day. Let him see his daughter-in-law and you be patient. It's the biggest kindness we can do him."

Clara closed the front door after the doctor and came back to the living room, her look suddenly keen and a little haggard.

"Did Mr. Brown telephone?"

"No, dear." Effie faced her, curiosity in her eyes. "You saw him? It's all right about the mortgage?"

"Of course, dear child!" The scornful smile faded again into that haggard anxiety. "You're sure he didn't telephone?"

"Louise didn't say anything about a call. And we've all been together here this last hour—"

"Of course, with this racket going on there's no telling," Clara murmured indignantly. She walked to the phonograph and stopped its song. "None of you could have heard a telephone bell with that thing blatting. And all the other excitement."

"Sorry," Effie said abruptly. She added after a moment: "Well, since it's all right about the mortgage, I'll pack my bag. But I'll have to wait for Ray—"

"Where in Heaven's name is Ray? I haven't seen him all day—"

"Ray left the house early. Along about seven o'clock." Effie added mysteriously: "I threw him out on his neck. It 'll do Ray a lot of good—"

Clara was not listening. "I can't understand about Enoch Brown," she was saying. "He told me—"

The telephone rang. Clara hastened to it, answered and made her voice suddenly cordial. "Oh, yes, Mr. Brown? Yes—what?"

The conversation did not last long. Clara mostly listened. It ended in her saying: "I see. Oh, quite all right, I'm sure. Yes—yes, doing splendidly, thank you. Good-by."

She disconnected the instrument and turned on Effie. A sudden helplessness had come over her. She moved awkwardly, bumped into a chair, felt along its back with her hands and hesitated.

Clara pressed a hand to her cheek suddenly and drew a long, shuddering breath that was almost a sob.

Effie exclaimed: "Clara! Oh, Clara, what—"

"The mortgage," Clara turned her eyes away, refusing to meet Effie's. "The company won't renew it."

"But, Clara! I thought—"

"It had to come up before the board. They were meeting this afternoon. Mr. Brown said—oh, he was so sure! He couldn't do it himself. That's what he says, anyway. He said the board settles all those questions. The coward! I can see through him. He didn't dare refuse me to my face. He had to hide behind this board. If that isn't like a man—"

"Oh, I don't know!" Effie exclaimed. "Just being president of one of those companies doesn't mean Brown can spend their money to suit himself. That's rather the usual routine with those questions— Oh, Clara, I'm sorry, dear—"

Clara waved her aside vaguely. She walked slowly to a window and stood looking out on the newly made lawn with its fuzzy, tender first grass. Her breath caught in her throat and she sobbed suddenly: "I was going to have petunias this year. Fred was going to plant them!"

Effie ran to her and wound her arms about her.

"Don't. Don't, darling! We'll have petunias yet. I give you my word we will, if I have to stick 'em in the ground myself—"

Clara was staring down into Effie's serious, round face. Clara's eyes were dark with tragedy. "Effie," she said slowly, "I've been a fool."

Ray came home an hour later and found the two women close together on the chaise longue. Their eyes looked queer and each of them clutched a small, moist wad of handkerchief. But Effie was grinning and Clara looked up with a faint smile that had something more of cordial welcome than her smiles had offered her son for years.

Ray would have kissed his wife, but she rose and backed away from him, hand upraised between them. "No, you don't. How about it, first?"

"Well, I got one. But, my Lord, Effie, you won't insist that I stick to it—"

"What doing?"

Ray turned red. "Listen, Effie, I had a hell of a time. A man can't go out and step right into a bank presidency, or be director in a moving picture company, you know! But I remembered what you said about getting a salary jog. Cash money every Saturday night, no matter how much it was—"

"It's a good thing you did, kid!"

"Well, I did! And I got one, but, Lord—honest, I hate to tell it—"

"What kind of a job is it?"

"Driving a wagon," Ray muttered, his eyes on the carpet.

"Ray! Fine! Like my old sweetie, that drove for Swifts? Honest, a regular truck?"

"Truck! Who said truck? Heck, it takes talent to drive a truck. This is a horse, Effie. Plain, bony old skate. And, Effie, it's a cheese wagon!"

"Whoops!" Effie cried and sprang on him, winding her arms about his neck, kissing him hilariously. "Ray, you old sugar pie! Bully for you, Ray! I'm proud of you!"

Ray began to grin faintly. "It's a delicatessen route, Effie. If I'd had a few days to look around, of course—well, it was getting late and I got desperate. You said I couldn't come back without a job, so I grabbed this. And I start to-morrow morning, at seven o'clock. Well, anyhow, darling, it pays cash every Saturday night. Twenty-two dollars and a half a week.

And, listen, Effie, a commission on collections. If I work like the devil, I can get the ante up as high as thirty-five smackers every Saturday night, huh?"

XI.

FRED FEENEY basked in such a feeling of luxury as he could not remember experiencing before. He was no longer ill. All pain had gone from his bones, all the ache from his head, all the fever from his body.

Yet he was not well, for if he had been in robust health, surely he would never lie abed so disgracefully late? And if he had been well, surely he would have been worrying about something!

He had no worries. Effie had been in the room with his pleasant late breakfast tray just recently and Effie had assured him that he had nothing to worry about. The matter of the mortgage was taken care of, Effie said and added that he need not bother his head about money, since Ray had a splendid new position in the city.

Feeney took the news with a radiant smile. He meant to inquire how the mortgage had been cared for, and what was Ray's fine new job. But Effie rattled on so! He had got to laughing at Effie instead and forgot his questions.

The nurse, Miss Brown, had been dismissed. She was a nice woman, but Fred Feeney preferred Effie. Clara had also been in to visit him. She put her head on his pillow and rubbed her cheek against his.

She certainly was a changed Clara, more like she had been in the first year of their married life. Feeney wondered what had changed her so.

But why ask? Asking might irritate her. Clara often became irritated over little things. Better to take the gifts the gods sent him and ask no questions!

Now he lay quietly and thought about ships. That old whaler, now, the Nell and Susan. She couldn't have been what you'd exactly call pretty! A sooty old tub, built for service.

He could see her without even closing his eyes, a pillar of smoke by day, of fire by night when her try furnace belched with the grease that fed its fires. No doubt she didn't smell any too sweet, but there was something romantic about that old girl!

Think of her, wallowing along amid the south polar ice, poking her scarred old figurehead into coral lagoons, again lost in the fogs of the North Pacific or the Okhotsk Sea; out for a year, two years, three years, and finally wallowing home again to staid New Bedford deep-laden with wealth and homesick men! That was a life and a ship for you!

A restlessness began to spread through Feeney's veins. He turned from thoughts of the sea to his workbench. His fingers ached to pick up the minute blocks and the intricate threads of rigging that still hung slack on his model of the Nell and Susan. The ghost of an old habit tried to rise between him and his desire reminding him that it was wrong to lie idle thus, wrong even to think of his ship model when the house and Clara needed all of his time and energy.

But something had happened to his conscience. It didn't make him feel bad, as it had formerly. Fred Feeney swung his legs out of bed and looked about for his clothes.

Downstairs Effie had just come from the telephone. She met Clara. Effie was smiling serenely.

"Got a new job," she announced. "It went through all right. I start Monday. I'm going back to Dr. Paxley of the Warburton Galleries—"

"Is that an art store?" Clara asked vaguely.

"You might call it that. Except it has an eight-story building all by itself. It's the biggest auction and exhibit corporation in the country—maybe the world. They import all the famous things, the fine paintings, china, screens, furniture, everything. They dispose of the big collections of rich men that are put on the market.

"Dr. Paxley is a big gun, an expert on art objects and antiques. He is in charge of all that department. I was his secretary before I went to a museum out West, darling. He used to say that I picked up the business quicker than any girl he ever had and he'd make an expert out of me."

Effie grinned.

"It's an open secret that he was tickled pink at the chance of getting me back and he's raised the ante to get me. I'm going to draw a hundred a week this time!"

Clara's eyes widened. She looked at her daughter-in-law with a new respect. Effie swaggered a little, but she was entitled to that.

"I told Ray the thing for us to do was to come back to New York where I can earn what I'm worth. With what Ray makes on the cheese wagon, I guess we'll all get along!"

"That poor boy!" Clara exclaimed.

"I know! But don't let Ray hear you say it. Ray's got to stick to the delicatessen route a little while, Clara. It 'll do him good, hard work will. Ray never worked in his life, and he needs to begin. I'll let him off the minute he shows signs of getting human. I'll help him land a decent job somewhere, but I don't think he'll need help after a few weeks of cheese! He'll be desperate enough to find his own job—that's how I got out of the five-and-ten. I couldn't stand it any longer."

"I wish I had a job!" Clara said suddenly, bitterly. She walked to the window and continued with her back to Effie. "I guess that's what ails me. Ray grew up. He didn't need me any more. That job was finished when he left home. Life is stupid here in Cranston, when you're just a wife and have a maid with ordinary common sense. Lord, how I envy you!"

"Well, I don't envy you." Effie looked thoughtful. "I couldn't stand what you call life. I told Ray we'd have a fifty-fifty marriage—both work, you know—or none at all. But you'll have your housekeeping back, Clara. You won't have Louise after next week. Or this house, either—"

"Effie, I can't bear the thought of leaving this place. It's our home—"

"You'll make another. That's your job. As big a job as mine! I saw a bear of a little cottage to-day. And the rent is only thirty-five a month. You and pop could manage that—"

Clara shuddered. "To be put out because we can't pay off the debt! The disgrace of it!"

"Where's the disgrace? Men fail in business right along. For the very same reasons. Nobody thinks they are disgraced."

"I'm afraid—it will kill—Fred."

Effie's lower lip trembled. Her eyes were scared.

"Clara, I'd give anything I've got to prevent it! If it wasn't that he had lost his job and broken his health, we could get the money. Now, everybody's afraid to take a chance on a broken man. Money makes such cowards of people!"

Clara turned to her, desperately pleading. "You can find a way! You know business. You're so sure of yourself. And smart. You've got to save our home!"

Effie shook her head. "Can't. You know I'd give a leg to do it. But I know when I'm licked. Living expenses I can attend to. Ray and I will take care of that until pop gets around. But about this house—well, I'm licked."

They heard the shuffling, uncertain tread on the stair simultaneously. It was at the rear stairs. They pushed open the kitchen door and surprised Fred Feeney at the door into the basement.

"Oh!" he exclaimed, looking at Clara like a guilty small boy. "I was just going to look at something a minute—"

"Oh, not the basement, Fred!"

"Why, yes—there was something on my workbench—"

"You'll catch cold!"

"A fine day like this? Anyhow, it's always warm and dry there. I'm sick of lying in bed and just wandering around the house, doing nothing, Clara. I—I don't like it, I tell you!" He began shaking his head, his face puckered with worries.

"Let him!" Effie whispered at Clara's shoulder. "Dr. Parker said anything that interested him he ought to do. Keep him occupied. And happy." She added cheerily, for Feeney: "Go ahead, old timer, but mind you don't experiment with home-made gin or the revenuers 'll get you!"

Clara's sigh was half exasperation, half humorous resignation.

"That basement! Effie, I've had to put up with that for nearly thirty years. That

basement and his workbench mean more to Fred Feeney than anything he does. He's spent a lifetime of spare time puttering, puttering, puttering! I try to get him to go out and meet people. No, he'd rather putter. I try to get him to sit down in the evening and read a good book. He'd rather putter. Or play bridge. He'd rather putter down there! Honestly, sometimes I think Fred Feeney is just a little—touched."

"What does he putter at?" Effie asked.

Clara shrugged. "I've tried to keep it a dark secret from everybody! I wouldn't have the neighbors think he was queer! I've kept him from talking about it and used all the slight tact God gave me to make him quit. It's no use. Effie, he makes *toy sailboats!*"

Clara's revelation came in a shocked whisper. She was much amused, indulgent and exasperated, all in one.

"Sailboats?" Effie repeated. "You mean models? Ship models?"

Clara smiled. "He called them that. He tried to get me to call them models—but they're nothing but toy sailboats, so far as I can see. And Effie, he spends years on them. Of course it's a hobby. A man needs a hobby. And poor Fred always worked like a dog. But why not a regular hobby? Golf? Or fishing? Or even poker? Something people could dare mention in polite society!"

Effie's eyes were bright and shrewd. Her cheeks were getting pinker with interest. She paused only to give her mother-in-law an enigmatic look, then ran down the basement stairs.

Once in the basement Effie paused. She was a little frightened at what she might see. Suppose she was mistaken! After all, what could Fred Feeney know of model making, a mild, middle-aged enthusiast, a putterer?

He had been making little ships for years and nobody had got excited about it. Nobody but Clara. Effie braced herself for a disappointment.

Feeney did not hear his daughter-in-law. He was holding a half-finished model whaleboat between his fingers, beaming at it absent-mindedly.

Effie saw him turning it round and round, his eyes narrow with interest, lips pursed. He picked up a knife and drew a slender thread of shaving off the unfinished wood. A sigh escaped him. Years dropped from his shoulders. He began to sing to himself as he worked, a tuneless, happy song. It was "Little Annie Rooney."

When Effie stood beside him and rubbed her cheek against his shoulder he was at last aware of her.

"Did you make that all yourself, pop? What a lot of work!"

"Well, it's kind of a hobby, Effie. Something to do with my spare time—"

"Why, it's lovely. A regular knockout! It's an old whaler, isn't it?"

Feeney almost dropped his knife. His eyes were round with surprise. "How did you know that?"

Effie looked a little confused. Then casually, "Must have seen a picture of one, somewhere. Maybe a model. Do you make many models like this, lamb?"

"Models!" Feeney grinned. "Nobody ever called them that before. Toy boats, Clara calls them. I tried to get her to consider them as models, but she can't see the difference." He defended Clara at once. "Not that Clara's alone in that. 'Most everybody calls them toy boats. Well, in a way they are—"

"No, they're not!" Effie said promptly. "Not when you make 'em as good as that—"

"But how do you know?"

"Oh, I know a lot!" She grinned at him teasingly. "I've held such a lot of jobs since I started life in the five-and-ten!"

"You're kind of a puzzle to me, Effie!" Feeney laid aside his work and regarded her curiously. He began his old, puzzling trick of rubbing his bald spot. "Sometimes you act so smart and—well, educated—and sophisticated. And sometimes—"

"Sometimes I'm an awful roughneck?" Effie smiled. "Well, I am a roughneck. Remember the stockyards, pop! But I've had to learn a lot of tricks as I leaped from job to job. A girl's got to have a different kind of front according to the people she deals with. In the old five-and-ten you can yell 'Cash!'"

Effie raised her voice in such a convincing stridency that Feeney jumped, then laughed aloud.

"The customers in a five-and-ten expect it there," Effie explained, joining his laugh. "But when you get in a shop on Madison Avenue, for instance, you never mention cash. You just sort of look down on money with a patronizing smile. You really hate to mention it at all!"

Unconsciously her voice became absurdly cultured as she said it. She laughed heartily.

"Pop, I've sold the same imitations of old Sandwich glass plates on Madison Avenue that I used to sell in the five-and-ten! And on Madison Avenue what's worth a dime will bring ten dollars. The whole trick is in learning what to say and how to say it. Women like Mrs. Enoch Brown wouldn't think of buying a glass dish for a dime, but they'll fight to pay you ten dollars for it as an antique!"

She laughed impishly.

"That's why you got along with Mrs. Brown so well!" Feeney exclaimed. "You did surprise me, Effie! Of course, I'd just met you and I honestly thought—well—"

"I know! You thought Ray had brought home something pretty awful! A daughter-in-law out of the gutter. Whoops, what a shock I must have been to you!"

"No, you were not. I loved you—right away."

Effie snuggled close to him. "You dear lamb! Just like I loved you. That's why I acted that way, I guess. I cared so much; I wasn't going to fool you with a grand manner and a big bluff.

"Oh, I had meant to! Naturally, I wanted to make my best impression. But you looked so honest—so genuine. I'm a fool if anybody makes a hit with me like that. I want people to like me for what I am, not on account of my tea-table manners. Pop, let's not talk about ourselves any more. It's silly. What's that boat back there on the shelf?"

"That? I was kind of proud of that one, once! She was a job, I'll tell you. The Witch of the Waves is her name." Feeney laughed apologetically. "I guess I started her as much on account of the name as anything—"

"American clipper? Tea trade, pop?"

"Why, Effie! Good Lord, how—"

"I worked in a—a store—one time where they sold some ship models. I used to be interested, sort of. Aren't you going to let me see her?"

Feeney bustled about and found a box on which he could stand and reach the dusty shelf above his workbench. He puffed his cheeks and blew clouds of dust off the model before he lifted it down in his arms. He found blocks and propped the ship on his workbench and fussed over it, blowing off the dust.

As he fussed Feeney talked eagerly.

"I used to think I did a pretty good job on her. I don't know. Tried to be accurate. I had copies of her original plans and scaled 'em down myself. She was a dandy, Effie! Built in 1852 and a crackerjack! She and a British ship, the Cairngorn, used to race tea from China to London. This one made the run from Whampoa to Dungeness in ninety days, and that was some sailing! She had a record of making three hundred and thirty-eight knots in twenty-four hours."

Feeney confided all this to his daughter-in-law with boyish enthusiasm. He ceased with a sudden look of apology. "Lord! I'm boring you to death—"

"You are not! I love it. And pop, it's a shame to let her get all dust like that—"

"Does seem kind of too bad. Well, I had to keep her some place, and that top shelf—"

"Didn't you ever show it? Exhibit it, I mean?"

"Exhibit it?"

"There's the Ship Model Society, you know!"

"Oh, yeah. Heard about them. But they're all rich people. Collectors. Millionaires with a hobby. No, I never showed it. Did think for a time of having it over our mantel in the living room of our other house. I kind of built it with that idea, but Clara—" Feeney sighed. "It would have looked kind of funny there, I guess!" They were both silent. Effie walked around the model critically, humming a little tune.

She touched its fine detail with a finger, and made faces at the dust that came off.

She asked more questions and Feeney talked with the eagerness of a man who has bottled up his enthusiasms during a lifetime.

When they heard Louise's voice calling them they realized with a mutual start that the morning was gone. It was lunch time.

"Well, what in the world have you two been doing down there all morning?" Clara drew her daughter-in-law aside. "My dear, your face is a mess! And look at your hands. But it was sweet of you to humor poor old Fred! He does so love to have anybody play with his toy ships."

"Toy ships!" Effie gasped. "Toy—" She said no more, returning to her former look of mystery. "Men are amusing, aren't they, Clara?"

"My dear! Do you wonder I have to laugh at Fred sometimes?"

"Yes, and women are amusing, too," Effie added unexpectedly. "Sometimes women hand me a bigger laugh than their husbands." She hurried off upstairs to clean the grime from her.

XII.

Effie said no more about ships or men or women. After lunch she walked to the village telegraph station and sent three messages. Then she went around to see the cottage that was for rent, keeping an appointment with Clara. They agreed that it would do and had a satisfactory talk with the agent.

"I don't know how I can tell Fred," Clara sighed. "His own home! Effie, it will simply stun him—"

"Don't tell him yet, darling. Not until Sunday. He needn't know until you are ready to move out. Promise not to breathe a hint!"

Clara promised readily enough. So far as Fred Feeney was concerned the week passed happily, without warning of any approaching disaster.

He gained strength and health and puttered happily in the basement. Effie took to early rising. She said it was in order to have breakfast with Ray, but she made a direct line for the front door and was first to examine the morning mail.

By Saturday night she was having a hard time concealing her disappointment and anxiety. She had lost most of her swagger. Her confidence in her own business sagacity had received a serious setback.

Effie, Clara, and Ray gathered in the living room after Sunday dinner. Ray was absorbed in the classified advertisement pages of the Sunday papers. From time to time he made penciled notes in his pocketbook.

Clara was staring forlornly out of the window at her lawn and Effie stood beside her, an arm about her waist.

"He's got to know it to-day," Clara sighed. "I'll have to start packing tomorrow. Louise and I have already packed everything we dared without letting him guess."

"Yes, I suppose you'd better tell him!" Effie sighed. "Poor lamb! I hate to see him worried now!"

"Tell him?" Ray snorted, his head bent over printed pages. "Of course you've got to tell him! You can't treat him like a baby. Anyhow, it's only for a few months. As soon as I can ditch that confounded cheese wagon and get into a regular business we'll buy the place back again. Say, look, Effie! Listen to this."

Ray read:

> "WANTED—Real hundred per center who understands how to sell; name your own salary and commissions, if you're the man, my proposition knocks 'em cold! Sells itself; gilt edged territory open for the right man; none but result-getters need waste my time—

"The address is a box number; maybe I'd better take a half day off and look into that, hunh? Sounds like real money—"

"Sounds like a lot of bologny!" Effie sneered. "Wants a supersalesman, but his stuff sells itself! Why doesn't he let it sell itself and save money? No, darling, that's nothing but a blind ad for a sucker wanted! Try something else—or stick to cheese!"

"Speaking of cheese," Ray exclaimed. "I was thinking about that. I wonder why

there isn't a good chance for a chain of delicatessen stores that would be run right. Clean. Like United Cigar stores. Effie, if you could see some of the messy little dumps I sell cheese to. And run by absolute brows. But every one of 'em making money! Good money, and yet they haven't begun to skim the cream off the trade. You know if I could get capital interested in a chain of real delicatessens I could clean up a million in a year!"

"Why not?" Effie glowed. "Ray, that's the first sign of real sense you've showed since you married me. You're beginning to act human—"

"Thanks, darling. That's the first kind word I've had since you married me. Maybe a few more kind words and I'd make our fortune in the cheese and bologny trade."

Clara sighed again.

She turned from the window, her lips pressed together tightly.

"It's no use being silly about this. Fred's got to know. I'll break the news to him. Poor Fred, I guess he's been through worse shocks—when he saw some of the bills I ran, for instance!"

"He will have to know," Effie agreed. "Do you want me to come along, Clara? Share the responsibility and soften the blow?"

"I'll manage it, dear. You've had enough disagreeable things to do since you came here. Well—"

"Wait, Clara."

Effie turned from the window. She was biting at her lip. Her hands were clasped nervously.

"What in the world is the matter with you?"

"Just glance out, will you, Clara? See a big automobile coming?"

"Yes. I wonder who that is—"

"Did it turn off at the corner?"

"No. Coming this way. It can't be the Browns' new car, surely! Why, Effie—"

"Yes, Clara, what?"

"It's stopping here."

"Honest, darling?"

"Yes. Why—I wonder if Louise is around? It's a man I never saw. Must be a mistake—"

"It's no mistake," Effie cried. She was filled with sudden energy. She had snatched the papers from Ray's hands and was prodding him with her elbow. "Get up out of that! And take those papers—"

"Say—listen!"

"Listen yourself. And get this. I don't want you in here. You, either, Clara—"

"Have you gone crazy?" Ray demanded. "Anybody would think you owned the house—"

Effie became tense and curt. "Get. Take the paper with you. I'll tell you when to come back. A man is coming to see me, and I don't want you in sight—"

"For you?" Clara gasped. "Who, Effie?"

The doorbell was trilling.

"You, too, Clara! Go upstairs, or any place. Only not near Fred. I'll want pop pretty soon. Don't tell him anything. Don't go near him. Isn't Louise ever going to answer that door? Now, Clara, out you go. Through the dining room! I don't want—"

At the door Ray turned, suddenly belligerent. "Hey, listen. Who is this guy—"

"Oh, shut up! And go—"

"Listen. You're my wife. I won't have any strange man—"

Effie gave him a shove, a pat on the cheek simultaneously and slammed the door on him.

Louise was entering the room.

"A gentleman asking for you, Mrs. Ray. A Mr. Porterfield—"

"In here, Louise." Effie barely had time to shake back her hair. She advanced self-possessed, pleasant, charming. "Mr. Porterfield. Awfully good of you to remember me after all these years. I had no idea you'd care to come, really!"

XIII.

RAY and Clara sat in the dining room. One hour went by. Then another. Sunday afternoon was beginning to be Sunday evening.

Ray was a gentleman. Ray's mother was a lady. It was not for them to eavesdrop. Nor for them to intrude on company

that did not want them. Perhaps it was bad manners even to wonder.

Ray tried to read the Sunday papers. Clara made out lists of household goods that must be packed and moved. But the murmur of voices, first two voices and later three, came through the door.

They found themselves listening and wondering time and again. When they heard Fred Feeney come up from his basement their wonder grew. When they heard other excursions up and down the basement stairs their wonder and curiosity went to boiling point. When they heard the tone of all three voices altering subtly from the formal to the companionable their curiosity boiled over and scalded them.

Ray and his mother stared at each other, mute questions on their lips and looked away again. Ashamed of such vulgar curiosity.

The front door closed finally. Effie opened the door into the living room and beamed upon them. "Well, darlings! You behaved like lambs. Come out of hiding. Louise is getting tea."

"Now, listen, Effie." Ray cornered his wife and scowled down on her. "I've stood for a lot from you. I'd like to know who your new playmate is. Of course, being only your husband I suppose that's none of my business—"

"Of course not, darling," Effie said sweetly. "So I don't intend to tell you!"

"Well, I hope you had a nice visit," Clara remarked. "If I had guessed anybody was going to call, I'd have had Louise dust to-day—"

Effie burst out laughing. "You poor dears! Why not ask pop? He might tell you. In fact, he's going to. Go on, pop, tell 'em the news!"

Fred Feeney had been standing fixed in the middle of the room. He seemed to be in a sort of rosy daze. His hand massaged his bald crown steadily while he stared at the slip of paper in his other hand. Effie had to shake his arm before he heard her.

"Oh, ye-e-es," he said dreamily. Then his face grew radiant. He rushed suddenly at his wife, his hand outstretched to show what it held. "Look, Clara!"

"It's a check!"

"That's what it is, Clara—"

"But, Fred? How—what—"

"Porterfield," Feeney said, as if that one word told all.

Clara was only mystified. But Ray broke out: "Say! Look, pop, you don't mean that bird was Carl Porterfield? *The* Carl Porterfield?"

Feeney beamed. "That's who he is, son."

"Hey, let's see that check." Ray snatched the slip of paper out of Clara's limp fingers. "Holy mackerel!" he cried. "A thousand smackers! A grand! Enough to hold the house and everything. So that's how he signs checks. Hunh! Why, pop, you could raise that figure to a million and Carl Porterfield's bank account wouldn't know it had been nicked—"

"I've been told so, Ray. Mr. Porterfield is wealthy. The movies, I believe—"

"Believe I'm telling you!"

"Fred Feeney," said his wife, "I never knew that you knew Mr. Porterfield."

"I never did, until this afternoon, Clara. He's Effie's friend—"

"Acquaintance, rather," Effie explained. "I met him when I was at the Warburton Galleries. I used to talk with him sometimes—"

"But this check. I don't seem to understand. How did you persuade Carl Porterfield to loan you a thousand dollars—"

"It's not a loan, Clara. It's mine." Feeney beamed and took Clara's hands in his. "It's all mine, honestly earned. I know it doesn't seem possible, Clara! I can't realize it. But there it is, isn't it—"

"Maybe that check's no good," Ray burst out. "Maybe that isn't Porterfield. Just some swindler that rented a car and a chauffeur and—"

"Try to be your age, Ray!" Effie exclaimed with sweet scorn. "I know the man, I tell you."

"Then how did you get this money?" Clara burst out.

"For one of my ship models, Clara. For the Witch of the Wave. Mr. Porterfield bought it and carried it away with him—"

"Fred Feeney! You mean you got

that—" Clara touched the check reverently. "For your—your—model ship?"

"Yes, and it isn't a fair price, either," Effie said. "I tried to get pop to let me bargain a little. Carl Porterfield is hard-boiled, believe me! He doesn't throw away any nickels—"

"But he wanted it," Feeney cried. "He appreciated it so. I want my ship to go to somebody who can appreciate it. It's an honor to have a ship in Porterfield's collection. He owns the finest models there are. I saw some at the museum just the other day—"

Effie observed philosophically. "Never mind, we'll charge him more for the next one—a lot more!"

Clara had drawn away from her husband. She was looking at him with a newer, keener interest that amounted to awe. She said:

"Fred, I never guessed. All these years you've been fussing in the basement—you were making something that was worth a lot of money. Those little boats—"

"Models, Clara." Effie smiled. "Any little ship that Carl Porterfield will spend money for is a model, not a toy. That means it's a work of art. And pop is an artist. I knew it the minute I saw what he was doing. And I knew that Porterfield and two others like him have been making a specialty of early American clipper ship models. So I sent telegrams to all three. Porterfield happened to be in town and got my message." Effie laughed. "Probably the others will be tearing out here in a week or so, mad as hatters that they missed a chance to bid—"

"I'll build 'em other models," Feeney said stoutly. "Just as good and better."

"Of course you will, lamb!" Effie explained to Clara proudly. "He already has an order for the Nell and Susan, the whaler, as soon as she's done. Porterfield will take her. The minute that gets known among collectors pop's reputation is made—"

"We don't have to give up this house, Clara." Feeney beamed. "But I'm never going to hold another job." His voice rang with conviction. Dignity had been added to his beaming happiness. "I'm going to build ship models. All my life I longed to do that and now I'm going to. It pays better, anyway."

Clara touched his sleeve humbly. "Fred, I have been a fool. I didn't know it meant so much to you—and I did think you were wasting your time. I only wanted to help you get on—"

"You're going to help me get on. Because I can't get anywhere without you!" Feeney answered. "Why you—you're wonderful, Clara—"

"No, you're the wonderful one, and—I'm so proud of you, Fred Feeney! A famous artist—think of it—famous!"

Even Ray looked impressed.

"Gosh!" he sighed. "I guess it's up to me to step on the gas, if I keep up with pop. Look, Effie, I'm going to go into that delicatessen idea to-morrow. I'm no artist, but I'll bet there'd be money in the cheese and bologny trade."

It was after tea when Effie and Ray had gone for a walk that Feeney, wandering in a happy daze about his house, overheard Clara at the telephone. Clara was holding a long, chatty conversation with Mrs. Enoch Brown. And in the course of that conversation Clara said: "The man who came in the big car? Oh, yes, dear, that was Mr. Porterfield—Carl Porterfield, you know. Oh, yes, a friend of Mr. Feeney's. It is thrilling, isn't it? You see, Fred and Mr. Porterfield got acquainted through their hobby, ship model collections. I'll let you in on a little secret, dear, Fred and Mr. Porterfield are carrying on some business deals together."

Fred Feeney eavesdropped on this shameless bragging of Clara's. He turned away with a wide smile and a mist of tears in his eyes.

He knew that he had won something he had wanted all his life. Clara was proud of him. This discovery he digested alone, in silence, a round, middle-aged little man with a happy, boyish face.

His hand rubbed absently at the bald spot on his crown and he beamed. Clara was proud of him. Fred Feeney was proud of himself.

THE END

Night Hawk's Gold

By KENNETH PERKINS

Author of "The Devil's Saddle," "The Mark of the Moccasin," etc.

WHAT HAS OCCURRED IN PART I

WHILE the sheriff and his posse of cutthroats had me handcuffed on a charge of shooting up Pedro's bar—when as a matter of fact I shot in self-defense after being cheated by a couple of gamblers—Miss Jennie West happened in our town requesting an escort into the Bad Lands of Soda Mesa. She picked me because they told her I was Night Hawk Higgins, the best gunman and horse wrangler in Mule City. After we had camped awhile in the desolate cañons fifty miles from anywhere, she told me I was elected because our object was gold her father and two pards had buried ten years before, and a gang of murderous renegades were guarding the cañon in which they knew the gold was buried, but they didn't know the exact location. Her father had been killed in trying to escape with it, the two pards had been killed in going back to get it, and now they were waiting for her, the last, to come get it. The only trick against them was that when they saw her she looked like a little boy, and they were waiting for a young man, not a pretty girl.

CHAPTER VI.

DESERT LAW.

IT got so hot the next day that our sombreros didn't do much more good than to act like they was a blower on top of a furnace—the furnace bein' our haids. You couldn't touch the pommel without you blistered your hand.

And all the time we were joggin' along, waitin' and waitin'. It ain't an overly pleasant occupation. We couldn't do much else but strain our eyes across the sage plains and down in the simmerin' purple cañons, and across the blue mirages, wonderin' just when we'd see a band of horsemen.

It was after sundown of the cussingest, longest, hottest day I ever did remember, that we had a visitor.

No visitor was welcome in our camp, as you can readily understand. But this particular bird didn't appear to be so very deadly.

He was a little old Pima Indian with a slouch hat coverin' a mane of dirty white hair. He had a flat nose, and a mouth speckled and sliced with a couple hundred

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wrinkles. And he was ridin' a moth-eaten gray mule.

He come mergin' outen the shadows. after announcin' his arrival for what seemed to me several hours, by the soft *clip-clop* of his mount in the alkali sand.

I was ready with six-gun drawn for to meet him. But when he came into the light of our camp fire I kind of laughed, bein' it was a descent from the sublime to the ridiculous.

Of course before he arrived I told the girl to go into the chaparral and hide. I didn't want her to be seen by no desert wolf.

A girl like Jennie West would attrack some kinds of these Sody Mesa muckers quicker 'n' a gold mine. Speakin' personally, I was much more concerned with winnin' this girl—and gettin' her safe outen the desert than I was with findin' a gold hoard. Perhaps that was because I didn't figure on ever gettin' any percentage of that hoard myself. It was all hers, and I was sot on her gettin' it.

They's nothin' that'll cool off the gold fever as much as a pretty girl. Look at the way the muckers sift their sand all day, and then pour their pay dirt into some cantina girl's lap at night.

Well, when this little ole hoot owl of an Indian comes stickin' his face outen the shadows and peerin' at me that night, I was all set to guard my treasure with my life. And it wasn't gold. It was this girl. She stayed off a good ways, and I had my little palaver with the unwelcome visitor.

"Ole Tom Yucca heap starvin' hungry," he says to me. "You save-'im my life."

I says to him: "All right, Tom. Cain't very well refuse to save your life. What 'll you have?"

"Water first, then cuevo," he answered good and quick, as if he'd studied it all out afore bumpin' into me.

I give him a swig of water, and he sure give the impression of bein' as dry as a cholla cactus at the end of summer. Then I give him some redeye, and his face wrinkled all over in jovial pleasure.

After wipin' his mouth and belchin', what does he do but hand me a necklace made of grizzly claws. It was a right generous gift for a drink of bad whisky, and I told him so.

"I ain't takin' pay for succorin' a man in the desert," I said. "'Tain't followin' the rules. You take what you want to eat—all as your shrunken little ole belly will hold."

Of course, the rule is in the desert that a man can take all he wants to eat—so long as he don't take nothin' along with him except what's inside his carcass. But I didn't mention this—bein' the old shaman or witch doctor, or whatever he was, had offered me that grizzly necklace.

"You take-'im necklace," he said. "Him make hy-yu-skookum charm so your enemy can't hurt you with arrow or bullet."

He was an uncanny little ole wart, and this suggestion of hisn kind of startled me. I felt like they was enemies all around in the dark ready to pounce on me and my girl. And I had a powerful leanin' toward the idee of givin' the necklace to Jennie West—as any man will want to give a gift of some sort to the girl who's hog-tied him.

So I says: "If you're that generous with your gifts, Tom, ole man, I'll be generous with my food. They's a lot of canned stuff in thar. And you Injuns have a powerful strong taste for canned stuff. You git into that food pack thar. They's three duffle bags of same, and help yourself."

"You eat-'im chow with ole Tom Yucca," the genial ole coot insisted.

Now I might of been naturally friendly to a ole man in the desert, especially when he looked like a dried up carcass that's been dug outen the ground. But I wasn't exactly a fool. In the first place I didn't put away my gun and start rummagin' around that food pack myself and thereby give the ole bird a chance to pounce on my back with a bowie knife—or plug me in the kidneys with a gat. I let him do the rummagin', while I set on a bowlder a little way off. Further and more, I wasn't goin' to join him in a meal and give him a chance of poisonin' me.

"I've just et," I said. "You go on, pick out any kind of vegetable you like.

There's the fire, and some water b'iling. Heat the cans if you've a mind to."

I knew he couldn't poison the canned stuff—so I just let him have a good time. They was three packs of cans—and a big kyack of flour and bacon and other cookin' stuff. I didn't allow for him to touch that. You see I was workin' powerful cautious. How did I know but this ole gray rat had been set on me by the gang of renegades who were waitin' to take our lives?

Well, that little Injun certainly went after them cans. But it was a funny thing—he didn't open 'em up promiscuous like. It seemed like he knew just what he wanted. Maybe you've heard that the Pima squaws when they weave their blankets and baskets git their designs sometimes from the labels of tin cans.

I seen a blanket worth a heap of money to the A. & P. tourists, which was Indian red with all kinds of Pima symbols and birds and corn stalks and such onto it—and across the middle was a zigzag design which if you read same carefully spelled out Boston Baked Beans.

It looked as if this ole coot had a pretty good idee of just what was in each can—because he would squint hard at each one and maybe get ready to open same with his bowie knife, then change his mind.

"No like-'im corn," he would say. "My squaw cookum too much baked corn and piki bread. Like-'im can tomato much better."

"You'll find tomato thar somewheres," I said.

He was a little way off from the light, and when he got a can that 'peared to be what he wanted he had to come back and examine it in the light of the fire.

He opened one after awhile and stuck his paw into it, like Jim Carson's pet b'ar sticks his paw into the half empty cans that are throwed out into the corral behind the chuck house. This ole Injun scooped it out and licked the stuff from his fingers in the same identical system of table etiquette as that b'ar.

I reckon he didn't open more'n about six cans durin' that long meal. But afore he did that, it looked like he's examined every can in every bag. I had a hunch that might he was scoutin' for blanket designs for to give his squaw—he took so dad-burned long makin' his choice. Dam' if he wasn't like a squirrel examinin' a nut afore crackin' it.

And all the time he'd look up out of the corner of his eyes at me—a-settin' on the bowlder near him—exactly like a squirrel looks around while he's at work, to see if they's any danger near by. Once when he caught my eye he must of seen that I was gettin' kind of impatient at this Injun ceremony, and what does he do but suddenly drop the cans he had holt of—and then rip off his vest and hand it to me.

It was a beaded vest with a spider web and rattler design onto it, like the war-priests wear. Kind of threadbare and greasy, but just the same, it was a right smart curio that any cowboy would be proud of.

"Here, take-um war-priest vest," he said. "Ole Tom Yucca mak' you heap trouble. This vest keep away curse of witch doctor and Bad Mind."

"I said I ain't takin' pay for this chow. I ain't no sutler or trade-rat."

But he argued me into it—which wasn't very hard bein' I'd taken a shine to the vest in the first place, and figured the girl might like to see what I looked like wearin' it."

"I pack 'im cans in duffle bags," ole Tom says after foolin' around a little more. "No good pack for sawbuck saddle. You watch him ole Tom." So he packs away the cans as slick as ever I saw—for which I thanked him, bein' the packs had rode kind of "dead," durin' that day.

Now it may be hard for you to believe, but all this time I was settin' up thar on that bowlder—keepin' one eye on the lookout for possible reenforcements to come up and back this little ole coot up in his game, whatever it was. Likewise, as I've remarked, I kept my six-gun in my hand.

Which shows I was powerful nervous. Bein' I can draw my gun from its holster about as quick as I can shoot it when it's already out. But they's a hair's breadth of a second difference—no matter what any fool gunfanner will boast about how quick

he can draw. And I had a hunch I might need that hair's breadth in my business.

Well, to finish up this here incident, all as I can say is that ole Tom Yucca thanked me and swore if he ever had the chance he'd give up his life for to save mine. Then he dragged his crooked rheumatic bones up to the back of his mule and rode off.

I called to the girl, and told her all about what had happened. I told her just the way I've told you—and I'll be jiggered if they was anything suspicious about the way that ole Injun rattlesnake acted—unless it was that he seemed kind of particular about just what brand of canned vegetables he ate.

But Jennie West, she said: "I don't like the looks of this."

"I ain't quite so sure that I do, either," I said. "But I cain't seem to put my finger on just what looks like a phony card." Then I added, kind of proudly: "Here's a necklace for you—b'ar claws—grizzly."

She took the necklace and seemed to like it, same as any young girl might fancy a gift of jewelry whether it's diamonds or plain adobe paste.

That was the end of the Tom Yucca incident so far as we could imagine. But three days later we had the sequel. It was like the taste you have in your mouth the morning after a night at Jimpson's fandango hall in Mule City.

When I say taste, I use just the right word. I opened one of them cans of chile con carne, and my tongue did a buck jump in my mouth tryin' to swallow and spit at the same time.

I mean to say in plain words, the stuff wasn't just right. I throwed it away and opened another, findin' the same result.

"We better not eat this chow," I says to my pard, "without we want to find ourselfs sick here in the heart of Sody Mesa Desert with ptomaine."

Then I examined the cans which had gone bad. I mean the two which I'd opened 'em—and what do I find but a neat little jab punched in both of 'em by a knife.

This led me to examine others, and every consarned can in our food pack was punched in the same way.

"Looks like as if ole Tom Yucca has a ornery streak in him somewheres," I said.

"And it looks like he's one of the gang that's layin' for us," said my young pard.

Which same was a much more sensible remark than mine.

CHAPTER VII.

FIVE ACROSS THE MOON.

OF course, for a good long while from then on we fell to palaverin' as to why a little ole skunk of a Injun should play a trick of that nature. There must of been what is generally termed by sheriffs or other legal experts—a motive. But nary a motive could we discover.

We didn't find out about all our food bein' spoiled till we were within fifteen miles of the cañon where the gold hoard was buried. The first thing that got us all het up was the mystery of that little reptile's visit. And the second thing was what-all were we goin' to eat from then on? In some ways, the second question was more important than the first. Leastwise it was more necessary to answer right away.

We knew well enough that the bandit gang was goin' to bump us sooner or later, and I can't quite remember that we were either of us overly surprised. I might say we felt kind of relieved after so many days of waitin' and bein' rode, bridle and spur, by what was a sort of Unseen Fear.

I calmed my little pard, and said we'd better plan on gettin' another food pack.

This wasn't quite so easy done as said.

As I've told you before this, the girl had a good savvy of livin' off the desert—the piñon nuts, wild peppergrass, valley quail, and such. But this would take a lot of time. She said she could make bread, tortillas, sugar, and candy and mush from just mesquite beans alone. But first we had to make the flour. And that would take time.

Time was the one thing we had everything else but. Since that little tête-à-tête with ole Tom Yucca we were both in a powerful hurry to get out of that thar country.

And this very fact gives me a clew as to what Tom Yucca's game was.

I figured thisaway:

That gang must of been patrollin' the Bad Lands—each man takin' a trail of his own. As I found out later they was only five men of the gang left, and bein' they had a large territory to keep watch over, they assigned different cañons to different members of the gang to watch. It don't take any miraculous detective work to guess at just how they worked it.

Each rider most like was given the orders to detain whoever he found prospectin' around them parts of the country. It didn't matter who it was. For all they knew, a stranger might come down with a map to where that gold was at. The duty of each man was to glom onto him—break him, if possible, arrest him; or if he didn't dast do that, detain him by some means, fair or foul.

This little Injun reptile sure found a means. I've already told how he axed me to chow with him, which I'd stake my life on the bet that he was goin' to give me some sort of a poison, so's to make me sick. Then he'd run off and get his pards.

Well, he didn't poison me, but he sure did try to make me sick. If I didn't have the nose of a fox, I might of et up a can or two of that stuff, which I'd sure have had to set down and wait for 'em—and maybe wait a good spell longer.

"He spoiled our grub-stake so's we'd have to waste time hangin' around this cañon gatherin' piñon nuts and catchin' rabbits," I said to my little pard.

"The best thing we can do is to get out," the girl said.

I didn't much fancy waitin' another ten years or so and tryin' the game again. I wanted to git it over with, and I told the girl that straight from the shoulder.

"First thing we're goin' to do," I says, "is to get rid of these cans—and travel light for a change."

"We'll only travel light for fifteen miles," she said doleful like. "Then—with a gold pack instead of cans, we'll sure eat up some pretty slow trail."

Still and all I was sot on going through with the game. I was doin' it for her. If I'd been doin' it for myself, I might have renigged. But that gold was goin' to be in our kyacks—right where the rotten cans had been, and I swore by hell's bells I'd get her out of the desert—and her gold likewise.

I threw away the cans, dumpin' 'em into a cactus-filled arroyo. I'd got the habit durin' those days of desert trailin' of sort of coverin' my tracks—and travelin' like a Mex lion who don't want to advertise hisself too openly.

Then we lit out for the cañon where the gold was at.

Can you git any picture in yore mind concernin' our feelin's?

There we were about to find the hoard—a hoard which had been buried for ten years, just waitin' for that girl to come and claim it. A hoard which men had died for; which a band of gunmen dreamed of, slinkin' around that desert waitin' and hopin', like a band of desert loboes waitin' at a water-pocket for their prey to come and drink!

Every mile that our ole nags shuffled along in that alkali brought us closer to wealth that you couldn't count—wealth and maybe death.

Down into a gulch we climbed, leadin' our tuckered out broncs; then up a zigzag deer trail across a mesa top where the piñones was thick and shut out the horizon. Then all of a sudden out to the top of a cliff where we seen the whole world stretchin' down in reds and yallers, shimmerin' in mirages, as silent and lifeless and bright-colored as a backdrop in Jimpson's Horse Opery Theater back there in Mule City.

It looked like it was painted by some fellow who wanted to use up as many cans of red as he could. And besides that, it looked like it had just been painted and hadn't dried yet—because the whole scene was shinin' in the Arizony sun. There didn't 'pear to be no atmosphere for to "tone it down" as I've heard artists say, or to give it perspective. It looked like if you reached out your hand you could touch the western horizon a couple hundred miles away.

"I know where it is," the girl said suddenly as we kind of held our breath and stared down into that fallin' cañon. "I see all the marks which we made that moonlight

night ten year ago, when we buried the gold."

Then she p'inted out a clump of piñones far off yonder on a mesa top; then a tall bunch of needles which made a piccacho of red rock; then a deep gulch like a well reachin' to the center of the earth.

"We get that piccacho and that bunch of piñones in a straight line," she says. "Then we trail along, keepin' 'em in a line till we get to the top of that gulch. Then we trail down the gulch to where it opens in a bowlder wash.

"We keep goin' till they's a big bowlder of quartz, which you get in line with the piccacho agin. A hundred paces from that bowlder, walkin' toward the piccacho, brings you to a thick mesquite patch, and the gold is buried right there."

Puttin' this on paper seems powerful complicated. But if you draw'd the p'ints out, you'd find it was simple enough. And the best of it all was, that the two ole muckers who were with the girl, and who buried the gold, knew well enough that one season would change the whole course of that bowlder wash. So they picked out a big rock the size of a barn, which it would take a glacier to move. And they didn't bury the gold in the stream bed, but 'way up a hundred paces from the wash, on a sort of ledge of adobe.

Still and all, you maybe think we walked right to that spot and dug down about six feet and glommed onto our treasure. Well, you've got another think comin'.

In the first place the girl looked for a clump of seven piñones, and she couldn't find 'em. We found a clump of three, and I figured maybe one of them Arizony sand storms had uprooted the others. We tried two different clumps afore we got into the right gulch. The whole mesa top was sliced deep with gulches and every one of 'em as like as two brindle calves, and the same color at that—brindle, with tawny adobe and black sage.

Finally we slid down a steep water course into what we were fairly sure must of been the gulch which led into the bowlder wash we was lookin' for. The piccacho which had first given us our bearin's was a fairly safe bet, although the girl said it had looked like a mole's head in the moonlight ten years ago, and I swore it looked more like a Hopi medicine man with buffalo horns of granite.

Anyways, we got down into the bowlder wash all right, and there was the quartz rock standin' as it had most likely stood in what I've heard the assay man at Mule City call the Glacial Age.

It didn't take any surveyor's instrument to imagine a line betwixt that bowlder and the rock piccacho with the horns. But I must say that a hundred paces ain't a very accurate way of measurin' distance. 'Specially when you have to pace ground that's webbed over wtih mesquite brush.

I made a try at it—four or five times, but the path to that buryin' ground had been pretty well growed over in the last ten years. If you ever tried walkin' through mesquite you'll know what I was up against. It's like a fly tryin' to bust his way through a web in a straight line, and count every time he blows his wings.

When I was fairly well satisfied that I'd got the right distance, I figured that it would be a few hours afore sunset and that the best thing to do was to wait. I was crazy to get my hands on that gold, but I was not crazy enough to be seen diggin' in that cañon. Darkness was a pretty good thing to wait for.

Meanwhile I left the girl there with the pack—or rather what was left of our pack, which wasn't much else but some empty kyacks—and then I went up around the cañon rim to take a squint along the horizon, and over the mesa top and the surroundin' gulleys, to satisfy myself that we were alone.

We'd taken a couple days locatin' the spot—even though we'd been only fifteen miles from it as the crow flies when that measly reptile, Tom Yucca, bumped into us. And durin' those two days I hadn't slep' a wink.

We'd taken turns stayin' on watch—Jennie and me—but whenever she was doin' her turn, why, I just stared up at the Great B'ar and the Little Dipper and watched them wheelin' around the Pole Star as the hours went by.

Well, we were doomed to a couple more

nights of that sort of life, till I begun to wish I'd never see the Great B'ar agin—nor Venus, nor anythin' else. The only one thing I didn't git tired of was the girl, settin' off somewhere on a high rock keepin' watch, her hair blowin' in the wind.

Which reminds me, I'd like to say somethin' about that silken hair. At night time it didn't look red. It was black—same as red hair will look in a photograft. Now I figured that was a important point to our expedition. You remember the girl—when she was first seen by one of the renegade gang, was a little shaver of ten, dressed as a boy—and it was at night time that she was seen. There was a camp fire, but I don't reckon that made much difference.

We'd talked this over a whole lot durin' our trip, and the girl was of a mind that she should cover her hair with a bandanna. But I said that waren't any use. Long hair—silkylike it was—a woman's hair, would be much more of a disguise than foldin' it up and makin' herself look like a boy—which is what she looked like when the bandit saw her that night ten year ago.

Well, to get back to our subject:

I dug around that pestiferous mesquite all night with my pick and shovel, but nary a sign of anything could I find except thick roots, like a mat, and a few mole holes and a sidewinder, which I had to wallop with my shovel before the girl would see him and get hysterics.

Dawn comes blowin' over the eastern rim of the cañon, turnin' the other side red, and bringin' the mirages again.

We hid that day—in a nearby gulch, I tryin' to pluck off a little snooze—which was about as impossible as pickin' off a bouquet of roses from the top of Sody Mesa.

The next night we had the same kind of joyful party—diggin' through the roots of mesquite into adobe or sand or shellmarl. I dug four or five different holes—Jennie fixin' up a cold supper now and then, and tryin' to help remember just how deep that hole originally was—and just what sort of soil they'd dug into.

A girl of ten—in the excitement of bein' pursued by a gang of renegades ain't very likely to charge her mind with what sort of sand they'd dug that hole into. Meanwhile I was gettin' powerful exhausted and whenever I swung the pick I'd feel like I was bein' lulled to sleep. I couldn't keep my eyes open.

But as soon as I laid down the pick or shovel and tried to snatch a wink or two, I was as wide awake as a sage rabbit watchin' a buzzard wheelin' above his haid. Some coffee would fix me—and the gal wanted to make me some. But we didn't dare build a fire.

Finally I come to the conclusion that a sort of layer of detritus must of been washed over that ledge in some of the storms durin' the past ten years. And that over this layer the mesquite had growed again.

It wasn't exactly possible because detritus could only be built up a few inches a year. But they was a good possibility that part of the cañon walls had slipped down. A storm in that country will do miracles, cuttin' out big swathes from a gulch in a single night—bein' there ain't any vegetation to hold the dry soil together—aside from a few mesquite patches and cholla and barrel cactuses.

So figurin' on this chance, I went back to each hole I'd dug, and dug down a few feet deeper.

All this time, I mustn't forget to say, I kep' ridin' around the rim of the cañon—which give me a fine lookout over the whole country. I mean I did this when it was light. And when it was pitch dark—except for the stars—I would dig.

Each night the moon came up a little later, but a lot brighter, until on that last night I didn't dast dig by its light, because with the quartz and shale of the cañon side reflectin' its glow, the whole place was as bright as day—and a powerful sight easier on the eyes.

The last night came. And I'd admire to stipulate that it was a pretty unlucky night for us.

It seemed like fate had just been playin' with us, smilin' cannily at us, like a poker player who feeds his victim a few small bets and gets him feelin' good, and then bumps a cold deck into him.

Although we were worn out and half

crazy with the certainty that them renegades would find us afore we could shag outen that cañon, we got more and more het up over findin' that gold.

Achin' in every bone of my haid—not to mention my carcass—I was dreamin' right along of spendin' the rest of my life gallivantin' around on a yacht with Jennie West. It wasn't such a bad liniment to our bruised bodies. Besides this I just about floated up out of the cañon on the sage-scented wind whenever I looked at Jennie West. And I ain't quite so sure but that she—

Well, I'll write about that later.

Let's get back to that gang of murderous buzzards. Tom Yucca was close-herdin' the gang. No doubt about that. And we sure were givin' him all the time he wanted. Besides, I didn't have much doubt of the unpleasant fact that they could easily trail us. I don't mean exactly easy. But what wind there had been wasn't strong enough to cover our tracks—except maybe with a fine coatin' of silt.

Our plugs had dug deep into the hard crusted sand, and wrote their signatures out with their hoofs as if they was writin' love notes of welcome to Tom Yucca and his gang. Then down in the bottom lands, where the prints were kind of indistinct in the bowlder washes, why, there hadn't been any wind at all.

In other words, from the place where we first seen Tom Yucca, there was a clear trail right to the spot where we were now at.

The end came that night, a little before the moon rose. It was a good big moon now, and you could see the cañons and craters and mesas on it like you were lookin' through a telescope. Well, just when it was sendin' its first glow up over the flat, long rim of the cañon side, I poked my shovel into a soft, pulpy thing like a barbecued cow buried in the ground.

It was leather—a kyack which hadn't changed much in ten years, on account of the soil bein' so dry. To carry on the same picture, it was like the carcass of a cow which had a lot of broken ribs inside.

"I've got it," I cried out to Jennie.

"Then cover it over, quick—" And I think she said: "For God's sake."

"Cover it over!" I shouted. "Don't make me laff. What did I dig all these holes for—exercise?"

"Look up there!" she said, her voice chokin'.

I turned to where she was pointin', and there was the moon peepin' over the edge of the cañon rim. And across it I seen a rider, black as ink, gallopin' his bronc, hell-bent, for election. Then come another one, gallopin', and then another. Five of 'em, I seen. And by that time the moon was up blazin' into the cañon like a spotlight.

"If I ain't mistaken, that looks like a posse of riders," I said. Which when I get it down on paper, don't exactly sound like a remark that has much sense to it.

"What 'll we do?" she cried, wringin' her hands.

"You get our nags," I shot back. "And I'm goin' on diggin'. I got to find out whether this thing I've poked my shovel into is a daid steer or a million dollars."

CHAPTER VIII.

WINDS FROM THE NIGHT.

"WE can't go on with this!" Jennie cried, beside herself. "Leave the gold there—or we're lost."

Well, it looked to me like we was lost anyway. Those riders gallopin' along the cañon rim had a good view of us now and, although we could of hid ourselfs in the mesquite, our nags were in plain view.

We saw the five riders circlin' along the top of the rim, sort of scoutin' for a gulch which they could trail down through. They disappeared down one of the gulches—and it was one I myself had trailed a few days before, and I knew there was a dry waterfall—I mean a precipice at the mouth of the gulch, and they wouldn't be able to negotiate same, unless they left their broncs and slid down through the brush and cactus.

This was the first bit of luck that ole Dame Fortune dealt out to us. It killed a heap of time, and the girl and me had a chance to collect our wits. Leastwise the girl had a chance. I already had my wits

pretty well corraled. I was goin' to git that gold outen the earth and pack it on our nags—come what may.

"If they catch us they'll kill us," she said, beggin' me to mount the nags and escape down the cañon.

"They'll catch us anyways," I said. "Our nags can't eat up trail the way theirs most like can. They've been livin' around this country ready at any time to do some fast trailin', and it ain't likely that a gang of renegades would be ridin' broncs that cain't travel fast."

"But if we have the gold—they'll kill us—and take it."

"If we don't have it, they'll torture us till we tell 'em," I said. All the time, of course, I was diggin' away like I was a prospector who'd just found a rich lode. Which, in fact, was the truth of the matter.

"It's the gold, all right!" I whooped.

"You mean you're goin' to try to escape, toting that gold along with us?" she cried.

"Sure, I am. There are only five men up thar. What's five men? Besides, they're fightin' for gold—and I'm fightin' for somethin' ten times more precious."

Back in my mind I must of had the idea—which wasn't formed any too clear—that if I had that gold in my possession I might use it to protect the girl. A bunch of desert renegades would find a girl like Jennie West pretty easy to look at—especially in that settin' of cactus and rocks. If I could show 'em somethin' else which would strike their fancy harder, I might have a weapon that would git results.

You've heard of the story of some one bein' trailed by a wolf pack, and throwin' over babies every now and then for to save hisself—or herself, whichever it was. And you've heard the story of a hombre winnin' a race by droppin' a gold apple every now and then, so's the person he was racin' would stop and pick same up? Well, those yarns came back to me.

"I'm goin' to tote this gold along with me," I said, and she could see there was no use arguin'.

She got the sawbuck saddles all cinched up, and discarded everythin' else we had.

Then, just as we seen the riders up thar near the rim, comin' out of the blind gulch agin, why, I dragged up the first kyack. Then I dragged another, and another. The leather thong at the mouth of one of the kyacks bust easy under my grip, and I stuck my arm into the mouth and came out with a fistful of gold nuggets.

My heart begun to pound like a bird's, and it pounded quick and fast in time with the hoofbeats of the riders racin' along the cañon rim lookin' for another trail to come down by.

It took me a good long while hoisting those kyacks to the backs of our three nags. One to each nag. The bags weighed as much as two heavy men—I mean each bag did. And it was all I could do to hoist one to a rock, then cinch one end to the back of a hoss, and then slide the weight over into the saw-buck.

By the time we heard the hoofbeats at the top of the gulch, which opened up into our bowlder wash, I had the three kyacks packed in the saddles and made fast. And I must say those poor ole soreback broncs sure did snort and stagger along under the weight.

The girl and me couldn't ride. I don't hardly have to say. We had to walk along, leadin' the pack hosses. If we'd rode it would of been just enough to bust their backs.

The gulch walls high up yonder at the top of the cañon were narrow cliffs of granite, and they brought down the sound of the hosses's hoofs like they were only a furlong away. But I knew well enough the renegades couldn't be any closer'n three or four miles.

Well, we started trailin' down the cañon. And by rough figurin' it looked as if we'd be overtook in just about thirty-five minutes.

They was no use in the wide world in racin', so I just picked out a narrow brush-filled gorge which opened up as a draw from the main cañon, on the side which the moonlight wasn't lightin'.

I had to kind of tear a trail through by pressin' into the chaparral head, an' draggin' the poor ole broncs behind me. The girl helped, and we pretty near tore the khaki from our backs in doin' the trick.

But when we'd drag the broncs in thar after us I pulled the branches of mesquite and other chaparral back so's we'd just about covered our tracks.

A bowlder wash don't leave clear tracks —particular in moonlight, and I reckon those bandits had figured on our makin' a straight break for the mouth of the cañon. Leastwise they weren't goin' to waste time huntin' into every side draw—which it would of taken all night and several days besides.

So they just galloped easily down the grade toward the open plain, passin' deep arroyos, dark as pitch, every furlong or so. If the gang had separated and each man taken one arroyo or gulch, one of 'em might have bumped into us. But he'd of bumped into somethin' else, too—which I mean myself.

I reckon they figured on that bein' a unwise procedure. Ole Tom Yucca, the Injun skunk, must of told 'em that I looked like a man that wouldn't be overly polite if cornered. Leastwise, I noticed that the riders stuck together as close as a brood of prairie chickens runnin' along the sand dunes.

They went tearin' by, gallopin' and crow-hoppin' over the bowlders and sand rifts and overturned barrel cactus. And Jennie West and myself peered through the thick brush which hid us. And keepin' a good holt on the noses of our broncs so's they wouldn't neigh, we saw the five riders passin'—and gallopin' off toward the mouth of the cañon.

After that we led our ole nags up the steep gulch, found a mule-deer trail which followed the watercourses higher and higher —allus keepin' in the shadow, and finally comin' out in the open moonlit plain of the mesa top.

There we had the best deal ole Dame Fortune ever give any man. A strong wind had come up—smellin' like sage, hot from the desert floor, and then mixed with the smell of pine—like you'll mix two likkers.

If that wind keeps up we're safe. It'll give us a day's head start on them coyotes, so's they can't find our tracks in this here alkali."

It kept up for a good long time. Almost until sunrise, in fact. And we sure put some trail betwixt us and that bandit gang.

But then the ole Lady Fortuna, she must of said to herself: "I dealt you two folks four aces just now—and you won a lot. So now I figure I'll just slip you a four-card flush."

Which same she did.

The wind dropped, and I began lookin' for bowlder stream beds where our nags wouldn't leave tracks; and likewise for some of those stretches of black lava which you find around Sody Mesa, or else sand and gypsum, where you kin ride a dray hoss without you leave any prints. But nary a spot could I find where our broncs didn't just brand ole Mother Earth, with marks as clear as these ink marks I'm makin' on this paper.

All as those bandits would have to do for the next day or two was to circle around that thar cañon wider and wider until they crossed our trail. They couldn't help findin' it. Another windstorm would have saved us—but the plains and mesas was as devoid of wind as of a dead hoss.

So we found ourselves smash up agin another problem. At first it didn't look like there was any other way out except to bury that gold. But that would just mean the whole sad story all over agin. Old man West's pards had buried it ten years ago. I wasn't sot on goin' through any such hell as they and Jennie had been through. Have it over with, says I.

On the other hand I didn't want to git rounded up with that gold in my possession. Couldn't bury it. Couldn't have 'em find it on me. Well, what sort of an answer could you think up to a problem like that?

Jennie West thought up one. And I will hand it to her for bein' a right slick analyzer. No assayist ever analyzed the gold in ore any slicker than Jennie West analyzed that problem of ours.

It all come about thisaway.

I figured we hadn't ought to be totin' those kyacks. The leather was all covered with adobe, and give evidence of havin'

been buried a good spell of time. What we orter do, says I, is to pack the gold in duffle bags, or somethin' that looks just like a ordinary miner's outfit.

Well, we had our duffle bags all right-o—although we'd emptied 'em of the canned stuff, and likewise of every tin cup, fryin' pan, pick and shovel, Dutch oven—or anything else we could possibly do without. We kep' the duffle bags for the simple reason that they weren't heavy, and we knew we'd have to get another grub pack at the nearest sutler's post we come to.

Then I says to myself, if we only had some food we could put the gold into the duffle bags and the food on top—so's no one would be suspicious.

But this was a fool idee. If we got caught by them renegades, the first thing they'd do would be to search everything we had, includin' the hoss's teeth.

"I know a way we can tote the gold and get away with it even if they search us," the girl said.

I told her I reckoned the sun was beginnin' to work her over or else she wouldn't have any such Jimpson-weed dream as that.

So she said: "Do you remember those cans we threw down into a cactus filled arroyo?"

I said, "Sure, but stick to the subject."

Then she said, "We'll get the cans and put the nuggets into 'em and tote the cans along with us."

I figured this over a dozen ways, and allowed that there was some sort of a reasonable hunch to it. But it would take a powerful lot of executive ability to make the idee practical.

Then I began to figure: we'd throwed away the cans about fifteen miles from the cañon where we'd dug up the gold. Durin' the night we'd made fifteen miles — and then the wind had dropped. For a mile or so we'd trudged along, wonderin' whether the Pearly Gates which we was certainly trailin' for were any bluer than those desert mirages which stretched all around us.

I worked this complicated arithmetic problem out in my haid and discovered that we weren't much more'n a few miles away — a little northward, to be exact— from the arroyo where we'd left the cans.

To branch off south to that cañon looked like the waste of some powerfully precious time, but bein' we were at that particular moment in a gypsum bed, and our tracks hard to follow, it would be a right clever stunt to branch off suddenly like a sage rabbit doublin' on his tracks when chased by a lobo.

So we went south.

When I looked at Jennie and noted how tired she was, and how her forehead was burned by the glare, and her mouth droopin' with exhaustion, and the light gone out'n her eyes—I figured then and there that I was goin' to take my time. No more trailin' on forced marches, makin' her hoof it across gypsum and sand dunes.

I was slated to meet that wolf pack, and they was no use hopin' for anythin' else. I might as well meet 'em on top of a good sleep, instead of on top of days of worryin' and watchin' and lyin' awake. Durin' the last week I had slept, all told, about as long as it takes a gopher to jump for his hole.

So we hoofed it, leadin' our heavy packed broncs over the dunes till we got to the arroyo where I'd throwed away the cans.

If I do say so myself, we made a pretty slick job with that trick. We had a little flour left in one of our duffle bags, and with this I told her to make some paste. Then I soaked off the labels of the cans.

Might you'll remember none of those cans had been opened more'n just a knife slice to let the air in and spoil the stuff. They all looked like absolute new cans.

Well, after soakin' off the labels I made a hole with my bowie knife in the side of the cans — not the end — and let all the canned food out. Then I got some bear grass and seed mesquite, which was dry as straw and stuffed it into the cans, and then squirmed a nugget or two into the hole so's it was in the middle of the can with straw clamped all around.

That would keep it from jinglin' in case some bimbo would come along and amuse hisself shakin' them cans. Which the girl

said wasn't likely. But I wasn't takin' chances. Just rummagin' around a kyack full of cans which had gold nuggets in 'em, would make a sound like a herd of cows with cow bells onto 'em.

After workin' this slick little trick, I pasted the labels over the holes. It bulged a little where the holes were at, but I smoothed these over. And unless a man had the previous intent of lookin' for gold in them cans he wouldn't be liable to notice the humps on the sides. They looked just like blisters in the labels which you'll find on a lot of cans down there in the desert.

Of course they was another thing aside from those blisters: the cans weighed much more'n they did before we started. But I figured that these desert renegades, or anybody else, prospectors and such—generally outfitted theirselfs for Sody Mesa so's they could travel light. They weren't experts in the weight of cans.

Besides, if you ever happened to notice a can that was extry heavy would you jump to the conclusion that it has gold into it? Not likely. You'd say this here boned ham ain't been boned properly. Or this here asparagus must have a lot of sand in it.

So we completed our job, and packed the stuff back again in our original duffle bags—in just the same way that reptile, Tom Yucca, had showed me how to pack a sawbuck. And I don't need to hardly say, we throw'd away the rawhide kyacks which had been the abode of that gold hoard in the first place.

Then I told the girl to lie down in the shade of one of the red bowlders and rip off a snooze. After she awoke she made me lie down.

And for the first time for what seemed a couple months, I was able to sleep. That was the relief we felt after stowin' away that hoard of nuggets.

When I woke up with a start and a yell I felt like I was able to fight a couple tribes of Yaqui Injuns.

Which was dam' lucky. Bein' we met up with the five bloodthirsty desert rats that very night.

And I'll start right in now describin' that meetin', which as I write it, I can't say it's much like writin' a love note to your sweetheart.

CHAPTER IX.

"THE FIGHTIN'S OVER!"

WE hit a trail which took us up between two giant mesas. Steep bluffs of granite were on both sides of us. This was a pass which I knew to be the shortest way out of the desert, and I figured if I could once git on the other side I might find a sutler's cabin or prospector's diggin's, and maybe have a chance to give the girl a good long rest. With the gold packed away in tin cans, I didn't object to runnin' into anybody or stoppin' anywheres.

But this particular pass I speak of was a uncomfortable locality. The bottom lands of the cañon was nothin' more'n a big bowlder wash, the bowlders bein' as high as a hoss. There were also plenty of side draws leadin' up into the sides of the cañon, like fissures in the solid granite. And a man could hide in same and ambush you without you havin' the slightest idea there was anythin' hidin' there aside from a few jack rabbits or chuckawallas.

It ain't hardly necessary to say that I kept well in the middle of the stream bed so's to avoid those side draws. How did I know but that our pursuers had seen us, from maybe the top of one of those mesas, and had watched us enterin' into that pass?

Well, as the pass got narrower, it was harder and harder to keep away from the little ravines in the cañon sides. Then, too, we soon found ourselfs in a maze of bowlders which we had to thread our way through 'em, not knowin' but that a bunch of men might pounce out on us at any minute.

Added to this feelin' of suspense the heat in that pass was like a blast furnace. No air came in except from the desert which was worse'n no air at all. And it had just stayed there and baked for days, suckin' up the pungent smell of sage so's you gagged when you tried to breathe. And if you tried to spit, all as you could get out of your mouth was a bit of alkali suds.

The worst of it all was my eyes were burnin' and bloodshot, and every bowlder I looked at seemed to simmer like it was a flapjack in a pan just before it swells up.

At first I walked ahead of the girl, peerin' careful like behind each bowlder, but not findin' any one waitin' for me, I got more and more used to walkin' right up to a bowlder and passin' it. It wasn't much use waitin' a few minutes to get up nerve to pass a bowlder when they was miles and miles of 'em stretchin' ahead of us as far as the eye could see.

Of course I kind of prided myself that if any poor fellow thought he could jump out from behind a rock and pot me, he'd find hisself on the sand first tryin' to digest a slug of lead.

But it was my eyes that begun to worry me. The waverin' rocks and the blue stretches of mirage which was just a furlong or so away from us all the afternoon sure got me dizzy. I wasn't afraid of a man hidin' behind a bowlder. I knew what he'd look like. But what would a man look like jumpin' out of a mirage?

I've seen a mule deer in a mirage, the surface of the fake water reachin' up to his withers, and dam' if it didn't look like the critter was actually swimmin' in water! If I saw a band of men swimmin' along thataway would I be able to do any crack shootin'? Most like if I aimed at their chest I'd maybe hit a barrel cactus a couple furlongs farther off.

I got to be as nervous as a cat. We trudged along without sayin' nary a word to each other. Part of the time we walked side by side, because the girl seemed to feel safer if she was touchin' me. But when we passed those bowlders one after another, I made her drop behind a ways. She wasn't nervous. She was somethin' like a little child puttin' her whole trust in a grown up. It was up to me to do the worritin' and the fightin'.

Well, it all came so gallopin' quick that it makes my stomach do a turn when I write about it.

There we were, leadin' our pack hosses mile after mile through that pass—bowlders, cholla cactus, sand, sojuara cactus, bowlders, sand, bisnaga cactus, more bowlders. Then bingo, a streak of light shoots out from over the tip of a red rock like a snake's tongue.

Not a sound for hours except the clip-clop of our broncs' hoofs and our own sore feet shufflin' up the sand. Then that ear-splittin' crack of a six-gun.

I answered it back with my own six-gun, and the two shots went echoin' from one granite wall to the other like they was started by one blast.

From the top of the bowlder a ragged lookin' man rolled down to one side and out on the sand in full view.

That all happened in the first second. Then came another streak of fire from a clump of sojuara and mesquite a little ways off. And another from between two big bowlders a hundred yards up the pass.

The slugs whistled past my ears, cut a tuft of hair from one of the broncs I'd just been leadin', ripped into my sombrero.

I winged one more man—and seen him drop down like a jack-in-the-box that's got a busted spring in it—back into the chaparral where he was hidin' at.

I tried to fire at each place I seen those streaks of light and those sombrero tips, but all of a sudden somethin' happened to me. I can't quite remember that I felt even a sting or a burn—but I tried to lift my gun for to throw it on another victim, when I found my arm hangin' limp and the six-gun lyin' on the sand where it had just jumped easylike out of my hand.

All this I've just described couldn't of took more than four or five seconds. I might even say it lasted as long as it takes me to fire two shots—which ain't much longer than it takes a horned toad to lick up a fly.

The girl ran to me as I stood thar swayin' and holdin' my hand tryin' to ask myself what in tarnation had happened.

For reasons which you can readily understand, the bandits didn't try to drop me after that. They didn't have any hankerin' to shoot the girl who'd throwed her arms about me. And for that matter they didn't want to kill me. If I was the bird who had come to the desert to get that gold, they weren't goin' to be in any hurry to finish me. They'd have to git the gold first.

Well, the next thing that happened I seen four ragged lookin' scarecrows walkin' toward me from every direction. They'd hid their mounts in a draw somewheres so's they were all on foot. I had dropped one of the five renegades and finished him.

I'd creased another—or rather I'd plugged him in the shoulder, which you'd call more'n a crease, and he come staggerin' along like as if he wanted to shoot me down then and thar. But I seen one of his pards stop him. The wounded man was a big Chulo with hair in his ears and nose, and a horse mane hangin' down under his sombrero.

Another hombre, a brown-skinned coyote with broken teeth and a big splotch of a birthmark on his face, came shufflin' up to me.

From another direction comes a fat barrel of a tramp without no neck and with little red pig's eyes.

They was one more—a undersized wisp of a man with white hair, a wrinkled and speckled mouth and a flat nose. It was that crawlin' ole reptile Tom Yucca.

"The fightin's over," the fat one said, as he come along with his pards—all of 'em coverin' me. "From now on we kin carry out our negotiations like gentlemen."

CHAPTER X.

PRIZE PACKAGES.

ONE of the renegades picked up my six-gun just as I leaned down for to get it with my left hand. Another give me a shove, so's I staggered back. Another took the girl by her wrist and yanked her from me. I was goin' to give him a left-uppercut, but I felt the warm steel of ole Tom Yucca's gat pressin' agin my neck.

I saw plain enough that the game was up as far as any fightin' on my part was concerned. I couldn't very well clean up four armed men with my fists—specially when one of my fists was hangin' limp with the hot blood tricklin' all over it, and the muscles in my arm stiffenin' up and congealin'.

As soon as the renegades saw that they had me prisoner the fat hombre barks out in a high voice like a coyote. "Search them pack hosses, men."

His three henchmen made a wild dive for the broncs, and in the next minute they were rummagin' through the bags.

I reckon their first idee was to slip the packs to the ground, but findin' them too heavy they just unstrapped 'em and searched 'em while they was still on the hosses. They could do this—as you maybe can understand—bein' the bags were restin' in sawbuck saddles.

The fat one which they called the "maestro," he got all in a fever watchin' the men searchin' for the gold. With his hands tremblin' and his breath comin' hard, he strapped my hands behind my back, not bein' overly gentle as to how he handled my wounded arm. He didn't pay no attention to the girl, except to make sure she wasn't heeled. Then he told us to both stay where we were at, if we didn't want to git plugged on the spot. The girl ripped off a piece from the sleeve of her own shirt and with her canteen started dressin' my crease.

The big breed which I'd wounded in the shoulder, why he was too excited huntin' for that gold to stop and fix his own wound. As for the other renegade which I'd dropped, nary a one of the others paid him any attention. He just lay thar groanin' his last groans, and a little later kicked off.

Meanwhile the maestro and his three henchmen went after them packs. They were tremblin', gruntin', spewing oaths, and goin' half insane. I said they was like wolves—well, they was more like four hogs over a trough that's just been filled with corn swill.

You see they'd made up their minds pretty sure that the gold was in those duffle bags. What else could they think? They'd seen me diggin' a hole right in that cañon where ten years ago ole man West had held 'em off for a long, glorious fight.

They had gone back there and looked at those holes I'd dug, after we'd escaped. It was as clear as daylight that those holes weren't dug for to find any surface float. A mucker don't dig down six feet under

mesquite high up on a ledge of a stream bed for to find surface float.

If he was followin' the source of a deposit—like a alluvial fan, just above where he'd found some float, why then he might dig holes like I'd been diggin'. But this wasn't a fan. It wasn't near the mouth of any ravine where the detritus would be washed out. When they found those holes —as I learned later they'd found 'em—they knew well enough that I'd dug up the gold hoard and toted it off.

So naturally enough, they figured they'd glom onto it as soon as they stopped us with those three pack hosses.

But all as they found was a pile of cans!

I'd hate to describe the faces on those four varmints as they turned to us, after discoverin' that they'd been gypped. Their eyes was pale—blazin' with a white kind of fire. They looked daft. They looked like they'd et Jimpson weed and was goin' to tear us to pieces. The wounded Chulo and the little Spanish breed showed their teeth like mad dogs. They was all frothin', spittin' oaths. And when they came back to us, the girl let out a scream.

"What did you do with it?" the fat hombre cried in a soft, high voice.

"Do with what?" I says.

"You know what—with those nuggets you dug up in the cañon back yonder."

"I'm a mucker huntin' surface float," I says.

The fat one turned white and his lips trembled. He found hisself up ag'in' a stone wall. One thing that made him madder'n ever was that I wasn't exactly the man he wanted me to be. You see he'd been waitin' all these years for the little red-headed boy to grow up and come back for his fortune.

It kind of stumped him to find that a girl had come back, and with her a man who was a good lot more'n thirty. I ain't exactly a white-headed ole granddad, but I ain't a twenty-year ole kid, either. What with my life as a cavy wrango and night herdin', my skin didn't look very much like a pink-faced boy, and those renegades could all see easy enough that I must of been over thirty.

This got 'em all mad, because it didn't fit into their ideas of what should of happened. It always makes a man mad to have a pet theory he's worked on for ten years upset, so's he's proved wrong.

"Thees hombre comes to the desert for the gold hoard!" the little Spaniard said. "Maybe he ees frand of the boy who knew where the gold ees buried."

"That's the answer," the fat maestro said. "And git this straight, stranger," he says pointin' a shakin' pudgy finger at me: "You ain't goin' to go back. You dug up that gold hoard and you dropped it somewheres. Tell us where it is or—"

"Or what?" I says, findin' myself the only calm man in the whole shebang.

"Or you'll be sorry you was ever born—and so will your wife here or whoever she is."

This gave me a jolt, speakin' of the girl thataway—and my forehead turned wet and cold. But I still looked like I was calm.

"Do you hide behind bowlders and plug every mucker that comes thisaway huntin' for float?" I says.

"We do—if we're sure first that he's the man we want—like we're sure of you. And if you ain't the man we want we're goin' to kill you anyways for bumpin' off one of our pards—"

"And for this wound," the big Chulo says through his gray lips, and clutchin' at his bleedin' shoulder.

"That's all right, Lazare," the maestro says to the Chulo. "You're goin' to git your revenge. We'll leave you do the torturin'."

"Do it now," the Spaniard says.

"Kill 'im quick," ole Tom Yucca, the reptile cries. "Is dangerous hombre. He kill 'um all of us with six-gun."

"We ain't goin' to kill him," the maestro says softly. "That's too good for him." And turning on me, he adds: "It would of been luckier for you if that thar crease in your arm had been somewheres else—where it would of finished you good and proper. You've got a long hard couple days in front of you, stranger, unless you're wise enough to tell us where you hid that gold."

"You think you can get anything out of me?" I shot back pretendin' indigna-

tion. "You think you can make me tell where gold is that I never heard of—me that's been prospectin' in the desert for years and never found pay dirt enough to buy seed for a sage hen—"

"Now wait," the maestro said, wipin' the sweat from his face and kind of coolin' off all of a sudden. "Just wait. *You* ain't goin' to tell us nothin'. We'll let it go at that. But the gal here—as soon as she sees what we're goin' to do to you—well *she's* the one that 'll tell. I'm sure glad they's a woman in this party. Women can't keep secrets."

"What are you goin' to do?" Jennie West cried out in the dolefullest, scaredest tone I ever heard a girl spill out.

"Nothin' right now," the fat maestro said, grinnin' and pretendin' to be chivalrous. "We're goin' to eat."

I found out right then that these loboes hadn't et anything for days. As soon as ole Tom Yucca started roundin' the gang up, and tellin' 'em that he'd found some one trailin' into that locality which they'd been watchin' for ten years, why all his pards dropped everythin', got their cayuses, and started on the hunt.

Yucca had told 'em that he'd destroyed our food pack and that we couldn't trail out of the desert again without we stopped to get more chow somewheres. He was right, we'd finished up all the supplies we had aside from those cans, and we were as helpless now as a half-starved cow lyin' in the sand, waitin' for the coyotes to end her suffering.

Still and all, they didn't lose no time gettin' our trail. And in doin' so, they'd covered miles of rocks and sand and cactus-filled gorges, without a meal. The result was we found ourselves now made prisoners by four bloodthirsty wolves who weren't any too agreeable when they had their stomachs full. You kin imagine what they were like when they were ragin' hungry. If I ever git tortured again, here's hopin' the man who does the dirty work will have a good big meal first.

Well, the maestro, bein' a fat man, felt the want of food more'n the others.

"We got plenty of time with these birds," he says, referrin' to me and the girl. "They'll hold out for a few days maybe, a few weeks for all we know. The other two hombres held out. And this here cuss with the hoss face and gray eyes—" he was referrin' to me—"why he don't look like he'll come through any quicker'n the others. We'll take our time. It's the girl who's goin' to tell. But she won't do it right off the bat. In other words, let's git some chow, and think this over."

I sure was glad to hear those words.

"But they ain't any chow left in their packs," one of the gang said. "They've et up everythin' except the cans."

"Might you'd like to try some of that canned stuff," I think I said.

I don't remember that any one laughed at my little joke. As I said they was all ragin' hungry—and one of their own gang—ole Tom Yucca—had already spoiled all the canned stuff.

The maestro turned his little pig eyes on me and squinted hard.

"How come you're still totin' those cans?" he asked.

This made my heart do a flop.

I thought a minute and then said: "Why not? I toted 'em down here to the desert from Mule City, so's the two of us could live high."

"*Live*—ay?" he snorted. "If you et one of them cans how long do you reckon you'd live? Have you opened one of 'em in the last couple days or so?"

"I opened two or three back yonder when we were goin' to have chow, and found that they were rotten."

"*Bueno,*" one of the breeds said. "Tom Yucca he punch holes in all of them."

"You don't say so?" I answered. "If I'd known that I'd of thrown 'em all away."

This kind of satisfied them that I was just a tenderfoot who didn't know anything about what had happened. They grinned at me like they enjoyed the joke I'd played on myself, totin' those heavy cans for miles of trail, and thereby gettin' caught.

The maestro didn't laugh. He was too hungry. "Throw them damn' cans out and take these pack hosses to the nearest Injun pueblo and trade 'em for a good big grubstake." He said this to the little tooth-

less Spaniard. And then he turned to me and said:

"The rest of us will set here and wait till you come back. I know a good game to work up our appetites."

By this I knew that he was goin' to start in torturin' me right away. The girl clung to me like a leech. She was too scairt to cry now—or to even speak. She just sat there alongside of me, her hands clingin' to mine, like as if to break my fingers. I didn't know what to say to comfort her. They wasn't much to be said. The comin' hours were beginnin' to look powerful black.

And then to cap the climax somethin' else happened. It was enough to take the heart out of the hopefullest mortals as was ever picked out for to be the devil's goat.

Up till now there was the excitement of havin' that gold—and of havin' gypped the regenades by hidin' it in them cans. It sort of buoyed us up. But this one bit of satisfaction to which we'd been clingin' in our despair, like to a straw—it was snatched from us.

The man with the cow-jaw birthmark was walkin' off to the arroyo where the renegades had hid their hosses. He led a hoss out into the open and was tightenin' the cinches when the maestro called to him.

"Ain't no use of your tradin' those pack hosses for grub, Santaro," he says. "We need pack hosses in our business. All as you have to do is to take them along with you—and take them cans likewise—"

"What good are the cans, maestro?" the Spaniard said.

"If you go to Gila Jo's pueblo you kin trade 'em. Ole Gila Jo and his tribe folk are fond of canned stuff," the maestro said. "You kin give him the cans for all the flour and bacon and corn he'll spare you. He's a ole trade-rat and he'll figure it's a pretty good bargain."

"But the cans are rotten," said the Spaniard.

"Gila Jo won't know that—"

"He'll find out when he open the cans," the other renegade said wisely enough.

"Them Navaho Indians are like coyotes," said the maestro. "They wait for meat to ripen afore eatin' same."

The little ole reptile Tom Yucca laughed a dry chuckle which I'd heard before this, and which sent a shiver through me. "Hyu-skookum!" he cried. "Gila Jo will take-um cans and fillum belly with poison."

The splotch-faced Spaniard began to see the joke, and they all strapped the duffle bags together again, chucklin' over their trick.

I noticed that one of the cans had dropped to the sand. But the renegades didn't see it. Them cans weren't worth a whoop—so far as they knew—but my eye caught it as it lay there on the ground winkin' at the sun. It came in for a good trump card later; and that's why I'm mentionin' it now.

The girl and I watched them cinchin' up the duffle bags, our hearts sinkin'. Up on top of each bag I'd left a few cans with the food still in 'em and the only hope I had now was that if Gila Jo started eatin' that stuff he'd open one of the cans which had food into it—instead of nuggets. But this was a pretty slim hope.

A little later we seen Santaro the Spaniard all hunched up in his saddle, and ridin' off, leadin' our heavy-laden ole nags up the cañon.

After awhile the maestro turned his pig eyes to me and I seen a light in them—like you see an alkali desert will make a white flame in a prospector's eyes when he's dyin' of thirst.

The girl gripped me hard, and I told her to have courage and not to give away the secret no matter what happened.

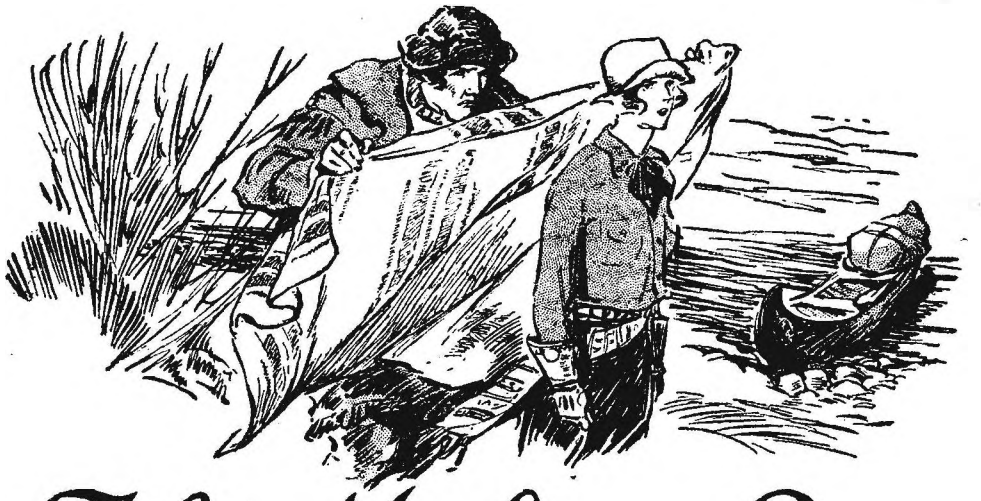
"What's the use?" she said. "The gold's lost."

"Not yet," I said. But I didn't have the slimmest hope or idee as how we'd ever get it back again.

Then the maestro—who was still glarin' at me out of his pig's eyes, and lickin' his lips, he says:

"All right, Yucca—go get some sage sticks and light a fire."

TO BE CONCLUDED NEXT WEEK



His Mother's Son

By FLORIA HOWE BRUESS

THE two men, Indian and master, puffed on their pipes thoughtfully, as their eyes swept the snowy bosom of Goose Lake.

"I want to save the dogs, or we would go up and meet them," Brissac said finally.

His Indian nodded. "Each minute flying on the wings of time brings the trappers nearer. Let us await them here, so the dogs may travel as eagerly to the post as the hunter's spirit seeks the Happy Hunting Ground."

"So shall we return to shore and erect our wigwam for the night. For the trappers also will camp until the bright eye of dawn drives the darkness before it." Brissac spoke in Cree.

The Indian turned the sled by the rib.

"*Marche!*" Brissac shouted to the dogs, and the little cavalcade sped swiftly over the snowy ice to the land.

Darkness was falling as the men reached shore. They selected their camping ground and beat down the snow with their snowshoes. Taking their axes from the sled they cut green spruce boughs and laid them on the hard-packed snow space.

Unrolling the light, though very strong, silk tent, they suspended it by the ridge rope; its corner ropes and side strings were made fast to the tree boughs. The light tin stove was taken from the sled, the stovepipe jointed and set up on the edge of the green billets.

While Brissac packed the snow around the edges of the tent, the Indian kindled a fire from the inflammable birchbark, and set a big pail of snow on the little stove. When fish for the dogs was thawed they were released from their harness and fed. Then they curled up on the snow; carefully arranging their thick, bushy tails over their faces, they slept.

The stew of moose meat, rice and evaporated vegetables simmered in the aluminium tightly covered kettle, while the men dried their mittens, duffels and caribou hide boots by the fiercely hot little stove. Darkness came as they ate their appetizing stew and fresh baked bannock, followed by tin cups of strong black tea.

A crooning wind sang through the treetops; gradually the night sounds of forest fur bearing creatures came on the wind.

The laughter of a loon came to them, a laughter that said soon the ice will be breaking up in the lakes.

The howl of the wolf held a new note, for the mating season had just passed, and the wolves hunted in couples. The female bears in their dens had brought forth their cubs as they slept in their hibernation. Before long their breathing would become uneasy, restless, for spring was near.

"I'm turning in," Brissac said, breaking the long silence. The candle was extinguished. The tent became a mere dot in that wilderness.

As they sat at breakfast the following day, a faint, distant tinkle of bells came to them on the still air. Brissac sprang to his feet with a catlike quickness.

He picked up his field glasses and adjusted the powerful lens to his eyes as he stepped to the shore.

He studied the long line of dark smudges moving down the lake. "Good! There are three teams—"

"The trappers you think?"

"Yes, for the sleds are heavily loaded. They are moving slowly."

As Brissac spoke he thrust his feet through the thongs of his rackets. "Make ready," he said to his companion.

As he skimmed over the ice he pulled his parka hood over his head and drew on his rabbit skin mittens. In silent admiration the Indian stood at the flap of the tent, watching the skimming figure.

Never had he seen a man make the speed Brissac did on snowshoes. In a long, sweeping motion the man literally flew over the snowy ice.

The small black eyes of the Indian widened with wonder.

"He comes with the speed of a stag," they said to each other. With one accord the teams paused.

As Brissac drew up beside them, his quick glance traveled the length of the three large sleds. They were practically filled with pelt bales, pressed down, and wrapped securely with long caribou hide strips.

"Which way do you set your eyes, my brothers?" he asked in perfect Cree.

The oldest Indian looked at him sharply.

"To Cumberland Post," he answered briefly.

"To let the white factor there rob you as the wolverine robs your traps?" Brissac spat indifferently as he spoke. The Indians sensed the contempt in the action.

"The wolverine is our enemy. He spoils our furs. Our white brother of the Big Company is our friend; he gives us many things in exchange—" The three Indians drew closer together, as the old Cree became their spokesman.

"The things I shall give you are as thick as the berries on the summer bushes, as thick as the leaves of the forest. I am not the wolverine. I do not cheat as does the white father at the post—" Brissac paused.

"Where are the things that are thick as berries, in the berry moon?" a younger Cree asked. No flicker of curiosity crossed his face as he gazed beyond the man's figure across the ice and snow.

"On the shore in my tepee," Brissac answered indifferently.

The Indians glanced at each other. "It matters not. We go on to the post," the old Indian said.

"You would travel twenty miles to take a wolverine-torn red fox from your trap when twenty feet down your trap line waits a prime silver fox for you to release?"

Scornfully Brissac turned. His eyes had seen the indecision in the faces before him.

"Let us see what he has," a younger Indian urged. "If the trade be good, then can we return to our lodges. The way to the post is long."

The three stood, their eyes on Brissac's retreating back. Each one of them disliked the long, cold trip, yet each one of them owed for many things at the company store.

Still—next winter the score could be paid. There would be no black cross put against their account if but one winter's furs were not brought.

"When the mist sprays, there is water ahead," said the third Cree. "Our stranger brother has said many words. Though the lightning cuts the sky and comes not earthward no harm is done. Therefore no harm can come in seeing if those many words spell truth?"

" Amik has said," the old Indian replied. Each took his place by his richly burdened sled; a word to the dogs; the teams swung around, and followed Brissac.

He heard them coming, but he did not turn his head, nor did a smile lighten his dark face. Gradually he increased his speed, and the musical jingle of bells behind him told that the trappers were making effort to keep up with him.

Through the field glasses Brissac's Indian saw them coming. From a moose skin bag he extracted a quart bottle of whisky. He pulled the cork, placed a tin cup in readiness, replenished the fire. The small tent glowed with heat doubly welcome to weary travelers.

Brissac halted at the edge of the lake and removed his rackets. " It is well, my brothers," he said. " The Great Spirit has whispered words of wisdom in your ears."

The trappers moved after him in single file, but they did not remove their snowshoes. As the Indian appeared in the tent flap they paused.

" He is but my servant." Brissac held back the tent flap. " Enter," he said briefly.

Each bronze hand fell on the razor-edged knife in each belt. Swift, piercing eyes took in every detail as they entered the tent. The warmth smote gratefully on their chilled bodies. The Indian filled the pint cup with the liquor, then passed it first to Brissac, who drank deep.

The watchful trappers thus assured there was no poison in the cup, gazed at it with glistening eyes. It passed from hand to hand, and was returned empty.

" Before you depart we shall drink again to the wisdom that directed you to my tepee," Brissac said gravely.

He turned to the sled that stretched the length of the tent. In silence he took several Ross rifles, boxes of shells, bolts of bright plaid cotton cloth, strings of brilliant hued beads, cans of tobacco, tea, meal, rice, and evaporated vegetables, and placed them on the spruce bough flooring. From a large moose bag the Cree extracted bottles of rum and whisky, setting them in a row.

Brissac's keen ears heard a sharply drawn breath as he bent over a twenty-pound sack of sugar. He gave no sign of the satisfaction he felt; his face remained impassive, devoid of expression.

" There are many other things in my sled; hatchets and axes, if such are desired," he said.

The Indians slipped their feet from the thongs of their rackets. Each went to his sled and returned with his bale of pelts. The bargaining had begun. The beaver skins were prime. Twenty pelts bought a rifle and two dozen shells.

" My brother speaks truth," the old Indian said, his customary craft forgotten as the powerful liquor sang in his veins. " The post factor gives us only a rifle for twenty-five beaver skins, so has his singing birds deceived us—"

A splendid black fox, worth easily five hundred dollars, was exchanged for three bottles of rum, ten pounds of sugar, five cans of tobacco, a bolt of plaid cloth and half a dozen strings of beads! For an hour the bargaining progressed.

Again the pint cup was filled; again it passed from eager hand to hand. It was a forbidden delight to the Crees, for the Canadian law prohibits the sale or exchange of intoxicating liquors to the Indians.

They gulped the fiery liquor with gusto. A pause was called while Brissac filled each man's pipe with tobacco. Squatting on their heels, the men smoked silently for a time, their bronze faces meditative.

The bargaining continued. A little later nothing remained save a glorious silver fox, which belonged to the old Indian. He had reserved it for the end.

Within ten minutes Brissac had bought it for three quarts of rum, a ten-pound sack of rice, a white blanket with a blue border and a bolt containing ten yards of red and green cloth. The Indians were satisfied.

This strange man had given them more for their pelts than the White Father at the post, for, above all else, they valued the liquor.

When the exchanges were packed securely in their sleds, the old Indian stood before Brissac.

" When the harvest moon hangs red in

the sky we go to the post for our winter supplies. The White Father will ask his red children—" he paused suggestively.

" Fear not the false music of his singing birds. Tell him sickness blew her hot breath over your lodge—"

Brissac's voice was soft. The Cree turned away. In a moment the jingle of harness bells came musically as the teams headed back to their homes.

The two men gazed at the shimmering, glowing beauty of the prime furs. Deep lustrous beaver, the pale shimmer of the silver fox, the glory of the rare black fox, challenged the soft, full beauty of the ermines, martens, lynx and fisher. A mound of lustrous red fox pelts was counted carefully, Brissac making entries in his notebook.

" These are fine muskrats," he said as he counted the pelts. " Those Indians had a big season—" his voice glowed. " Break camp while I bale the pelts. Get the stove out first; I want it entirely cold before it goes on the sled—"

Brissac's fine dark eyes gleamed. " The gods of the traps sent us many fine pelts, Hi-lo-wa." His voice was warm and eager.

" The freezing moon has smiled upon us," the Indian assented gravely. The big sled was packed, each man carried a bale of pelts on his shoulders. The journey had begun.

" I do not return with you," Brissac said.

The purchases for his Indian had been made. The sled was loaded with provisions and merchandise. Two hundred dollars was the man's share for pelts that would bring Brissac ten thousand when sold by his outside partner. But the Indian knew nothing of this. He was content with his share.

" I go to find new trails," Brissac continued. " During the moon of the new blossoms, to the moon of the harvest, I shall seek the trapper's trails. I shall send you word where to meet me with the dogs and sled, in the season of the Aurora. Let your lips be shut as tight as the steel trap closes on the leg of the fox."

The Indian looked at him gravely.

" As long as the sun shines and the water runs." Solemnly he swore the Cree oath. He touched his hand to his forehead and, turning, stole noiselessly from the room.

Brissac stood by the window staring into the narrow street. " This has been a profitable winter," he told himself. " Three fine shipments. It is wise, however, to leave this territory. When spring unlocks the lakes I shall canoe down to Norway House. I must also ascertain if there is much talk among the factors."

He drew out his notebook, and scanned its contents carefully.

II.

THE weeks passed slowly for the man as he lay in Woody awaiting the unlocking of Moose Lake. Eagerly he watched the mounting sun as it turned snowdrifts into rivulets, set the ice in the lake to groaning and struggling in its long imprisonment. Nightly the owls and loons hooted and laughed at the quacking ducks and the honking geese as they flew to the opening water.

The wind blew free and unsullied from the Pole; untarnished with the soot and murk of the cities. The dazzling sun, the blue infinitude of sky was not besmirched by the miasmatic breath of crowded cities.

The lakes and rivers realized in some mute sense that the holding grasp of winter was weakened. The small streams and creeks burst their bounds, flowing with a flood rush and tear into the Nelson.

The ice became water rotted, cracked and separated. With a roar the long silenced water lifted its voice in a shout of freedom.

Under the rapidly melting drifts the grass shone green and lush; brown trees betrayed the throb of life as the delicate green tracery revealed the swift running sap. The bosom of nature heaved as though awakening from a long, deep sleep.

Brissac had his canoe in readiness. A big four fathom birchbark, comfortably filled with his outfit and provisions.

" I am an Easterner on a summer's vacation," he said to himself, a sinister smile glistening his eyes.

Moose Lake was not entirely open, yet

enough free water ran to assure fairly safe passage, and Brissac was anxious to leave Woody.

He put off from shore, a light glowing in his dark eyes, as he felt the swift flood water beneath him. The music of its wild freedom filled the air.

Cautiously he picked his way. As the days passed the lake became more open, and the ice disappeared rapidly. On the water from sunrise to sunset, he finally came into Cedar Lake.

Down that he intended paddling until he swung into Lake Winnipeg and Norway House, the post erected on its shore.

The days grew warmer, trees and brush burst into leaf. The swift short summer had been born, yet Brissac dipped his paddle oblivious to the exquisite marvel.

His mind was visualizing the beaver who built his dam in the sparkling offshoots of the lake, also the mink and the muskrat that lined the silent green shores.

"When I have made a hundred thousand, then the trails shall no longer know me," he murmured. "Another year—or two—"

He paused, his eyes sweeping the lake shore. A cluster of buildings lay before him.

"A-a-h. Norway House!" he said softly.

III.

"I THINK it is an outrage!" Elizabeth's voice trembled a little as she interrupted. Her father looked up from the letter he was reading aloud. "Excuse me," she added hastily. "Go on."

The man continued reading: "Even the Mounted are at a loss. There seems to be no clew whatever, and the Indians refuse to talk. For years they have had liquor in fairly large quantities; each spring many posts report a severe slump in furs. Cumberland House Post suffered very heavily this year, also Churchill Post.

"But the worse part of it is the demoralizing effect this almost raw alcohol has had on those who obtained it. You know Eagle Eye—as good and straight an Indian as one could wish for. He killed his squaw with a hatchet and slaughtered his four children! After he was in custody the Cree said he remembered nothing about it, and would not believe his family were dead. That is only one instance. There are many more, of which I have told you in previous letters—"

The reader paused as the girl gave a little gasp of indignation.

"How perfectly terrible," she said fiercely.

John Webster folded up the letter. "That's about all," he said quietly. "You see, Elizabeth, the Indians never get whisky any more. The law has been rigidly enforced, and when they do get it it makes them crazy. The redskin is particularly susceptible to firewater. It arouses every slumbering savage instinct. If they had enough of it whole tribes would go on the warpath and massacre every soul in their post town—"

"Horrible!" the girl breathed. "And this is the fifth season. Surely the Mounted should find these men—"

"Surely. But they don't. The men must have the cunning of fiends—"

"What do they do with all those furs? How can they dispose of them? All the factors are warned—"

"They must be shipped out," Webster said gravely. "Yet all express shipments are being watched; suspicious consignments are opened and examined. An eye is kept on every shipping office in this part of the country, and nothing has been discovered."

"The Northwest Mounted are working among the trappers?"

The man smiled at the fierce little note in the girl's beautiful voice.

"Fred does not say in his letter, but no doubt they are not overlooking any corner. You know our Mounted—they will get their man or men—if it takes years."

John Webster paused thoughtfully. He had spent his life in the North, as missionary and minister. From Hudson's Bay to Lake Winnipeg the gentle, kindly man was known and loved.

When his daughter was but a child, and the red death—smallpox—had raged from the lower water of James Bay to Port Nelson, he had, oblivious to all peril, gone among the sick, ministering, comforting.

The girl's mother had yielded her life when the child was born. Elizabeth was a veritable daughter of the snows. She had grown into magnificent womanhood, and the bond between father and daughter was unusually close and sympathetic.

The company had built a small school house, a building of logs and clay; there Elizabeth taught the children of the post; white, red, and breed.

The two walked along the narrow road, each deep in thought. Presently Elizabeth raised her eyes and stared ahead. They widened in surprise, and she pressed her father's arm.

A man was coming along the narrow dirt walk. He was gazing about curiously, quite evidently a stranger. His splendidly muscular figure was not tall, yet gave an impression of height, so erect, military was his carriage.

There was an air of hauteur, of cold superiority in the turn of his head, crowned with remarkably thick black hair. His manner gave an impression of quiet power.

He came to a pause as he reached the couple who had watched his approach. The setting sun glinted on his remarkable hair, casting a blue-black tinge, as he swept off his felt hat.

"Can you tell me where I may find a man who can help me repair my canoe? I'm a stranger here." He gazed intently into the beautiful depths of Elizabeth's jewel-like eyes, then made a courteous inclination of his head toward Webster. "I have come down the lakes and rivers, spending a summer in quest of fish and game; and—"

Elizabeth colored faintly as she became conscious of her protracted stare.

"Certainly," her father answered. "You will find a settlement of Indians back in the woods. Many of them are expert builders of canoes."

"Thank you." The man replaced his hat and walked on.

"What a remarkable looking man, dad," the girl said a little breathlessly.

"Very handsome, very polished. The outside is full of them, child, but we have few of them here." They walked on to their little home.

Brissac pitched his silk tent on the shore of the lake. He slung his canvas hammock between two great trees, and put his camp in order, while the Indian repaired his canoe.

The following morning was Sunday, and Brissac strolled through the settlement. As he passed the log-built church he heard voices singing. A pale smile was on his inscrutable dark face as he mounted the three steps. The little building was filled, children sat in the front benches, wide-eyed, absorbed; behind them the breeds with their wives; the Indians with their squaws.

Brissac stood in the shadow of the opened door. The singing had ended as he entered. He listened to the short prayer; at its conclusion Elizabeth stood up; her voice full and of a velvet quality, rose in the music of the old hymn: "Onward, Christian Soldiers." Presently the tap of moccasined feet on the bare floor was keeping time to the martial music.

"Now everybody sing the chorus," she cried.

Again the pale smile lay on the man's face as he listened to the children's voices struggling with the English words; the strong accent in the French breed tones, the guttural humming of the adult Indians. He waited for the conclusion of the service, his eyes never moving from Elizabeth's fine face. That day he accepted an invitation to midday dinner at the missionary's home.

IV.

"AND so I was glad to come back," the girl concluded.

"I can hardly understand that; a woman young, beautiful, charming—I should think the life of a great city would interest her. Surely you must get lonely here?" Brissac's voice was casual, friendly.

"Lonely for *what?*" the girl turned her sparkling jewel-like eyes on the man. "Does the clatter and roar of a city compare to that? Listen."

The waves of the lake came laughing to the shore, tinkling against stones; singing as they sprang up the grassy edge, there to pause a moment in the purple shadows cast by the great trees. Then they curved with a blue flash, whirled and eddied, and went

romping back to the deep water that lay shimmering under a turquoise sky. The air was laden with the fragrance of spruce and pine.

"I hear it," the man said without removing his eyes from the girl's glowing face.

"Do you think it compares to the clatter of a city like Winnipeg?" They walked on slowly. She stooped to pick a handful of the many tinted latyrus, and the orange and crimson kierachium. "Sunset colors—if I put caribou moss around their stems they will keep fresh for days."

She pinned a latyrus on his hunting coat. The fragrance of her hair, a fragrance of sweet-scented air and sunshine came to him. The pupils of his dark eyes dilated.

"My father thought I might be happier in Winnipeg, so he took me for a visit with my mother's sister who lives there—"

"And?" Brissac suggested.

"After a short time I was wild to get back. And I love my work here, too. I love the children; they are bright, and so anxious to learn, and—yes, I pity the Indians." She paused and faced Brissac, a little defiant look on her face.

"Why?" he asked.

"Oh, many reasons." Her voice was impatient. "We must return now; I have work to do."

"Stop and have tea with me at my camp?" Brissac spoke indifferently, but his heart seemed to pause as he waited for her answer.

"You Easterners!" Elizabeth laughed. "We don't have afternoon tea 'way up here. How ignorant you are of post life."

"You are a teacher. Instruct me," he suggested.

"My first lesson is— Do not take tea. It spoils your supper."

"Elizabeth," Brissac's voice was low. "A month of sweet days have passed since the day I saw you first. You have bound my heart in chains. Chains linked of that strange sweet thing called love." He fixed his flaming eyes on her lovely face.

The girl gazed at him, fascinated, half fearful. His remarkable beauty was a potent thing, the man's magnetism was undeniable.

"Henri," his name faltered on her lips. With a swift motion he swept her in his arms.

"You love me." He made the words a fact, not a question.

"Is it love that makes me think of you day and night? Is it love that makes me restless, dissatisfied, if I am not with you?" she demanded passionately.

"You love me," his voice was throbbingly soft, piercingly tender. The world receded as she felt his kiss on her lips.

Then he put her from him, and gazed exultantly at her brilliant, fever-flushed cheeks.

"But are you willing to live your life here, Henri?" she questioned, after a little pause.

"Here?" He laughed shortly. "But no. You go with me out into the world, by my side."

She drew back, and her face whitened. "But I cannot go. I cannot leave my father; he is frail and needs my care." She sighed tremulously.

His face darkened. "I cannot spend my life here, I should rot. Elizabeth, love awaits you, the gay world of lights, music; the silken things of life; the joyous things. Come with me." His voice was caressingly tender.

She looked at him with misty eyes.

"I cannot leave my father," she repeated over and over as he pleaded with her. "I am all he has—all he has," she repeated as Brissac argued, stormed, and left her white and shaking under his fierce kiss.

Anger began to glint his dark eyes as the girl remained impervious to his pleading. Gradually he realized her determination.

"I shall accompany you to your home and say good-by to your father," he said harshly. "I leave to-day."

It seemed to the girl an icy hand clutched her heart. The warm summer day grew suddenly cold. She turned pain-filled eyes on him; opened her lips, closed them without speaking. They walked silently to her home.

Two hours later John Webster stood on the bank of the lake, and watched Brissac's canoe, packed with his camping outfit, push swiftly from the shore.

" You will deliver the letter to my sister when you reach Winnipeg?" Webster had asked for the third time.

" Immediately on arriving," Brissac had answered. For an hour he paddled down Lake Winnipeg, his eyes sweeping the forest-like shores closely. When he found a site that suited him, a site protected by heavy timber from all view of the lake he made camp.

For two weeks he waited, the fever in his blood glinting his eyes, coloring his dark face.

On the fifteenth day of his departure from Norway House he stole silently up the lake. Noiselessly he beached the canoe. Stealthy as an Indian he crept on moccasined feet along the shore where he knew Elizabeth spent an hour each afternoon.

Lying motionless as a log, he waited, screened by the thick brush. Presently he heard the crackling of twigs. Raising his head cautiously, he saw the familiar blue cloth skirt, and drew himself nearer inch by inch.

The blanket flung over his shoulder was whisked off and was around the girl's head and body before she could scream. With moose hide ropes he tied her securely. Lifting her in his powerful arms, he carried her to the canoe, and laid her down. Swiftly he returned, and with woodsman skill obliterated all trace of a moccasin's tread from the grassy earth.

On his knees he backed to the lake, smoothing the grass and bent twigs as he went. Finally he scanned the water with the field glasses he took from his coat pocket.

No craft was on the water; it lay placid, shimmering under the sun. The canoe shot swiftly up the lake. Within an hour he swung into Cross Lake, going north into the Nelson River, the river that emptied into Hudson's Bay.

Everything had worked out well. His heart swelled with exultation. He knew he would not be connected with the girl's disappearance. Had he not left for Winnipeg two weeks before? He smiled darkly.

The girl attempted to move; he heard the muffled voice, hoarse, panting. Leaning over the trussed figure he loosened the blanket over her head so air could reach her.

Through the balmy afternoon he paddled without a pause. The sun set in a riot of color; still he went on. A soft lavender twilight hung over the lake. The forest trees became dark, vague, the brisk little wind blew its cool breath over the silent world. From the forest came the first melancholy " hoo " of an owl.

" She will be more comfortable in that blanket now," he thought.

Tirelessly he went on, as slowly the moon sailed in the velvet dark of the sky. Its pallid silvery light touched the forest trees, lighting the dim recesses with eerie light. Brissac's muscles were tiring. He swung the canoe toward shore.

Taking a handkerchief from his pocket, he loosened the blanket over Elizabeth's head and had the handkerchief twisted over her lips in an instant. With her head free, she lay staring up at the moon-lighted face above her.

She was flushed from the heat of the blanket; her hair hung in damp tendrils. There was a fleck of blood on her chin where her teeth had bitten through the skin of her lip.

The flame in her eyes turned to incredulous wonder. A wonder tinged with a vast relief as she looked up at the man bending over her.

" You did not know who your abductor was? I see the relief on your face," he said. " Perhaps I am mad to do this, but I love you, and love is an emotion akin to madness, Elizabeth. I am sorry to have terrified you. I brought you away to be alone with me. I can convince you that your life belongs to me; because you love me. I will not let you go because of an old man—who happens to be your father. He has lived his life; yours is just beginning." He paused.

After a moment he went on. " It is quite impossible for me to spend my life in Nelson House; therefore you must come with me."

He bent over her and removed the gag. For a moment she lay breathing deeply.

" Untie me, Henri," she said faintly. " I am in torture, bound for so many hours."

Quietly he unloosed the thongs. As she came to her feet stiffly, he swung her over the side of the big canoe, and watched her intently as she paced back and forth on the river edge.

Finally she paused before him. As his arms went around her, her head fell on his breast with a long, weary sigh.

"It is very hard for me, Henri. I love you, yes, but I love my father, too. Such desertion of him seems very cruel—"

"You are tired, Elizabeth." His voice was very gentle. "I shall fix you a bed. Sleep, and to-morrow you will see the thing as I do."

Taking an ax from the canoe he cut branches, and piled them up, until a springy, fragrant bed awaited the girl. Throwing a blanket over the mound, he motioned her to lie down, and covered her with another soft white blanket.

Her breathing became soft, even; he saw that she slept. Sitting with his back against a tree, he watched the river until a faint gray etching in the eastern sky heralded the approach of dawn.

There was a crash of flying hoofs as a moose sprang from the woods. With a flash he was in the water, swimming.

Instantly Brissac's gun was in his hand. What had startled the animal? He stood silent as one of the trees. The sound of snapping twigs grew nearer.

An Indian stepped from the deep shadows and paused in surprise as he faced Brissac, who held up a hand for silence.

A glance at Elizabeth showed she still slept, apparently tired out. Brissac walked noiselessly to some distance from the girl, the Indian at his heels.

"Cree?" he asked abruptly.

"You have said," the man answered in his native tongue.

"Tell me, are there any cabins, settlements, either breed, or red in these woods?" Brissac asked swiftly in the Cree tongue.

A faint flicker of surprise shone in the full dark eyes of the young Cree, as this white man spoke so easily an Indian language.

"My wigwam lies on the river bank. There are many tepees there on the banks of the swift water," the Cree answered.

"Trappers?" Brissac asked sharply.

"Indian trappers," the man responded.

"You take your pelts to the post on Lake Winnipeg in the moon of the mating season?" Brissac next inquired in soft Cree.

"From the moon of the mating season to the moon of the lush snows," the young Cree answered.

A soft stealthy pad sounded among the trees. The Indian turned, crept noiselessly in pursuit. Brissac returned to the sleeping girl.

The wistful light of dawn bathed her face in a pearl-like radiance. He stood looking down at her.

"Her sleep is deep, I believe dreamless. What a companion she will make. Born in the wilderness, bred to the snows, a life she loves. Her eyes gazing at me across our camp fires." A long breath raised the man's deep chest.

He turned, glanced across the river as the first rays of the rising sun tinted the waters with an opal sheen. He took off his leather coat and removed his moccasins. Clad in knee-length breeches and long wool hose, he stepped into the canoe and put out from shore.

His glance rested on the guns lying in their cases in the bottom of the craft.

"I will not trust her near a gun," he decided. "I am not sure of her—yet."

When in deep water he dropped over the side of the craft, swimming vigorously.

Elizabeth yawned and opened her eyes. She saw the canoe lying lazily on the surface; saw the back of Brissac's dark head as he cut through the rippling water.

Ten minutes later Brissac returned from his morning swim. As he beached the canoe, Elizabeth sat up.

"How I slept!" she said crisply. "And I'm hungry. Go get me a fish, and I'll make the fire for breakfast. Have you tea in your kit?"

The man stared at the girl's glowing face, was startled at the gay voice.

"The water teems with fish," she went on as she bent over the brink, splashing the cold water on her face and hands. "Are you a good angler?"

"I shall have a fish for you within five

minutes," Brissac answered quickly. He sprang in the canoe, pulling his coat on as he did so.

Elizabeth cleared a large flat rock of underbrush and piled a mass of dry twigs on it. She searched through the provision kit, lying on the shore, and brought forth tea, sugar, and salt. From a bag she produced a kettle and frying pan.

The girl was in a soft, pensive mood as they breakfasted, and the man watched her with glowing eyes.

"We are on the river," she said finally. "If we make only brief pauses, we can reach Port Nelson by New Moon. I can paddle also. Farther north the current is swift. We can make splendid time—" She paused, her eyes holding his gaze as the wild cranberry color mounted in her cheeks.

"And when we reach there?" he asked.

"There is a missionary at the port. He can marry us," she answered simply.

Brissac swung her to her feet in a swift exultant embrace.

"I have thought it over, Henri," the girl's voice throbbed. "You are right. It does not seem natural that our love should be denied because of my father. After all, he will not be so lonely. His life is busy; he is greatly loved—" she paused. "Surely I can trust you, Henri? We shall be alone many days before—"

"You can trust me—surely," he answered gravely.

Later she said: "I wish we could send word to father. He will be wild with anxiety. Every Indian in Norway is probably searching the woods, the lake—" Her eyes were wistful, pleading.

"Word shall be carried to him as soon as we reach Nelson," Brissac assured her.

The days, bathed in a golden radiance of sun, passed swiftly; the nights in which the moon throbbed over the dark water passed as the wind. At sunset they made camp along shores fringed with marshy reeds and sandy beaches. At the first thread of light they were on the river again.

The girl was gay at times. At others a pensive softness enfolded her. Brissac told her tales of life in the great outside, and she listened with sparkling eyes.

Farther north they camped by a dim, deep gorge where the water fell in a sparkling cataract. All around them lay the vastness and hush of a silent, virgin world. Back in the forest came the scream from a cat-animal. Wailing, pulsating, it trembled on the still air.

"To-morrow we are in Port Nelson," Brissac told her. They sat by their camp fire, the girl leaning against his shoulder.

"You seem to know this country, Henri," she said idly, as she watched the blue-red flames.

"I was born under the Northern Lights, my girl," he replied slowly. "I have traveled many miles of its territory."

He watched the widening of her beautiful eyes, watched the firelight quiver in her masses of heavy red hair.

"But—I thought you came from outside?" she questioned.

"I have been in Montreal. It was there I attended school—"

"You have a French name, Henri, but your English is as pure as mine," the girl observed after a pause.

The man stirred restlessly.

"Later I shall tell you—more," he said, a sudden harsh note in his voice. "You seem tired to-night, Elizabeth. The trip is hard on you, after all. Go to bed and sleep; we leave at dawn to-morrow." His voice softened as he caressed her.

V.

THE port with its long, squat, dark buildings lay to one side of them. The man beached the canoe in front of the company store; shot a swift glance down the narrow street.

"Henri, I want to buy something new to be married in." The girl's eyes sparkled. She looked down at her crumpled blue skirt distastefully. "I am sure they have some made-up garments. Every girl wants to look nice on her wedding day," she pleaded softly.

"Buy anything you want," he agreed quickly, extracting a gold piece from his money belt. "After the preacher has finished, we will load up with provisions, for we return to the woods, for a time longer.

Later I have work to do—" He paused as they crossed the narrow littered street, to the long store.

Children shouted and tumbled in play, thin, underfed dogs barked and yelped. Dark, bronze faces looked curiously at the two.

Brissac could not take his gaze from the girl's face. Her eyes were marvelous, as though lighted by a stream of happiness. Her face paled and flushed, her lips curled in smiles.

She walked swiftly to the factor who stood behind the counter sorting out some cloth. Brissac lounged in the door watching her. An hour, a half hour, and she would belong to him, his property, his chattel, was his thought.

He listened absently as she answered quickly the man's surprised questions. A strange white woman was a rare occurrence in that Far North post. She gave a sidelong glance at Brissac, saw him turn and scan the street.

Instantly her hand flashed to the pocket in her skirt. With a look of warning in her eyes she pushed under the hand of the factor a square piece of birchbark, that had been rubbed on stone, until both sides were smooth and polished.

Brissac turned: she was selecting some gay-colored cotton shirts, a buckskin, fringe-trimmed skirt.

"And now some stockings," he heard her say.

Presently the package was ready. Brissac walked with his graceful catlike step to the factor.

"Which way lies your mission house?" he asked quietly.

"About a hundred yards up the street. The building has a cross on the door."

The factor stared after the two as they crossed the low porch of the company store. Then he lifted the piece of smooth wood and stared at it curiously.

Brissac explained his desires to the young preacher, while the girl stood quietly by his side.

"I am glad to be of service." The preacher's voice was cordial. "Come right in."

"We have traveled a long way," Elizabeth said simply. "May I step into another room and change my clothes, and freshen—"

"Most certainly. The cabin is at your disposal. I wish my wife were here—"

"Thank you," Elizabeth said gently.

Impatiently Brissac waited. She was infernally long. Twice he tapped on the door of the room into which she had disappeared, and each time she said: "Almost ready."

When at last she emerged she asked for a cup of tea. Willingly the preacher made and brought it to her. She drank it very slowly.

"It's so hot I can't drink it fast," she faltered.

Brissac stared at her. Her eyes glowed and sparkled. There was a vivid splash of red in her cheeks and lips.

Presently she put down the cup and rose. Brissac walked to her side; the preacher opened his Bible.

"You have the ring?" he asked.

"Take this off my finger, Elizabeth."

Brissac held out his hand. On the little finger was a ring composed of two slender twisting serpents of dull gold. Slowly the girl slipped it off, and handed it to the minister.

The marriage sacrament began; Brissac gazed curiously at the girl by his side. Her face had whitened. He tried to see her eyes, but she shielded them with her thick red lashes. What a to-do women make over nothing, was his thought. Why, the girl was actually trembling!

"Do you take this woman to be your lawful—" the clergyman paused.

A rear door was thrown open. The factor, two other men, and a Northwest Mounted sprang through, their automatics all ready.

"Up with your hands," the officer commanded briskly.

"The reason we are a little slow in getting here is because I had hard work, deciphering your message scratched on that piece of bark," the factor said to Elizabeth. "All I could make out was: 'Man a criminal—he abducted me—follow us to mission—quick.'"

Even those hardened men shuddered in-

voluntarily as they watched the terrible gaze Brissac turned on the girl. Slowly he raised his hands.

The inspector stepped to him quickly, felt his pockets and brought forth the revolver. He backed away, holding the gun in his hand.

Elizabeth took a step forward, facing Brissac, who stood as though carved from stone.

"You terrible man," her voice was low, vibrant. "I discovered who you were long ago. The first night we camped, I heard you talking with an Indian, while you thought I slept. That aroused suspicion in my mind, for no Easterner, as you claimed to be, can speak fluent Cree.

"The following morning, while you were swimming in the water, I searched that coat you left behind on the shore. I crawled inch by inch, face down, lest you see me, until I had the coat in my hands."

She paused, put her hands to her luxuriant thick hair. After a moment she brought forth an envelope.

"Read that letter, and the pages I tore from his notebook." The atmosphere was electric as the factor opened the envelope.

"Dated Ottawa, sent to Jeff," he read. "I have deposited twelve thousand to your account. The last bale of beaver pelts were splendid. Sold the silver fox for two thousand. Muskrats not so good as former bale. Good prices for ermine and mink. Had no trouble in getting out of town with trunk. Much safer than shipping express. Will be at place you designate with empty trunk. Hope to take back good pelts. Luck."

The factor paused; a low whistle of astonishment came from his lips.

"And if that proof is not sufficient, look at that memorandum. He writes the location of where he got the pelts, and has notes of the purchases he made to give to the trappers. Look at the cases of whisky he made record of. Whisky which has demoralized our good Indians, made murderers of them, brought suffering, starvation to them.

"Oh, you terrible man!" the girl went on passionately, her eyes flaming at Brissac. "I fooled you. You have fooled the North for years—but I—a woman—fooled *you*. To my shame I did, for a time, care for you. Or was it a mere fascination, you were so different from men I have known?"

The two were oblivious to the staring circle of men. Brissac's dark eyes burned as he watched the girl's white face.

"But I never loved you," she continued, a terrible passion of loathing in her voice. "The hour I discovered you—killed what fascination you had exercised over me. The past weeks have been weeks of intense suffering for me. Forced to look at you, to listen to your voice, and to lull any suspicion you might have of me, to make you think I loved you."

Her voice swept on low, half strangled.

"I planned all this, and you played into my hand—" She paused gasping.

"Very dramatic," Brissac's voice was cold, sneering. Without removing his eyes from the girl's face, he went on: "Red coat, what charge have you against me? True, I am a free trader; there is no law against that."

"There is a law that prohibits the sale or exchange of intoxicating liquors to the Indians. Your own memorandum proves you bought their pelts with whisky, chiefly, therefore you took the furs unlawfully. There is also a law against abduction, a law punishable with life imprisonment, Henry Bassett!"

The man's head went up like a stag who detects a taint in the air. His nostrils quivered.

"The Northwest Mounted has been looking for you for years. At last we have you, thanks to this intrepid girl." The inspector's voice was granite.

"Henry Bassett!" Elizabeth's voice shook. "Who is this man?"

"The son of an Englishman and a Cree girl. He is wanted for murder. Killed a man in a card game in Montreal and got away. He was raised in a Cree settlement; when he was fifteen his father brought him to his home—in Montreal. Educated him, would have made something of the boy, for Henry was bright. Yes, and treacherous as a wolverine, cunning as a fox. Every time we found a clew, we lost it." The inspector paused.

"*A breed!*" Elizabeth whispered.

"I would say all Indian, save in manner and education," the man concluded bitterly. "He acquired a certain polish from association with his father. It was hard on the man, when his son— Now we have you, Henry. And you go back with me to Montreal to the gallows!"

"But how did you know it was he?" the preacher asked wonderingly.

"We all have carried pictures of him for years; and he is an unusual type. The identification is complete."

The animal-like snarl on Henry's mouth smoothed; the lurid fire died from his eyes. He looked through the window across the river to the forest beyond.

It seemed he became remote, unconscious of the staring group. Suddenly a weird wailing chant rang through the room in a voice that made the spine chill, mournful, utterly melancholy as it was. Higher and higher it mounted, finally to fall into a dirge, slow and solemn.

"What is he chanting?" Elizabeth whispered fearfully. "It seems half familiar."

The men looked at each other uneasily.

"It is the death song of the Crees. He is saying: '*The hunter will return not from the hills. The ashes of the camp fire grow cold. Great Spirit I come; I come from out the valley. Guide me, for to-day I die. The winds are whispering of death.*'"

The factor's voice ended in a shout. "Look out!"

Swift as the lightning flashes across the sky, Henry had drawn his knife from inside his shirt. The blade was buried to the hilt in his deep chest.

His glazing eyes were fixed on the deep forest beyond the window. His spirit was winging its way. Slowly he sank to his knees, then to his face.

The girl gave a little gasping sound, and the factor put his arm protectingly around her.

"He dies—an Indian," the inspector said gravely; "his mother's son. The country is rid of a dangerous man," he concluded.

"Thank God, here comes my wife. She will care for the girl until we can get her to her home." The missionary's voice was awed, solemn.

The morning sun shone through the window as the inspector turned the body over. It fell on the dark face—a face impassive, beautiful as a piece of sculptured bronze.

THE END

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DRAUGHT

IN a long-dead May
I gathered up
The light of the moon
In a buttercup.

In a golden chalice
Where star-dust gleams
I gathered the dew
And the light of dreams.

Then I drained the goblet,
And that is why
I can see the fairies
As they dance by.

Edgar Daniel Kramer.

6 A

Harlequinade

By ELIZABETH YORK MILLER

Author of "Her Hour of Reckoning," "Miss Wynn's Secret," etc.

WHAT HAS OCCURRED IN PARTS I and II

THE vaudeville act of Professor La Turcque, known as Turco, his protégé, Jess Trelawny, and Will Murch, was so successful after its opening under Hy Housemann's management that it played from Frisco to New York. When they arrived they found Sally Leggett, wealthy girl from a California lumber camp, who had come East to be educated, whom they had known when they played their ill-fated show at Boganny's lumber camp hotel. Kerry Marvel, then a member of the company, had tried to kill Jess from jealousy of Frank Baird, an Englishman who was forced to leave England after a shooting scrape over the woman who was now Marvel's wife, Juanita. Jess learned from Sally that Juanita had gone on to Reno for a divorce, and that Frank Baird, whose real name was Barrington, had returned to England to claim a title and fortune.

CHAPTER XII.

MOTHS ABOUT THE FLAME.

SALLY LEGGETT'S "chapperone" was a pleasant woman on the sunny side of forty, but in nowise inclined to flaunt her youth and not unduly concerned in maintaining it. Her name was Marcia Cormick, and Sally had found her through the help of a professor at Berkeley. Miss Cormick took her job as teacher very seriously, almost too much so for Sally, who found New York so distracting that it was difficult to put her mind upon the task of tidying up the confusion to which she had reduced the English language.

Between Miss Cormick and the dressmakers, the heiress from Boganny's was persuaded to let her waist out a little and add a size to the length of her shoes. Some of the diamonds were sent to a bank for safe keeping, and some were reset in narrow bangles and one rather magnificent brooch. Sally bought a string of pink pearls, but

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never got any credit for the huge sum she paid for them because they looked pretty much the same as all the pink pearls every other woman was wearing that season. Her furs, however, were a different matter.

It was very hard for Turco to put down his foot and deny Sally the pleasure of duplicating her extravagances on Jess's behalf. Some few things he was obliged to grant her, but after a month in New York his little ewe lamb's head was in some danger of being turned, and Turco had to take a stand somewhere.

Luxury—hectic times. Jess's contract was juggled by Turco's friend, Hy Housemann, who leased her out to a roof garden show, and kept Turco and Will Murch on at his vaudeville house in a pale replica of the old act Turco had made his name with when Jess's father was his partner. But now, alas, Turco's agility in risking his neck to thrill an audience was not what it had been in the old days, and they were not headliners. Still, they went very well, all things considered.

Will had almost nerved himself up to the point of asking Sally Leggett to marry him, but he was shy of her money. Sally did her best, encouraged him modestly, and very likely the time would come when she would save him the task of doing the proposing.

But poor Sally had been once bitten in the matter of love, and she too was shy to a certain extent. She knew now that where the good young man her heart yearned for was concerned, her money was an obstacle rather than an asset. He would have to be coaxed to take the plunge in spite of that copper mine, and not because of it.

There were moths aplenty round the flame that was Jess Trelawny. Sally shone in some of the reflected glory and had moments when she meditated going upon the stage herself.

It seemed to Turco that wherever he looked he saw men, the unnumbered men who wanted to take Jess out to more meals than she could possibly eat, to give her presents, to introduce her to their mothers, to take her for motor rides.

Fortunately for his peace of mind, his own show finished well before hers, and he was always there to fetch her back to the hotel. Those would-be admirers even tried their blandishments on him, but it was rough work for them. There were times when Turco was almost thankful for Jess's obsession by the memory of the man she had known so briefly at Boganny's.

That romance, defeated in the bud, had left her rather chill toward these other men. She seemed to have attained some of her mother's detached outlook on life without the heartless cynicism that had been Dora's, and she was ambitious professionally.

Turco scarcely needed to impress upon her that there must be more work and less play if she was to keep her foothold on the ladder. So easy to tumble off, to disappear into that deep pit which yawns to engulf the careless.

She was too young to drink, almost too young to smoke, and in any case those dubious relaxations were denied her because of her profession. Dancing was her work in life.

As she said to Sally, "What fun can I get out of midnight parties? They don't seem to see that. I'm bored stiff."

"It's a shame you have to work so hard," said Sally.

"But what would I do if I didn't work?"

"Fall in love, perhaps. Work's awful. The way Miss Cormick keeps me at it is cruel, and I've a mind to leave her behind when we go to Europe. Only I promised pap—"

"Oh, Sally, you mustn't. You're getting on so splendidly," Jess said anxiously. "You've no idea how you've improved."

"Yes, I have. I'm improving so darned fast that it's taken all the pep out o' me. I used to enjoy life. What wouldn't I give for a chunk of spearmint. Cigarettes burn my tongue. And why don't—I mean why *doesn't* Will ask me to marry him?"

"He's very much in love with you," Jess said pensively. "Honestly, he is, Sally."

"Well, he takes a helluva time saying so. You can drop him a straight tip from the horse's mouth that I'm not going to trail him all the way to London without there's an engagement ring on my finger.

It can be a lucky dip at Woolworth's, or one of them—one of those elephant-hair mascots that's all over town at a dollar and a quarter. I don't care what it is, so long as it's a ring that Will gimme. I can't help it if I'm rich and he's poor. It's—it's all pap's fault, anyway, and I wish I was back home."

Sally began to cry, and Jess nestled an arm around her neck.

"Don't, dear. It's going to come out all right for you, Sally. Didn't Turco tell you so? Look here, we'll have a little picnic party in our sitting room to-night, just we four, with beer and pickles and sausage, and I'll make Turco tell our fortunes again.

"And then Will can see you back to the Plaza in a taxi—don't order your car—and you can just tell him you're feeling a bit down and longing for the simple things of life, and perhaps you'll cancel that suite on the Leviathan. Oh, you know, Sally."

Sally dried her eyes by degrees, with little plaintive snufflings ending finally in a vigorous use of her handkerchief.

"All right," she said. "If it doesn't come off, nobody can say I didn't try."

Turco rose with pathetic eagerness to that little occasion. What the law allowed under the name of beer could neither help nor hurt, but sausage reenforced by pickles was a weakness with Turco, and never failed to stimulate him. Also he was happy because his little girl wanted this homely, this almost family, party, and didn't want any other kind.

He wished Charley Boganny were here to share it. To Turco, Boganny was one of those special friends that one makes for life but only enjoys briefly.

Turco was willing to tell anybody's fortune that evening. He gave Sally Leggett an intellectual aura colored blue and yellow. He said she was "following her star," and would succeed. Everything was kindness for Sally.

"Darling Turco, why don't you look into the little glass ball? Please! You might see something about me," pleaded Jess.

"Oh, do, Mr. Turco," Sally cried, "and you might see something more about me."

Turco was a little reluctant, but finally he gave in. The crystal was fetched, and he settled himself before it, his elbows on the table, his head supported between the palms of his hands. Jess watched him closely, almost breathless. How often had she stared into that smooth glass ball, and never seen a thing.

A room with many people dancing. There was a man whose face Turco knew, and a strange woman with her dress cut down to the waist at the back. They were dancing together.

Turco rubbed his eyes and pushed the crystal away. He had on his blinking "monkey look" now, and Jess knew at once he was going to be difficult. Neither coaxing nor bullying would have the slightest effect on him if he didn't choose to reveal what he had seen.

"I'm tired. I'm no good to-night. Nothing doing."

"Turco, that's not true," Jess said sharply. "You didn't bring me up to tell lies—I've had that flung at me over and over again. Well, you shouldn't tell them yourself."

"I said nothing doing, and that's what I mean," Turco retorted. His old face was a little ashen.

Sally Leggett had never seen Turco on the verge of what might be called bad temper, and it made her apprehensive.

"Good night," she said hastily. "It's been lovely. Good night, Jess. I'll tell you to-morrow if anything happens—you know what I mean. Oh, are you going to see me back, Mr. Murch? How *verra* kind of you."

The good-byes were soon over, and Will, of course, had gone off with Sally.

Jess climbed on to the arm of Turco's chair and encircled his neck with her arm.

"There are three of us in this room," she said gravely. "You, Daddy Turco, me, and that crystal—I mean who you saw in it. You saw 'him,' didn't you?"

"Who?" Turco fended.

"Lord Barrington."

"Never heard of him. There's no dukes or earls in my acquaintance."

"Well, then—Frank Baird. You've heard of him, haven't you?"

"Get off my chair, Jess. Stop strangling me," Turco said gruffly.

"Please," Jess pleaded.

"Oh, I know that fellow's in your mind all the time. You didn't ought to have such thoughts. It's not modest or becoming in a young female."

"But wouldn't you rather I told you? It's dreadful having it all bottled up inside me, and I've got nobody I can talk to but you, Turco." She rubbed her head against his and whimpered. "Tell me what you saw."

"Oh, all right. It wasn't no more than a glimpse. I just saw the fellow and a lady dancing in what you might call a ballroom, green and gold it was, with chairs and tables around the edges. That's all. I didn't want for to look any more."

"Was the woman Nita?" Jess asked.

Turco shook his head. "No, little love. I don't know who she was. A tallish woman with yellow hair and no back to her dress."

"Did he—did he seem to like her?"

"I can't tell you," Turco said crossly.

"And what's more, you wouldn't if you could," Jess added for him. "Sometimes you can be very irritating."

She slipped down from the chair and was on the point of stalking off to bed with her nose in the air, but thought better of such rudeness and came back again to give him his good night hug and kiss.

"Don't you worry," she said, patting him rather forcefully. "I'm getting over it—really I am. I suppose a girl has a right to make a fool of herself over a man sometimes."

"Not you, my little love," Turco said wistfully. "You're too fine, too pure and young and spotless for such things. Why, you're only a baby. What do you know about love? There's just one kind of love for you, my sweet one, and that's the love of God.

"Fill your heart with it, and nothing else don't matter, because you'll be happy. You won't be able to help yourself." He kissed her gently on the forehead. "And when I'm gone from you, you'll always remember I said that, won't you? It 'll be a comfort to you over the hard places."

After that little talk with Turco, Jess was in better spirit. Perhaps the image of Frank Baird was fading a little. Anyway, the Frankie Baird of Boganny's no longer existed, and very likely if she ever chanced to see him again she would find that Francis, Lord Barrington, was an altogether different person.

The weeks flew by, and toward the end it seemed as though there wouldn't be time for the things they had to do. In the midst of it all, Sally and Will decided they would be married at once, and Will was going to take a course in mining engineering after that European honeymoon which Sally insisted upon. It was an original sort of honeymoon, for the whole little party crossed the ocean together, and Miss Cormick and Kisha San accompanied the newly wedded pair to the various Continental capitals that Sally wanted to visit.

Of course, the expenses all came out of Sally's pocket—or shall we say out of pap's copper mine?—and Will didn't like the idea very much, but he should have thought of all that before he fell in love with Sally Leggett.

And now for Professor La Turcque and Miss Jess Trelawny, it was home again, June in England, and plenty of noise and dust in Percy Street. They had made a lot of money and saved some, and could afford to take it easy while Turco looked around for likely engagements.

He had to find a new dancing partner for Jess, and that was a worrying business, because Turco could pick flaws in the most promising samples. He hated them all, those sleek-haired, woman-waisted gallants who hailed mostly from the Argentine but generally posed as exiled Russian nobles.

He just gave them all the once-over, grunted, and shook his grizzled head, behaving on the whole very much like royalty himself, a despot who was all too ready to turn down the thumb.

Jess could have got any amount of engagements on the strength of her American success—she had gone away a little nobody and come back with a name known favorably to the managers—but Turco's

obstinacy in the matter of a dancing partner stood in her way.

It was tiresome of Turco. He had wanted her to be ambitious, had encouraged and trained her to be just what she was, and now it seemed as though he wished he hadn't.

But it was easy enough to see through him. He simply didn't want her to come out into the limelight here in London, because then the moths would start fluttering out again, and he was fearful of a certain one who might come fluttering and find favor—who might, indeed, dash out that little shining light.

CHAPTER XIII.

LOVE AND A LONDON PREMIERE.

THERE is a little village in London called Mayfair, which scarcely needs more description to readers of popular fiction, but a stroll through its precincts can be educational. To lots of people Mayfair is an idea rather than a locality, and as such that little village stretches as far as Ascot and other fashionable suburbs, not to mention the Lido, Biarritz, or Deauville.

Actually, however, the heart of Mayfair beats in that much-furbished little slum known as Shepherd's Market, where bored aristocrats and others come to dwell when they find themselves what their world calls poor, or to play artistically at Bohemianism.

One can live well on five thousand pounds a year in a little house close to Shepherd's Market, and one can live even better on an income of five hundred and the prestige of an attic floor over, say, the green-grocer's premises, for in the latter case nothing beyond an occasional chafing-dish supper is expected of you, and you get invited out.

In one of these attics—over some mysterious clerical firm in this case—lived a woman who had been famous, or perhaps notorious is the more expressive word, in several continents for the past twenty years. The name by which she was known, and it might have been her own, was Mrs. Denise Crowley.

In her heydey she had wrung vast fortunes from the material possessions of men and much anguish from their hearts. She had done it with that species of soulless good nature which seems to take the sting out of a sinner's meanest crimes.

Also she gave away as lavishly as she took, and now when the getting was a little harder and the giving took thinking about, she found herself in the early forties living in this attic apartment in Mayfair, with perhaps a little more than five hundred a year she could count upon, but not much more. The rent was trifling, for she had taken over an old lease. It amounted to rather less than the rates.

The attic was furnished charmingly, in smoothly calculated taste, and that had cost her nothing. A daily woman did what was required in the way of housework, and a visiting maid twice a week looked after her clothes, which was the only real task about the place.

Mrs. Crowley spent next to nothing on food, and old friends saw that her little wine-cupboard was in good order. She had lots of old friends, mostly aged men who liked to drop in for a cup of tea, or something, and a reminiscent chat over the early Edwardian days when everything was so much better then than it was now, including women and whisky.

But indeed the men had aged, and it was a miracle how Denise Crowley kept up her youth. As the saying is, she took care of herself, and it was only the spirit that had grown a little slack.

Clothes were her great extravagance. She loved beautiful raiment down to the last detail with the passion that some women bestow on children, or perhaps on dogs. But all the lovely bits and pieces in which she arrayed herself, and took exquisite pleasure in the sight and feel of, were for herself alone.

Years and years ago she had settled in her own mind that ancient argument as to whether women dress well to please men or rouse envy in other women. It was for neither, really. It was to create well-being in oneself. Men, if they loved you, didn't notice your clothes and didn't like any other man to notice them; and it was never wise

to challenge the envy of one's own sex. You roused at the same time a battle cry.

Denise Crowley, who had been shameless and heartless and might well be termed a wicked woman, had never made a real enemy in her life, and she had kept all of her friends. Moreover, she was intellectual, as differentiated from intelligent, and took her real amusements in lonely browsing in book shops, in her library ticket to the British Museum, in the many hours she spent in the old churches sifting down and assimilating their histories to the minute trifle of a diamond of ancient glass.

Something that was nobler and much more honorable than herself walked with Denise Crowley and guided her, easing her mind so completely that it never turned inward. If she had a conscience she was not aware of the fact. Her personality was divided sharply. One side was the Denise Crowley of a great gambling scandal, of a divorce or two, of a suicide brought sharply to her door.

The other Denise had done something quite foreign to the ægis of her twin being. Indeed, that other Denise had done many erratic things on the side of kindness. But in particular, at considerable risk to herself —considering her more than dubious record —she had set free a man from a life sentence of murder. Francis Barrington owed his liberty to her, and she had given it to him when she had nothing to gain for herself.

She had rushed all the way from Constantinople on a mere impulse, after nearly seven years of Oriental seclusion in a palace on the Bosphorus, which suited her perfectly.

One morning, a heavenly morning in June, when just to be alive was almost enough for anybody, from her fretted window Denise Crowley had seen a skylark rise, up and up and up, until all but his song was lost in the empyrean blue, and she suddenly thought of Francis Barrington.

That boy, that poor dear fool of a boy, still shut up in prison for a crime that she could bear witness he did not commit.

She had run the risk of it on that impulse, returned to England, wangled a personal interview with the Home Secretary, laid herself open to a very serious charge, and in the end effected the liberation of the young prisoner. And when the dazed boy's own family were concerned merely to get him out of the way, it was Denise Crowley who gave him a letter to one of her numerous friends, an old miner by the name of Leggett at a place in the California Rockies called Boganny's, and told Frank to go out there and recapture the savor of life.

Thus over a year passed away and Mrs. Crowley, now settled in her attic in Shepherd's Market, Mayfair, though perhaps sometimes dreaming of her palace on the Bosphorus, might never again have thought of young Barrington except that the accident of two deaths occurring within a short time of each other, established him as the head of the family which had spurned him.

To Frank's surprise and great bewilderment at first, the world in which he now found himself was quite willing to forgive and forget his past, and extended the glad hand of welcome. It was whispered—and this was true enough—that he had gone to prison to save a woman from such a fate, a woman whose name everybody had forgotten by this time, but with whom he had been desperately in love. She had disappeared, promptly married somebody else when the prison gates closed upon her chivalrous young lover.

But who knew the truth of it, really? People shrugged their shoulders, and they were willing to give Barrington the benefit of every doubt.

Thus he, who had never been anything in the life of Denise Crowley, except a boy upon whose fate she had taken a tardy pity, thus he came very much into her life when she was facing her forty-third birthday and wondering why she simply could not give up extravagance in dress, since the bills were so heart-breaking, and there was no sense at all in hoarding up all those lovely things, the half of which she would never wear.

Francis Barrington called upon her within a few days of his return, and she had difficulty in controlling her amazement at the change in him. Here was no pallid-faced youth branded with the cruel stigmata of imprisonment, but a clear-eyed,

sunburned man; hard bitten it was true, but too good looking for any woman's peace of mind, and radiating that quality which is sometimes but poorly described by the word charm.

At the age of nearly forty-three Denise Crowley fell in love for the first time.

It would have been some time in September, nearly a year after the visit of Professor La Turcque's Troupe to Boganny's, that Mrs. Crowley was waiting one evening in her attic salon for Lord Barrington to call and take her out to supper and dance.

She was a tall, fair-haired woman of the Junœsque type, with arms and shoulders that in her young days bad been acclaimed incomparable, but were perhaps thought too heavy for modern taste. This slight tendency to plumpness which she kept well in check about the waist and hips and which in no wise distorted the contours of her long, graceful limbs, saved her from the nightmare of wrinkles.

Her face was smooth, almost glacially so; her hair was dyed to the tone it had been in youth, and she wore it rolled into a shining coil at the nape of her neck, having some years before enjoyed the excitement of the shingle and decided that it did not suit her.

She had long, tapering hands, very white, adorned to-night with one ring, a large black pearl set in diamonds. Her dress was black, sequinned, cut very low in the back and with a great chou at the side of silver tissue. Clasped about her throat was a narrow circlet of linked squares of black onyx edged with pearls and diamonds.

She had dined frugally, as she always did when she was alone, making herself some scrambled eggs and toast and eating it in the kitchenette, and now she had a coffee service ready for Frank's arrival, with chairs drawn up before a pensive, half slumbering fire.

It might be that Frank would not care to go to the Follies after all; and Denise herself would prefer an evening with him alone, and early bed. Still, it had been arranged and she was willing to fall in with any mood he offered. She was his slave for love, although he did not know it.

Often she wondered about him and his probable love affairs. It couldn't be that he was still fond of that stupid Nita. He had told Denise a little about his last encounter with Nita, the sequel to what the Boganny's stage driver reported so faithfully. He had given Nita a little money, and since his return to England he had sent her some more to keep her at Reno where she wanted to go to qualify for a divorce. But that was some months ago and Nita Marvel would not be likely to come to England again.

Still, Frank must occasionally be interested in some woman. There was no lack of opportunity for him. Right and left girls were being hurled or were hurling themselves at his head, but for all Denise could see, those amorous assaults only provoked cynicism in him. Perhaps he had been hurt too much. There were scars, no doubt, too deep even for the eyes of love to discern.

And Denise Crowley knew, also, that in taking her about as he did, dining and dancing with her constantly, appearing in her company at first nights and even accompanying her on her Bond Street shop hoverings, he was laying himself open to a great misunderstanding.

Yet she believed he did it deliberately and with malice aforethought. He was no lovesick boy now, but a hard-bitten man who had suffered the slings and arrows of a most outrageous fortune, and whose world had only taken him to its heart because he was in a position to snap his fingers at it.

Perhaps, too, he felt comfortable in her society because she was one of the very few people—the only one besides Nita, in fact, who knew positively that his was not the hand that had slain Nita's first husband.

Denise Crowley did not expect Frank to make love to her in the way that other men had done, or it might be truer to say in the way that other men had attempted. She had earned her hard name more in theory than in actual practice. It might have been a kinder name if she had been more generous with her favors, or wrecked her own life on the sharp reefs of love.

What was it, then, that she did expect from this new Barrington? Not money.

In a weary way she had got beyond that. Once it had been a game, the same sort of game that financiers play, this separating a man from his money—but it had palled.

The doorbell tinkled, and she went swiftly to answer it.

It was very cozy in this attic room with its quaint dormer windows, palest mauve walls and the hangings of mauve and blue; asters and delphiniums set in silver bowls, and all the fine odds and ends of Sheraton and Chippendale that had survived the gradual decay of Mrs. Crowley's fortunes.

Frank had his coffee and a liqueur and a cigarette. They talked in a desultory fashion of the theaters and of books they had read, and of a picture Denise had recently unearthed in some obscure East End shop and thought might prove to be a Gainsborough.

And then they were silent for a while. Denise was quite happy. It seemed to her that for the first time in her life she was aware of the sweetness and beauty of which a woman's existence may be enriched. This was her very small hour.

"Frank," she said suddenly. "I want to ask you something. You may snub me if you like. Was there ever anybody after Nita who—who counted where you were concerned?"

His laugh was tinged with bitterness.

"There wasn't much time for me, was there?" he commented.

"Oh, that's silly. Falling in love doesn't take any time at all. I suppose you'll marry some day. It's your duty, isn't it?"

He shrugged his shoulders. "In these days! No, I don't regard marrying as my special duty."

"When you fall in love—" Denise suggested softly. "And you never did, Frank?"

"Not exactly. It might have come to something once, but I scarcely saw anything of her. A girl I met at Boganny's."

"But not Sally Leggett," Mrs. Crowley said with breathless haste.

Frank's eyes met hers briefly. He knew well enough now, that Sally Leggett was Denise Crowley's daughter.

"Oh, not, not Sally," he assured her. "But it's true. I have thought of marrying. What about you, Denise? Would you have me?"

"Me?" She caught in her breath. "Don't joke, please."

"I'm not joking." He took one of her lovely hands and raised it to his lips. "Will you marry me, Denise? I will try very hard to make you happy."

It must be that she was dreaming, thought Denise. A swift mental calculation told her that the difference between her age and Frank Barrington's was fourteen years if it was a day; while the difference in experience—well, that wouldn't bear thinking about.

"But you don't love me," she protested.

"I'm asking you to be my wife," Frank said gently. "Doesn't that speak for itself?"

"But why are you asking me? Because I let you lay in prison for years without lifting a finger?"

"No, because you ultimately did lift more than a finger," he said.

"Ah, yes, I knew it must be that. You don't love me and you can't respect me. You can guess to some extent what my life has been and you are not sufficiently simple to imagine it makes a pretty picture. Your friends will not have hesitated to tell you all there is to know about me, to warn you that you were asking for trouble in seeking my friendship, even. All this, and yet you ask me to be your wife."

She paused for a moment to control the twitching of her lips, but her eyes and a gesture held him from speaking.

"I'll tell you why," she went on presently. "You're offering to make me your wife from much the same motive that you let yourself be convicted of murder."

"Denise, don't—"

"Wait a moment, please. It's quite true, Frank. I've let you know without meaning to, how fond I am of you, and you feel grateful to me because you've got your liberty. You still feel bitter toward the world, and I—I am to be the tool for your revenge. If I marry you, you will have revenged yourself amply on society. But why, my poor boy? Why need you go to such lengths?"

Her voice broke and suddenly she covered her face with her hands and broke into difficult weeping.

"Denise, my dear, you make me feel an awful cad," he said uncomfortably.

She dropped to her knees, her head bowed in those pale lovely hands.

"Oh, Frank, only say you love me. That's all. If you love me, I'll risk anything—risk hurting you and making myself ridiculous. If you love me, marrying you would give me the greatest joy and pride I could ever know. A few years—perhaps five, or a little more—before you tired of me and began to notice how much older I am. If you love me, now, I'll risk all that, all the pain I may suffer later on—"

"Oh, Denise, I can't stand this. I had no idea—"

"That I cared for you so much?" She got to her feet, her manner suddenly calm. That little scene, which she could not help, might have moved him a little, but it had come perilously near to boring him. She shouldn't have let herself go like that.

"Now, then," she said, blinking back her tears and smiling. "Let's be sensible. I'm sorry I frightened you. It's all over now, and I should very much like some supper. I had so little dinner and I'm simply famished."

"Look here, dear—" he caught her hand as she was darting off to fetch her cloak. "Not so fast. What's the answer to be? I'd like to know now. Are you going to marry me?"

Still he hadn't said that he loved her. She was merely the woman who had given him freedom, and it was rather paradoxical that he should offer his freedom back to her. Of course he liked her. They had got on together like a house afire where friendship was concerned.

She ought to say no, that it would be the crowning folly of both their lives to enter upon such an important relation; but she hadn't the strength.

"Very well." She sighed, keeping herself well in hand emotionally. "I accept your kind offer with sincere appreciation, Lord Barrington. As they say, we are affianced. And now let me get my wrap and handbag."

The mood in which Frank had approached this matter was not one of mere impulse, nor was it the result only of gratitude to Denise Crowley mingled with a desire to be revenged. His grudge against society was for its insincerity. He had been forgiven for his supposed crime only because of his recently inherited title and fortune. Consequently he did not care a fig for any of the people who fawned upon him.

The truth went a little deeper, though. He had grown fond of Denise. She comforted his loneliness. She satisfied his need for rational and serious converse. During those long years of imprisonment he had had too much time in which to think, and now that he was free, he found scarcely anybody who was interested in the ideas, big and little, he had developed. But Denise Crowley was. He could talk with her for hours and neither of them would be wearied.

Also he could enjoy dancing with her, and to-night they were going to dance.

Yes, she wanted to dance, now. After the little scene of tears and stress, Denise was afraid to trust herself too wholly alone with Frank until she had become thoroughly accustomed to the idea of the new relation. For her, it had come as a tremendous surprise and her nerves were no longer youthfully elastic.

This was going to be a terrific strain on her. Already she was thinking about that appointment she must make with her beauty specialist whom, through sheer lazy content, she had neglected lately. Her hair would need touching up, and as she powdered her nose preparatory to going out that night, she took a careful minute to search for any sign of the wrinkles that so far had not appeared.

Oh, just a faint suspicion of two across her brow—but mere children could acquire those. There was also a little break, more a delicately traced line than a wrinkle, at the left side of her mouth. She had been used to pulling down her mouth on that side when in a jeering or sarcastic mood. Well, she mustn't have such moods any more.

"Ready, Frank."

"You look wonderful, my dear. But then, you always do."

"I am rather happy," Denise said wistfully.

"So am I. This is a great night, isn't it? And nobody knows but you and me." He squeezed her hand.

"Frank, I don't want anybody to know. Promise me. I couldn't bear all their—well, never mind."

He helped her into his car which was waiting outside the dingy old building, and then she began to discuss in lively fashion what they should do about this marriage business.

Frank wanted it to be soon, at least before Christmas. Thus Denise would escape a lonely festival of which only a woman of her sort knows the dread, and Frank would have a valid reason for excusing himself from a family feast.

Once he had set a few affairs in order, there would be nothing to tie him to London.

Denise had appeared to think of everything in less than no time.

They would be married at a registrar's without benefit of friends, and then—if the idea appealed to Frank—go straight to Tunis and find a villa somewhere in the country near by, where they would spend the winter and spring. There was something about Denise Crowley that suggested the fair Circassian of tradition. The polyglot atmosphere of the East drew and suited her.

Frank agreed, but he was much astonished to feel himself wincing at her intimate knowledge of Moslem housekeeping arrangements. She would have played with the idea of his being an emir if he had let her.

During that short drive to Northumberland Avenue a tremendous change came over Denise. She had determined to hold herself rigorously aloof from too great demonstrations, but her feelings swamped her. She was that dangerous expert, a woman of the world head over heels in love at an age when her nerves were no longer calculated to bear the strain of fresh passion.

She gave herself away by her too ready knowledge, and Frank, who thought he had no illusions left to be shattered, was conscious of a very slight repulsion. Denise the lover was not as perfect as Denise the friend.

She had already given him a sketchy outline of her association with Job Leggett. Leggett had gone abroad rather late in life with a conducted tour, and Denise had met him in Paris, where, according to her story, she was acting as companion to an elderly woman. Frank felt that probably she had glossed over the details of her adventure with the Californian.

Leggett had persuaded her to marry him, she said, but the marriage for some reason or other turned out not to be legal. Then Sally had been born, and Job Leggett had paid Denise something like half a million dollars to let him have Sally.

At the time of the telling of that story Frank had been sympathetically inclined because his own feelings were not involved. Now he found himself secretly a little critical. He had discovered in old Job Leggett one of nature's true gentlemen, although a weakly infatuated parent in respect to the strong-willed Sally.

They had their supper, and it was very good. Denise ate in that seeming greedy fashion of the nervously excited. The rapid consumption of food and drink both checked and fed the tumult of her senses. It was something to do. So was dancing.

She took the floor with Barrington in the pleasant consciousness that they were both exceptional, that she looked as well if not better than she had ever looked before, and, in defiance of the public glare and the boring glances of those who felt obliged to interest themselves in her and Frank, her heart purred a steady beat of joyous satisfaction.

She and Frank were going to be married. "A few more years shall roll." Let them roll, and afterward, come what may, she would have had one little slice of honest, sincere living. She it was who had all to give and nothing to ask; the courtesan humbly in love.

Now the cabaret show was coming on, and they sat down again at their table and

ordered some more champagne. Denise felt that no amount of wine could go to her head to-night. Frank picked up the gayly decorated program and glanced through it idly. Then his eyebrows lifted and he made a little sound under his breath.

"What is it?" Denise asked. She was quick to notice the least sign in him; it seemed almost as though she could read his every thought.

"Do you want to see it?" He passed her the program, and she too glanced through it.

The usual thing—the widely advertised chorus, a foreign comedian, a pair of jugglers, and a new dancer "fresh from her American triumphs."

Mlle.
TRELAWNY
and Partner

"Trelawny?" Denise queried as though to herself. "Good heavens, is that where Dora Trelawny's been all these years? A *new* dancer, indeed! Why, she must be—" She bit her lip to clip off the end of that sentence. Probably Frank Barrington had never heard of Dora Trelawny.

"This girl is very likely a daughter," Frank said. "That is, if she's the same girl I'm thinking of."

Denise glanced at him sidewise. It was silly to be jealous merely because he seemed to know a little something about Dora Trelawny's daughter—if Dora had ever had a daughter.

"I had an idea that Dora Trelawny died," Denise said. "I remember one year I was at Monte Carlo, and she was there, supposed to be very ill. These stage people—one can't keep track of them once they leave the limelight."

"Yes, she is dead," Frank replied. "The girl told me so."

"Oh, you know her—this one?"

"Hush—wait—this next is her turn."

Frank drew his chair a little apart as though he wished to be alone, and Denise Crowley drank some of her wine and lit a cigarette. Her heart was beating not so contentedly now, and yet it was very foolish to be disturbed.

Why? There was nothing to worry about. Was she going to get upset every time Frank spoke of another woman? This was absurd. It only bore out what was always said about middle-aged women who fell in love with young men. It was odd to think that she, Denise Crowley, should suffer from an inferiority complex.

The velvet curtains swung back, and Jess Trelawny ran out on her toes.

Ah, sweet and lovely Jess—graceful shade of the immortal Taglione—in her old-fashioned ballet dress; a pink and gold Columbine; light as air, buoyant as thistledown.

Frank Barrington's heart seemed to miss a beat. The last time he had seen her, had held her in his arms, came back to him in poignant memory. Her crushed tulle skirts. This was a new dress, of course, though pink, but set off with gold instead of silver.

As she danced a rosy mist flecked with sunlight seemed to envelop her. Her sweetly smiling lips, those warm eyes with the youthful crinkles at the corners, eyes that as she smiled appeared to have hot tears in them.

He glanced briefly at the supermuscled youth in bronze fleshlings with a leopard skin draped about his torso, who was the partner, in such small letters. Well, that's about all he deserved to be.

"Frank!" Denise touched his arm.

"Eh—what?"

"I asked you a question. Do you know that pretty little girl?"

"Yes—that is, I've met her."

Tumultuous applause, but apparently an encore was not to be allowed. Mlle. Trelawny came out and bowed deeply from the waist with one foot pointed behind, kissing her hands to right and left—to all those kind people who had received her so generously. This was her London premiere, and there was no doubt about its success.

"Partner" was led forward, and he too bowed.

"Frank, where did you meet her?" This was Denise again, tugging at his arm.

But Frank did not answer. He was standing up now. He never quite knew

why he had risen. Was it because he wanted Jess Trelawny to see him?

At last she looked straight into his eyes, and only he perceived a slight faltering in her perfect poise.

Then she blew a kiss in his direction, and allowed her partner to lead her from the floor.

CHAPTER XIV.

AUTUMN FEELS SPRING.

IT was rather a far cry from the log cabin dance hall of Boganny's to a fashionable cabaret show in London, but Frank knew nothing of all that had happened between to swell the fame of Jess Trelawny. He knew nothing of Hy Housemann and the long string of vaudeville houses ending with a real flare-up in New York.

Frank was tremendously excited. If it hadn't been for Denise he would have hastened to find Jess immediately. He wanted to take her little hands in his and shake them hard in true Yankee fashion, and congratulate her on the good turn in her fortunes. He was boyish enough to wonder if she had heard about the change in his, and at the same time cynical enough to suppose that if she had heard it would probably affect her as it had everybody else—everybody except Denise.

In his excitement after having that kiss blown at him, he had forgotten all about Denise, but now he remembered her. She was sitting there passively looking at him, a cigarette in a long green holder between her fingers, and the left corner of her mouth sagging in a jeering fashion.

"Well," she said coldly, "when you've quite finished your 'turn' with the young Trelawny, we might go. I wonder you did not throw her a kiss back—or wasn't that in your contract with her press agent?"

And surely enough, Denise Crowley's were not the only eyes that had marked that little scene. A couple of Frank's male acquaintances shook their heads in mock lugubriousness as though to say: "Oh, well, we can't compete with a fellow like you. You've got everything, including an A1 scandal in your past."

Girls tittered, and a middle-aged man who had to fill a sparkling gossip column in a popular illustrated weekly made a few notes on the back of a program, putting the latter into his pocket.

Frank sat down with an effect of having been jerked back to his chair. He felt an awful fool; he also felt contrite, on Denise's account. He had behaved stupidly. It was unforgivable, considering he was in the company of a woman, and that woman Denise, whom he had just asked to marry him.

"I'm sorry," he said. "Please don't be cross with me, Denise."

The famous chorus was on again now, and after they had romped about a bit Bud Hurley's Bandbox Band invited the audience to take the floor again in the Charleston or fox trot.

Denise beat an impatient toe. "Don't be silly. I'm not cross. But what did you bring me here for?" Was this the Denise that Frank thought he knew so well? "Let me tell you, Frank Barrington, I'm not used to being insulted. Whatever my life has been—"

"What, precisely, do you mean by that?" he heard himself asking. Denise was rousing his curiosity in an inexplicable way.

"You must have known," she went on, ignoring the unconscious subtlety of his query, "that that Trelawny girl was making her London début here to-night."

"My dear Denise, if only I understood what you're driving at. I didn't know, and even if I had—I was surprised and interested, that's all. She's a dear little girl, really, I stood up to—to see her better, and it was very sweet of her to notice me. She wouldn't have had the least idea that she was getting me into trouble."

"Trouble with a jealous woman," Denise commented bitterly. "Frank, is that the girl you told me about, that you'd only met a couple of times—the girl you might have fallen in love with?"

Frank went scarlet to the very roots of his hair. Women were the very devil! What had made Denise pitch on that?

"You needn't tell me," said Denise, answering her own question.

Crash!

Oh, that band!

She had a headache; she was tired to the bone. Oh, if only they'd stayed at home this evening, as in her heart of hearts she had wanted to do, and would have suggested except for that proposal of marriage.

She tried to imagine how she would have felt about this small episode if she had still been no more to Frank than his friend. Probably it wouldn't have hurt at all. She knew of other girls, friends of his snobbish married sister, Myra Kestral, to whom he had paid some attention, much more important than a cavalier smile thrown to a ballet dancer. Why should this seem so important that literally it made her feel faint?

"Shall we dance?" That was Frank's voice.

"We might as well," Denise replied.

In one shivering moment she had reasoned it all out. It wasn't the young Trelawny she feared. It was being alone with Frank and trying to resist an overwhelming urge to force words of love from his lips.

He had asked her to marry him because of the wound in his life that she had repaired so tardily; and because she was a sane woman, oh, most well balanced, with sorrows of her own, and a great capacity for friendship. She had given him perfect comradeship, and he did not ask for love.

There would be passion, of course.

Denise thought that over. She thought it over in a new light, and suddenly she was frightened.

There had been immense surprise in that little ballet dancer's eyes, and a summoned bravura in the last, lightly-blown kiss.

Denise knew it hadn't been planned, that neither Frank nor the young Trelawny had anticipated the incident.

"My dear, must I keep on apologizing? Aren't you going to say something?"

"Why, yes; we usually do talk when we dance, don't we?" Denise replied. She squeezed his hand. "Frank, do you remember that night at the Tic-Tac Club—the first night you took me out? Don't you remember how solemn everybody else seemed, while you and I were dancing away and talking nineteen to the dozen at the same time?

"And you said, 'Mrs. Crowley'—you called me Mrs. Crowley then—you said in that delicious accent you've almost lost—'Mrs. Crowley, I guess you and I are the only couple in this room who're having a good time.' And we were having a good time, weren't we, Frank?

"It was wonderful. Oh, my darling, I fell in love with you then and there. You were such a boy and you'd lost such a lot—yet who couldn't say what you had gained? Probably more than most people had the faintest idea of."

Crash, bang!—and now the little orchestra fluted on the thin, high notes, on slender horns with a wailing as of conscience in them.

"I think, dear, we really must go now," Denise said presently. "I've got rather a busy day to-morrow."

She had her emotions in hand by this time, and was terribly sorry to have shown him that unbecoming side of herself. Such a confession of weakness, too.

He held her hand during the drive back to Shepherd's Market, but she would not let him come any further than the door with her to say good night.

"You'll lunch with me to-morrow?"

"If you want me to, Frank. Perhaps I'd better meet you somewhere. I'll be out most of the morning."

They arranged where to meet, and then Denise shut the street door with an apologetic click.

Frank stood on the steps for a moment to light a cigarette. How oddly she had behaved. This was the very first time they had gone out together that she hadn't invited him in if only for a few moments, no matter what the hour, and to-night it wasn't late at all. He wondered if the moment would ever arrive when he could say that he understood anything about women.

It happened that Frank's sister, Mrs. Kestral, was lunching at the same restaurant where he took Denise the next day, and on their way out a waiter followed and handed him a message from her scrib-

bled on a visiting card. It merely said, "Come in at tea time if you can manage it."

Frank laughed and showed the card to Denise, whose eyes narrowed. This woman of the world knew what she was up against, but she was not afraid of any Mrs. Kestrals. That sort of thing had happened before; very often, indeed, there had been a man who needed rescuing from her clutches. But she felt no menace now. It scarcely seemed necessary even to bare her claws.

"Well?" she said, laughing back at him.

"I sha'n't go," he replied.

"Oh, yes, do! It will be such fun, and you must tell me all about it afterwards. I only wish I could listen behind a screen. I knew the 'Pasha' once, very slightly. What a squeaky voice he has in the House."

The Pasha was Frank's brother-in-law, Percy Kestral, a hardy perennial of the Conservative party for Upper Hickston. He was a round little person, one of those men who seem entirely composed of globes, round head and eyes and body and chubby, round fists, and stubby-toed boots. Frank did not dislike the Pasha specially, but he regarded him as almost positively negative.

Denise had had a very satisfactory morning. Her freshly done hair glittered golden, and she had gone to the extravagance of a most expensive facial massage. Her clothes, of course, were in irreproachable taste, and for once it seemed as though she had found a man who appreciated the trouble she expended on them.

The rakish little hat with its diamond arrow, the touch of bright embroidery on cuffs and collar, the small stole of Russian sable, the gardenia posy, all served to set off the arresting personality that was Denise Crowley. She made most other women look dowdy, no matter what dressmaker they patronized.

After lunch Frank and Denise strolled slowly down Bond Street, stopping now and then to look into shop windows whenever Denise was attracted by some article of jewelry, a display of dress, or a picture. It was a sunny afternoon, but with a hint of approaching autumn in the air.

Frank urged Denise to help him choose a ring for her, but she laughed and shook her head. "There's only one ring I want you to give me," she said, "and it's going to be a real old-fashioned one, too. A nice gold wedding-ring, the kind women used to wear when—when you were very young, Frank."

He smiled back at her. "Very well, my dear. Whatever you say. What I'd like is to buy you something."

When had Denise Crowley ever refused a man that privilege? She flushed a little and shook her head again, and then sighed. "Really, Frank, I'm too happy. There isn't a thing in the world I want, because what I've got is so very perfect. It will be as soon as we're married and away from this scandal-mongering little town. Oh, look, my dear, what enchanting jade. Did you ever see anything so brutally suave as that fat old Buddha?"

They paused to look into yet another window, and then Frank heard a hectic whispering behind him.

"I will, too. I don't care if it ain't good manners—"

"You mustn't. Honestly, you mustn't, Sally."

Frank turned to encounter the distressed and apologetic eyes of little Will Murch, and the glad grin of she who had been Miss Sally Leggett.

"Hello, Frankie," said Sally. "This is a funny place for you'n me to bang into each other again, ain't—I mean, is it *not?* Meet my husband, Mr. Murch, but you did meet him once, didn't you? We're married now. Say something. Will."

"How do you do," Will Murch said obediently.

"He's out'a the show business," Sally went on. "Studying at King's College all about mines. Gee, Frankie, I've got a helluva lot to tell you—sometime when you ain't too busy." Sally, who was rather magnificently got up herself shot a shy, appraising glance at the lovely Denise.

Frank took Denise's hand and gave it a quick, firm pressure.

"Denise," he said, "you've heard me speak of Mr. Leggett and his daughter, who were so kind to me at Boganny's. This young woman is—or was—Miss Leggett.

Now Mrs. Murch? Splendid! And this is Mr. Murch."

A wave of faintness swept Denise and Bond Street did a complete revolution before she found herself holding out her hand to Sally and saying, "But of course! I—I feel as though I knew you quite well."

Sally nudged Frank. "But what is *her* name?" she demanded *sotto voce*.

"I am Denise Crowley." Denise said. "One of Frank's old friends. And I knew your father once, too."

"Did you?" Sally was blandly surprised. "Pap never said anything. I should think he'd of remembered knowing you, Miss—er—Mrs. Crowley. I wouldn't have dreamed pap ever met anybody so swell. If you'll excuse my saying so, pap's been so busy all his life looking after things at Boganny's, that he hasn't hardly had the time to get into society."

Denise smiled wryly. "Perhaps he saw a little of it and decided that he wasn't interested," she said. Quickly she turned to Frank, giving him a flat hint to leave her to handle this intriguing situation alone. "What about your sister, Frank? Mustn't you be off? Perhaps Mrs. Murch will come back and have a cup of tea with me—and Mr. Murch, of course, if he can manage it," Denise added.

Will, also, could take a hint, or else it was true as he said that he had to go back to his college to attend a lecture. Sally expressed herself as delighted to accept Mrs. Crowley's kind invitation.

They took a taxi, and one may judge of Sally's surprise when the exquisitely gowned Denise embarked her at the dingy old house in Shepherd's Market. She had expected at least a Parklane palace.

It did not seem at all odd to Sally that a strange woman to whom she had just been introduced in the street should immediately invite her home to tea. Spontaneous friendship and quick offers of hospitality were in Sally's creed. Also, this beautiful and most fashionable Mrs. Crowley had once known her father. Sally was frankly curious about that. Pap must have had a few bright moments in his life that he hadn't advertised.

"This is where I live," Denise said, as she paid off the taxi. "Dreadful little slum, isn't it? But I like my attic. So easy to run, and so cheap. There are three flights of stairs."

Sally felt embarrassed and disappointed. Meeting this fine lady in the company of him who had miraculously become a Lord Barrington, she had visualized herself as achieving the topmost pinnacle of London society in one easy bound. Not that Sally cared about such things really, or that she was in any sense of the word a snob.

But we all have a little liking for the fripperies of life, the gilt on the gingerbread, or more particularly on the Lord Mayor's coach, and that was how Sally felt. She was inclined to draw in a little, remembering other disillusions.

It was extraordinary how people scented out the fact of her being a woman of money, even when she didn't tell them, and long ago she had given up flaunting the copper mine as a means of self-glorification. It had been to costly. They were like burrs, all those sycophants who hoped for and sometimes almost demanded a share of her wealth for the mere task of looking pleasant while they gave themselves the pain of extorting it.

Perhaps this Mrs. Crowley was another of them, and Sally wasn't having any more of that sort of thing. So, as she mounted the narrow stairways in the wake of Denise, she was decidedly on her guard.

Denise was a little flushed with excitement, anxious to show off, to make a good impression. For the first time in her life she experienced a twinge of that malady known as conscience. No, she told herself, it wasn't that she pretended anything so hypocritical as maternal instinct or feeling.

She had been as anxious to get rid of Sally as any frightened, traduced maid-servant might have been in like circumstances, and with far less reason. But she didn't care to remember, now, that she had sold the child, and there was a hard and fast legal document which stood in the way of her ever proclaiming herself as Sally's mother.

In fact, all that Denise had left in the

world, the small fixed income on which she now existed in her Mayfair attic, was subject to that bond. Perhaps Job Leggett had foreseen this day, or something like it.

Denise had no intention of jeopardizing her own interests, and there was, besides, her impending marriage. She was a little sorry, now, that Frank knew about Sally. Still, since he did know, she was under no necessity to worry as to what he might find out.

"This is my little home," she said brightly, throwing open the door of the big front room.

It was one of the sewing-maid's days, and the fire was burning brightly, with tea already laid and a kettle on the hob.

"Why, it's quite nice, isn't it?" said Sally, slightly surprised to find an attic so beautifully furnished. "I guess you're an artist, Mrs. Crowley."

Denise laughed. "In my day I have been called an artist," she admitted dryly, "but not as a painter of pictures. I'm a trifler, really. I don't do anything much except amuse myself and potter about."

"I guess you read a lot," said Sally, noting the many low bookshelves. "Do you do it because you like to?"

"Yes, I think so. Books are wonderful companions. Won't you sit down? This chair."

"Thanks. Yes, maybe they are companions. That's what Will says, but you can bet your bottom dollar he ain't much in the companion line when he's got his nose buried in one. And Miss Cormick—she's my governess—she's even worser'n Will."

Denise pushed the kettle over the fire.

"Your governess?" she asked, amused.

"Sure. I wouldn't go to school when I was a kid, and pap was weak-minded about it. He never could do nothing—I mean, do *anything* with me. I just brought myself up, you see, the way I liked. Of course, later on I was sorry, just like pap said I'd be."

Denise made the tea and encouraged Sally's ego.

"And then you decided to have a governess," she prompted.

"Sure. Well, I didn't so much think of it myself, really, but there was a girl came to Boganny's last year—she's my best friend, now—kind of a cute little girl, and at first I was jealous of her on account of Frankie—I mean on account of Lord Barrington. Well, this girl was like me in some ways, except she didn't have any money—not that I'm rich, it's only my pap, and he don't give me'n Will any more than we need for ourselves.

"But, as I was saying, this girl's mother was dead, same as mine and her pap, too, but she was brought up by an old gentleman in the show business that's just like her pap, and not so weak-minded as mine. He'd made her go to school, you see, and it was this girl what put the idea into my head."

Denise listened tensely, her eyes sympathetically warm, a fixed smile on her lips. But now it seemed that she was listening to the beating of her own heart.

"And were you—were you a little bit fond of Frank?" she asked archly.

"Oh, gee, who could help it!" Sally laughed. "All the girls were crazy about him. But a funny thing, the minute I set eyes on Will, I sort of knew he was my fate, and it seemed to me that Jess Trelawny was Frankie's fate, only somehow they didn't get a chance with that Mrs. Marvel messing about and her husband gone out of his head over Jess. But I'm afraid I'm boring you."

"No, no—indeed you're not," Denise assured her.

She pressed cakes upon Sally, but took nothing herself except a cup of tea with neither cream nor sugar.

Little by little she elicited the story of the Turco-Marvel Troupe's sojourn at Boganny's, and learned what part Frank had played in the mining camp drama.

"And now, of course, Jess will never see Frankie again," Sally concluded.

"Why—er—why not?" Denise forced herself to ask.

Sally colored. "Oh, well, if you don't know, I'd rather not say. You being a friend of Frankie's, and all." But under a little blandishment she continued.

"Well, don't say anything to him about it, will you? Mr. Turco wouldn't let Jess

look at him, even if he was to go down on his knees to her, which isn't likely. Anyway, my Lord Barrington isn't likely to worry himself about Jess Trelawny, now he's what he is, but he needn't think she cares.

"Jess Trelawny should worry, too — *I don't think!* You should of seen the men in New York, and I guess there'll be plenty in London, too, now she's got this engagement with the Follies. Mr. Turco was ever so long letting her take an engagement here. He's awful particular."

Denise drummed nervously on the arm of her chair.

"But what, precisely, did Frank do to make him so—er—ineligible for the good will of this Miss Trelawny?"

"Do?" Sally looked as though she might explode. "*Do?* Well, I ask you! He only just ran away with that Mrs. Marvel what he'd been mixed up with once before in his life. Took her up to Reno—so we heard—so she could get a divorce. You can get a divorce for any old thing in Reno, if you live there long enough.

"Maybe she's still there. I dunno. Maybe he's got tired of her. It's none of my business, and I'm broad-minded, anyway, but Mr. Turco—he's that strait-laced that he couldn't take a full breath without his conscience pinching him. He's an actor, too, you'd hardly believe it."

Denise sat quietly now, her hands clasped in her lap. It was all right. She needn't let it bother her too much. Last night she had behaved with incredible stupidity over that same Trelawny, but Frank was going to marry her, Denise, and it scarcely seemed likely that he would try to renew his acquaintance with the dancing-girl, while the girl herself believed him still to be enamored of Nita Marvel.

Denise knew the truth of that supposed elopement, when Nita and Frank found themselves at a railway station with tickets for the same train, but she saw no reason why she should reëstablish his good reputation with Sally.

"I suppose," she said, "that you see a great deal of your friend Miss Trelawny?"

"Oh, sure—I see her most every day," Sally replied.

"But I don't suppose you'll tell her that you ran into Frank?"

"Why not?"

"It might—it might start her thinking about him," Denise explained rather inadequately.

"Well, she does think about him, anyway. Only, he isn't on her brain, believe me."

Denise felt slightly annoyed. She had jumped too readily to the supposition that this crude daughter of Job Leggett's would be easy to handle, forgetting that Job, himself, had been unable to accomplish such a task.

"Do you really feel," she said, "that it would be a kindness to Miss Trelawny to put ideas into her head?"

"Mentioning Frank to her? What sort of ideas?"

Denise shifted her position, and Sally, glancing at her sharply, perceived that she was uneasy. Sally would have said that Mrs. Crowley looked rattled.

"It's rather hard to explain," Denise said, with a would-be patronizing smile. "You see, Frank's a very old friend of mine. There are lots of things about him that probably you don't know."

"Oh, yes, I do. I know all about his having been in prison for shooting Mrs. Marvel's first husband, if that's what you mean."

"He's put all that behind him," Denise said hastily. "He was only a boy when it happened, and—"

"Good gracious, of course I remember!" Sally cried. "Why, you're the woman he spoke about to Kerry Marvel. He mentioned your name right in front of Job and me. He said you'd 'turned up again,' and that was enough for Mr. Marvel."

Denise made a gesture of irritation.

"My dear child, that's got nothing to do with what I'm trying to tell you, if you'll allow me. Let me put it before you. Nobody's concerned in the very least with Frank's past. Through the deaths of his uncle and cousin he's come into the Barrington title and estates. I suppose he has an income of twenty thousand pounds a year—"

"Is that all?"

"It's quite a lot, isn't it?"

"Well, I don't call it so much. However—it all depends where you sit, how your picture's going to look."

"I'm trying to tell you—" Denise went on impatiently, "that Frank isn't likely to marry a ballet dancer."

"Has one asked him?" Sally demanded coolly.

She got up and began to put on her gloves.

"My dear, I'm only trying to tell you—"

"I wish I knew what it was. Write it in a letter, Mrs. Crowley." Sally smiled to counteract the acidity of her advice. "Well, I must be going now. It was fine of you to ask me here, and it 'll be a big joke on pap when I tell him I've met you—him keeping his society doings so dark. I expect you met him when he was to Europe that time before I was born. He's got some colored pictures on glass of all the things he saw—the Eiffel Tower and Napoleon's Tomb, and everything. Well, good-by, Mrs. Crowley. Any time you care to look in at the Ritz, I'd be pleased to give you a cup of tea."

Denise saw her hearty young visitor off the premises, then came back and collapsed in a chair before the fire.

Why had Frank Barrington chosen last night to ask her to marry him?

That proposal, so unexpected and so madly acceptable to a woman head over heels in love, had acted like a lighted match set to a gunpowder fuse.

Fate had been crouching all these years to get in a whacking blow at her. Malicious.

Her mind traveled around in a circle and came back to the point where she accused herself of incredible stupidity. She was making a monstrous thing of nothing.

Let us analyze this, then: last night Frank had asked her to marry him, and she had given him the right answer. Very well, then: last night they had gone out to supper and there had been a cabaret show during the course of which one of the performers tossed a kiss in Frank's direction. She was a girl he had known very briefly. To-day Frank had been hailed in Bond Street by Sally. Oh, there was too much of coincidence in all this.

When fate means to be particularly offensive, she arranges coincidences, otherwise life would be a fairly peaceful affair. Even the casual message of Myra Kestral now took on a sinister significance in Denise's mind, whereas she had been merely amused when Frank showed her his sister's card.

Why didn't he come? There had been plenty of time for him to see Mrs. Kestral and her squeaky-voiced tub of a husband and hear all they had to say on the subject of Denise Crowley. Time enough and to spare. Whatever Myra Kestral might say would only move him to polite impatience; or, since she was a close relative, it might not be so polite.

But presently Denise's fears were partially set at rest. There was the sound of Frank's step in the passage and she ran swiftly to let him in. His arms were burdened with an enormous parcel of flowers, and it seemed so boyish and sweet of him to bring them himself, that tears filled Denise's eyes as she gave him a hug.

She found, indeed, that once the tears had started it was impossible to stop them, so she kept laughing and mopping her eyes, feeling almost sick with the reaction from her visit with Sally.

"My dear, what is the matter?" Frank asked.

"I don't know. I—I'm so happy." She kissed him a little wildly.

"Poor Denise. It must have been a bit of a shock running into Sally like that. Had no idea she was in London, and married to that comic young fellow."

"Oh, it's not that. Frank, hold me close—tell me you love me. There's nothing in the world I care about but that."

CHAPTER XV.

WOMAN'S NICHE.

IT seemed to Frank that there were many reasons why he should be very tender with Denise, for all she was so emphatic in proclaiming her great happiness.

In the first place, he hadn't expected her

to feel like this. He looked back a little regretfully, himself, to their days of comradeship, as though he had lost something that would not be recaptured easily. It was a continuation of their comradely relationship he had hoped most for when he asked Denise to be his wife, and her frantic, ill-concealed passion roused vague misgivings in him. He now realized that the quality of affection he had for her lacked a great deal of what she anticipated.

He had thought of them as both being rather in the same boat where the world was concerned—two people who had earned, whether by accident or not, a definite approbrium. By joining their ill-starred lives they could leave the world to its own devices and gain a great comfort from their mutual affection.

He thought of them as traveling a great deal, of making temporary homes here and there wherever fancy prompted, of studying, reading, enjoying as they went along. He was afraid of passion.

Once he had loved Juanita Marvel, and the desperate lengths to which that youthful affair had led him was both appalling and wholly inexplicable. For as he felt now, Nita was the very last woman in the universe for whom he could have summoned a shred of sentiment.

And even Denise—a very different sort of woman from Nita—even Denise roused in him a feeling of distaste when she revealed her clamoring emotions. Yet he must be very tender with her. He owed her much and he liked her tremendously. It must have been a great ordeal for her meeting Sally like that. Not a word of warning.

But she had stood up to it nobly. Frank wanted to talk about Sally and when Denise shook her head, and swallowed at a lump in her throat, he realized that he had blundered. He supposed it would hurt her to talk about the child whom necessity had compelled her to give up when Sally was only a baby.

Frank was also conscious of a sense of guilt. Since Sally was married to Will Murch it was only reasonable to assume that she knew something of the fortunes of that lovely young Jess Trelawny. Frank wanted to know about Jess, but he was quite sure that if he mentioned her name to Denise, it would provoke a scene. So he dared not ask, and in consequence of keeping it to himself, he felt guilty.

Denise arranged the flowers he had brought her. She was deft and picturesque about it, and uttered little cooing cries of rapture every now and again to show her appreciation of his thoughtfulness. They were not specially choice flowers, only a hasty selection from the stock of a small dealer around the corner, yet one would have thought Denise Crowley had never had flowers given to her before.

He wished she wouldn't make such a theatrical fuss over them. He might have done so much better if he hadn't been in such a hurry.

When he produced his pipe she insisted upon filling and lighting it for him, and that was a nuisance, because he preferred performing that rite for himself. Then she sat on a cushion at his feet and leaned her head against his knees.

"Isn't it just perfect, Frank—you and I together like this—for the rest of our lives, darling?"

Involuntarily Frank gave a little start. For the rest of their lives, of course. What else could he have imagined when he asked her to marry him?

"Tell me about Mrs. Kestral and the Pasha," she said dreamily, caressing his hand. "Were they very horrid?"

"Oh—Myra. Percy wasn't there, thank heaven. She'd arranged to be alone."

Denise moved from his knees and hugged her own.

"So as to get at you better, I suppose."

Frank laughed and puffed at his pipe.

"In a way, but not what you think. Myra asked about you—said people were coupling our names together and all the rest of it—so it was only fair to you, my dear, to tell her the truth. You didn't want it told, but I felt I had to use my own judgment in this instance."

"Oh, Frank, you darling! And then—"

"Oh, poor Myra only wanted to borrow some money. Percy's come a cropper over his blessed speculating. She seemed quite friendly where you were concerned."

"I see," Denise said slowly. "How much did she want?"

"Only a couple of thousand."

"And for that, I suppose, she'll take me to her heart when I'm your wife."

"You're too sharp, Denise. Of course, I'll lend it to her. Percy's embarrassment is only temporarily. It's simply that he doesn't want to upset the applecart for a trifle. But I told Myra she needn't worry about you and me. I told her we were going abroad very soon."

"That was a relief to her, I'm sure," Denise said.

Frank made no reply. He, too, had seen through his sister's maneuver and would have respected her more if she had not offered that *quid pro quo*, but he didn't like to think that Denise was equally omniscient. In effect Myra had said: "Lend us two thousand and we'll ask your wife to dinner." Well, Frank had rejected her side of the bargain. He wished, now, that he had not mentioned it to Denise.

It was six o'clock when he left her and he would not see her again that evening. She had a dinner engagement that it would have been unreasonable and awkward to put off, although she would have done so had Frank expressed a wish.

"But I'll come home early, darling—not a minute later than eleven," she assured him.

She had been a little too quick with her readjustments. As friends they had met two or three times a week, and it was only last night they had become something more exacting in each others lives. Frank, also, had an engagement, although he had not thought to tell Denise about it.

His was at a well-known sporting club where something unique in the way of a boxing match had been arranged to follow one of the orthodox events. Two veteran champions in the lightweight school were to spar more for the fun of the thing than for the nominal purse that had been put up.

"I'm afraid I won't be able to come in," Frank said. "I'd be too late," he explained.

"I don't care how late it is!" Denise cried. "Oh, Frank—not to see you again to-night—I couldn't bear it."

"But my little beanfeast won't break up until long after midnight," he protested. "Hang it all, I have to sleep sometimes. Sorry, dear. But it would be rather late, wouldn't it?"

"Yes—yes—of course it would," she agreed reluctantly.

He grumbled to himself as he walked back to his apartments in the Albany.

The friendship of Denise had blessed his liberty, and the man who doesn't need a woman to fill some niche in his life must be as rare as he is inhuman. Denise was all right in her place, but this unfortunate tendency she was showing to occupy other niches beside her own, already irked him.

There was one little niche she could never fill. He told himself that it would always be empty, although not because there were no women in the world worthy to fill it. Rather, the fault was with himself. He distrusted himself in the rôle of a lover.

And scarcely had he thought in his humble fashion than the image of Jess Trelawny leaped into his mind. He saw her as she was last night, running out so blithely on the tips of her toes, the warm-eyed smile, the tender youngness of her.

At Boganny's she had seemed scarcely more than a child to him, a little girl whose life was none too easy, whose future might be very hard, indeed. And so she had been a child at Boganny's, but even then she had inspired desire in that prince of cads, Kerry Marvel. In Frank she had inspired a yearning tenderness.

What a straight-dealing young soul she had shown herself to be when Nita left her to bear the stigma of intrigue alone. She wouldn't have split on Nita. Not she. And then that other fearless creature, Sally Leggett, had come nobly to her rescue with as fine a pack of lies as was ever conceived. All this talk about the modern girl—well, anyway, she knew how to be a pal to her own sex.

Somewhere in London was Jess Trelawny. To-night he could see her again if he wanted to, merely by looking in at the Follies. He would like to see her again, but not with an effect of footlights between them. He thought it would be rather jolly if he could get her and Sally to come to tea at his place.

When he let himself in he began at once to people his sitting room with that tea-party, seating Jess in this chair and Sally in that, and Sally, of course, being the matron, would pour the tea. What fun to chat about old days at Boganny's. Sometimes Frank felt a little homesick for the mountains and Red Beard and fat Charley Boganny.

Also for his little lonesome cabin, and for Moonstar waiting so patiently down at the livery stable in Grass Valley. Oh, he would go back to pay them all a visit some day—only there was a slight rub about that. He winced when he thought of it. Certainly, as long as Job Leggett was alive, he couldn't go back with Denise, and very likely she would object to his going alone.

Suddenly the roving life Denise and he had planned for themselves seemed a little distasteful. Particularly, he didn't care much about that Arab villa.

In a flash he visioned something altogether different; something in the country here in England, with woods to poke about in, and rolling meadowland studded with sheep; an Elizabethan house with a clock tower over the stables where beautiful Moonstar would be established in equine splendor. There must be a great walled kitchen garden and a little lake nosing its way under the willows, a lily-splashed lake where children would be quite safe pottering about in an old flat-bottomed boat.

Frank meditated peacefully before his fire, lit his pipe in the slow, rather clumsy way he liked doing it, pressing down the tobacco with his thumb and taking a lot of time between the striking of the matches. Those years in prison had taught him to make the most of a pipe. He stretched his long legs out very straight, and rested on the small of his spine, his shoulders hunched comfortably.

That ancient house with the herring-bone chimneys and creepers on the wall—well, what was the use of pretending that it was a dream house? Barrington Towers, address near Lymington, Hants, belonged to him, didn't it?

Myra was always urging him to open the Towers for the benefit of the family; always hinting that he could not do better than marry some nice quiet girl—of her choosing—and settle down there. A wonderful place for children. Myra continually suggested, and, of course, her prodigal brother would marry some day and have lashings of progeny.

That continual prod in the direction of the Barrington country seat had bored, irritated, and amused Frank by turns. This evening he felt drawn by the idea. Extraordinary.

He ruffled his hair and drew hard on his pipe. Why—why should he suddenly feel that way about Barrington Towers, which he remembered only as a schoolboy, and chiefly associated with the memory of his rather dull uncle and the delicate heir, Sylvester—delicate in both mind and body—who at the age of twelve had a horror of white mice as pets and of frogs as bedfellows.

But there were other memories. The flat-bottomed boat, for instance; the warm, cloistered walls hung with choice forbidden fruit, and the mad gallops in the wake of a rather makeshift and assorted pack of hounds on frosty mornings.

Frank was evicted from this sentimental reverie by his old manservant; yet curiously enough the very fact of John Peggen being in attendance upon him here in the Albany, was all in keeping with the tradition of Barrington Towers. Peggen had been an under footman at the Towers when Frank's own father was a boy. It had worried him a little as to what he was to do with the old fellow when Denise and he set forth upon their wanderings.

"I've laid out your clothes, my lord. It's nearly eight o'clock. If your lordship would like a little dinner in, I could manage it."

Frank got up, stretched himself and laid a friendly hand across the old servitor's shoulders.

"Comes easy to you, Peggen—this 'my lord' business. 'Member when it was just 'Mr. Frankie,' and sometimes 'Mr. Francis, you're a fair young devil, if I do say so!'"

Peggen grinned. He was most positively of the old school: hardly a score of his kind left in the whole world.

"Sometimes I forget myself. You did lead us a dance when you came down to the Towers, my lord. Poor little Lord Sylvester—'e couldn't keep pace with you, not he, with his bad chest and his nightmares and all. Yet he was ever so fond of you, my lord, and when—" Peggen broke off to cough distressfully.

Frank helped him. "And when I heaped disgrace on them, poor little Sylvy was dreadfully cut up. Yes, I know, Peggen. He used to write to me when I was shut up in Maidstone. I've kept his letters—but that's all over, now, isn't it?"

Peggen coughed again. "Not quite, my lord. There's still Barrington Towers."

Frank went to the sideboard and mixed himself a drink.

"Mrs. Kestral's been talking to you," he said over his shoulder.

Peggen's wrinkled old face went a becoming rose color.

"Mrs. Kestral 'as mentioned the matter, my lord, in the family way of speaking—me being what you might call of the family from my birth up, and before."

"I should think so!" Frank agreed. When had there not been a Peggen in the Barrington family?

"But it was quite my own idea, my lord, apart from Mrs. Kestral. I've always hoped we'd be going back, some time. The Towers is too good to waste. Perhaps in these days it seems old-fashioned like, to talk of 'going back.' But it's the comfort I'm thinking of, the peace and gentleness of it all. I'm getting on for an old man, my lord—seventy odd, this coming Lady Day. Some time I'd like to go back—excuse me, my lord—there's the doorbell, I believe."

Peggen ambled off, but in a moment was back again.

"It's a young lady asking to see you, my lord. Miss Trelawny, the name is. I should have mentioned the young lady asked for your lordship on the telephone about an hour ago."

Naturally Frank was astonished. Without a word he hurried into the hall where Jess Trelawny had been left by Peggen, looking rather a little figure of misery.

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK

THE PROSPECTOR

FORTY years he tramped the Western hills,
Heedless of the whisperings of time,
Dreaming of steel gallows frames, and mills,
Watching phantom smoke-clouds upward climb.

Wintering in cabins lost in snow,
Sleep—and grub—and thoughts of how he'd spend
The gold he'd find: places he would go
When he struck it—pals that he'd befriend.

Silver-lock'd, but mocking senile age,
Furrowed cheeks from wind and desert heat,
Brother of the solitude and sage,
Kinsman of the wild things—and the fleet.
Forty years—and what has he to show?
Gentle, childlike faith, and eyes that glow.

Steve Hogan.

A Good Guess

By HELEN A. HOLDEN

THE train never missed a station. As a thorough stopping train Keith James had never met its equal.

It was a gloriously warm Saturday noon for October. The train looked as if every one in the city had determined to make the most of the good weather, and was traveling countryward.

Peggy, Keith's wife, had planned the afternoon. He had agreed with proper enthusiasm, although hidden away deep down in his heart he had a plan of his own.

But Peggy's ardor was contagious. So Keith said nothing of his desire, but fell in with the afternoon arranged in her usual vigorous fashion.

Instead of coming all the way out to their home station at Northfield, he was to leave the train at Fairfield. She would meet him there with the car. They would drive across country, selecting some choice spot for the luncheon she would have with her.

So far so good. This was just as Keith would have it—but from this point on his private plans disagreed with the ones Peggy had adopted. They were then to amble on to call on Hilda Stevens, or rather Mrs. Warner, as she was now.

At one time in Keith's youth he had thought Hilda the embodiment of everything that was chic, beautiful, and clever. Then he had married Peggy and forgotten all about her.

Peggy had met her at a recent tea when Hilda had been overwhelmingly friendly. She insisted that Peggy let Keith drive her over to call, a distance of some-twenty miles from Fairfield.

Keith glanced around the car, where every seat was taken. He marveled that there were so many people with so much spare time. If it hadn't been for giving Peggy such a lengthy wait he would never have taken a way train. He would have waited for the next express.

It was too bad he had missed the train agreed upon. Surely Peggy would wait over the one train at least. The delay had been unintentional..

He had read in the *Herald* of the transfer of a certain property, " The Château," from Mr. Mark Anthony Parker to a Mr.

Thomas Marvin. He was not especially interested in Mark Anthony or Thomas or the property in general. But he was tremendously concerned about the building that occupied a small section of the huge estate.

A photograph of this massive pile, situated in Fairfield County, had been printed with information that it was soon to be remodeled. Now as an architect keenly interested in his work, Keith had wondered why he could not have at least a try at this reconstruction.

It had appealed to him instantly. There were such fine possibilities in the massive structure. A feeble copy of a French château, it was more or less a nightmare as it stood.

So much could be done to make it beautiful. Keith had run his eye over the photograph, deciding what he would tear down and what was good enough to leave.

Keith felt an insistent urge to call on Mr. Marvin. He didn't know where the place was, but he would have liked to poke about Fairfield County till he found it.

He knew the country about Northfield like a book. But the Fairfield section he was unfamiliar with. Anyway, Peggy's plan of the Hilda trip shelved Mr. Marvin, unless he could combine the two. And this would necessitate some inkling of where The Château was located.

Several times during the morning he had thought of calling up Mr. Marvin's office. Then each time he had decided he could do much better by seeing him and talking the matter over personally.

He decided to stop on his way to the train. He allowed himself an hour. He felt he could do much to bring Mr. Marvin to his way of thinking in that length of time.

On reaching the office he found Mr. Marvin out. Not admitting defeat, he sat down to await his return.

The time passed quickly. Keith even forgot it was his usual lunch hour. He sat reconstructing the French château into a substantial American house. It could be done if Mr. Marvin had no sentiment about the place, and would consent to having much torn down.

Keith's dream was interrupted by an oldish young man, who had taken the place evidently of the youth who had admitted him. When he learned that Keith was waiting to see Mr. Marvin he informed him that Mr. Marvin would not be in again till Monday.

Keith refrained from asking why he had not been told this in the first place. He came to the conclusion that if he had only had his wits about him instead of mooning about The Château he would have realized that Saturday noon was an impossible time to try to see a man at his office.

Feeling annoyed at himself, it did not add to his peace of mind to run into a traffic jam on his way to the station. He was delayed just long enough to miss the express. Then not to keep Peggy waiting any longer than necessary, he took the way train and sat fuming at this bit of Saturday luck.

Here he was with the prospect of making a call that he didn't want to make—wanting to make a call that he couldn't make—and wasting time on a poky way train! Some mess!

Of course, Mr. Marvin would be at his country place over the week-end. Probably motored out Thursdays, or at the latest, Fridays, while the good weather lasted.

At last, leaving Mr. Marvin, his thoughts turned to Peggy. If a call on Hilda was her idea of a pleasant Saturday afternoon, why, bless her heart, it was up to him to fall in without any grouching. She need never know that Hilda Warner's was the last place on earth that he would have chosen to go.

Moving restlessly in his cramped quarters, Keith's foot struck against something. Stooping he picked up a large envelope.

As he handed it to his seatmate his glance caught the address:

BOB ACRES
FAIRFIELD COUNTY
FAIRFIELD, CONN.

This "Bob Acres" amused Keith, recalling, as the name did, the famous character in "The Rivals." He could not repress a grin as he handed it over. But the man sitting next him was evidently used

to the comparison, for he did not refer to it as he took the envelope.

First a "Thanks," then he added in a friendly way: "Does it strike you that this way train is stopping more often than is necessary?"

"I'd say it does!" Keith replied.

Then Keith was suddenly aware that the station at which the train was stopping was Fairfield. He was forced to follow the immaculate figure of Bob Acres step by step along the crowded aisle. It seemed as if the whole carful was leaving at Fairfield.

Once on the platform Keith took advantage of the thinning crowd to make good time. He dodged around one woman but failed to make allowance for the bundles in the arms of the woman in front. The collision was disastrous.

The numerous packages shot in various directions. As Keith helped her to pick them up he was stepped on till he got exceedingly hot under the collar.

Of course, in a way, it had been his fault. It did not make him feel any cooler, however, when the woman received his assistance with an irate stare instead of expressing any gratitude.

At last he was free to look for Peggy. She had said the right hand side of the station as near the platform as she could find parking space.

Out of the half dozen cars still remaining there was no familiar roadster with the radiant Peggy at the wheel.

Surely she would have waited over the one train. Perhaps she had been late in getting off. Then again she would never be three-quarters of an hour late unless something serious had happened.

As the minutes sped by he began to get nervous. He began to imagine everything possible and impossible. At last he decided to call up the house.

The two phone booths were occupied when he reached them. All sorts of absurd reasons for Peggy's absence continued to chase through his mind. He awaited his turn in a fever of impatience.

At last the man in the nearest booth began collecting his belongings. As he came out he nodded to Keith. It was Bob Acres.

While waiting for his connection, Keith wondered about the man. His name seemed a joke. Had his parents actually given him such a handicap in starting out in life?

In the end Keith was unable to get the house. That meant that Peggy had left. He wished she wasn't in the habit of driving so fast. She was an exceptional driver, but the roads were perilously crowded week-ends.

He left the booth feeling more worried than when he entered it. He walked along both sides of the station. No sign of Peggy. Not knowing what next to do he spent what seemed an endless time strolling restlessly back and forth.

At last, realizing that worry was not getting him anywhere he resolutely turned his attention to other matters.

The trip he had privately planned for that afternoon immediately filled his mind. Why not kill time looking up Mr. Marvin's address in the phone book?

Five minutes' search and he bade the project a final farewell. There was no such person as Thomas Marvin in any section of the country thereabouts. At least nothing was listed under Marvin or Parker.

So that settled that. Keith now had nothing to keep his mind from the problem of discovering the whereabouts of Peggy.

Various plans occurred to him. But he discarded each in turn as worthless.

There would be no use in taking the next train to Northfield. Peggy was not at home or she would have answered the phone. There had been no mention of another place of meeting. At last he made up his mind to walk along in the direction from which she would come.

This was better than waiting around the station. As he reached the main road he ran into a bunch of traffic. Waiting a chance to cross, he became conscious of a car whose occupant was signaling him.

Hurrying across, he was sure the summons was a mistake. The car was a foreign one. No one of his acquaintances owned that particular make.

To his surprise, he found his recent friend Bob Acres sitting beside—Keith could not be sure whether it was the chauffeur or a

friend. The younger man was not in uniform. He was a good-looking chap and might have been either Bob Acres's son or his driver.

And who was Bob anyway? Was he the owner of the car, or a needy neighbor who had been invited to ride home? Keith gave it up.

"Can we take you to your destination—part of the way?" Mr. Acres asked and Keith decided it must be his car.

"It's very kind of you," he replied gratefully, "but I'm expecting," he glanced along the road in the direction in which Peggy would come, "here she is now."

Sure enough, Peggy's neat roadster was coming at a rate that made Keith catch his breath. The big machine moved off and Peggy's car quickly took its place.

"Who's your friend?" she smiled happily at Keith as she made room for him behind the steering wheel.

Keith had it in his mind to tell her how anxious she made him with her reckless driving—how he had nearly lost his mind worrying about her while she kept him waiting—how more than relieved he was to see her. Instead, Peggy being Peggy, and it being Saturday and a half holiday, he replied:

"Bob Acres."

"Did he once play the part and never recover?" asked Peggy.

"I don't know. I can't make up my mind," and Keith told how he had sat with the man on the train. He explained how in picking up the envelope he had glimpsed the name.

Then he inquired casually about the delay in meeting him at the station.

To his secret amusement, Peggy was completely unconscious that she had done anything to make him anxious. She had arrived in good time to meet the express. When he failed to come on that she supposed he had missed it.

While waiting for the way train which she naturally expected him to take, she suddenly remembered that Fairfield had exceptional stores. She thought of a little shopping she might as well do. So the time had slipped by more quickly than she had realized.

It seemed to Keith the one explanation that he had missed out of the nine hundred and ninety-nine he had thought of.

II.

THREE o'clock found Peggy and Keith near the town of Fairfield just where they had started from two hours before. They had eaten a successful lunch, but that was as much as they had accomplished.

They had failed to find the house in which Hilda Warner lived.

"She certainly said turn to the right after leaving Fairfield. Then straight on for about ten miles—'a large stone house on the right hand side of the road—high up from the dusty thoroughfare, overlooking the country for miles and miles,' her very words," quoted Peggy.

It seemed more or less hopeless. The afternoon, however, was spoiled as far as Keith was concerned. He might as well spend the rest of the time looking up Hilda as try to do anything else.

It was beautiful country through which they were driving. The leaves were turning red and yellow. The country estates were large and well cared for. Few houses could be seen for most of them were still hidden by the trees.

"Drive slowly," commanded Peggy. "There's the place I'd like to live when we've saved enough money to retire."

The house was not visible from the road but the approach piqued one's curiosity. An inviting lane meandered leisurely toward a cluster of trees behind which the house was hidden. The trees, a tiny brook, and a green meadow made an appealing picture.

Across the road were stables that reminded one of a bit of English scenery. Some one was holding a restive horse while another man in riding clothes stood by.

"Bob Acres!" and Keith put on the brake so suddenly that Peggy was nearly jerked through the windshield.

Almost before the car came to a stop, Keith had jumped out. Being assured that Peggy did not mind, he left her while he went back to see what information he could gather. He had a feeling that he was meeting again an old acquaintance.

"Evidently we are on the right road," Keith reported on his return. He got in and started the engine. "Bob's not sure, but he thinks the Warners' place must be about ten miles farther on. There is a big stone house high up on the right hand side of the road."

"He doesn't know them, then," said Peggy. It seemed strange, for they were such near neighbors for the country.

"He doesn't know many people for he hasn't lived here very long," replied Keith, "but he thinks it must be they."

"I like 'Broad Acres' for a name," decided Peggy thoughtfully. "That was the name on the gate posts the other side of the road—'Broad Acres.' 'Bob Acres.' Why, Keith, that's not the name of your friend, but of his place. You glimpsed it wrong on the envelope you picked up on the train."

"I'd hate to contradict a lady—especially when I think she's right," nodded Keith.

And during the ten miles of road that lay between them and the Warner place he chuckled whenever he thought of his mistake.

As they came within sight of the Warner estate, Peggy exclaimed enthusiastically:

"What a beautiful place, Keith!"

Keith replied: "Warner must have all sorts of money to live up to this."

Hilda had always been a good dresser. What must she be now with such surroundings, such a background, to set her off. Keith visioned her as a sort of princess in royal robes dispensing open-handed hospitality to her old friends.

He drew up to the door with as great a flourish as the roadster was capable of. Some way it never occurred to either Peggy or himself that it might not be the Warner castle.

They were so sure of it they both got out. They advanced expectantly, looking for a hearty welcome.

"What if Hilda insists on our staying for dinner?" Keith looked critically at the clothes he wore.

"She probably is pretty well booked up for the week-end," replied Peggy, "but I think even if she insists we'd better make some good excuse for leaving. That's one reason I didn't let her know we were coming. Didn't want her to feel she had to ask us to a meal."

"Bet you two to one you don't get away," but the door opened before Peggy had time to answer.

"Is Mrs. Warner in?" she asked of an august butler blocking the doorway.

"Mrs. Tillinghast is out," replied an unfeeling voice.

"Are you—is—doesn't Mrs. Warner live here?" inquired Peggy.

"If you mean Mrs. Bill Warner, she resides down at the lodge—the one just as you come in at the gate," amended his highness as if it was just one of the numerous lodges tucked away on the estate.

A few minutes later as they drove slowly toward the lodge the irresistible Peggy quoted:

"'When thou art bidden—sit not down in the highest room—sit down in the lowest room, that when he that bade thee cometh, he may say unto thee, "Friend, go up higher."'"

"It was a funny mistake you made," grinned Keith, "but I believe I'm rather glad. Hilda as a princess might be somewhat overpowering."

Peggy didn't say so, but she was quite sure the mistake had not been hers. Hilda had meant her to think she lived in the mansion on the hill—not bothering about whether she found out the truth or not.

She was the same old Hilda—ready to bluff a thing out if she could. Peggy rather pitied her. She so wanted the good things of the earth she fooled herself more often than others into thinking they were hers.

Their knock on the door was answered by a pale youngster. She left them standing outside while she lifted up her voice: "Mother, some one to see you."

Mother's voice could be distinctly heard inquiring who it was. She had no intention of wasting time on agents.

As the child didn't know, there were further words. Finally Mrs. Warner advanced a few steps down the stairs to see who was disturbing the quiet of the afternoon.

When she recognized Peggy and Keith it was too late to withdraw. She made the

best of an awkward situation and welcomed them with royal indifference.

Peggy could not help but admire the calm way she ignored a torn gown, sloppy shoes, and tousled hair. She offered no apologies.

It was not what could be called in any sense a successful call.

When they finally climbed into the friendly roadster, there was a long silence. It was broken by Keith.

"I can't see how you were ever such intimate friends, Peggy."

"But we never were," replied Peggy.

"Then why this sudden friendship?" queried Keith.

"On your account, of course," explained Peggy to one very obtuse, "you used to admire her so much, you remember."

"Don't tell me we went on my account," groaned Keith. "Why, all the time I was crazy mad to hunt up a Mr. Marvin who has just bought property in Fairfield County, perhaps in this very neighborhood."

"And I," said Peggy, "smothered a wild desire to try a game of golf over the new Arden course. You were so interested in my meeting up with Hilda that I planned this little excursion entirely on your account."

"It was mere curiosity, my child, not interest," corrected Keith.

"Whatever it was," said Peggy bitterly, "it caused us both to lose out."

"Before we leave the subject forever and ever," rejoined Keith, "what do you judge is the position of Bill on the Tillinghast estate?"

"Hilda would probably have told you that he is Mr. Tillinghast's private secretary," began Peggy.

"While we draw our own conclusions," continued Keith, "that he is a public overseer or superintendent."

"She used to dress so well," observed Peggy.

"'Used to' is right," agreed Keith.

"Thank goodness it's over," exploded Peggy, "but what a tragedy! Each one going because he thought the other wanted to."

And Peggy's thoughts traveled to the Arden Golf Course where she and Keith had each bettered their scores while they reveled in the beauty of the place, while Keith's thoughts turned toward the Château once owned by Mr. Mark Anthony, but now the property of Thomas Marvin.

He had just decided that the doorway was good and could be left, but the windows were too small, when he was interrupted by Peggy:

"Isn't that your friend Bob Acres?" She peered into the fast gathering dusk ahead as she espied a figure on horseback.

They were nearing Broad Acres. The stables on the left ahead were brightly lighted.

"We have time to stop a minute or two, haven't we?" Keith quickly slowed down. "He was awfully nice about directing us. I'd like to tell him we found the place."

"Surely," Peggy was only too glad to stop and admire the sight of a man mounted on an easily recognized thoroughbred.

Keith got down from the car. As he approached the older man Peggy could see that he was quickly given a friendly welcome.

A few minutes later the rider turned in toward the stable. Keith returned to the car.

"Bob invites us to have a look at his stables. Horses are evidently his hobby."

"They would be mine if we could afford it." While she spoke Peggy ran the car well to the side of the road. Then, joining Keith, they hastened to the stables.

"Peggy, let me introduce to you the man I was lucky enough to sit with on the train coming out from town—Mr. Bob Acres." And Keith laughingly told him how he had made the mistake in reading Bob for Broad on the envelope he had picked up.

"Bob Acres of Broad Acres! I like that," he smiled at Keith—then turned to Peggy.

"I suppose your husband missed the express as I did. But with me it was a series of misses. I expected to motor out on Friday as usual. At the last minute an important meeting kept me over for Saturday morning, so I let the car go off without me. Then a traffic jam near the station made me miss the express.

"That way train certainly got on our nerves, your husband's and mine. But now, having met you, I can see that he had more cause to fidget than I."

"I was not wholly to blame," laughed Peggy. "Keith was keen to get out here, where he might meet the owner of a place called The Château."

"A Mr. Mark Anthony Parker has sold it to a Mr. Marvin, Thomas Marvin, and it is to be altered," said Keith eagerly. "That's my business, you see. I just hanker to get a chance at that particular building—there are such possibilities in it. But I looked up both Mr. Parker and Mr. Marvin in the phone book, and neither are listed."

"Mr. Parker sold it to Marvin, but he was not living there at the time." Their host started on the tour of inspection, followed by Peggy and Keith.

He continued: "Parker had rented it to a Mr. Kennedy before Marvin bought it. If you had looked for John Kennedy, you would have found him the occupant of The Château in the phone book. Mr. Marvin is such a recent comer it has not been changed to his name yet."

"Then you know Marvin? He does live around here?" asked Keith eagerly.

"Quite intimately and quite near," and the proud owner of the stables pointed out its chief attraction to an equally enthusiastic Peggy.

Keith did not like to appear insistent. But he watched like a hawk for a chance to turn the conversation toward the subject that obsessed him.

And it was not till they were saying good-by. Peggy had promised to come again when there would be time to visit the house at Broad Acres. Then their friendly host turned to Keith, making his heart beat high with hope.

"When I next see Marvin I'll tell him I'm convinced you are the man to do over The Château. But it's not called The Château any longer. Before he had it ten minutes he had changed it—"

"Give me just one guess," cried Peggy. "I can tell you what he called it."

There was an understanding smile between Peggy and their new friend. It puzzled Keith till he heard Peggy say in answer to his quick nod of assent:

"Broad Acres."

THE END

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THE OLD ROWBOAT

SOME careless hand has beached and left her there
To weather through the season as she may,
Her broken oarlocks gaping like a pair
Of gray-clad elders on a holiday.
Her sharp bow nosed into a bank of sand,
Her stern tipped on the shale, hold her fast
A helpless prisoner upon the land,
Beyond the reach of waters gliding past.
Her rotting timbers lie like bleaching bones.
Her short, unknotted length of hawser rope
Rests still and snakelike on the sunbaked stones,
While just beyond her on the grassy slope
The low shoreline is laced by slender trees—
Ah, once she was a part of such as these!

Anna Hamilton Wood.

Faster Than Broadway

By JOHN HOLDEN

Author of "Fingers Don't Lie," "The Great Mistake," etc.

CHAPTER XVII (*Continued*).

A STARTLING PROPOSITION.

"NO, I'm not joking! Listen, Tom. I love you, and I want you. That sounds unladylike and immodest, I suppose, but I don't care. You're a man of the world and can understand."

"Sure—surely, I can."

"Here's the situation: I love you, but you, it seems, care for some one else."

"Yes, I do."

"You do at present, Tom, but you won't forever. Not even for very long, because it isn't human nature for any man to go on loving any woman when all the qualities that attracted him to her have vanished.

"That little girl—she had vivacity, and charm, and all the other attributes of perfect health, but she hasn't got them any longer, and she'll never recover them. Of course, you still care for her, or think you do.

"The grip of her old charm is upon you. But it will weaken, Tom—it must!—and finally it will vanish. Then what? You'll be saddled with a crippled wife that can be of no earthly use to you, mentally, physically, financially, or any other way.

"And you won't even love her. You may pretend that you do, may wait on her hand and foot, perhaps even convince yourself that your pity for her is love, as men sometimes do in such cases, but away down at the bottom of your heart you'll feel a

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constant urge, whether you heed it or not, to seek feminine companionship elsewhere.

"On the other hand, Tom, think of what I can offer: That sort of Society that you long for, but can never enjoy with Marion Beaumont for a wife, even if she were in perfect health; travel anywhere on earth; leisure if you're tired of struggling for a living, because I have an income sufficient for all our needs.

"Or if you prefer to make your mark in the business world, an opportunity really to accomplish something.

"On top of all that, Tom—myself. I'm not old and ugly, am I? Plenty of men, I assure you, think I'm good-looking. I haven't shown myself to be any more catty, or selfish, or ill natured than the ordinary woman, have I?

"I'm developed; you know what you're getting, which is never the case with a girl in her teens, who may grow into almost any kind of woman—as many a man who married young has learned to his sorrow.

"In every way, Tom, I think I'm the woman you should marry. You like my manner of living, you like culture and leisure, and the society of such people as I chose for friends; you like money and power; you like everything that I represent; and I think that you would grow to like me."

His first shock of surprise over, Kitson listened to Edith's remarkable disclosure with the keenest interest. There could be no question about her being in deadly earnest. She was baring her heart to him in a manner that held him spellbound, that he never had thought possible in even the most emancipated and broad-minded woman of the present day.

He did not think any the less of Edith for stating what she really thought; in fact, he admired her courage for overriding the ancient and absurd dictum that a woman should conduct herself in so vital a matter as though she possessed no mind and no will of her own.

"Edith," he said slowly and very seriously, "I am very much flattered by your proposal, but would you mind just telling me one thing. Did you have me discharged from the management of the speedway?"

"No, Tom. That was father's doings. I did not influence him one way or the other. But I could have, you know. I think I could still persuade him to reinstate you, if that is what you desire more than a trip to Cuba."

Thoughtful silence.

Kitson was thinking of what Marion herself had told him; that he should not burden himself with the invalid that she would always be, that she wished to break their engagement, that he would be happier in the end with the woman from whom she had won him.

In a way, he reflected, Marion's contention was as correct as was Edith's. An invalid wife is a handicap to any man who has his way in the world to make. A rich and cultured wife is a blessing in more ways than one.

He did like all the things that Edith represented—culture, and leisure, and the opportunity to accomplish something in the business world that would quickly cause the memory of the speedway wreck, for which he was not really responsible anyhow, to fade from the minds of men.

For a long time he considered.

"Edith," he said at last in his kindliest tone, "I appreciate your truly wonderful offer more than I can ever tell you. I admire you, and I like you.

"But the stars, or Fate, or whatever it is that rules the affairs of men, have decreed that I shall love Marion and Marion alone, therefore I cannot accept it."

With regal grace, Edith rose.

"All right, Tom. As the saying is, that's that. I hope you won't think too badly of me for acting so boldly."

"I admire everything that you say and do."

"Thanks, Tom." She laughed with just the faintest note of hysteria. "I hope you'll be very happy with Marion. I shan't bother you any more, even with my presence in Duncaster. I'm going, as I said, far away."

"I hope you'll have a wonderful time. I'm sure you will, when new scenes and new faces counteract your memories."

They were at the door now.

"Tom—could you kiss me just once? Give me just one little memento of our

many good times together, something to treasure in my memory forever?"

He kissed her,

"Good—good-by, Tom."

"Good-by, Edith."

The door closed, and Kitson walked slowly away, while, in the great house, a proud woman collapsed in a pitiful heap on the floor, and sobbed into a silken cushion.

Next morning Kitson rose with fresh determination.

"Got to get busy, got to do something," he admonished himself. "Can't moon around any longer. There's nothing for me in Duncaster; so I guess I'd better go to Halton."

Being uncertain as to what sort of work he should seek there, he started for the city on foot in order that he might have plenty of time to make up his mind.

And, since the speedway was the result of his planning, he decided to traverse it once more from end to end, to live again the satisfaction that had been his while it was being built.

Another freakish fancy struck him. Since this might well be his farewell to the town of his birth, he would look again at the things that had fascinated him on his arrival—some of them, at least.

The old canal, there it was, lying like a great lazy dun-colored serpent, useless and sluggish and dirty. Somehow it did not look the same; romance was stripped from it now.

It is all very well, Kitson thought, to sentimentalize over the scenes of one's boyhood when one revisits them with money in one's pocket and a good job to return to; but when one depends on one's old environment to supply one with a job, things are different.

No wonder his old schoolmates who had remained in town were cold and indifferent to such scenes!

Down the speedway he progressed on foot, so ashamed that he stepped behind a bush whenever one of the busses came along. Many cars were using the road again, but he paid no more attention to them than they did to him.

Good-by to his one big plan! He knew not what the future held for him, but he doubted if anything should ever thrill him as did the building of this roadway.

What a variety of things had been crowded into his experience here! Life-imperiling adventure, the love of two women, the commendation of many men, and the hatred of a few, the terrible accident that had brought his brief reign to a close. For awhile at least he had lived.

And now it was all over. The work and the struggle, that is. In another sense his life was only beginning, since in a few months he would achieve the life partner that had been designed for him from the beginning of time.

Invalid or not, he would marry Marion if she would have him, and he felt sure she would.

He strolled along. Most any kind of new job would do for a start.

He would try for a bus driver's position on one of the other lines, he thought; but if that were refused him he would go back to an office. Anything that paid a fair salary would do. Maybe in time he could work up to a job that would be equivalent to his last one.

Arriving at the sign "Dangerous Curve Ahead," Kitson slowed his pace somewhat in order to try and figure out just what had brought the car which caused the wreck to so sudden a stop right in front of the bus. That was a thing that had never been explained to his satisfaction, even though it had been to the judge's.

What kind of slight obstruction could cause a car to swish around like that, bring it to a halt directly in front of the bus, where it could do the most damage? Perhaps it was the car's mechanism that had really been at fault. The gears might have jammed or something.

Noticing that the car still lay, a twisted wreck, alongside the speedway where it had been pulled after the accident, Kitson took a good look at it, then shook his head regretfully as he decided that its present condition contained no hint of its condition immediately before the bus hit it.

He was about to turn away when a dangling piece of stout cord caught his attention. He traced it to a knot which was

partly concealed underneath the wreck, and as he saw the reason for the tying of the knot he stopped short and caught his breath. A new and startling idea had hit him with the force of a brickbat.

The door beside the driver's seat was tied open. The driver, Oscar Filgus, had escaped injury by leaping from his stalled car, via the open door, a second or two before the bus struck it.

Had the man deliberately stalled his car in order to wreck the bus?

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE AMATEUR SLEUTH.

THE more Kitson considered the new and startling hypothesis which had occurred to him when he saw the tied-open door of the wrecked car, the more reasonable did it appear.

The enemies of the speedway maintained that unlimited speed on a private motor road was dangerous, and wished to pass a law to prohibit it.

What could bolster up their argument better than a speedway wreck that could be blamed on excessive speed? Swazey in particular had made the most of this wreck, was even now striving, through a member of the provincial parliament, to have such a law passed.

Kitson was still convinced that Burkett's horses had been poisoned, and that a deliberate attempt had been made on his own life when the dump cars on the trestle broke loose.

He believed that Al Swazey was behind both those dastardly plots; he also believed that Swazey had sent, or at least inspired, the anonymous letter to Edith Falconer regarding his love for Marion.

If it was true that Swazey had tried to kill him on the trestle, was it not reasonable to suppose that Swazey had engaged a man to bring about the fatal wreck?

Such a plot could be carried out as follows: Drive an old car on the speedway at about the same time that the bus came along, dart ahead of the bus on the curve, stall the engine and throw on the brakes, escape through the open door before the crash came, sacrifice the old car, and claim an accident.

Kitson looked at the wrecked car again to see if the brakes were on. They were! Filgus possessed a shady reputation, the car was almost worthless, the man had darted ahead of the bus, the whole business now possessed the earmarks of design, just as did the horse poisoning case, and the trestle accident.

Murderers! That was what Swazey and Filgus were, if Kitson's suspicion was correct; a woman had been killed in the bus wreck. If that so-called accident could be proved to be a plot, those two men would be hanged!

It was a terrible thought, but one from which Kitson could not free himself. There was the evidence, the tied-open door and the brakes.

And there were the incriminating circumstances, the whole string of them that began with Swazey's first threat and ended with the apparently senseless dash of the shabby car ahead of the bus.

He went to the headquarters of the Halton police, and imparted his suspicion to the chief. The latter sent a detective with him to the scene of the wreck, and when they returned the detective was instructed to bring Filgus to the station house.

"You can wait in another room till we are through with him, if you want to," the chief told Kitson. "We'll tell you then if there's any ground upon which we can hold him."

So Kitson waited, a wearisome business because it was several hours before Filgus was located and brought in. Another hour passed, and then the chief called Kitson to his private office.

"We let him go," he reported. "He told a reasonably straight story. There's nothing we could hold him on."

"And yet," said Kitson, "I'm more convinced than ever that Filgus was hired by Swazey to do it."

The chief shook his head.

"Couldn't you have Filgus shadowed for a few days to see if he meets Swazey?" Kitson queried. "If he does, that would belie his story that he doesn't know Swazey."

"I'll do that," consented the chief.

During the few days that followed Kitson visited Marion regularly at the hospital, but on no occasion did he mention his suspicion of Filgus. It would only excite her for nothing, he reasoned. For a similar reason he said nothing of Edith Falconer's proposal of marriage.

Marion did not state again that she wished to break their engagement, and yet Kitson divined that the thought was in her mind.

Her condition was improved, but still the doctors agreed that she must remain in the hospital for a few weeks more, and that her ultimate recovery to her previous state of health and cheerfulness was a matter of grave doubt.

Kitson learned from the newspapers that Edith Falconer had departed on a short trip to Cuba. It seemed foolish for him to be interested in anything she did, since he no longer came into even the most casual contact with her, and yet he was. He felt a definite sense of relief. In some queer and intangible way Edith had seemed to be a menace to his happiness and Marion's.

He mentioned the news to Marion, and was a bit surprised to find that Marion had a high regard for Edith. He wondered if his fiancée would retain it if she learned that Edith had proposed to him.

During these days Kitson sought employment, but failed to find any that he considered suitable. The office jobs that he found available were insignificant, and carried salaries so small that even an unmarried man would be hard put to it to support himself on the best one.

He applied at the offices of the two bus companies, aside from the Duncaster lines, that maintained headquarters in Halton, and was informed at both places that no opening existed, not even for such humble and poorly paid services as wiping cars and greasing axles.

He was wondering if he should go to Toronto in search of a job, or even back to New York, when one day his landlady informed him that there was an urgent call for him.

He went to the telephone all atremble because he feared the hospital was calling to state that Marion had suffered a dangerous relapse, but it was from the chief of police. The latter wished to see him at once. Kitson grabbed his hat, and hurried there.

"Filgus is going to New York," the chief reported. "He bought a ticket this morning. We can't follow him across the line, but maybe you'd like to."

"You think he might do something there to prove that he wrecked the bus?"

"Yes; if he's as guilty as you believe him to be, he might give himself away once he gets in a place where he thinks he's free from surveillance. He's suspicious of it here; perhaps even knows he's being shadowed."

"What do you think of his possible guilt? Is it worth my while to follow him to New York?"

"The mere fact that he's going there would seem to indicate that he has received money from some unknown source and wants to get out of the country. That looks a bit suspicious."

"By George, I will follow him! Better than that; maybe I can beat him there, and watch where he goes from the station. What train will he take?"

"Probably the eight thirty, since he didn't pay an extra fare."

"Which road?"

"T. H. & B. to Buffalo, then New York Central."

"Good. I can take the through express from Toronto to New York, and beat him to the Grand Central Station by an hour or so."

"Go ahead and do it. If you get anything on him, let me know, and I'll send a man over to arrange for extradition."

"I will."

Easy enough to say, thought Kitson after he left the police station, but not so easy to do. His cash was practically all spent. There remained his stock in the speedway, but it was still being quoted at a figure so low that the sale of every share he possessed would net him less than four hundred dollars.

Business on the speedway had picked up, it was true, but there remained the

menace of the proposed law to make privately owned roads amenable to the same speed laws that governed the public roads. He felt, however, that he should leave no stone unturned to convict Filgus and Swazey of the outrage that he was convinced they had committed.

It was a duty that he owed to the various victims, including Marion, and the Falconers, who had built the speedway, and to himself because the wreck had deprived him of his position and his business reputation.

The first broker to whom he carried his speedway stock did not want it at any price; the second would take it, but at so great a discount that Kitson declined to part with it.

There was no regular stock exchange in Halton where it could be sold; he had to keep going to broker after broker until finally he found one who was willing to take it off his hands at a greatly depreciated valuation.

When the cash was in his pocket and he found himself on the street, Kitson realized to his dismay that the New York express was due in just fifteen minutes. He did not even have time to get his baggage. He hurried to the station, hoping to have time to telephone Marion, but in that he was disappointed. There was a line ahead of him at the ticket office, and when he finally secured his transportation, together with the berth, which was mandatory on the express, he had only time to swing aboard the flyer.

"I'll wire her," he said to himself. "She will understand."

And then he reflected that he had refrained from imparting his suspicion regarding Filgus to her, and must give a false explanation for his absence.

He wondered if Filgus really would follow on the slower train to New York. Perhaps the man, or one of his friends, had seen him depart, and guessed what he was up to, and the suspect would make a fool of him by going somewhere else.

Even if Filgus did follow to New York, could an inexperienced man like himself shadow him successfully? How did one set about such a job, anyhow? Kitson tried to recollect something he had once read regarding the art of shadowing. He wondered if the train's newsboy had a book which dealt with the subject, and was overjoyed when he was able to purchase for ten cents a work entitled "The Detective's Handbook, or Arts and Devices of the Super-Sleuths."

Alighting at Grand Central Station early next morning, after a fairly good sleep aboard the train, Kitson found that he had two hours to wait before the slower train from Halton was due. He ate breakfast at a lunch counter, and at once set about the matter of securing some sort of disguise.

First, he decided not to follow his customary habit of shaving; next he procured a pair of cheap horn-rimmed spectacles with plain glasses; then he traded his fairly good hat for a battered one at a second-hand clothing store.

Thus prepared for his new career of amateur sleuth, he still had an hour to pass before taking up his self-imposed duty. He sauntered along slowly to Fifth Avenue, and from there along Forty-Second Street to Broadway.

He liked the crowds, and the hurry, and the incessant clamor no better than when he had left New York early in the spring. It was fall now, and the city seemed even more jammed with people than when he had left.

Every one was hurrying as though upon business of enormous significance; yet he knew well enough that in the cases of nine out of ten the business was insignificant.

Fifteen years he had spent in this maelstrom of human activity, and yet in all that time less had happened to him than in just a few months in a quiet town. And now that he was back, his standing was almost that of a stranger.

He wondered if his old companions back at the office would remember him, if he could procure a job there. He doubted it. The new office manager would not want the ex-manager working under him, and in the other branches of the great company's business Kitson had secured no experience.

That in particular was the great drawback of New York! one did not secure varied experience. One specialized along one narrow line, had to in order to hold one's own against the fierce competition.

Back at the mammoth railroad station, Kitson stationed himself at the exit from the train he expected Filgus to arrive on, and waited for the passengers to appear.

Many others were waiting for the same train; so he figured that, in his partial disguise, Filgus would not recognize him if he came face to face with the man.

Out came the passengers. Filgus was not among the first ones. Nor was he with the next group. Ah, there he was!

Kitson stood behind a stout lady and, without appearing to do so, watched Filgus from the corner of his eye as the man approached and passed him, apparently with no suspicion that he was being watched. At a distance of some thirty feet Kitson followed. A thrilling business, this!

Outside the station Filgus stood uncertainly on the sidewalk, bag in hand, looking up and down the street. Kitson half expected that some bunco steerer would approach the man who so plainly was a stranger in the great city. In the movies, one always did.

Filgus, however, remained quite unmolested. He kept looking at taxicabs in an apparent state of timidity, and at last called one.

This was Kitson's cue. He would grab another and order it to follow the first one. A detective always did that, in books, in the movies, on the stage.

An empty one was handy, and he hailed it.

"See that cab?" He indicated Filgus's, which was getting under way. "Follow it to its destination."

To Kitson's surprise, the driver gave him a nasty look, and made no move to comply. Evidently he was no student of the drama, and therefore did not know that he should "take up the chase" with speed and unfaltering accuracy.

"What for?" he demanded.

"Because there's a suspected criminal in it," snapped Kitson, really alarmed now for fear Filgus would get away from him. "I'm a detective, see? Shut up and get busy."

"Yeah?" leered the driver. "Lemme see your badge."

CHAPTER XIX.

WHAT HAPPENED TO MARION.

KITSON was stumped. Why had he not had the foresight to procure some kind of official looking badge that would impress this lunk-headed driver?

His reading and movie-going had taught him that a real detective always flashes a badge. There had been one in a pawnshop that he passed, too. Since he possessed none, however, he must rely on bluff.

"Never mind a badge," he snarled. "Get after that cab, and don't let it out of sight."

To his pleased surprise, the driver grabbed a lever.

"Got yuh, Cap. Thought mebbe you was one o' them correspondence school dicks that flash tin badges. Can't afford to get in wrong with you real guys by monkeying with them birds."

"Right," growled Kitson. "Got him?"

"You bet."

"Keep him."

Over to Fifth Avenue went Filgus's taxi, and down it to Twenty-Third Street, then crosstown to a point near Third Avenue, and stopped in front of a row of old brownstone houses.

"Stop right here at the opposite curb," ordered Kitson, and the driver obeyed.

Filgus dismissed his taxi, and stood looking up at different signs in the windows which proclaimed that rooms were for rent, and at last entered a house bag, in hand.

Continuing to watch from behind the drawn curtains of his taxi, Kitson waited for several moments, until he began to fear that Filgus must suspect the purpose of the taxi on the opposite side of the street. Then the door opened and Filgus came out without his bag, and without so much as a look toward Kitson, went to a lunchroom on the corner.

"All right, you did fine," said Kitson to the driver and, dismissing him with a tip,

he entered the same rooming house that Filgus had, and asked the slatternly landlady if he might have a room.

"Got just one left," she replied. "Lots o' business I'm doing this morning, what with another gentleman just having engaged the one across the hall from this one. Mebbe you'd like to meet him."

Kitson paid a week's rent in advance, and gave an assumed name.

"Don't want to meet anybody," he said. "Got too much to do to be sociable."

"Deary me! So different from the other gent. He's got nothing to do yet, poor fellow, having just come from away off up in Canada this very morning."

"Looking for a job, is he?"

"Yes. Mebbe you're a stranger to the city, too?"

Kitson chuckled. "Do I look like a hick?"

"Lordy, no! Kind of a literary fellow, with them big spectacles an' all."

Kitson reflected quickly that literary fellows are allowed plenty of latitude in the matter of eccentricity.

"You've hit it, but don't tell everybody. I'm here to work, not to make friends. Just let me alone, and don't talk about me to the others so they'll let me alone, too, and you'll have one of the best roomers you ever had in your life."

"Indeed, sir, and it's me that 'll do that."

She left, and Kitson stepped to the front window, from which he could view the entrance. Fine! Also there was a transom, not to mention a wide crack under the door, through which he might keep watch on Filgus's room, immediately across the hall.

From behind his drawn curtain, he watched the street between the house and the lunchroom corner, waiting for Filgus to reappear. This the man did presently, bringing with him some newspapers and magazines.

He entered the house, and Kitson heard him go into his room. He remained there until nearly one o'clock, and then went out again.

Thinking that Filgus might remain out all afternoon, Kitson decided to try his hand at shadowing him.

He adjusted his horn-rimmed spectacles with the plain glasses, and inspected his attire to make sure he was wearing nothing conspicuous, since his handbook of the detective's art warned him that a shadower must never attract attention.

Satisfied with his appearance, but feeling pretty nervous, nevertheless, he permitted Filgus to get about a quarter of a block away from the house, then joined the few people on the sidewalk.

Filgus entered the corner lunchroom again. Kitson did not know whether he should also enter or not, but finally decided against it, and went into a smaller one across the street.

He ate his lunch with an eye on the entrance of the first eating place, and when he had finished he went out and stood just around the corner.

In a few minutes his quarry reappeared, stood at the curb for a moment, picking his teeth, then walked slowly toward Third Avenue, and climbed the stairs to a station of the Elevated railroad.

Kitson had to take a chance now. He must board the same train as Filgus in order to keep him in sight and, since only a few people were using the "L" at this time of day, Filgus could scarcely fail to see him.

He waited in the station until a thundering noise signaled the approach of a train, and then entered the same car as Filgus from the opposite end.

Filgus alighted at Forty-Second Street and walked across to Broadway, and entered a burlesque theater. Kitson remained outside, wondering if his quarry would remain for the afternoon show, and when the latter failed to come out in a few minutes he decided that he would.

Kitson wondered what he should do now. Go inside and try to pick Filgus out of the audience and keep an eye upon him, or go away and come back when the show was over? He decided upon the former course.

He purchased an orchestra seat and stood at the back, and presently had the satisfaction of sighting Filgus in a seat near the rear. His own seat was still farther back; so during the whole show he was able to keep his man under surveillance.

He left before the last act was concluded, waited outside for Filgus, trailed him to a Broadway restaurant and ate dinner a few tables from him, picked him up again outside and shadowed him to a movie theater.

Here Kitson encountered a difficulty that proved too much for him. He entered the movie house after Filgus, and in the darkened interior he failed to pick him out of the audience. He left at the point in the feature picture where he had entered, and stood around outside expecting Filgus to appear, but in vain.

His quarry had left without seeing the whole program, or else was remaining for a second showing. Kitson went home, and about eleven o'clock he heard Filgus enter his room.

Next day Filgus seemed to get acquainted with some men at a pool room on Third Avenue, for he remained there several hours. Again he went uptown, and again Kitson lost him, this time in the tidal waves of humanity that rolled up and down Broadway.

The few days that followed were largely a repetition of the first ones. Kitson kept following his man. Twice he managed to keep him in sight from the time he left the rooming house until he returned. On the other occasions he lost him, but always Filgus returned to his room.

Kitson began to worry. He did not seem to be getting anywhere. The fact that Filgus possessed money without working for it implied that he had been paid to leave Halton and remain away, but on the other hand, he did nothing of an incriminating nature.

Much of his time he spent at the pool room, the rest of it at low-class shows, with an occasional visit to a cheap dancing place.

Kitson was careful to keep out of Filgus's sight at the rooming house and to make slight changes in his appearance—different attire, and different kinds of glasses—and the man seemed not to suspect that he was being watched.

Kitson wanted to abandon his quest, and return to the hospital in Halton, where he thought that Marion must still be. He had written to her twice, telling her all about his quest and his assumed name, but had received no reply; and he feared that this meant a relapse on her part.

Also he must soon go to work because his funds were ebbing low, and he meant to return to Halton for that purpose, even though his chance to secure employment in New York might be better. He decided to remain in New York a few days longer; then if nothing developed return to Halton while he was financially able.

Without warning the development that he had hoped for came about. The postman rang the bell instead of dropping the mail into the letter box as usual, and the landlady went to the front door. Kitson stood just inside his room door and listened.

"Registered letter, is it?" he heard her say. "For Mr. Filgus? Sure, I'll be glad to sign for it."

She did so, and the postman departed. She left the hall and, peering out, Kitson was delighted to find that she had stuck the registered letter for Filgus into the wire rack just as though it were an ordinary letter. He looked at it. The Halton postmark!

Here was his chance. If his theory was correct, the letter was from Swazey, and might contain information that would convict both him and Filgus of murder.

The name and address on the envelope for return in case of nondelivery were not Swazey's, but that would be merely a blind.

The letter inside might be from him, even though his name might not be signed to it. The thing to do was to open the envelope, and read the letter. But how?

Steam it open, that was the way that detectives worked in all the stories that Kitson had ever read. He must steam it open at once, before Filgus returned, which might be at any moment, and without letting the landlady know.

He must read the contents and, if they were what he hoped for and expected, carry the letter to the New York police and ask them to arrest Filgus.

Steam? There was none in his room. But there was a gas jet, and a water tap, and a tin cup. He put a little water in the cup and held it over the gas jet, and soon a thin vapory mist was rising from it.

Laying down the cup, Kitson crept into the hall and grabbed Filgus's registered letter. He was taking a big chance now, doing an unlawful thing, really, but he reasoned that the end justified the means.

Clutching the letter in his left hand, Kitson held the cup of hot water over the gas jet until it steamed again, trembling with nervousness all the while. He held the back of the letter over the steam and then with his knife he separated a portion of the flap from the envelope.

More steaming followed, more delicate manipulation of the knife. How difficult it was to get it open! He always had thought it was easy, just as he had considered it not particularly difficult to keep a man in sight on the street.

Ah! Now he was getting it. In a few seconds he would possess, perhaps, the evidence that would send both Swazey and Filgus to the scaffold.

Two one-hundred-dollar bills! The evidence that he wanted, proof that Swazey had sent his companion in crime out of Canada, and now was paying him to remain out! The accompanying letter would supply the last bit of needed proof.

But there was no accompanying letter! Just the two bank notes, new and neatly folded, and nothing else.

Not so good. The money was from Swazey undoubtedly, but how could one prove that it was? The letter was not even postmarked at Swazey's place of residence, which was Duncaster.

Kitson knew: write the Halton police to ascertain if a man who bore the name on the back of the envelope resided at the return address given, and if so, what his relation to Filgus was.

Right now, however, Kitson's task was to reseal the letter so that Filgus could not learn that it had been opened, and stick it back in the letter rack.

He must do that because the landlady would be sure to tell Filgus she had received a registered letter for him, and if it were missing from the rack an alarm would be raised at once.

He did this quickly, being fortunately possessed of some mucilage left by a previous tenant. He put it back in the rack, and five minutes later Filgus entered and took possession of it.

Leaving the house, Kitson dispatched his telegram, and anxiously awaited a reply.

It came a few hours later, and was precisely what he expected.. No such person was known at the address given.

He sent another wire to the Halton chief of police, explaining what had transpired, and asking for instructions. He did not expect a reply to this wire until the next morning; so he instructed the telegraph office to hold it until he called for it, because he feared that the delivery of a telegram at the rooming house might arouse Filgus's suspicion.

Early next morning Kitson called at the telegraph office, but it was not until ten o'clock that the expected reply was received. It instructed him to have Filgus arrested.

Overjoyed now that he appeared able to fix the murder of his bus passenger where he was sure it belonged, Kitson went to the nearest police station, explained everything, showed his telegrams, and asked for an officer, preferably a plainclothes man whose approach would not cause Filgus to flee, to make the arrest. He secured one without delay, and with him walked to the rooming house.

The detective knocked, and received no reply. He asked Kitson to ascertain from the landlady if Filgus had given up his room, and Kitson learned that the man had not. Finally the detective burst in the door.

Filgus had given up his room plainly enough, even though he had failed to notify the landlady. His bed had not been slept in, and all his belongings were gone.

"Flew the coop as soon as he got the money," remarked the detective. "There's no telling where he is now."

Kitson was dismayed. He had been so certain that Filgus was within his grasp, and now the man had got away.

"Maybe he left a clew to where he went," he hazarded. "They usually do, don't they?"

"In the movies, yes, but not in real life." The detective made a minute examination of the room, but failed to uncover a clew.

"Could he be looked for around the city?" Kitson asked. "He's a murderer, you know—if my suspicion and that of the Halton chief is correct."

"Sure thing. Come back with me to the captain, and tell him all about your man. We're always glad to coöperate with the Canadian police. Our own wanted men keep skipping up there, and the Canucks are darned good about returning them."

The captain assured Kitson that the city would be scoured for Filgus, and the railroad stations watched.

"If he meant to leave the city though, he's gone by this time," he warned.

Day succeeded day, and nothing happened. The police reported no progress. Kitson himself tramped the streets ceaselessly, hoping to catch sight of his man, but in vain. Inquiries made at the pool room and eating places that Filgus had patronized resulted in nothing.

Kitson began to experience a depressing sense of failure. He had failed in the bus business, and now success had eluded him again. In his own narrow little rut, as office manager of a particular concern, he had managed to get along all right, but once he got off his beaten path he seemed to be helpless.

Was his failure the result, he asked himself, of his having lived the narrowest kind of life for fifteen years? If it was, as he believed it to be, another black mark must be placed against the New York system which compels specialization, and therefore fails to give one the training needed to cope with life in general.

His desire to return to Halton increased. Probably he could secure a better job in New York, where he was favorably known by at least one big corporation; but his distaste for the gargantuan city was as pronounced as it ever had been at any time. His distaste for the clamor, and crowding and incessant hurrying that got one nowhere was increasing.

He wished to see Marion. Her conduct, he thought, was strange. Not a word had he heard from her since he left her, though he had written her repeatedly. Even if she still were not strong enough to wield a pen she might have dictated a letter to her mother.

Perhaps the old lady considered him a failure and wished to break the engagement, and would not write a letter for Marion.

It was even possible that Marion was dead. But Kitson shrank from that terrible thought. She had seemed on the road to ultimate recovery when he left her, though she might never regain the full use of her limbs. Surely her mother or some one else would have notified him.

The unwelcome thought came to him that Edith Falconer would not have failed to write him if she promised to do so, a dependable woman, Edith. He half wished that she was in New York now, so that he might have a talk with her.

He felt lonesome and discouraged. She would cheer him up if he could see her. She never had failed to do so, even when his meeting with her had been the reverse of pleasant. Always she had imparted to him a degree of self-confidence that now he felt sadly in need of.

His cash was getting low. There remained scarcely more than enough to take him back to Halton on a slow train. Back home, and broke! It was a disagreeable thought, but the thought of not seeing Marion again for an indefinite period was still more unwelcome.

Surely in Halton, maybe even in Duncaster itself, he could secure employment at something. He had been too particular before; that had been the only reason he had not got his name on a pay roll.

He boarded a train for Halton, and in due time approached again the county of his birth and upbringing. It was different, however, from his first approach.

Then he had considered himself well to do, Ontario had been new and refreshingly different, he had been optimistic and self-confident, romance had appeared in even so small a thing as a column of smoke rising from a chimney.

Now he was returning to the scenes of his boyhood, not to dream over them and people them with persons of the past, but to wrest from them a living. They did not seem to invite him.

The country, not quite so beautiful now that early autumn was darkening the once green fields, seemed to be warning him that he had failed once in Ontario, and would fail again.

Lake Ontario looked cold and bleak where once it had appeared inviting; the old familiar "mountain" seemed to frown upon him.

He alighted at Halton, and registered at a cheap hotel that he would not have dreamed of patronizing on his first arrival, and went immediately to the hospital where he had left Marion.

The superintendent was not very cordial.

"Marion Beaumont? Are you sure she's a patient here?"

Fear clutched at Kitson's heart.

"She was a month ago. Isn't she now? What's happened?"

The man consulted a book.

"Not here now. No. But she was."

"Where is she? Don't tell me she died!"

Kitson held his breath while the man looked at another entry.

"Not dead, no," he replied. "Just left."

"Where did she go? Home?"

The man turned to a letter rack back of him.

"Home? Yes, I guess so. That's where they generally go if they've got a home." He fingered a letter. "Kitson you say your name is? Thomas Kitson?"

"Yes."

"Here's a letter that was left for you."

Kitson tore it open. Marion's name, signed by herself, was at the bottom. He raced through the contents, and as he reached the end he sat down heavily in the nearest chair, and stared at the last sad paragraph in the strange epistle:

> So you see, dear, I mean it for your good. I cannot consent to burden you for life with the care of an invalid wife.
>
> Thanks to the unexpected generosity of a distant relative, I am going far away with mother to a country where it is always summer, and there I shall try to forget you.
>
> Give Edith half a chance, and she will help you to forget. She is a good woman, Tom—the sort, perhaps, that you should have chosen at the start.
>
> I am crying over this, Tom, but that is only because I am silly. You must be brave. A year from now you will see the wisdom of my action if you don't now.
>
> Good-by, dear—good-by. MARION.

CHAPTER XX.

EDITH RETURNS.

KITSON put the letter in his pocket and walked out of the hospital. He wandered aimlessly around until he came to a small park, and there he sat on a bench, further to ponder this apogee of his misfortunes.

At least Marion was on the road to recovery, even though her fear that she would always be a semi-invalid might prove to be warranted. And she loved him. He ought to feel thankful for those mitigations of his misery, and he was.

But why should he and she have been plunged into misfortune at all? It was all he reflected, due to Swazey, who had engaged the slinky scoundrel, Filgus, to wreck his bus. Up to that point everything had been going well.

His management of the speedway had placed it on a paying basis, his sweetheart had been as healthy and happy as a lark in springtime, he had possessed money and position; only the minor problem of how to tell Edith of his love for Marion had troubled him.

He did not doubt now that the wreck had been deliberately planned any more than he doubted that a drab and leaden autumn had succeeded the radiant summer.

But with Filgus lost in the vast spaces of another country, how could he ever hope to prove his contention? How could he clear himself of blame, how restore to the girl he loved the glowing health that two murderers had robbed her of?

In helpless anger, Kitson gritted his teeth, and clenched his strong hands. Why had he let that cowardly cur, Filgus, escape him? Why had he not fallen upon him, there in the New York rooming house, when he learned that the fellow's blood money had arrived for him, and battered a confession out of him?

He had depended upon the law. But the law was a torpid mare that could be driven only with the sharp whip of proof, and legal proof he had not possessed, though moral proof lay upon the case like February snow upon a pigsty.

What to do now? Sadly Kitson reflected that he possessed little choice. Go to work in order to keep body and soul together, that was all he could do, seek whatever employment he could get, even though it were no better than shoveling dirt for Burkett or some other contractor.

A nice husband he would make for Marion, even if she were present and willing to marry him! It seemed doubtful whether he could maintain himself, let alone a wife.

He sought first a job with one of the motor-bus companies that had rejected his application before. He was almost sure that his record as a reckless driver precluded his securing it, but he was stubborn.

That was the line of business he had chosen, and that was the line he would follow until further pursuit was hopeless.

Somewhat to his surprise, the manager listened respectfully.

"There's no opening as a bus driver, even though we might wish to employ a man who wrecked a bus and killed a passenger," the man stated in a tone that was not unkindly. "We might be able to put you on as a service man, but I don't suppose the ex-manager of the speedway line would care for such employment as that."

"You're wrong," Kitson replied. "I'd be glad to get it. I can work up to a better job. I wasn't to blame for that wreck, and some day I'll be able to prove it."

The manager gave him a shrewd look.

"What's on your mind, Kitson? Do you think that Filgus caused the wreck by spilling his car in front of you?"

"I'd rather not say, if you don't mind. I've got no proof of what I think—none that would count in a court room, at any rate."

"I see. Well, if greasing axles and filling tanks will satisfy you, you can start right in to-morrow."

"Thank you."

The manager seemed to recollect something.

"In this company, Kitson, we play no favorites. You understand that, I hope?"

Kitson knew to what he was referring, his friendship with the daughter of the man who had financed the speedway.

"Thank Heaven for that!" he exclaimed.

Though his place of employment was now in Halton, Kitson decided to live in Duncaster, as did so many people who worked in the city.

The inconvenience was not great, since he used the speedway bus, to which practically all the commuters had returned, and the cost of this transportation was more than offset by the cheaper cost of living in the town.

There were other reasons, too. He liked to ride on the speedway. After all, he had conceived and built it, and he was proud of it. It represented his one worth-while accomplishment in life, aside from the winning of his lost sweetheart's love.

He liked to look out the bus windows at the splendid scenery, to travel at a greater speed than was permitted on the public highway—Swazey having failed to get the law passed that would limit it—to reflect that even though the town believed he had caused death and injury, it could not deny that he also had furnished swift transportation, and benefited many of the stockholders in the old interurban railroad.

There was something about his old home town, too, that comforted him, even in his darkest moments. There were the old scenes where, once upon a time at least, life had been bounteous in its blessings. He could reflect upon those vanished days, and gather a little comfort from their faded memory.

His old schoolmates were friendly, too; more so than in the days of his prosperity. He was one of them now; just a common workman striving to get along. He wished that he had paid more attention to them and less to the local aristocracy in the days of his glory.

Residence Hill paid little attention to Kitson now, his own fault to some extent, since he took pains to avoid the dwellers thereon.

Some of the girls seemed interested in him at first, in fact one of them invited him

to a party; but Kitson declined, and thereafter the more friendly ones merely nodded to him while the others did not notice him at all.

He paid no attention to strange girls anywhere. He disliked to see a group of the younger ones, the kind usually referred to as flappers, laughing and chatting gayly, since they never failed to remind him of Marion.

That was the sort of girl she had been just a few months previously; happy, vivacious, peppy as pop corn on the fire. And now a physical wreck, a spiritless shadow of her former self, striving in a foreign climate to regain what small portion of her former well-being fate was minded to restore to her.

Once, on a Sunday, Kitson walked out to the old homestead and roamed about it. So bleak and lonely it was; the ancient stump fences gaunt with the storms of eighty years, worn white by sunshine and rain so that they looked like the dried bones of a race that had passed on.

And yet the old place cheered him, too, in a melancholy way. Here his people had lived and suffered. He seemed to feel their companionship and sympathy. No such friendly spirit as hovered over these deserted acres could ever exist in that maelstrom of humanity known as New York.

Little incidents of his early boyhood crept into Kitson's recollections like timid ghosts. That awful crop failure that had plunged the family into despair, that was almost as bad, was it not, as the calamity that had descended upon him?

His folks had not deserved unjust treatment any more than he had. Nature itself, it seemed, had given them a raw deal; therefore why should he complain because two scoundrels had brought distress and a measure of disgrace upon him?

Was it not in the eternal scheme of things that men should suffer? The ruined crop, Kitson recollected, had been followed by an unusually bounteous one. God had righted the wrong; had, it seemed, only been testing the faith and patience of his people.

Perhaps, in like measure, his wrong would be righted, too. Maybe the Deity was just testing him, as He had tested his forbears. Marion might be restored to him in her former state of health, Swazey and Filgus might be punished, he might regain his former high standing in the bus business.

He returned to Duncaster considerably comforted, and next morning went to work with renewed courage.

A week later he was promoted to a position as driver.

"It's your big chance, Kitson," the manager told him. "Show us that you're competent at the wheel, wipe out the impression people have that your carelessness caused the speedway wreck, and we may have something still better for you.

"The bus business is young, remember. Ten years from now there'll be motor busses on every road in Ontario instead of on just a few of the main ones."

Six weeks later Kitson was promoted to the position of assistant manager.

"I've had my eye on you, Kitson," the manager told him. "I've watched every move you've made, and, more than that, I've investigated your record with the speedway people.

"You did a mighty good job there. You had a brilliant idea, and you carried it through. I don't think you were to blame for the wreck. You're the kind of man this company wants.

"If there are any improvements that you can suggest in our service to Toronto, or any new branch routes that you think it would be well for us to open, your suggestions will be eagerly listened to."

"Thank you," replied Kitson. "I'll certainly try to deserve your confidence."

He continued to reside in Duncaster, traveling to his office in Halton every morning on the speedway bus.

It was odd, he reflected, how the line which he had built continued to interest him. Sometimes he found himself unconsciously considering little improvements that could be made in the service.

"That 'll never do," he told himself. "Got to think of my own line; that's what I'm paid for."

In his old home town he was beginning to be respected again. Many people were

saying now that the wreck had been no fault of his. His present employers could not think it was, otherwise they would not have promoted him to a position of responsibility.

People spoke of the benefits he had conferred upon Duncaster; he had put the town on the map; had attracted tourists by means of the speedway.

The swift transportation to the city which he had provided had brought in new residents, the town was growing, business was picking up even though the place was now in the grip of winter and pleasure driving was at a minimum. Last but not least, many small stockholders felt deeply grateful to him.

"First thing you know, Kit, they'll be electing you mayor or something," Wick Haddock said to him one day.

Angus McKane, who also was present, commented: "You said the well-known mouthful, Wick. It's queer, isn't it, that Kitson should be considered the local bus magnate when he hasn't a darned thing to do with either of the bus lines that run out of Duncaster, neither the speedway nor Swazey's?"

"Poor old Swazey," remarked Haddock. "The lad doesn't look the same, does he?"

"Guess you wouldn't either, if you lost two-thirds of your business."

Swazey, in truth, did not look the same, and Kitson did not fail to notice it. The fellow's jaunty and cocksure demeanor was missing nowadays.

He drank more and joked less. He still was making a living with a single bus on the public highway that he drove himself, but that was about all.

Along toward the end of the winter Edith Falconer returned from her trip to Cuba. She called up Kitson at the hotel, and insisted that he should come up to her residence for a nice long chat.

Kitson was willing enough to go. The resolution he had made never to see Edith again seemed rather silly. She could not harm him. Haddock, and McKane, and the rest of the old gang, and his new acquaintances were all right in their way, but recently he had felt a longing for companionship of another kind.

Their viewpoint was not his. They had never traveled, were not interested in music, and literature, and the various phases of the cultured life that he used to discuss with Edith. Then, too, he was rather fed up with masculine society only.

"Tom, I'm delighted to see you!"

Edith looked so radiant when he arrived at her home that it was a tonic just to see her. She seemed to have grown younger instead of older, was more vivacious in appearance and manner than many a girl fifteen years her junior.

"You must have had a very pleasant trip," Kitson told her.

"Oh, I did. Such a wonderful place Cuba is. I'd never been there before. Panama and Florida, too. And yet, do you know, I'm glad to get back to Duncaster while there's still a little bit of good old winter left.

"I missed it down there in the languid South, where it's summer all the time. I don't think I could live there permanently. Again and again I found myself longing for the tang of frosty air, the sight of white snow, the jingle of sleigh bells.

"It's energizing, Tom, this Canadian air is, peps one up, clears one's mind. It's nice, too, to have a variety of climate; four separate and distinct seasons.

"There are times when I'm inclined to doubt if any climate, anywhere on earth, can beat that of Southern Ontario."

After awhile they swung around to personal topics.

"So your fiancée left you," Edith commented. "Confessed that she loved you, yet she went away and left no trace because she would not burden you with the care of an invalid wife. That was rather noble of her, wasn't it?"

"It wasn't what I wanted. I'd rather have her as an invalid than not at all."

Edith shrugged her shapely shoulders. "You think you would, of course, but if you actually were to get her in the condition she left—well, I don't know.

"I'm afraid it isn't natural for a man to be satisfied forever with an invalid wife. It's too bad you couldn't have cared for another girl; one of the many nice ones I introduced you to."

"It's too bad, Edith, that I couldn't have cared for the nicest one of all in that class—yourself."

"Tom Kitson!"

"Oh, I'm not trying to flatter you. You're a wonderful woman—one in ten thousand. Every one knows that. How you ever came to care for an ordinary chap like me—but I suppose you forgot all that foolishness long ago."

Edith averted her face, and Kitson was sorry he had spoken so personally. Her countenance was not so radiant when she turned to him again.

"I have forgotten nothing, Tom. I cared so much then that I actually went to the frightful length of proposing to you—and I'd do it again if I thought it would do any good."

"Oh, I'm sorry. I didn't mean—honestly, Edith, I didn't. If I only could—you know how much I respect you and like you, too. But Marion—there's only one Marion in all the world.

"Sick or well, it makes no difference. I long for her all the time. I'm going after her some day, too; going to search for her. I haven't given her up forever, and I never shall."

Edith smiled.

"Don't be too sure, Tom. Men change their minds. Not so long ago you didn't even want to talk to me—oh, I could tell—yet here you are."

He rose. "I'd better be going."

She put her hands on his shoulders, and pushed him back into his seat—shapely hands, beautiful arms, attractive eyes were very close to his.

"Don't go, please. Let's talk about business. You're doing marvelously well with another company, I hear."

"Yes, thank goodness. It's done a lot for my self-confidence, I can tell you."

"But it *is* another company, not the one that you organized yourself. I'll wager you'd rather be back with the speedway."

"Perhaps."

A luring smile.

"I might be able to fix it. Father, you know—he isn't so vexed with you as he was. Thinks now that maybe the wreck wasn't your fault.

"All along I tried to tell him it wasn't, but he wouldn't listen. Now he does. So what do you say? Shall I try to get your old job back for you?"

Kitson rose more emphatically than before.

"Never! No more favoritism for me, Edith. I had enough of that."

"Favoritism? What do you mean?"

He spoke more gently.

"Pardon me. Don't think for a moment that I don't appreciate everything you did for me. It was wonderful of you. But you did do things for me, and people knew you did.

"They didn't respect me then as they do now. I'm making headway on my own, as the saying is, and I like it, Edith. The progress is slower, but also it's safer. So please say nothing about me to your father."

"Very well. But wouldn't you like to come to one of my parties? Meet again the people you used to get along with so nicely? They say you actually snub them."

"Just avoid them, Edith, so they won't snub me."

"How foolish. They wouldn't. Will you come?"

He shook his head slowly. "No, thank you. Your father told me once that I didn't really belong in your circle, and he was right."

Edith protested, but Kitson was firm. They parted on the friendliest terms, however, and when he returned to his hotel, Kitson felt comforted and encouraged.

After all, there was something about Edith that he liked. Yes, he might have grown still more intimate with her had he not fallen in love with Marion. He and she seemed to become more congenial as they became better acquainted.

Poor Marion. Where in the world could she be? Why did she not write to him? Was she really being as considerate of his feelings as Edith had been?

Why should she have taken it upon herself to decide that he would be happier without her? Her intentions were good, of course, but—well, he did wish that he could hear from her.

Next day, on Sunday, thoughts of both

Edith and Marion were temporarily driven from his mind when he opened a telegram. It was from the New York police—addressed to him, oddly enough, when he had expected that any such advice would be directed to the Halton chief of police—and it contained startling news regarding Oscar Filgus.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE CHASE.

THE telegram stated in a few words that Filgus had been shot by an underworld character in Brooklyn, and that just before he died he had confessed to a motor car plot with a man named Swazey which had resulted in the death of a bus passenger.

So shaken was Kitson by this news confirming his previous suspicions that he stood staring at the telegram in his hand, breathing hard, his eyes flashing, and his jaw clenched, so that several men in the hotel noticed his excitement. Angus McKane asked:

"What's wrong, Tom?"

Without much thought of what he was doing, Kitson held out the telegram.

"Read it for yourself."

McKane did so, and muttered "Good Lord!" and showed it to the other men. They jerked into attention as though flicked by an electric current, and exchanged significant glances.

The son of the woman who had been killed in the bus accident, a big brute of a fellow with hands like shovels, happened to be present, and when he read the telegram his hands shook so much that the paper crackled.

He handed it back to Kitson without a word, and moved away with some others to form an ominously whispering group in a corner.

Kitson decided that the first thing he should do was to notify the town constable, and have Swazey arrested. He called the Town Hall on the telephone, and waited a minute or more, and then was informed that the constable was out on the street somewhere. He hung up, and looked around.

"Hello," he said to the clerk, "where did all the gang go?"

The latter, a fragile youth, looked frightened.

"Dunno. They didn't say. An awful ugly look they had on their faces, though, that fellow whose mother was killed especially."

"Say! You don't suppose—" Kitson hurried to the door. He looked down the street, and saw a sizable group of men on a corner engaged in what appeared to be, from their emphatic gestures, a passionate debate.

The clerk grinned in a sickly manner.

"I thought there was a guy said something about lynching, but I wasn't sure."

Kitson gasped. He did not fear anything so drastic as that, since Canadians are not prone to let their passions run away with them; but there was a chance that if the mob got hold of Swazey it would administer a terrific beating.

"Where's Swazey likely to be now?" he demanded. "On his bus?"

"Yeah."

Without disclosing his intention, Kitson hurried from the hotel to the nearest garage, and demanded a car and a driver. He had made a mistake in letting any one know the contents of the telegram, and the least he could do to rectify it would be to warn Swazey. Fortunately both car and driver were available.

"Down the public highway to Halton," he instructed, "as fast as you can make it."

The car shot past the mob, which now was moving down the street, gathering recruits in snowball style. Its members saw Kitson and shouted words and phrases that he could not make out.

Four blocks farther on, Kitson sighted Swazey approaching in his bus with only three or four passengers. He made his driver block the roadway so that the bus had to stop, and he leaped out and ran to Swazey.

"See that mob?" and he pointed at the group of some thirty or forty men and boys which now was running toward them with shouts and threats. "They're after you.

"Filgus confessed. They know you caused the bus accident. Better get into

my car and let me take you to Halton before they get you."

Swazey went pale as pie-crust.

"Get 'em out!" he shouted, indicating his passengers with a jerk of his thumb over his shoulder.

Kitson jumped at the latter.

"Out! Quick! Trouble in a minute. See that mob?"

He hustled the passengers out before they had time to protest, one of them falling as he stepped on the roadway because, even as Kitson was helping them to alight, Swazey was turning the bus. The fellow seemed to have more faith in it than in Kitson's car, though the latter was theoretically faster; either that or he did not trust Kitson.

Kitson thought that Swazey would flee down the public highway, but the latter turned into a street that led to the speedway, a sensible idea, since he could make better speed there, and was not so likely to be stopped or run off the roadway.

Kitson did not fear that Swazey would escape. He himself would see to that. Once they arrived safely in the city, he would signal the first policeman they saw, and have Swazey placed in care of the law. What he wanted was to prevent the men of Duncaster from doing something they would be sure to regret.

That seemed easy enough once he and Swazey got under way well ahead of the mob, but in another moment Kitson realized that such might not be the case.

The mob, too, had got hold of a bus, one of the faster speedway vehicles, doubtless by commandeering it as it came down the street on its regular trip and compelling the passengers to get out.

Kitson informed Swazey that he was not safe yet from mob violence, and the latter, looking back, bared his teeth like an animal and leaned over the wheel, giving the engine all the gas it could digest, paying no attention to the local law which forbade such speed before the private motorway was reached.

On came the pursuing bus, less than two blocks behind, the yells of the occupants, who seemed to have worked themselves into a frenzy, coming plainly to the ears of the fugitive, and the man who hoped to deliver him safely to the law.

The gate to the speedway was closed, but Swazey paid no attention to that. He crashed into it. The light rail was smashed off like a toothpick and, on the level speedway, the bus roared like a racing car.

It was not, however, as fast as the newer and better speedway bus, even though the latter was weighted down with angry men. Steadily the latter kept gaining.

Other cars on the speedway heard the roaring and thundering of the two heavy vehicles and drew aside to let them pass, joining in the pursuit as soon as they had done so.

With nothing to do, since Swazey was driving, Kitson held on to the hand-holds of the seats, and looked back through the rear window.

What a race! More thrilling than anything he ever had participated in. The speeding he had done on this very road just before the fatal crash had not been nearly so fast as this. How ferocious the men behind had become!

He was not so sure now that, if they caught Swazey, they would content themselves with a mere beating. The race was exciting them to such a pitch that they might stop at nothing. Not only might they lynch Swazey; they might also wreak summary vengeance on the man who was trying to help Swazey escape.

They were only two or three lengths in front of the mob now, with the pursuing bus gaining all the time. Plainly Kitson could hear their cries:

"Stop, murderer!"

"Run him into the ditch, driver!"

"We'll get you, you ——"

The pursuers drew up even. The huge vehicles tore along side by side, clumsy, ungainly, like racing elephants, yet more swiftly than one who has never seen a bus travel at top speed would anticipate.

Kitson tried to placate the pursuers.

"Let the police have him," he shouted. "I'll take him to jail."

Angry replies reached his ears.

"To hell with the police!"

"Make him stop or we'll ditch you, too."

Kitson warned. "Don't do anything you'll be sorry for."

Scornful replies, "We won't."

"Just want to slap his wrist, we do."

"Talk to him like a lamb, that's all."

Swazey said not a word, did not shift his intense gaze even for an instant from the roadway ahead.

The pursuing bus had drawn ahead now, and slowly and surely was edging Swazey over to the edge of the roadway. It was a case of give way or run into the speedway bus, and Kitson knew what would happen if Swazey chose the latter course. He would get the worst of it; would be dumped into the ditch; the two of them would be badly hurt if not killed.

"Better stop," he yelled in Swazey's ear. "They won't hurt you."

The latter seemed afraid to, however, even though the alternative was a disastrous collision. Or perhaps, thought Kitson, he was so frightened that he could not stop. If that were the case—

Kitson reached forward and threw off the power. Swazey tried to throw it back on, but Kitson grabbed his hand and prevented him. The bus careened and zigzagged now, but also it was slowing down.

Presently it came to a halt. The mob piled out of their own bus and into Swazey's. They dragged the scoundrel out onto the roadway, and formed a circle around him.

There were cries of "Lynch him!" "Kill the murderer!" but the leader of the mob yelled "shut up!" and the sanguinary cries subsided.

"Confess!" shouted the leader at Swazey. "Either that, or swing from that tree over there." He indicated a limb that looked very suitable for a hanging. "Did you hire Filgus to wreck the bus? Say you did and you won't get hurt."

Swazey said nothing, but just gazed from one hostile countenance to another, his face ashen, his eyes animal-like with fear.

Some one brought a rope.

"Spit it out!" warned the leader, handling the rope with grim significance.

Suddenly Swazey dropped to his knees.

"I did it! I hired him! Keep that rope away!"

Kitson stepped forward.

"You poisoned the horses, and tried to get me killed on the trestle, too, didn't you?"

"No, no! Not killed. Just wanted to scare you. Didn't want to kill any one on the bus, either."

The leader jerked Swazey to his feet. "That's enough." He dragged him into the speedway bus. "Everybody aboard."

The mob jammed the bus again, Kitson and Swazey with them now, and at a more moderate speed drove toward Halton. They reached the city and proceeded to Police Headquarters and there delivered their prisoner, together with a full account of all that had happened, Kitson also surrendering the telegram he had received from the New York police.

Still grim-faced for the most part, though a few were laughing and joking now that the strain was over, the men drove back to Duncaster, Kitson with them, and returned the bus to its driver.

A crowd that almost blocked the street in front of the hotel was awaiting them. News of what was occurring had spread through the town like news of a great battle in wartime, some one had notified the hotel by telephone of the final result in Halton.

There was no great demonstration, but the returning men were gazed at and talked to, and in many cases congratulated.

Kitson in particular was the center of interest. The mob had been respectful enough to him, but they had not thanked him for his endeavor to get Swazey away from them.

Now, however, the more prominent townspeople, who believed in the enforcement of law and order at any cost, were quick to shake his hand, not only because he was exonerated of all blame for the wreck, but because he had done his best to let the law take its course.

This sort of thing continued until presently the parts played by every one else was largely forgotten, and Kitson stood out as the hero of the occasion. There were even some of the mob who told him, after a while, that they were glad he had reminded them of their duty as law-abiding citizens.

Edith Falconer and her father came to the hotel especially to see him, Edith to congratulate him, Mr. Falconer to proffer profuse apologies for having discharged him.

"The job as manager of the speedway is yours again," he stated. "You can go right to work to-morrow morning if you want to."

Kitson shook his head.

"Thank you very much, Mr. Falconer, but I don't think I'd care to accept it. I'm doing very nicely where I am."

The capitalist was surprised.

"Really! I thought you'd rather be a manager than an assistant manager."

"I would. But I don't care to feel under obligations to any one. I'm progressing where I am on sheer merit. That's the way I want to progress, but it's not the way I got along as manager of the speedway."

"Who says it wasn't?"

"Everybody."

"They have no business to."

Edith argued: "You could have your business right here in Duncaster, Tom; then you wouldn't have to travel to Halton every day."

"That would be an advantage—true. But I don't mind it so much that I want to make a change."

"My offer remains open," said Mr. Falconer. "Perhaps you'll think better of your decision after awhile. The speedway company is ready at any time to make everything just as it was."

With more than a hint of sadness in his tone Kitson replied,

"It can't quite do that, Mr. Falconer. It can't restore the life of the woman who died—nor the health and strength of the girl I was going to marry either."

"That is true, Tom," Edith replied. "Haven't you ever heard from her?"

"Not a word."

"You don't know whether she is living or dead?"

"Oh, I'm sure she's living. If she weren't her mother would surely have notified me. Probably she's recovering her health and strength, too."

"I don't think that Miss Beaumont is being very nice to you, Tom. It would seem that she might at least drop you a line."

Kitson shrugged his shoulders.

"It isn't logical that she should. She said she wished to drop out of my life entirely. She wants me to forget her, and I couldn't do that if she wrote to me."

"I think you ought to forget her," Edith suggested.

"Perhaps."

"Are you trying?"

"No—but some day I may."

"What you need is distraction, Tom, and plenty of it. Gayety. Society. Sports, and dancing, and motoring. You made a mistake when you declined my last invitation.

"You've been living almost like a hermit this winter, and I think it's time you quit it. You'll have a fine chance to if you want to, because I have an idea that, after to-day, you'll be lionized by the whole town."

"Don't try to give me a swelled head," said Kitson.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE TOWN JOKER.

IT seemed that Edith Falconer was right when she prophesied that Kitson would be lionized. Everywhere he went in Duncaster he was halted and congratulated.

People who never had spoken to him before told him he was a credit to the town; speedway stockholders whom he did not know thanked him for his efforts on their behalf; the few who had spoken harshly of him following the wreck were quick to beg his forgiveness.

The members of Edith's Social circle, with whom he had once been friendly, protested against his aloofness with the kind pretense that they had never given him any cause to feel that way.

A more substantial recognition of his absolution from blame came when the *Duncaster Star* recounted all he had done for Duncaster.

Following the appearance of this eulogy, a number of local moneyed men got together, bought from Mr. Falconer his controlling

interest in the speedway, and asked Kitson to resume the management.

He did so gladly. No one could say now that he held his position by the grace of the Falconer family. He was through forever with the mixing of business and social affairs.

His heart was in the speedway, which he had conceived and brought into existence, and he resumed his old job with a degree of interest that he had never been able to feel for the job with the other bus line.

His interest was further stimulated by the fact that the new president and board of directors made it possible for him to acquire a sizable block of stock on the installment plan.

Back at his desk in the Duncaster terminal there were, however, certain reminders of Marion that caused Kitson many a pang. The typewriter she had used, a picture she had hung on the wall, the mental image of her beside his desk that he could so plainly see whenever pensive reverie took possession of him, as it often did.

Where was she now? Why did she not write? Was Edith's contention that Marion was inconsiderate true? She had not instituted a suit for damages against the company, and that seemed to argue that she was at least on the road to recovery.

It was all very puzzling. He decided that as soon as he got the speedway affairs in order he would take time off to learn where Marion had gone to, and, if possible, get in touch with her.

Meanwhile, now that the Falconers had severed all connection with the speedway, it seemed that he need not be averse to having anything to do with them or their Social set. Edith reminded him of this when they happened to meet on the street one day.

"You don't have to avoid me because I once proposed to you," she whispered to him. "Surely you don't think I'm so weak-minded that I can't have you in the same house with me without suffering an attack of melancholia."

"I hope I'm not so conceited," Kitson replied with a smile.

"I may think you are if you refuse to come to my party."

"Guess, I'll have to go then."

He went. And when he was invited to a second party on Residence Hill it seemed that he could not decline on pain of having people think he would accept invitations only from the Falconers.

These two parties led to a third, and then to a fourth, so that soon he was in the Social whirl almost to the extent that he had been back in the days when Edith knew nothing of his love for Marion.

He liked it, too. In a town such as Duncaster, Social life was almost a necessity. The old gang—Wick Haddock and Angus McKane and the others—were all right in their way, fine fellows and all that, but his point of view was wider than theirs, and they could not entirely satisfy his desire for sociability. Once Wick Haddock mentioned the subject.

"Glad to see you stepping out in Society again, Kit."

"Why?"

"You seem to kind of belong there."

"I wouldn't say that, Wick. I wasn't born into the Society crowd."

"What of it? If every one had to stay in the crowd he was born into, this would be a pretty rummy old world."

"I daresay you're right."

"You're darned tootin', I am. And that ain't all either."

"What else is on your mind?"

Haddock looked embarrassed, but not for more than about two seconds.

"If you'll excuse my butting into your personal affairs, Kit—why don't you marry Edith Falconer?"

"Don't talk like an idiot."

"I mean it. You could. The whole town says she's dippy about you."

"It's the town that's dippy."

"They say she got her old man to finance the speedway just so she could grab you."

"Ridiculous."

"Maybe, but you used to pal around with her a lot before you got interested in Marion, and lately she's been shining up to you again; so it looks like there's something in what the town says. Personally I think there's a lot in it, and what I say is—grab her! She's a darned fine woman."

"I know that, Wick—but Marion hap-

pens to be the one that I've got that sort of interest in."

"Naw, she ain't. Was the one, you mean. That girl gave you the slip like Edith never would have. It was a raw deal she gave you, and darned well you know it."

"It was no sure thing. Any day now I'm likely to hear from Marion. If I don't pretty soon, I'm going to trace her and find her, and make her strong and well again, and marry her. That's that, Mr. Wick Haddock, Town Joker, and don't you forget it!"

Wick scrutinized Kitson.

"Gee! Sounds like you mean it."

"Absolutely and positively, I do."

Nevertheless there were times when Kitson reflected that Edith was easy to look at, and still easier to talk to, and that she seemed to like him as much as she ever had. There were even brief intervals when Marion seemed to vacate his mind.

But always her image returned to shame him for his momentary aberration—Marion as she had been when he met her, cheerful, vivacious, overbrimming with health.

In a few more weeks he would be able, with luck, to arrange his affairs so that he could go and search for her. What an adventure that would be, what a triumph when he found her!

Surely he would be able to talk her out of her written resolution. No matter what her state of health should be, he would insist that she marry him.

Kitson was disappointed, therefore, when he learned that the town wished to mark the first anniversary of the speedway's opening with a monster celebration. He must remain and participate, must postpone his search for Marion, because the affair would be a tribute to him.

The women of Duncaster planned to assist in the celebration, and, as was usually the case, they would be captained by Edith Falconer.

Kitson was sorry to hear that. Once again it would be Edith, quite as much as any other individual, who would keep him away from Marion.

The celebration, he learned, was to end in a monster ball at the Falconer mansion, to which the whole town would be invited. For once in its history the great house would drop the mantle of exclusiveness that it had worn so long and with such distinction.

Wick Haddock, Kitson learned to his surprise, was one of the leading spirits in the proposed celebration. Wick, it seemed, could take a very active interest in things when he was minded to, he wielded an influence out of all proportion to the humble position he occupied in the town's economic structure. Other members of the old gang were active too.

Backed by the whole town, preparations for the biggest celebration the place had ever known went on apace.

Magically Duncaster awoke to the bustle and stir of a miniature New York. Old town boys who now lived elsewhere were invited to return for the great day, banners flaunted the slogan:

LIVE IN THE SPEEDWAY TOWN

Residences were converted into rooming houses to care for the crowd that already was beginning to pour into the place.

Kitson was not sure that he liked all this stir and bustle. It reminded him too much of New York. But it would be over soon, he reflected, and, anyhow, towns must keep step with the march of progress or be wiped off the map.

Once he sighted Wick Haddock coming out of the Falconer residence. Wick told him that inasmuch as he and Edith were members of the same committee he had to confer with her, but Kitson thought it was a bit odd for all that.

Edith seemed to be a changed woman, not aloof and haughty any more, but as democratic as any one could desire.

Kitson sensed that the town was preparing some sort of tribute that was expected to surprise him.

Probably, he thought, they meant to make a few speeches about his services to the town and present him with a loving cup. He thought of some things that he would say in reply.

How wonderful it was actually to be somebody. In New York he would have remained a mere atom, a small cog in a vast

machine. How thankful he was that he had escaped from the dismal grind of a great city, how sorry that he had wasted fifteen years of his life there!

If only he could hear from Marion before the great day arrived, if he could be assured that her health and strength had returned to her! But one cannot expect everything.

He must accept conditions as he found them. Above all, he must not betray the fact that he would rather leave Duncaster to search for her than remain to participate in the celebration.

At last, the great day!

First of all there was a parade down King Street, all the town bodies marching behind the same old town band that Kitson had listened to as a boy. They wore the same scarlet uniforms, and had the same great silver horn wound around the body of a bandsman.

Then the motor parade moved down the speedway and back to a point close to town, every car in town, and hundreds from other places.

Speeches!

Kitson had been right. A silver loving cup was presented to him, with a eulogy of his efforts to bring progress to the town that brought a blush to his cheeks.

He made what he hoped was a suitable reply. The people cheered, and the band played. It was all very wonderful indeed.

Races!

Not the commercialized sport of the racing tracks, with pinched-faced drivers striving desperately to win huge money prizes, but sport for the love of it.

There were races for flivvers, for big cars, for motor cycles, and bicycles, even a velocipede race for the kiddies. Fun! No one cared much who won or lost.

After the races there were a couple of hours of adjournment, to enable folks to catch their breath, and then the evening festivities began with the great open air supper on the Falconer lawn, on tables that reached almost from the street in front to the street at the back.

There was no exclusiveness now; rich and poor mingled together, tawdriness rubbed elbows with style; barber shop humor challenged drawing-room wit; mechanics chatted with capitalists; washerwomen with ladies who had been presented to Queen Mary.

If only Marion could be there.

But she was not, and therefore Kitson's joyous demeanor was a mask that he wore with increasing dissatisfaction as the supper was concluded and the dancing began.

He saw Wick Haddock and Edith Falconer conversing and glancing toward him. Odd. Haddock had never dared to address Edith until recently, and now the two of them were chatting like old friends—or fellow-conspirators.

What did it mean? Were they up to something? Wick Haddock had not achieved his reputation for being the town joker for nothing. It used to be the fellow's greatest glory to play some sort of practical joke on an occasion such as this.

Edith and Haddock approached Kitson, and Haddock spoke.

"Having a good time, Kit?"

"I surely am."

Edith said:

"Not dancing?"

"I will if you'll do me the honor."

She smiled, and shook her head.

"Wick and I want to show you something first."

"Up to your old tricks as town joker, eh, Wick?"

The fellow grinned. He took hold of Kitson's right arm and Edith took his left one, and they piloted him into the house.

"Got a good trick this time," Wick warned.

"Wonderful trick," confirmed Edith.

They marched him to a little room back of the great living room that was crowded with people. They opened a door. A girl stood in the room, alone. She turned as the trio entered.

"Marion!"

Kitson stared. Was he dreaming, or was it really she? It was! No cripple either. Attired in a dancing gown, her cheeks aglow with health.

"Is—is it really you, Marion?"

"I, myself, in the flesh."

"You're entirely recovered?"

"Haven't got even a scar."

"How did you get here?"

"Through your friends, Edith and Haddock. Was coming back pretty soon anyhow.

"But Wick wanted to spring a grand surprise on you—said he had to live up to his rep as the town joker—and Edith helped him when he asked her to, and they learned my address, and shot one wire after another at me with offers of expense money and so on until finally—well, here I am."

Kitson looked around.

"They're gone."

"Yes."

"We're all alone."

"So we are."

"You could kiss me a dozen times."

"More than that."

Presently they went out, and edged into the dancing crowd. How light on her feet Marion was, how springy, how full of life. God had been good to her after all.

People sighted them. Whispers flew around. Some one stopped them. Everybody stopped dancing. Kitson and Marion became the center of a mob that congratulated Kitson, and gasped at the wonder of it all, and wished them all the good luck in the world.

Wick Haddock did a little bit of explaining.

"Remember, Kit, when I had that very personal talk with you?

"That was just to find out what you really thought, what you wanted. I darned soon saw what you wanted—who, rather—and I says to myself, says I: 'Wick, old boy, here's your chance to put over a joke that is a joke,' and when Miss Falconer agreed to help me, why, the thing was as good as done."

"Some joker, you are," grinned Kitson.

"I could kiss you for it." And Marion did just that.

She kissed Edith, too, when they found her. Edith blushed like a schoolgirl, and murmured something about happiness and good wishes, and flitted off with great abruptness.

Wonderful night!

Wonderful Marion; the same bewitching vivacity, the same lustrous eyes!

Almost too good to be true, it would seem. And yet it was not. The night passed, and days followed, and weeks grew into months. A honeymoon followed a marriage, and the prettiest little home in all Duncaster was occupied by the newlyweds; and still no flaw showed in Kitson's happiness.

Fate, it seemed, was repaying him for the trials he had undergone, even as it once had repaid his forbears with a bounteous harvest after a ruinous year.

With Marion he sprawled one night on the rug in front of the wood fire in the grate. The red tongues flickered, the glowing wood crackled, shadows danced upon the wall.

"I see," he remarked, "that Edith Falconer is engaged to that old admirer of hers, Ted Saunders."

"Yes. They ought to be happy together. He's just her sort—rich, I mean."

Marion seemed disinclined to talk about Edith and, as a matter of fact, Kitson was, too.

"Do you know, honey," he said after a long pause, "when all is said and done New York does possess one thing that I like.

"I'm tickled to death to live in Duncaster instead of there. I like to be a real citizen instead of a metropolitan atom. It's glorious to live in a quiet house with grass and flowers and shrubbery instead of in a noisy box-stall of an apartment, and it's a bit of heaven to have a wife like you.

"And yet there's this about New York: The latest songs, the snappiest music, the wittiest wise cracks, all originate there.

"In that one way the big burg has the edge on places like Duncaster. Every other way you can think of we've got it beaten forty ways, but in that one way it's got us beaten."

"You're right," agreed Marion.

Kitson rose, and turned a knob on the radio.

"So, if you don't mind, we'll tune in on the big town, and bring their songs and jazz right here to the fireside."

Marion rose.

"Tune in on some night club, and we'll dance," said she.

THE END

The High Cost of Funerals

By EDITH LOWELL

JOEL WALKER had been having a " run of rotten luck." His brother, Jim, had been " sickly " for years, and now he was dead. Joel had the funeral to pay for, and when a man is not over-strong and earns his daily bread by mowing lawns, pulling weeds, and doing a thousand and one small chores for summer residents, funerals certainly work havoc with his bank account.

But Jim Walker was buried in proper style and now Joel was alone with his depleted savings and his old moth-eaten dog, Mose. He lived in a little weather-beaten shack on the rocky point near the fish houses, and breathed in the decidedly aromatic sea—and other—breezes.

Somehow it seemed to Joel that he was slowing down. Although it was April and the buds were swelling he did not feel the same zest for the time to come when the first " rusticators " should arrive and presage a busy season behind the " ole grass-eater," as Joel called his mower.

He told old lady Duffy how he felt, and she mixed him up a nauseous brew of spring bitters, but still Joel's feet dragged and everything seemed to require monstrous effort.

" I guess I got T. B. like pore ole Jim. Yes, I guess that's what ails me," Joel would say to the cracker-box club in the general store and post office. " I'll go like Jim did, an' it 'll take more'n I got to bury me. No Walker was ever on the town yet, but I dunno, I dunno—" and Joel would meander down the street with Mose tagging at his heels.

As the days went by Joel grew worse and worse, and then one day he found out the tragic truth. He overheard Doc Higgins, the vet, talking to old lady Duffy:

" He won't last a month, sure's there's hair on a dog!" And old lady Duffy had answered: " No, I guess he won't, it's all he can do to put one foot afore the other now. I give him a dose that would 'a' cured the critter if there'd been a chance.

It 'll be a pity—" and the two old people had walked around the corner of a barn.

Joel had heard enough. It had not been intended for his ears, but he had overheard. What should he do?

For a day or two he was as nearly distracted as a panicky woman would have been, and then came the big idea. He confided it to Mose with growing enthusiasm.

"I know what I'll do, Mose, ole scout! By jing, it's a good thing I thought of it, a mighty good thing."

Mose, who was lying by the stove, lifted his head from between his paws and batted an eye.

"I'll buy a chanst to go to sea with Cap'n Snow on that ole slow-sailin' tub of his'n. I ain't able to work none, but I guess he'll let me pay for my passage and go along. Jim done him a good turn that time his barn 'most burned up. Then inside of a month I'll die at sea an' they'll sew me up in a canvas and roll me overboard. 'T ain't pleasant to think of, Mose, ole boy, but it's a darn sight better'n bein' on the town, by jing, ain't it now?"

Mose, so appealed to, rose, yawned, stretched himself fore and aft, and laid his big head on his master's knee.

"I knowed you'd think 't was a good idee," said Joel, thumping the dog's shoulders with his horny hand.

And so it was arranged. A week later Joel and Mose embarked on the Molly C. Trowbridge bound for Norfolk.

For a few days Joel was sure that the end was in plain sight, and he confided the care of Mose to Captain Snow with tears in his eyes. Then he began to mend. When the Molly C. had been out ten days Joel felt like an old salt.

By the time they reached Norfolk he was taking an interest in the ways of sailormen. On the return trip they encountered stormy weather and Joel was on his back again, and this time he knew he was done for; but it was not to be. He was well again when they reached the home port.

All the same when the Molly C. sailed once more Joel was on the deck in his chair.

"I s'pose it's likely to be kind o' sudden, an' I'm likely to drop off any time, but I do hope to goodness the Molly C. won't be in port, by jing!"

The Molly C. was not in port. In fact, during a series of storms, the like of which had seldom been known in those parts, the Molly C. Trowbridge, her gallant captain, and six of her crew went to their final resting places on the bottom of the ocean.

Joel, with a half drowned cur in his arms, was pulled aboard a freighter bound for extremely foreign parts. He was well-nigh exhausted, but made a rapid recovery.

It was six months before Joel, followed by old sea-dog Mose, stepped on the shore near his familiar haunts, the fish houses.

How good his little gray shack looked to him! How cosy it seemed as he stepped inside the little room.

There was his table with the red-checkered cloth, and there in the corner was his bed. No small wooden bunk like the one on the freighter, but a real bed. This was home and it was good to be here.

The summer people had come and gone, and no doubt they had missed him and inquired for him.

"Gone away to sea, to die," the cracker-boxers had probably told them.

"Huh," chuckled Joel, throwing old lady Duffy's bitters bottle out of the door. "Huh! Die! Prob'ly live to be a hundred if I ain't careful. I ain't goin' to have no funeral.

"Hello, there's Doc Higgins! Hey, Doc, come here a minute. How are yer, Doc? Say, Doc, I heard yer last spring when you said I couldn't live a month, but look at me now, will yer? Don't look much like dyin', do I?"

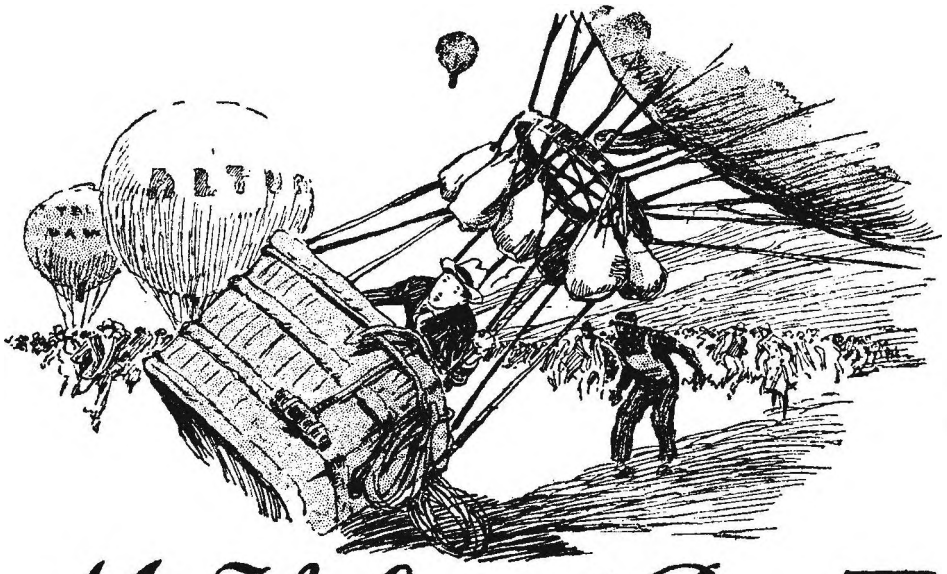
Doc Higgins scratched his head and looked at Joel in a puzzled way.

"Wha'do ye mean?" he said at last. "Live a month? I never said no such thing about ye. What was ye dyin' of?"

"T. B., like Jim. Why, I heard yer, Doc, you an' ole lady Duffy, down by the Drews' barn; I was goin' by."

Doc Higgins furrowed bis brow in deep thought. Suddenly he burst out laughing: "Ho, ho, ye poor fool, ye poor fool! We was talkin' about Henry Drew's old black horse!"

THE END



Mr. Hicks and the Pip III

By GORDON STILES

AFTER all, Mr. Nelson Hicks pondered, the old subscription game was not to be despised. You could figure on at least a month before any of the victims would squawk. And a month —any month at all of any year at all— usually witnessed several complete changes of scenery, so far as Mr. Hicks was concerned.

Also, scenery had no corner in the matter of changes. The police of a score of cities had "on their lists" sundry, and various names such as, Patrick McQuade, George Wilson, James Tilley, Herbert Slade. Oh, there were a number of others, but, if successfully followed, the trail in each case would have led to the dapper young man who had just finished an ample and satisfactory lunch in the Lotus Grill, easily the first restaurant of Greystone Heights, Indiana.

Mr. Hicks never made the mistake of operating generally over any large section of territory. If, by virtue of great industry, he managed to secure a decent return in a California town, he would be heard from next in Texas, perhaps. Or even Massachusetts.

These long jumps paid. Witness, his field of endeavor just prior to concentrating upon Greystone Heights, had been Cooper, Maine, where he had netted close to two hundred and fifty dollars. The fare to Indiana worked out around fifty dollars and was worth it.

Mr. Hicks was, on the whole, rather modest. He liked to travel and because the losses to his victims averaged only about four dollars, the police departments of the second and third rate towns wherein he operated had not caused any great national demand for his apprehension.

Mr. Hicks blew out clouds of fragrant cigar smoke and ruminated pleasantly. Greystone Heights had contributed nobly; the amount was near four hundred dollars for a week's work, gleaned principally from bored housewives who were glad of a break

in their routine, none the less because Mr. Hicks was a fluent and interesting talker. Thus, signatures on the dotted line at the foot of the printed forms headed,

McBLOW PUBLISHING COMPANY

had been gratifyingly frequent.

It is true that the forms mentioned had never seen the inside of the great McBlow offices and that the company was wholly unaware of the efforts of Mr. Hicks in its behalf. Also, that the gentleman in question was offering certain literary premiums of which the company had no knowledge.

But to the unsuspecting subscriber, all appeared regular enough. And who in his right mind would not pay four dollars for a year's subscription to *McBlow's Weekly, The Practical Fruit Grower and Tattlers' Tales,* especially when a complete set of Stevenson or Mark Twain was held out as a bait—"for advertising purposes only?"

Mr. Hicks's overhead was slight. The forms, printed in a shabby little New York shop, cost only eighty cents a hundred.

This noon, Mr. Hicks was debating with himself the interesting subject of where he should go next. Seattle and Atlanta had been been halving it for an hour. He could take a train in either direction in the early evening.

In the end, he decided in favor of the Pacific port. The Chicago train left thirty minutes in advance of the one which would bear him southward and Mr. Hicks was anxious to be off.

He thought, as he made his way to the modest hotel where he had been parked for a week, that he might as well put in his time to advantage. There was little stirring in the town; most of those who could manage it had already gone off to Fernside, twenty miles down the line, where the State Aëro Club was staging a balloon race that afternoon.

Mr. Hicks would have gone himself, only to do so would mean another day in Greystone Heights.

So he packed his bag; determined to check it at the station and try to charm another ten or twenty dollars from the pockets of Main Street business folk.

II.

HAVING employed his blandishments successfully in the case of a stenographer whom he discovered behind the grille of an insurance office, Mr. Hicks entered the town's principal butcher shop—Glauber's Meat and Fish Emporium, it was fancifully titled. The single clerk on duty came alertly forward.

"Yes, sir. What can I do for you?" he said.

Mr. Hicks plunged glibly into his stereotyped tale, scarcely looking at the subject of his efforts. It was only when the final arguments were falling from his lips that he sensed something not exactly as it should be.

He raised his eyes to discover that the other was staring at him with a gaze which was a combination of bewilderment and anger.

The clerk demanded: "How come you're sellin' subscriptions to these magazines in this town?"

Mr. Hicks, scenting a delicate situation, parried: "Why shouldn't I sell subscriptions here?"

"Because," the clerk declared, "because I am the local subscription representative of the McBlow Publishing Company. This is my territory, that's why!"

Mr. Hicks never faltered.

"Certainly. Of course," he said. "The company has local men everywhere. I'm a special representative, you see. Just out on a special advertising trip and the local parties will get their usual commission on whatever business I pick up. Glad to meet you, Mr.—Mr.—"

"Petrie—Frank Petrie," the other supplied, looking fixedly at his caller. "I can't see that sort of a stunt, though. Here they let you offer books as premiums. If I could do that, I could get a lot more names on the line. This ain't the same kind of contract, either. 'S funny." He fingered the slip of paper which Mr. Hicks had placed in his hand.

The one thing Mr. Hicks desired at that

moment was to be away from there. But he felt that any indication of undue haste might be fruitful of unpleasant results. The lad before him had a cold, suspicious eye.

"When do I get my commissions?" he inquired. "We're supposed to get cash—at the time the order is taken."

"That's the rule," Mr. Hicks said smoothly. "But where a special representative works a territory, the commissions are sent in a lump to the local man, when the special turns in his report. See?"

"Uh-huh," grunted young Petrie. "But they never mentioned no special stuff to me. Ain't no reason for it, anyhow. I can dig up business enough here if I have time. Only workin' spare time, a feller can't cover the ground in a minute. I'll tell you right now, I ain't satisfied. I'm gonta telegraph McBlow himself an' tell him so—an' quit!"

Genuinely alarmed, Mr. Hicks did some quick thinking.

"Tell you what I'll do," he said, placatingly. "In your case, I'll make an exception. Want you to feel right about it. The McBlow folks are nice people to be in with. So, just to prove it, I'll go back to the hotel and figure out what's coming to you on the business I've got here and pay you in cash for it. Could you drop around to the hotel—or, better yet, I'll come in and pay you to-morrow, some time. That be all right?"

"Yes. That's fair enough, I s'pose," Petrie admitted grudgingly. But his eyes followed the departing form of Mr. Hicks with no amiable gaze.

And, after thinking hard for some minutes, the young man doffed his apron, turned the key in the door of the deserted shop and journeyed the two intervening blocks to the headquarters of the Greystone Heights police. Which maneuver, it chanced, was not lost upon Mr. Hicks who had no heart for further conquest and was dawdling nervously in a soft drink parlor past which the militant Mr. Petrie made his way.

Mr. Hicks stared at the figure of his antagonist and surmised correctly that when the latter had imparted his suspicions to officialdom, the next move would be a telegram to the McBlow Publishing Company. It was unlikely that any offensive would be started before the reply arrived.

But you never could tell about these tank town cops. More than ever, Mr. Hicks desired to place distance—lots of it and that swiftly—between himself and Greystone Heights!

Which laudable ambition received a healthy stimulus when Mr. Petrie, accompanied by half the town's police force, to wit: two officers in uniform, emerged from the station house and stood, looking up and down the main thoroughfare.

So, thought Mr. Hicks, with a tightening of the hair at the back of his neck, they are going to pinch me "on spec!" Whereupon he determined not to be pinched, "on spec" or otherwise, if he could prevent it.

III.

IMMEDIATELY Mr. Hicks passed up the grip which was reposing at the railroad station. It contained nothing but pyjamas, shaving kit and a sheaf of forms. The cops would be keeping an eye out down there, if nowhere else. It behooved Mr. Hicks to depart by some other means and that quickly.

It was at that moment, when the young butcher lad had returned to his deserted post and the minions of the law had strolled off in different directions with a great air of casualness, that fate which had smiled on Mr. Hicks many times before, served him once again.

Easing along the street, already almost full, came a Ford station wagon bearing a placard which read:

TO THE BIG BALLOON RACE
50 Cents

Instantly the fugitive muttered: "My meat!" And darting out with swift glances to right and left, he swung himself aboard the moving vehicle.

Out there at Fernside, mingling with the crowds, he felt that he would be safest for the moment. He would discover some way to manage, afterward. And when he found

some twelve or fifteen hundred spectators milling about the four huge gas bags, tugging at their moorings in the field, he decided that his judgment was perfectly sound.

Mr. Hicks pushed his way close to the silken spheres and observed with interest the preparations for flight.

As the gas from the oxygen tubes found its way into the bulging envelopes, a swarm of laborers, under the direction of the pilots and their aids, would drop the line of sandbags which encircled each craft, another notch, so to speak—and hook them on to a lower tier of the diamond wove mesh. So that, little by little, the balloons changed in aspect from giant mushrooms to palé yellow globes.

Admiringly, Mr. Hicks watched in particular the progress of events which concerned a balloon ridiculously painted with the letters:

PIP III

Just why he selected that balloon was not clear. But it seemed to fascinate him. He liked the appearance of the pilot, a young man of thirty-five or thereabouts, hard and lean and efficient-looking. The aid was somewhat older, bulky and placid.

Mr. Hicks had read much about balloons, but had never been so close to one before. He stood about until almost time for the official take-off, then wandered back into the crowd where he could get a more general view of the scene. Came then the second severe jolt of the day.

Mr. Hicks's watchful eyes suddenly fell upon an individual, the sight of whom was, to say the least, disconcerting. The party in question was one of the two officers who had accompanied young Petrie out of the police station, and there was in his bearing an alertness that Mr. Hicks felt boded himself no good should the officer chance to spy him.

He calculated rapidly. Almost two hours had elapsed since his departure from Greystone Heights. Yes. It was just possible that a reply to the telegraphic inquiry had been received and that the cops were after one Nelson Hicks, in dead earnest.

As rapidly and inconspicuously as possible, Mr. Hicks edged away, face averted, but eyes vigilant. And presently he found himself again close to the wicker car which had been toggled on to the netting of Pip III. He fidgeted about, wondered if striding boldly off the field would be a safe bet.

Before he could reach a decision on this point, two events occurred that left Mr. Hicks astonished and bewildered, to put it mildly. The bulky aid, in climbing out of the car, caught his foot on the edge of the wicker basket, lurched forward head first and crashed to the ground. The distance was only a few feet, but the man lay quite still, groaning dolefully!

The crowd pressed forward, and among them Mr. Hicks caught a glimpse of his Nemesis. However, he was too astute to try for a get-away; he knew that the injured man would hold the policeman's attention.

There, he was right. From somewhere a doctor appeared like magic. A hasty examination and the verdict: Broken collar bone; nothing serious. A motor was commandeered and the disabled aëronaut packed off to hospital.

Then, to his relief, Mr. Hicks noted that the Greystone Heights sleuth had set his face toward the other end of the flying field, where the first balloon was about to rise.

The pilot of Pip III grumbled: "Hell of a note! That disqualifies me! No aid, and the rules call for one!"

Mr. Hicks never did know by what amazing mental process he arrived so quickly at his decision, or how he had the nerve to follow it up. Still, for some minutes he had been squirming under sickening visions of yawning cell doors, court room scenes with cold voiced district attorneys reciting a long list of towns where the prisoner was wanted! Ugh! And again, ugh!

Mr. Hicks found himself at the side of the disgruntled pilot. "How about taking me along as aid?" a voice that sounded strange inquired.

He could feel the eyes of the other turned on him, heard him say, "Know anything about balloons?"

"Quite a lot," lied Mr. Hicks. "I was in that branch of the service during the war. Never took one up myself, though."

"All right," the pilot told him. "You can do what you're told, I suppose. Hop in here and I'll explain the conditions of the flight."

Mr. Hicks scrambled into the car, devoutly hoping that the energetic policeman would stay where he belonged. Certainly he never would think of looking for his quarry among the airmen.

"Very comfortable car," the pilot was saying. "With your weight, we can carry at least ten bags of ballast. Hey, you," to the men, "trim her up now."

Sandbags were lifted out until the craft was balanced nicely; the pilot undid the string around the "appendix." He pointed up to a couple of cords, slung back where they would be out of the way, yet easily reached.

"Valve and rip cords," he explained.

Mr. Hicks nodded.

"Now," said the other, "we're all set. Oh, I must notify the race officials of the change. What's your name?"

"Harry Johnson," replied Mr. Hicks quickly. He had expected something of the sort.

His companion spoke to the men about the car: "Hold her for a minute while I attend to this business."

He got out and hurried to the little table under a square of canvas where the timers sat. Two burly helpers easily held the buoyant craft in place while they waited for him to return.

It was at this unlucky instant that Mr. Hicks beheld his pursuer threading his way rapidly through the surrounding crowd. The officer's face was set straight toward him, and in his mind there was no doubt as to the turn events were likely to take within the next five minutes!

Throwing discretion to the winds, he made a frantic effort to scramble out!

Not being adept in this line, Mr. Hicks fouled, first, the suspension ropes, then the arms of the two men who held the enterprising car in place. There were startled exclamations, a jerk, and Mr. Hicks fell backward into the bottom of the car just as the balloon, freed from restraining hands, rose grandly and scooted heavenward at a pace which even a trained airman would have described as lively!

IV.

STILL obsessed by the idea of getting out, the luckless Hicks scrambled to his feet, hanging grimly to the headlines of the swaying car. But one look at the fast receding earth, at the blur of white which was the faces of the onlookers, and he cowered back with chattering teeth and a face even whiter than any of those below.

It may be interpolated here that Mr. Hicks was not a brave man.

Spite of all which, his powers of reasoning began to work. At any rate, the cop had not got him.

He was in a balloon, to be sure, and he did not know how he was going to return to earth. But balloons couldn't remain aloft forever; he would be sure to land some time, somewhere. He shuddered a little at the thought.

Lord! He was going up fast—shooting straight for the sky. He wondered if there was not some way to stop the damned thing! His ears were ringing with the changing pressure only he did not know what it was all about.

Finally, after what seemed an endless time, it occurred to him that the thing had stopped rising. He stole a look over the side and shivered with giddiness. He could make out nothing definite below; the field from which he started seemed to have disappeared.

The earth was a colorful patchwork of smooth, irregular plots, and by the rate at which he was drifting across this maze, he might be anywhere before he came down.

Before he came down! Well, how in the devil was he going to get down? He concentrated on the things he had learned from reading articles on ballooning.

To rise, one must throw out ballast—sand. There were disposed about the bottom of the car eight or ten bags of this. But Mr. Hicks was as high as he cared to be.

To descend, you had to let out gas, pull the valve cord. Ah! That ought to be simple enough. He looked up. There, as the pilot had observed, were the valve and rip cords. The heart of Mr. Hicks sank. He did not know which was which!

The rip cord, he knew, would tear a panel out of the envelope. And the thought of tearing out such a panel at the height which the Pip III had attained caused Mr. Hicks to go cold inside!

He stared at the two cords. One of them would release gas and cause the balloon to drop. The other would also release gas and cause the balloon to drop. But, oh! What a difference!

A grappling iron, attached to a coil of rope, hung at one side of the basket. Mr. Hicks eyed it speculatively. By golly! If he ever got near enough to the ground, he'd throw that thing out in a hurry! Hook onto something!

He divided his attention between that and the two cords above. He wished he dared experiment, but knew that he did not. He wondered if he would ever find himself on solid ground again, alive and well again. It would be a blessed sensation!

Finally, very miserable and very frightened, the "Special Representative of the McBlow Publishing Company" huddled in the corner of the car to await developments.

V.

THE coming of darkness put the fear of God into him. He had looked over the side as twilight fell, watched the fleeting panorama of darkening fields and toy rivers showing silver in the dimming light.

The balloon seemed to be drifting on an even keel, so to speak; certainly it was no higher. But it was moving fast, which was the only bit of consolation Mr. Hicks could muster.

Then night and the blotting out of the landscape below. Mr. Hicks shuddered as he floated through the velvety blackness; it was so horribly quiet up there. His only company was thought, and thought, in the circumstances, was not pleasant. Then terror yielded to fatigue—the fatigue of excitement and, curled up in his corner, Mr. Hicks slumbered.

When he awoke, he was cold and stiff. For a moment he could not realize where he was. When he did succeed in grasping the situation, he at once hauled himself to the basket's side.

Below him nothing but blackness; in the distance a spattering of lights told him that he was approaching a town. Helpless, but fascinated, he watched the illumination advance to meet him, as it seemed.

With a start, he observed that these lights were near him, much closer than the ground had been during the afternoon! In other words, the balloon was dropping earthward, and even in his ignorance, he knew that it was dropping rapidly.

Frantically, he tugged at the rope that held the grappling hook, and gingerly lowered the thing overside. There, let it catch on what it would.

There were two points about ballooning that Mr. Hicks did not know. One was that the night air cools the gas, causes it to contract, with the result that the balloon is then bound to descend unless some ballast is thrown overboard.

The other was that when a balloon starts to descend under such conditions, it sometimes falls too rapidly—what is termed, "getting a run on." In which case the occupant or occupants may find themselves in a much more violent contact with Mother Earth than they had bargained for or desired.

Well, the balloon of which Mr. Hicks was temporary pilot had a run on, and a sweet one at that!

It was only when he went booming across the town, just skimming the housetops, that he thought of throwing out some sand to check his descent. Acting quickly, he seized one of the bags which his groping hands found, and was about to hurl it over when there came a terrific jerk. The balloon seemed to have flopped over on its side and was pulling desperately to free itself of whatever was holding it!

Mr. Hicks, thrown into the ropes which held the car to the concentration ring, clung grimly to whatever his fingers clutched! He could hear a confused shout-

ing below him, and suddenly the white pool of a searchlight revealed a patch of level ground directly under the threshing monster.

It seemed quite close, and, preferring anything on earth to what might be in store for him above, Mr. Hicks watched for the lowest point of the swing and dropped!

Relieved of his weight, the balloon, with a wild and convulsive tug, freed herself and, leaving a thudding trail of bricks and mortar in her wake, rose defiantly toward the star-powdered sky!

Mr. Hicks rolled over, lay quietly for a moment, half stunned. Out of the medley of voices around him he gathered such phrases as "Caught on the brick wall," "Off to hell and gone!" Then somebody hauled him to his feet.

His bewildered eyes took in a circle of half dressed men, staring at him with sleepy eyes, apparently not certain of what to do or say. But just as Mr. Hicks found words, a stern faced individual, fully clothed, broke into the group.

"What's the row?" he demanded crisply, glanced sharply at the one so lately delivered from the perils of the air.

"Balloon down, got away again. This guy was in it."

Mr. Hicks broke in: "Say, where the hell am I? What place is this?"

The newcomer walked over, tilted the airman's chin so that he could examine his upturned face, and said, with the air of one who imparts important knowledge: "This, my lad, is Greystone Heights, Indiana. You are now in the yard of the county jail." He chuckled and added: "According to the dope that's been flying all over the State this afternoon, you have come to the right place!"

Mr. Hicks turned his eyes aloft and toward the point where the galloping balloon had disappeared, shivered once more and said: "It's O K with me, chief. It's certainly O K with me!"

THE END

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THE TRAIL OF THE PONY EXPRESS

WHERE the air of the crests is rare and keen,
Where the fierce-eyed eagle swings,
The mails o'er the chasms and crags careen
Borne on 'neath an airplane's wings.

Where the plains roll on in a level scroll,
Where the bright day flames and fails,
Due east, due west in a thunderous roll
Drive the mails on the ringing rails.

Where the bowl of the sky cups vale and crest,
Where the hermit silence broods,
There's a picture limned in the fleecy nest
Of the white clouds' shifting moods.

And the silhouette of a man and steed
Rides hard on the aërial grade
To carry the message the gods may read:
Then fades as all phantoms fade.

Olin Lyman.

THE READER'S VIEWPOINT

NO, G. K. H., the crape hangers haven't run Edgar Franklin out of the paper. A new serial of his is scheduled to start not many weeks hence. Yes, his "Noise in Newboro" was great and made a corking picture. We wish to thank Mrs. M. H. for her spirited account of how she made acquaintance with ARGOSY. Sorry not to be able to oblige our friend from Lankershim, California, but "At His Mercy" appeared so many years ago that copies containing it are now out of print. Mrs. E. E. W. is wrong in her guess as to the authorship of "The Seal of Satan."

SHELBYVILLE, TENN.

DEAR FRIEND OF A BORED NATION:

Have intended for some little bit to add my word of appreciation to the many you receive. Possibly I would never have butted in, but some of your readers have got my dander up, talking about my favorite author.

Hey, you crabs! Lay off Edgar Franklin! If you don't, I am going to be real riled. He has sense enough to know a feller needs a laugh once in a blue moon. His stories have every writer stripped a mile. Years ago—not so many—I read one of his stories, "A Noise in Newboro." It is beyond the peradventure of the shadow of a doubt, unequivocally the best story you have had the honor of publishing. Now, I like his stories. What you got to say about it? I've been reading for months looking for another one. What have you done with him? Have the gloomy crape hangers run him out of the paper?

"Vingo's Devil Girl" was great. Something else I like—a little heart interest. Why overlook it? It's in all of life whether you want it or not. Yet here come some more of the fellows trying to hang some more crape on the door-knob, voting against all love stories. You have had some splendid short stories along this order as well as novelettes and continued stories. I like your short stories, novelettes, and three-part stories best.

And the war stories! Brother, the war is over! Why in the name of good reading do we have to drag out all the gruesome details and fight it all over again? I'm sick unto nausea of war stories! I'll admit they are good war stories. The ones you publish, I mean. But why take up good space with the rot? And you had *two* hand running! Awful!

I like *everything* else you print.

Yours for a heap o' good reading. G. K. H.

CHAMPAIGN, ILL.

I have not yet had time to read "The Pancake Princess," but I know that it will be a good story. Fred MacIsaac wrote it. H. F.

NEWTON, KAN.

I have taken a great deal of interest in the views of your readers and so decided I would add the account of my first meeting the ARGOSY. I don't remember the date, but it was a good while ago. I was visiting in the mountains of Colorado and while out walking I lost my way.

While following an old burro trail a stone rolled and sent me to the bottom of the gulch, some fifteen feet below. When my scattered wits finally decided to work once more I found some one was pouring water over my head and opened my eyes before they had quite drowned me. I found a cowboy had been bringing water in his hat and had thoroughly soaked me.

Finding a badly twisted ankle he promptly picked me up and carried me to the creek where, without so much as a "by your leave," he stripped off boot and stocking and placed the foot in the icy water. Going to his horse, he took the blanket roll from the saddle and gave me an ARGOSY, saying I could read while he fixed up my foot, which he carefully bound with his neckerchief.

I still have the cowboy, and never miss a copy of the magazine if I can help it. Leave it the way it is, say I, as I think it can't be beat.

MRS. M. H.

MIAMI, FLA.

Your February 26 issue of ARGOSY is the best yet. The serials are just O. K. Print more "Thundering Dawns," "Long Arm of the Big Gun," and no Westerns would suit me fine.

J. W. A.

LANKERSHIM, CALIF.

My father read your magazine when it was what he laughingly calls a "little yellow back" and has never missed a copy that he can remember. And I started to read it about twenty years ago and I have never missed a shot. At that time you had the ARGOSY and the *All-Story*. Now, in one of them you ran a story called "At His Mercy." I did not, for some reason I cannot remember, get to finish it, and as I never will stop wondering about how it ended I would like to know if there is any way I can get that story. If it is not too much trouble, will you send me what information you can in regard to it?

Now, a little criticism, not on your stories, but on some of the letters in the Viewpoint. In April 2 issue G. E. T. goes to some extent to knock Kenneth Perkins, Edgar Franklin, E. K. Means, and Richard Barry. I have noticed so much of this same criticism in the Viewpoint lately. Why can't the person say that he or she does not like

that certain author's story or stories? Other people just as discriminating do like these authors and think they are of the best. It takes all kinds of stories to please the public. I read them all, every one. Some few I do not like so well, some I think are great, all of them are worth reading. All I can say is, please don't change the ARGOSY again; it has been changed enough. Just keep it as it is now, just as well balanced as it has been lately, and as far as I am concerned, the magazine world is yours. Wouldn't it be a funny old world if every one liked the same thing?

Yours for another twenty years, J. H. T.

LONG BEACH, CALIF.

Having read with interest the Reader's Viewpoint, I feel that I must add my voice. As to when and how I began reading the ARGOSY, in 1922 we had a young man working on our ranch who was an ARGOSY fan. I read his copies and when he left, purchased my own, and have done so ever since. I like the magazine very much, though there are times when I become rather disgusted and vow I'll stop reading it. Then a good story starts and I change my mind.

I didn't like "The Future Eve" and I never read Edgar Franklin. His comedies would make good short stories, but to drag through five and six numbers of his stuff is excruciating. I am a native Californian, but I sure like Westerns unless they be written by Kenneth Perkins. He spends too many words trying to create dramatic situations. The only story by him which I thoroughly enjoyed was "Jungle Test."

Some one wanted to know what had become of Frank L. Packard. I am sure I know. The mysterious author of "The Seal of Satan" is none other than Frank L. Packard. Now I put this in the form of a question. Am I right? Please answer me. I fail to see why as good a writer need write anonymously to pique interest.

My only criticism of "Moonglow" was the negro dialect. It didn't sound right to me. Though I have never been in the South, my ancestors came from there and I have heard some of them imitate the negroes.

I like romantic stories, such as "The White Horseman" and those "a-la Graustark."

Leave the ARGOSY as it has always been, I say.

MRS. E. E. W.

DETROIT, MICH.

Have read the ARGOSY for quite some time and wish to say that I am heartily in accord with its policy of giving all kinds of stories to its readers. Of course it is a known fact that any one particular story can never please all of the readers. One person may think a story absolutely N. G., while still another may enjoy it immensely. For my part, I think that Edgar Rice Burroughs is one of the best writers we have, so I was glad to see your announcement that he would be with us again.

I agree with E. C. L. that Barry cut his sequel to "The Big Gun" too short, but otherwise it is a fine story. Would like to see about the same number of Western stories as you have run all along. The magazine is just about right the way it is.

W. R. L.

BROOKHAVEN, GA.

As I am an old reader of your interesting magazine, having read it for nine years steady, I wish to give you my viewpoint. Western stories are the "bunk," because they are all alike. The handsome, blue-eyed stranger, the girl, a gang of rustlers and a thrilling climax, all get on my nerves. However, Westerns are a pleasure to read when they are a little historical. I am heartily in favor of war stories, because they show to us some of the bitterness of war. Those like "War Spawn" and "Battle Sight" are now in favor by the general public. Some of your authors are a little better than others, but as we know "variety is the spice of life." print 'em all, including good Westerns.

C. T. C.

OLDHAM, S. D.

I have been reading the ARGOSY since I can remember and needless to say, I think it's the best little old magazine going. Some of the stories I do not like as well as others, but no man has ever pleased the whole world yet, and I think the editor comes as close to it as any man can.

As to "An Old Hat," Robert Beith gives *Sally Jenks's* husband credit for holding more city or village offices than any man I know of. Maybe I am wrong, but in this town no man holds more than one public office, and in this story *Mr. Jenks* is "Member of the Board of Education" and also "councilman." Can this be? I like this story very much, anyway. Three cheers for the editor.

R. J. L.

MARKED TREE, ARK.

I have been reading the likes and dislikes of our readers for quite awhile. I have only read one letter landing the poetry. Well, that is what I like, as I always read the poetry first; probably because I write a little myself. I have missed one copy of the *All-Story* since December 5, 1908, and I like the *whole* thing.

In regard to the story "An Old Hat," I liked it. It was so much like folks. The woman trying in a woman's way to help the husband she loved. The small town wrangle, the man trying to do what was best for the town in spite of opposition. Then later trying to shield his wife yet make good the loss caused by her. (But I bet most husbands would have walked the floor and cussed before they decided what to do.) Then the ever-ready notion that getting insurance 'most anyway, is all right. *Bill Daly's* change of heart in regard to the new fire engine, and when all is said the characters were like the rest of us. They were not perfect.

MRS. T. B. H.

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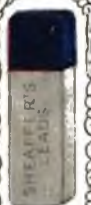

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