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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE BURGLAR AND THE BLIZZARD: A CHRISTMAS STORY ***

The Burglar

The Burglar and the Blizzard

A CHRISTMAS STORY

BY ALICE DUER MILLER

AUTHOR OF "THE BLUE ARCH," ETC.

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS BY
CHARLOTTE HARDING

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1914

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The Burglar and the Blizzard

I

Geoffrey Holland stood up and for the second time surveyed the restaurant in search of other members of his party, two fingers in the pocket of his waistcoat, as if they had just relinquished his watch. He was tall enough to be conspicuous and well bred enough to be indifferent to the fact, good looking, in a bronzed, blond clean-shaven way, and branded in the popular imagination as a young and active millionaire.

At a neighbouring table a man lent forward and whispered to the other men and women with him:

"Do you know who that is?—that is young Holland."

"What, that boy! He doesn't look as if he were out of school."

"No," said one of the women, elaborating the comment, "he does not look old enough to order a dinner, let alone managing mines."

"Oh, I guess he can order a dinner all right," said the first man. "He is older than he looks. He must be twenty-six."

"What do you suppose he does with all that money?"

The first thing he did with it, at the moment, was to purchase an evening paper, for just then he snapped his fingers at a boy, who promptly ran to get him one.

"Well, one thing he does," answered the man who had first given information, "he has an apartment in this building, up stairs, and I bet that costs him a pretty penny."

In the meantime Holland had opened his paper, scanned the head lines, and was about to turn to the stock quotations when a paragraph of interest caught his eye. So marked was the gesture with which he raised it to his eyes that his admirers at the next table noticed it, and speculated on the subject of the paragraph.

It was headed: "Millionaires' Summer Homes Looted," and said further:

"Hillsborough, December 21st. The fourth in a series of daring robberies which have been taking place in this neighbourhood during the past month occurred last night when the residence of C. B. Vaughan of New York was entered and valuable wines and bric-a-brac removed. The robbery was not discovered until this morning when a shutter was observed unfastened on the second story. On entering the watchman found the house had been carefully gone over, and although only a few objects seem to be missing, these are of the greatest value. The thief apparently had plenty of time, and probably occupied the whole night in his search. This is the more remarkable because the watchman asserts that he spent at least an hour on the piazza during the night. How the thief effected an entrance by the second story is not clear. During the past five weeks the houses of L. G. Innes, T. Wilson and Abraham Marheim have been entered in a manner almost precisely similar. There was a report yesterday that some of the Marheim silver had been discovered with a dealer in Boston, but that he could not identify the person from whom he bought them further than that she was a young lady to whom they might very well have belonged. The fact that it was a young lady who disposed of them to him suggests that the goods must have changed hands several times. The Marheim family is abroad, and the servants...."

Here a waiter touched his elbow.

"Mr. and Mrs. Vaughan have come, sir," he said.

"Send up to my apartment and tell Mrs. May we are sitting down to dinner," returned Holland promptly, and advanced to meet the prosperous looking couple approaching.

"I'm afraid we are late," said the lady, "but can you blame us? Have you heard? We have been telegraphing to Hillsborough all the afternoon to find out what has gone."

"You are not late. My sister has not come down yet. I was just reading about your robbery. Have you lost anything of value?"

"Oh, I suppose so," said Mrs. Vaughan cheerfully, sitting down and beginning to draw off her gloves. "We had a Van Dyke etching, and some enamels that have gone certainly, and Charlie feels awfully about his wine."

"Yes," said Mr. Vaughan gloomily. "I tell you he is going to have a happy time with that champagne. It is the best I ever tasted."

"Upon my word," said Geoffrey, "they are a nice lot of countrymen up there. Four robberies and not so much as a clue."

"*You* need not be afraid," said Mrs. Vaughan rather spitefully. "In spite of all your treasures, I don't believe any thief would take the trouble to climb to the top of your mountain."

Holland's selection of a distant hilltop for his large place pleased no true Hillsboroughite. As an eligible bachelor he was inaccessible, and as a property-holder he was too far away to increase the value of Hillsborough real-estate by his wonderful lawns and gardens.

Mrs. Vaughan's irritation did not appear to disturb Geoffrey, for he laughed very amiably, and replied that he could only hope that the thief was as poor a pedestrian as she seemed to imagine as he should not like to lose any of his things; and he added that in his opinion Vaughan ought to be starting for Hillsborough at once.

"Pooh," said that gentleman, "I can't go with the market in this condition,—would lose more than the whole house is worth."

"You would go duck-shooting in a minute," said Holland, "and this would be a good deal better sport."

Mr. Vaughan ignored this remark. "The thing to do," he said, "is to offer a reward, a big enough reward to attract some first-class detective."

"All right," said Geoffrey readily, "I'll join you. Those other fellows ought to be willing to put up a thousand apiece,—that will be five thousand. Is that enough? We can have it in the papers to-morrow. What shall I say? Five thousand dollars reward will be paid for information leading to the conviction—and so on. I'll go and telephone now," and with a promptness which surprised Mr. Vaughan, he was gone.

When he came back his sister was in her place and they were all discussing the burglary with interest. Mrs. May, who was somewhat older than her brother, had some of the more agreeable qualities of a gossip, that is to say she had imagination and a good memory for detail.

"For my part," she was saying, "I have the greatest respect and admiration for him. Do you know he could not find anything worth taking at the Wilsons',—after all his trouble. I have often sat in that drawing-room myself, and wondered if they should offer me anything in it as a present, whether I could find something that would not actually disgrace me. I never could. He evidently felt the same way. The Wilsons make a great to-do about the house having been entered, and tell you how he must have been frightened away,—frightened away by the hideousness of their things! Those woolly paintings on wood, and the black satin parasol that turns out to be an umbrella stand."

"My dear Florence," said her brother mildly, "how can a black satin parasol be an umbrella-stand?"

"Exactly, Geof, how can it? That is what you say all through the Wilsons' house. How can it be! However it is not really black satin, only painted to resemble it. The waste paper baskets look like trunks of trees, and the match boxes like old shoes. Nothing in the house is really what it looks like, except the beds; they look uncomfortable, and some one who had stayed there told me that they were."

"Dear Florence," said Mrs. Vaughan, "is it not like her kindness of heart—it runs in the family—to try and make my burglary into a compliment, but really though it is flattering to be robbed by a connoisseur I could forego the honour. You see you have taken away my last hope that my very best escaped his attention."

"No, indeed, the best is all he cared for. Honestly, Jane, haven't you an admiration for a man of so much taste and ability? Just think, he has entered four houses and there is not the slightest trace of him."

"There must be *traces* of him," said Geoffrey. "The Inness house was entered after that snow storm in the early part of the month. There must have been footprints."

"Of course," said Mr. Vaughan, "that is what makes me think that the watchmen are in it. It's probably a combination of two or three of them."

"Well, that lets Geoffrey out," said the irrepressible Florence. "No one would take his watchman into any combination,—he is a thousand and two and feeble for his age. However, there is no use in discussing the possibility, for it is not a combination of watchmen, begging your pardon, Mr. Vaughan. It is lonely genius, a slim, dark figure in a slouch hat. That is the way I imagine him. Do you really suppose that a watchman would take six pair of Mrs. Inness' best linen sheets, embroidered in her initials, the monogram so thick that it scratches your nose; and a beautiful light blue silk coverlet,—all just out from Paris. I saw them when she first had them."

"What," said Geoffrey, addressing the other male intellect present, "do

you make of the young woman who disposed of some of the Marheim silver in Boston?”

“It was a young lady who disposed of the silver”

But it was Mrs. May who answered: “She is of course the lady of his love—a lady doubtless of high social position in Boston. There was a book about something like that once. He is just waiting to make one more grand coup, rob the bank or something and then the world will be startled by the news of their elopement. They will go and live somewhere luxuriously in the south Pacific, and travellers will bring home strange stories of their happiness and charm. Perhaps, though, he would turn pirate. That would suit his style.”

“I hope,” said Holland, “that he won’t take a fancy to rob the Hillsborough Bank, for I consider it public spirited to keep quite a little money there. You begin to make me nervous.”

“No bank robbery would make *me* nervous,” replied his sister, “that is the comfort of being insignificant. I have not enough money in any bank to know the difference, and as for my humble dwelling in Hillsborough, who would take the trouble to rifle it when Geoffrey’s palace is within an easy walk. Besides, I haven’t anything worth the attention of a respectable burglar like this one.”

“Thank you,” said Geoffrey, “I’m sorry I spent so much time choosing your Christmas present a year ago.”

“Oh, of course, Geof dear, that wonderful old silver is valuable, but it is put away where I defy any burglar to find it. There is only my sable coat, and I am going to send for that as soon as I have time to have it cut over.”

“In my opinion,” said Mr. Vaughan, “the man is no longer in the neighbourhood. He would scarcely dare try a fifth attempt while the whole country was so aroused. You see Hillsborough has always been an attractive place to thieves. It is such an easy place to get away from,—three railroads within reach. A man would be pretty sure to be able to catch a passing freight train on one of them at almost any time, to say nothing of the increased difficulty of tracing him.”

“I don’t suppose he will ever be caught,” said Florence. “When he has got all he wants he will simply melt away and be forgotten. If he were caught—”

Here she was interrupted by the waiter who laid a telegram at her plate. It had come to her brother’s apartment, and been sent down.

“Who is telegraphing me,” she said, as she tore it open. “I hope Jack

has not been breaking himself.”

Opening it, she read:

“Your house was entered about five o’clock this afternoon. Tea-set and sable coat missing.”

II

The next evening at seven o'clock, Holland stepped out of the train on the Hillsborough station. He wore a long fur-coat, for the morning had been bitterly cold in New York, and though the snow was now falling in small close flakes, the temperature had not risen appreciably, and a wild wind was blowing.

He looked about for the figure of McFarlane, for he had telegraphed the old man to meet him at the train with a trap, but there was no one to be seen. The station, which in summer on the arrival of the express was a busy scene with well dressed women and well-kept horses, was now utterly deserted except for one native who had charge of the mails.

"Hullo, Harris," Geoffrey sung out. "Is McFarlane here for me?"

"Ain't seen him. Guess it's too stormy for the old man," Harris replied dropping the mail bag into his wagon.

"Then you've got to drive me out."

"What, all the way to your place? No, sir, I guess it is too stormy for me, too."

But Geoffrey at last, by the promise of three times what the trip was worth, induced Harris to change his mind. He stepped into the mail cart, and having stopped at the post-office to leave the bag, and at the stable to change the cart for a sleigh, they finally set out on their five-mile drive.

"Guess you come up to see about Mr. May's house being robbed?" Harris hazarded before they had gone far.

"You're a nice lot, aren't you?" returned Geoffrey. "Five robberies and not a motion to catch the thief!"

"Oh, I dunno, I dunno, there is a big reward out to-day," said Harris, divided between pride in the notoriety and shame at the lawlessness of his native town.

"Yes, but not by any of you."

"Well, the boys did talk some of a vigilance committee, if any more houses was robbed."

"They are going to wait for him to make up his half dozen."

"Well, to tell the truth," said Harris, "it seems like he only went for you city folks, and I guess the boys thought you could better afford to lose a few things than they could to lose their sleep. That's about the size of it."

Geoffrey could not but laugh. "That's a fine spirited way to look at it, I must say."

"Well," returned Harris, who appeared to have need of the monosyllable in order to collect and arrange his ideas. "'Tain't lack of sand exactly, either, for most of the fellows about here thinks it is a woman."

"A woman?" cried Geoffrey, remembering the lady in Boston.

"Yes, *sir*," said Harris, "a young woman. Look at the things took. What burglar would want sheets and a lady's coat? Besides just before the first one happened, Will Brown, he was driving along up your way and a young woman, pretty as a picter, Will said, slips out of the wood and asks for a lift. Well, Will takes her some two miles, and when they got to that piece of woods at the back of your place she says of a sudden that she guesses she wants exercise, and will walk the rest of the way, and out she gets, and no one has seen her since. Seems kinder strange, no house but yours within six miles, and you away."

"It would have seemed quite as strange if I had been at home," returned Geoffrey, amused at his imputation.

"Well," Harris went on imperturbably, "you can't tell the rights of them stories. Will Brown, he's a liar, just like all the Browns; still this time he seemed to think he was telling the truth. Looks like we were going to have a blizzard, don't it?"

When they reached the McFarlane cottage, Mrs. McFarlane appeared bobbing on the threshold. She was an old Scotch woman and covered all occasions with courtesy. It appeared that Holland's telegram had been duly telephoned from the office, but that her husband was down with rheumatism, the second gardener dismissed, and the "boy" allowed to go home to spend Christmas, so that there had been no one to send. Geoffrey suggested that she might have telephoned to the local livery-stable, and she was at once so overcome at her own stupidity that she could do nothing but bob and murmur, until Geoffrey sent her away to get him something to eat.

It was about ten o’clock, when he determined to take a turn about his house. The next day he intended removing all valuables to the vaults of the Hillsborough bank.

It was a long walk from the cottage, and Geoffrey, as he trudged up hill against the wind, was surprised to find how much snow had already fallen. He had expected to return to New York the next day, but now a fair prospect of being stalled on the way presented itself. It took him so much longer to reach the house than he had supposed, that he abandoned all idea of entering it. It stood before him grimly like a mountain of grey stone, its face plastered with snow. He walked round it, feeling each door and window to be sure of the fastenings. Once past the corner, the house sheltered him from the wind. He was conscious of that exhilaration snow storms so often bring, while at the same time the atmosphere of desolation that surrounds all shut up houses, even one’s own, took hold of him. Unconsciously he stopped and felt in his pocket for his revolver, and at the same moment, faintly, in the interior of the house, he heard a clock strike.

The sound was not perhaps alarming in itself, yet it sounded ominously in Geoffrey’s ears. He recognised, or thought he recognised, the bell. It was that of an old French clock he had bought, and had never had put in order. He had never been able to make it go, but once touching it inadvertently he had aroused in it a breath of life so that it had struck one,—this same sweet piercing note. Who, he wondered, was touching it now?

Geoffrey was one of those who act best and naturally without delay. Now he hesitated not at all. He had the keys of the house in his pocket, and he moved quickly toward a side door which he remembered swung silently on its hinges. It was not so much that he believed that there was any one in the house—perhaps to the most apprehensive a burglar comes as a surprise—but he felt he had too good grounds for suspicion to fail to investigate.

He unlocked the door without a sound. As he stepped within, doubt was put an end to by the patch of white light that, streaming out of the library door, fell across the passageway before him. He stooped down and took off his boots, and then cautiously approached the open door and looked in, knowing that darkness and preparation were in his favour.

His caution was unnecessary, for his entrance had not been heard. The Hillsborough theory of the femininity of the burglar instantly fell to the ground. A man of medium size was standing before one of the bookcases with his elbow resting near the clock; he was holding a volume in his hands with the careful ease of a book fancier. The man’s back was turned so that a sandy head and a strongly built figure were all Geoffrey could make out. Had it not been for a glimpse of a mask on his face, he might have been a student at work.

So intent did he appear that Geoffrey could not resist the temptation to make his entrance dramatic. Creeping almost to the other’s elbow, revolver in hand, he said gently:

“Fond of reading?”

The man, naturally startled, made a surprisingly quick movement toward his own revolver, and had it knocked out of his hand with a benumbing blow. Geoffrey secured the weapon, and seeing the man’s retreat, may be excused for supposing the struggle over.

He underestimated his adversary’s resources, for the burglar, retreating with a look of surrender, came within reach of the electric light, turned it off, and fled in the total darkness that followed. Geoffrey sprang to the switch, but the few seconds that his fingers were fumbling for it told against him. When he turned it on the room was empty. The door by which the thief had gone opened on the main hall and not on the passageway, so that Geoffrey still had time to secure the outer door. Next he lit the chandelier in the hall, but its illumination told nothing. It was Geoffrey’s own sharp ears that told him of light footsteps beyond the turn of the stairs. Here Holland recognised at once that the burglar had a great advantage. The flight of stairs from the hall reached the upper story at a point very near where the back stairs came up, while they descended to widely different places in the lower story, so that the burglar, looking down, could choose his flight of stairs as soon as he saw his pursuer committed to the other, and thus reach the lower hall with several seconds to spare. Fortunately, however, Geoffrey remembered that there was a door at the foot of the back stairs. With incredible quickness he turned off the light again, threw his boots upstairs in the ingenious hope that the sound would give the effect of his own ascent, dashed round and locked the door at the foot of the stairs and then at the top of his speed ran up the front stairs and down the back. The result

was somewhat as he expected. The burglar had reached the door at the foot of the stairs, and finding it locked was half way up again when he and Geoffrey met. The impetus of Geoffrey's descent carried the man backward. They both landed against the locked door with a force that burst it open. Geoffrey, on top and armed, had little difficulty in securing his bruised foe, and marching him back to the library where he now took the precaution of locking all the doors.

Geoffrey, who had felt himself tingling with excitement and the natural love of the chase, now had time to wonder what he was going to do with his capture. He thought of the darkness, the storm, the absence of the two undermen, and the helplessness of the McFarlanes. Then he remembered the telephone, which, fortunately, stood in a closet off the library.

He turned to the burglar. "Stand with your face to the wall and your hands up," he said; "and if I see you move I'd just as lief shoot you as look at you," with which warning he approached the telephone and, still keeping an eye on the other, rang up central. There was no answer. He rang again,—six, seven times he repeated the process unavailingly. He tried the private wire to the McFarlane cottage with no better result.

At this point the burglar spoke.

"Oh, what the devil!" he said mildly; "I can't stand here with my hands over my head all night."

"You'll stand there," replied Geoffrey with some temper, "until I'm ready for you to move."

"And when will that be?"

"When this fool of a Central answers."

"Oh, not as long as that, I hope," said the burglar, "because, to tell the truth, I always cut the telephone wires before I enter a house."

There was a pause in which it was well Geoffrey did not see the artless smile of satisfaction which wreathed the burglar's face. At length Geoffrey said:

"In that case you might as well sit down, for we seem likely to stay here until morning." He calculated that by that time, Mrs. McFarlane, alarmed at his absence, would send some one to look for him,—some one who could be used as a messenger to fetch the constable.

To this suggestion the burglar appeared to acquiesce, for he sank at once into an armchair—an armchair toward which Holland himself was making his way, knowing it to be the most comfortable for an all-night session. Feeling the absurdity of making any point of the matter, however, he contented himself with the sofa.

"Take off your mask," he said as he sat down.

"So I will, thank you," said the burglar as if he had been asked to remove his hat, and with his left hand he slipped it off. The face that met Geoffrey's interested gaze was thin, yet ruddy, and tanned by exposure so that his very light brilliant eyes flared oddly in so dark a surrounding. Above, his sandy hair, which had receded somewhat from his forehead, curled up from his temples like a baby's. His upper lip was long and with a pleasant mouth gave his face an expression of humour. His hands were ugly, but small.

They sat for some time without moving, the burglar engaged in bandaging the cut on his right hand with obvious indifference to Holland's presence, Geoffrey meanwhile studying him carefully. The process of bandaging over, the man reached out his hand toward the bookcase and, selecting a volume of Sterne, settled back comfortably in his chair. Holland stared at him an instant in wonder, and then attempted to follow his example. But his attention to his book was much less concentrated than that of his captive, whose expression soon showed him to be completely absorbed.

They must have sat thus for an hour, before the burglar began to show signs of restlessness. He asked if it were still snowing, and looked distinctly disturbed on being told it was. At last he broke the silence again.

"You don't remember me, do you?" he said.

Geoffrey slowly raised his eyes without moving—his revolver was drooping in his right hand. He ran his mind over his criminal acquaintance unsuccessfully, and repeated:

"Remember you?"

"Yes, we were at school together for a time."

Geoffrey stared, and then exclaimed spontaneously:

"You used to be able to wag your ears."

“Can still.”

“Why, you are Skinny McVay.”

The man nodded. Neither was without a sense of humour, and yet saw nothing comic in these untender reminiscences.

“I remember the masters all hated you,” said Geoffrey, “but you were straight enough then, weren’t you?”

Again the man nodded. “I took to this sort of thing a month or so ago.”

After a moment Geoffrey said:

“Did not I hear you were in the navy?”

“No,” said McVay. “I was at Annapolis for a few months. I had an idea I should like the navy, but Heavens above! I could not stand the Academy. They threw me out. It seems I had broken every rule they had ever made. It was worse than State’s prison.”

“Are you in a position to judge?” asked Geoffrey coolly.

“No,” said McVay, as if he nevertheless had information on the subject.

“Well, you will be soon,” said Holland, not sorry for an opportunity to point out that his heart was not softened by recollections of his school days. But McVay appeared to ignore this intimation.

“Yes,” he said ruminatively; “I’ve done a lot of things in my time.”

“Well, I don’t want to hear about them,” said Geoffrey, who had no intention of being drawn into an intimate interchange. The burglar looked more surprised than angered at this shortness, and only said:

“Would you have any objection to my putting a match to that fire?”

“No,” said Geoffrey, and McVay, with wonderful dexterity, managed to start a cheering blaze with his left hand.

For a few minutes Geoffrey’s determined attention to his book discouraged his companion, but presently rapping the pages of Tristram Shandy with the back of his hand, he exclaimed:

“Sterne! Ah, there was a man! Something of my own type, too, it sometimes strikes me. Capable, you know, really a genius, but so unfortunately different from other people. Ordinary standards meant nothing to him—too original—sees life from another standpoint, entirely. That’s me! I—”

“Sit down,” roared Geoffrey.

“Oh, it’s nothing, nothing,” said McVay, “only I talk better on my feet.”

“Well, you wouldn’t talk as well with a bullet in you.”

McVay sank back again in his chair. “Yes,” he said, “that’s me. Why, Holland, I have no doubt you would be surprised if you knew the number of things that I can do—that I am really proficient in. Anything with the hands,” he waved his fingers supplely in the air, “is no trouble to me at all. I have at once a natural skill that most people take a lifetime to acquire.”

“I’m told there’s work for all where you are going.”

McVay looked a trifle puzzled for an instant, but never allowing himself to remain at a loss, he said:

“Work! Do you really mean to say that you believe in a utilitarian Heaven, where we are going to work with our hands? For my part—”

“I had reference to the penitentiary,” said Geoffrey.

“Oh, yes, of course, the penitentiary. There are some wonderful men in the penitentiary. You don’t admit that, I suppose, with your conventional ideas; but to me they are just as admirable as any other great creative artist,—sculptor or financier. I see you don’t quite get that. You are hemmed in by conventional standards, and your possessions, and all the things to which you attach such great importance.”

“I don’t attach so much importance that I steal them from other people,” said Geoffrey.

“Philistine, Holland, philistine! Is not any one who has anything stealing from some one or other? Of course. But I see you don’t catch the idea. Well, I dare say I would not either in your place—rather think I would not. My sister is just the same way. Sweet girl, witty in her own way, but philistine. She is so good as to be my companion, apparently on equal terms, in many ways my superior, but it would be impossible for me even to mention these ideas to her,—ideas which are of the greatest interest to me.”

“I wonder,” said Geoffrey, “how much of all this rubbish you believe?”

McVay smiled with great sweetness. “I wonder myself, Holland. Still it is undeniably amusing, and the main thing is that I enjoy life,—a hard life too in many ways. Fate has dealt me some sad blows. Look at such a

coincidence as your turning up to-night, of all nights in the year."

"It was scarcely a coincidence. I came—"

"Oh, I know, I know. You came to see after your sister's things, but still, if you look at it a little more carefully, you will see that it *was* a coincidence that you should be by nature a man of prompt action. Nine men out of ten in your place—still, I'm not depressed. You cannot say, Holland, that I behave or talk like a man who has ten years of hard labour before him, can you? I dare say you have never been thrown with a person who showed less anxiety. Yet as a matter of fact, there is something preying on my mind. Something entirely aside from anything you could imagine."

"You don't tell me!" said Geoffrey, who did not know whether to be most amused or infuriated by his companion's conversation.

"I am about to tell you," said McVay graciously, "I am very seriously worried about my sister. In fact I don't see that there is any getting away from it; you will have to let me go out for an hour or so and get her."

"Let you do *what*?"

"Get my sister. She's living in a little hut in your woods, and I am actually afraid she will be snowed up."

"It seems highly probable."

"Well, then, I must go and get her."

Geoffrey stared at him a moment, and then said: "You must be crazy."

"Maybe I am," answered McVay, as if the suggestion were not without an amusing side. "Maybe I am, but that is not the point. Think of a girl, Holland, alone, all night, in such a storm. Now, I put it to you: it is not a position in which you would leave your sister, is it?"

Geoffrey began a sentence and finding it inadequate, contented himself with a laugh.

"There you see," said McVay. "It's out of the question. The place is draughty, too, though there is a stove. Do you remember the house at all? You would be surprised to see how nicely I've fixed it up for her."

"No doubt I should," replied Holland, thinking of the Vaughan and Marheim valuables.

"It is surprisingly livable, but it *is* draughty," McVay went on. "The truth is I ought to have gone south, as I meant to do last week. But one cannot foresee everything. The winters have been open until Christmas so often lately. However, I made a mistake and I am perfectly willing to rectify it. If you have no objection, I'll go and bring her back here."

"If you have any respect for your skin you won't move from that chair."

"Oh, the devil, Holland, don't be so—" he hesitated for the right word, not wishing to be unjust,—"so obtuse. Listen to that wind! It's cold here. Think what it must be in that shanty."

"Very unpleasant, I should think."

"More than that, more than that,—suffering, I have no doubt. Why, she might freeze to death if anything went wrong with the fire. It is not safe. It's a distinct risk to leave her. Let alone that a storm like this would scare any girl alone in a place like that, there is some danger to her life. Don't you see that?"

"Yes, I see," returned Geoffrey, "but you ought to have thought of that before you came burgling in a blizzard."

"Thought of it! Of course I thought of it. But I had no idea whatever of being caught, with old McFarlane laid up and the two boys away, it did seem about the safest job yet."

There was a pause, for Geoffrey evidently had no intention of even arguing the matter, and presently McVay continued:

"Now you know you would feel badly to-morrow morning if anything went wrong with her, and you knew you could have helped it!"

"Helped it!" said Geoffrey. "What do you mean? Let you loose on the county for the sake of a story no sane man would believe?"

"Well," returned McVay judicially, "perhaps you could not do that, but," he added brightly, "you could go yourself."

"Yes," said Geoffrey, "I *could*—"

"Then I think you ought to be getting along."

"Upon my word, McVay," said Holland, "you are something of a humorist, aren't you?"

McVay again looked puzzled, but rose to the occasion.

"Oh, hardly that," he said. "Every now and then I have a way of putting things,—a way of my own. I find often I am able to amuse people, but if

you are cheerful yourself, you make other people so. I was just thinking that it must be a great thing for men who have been in prison for years to have some one come in with a new point of view."

"I'm sure you will be an addition to prison life. It's an ill wind, you know."

"It's an ill wind for my sister, literally enough. Come, Holland, you certainly can trust me. Do be starting."

"Why, what do you take me for?" said the exasperated Geoffrey. "Do you really suppose that I am going, looking for a den of your accomplices in order to give you a chance to escape?"

"'Accomplices!'" exclaimed McVay; and for the first time a shade of anger crossed his brow; "'*accomplices*'! I have no accomplices. Anything I do I think I am able to do alone. Still," he added putting aside his annoyance, "if you feel nervous about leaving me I'd just as lief give you my word of honour to stay here until you come back."

"Your *what*?"

McVay made a slight gesture of his shoulders, as if he were being a good deal tried. "Oh, anything you like," he said. "I suppose you could lock me up in a closet."

"I don't think we need trouble to arrange the details," said Geoffrey drily. "But I'll tell you what I will do. After I get you safely in jail to-morrow, I'll get a trap and go and look up this hut."

"It may be too late then."

"It may," said Geoffrey, and continued to read.

Yet he had no further satisfaction in his book. He knew that the burglar kept casting meditative glances at him as if in wonder at such brutality, and in truth, his own mind was not entirely at ease. If by any chance the story were true,—if there was a woman at his doors freezing to death, how could he sit enjoying the fire? But, on the other hand, could any one have a more evident motive for deception than his informant? What better opportunity for escape could be arranged? It was so evident, so impudent as to be almost convincing. What more likely for instance, than that the hut was a regular rendezvous for criminals and tramps, that by going he would be walking into the veriest trap? Yet again there was the report confirmed by Harris's story that a woman was in some way connected with these robberies. The wind whistled round the house with a suggestion of difficulty, of combat with the elements, of actual danger, perhaps, that suddenly gave Geoffrey a new view of delay. Had it not something the air of cowardice, or at least of laziness? He found his eyes had read the same page three times, while his brain was busy devising means by which McVay could be secured in his absence—if he went.

At length he rose suddenly to his feet.

"I'll go," he said, "but before I go, I'll tie you up so safely that, if I don't come back, you'll starve to death before you'll be able to get out or make any one hear you. On these terms do you still want me to go?"

"Oh, yes, I want you to go," said McVay, "only for goodness sake be careful. If you should feel any temptation to lie down and go to sleep don't yield to it; they say it's fatal. The great thing is to keep on walking —"

"Oh, shut up," said Geoffrey. In view of the possibility that he was going to meet death at the hands of his fluent companion's accomplices he found this friendly advice unbearable.

"This hut, I take it," he said, "is an old woodcutter's shanty in the north woods?"

"Yes, something over a mile and a half north of here."

"I know the place," said Geoffrey, "now come along, and we'll see how I can fix you up until I come back."

He had in mind a heavy upstairs cedar-closet. It had been designed by a thoughtful architect for the storing of summer wearing apparel, and was strongly built. It had besides the advantage of having a door that opened in and so was difficult to break open from the inside. Here, having removed a complete burglar's outfit from his pockets, Geoffrey disposed McVay, being met with a readiness on McVay's part that seemed to prove either that he was sincere in his belief in Holland's safe return, or else was perfectly confident of being able to open the door as soon as Geoffrey's back was turned.

"But he'll find himself mistaken," Geoffrey murmured as, having locked the door, he turned away. At this instant a faint knocking was audible, and, gathering that McVay had some final instructions to give, Geoffrey again opened the door.

“By the way,” said the burglar, and for the first time a certain constraint, amounting almost to embarrassment, was discernible in his manner, “my sister has no idea about—it would be a great shock to her—in fact, you understand, she has not discovered exactly how our money comes to us.”

“Do you expect me to believe that?” asked Geoffrey.

“I grant it does not sound likely,” returned McVay, “and indeed would not be possible with any other man than myself. But I hit upon a pretty good yarn,—worked out well everyway. I told her—”

“I don’t want to hear your infernal lies.”

“But it might be convenient for you to know. I told her,” McVay chuckled, “that I was employed as night watchman at Drake’s paper mill. That of course kept me out all night, and—”

“She must think night watchmen get good wages.”

“That was just it. I told her Drake was an old friend of mine, and just wanted an excuse to give me an allowance until he found me a better job. You see I just lost a nice job in a bank—”

“I suppose it would be indiscreet to inquire why?”

“Well, we won’t discuss it,” said McVay with an agreeable smile. “Of course she could understand that such an inferior position as a watchman’s had to be kept a profound secret, hence our remote mode of life, and the fact that I don’t allow a butcher or baker to come near us. I tell her that if it were known that I had held such a poor position, it would interfere with my getting a better. So, if you should happen to find that you have to explain to her why I am detained here—”

“*If* I should explain to her,” said Geoffrey. “What do you suppose I am going to do?”

“Well, I suppose you will find it necessary,” said McVay. “Indeed, as a matter of fact, I would much rather have you do it than do it myself. Still, you might bear in mind to tell her as gently as possible. If she were your own sister—”

“Oh, go to the devil,” said Geoffrey, and slammed the door.

III

Geoffrey was born with a love of adventure, and his dislike to his present expedition arose not from fear, but from a consciousness that if he did run into a den of thieves he would think himself such an ass to have come. Indeed, there seemed a fair chance that he might think this even if nothing worse happened than that the hut proved empty, for he would have had a long walk for nothing better than to provide McVay with an opportunity to escape. He did not see exactly how McVay could get out, but he was aware that few people would think it wise to leave a burglar locked in a closet in an empty house with some hours of leisure at his disposal.

The first glimmering of dawn was visible as he stepped off the piazza; the wind was blowing fiercely and the snow still falling. He had not gone a hundred yards before he knew that the expedition was to be more difficult than he had imagined. To make headway against the wind was a constant struggle, and he seemed to slip back in the snow at every step. Still the natural obstinacy of his nature was aroused, and as his attention was more and more engaged with the endeavor to make his way, he had less time to think of the probable futility of his proceeding.

Long before he sighted the hut, he was wet to the waist, not only because he had been in half a dozen drifts, but because the snow had penetrated every crevice of his clothing.

The hut was a forlorn little spot upon the landscape, a patch of grey on the stretch of forest and snow. A shutter blowing in the wind gave an impression of desertion, for how could any one, however wretched, sit idle under that recurrent bang?

Drawing his revolver, Geoffrey approached the door. He had no intention of giving a possible enemy an opportunity to prepare himself, and so did not knock, but, putting his shoulder against the door, shoved mightily. The hinges broke from the rotten wood at once, and he stumbled in.

The pale light of the early winter morning showed a depressing interior, for the window was not the only opening. There was a great gap in the roof where, earlier in the night, the chimney had fallen, and now its bricks littered the floor, already well covered with snow. Some attempt must have been made, as McVay had boasted, of “fixing it up”; there were books in the shelves on the walls, and a black iron stove on which the snow now lay fearlessly. As Geoffrey took in the situation, something in a huge chair, which he had taken for a heap of rugs, stirred and moved, and finally rose, betraying itself to be a woman. Geoffrey had been prepared to find a den of thieves, or nothing at all, or even a girl, as McVay had said. He told himself he would be surprised at nothing, yet found himself astounded, overwhelmed at the sight of a beautiful face.

The girl must have been beautiful so to triumph over her surroundings, for all sorts of strange garments were huddled about her, and over all a silk coverlet originally tied like a shawl under her chin, had slipped sideways, and fell like a Hussar’s jacket from one shoulder. Her hair stood like a dark halo about her little face, making it seem smaller and younger, almost too small for the magnificent eyes that lit it. Geoffrey, tolerably well versed in feminine attractions, said to himself that he had never seen such blue eyes.

And suddenly while he looked at her and her desperate plight, pity became in him a sort of fury of protection, the awakening of the masculine instinct toward beauty in distress. It was a feeling that the other women he had admired—well-fed, well-clothed, well-cared-for young creatures—had always signally failed to arouse. He had seen it in other men, had seen their hearts wrung because an able-bodied girl must take a trolley car instead of her father’s carriage, but he had thought himself hard, perhaps, unchivalrous; but now he knew better. Now he knew what it was to feel personally outraged at a woman’s discomfort.

“Good God!” he cried, “what a night you have had. How wicked, how abominable, how criminal—”

“Good god,” he cried “what a night you have had”

“It has been a dreadful night,” said the girl, “but it is nobody’s fault.”

“Of course it is somebody’s fault,” answered Geoffrey. “It must be. Do you mean to tell me no one is to blame when I have been sitting all night with my feet on the fender, and you—”

“Certainly,” said she with an extraordinarily wide, sweet smile, “I could wish we might have changed places.”

“I wish to Heaven we might,” returned Geoffrey, and meant it. Never before had he yearned to bear the sufferings of another. He had often seen that it was advisable, suitable just that he should, but burningly to want to was a new experience.

“Thank you,” said the girl, “but I’m afraid there is nothing to be done.”

“Nothing to be done!” He dropped on his knees before the black monster of a stove, “Do you suppose I’m here to do nothing?”

“You are here, I think, for shelter from the storm.”

It had not occurred to him before that she looked upon him as a chance wanderer.

“That shows your ignorance of the situation. I am here to rescue you. I left my fireside for no other reason. As I came along I said at every blast, ‘that poor, poor girl.’ I set out to bring you to safety. I begin to think I was born for no other reason.”

She smiled rather wearily, “Your coming at all is so strange that I could almost believe you.”

“You may thoroughly believe me, more easily perhaps when I tell you I did not particularly want to come. I started out at dawn very cross and cold because I did not know what I was going to find....”

“But I thought you said you did know that you were going to rescue a girl?”

“A girl, yes. But what’s a mere girl? How many thousand girls have I seen in my life? Is that a thought to turn a man’s head? What I did not know was that I was going to find *you*.”

“The fire will never burn with the chimney strewn on the floor,” she said mildly.

“Well, I’ve said it, you see,” he answered, “and you won’t forget it, even if you do change the subject.” He turned his attention to the fire. Where is the man, worthy of the name to whom the business of fire building is not serious?

Presently seeing he needed help she dropped to her knees beside him and tried to shove a piece of wood into place. In the process her numbed

fingers touched his, and he instantly dropped everything to catch her hand in both of his.

"Your hands are as cold as ice," he said, holding them tightly, and thanking Fate that this bounty had fallen to his lot.

She withdrew them. "You are too conscientious," she said. "That is not part of the duty of a rescue party."

"It is, it is," said Geoffrey violently. "It is the merest humanity."

"Humanity?"

"To me, of course, if you will pin me down."

"Oh, there is no reason for the rescued to be humane."

"They ought to be grateful."

"They are."

"*Gratefuller* then. Is it nothing that I have taken all the trouble to be born and grow up and live just to come here for you?"

"Perhaps I could be gratefuller if there were any prospect of a fire."

"Oh, curse the fire," said Geoffrey rising from his knees. "Who minds about it?"

"I mind very much."

"Well, you mustn't. You must not mind about anything, because it sets up too strong a reaction in me. There's no telling what I might not do under the stress. Come away from this dreadful place. The fires will burn in my house, and that is where we are going."

"I can't do that," she said, looking very grave.

"You can't do anything else."

"I must wait for my brother. He's out somewhere in this storm, and if he comes back and finds me gone—"

"Oh, your brother," said Geoffrey, "I forgot all about him. He's at my house already. He sent me for you."

"Oh," said she, sighing with relief, and then added maliciously: "then my plight was not revealed to you in a vision?"

"The vision is with me now."

She had to perfection, the art of allowing her mind to drift away when she thought it advisable.

"And so you took poor Billy in?" she said.

Geoffrey coughed. "Well, in a sense," he answered.

She rose. "We'll go at once," she said. "Is it far?"

"Not very, but it is going to be hard work."

He felt more practical. His delight had slipped from him at the realisation of her relationship to McVay. For a moment he felt depressed, then as he saw her struggling to undo the knot that held the comforter about her, he forgot everything but the pleasure of doing her a service. And in the midst of this joy, the coverlet slid to the ground and revealed her clad from head to foot in his sister's sables.

There was a pause.

"What are you looking at?" she asked.

"That is a nice warm coat you have on."

"Isn't it?" She rubbed her cheek against the high collar with a tenderness trying to any masculine onlooker. "It saved my life."

It was on the tip of Geoffrey's tongue to ask if he was not entitled to a similar claim on her consideration, but he suppressed it. Was it possible that she did not know that the garments she wore were stolen? Could any sane woman really believe that sable coats fell naturally to the lot of night watchmen? Her manner was candour itself, but how should it not be? What more inevitable than that she should make an effort to deceive a casual stranger? She had the most evident motives for behaving exactly as she did. Just so, however, he had reasoned about McVay, and yet McVay had been sincere. There had been a girl in distress exactly as he had said. It was contrary to all reason, but it was true. Might not the girl be true too? Was it not possible, he asked himself, and answered that it was more than possible, it was the truth. He chose to believe in her, and turned his anger against McVay, who could drag her through such a mire. He felt the tragedy of a high-minded woman tricked out in stolen finery, and remembered with a pang that he himself was hurrying on the moment of disillusion.

"I wonder," she said, "if I could take some things with me. Is it impossible for me to carry a bag?"

"Yes, but not for me."

"It would be only this." She held up a small Russia leather affair legibly

marked with Mrs. Inness' initials.

"I will take it," said Geoffrey. His faith was sorely tried.

She moved about collecting things and packing, and presently remarked:

"But if Billy is all right, why didn't he come for me himself?"

"Oh, because—" Geoffrey hesitated an instant, and her fears interpreted the pause.

"He's hurt. You are keeping it from me. You are deceiving me."

"I would scorn to deceive you," said Geoffrey with passion, and looked at her to find some answer to the reverse question which he did not put into words.

She did not appear to understand. "Then why didn't he come?" she asked.

"He had been out in the storm already. I thought it was my turn."

"I think you must be stronger than Billy." She cast a reflective glance at his shoulders, and he was ashamed to find himself inordinately flattered.

"He is really safe at your house?"

"I hope so, I did my best," he returned grimly.

She looked at him gravely. "You have been very kind to a stranger," she said.

And at this point Geoffrey made the fatal mistake of his dealing with her. It did not occur to him that he was going to shield McVay, but he thought a more advantageous time could be found for telling her the truth, in case of course she did not know it already. He felt that he himself would be better able to deal a cold blow when she was warm and sheltered. No man, he said to himself, could be disagreeable to a girl who had no one to depend on but himself. So he said:

"He was not exactly a stranger to me. We were at school together."

"Oh, another of Billy's friends. I never knew such a person for discovering friends at the most opportune times. He never wants anything but what a friend turns up. Did you find him wandering about, or did he come and demand admittance?"

"Why, neither exactly. I was not in the house at the time. He felt he knew me well enough to walk in."

"He never told me he had a friend in the neighbourhood."

"We have not met since we were at school."

"He had not seen you since he was at school, and yet he felt he knew you well enough to walk in on you!"

"Yes, he just walked in, and then I would not let him go."

"Men are so queer!" she exclaimed with a little laugh that had a spice of admiration in it, under which Geoffrey writhed. He was sailing under such false colours as her brother's benefactor.

"We ought to be starting," he said.

She looked round the room. "I hate to leave all these nice things," she said. "Billy is so fond of them. There is some wine that some one gave him that he says is really priceless."

"Leave it," said Geoffrey shortly.

"One would think you were a teetotaller from that tone. I wonder if I could not take one bottle as a surprise to Billy. He would like to contribute something to your hospitality, I am sure. Besides, if I leave it, it may be stolen."

"Yes, it may be stolen." He looked down into her face.

"Then—"

"I ask you as a favour to leave it behind."

Nothing could have been more charming than her manner of yielding, sweet and quick like a caress. It made him feel how pitiful sordid it all was.

They started immediately, started with a certain gaiety. Geoffrey chose to remember only that they were together through a hard adventure, and that it was his part to smooth her way. The bond of difficulties to overcome united them. They felt the intimacy of a single absorbing interest. They had nothing to think of but accomplishing their task,—of that and of each other. As far as they could see were snow and black trunks of trees. They scarcely remembered that any one but themselves existed.

Now justly he could admire something besides her beauty. Her courage warmed his heart. Yet with all her spirit she made no attempt to

assert her independence. She turned to him at every point. He guided her past the scenes of his own disasters and saved her from the mistakes he had already made.

But only for a little while did they move forward in this delightful exhilaration. Before they had gone far she grew silent, and when she did answer him spoke less spontaneously. She asked for neither help nor encouragement, but plunged along as steadily as she was able. Her skirts, however, wet and heavy, hampered her desperately, and the exertion of walking through the thick snow began to tell. Geoffrey made her stop every now and then for a breathing spell, but at length she stopped of herself.

"Have we done half yet?" she asked.

"Just about," he answered, stretching truth in order to encourage her. But he saw at once that he had failed,—that she had had a hope that they were nearer their destination—that she began to doubt her own powers. Presently she moved forward again in silence.

He began to be alarmed lest they should never reach his house, yet took comfort in the thought, as he looked at her, that whatever strength she had, she would use to the end. No hysterical despair would exhaust her beforehand. She would not fail through lack of determination. Whether or not she were the confederate of a thief she was a brave woman, yes, and a beautiful one, he thought, looking down upon her in the glare of the snow.

Presently he held out his hand in silence, and she as silently took it. This was to Geoffrey the explanation of his whole life. This was what men were made for.

Once as they stood resting the wind, which fortunately had been at their backs the entire trip, hurled her against him, where she remained an instant, too weak to move. It was he who set her gently on her feet again.

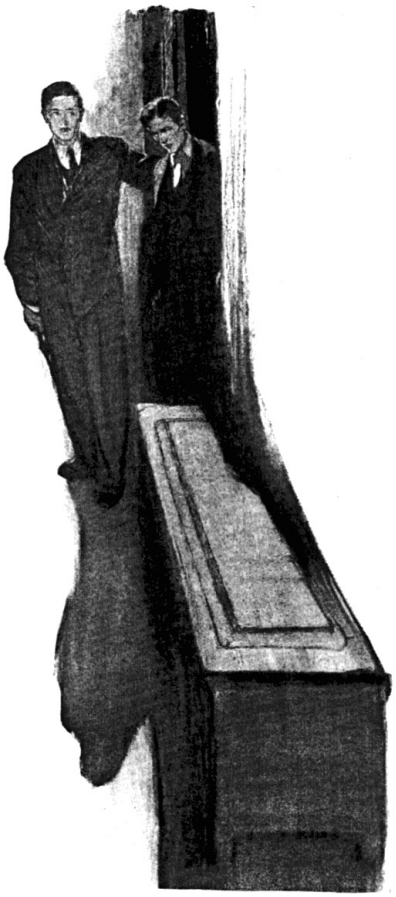
The latter part of the journey she made almost wholly by his help, and when they stood before the piazza, she could not have managed the little step had he not virtually lifted her up. He took her directly to the library and laid her on the sofa. The fire, owing to the absence of McVay, had gone out. It took Geoffrey some time with his benumbed hands to build a blaze. When he turned toward her again she was sleeping like a child.

The sight was too much for his own weariness, and reflecting that McVay was either gone or still safe, he stretched himself on the hearth-rug and was soon asleep also.

IV

It was after two o’clock in the afternoon when he awoke. He must have slept three hours. He looked at the sofa and saw the girl still sleeping peacefully. He almost wished that she would never awake to all the dreadful surprises that the house held for her. Her eye-lashes curved long and dark on her cheek. Geoffrey turned away quickly.

He had awakened with a sudden disagreeable conviction that people have been known to smother to death in closets. He stole quietly from the library and ran up stairs with not a little anxiety. Indeed so great was his dread that he would have been really relieved to see the closet door standing open as an immediate proof that it did not hide a corpse. It was, however, locked as he had left it. But as he hastened to undo it, a voice from within reassured him:



He let McVay out of the closet

“Well, where have you been all this time?”

“You may be thankful I’m back at all. It did not look like it, at one time.”

“Where is Cecilia?”

“Down stairs asleep.”

McVay gave a little giggle. “Ah,” he said, “I bet you have had the devil of a time. I bet you wished once or twice that you had let me be the one to go.”

“It wasn’t child’s play.”

“Child’s play! I rather think not. These things are all well enough among men, but women!” he waved his hand; “so sensitive, so cloistered!”

“Your sister behaved nobly,” said Geoffrey severely.

“Bound to, Holland, bound to. Still it must have been a shock.”

“It was a hard trip for any woman.”

McVay looked up. “Oh,” he said, “I wasn’t speaking of the trip. I meant about me. What did she say?”

“She did not say anything. She went to sleep.”

“She did not say anything when you told her I was booked for the penitentiary?”

“Oh,” said Geoffrey, and there was a slight pause. Then he added: “Why should I tell her what she must know.”

“I tell you she knows nothing about my—profession.”

“Your *profession*!”

“Hasn’t a notion of it.”

“What, with my sister’s coat on her back, and the Innes’ bag in her hand?”

“No!” McVay drew a step nearer. “You see I told her that I had found a second-hand store where I could get things for nothing.” He chuckled, and Geoffrey withdrew with a look of repulsion that evidently disappointed the other.

“That was a good idea, wasn’t it?” he asked with a faint appeal in his voice. “She thought it was likely, anyhow.”

“She must be very gullable,” said Geoffrey brutally.

“Or else,” said McVay with a conscious smile, “I must be a pretty good dissembler.”

At this acute instance of fatuity Geoffrey, if he had followed his impulse, would have flung McVay back in the closet and locked the door. Instead, he said:

“Come down stairs. I want to look up something to eat.”

“Thank you,” said the burglar, “it would be a good idea.”

“You need not thank me,” said Geoffrey. “I don’t take you with me for the pleasure of your company, but because I don’t dare let you out of my sight.”

McVay, as was his habit when anything unpleasant was said, chose to ignore this speech.

“You know,” he said, as they went down stairs, “I suppose that most men shut up in a closet for all those hours would take it as a hardship, but, to me it was a positive rest. I really in a way enjoyed it. It is one of my theories that every one ought to have resources within. Now I dare say you were quite anxious about me.”

“I never thought of you at all,” said Geoffrey. “After I got in I went to sleep for three hours.”

McVay looked at him once or twice, in surprise. Then he said with dignity: “Asleep? Well, really, Holland, I don’t think that was very considerate.”

“Don’t talk so loud,” said Geoffrey, “you’ll wake your sister.”

Geoffrey had always been in the habit of going on shooting trips at short notice, and so it was his rule to keep a supply of canned eatables in the house to be ready whenever the whim took him. On these he now depended, and was not a little annoyed to find the kitchen store room where they were kept securely locked.

This difficulty, however, McVay made light of. He asked for his tools and on being given them set to work on the door.

“Have you ever noticed,” he said, “the heavy handed way in which some men use tools? Look at my touch,—so light, yet so accurate. I take no credit to myself. I was born so. It’s a very fortunate thing to be naturally dexterous.”

“It would have been more fortunate for you if you had been a little less so.”

“Oh, I don’t know about that, Holland. I might have starved to death years ago.”

“I wish to God you had,” said Geoffrey.

McVay shook his head faintly in deprecation of such violence, but otherwise preferred to pass the remark by, and they soon set to work heating soup and smoked beef. When all was ready and spread in the dining-room—this was McVay’s suggestion; he said food was unappetising unless it were nicely served—Geoffrey said:

“Go and see if your sister is awake, and if she is,” he added firmly, “I’ll give you a few minutes alone with her, so that you can explain the situation fully.”

McVay nodded and slipped into the library. Geoffrey shut the door behind him, and sat down on a bench in the hall from which he could command both doors.

If he entertained the doubts of her innocence which he continually told himself no sane man could help entertaining, he found himself strangely nervous. He felt as if he were waiting outside an operating room. He thought of her as he had seen her asleep, of the curve of her eye-lashes on her cheek, of her raising those lashes, awaking to be met with McVay’s revelations. Even if she were guilty, Geoffrey found it in his heart to pity her waking to learn that her brother was a prisoner. How

unfortunate, too, would be her own position,—the guest, if only for a few hours, of a man who was concerned only to lodge her brother in jail.

His heart gave a distinct thump when the library door opened and they came out together. His eyes turned to her face at once, and found it unperturbed. Didn't she care, or had she always known?

McVay caught his arm when she had passed them by, and whispered glibly:

"Thought it was better to wait until she had had something to eat—shock on an empty stomach, so bad—so hard to bear."

Geoffrey shook his arm free. "You infernal coward," he whispered back.

"Well, I like that," retorted McVay, "you didn't tell her yourself when you had the chance."

"It wasn't my affair. I did not tell her because—"

"Oh, I know," McVay interrupted with a chuckle. "I've been knowing why for the last ten minutes."

They followed her into the dining-room.

It was not a sumptuous repast to which they sat down, but Geoffrey asked nothing better. He was sitting opposite to her,—a position evidently decreed him by Fate from the beginning of time. He could look at her, and now and then, in spite of her delicious reluctance, could force her to meet his eyes. When this happened, nothing was ever more apparent than that, for both of them, a momentous event had occurred.

She was almost completely silent, and as for him, his responses to the general conversation which McVay kept attempting to set up, were so entirely mechanical that he was scarcely aware of them himself.

It was she who suddenly remembered that it was Christmas day.

"And *this* is our Christmas dinner," observed McVay regretfully.

"Oh, no," returned the girl, "this is luncheon. I'll cook your dinner. You'll see."

There was a pause. Geoffrey looked at McVay. The moment for disillusioning her had manifestly come. Wherever they might next meet it would not be at his dinner table. A hateful vision of a criminal court rose before him.

"Miss McVay," he said gravely, indifferent to the signals of warning which the other man was directing toward him; "we shall not be here at dinner. Your brother will tell you my reasons for wishing to start down the mountain."

"Now?"

"At once."

She coloured slowly and deeply,—the only evidence of anger. "I do not need any other reason than your wish that we should go," she said, rising. "I should thank you for having borne with us so long."

"Upon my word, Holland, it is madness to start as late as this," said McVay. "It will be dark in an hour."

She turned on her brother quickly: "Please say no more about the matter, Billy," she said. "We will start at once."

"You won't start if it means certainly freezing to death," he remonstrated.

She flashed a glance at Geoffrey, who had also risen and was trying to compel the truth from McVay by a stern, steady glance.

"I *would*," she answered and shut the door behind her.

McVay sprang up and was about to follow her when Geoffrey stopped him. "One moment," he said, "you are quite right. It is too late to start to-night. We must stay here until to-morrow. But if we are to spend a night here without your sister's being told—"

"My dear Holland, think of her position, if we did tell her!"

"I grant that the information had better be withheld until just as we are starting, but in that case I must—"

"I know what you are going to ask,—my word of honour not to escape. I give it, I give it willingly."

"I'm not going to ask for anything at all," said Geoffrey. "I'm going to tell you one or two things, and I advise you to pay attention. We won't have any nonsense at all. Remember I am armed, and I am a quick man with a gun. There may be some quicker, but not in the East, and it wasn't in the East I got my training. You will always keep in front of me where I can see you plainly, and you will never, under any circumstances come nearer than six feet to me. If you should ever come nearer than that or take a sudden step in my direction, I'd shoot you just as sure as I stand

here."

McVay looked distinctly crestfallen. "Oh, come, Holland," he said, "isn't that the least little bit exaggerated? You would not shoot me before my own sister?"

"I would not like to, but there are things I should dislike even more, and having you escape is one of them."

The other thought it over. "The trouble is," he explained, "that I am impulsive. You must have noticed it. I get carried away. You know how I am. I'm not at all sure that I shall remember."

"I advise you to try, for this is the only warning you will get."

"I cannot believe, Holland, that you would really shoot me in cold blood in the presence of my own sister."

"You had better behave as if you believed it."

"I don't like this arrangement," McVay broke out peevishly. "Suppose, for the sake of argument, that I did forget,—that I put my hand on your shoulder—a very natural gesture."

"I should shoot instantly."

"But fancy the shock to Cecilia."

"Not more of a shock, perhaps, than discovering that you are a thief. And another thing, it may be very gay and amusing to be forever fooling about the subject, but I advise you against it. It does not amuse me."

"Oh, be honest, Holland, it does, it must amuse you. It is essentially amusing."

"It won't amuse her, or you either when she finds out that you are not only a thief but that you have been able to find amusement in deceiving her."

Again McVay's gaiety seemed momentarily dashed. "Very true," he said, "I had not thought of that. But then," he added more brightly, "who can tell if it will actually fall to my lot to tell her. Things happen so strangely. It may turn out that that is *your* part."

"It may," said Geoffrey, "but only because I have had to shoot after all." With which he opened the door and they returned to the library.

V

Cecilia was not in the library, and McVay, without comment on her absence, turned at once to his book.

"If you won't think me impolite, Holland, I'll go on with my Sterne. Conversation is always a great temptation to me, but I have so little opportunity to read that I feel I ought not to neglect it,—especially as your books are so unusual."

He settled himself to Tristram Shandy with appreciation, but Geoffrey could not read. He sat, indeed, with a book open on his knee, but his eyes were fixed on the carpet. The knowledge of the girl's presence in his house distracted him like a lantern swung before his eyes. He gave himself up to steeping himself in his emotion, which, in some situations, is the nearest thing possible to thinking.

Geoffrey's success with women had been conspicuous, as was natural for he was good looking, rich and apparently susceptible. As a matter of fact, however, his susceptibility was purely superficial, and for this very reason he was not afraid to give it full sway. The deeply susceptible man learns to be cautious, to distrust his feelings, but Geoffrey had always too truly recognised his fundamental indifference to have any reason to distrust himself. He had never been in love. Like Ferdinand he, "for different virtues had liked many women," although in his case it had not always been necessarily virtues that had attracted him. But there were certain women who had always appealed to him for some conspicuous quality, or characteristic, who for one reason or another pleased him, to which one side or another of his nature responded. He had often thought that if he could make up a composite woman of all of them he might be in great danger of falling in love. But now he was aware that his whole nature responded to the attraction of the girl upstairs, as a dog answers instinctively to the call of its master. He could say to himself that she was this or that,—brave and beautiful, but he knew that such qualities were but an insignificant part of the total effect. His reason could find causes enough to approve her, but something more important had gone ahead, and made straight the paths of his reason, something which transcended it, and which in case of a divergence between the two, his reason could never overcome.

For, of course, the realisation of McVay and all his presence implied fell coolly upon his exaltation. By no means had Geoffrey said to himself in so many words that he was in love,—far less had anything so definite as marriage crossed his mind. He was too much in love to be so practical. He only knew that McVay's mere existence was a contamination and a tragedy.

He had been sitting thus for some time, when he heard her step on the stairs. He rose and met her in the hall, whence he could still keep his eye on McVay's studious figure in the library.

She was dressed in her sables ready for departure.

She Was Dressed In His Sister’s Sables—ready For Departure

They looked at each other a moment in silence, he appealingly, she, with a cold blankness that seemed to say that not even a look could make her take further notice of him as a living being.

“Have you really been thinking that I wanted to turn you out?” he said, with directness.

“I have not been thinking about the matter at all,” she answered, turning her head a little aside from his direct gaze. “But I do think so of course. After all why should you not wish it?”

“You think me likely to want anything that would part us—that is the way my manner strikes you?” He was surprised to find his voice not absolutely steady.

She favoured him with a short stare from under her lids. “You seem to forget that I have your own word that you insisted on our going. Possibly you have changed your mind, but I have made mine up.” She made a motion as if to pass in, and go on toward the library.

“I have changed so completely since I saw you,” said Geoffrey, “that I scarcely recognise life in this—this ecstasy. That is the only change. Am I likely to turn you out when I have been waiting all my life for you to come?”

It had been with her own dream, her own credulity with which she had been fighting quite as much as with Holland, and the charm began to work once again. She said very coolly:

“You are very kind, but as you said, we ought to be starting,—or have you forgotten saying that?”

“Be just. You knew I was going too. You knew I urged our going because—”

“Well, why?” Her look was still from half-shut lids, but the lines of her mouth had softened by not a little.

“There is a danger of being snowed up here. Now I appreciate that there would be greater danger in starting out so late. And,—and equally desperate for me, whatever we do.”

“Desperate?”

“If you only want an opportunity to think so meanly of me,—to hate me, as your look said.”

“I do not hate you.”

“You are very eager to be rid of my company.”

“I did not understand.”

“You are going to stay?”

“Until we can go safely.”

“Not longer?”

As this was a question obviously impossible to answer directly she said, “We are under sufficiently large obligations to you already.”

And Geoffrey, about to answer, looked up and saw McVay was observing them with satisfaction, so that words froze on his lips.

Here was the whole bitterness of the situation concentrated. To be observed at all in a moment of genuine emotion was bad enough, but to be observed by one who so plainly hoped to profit, was unbearable. Never, said Geoffrey to himself, at that glance of triumph from McVay’s clear little eyes, never should any influence lead him to let a thief slip through his fingers.

He realised too, for the first time, that he could not hope for another word alone with Cecilia. McVay must always be present. It was a hideous sort of revenge that every waking minute must be spent in the man’s company. Geoffrey had not appreciated the full meaning of his instructions to McVay to keep always in sight. Not a word or a look could be exchanged without McVay’s seeing and rejoicing.

Yet, in spite of his irritation, he could not but admire the sort of affectionate swagger with which McVay rose to greet her, as if the brother of so tender a creature must remember his responsibility.

“Well, my dear,” he said sitting down beside her on the sofa, “feel better? Really a terrible experience. Holland has just been telling me about it—saying how well you behaved,” (Geoffrey favoured him with a scowl behind her back), “a perfect heroine,—so he says.”

“Mr. Holland is very kind,” said the girl.

“Kind!” cried McVay enthusiastically. “Kind! I should rather think he was. Why, I could give you instances of his kindness—”

“You need not trouble,” said Geoffrey.

McVay smiled at his sister as much as to say: What did I tell you?... so modest, so unassuming.

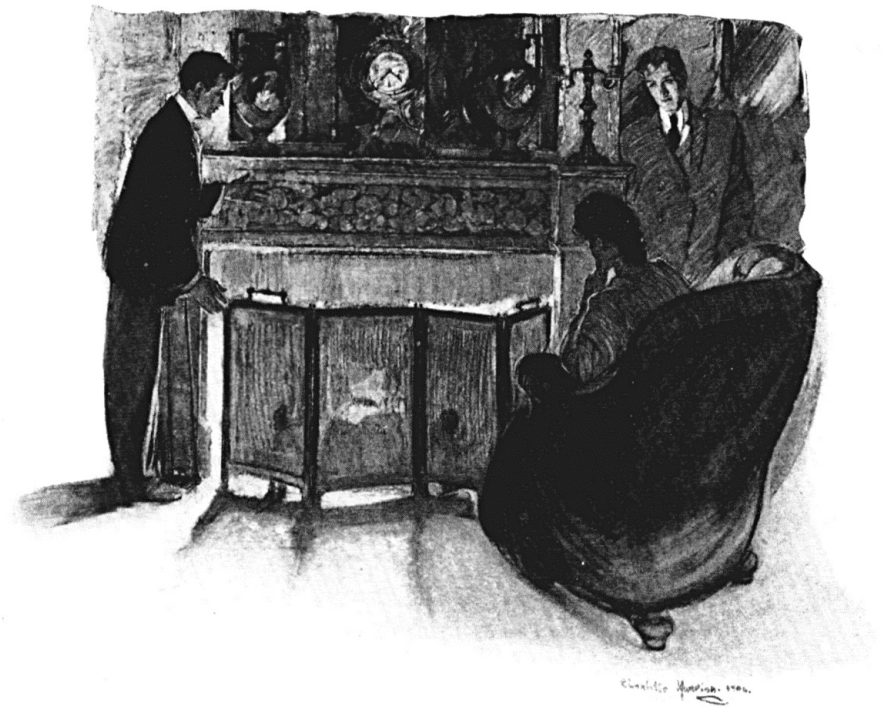
To Geoffrey this sort of thing was unspeakably painful. He was willing enough to meet McVay in a grim interchange over his strange combination of facility and crime, of doom and triviality. But when it became any question of playing upon Cecilia’s unconsciousness of the situation, he writhed. Yet, a little discernment would have shown him how natural, how encouraging from his own point of view her unconsciousness was. To fall in love thoroughly is sufficiently disconcerting. Which of us needs to be told that it is an absorbing process, that life looks different, and that all past experiences must be reviewed in the light of this unexpected illumination. And if this is true of the more usual forms of the great passion, what is to be said of a girl who, in a single day, sees and loves a rescuer, a handsome powerful young creature, who comes to her with all the attributes of a soldier and a prince, who comes not only to save and protect, but as host and dispenser of all comfort and beauty.

It was not to be wondered at that she was dazzled and aware of one fact, one personality, that far from being able to draw shrewd conclusions from the little happenings going on before her, she was but dimly aware of the existence of her brother, of the world, of anything but Geoffrey.

Presently she said, as if trying to call up the picture:

“And this is where you sat all night?” And if the thought was interesting to her, it was not on account of her brother’s share in it.

“Yes,” returned McVay, springing lightly to his feet. “Here we sat discussing plans for your safety.” He took a step toward the pair at the fire, and then remembering, stopped. “Please move a little back, Holland,” he said, “I want to get nearer the fire. I’m cold.”



“Please move a little back, Holland,” he said, “I want to get nearer the fire”

“You can go to the fire,” said Geoffrey, with a gesture of permission.

“Of course you can,” said the girl, “Mr. Holland is not in your way, Billy.”

But Billy continued to eye his host. “Oh, no, you don’t,” he said warily. “Not unless you move back. Do move, there’s a good fellow.” And Geoffrey laughed and moved, somewhat to the girl’s mystification. She forgot to wonder, however, in pursuing the more wonderful train of thought which had already been occupying her. Suppose that their plans for her relief had been decided differently, suppose her brother had come for her instead of the magnificent stranger, with what different eyes she might now be looking on life—this ecstasy as Holland had defined it. Curious to know by what accident she had been so blessed, she asked:

“Why was it, Billy, that you did not come after me yourself?”

“Just what I said to him,” replied McVay eagerly. “If I said once, I said a dozen times: ‘Holland, it is my duty and pleasure, it is my *right* to go,’ but ...” McVay shrugged his shoulders, “when he once gets an idea into his head, it takes a gimlet to get it out.”

“Upon my word, Billy,” the girl said indignantly, “I don’t think you ought to talk like that even in fun. You know perfectly well that Mr. Holland only insisted on going because he thought he was better able to bear the physical strain.”

“Physical strain!” exclaimed McVay colouring to the roots of his sandy hair, from pure annoyance; “I don’t know what you mean,... Holland is, of course, a larger man than I, but not stronger.... Oh, well, as far as mere brute force goes, perhaps, but in the matter of bearing physical strain, you betray the most absurd ignorance. It is well known scientifically that medium-sized men like myself, when their muscles are at all developed (and you know my muscles), are better fitted for endurance than any of these over-grown giants.”

“Then,” said she calmly, “if you knew you were better fitted I can’t see why you did not go.”

“You are not quite fair to your brother,” said Geoffrey interrupting, for McVay looked as if he would explode in another moment under the sense of injustice. “He did propose going himself, but I would not let him; I—I made it a personal matter.”

“Very personal,” replied McVay with feeling. “I’ll just explain how it was. Last night, as soon as I realised how bad the storm was, I made up my mind that I had better attempt to enter the house. I succeeded after some trouble, came to this room, turned on the light—a spooky thing; an empty house, picked up a book, had quite forgotten my position, the world, everything, when a voice at my elbow said: ‘Fond of reading?’ I was never more surprised in my life. I felt distinctly caught,—an interloper. And to make matters worse, I saw that Holland did not at once recognise me. I made every effort to leave, but he would not hear of

such a thing. He made it perfectly plain in fact that it was his wish to keep me. I yielded. That, I think, Holland, is a pretty accurate account of the night's proceeding, isn't it?"

Geoffrey did not answer. His soul rebelled at the farce, and at McVay's irrepressible enjoyment of his own abilities. As Holland met the twinkling joy of those small blue eyes, he wondered if he would not be doing mankind a favour by putting a bullet into McVay before the dawn of another day. Unconscious of this possibility, McVay continued to his sister:

"Well, it has all been a painful experience for you, my dear ... a long and dangerous adventure for a woman, but you were at least warmly clad. A handsome coat, is it not, Holland?"

"Very," said Geoffrey chillingly.

"Now that coat," McVay went on unchilled, "was a real bargain. I may say I paid nothing for it,—little more than the trouble of taking it home. Although from another point of view, its price was pretty high...."

"Really, Billy, I don't think Mr. Holland is interested in our bargains."

"In *some*, he is."

"Yes, indeed," said Geoffrey, eyeing McVay with a warning glance, "I think I know of just about a dozen people who will want a circumstantial account of all of them."

"Now there, Holland, there is one of your philistine words,—circumstantial! It takes all poetry, all imagination out of a subject. Do you know, the only connotation—(are you familiar with that word?)—the only suggestion it has for me is a *jury*?"

He scored distinctly. Geoffrey had nothing to say in reply.

It was McVay himself, who, disliking a pause, observed that it was almost time to begin on the preparation of the Christmas dinner. They all rose as if glad of a break. As they passed out of the door, Geoffrey laid his hand on McVay's arm.

"Why do you deliberately try to exasperate me?" he said.

McVay smiled. "Why do little boys lay their tongues to lamp-posts in freezing weather? Don't I amuse you? Be candid."

"No."

McVay looked regretful. "As I remembered you, Holland, as a boy, you had more sense of humour," he said gently.

VI

In the kitchen McVay made it evident that his talents were for organisation rather than for hard labour. He drew a chair near the wall, and tilting back at his ease, watched Geoffrey and Cecilia at work. Geoffrey, engaged in lighting the range-fire, looked up at her as she moved about filling the kettle and washing out pots and pans, and thought that he and she presented the aspect of a young couple of the labouring class with no further ambition than to keep a roof over their heads. He almost had it in his heart to wish that they were.

She proved herself infinitely more capable than the two men had been, discovering tins of butter and soup and sardines, a package of hominy, apples and potatoes in the cellar, and an old box of wedding cake, which, with a burning brandy sauce, she declared would serve very well for plum-pudding.

Manual labour was such a novelty to Geoffrey that he soon forgot even his irritation against McVay and the triangular intercourse was more friendly than before, until marred by an unfortunate incident.

He was standing in the middle of the kitchen with a steaming pot in each hand, when McVay, without warning, advanced toward him, handkerchief in hand, exclaiming:

“My dear fellow, such a smut on your forehead, pray allow me—”

“My dear fellow—pray allow me”

“Look out,” roared Geoffrey, realising how easily in another second his revolver might be taken from him. The tone was alarming, and McVay sprang back ten feet. “I was afraid of burning you with the soup,” Geoffrey explained politely.

“I own you made me jump,” said McVay.

The girl said nothing, and Geoffrey feared the incident had made an unfortunate impression on her.

It appeared to be completely forgotten, however, when they presently sat down to their Christmas dinner, of which they all expressed themselves as inordinately proud. There was canned soup, and sardines and toasted biscuits, canned corned beef, potatoes and fried hominy, bacon and a potato salad, a bottle of champagne, and finally the wedding cake.

Now to say that by the time dessert was put on table McVay was drunk would be to do him a gross injustice. All the more genial side of this nature, however, was distinctly emphasised. The better part of a quart of champagne had not produced any signs of intoxication; his eye was clear, his speech perfect, and he was more than usually aware of his own powers, confident of appreciation.

As he finished his share of cake, he rose to his feet, and leaning the tips of his fingers on the table, addressed Geoffrey.

“My dear Holland,” he said, “I will not wish you a Merry Christmas, for it has already been as merry as it has lain within my poor capacity to make it. Let me, however, express my own gratitude to you for this

delightful occasion. You have referred to the fare as meagre, to our position as constrained, but believe me, I am not exaggerating when I say that I so little agree with you that I am confident that, during many of the remaining years of my life I shall look back to this Christmas as one of unusual luxury and freedom. It is, perhaps, the warm glow of friendship that gilds all small discomforts, for in situations like ours characters are tested, and yours, Holland," he paused impressively, "has stood the test."

Geoffrey bowed gratefully, and McVay continued:

"I have here a slight token in honour of the day. It is of little pecuniary value, but between us, Holland, pecuniary value is no longer mentioned. I feel that it will be recommended to you more than mere worth could recommend it by the fact that it is peculiarly my own,—my own as few human possessions can be said to be. I offer it," he said, drawing from his pocket a square flat little package, "with best wishes for a happy New Year."

"I Have Here A Slight Token, In Honor Of The Day"

The idea that McVay was going to give him a present had never crossed Geoffrey's mind, and now it struck him as so characteristic, so perfectly in keeping with McVay's consuming desire to triumph in minor matters, that he was able to smile pleasantly and receive it appropriately. He exchanged a glance of real appreciation with the donor, and received a grave bow in return.

Cecilia smiled, too, "I don't know exactly why you should think Mr. Holland wants your picture, Billy," she said.

"It may be of the greatest service to him," said McVay.

The girl turned to Geoffrey. "I can't make a speech like Billy's," she said, "but I have a small present for you which I hope you won't despise because it is not new. I mean I have worn it myself for some time, and I hope *you* will now, in remembrance of the time when you sheltered the houseless." She held out on her pink palm a flat gold pencil with a single topaz set in the top.

The thing was of some value and Geoffrey, looking up, caught McVay's eye in which danced such a delicious merriment that Geoffrey's half-formed question was answered. McVay was undergoing such paroxysms of delight at the idea that Geoffrey was about to become a receiver of stolen goods that he could not well conceal it. And instinctively Geoffrey drew back his hand. The next moment he realised that he must at once accept the gift with decent gratitude, whatever he might choose to do with it afterward, but unfortunately the girl had noticed his hesitation.

She said nothing whatsoever, but she closed her hand on the pencil, rose from the table, and left them to dispose of the remains of the feast as best they could.

McVay, as if he had observed nothing, threw himself at once into the part of a waiter, tucked a napkin round his waist, flung another over his arm and began to clear the table.

"Wait a moment," said Geoffrey, who had not followed his example; "I have something to say to you. I see you are in possession of my sentiments in regard to your sister.... I think her a wonder,—that's all it is necessary for you to know."

"Quite naturally, Holland. She is, she is."

"I won't discuss that with you. The point is that you seem to be under the impression that this will do you some good. Well, it won't. You stand just where you did before. You go to jail when the snow melts. Then I settle my affairs."

McVay's face fell. "Really, Holland," he said, "I don't see how, if you are fond of a woman you can want ..."

"... to spare her such a brother as you. Think it over."

"There are worse brothers than I," replied McVay, "how many men would have sacrificed what I have sacrificed in order to keep her comfortably."

"Not many, I hope."

"She is extraordinarily fond of me."

"Perhaps. You see she has not any one else to be fond of."

"We can scarcely say that *now*," returned McVay encouragingly.

"I won't discuss it with you."

"You can't mean to tell me that you are in love with my sister and mean to send me to state's prison?"

"I mean exactly that."

"Why, she'd never forgive you."

Geoffrey thought this so probable that he had no answer to give and presently McVay, who had been grumbling over the matter to himself, asked: "Are you serious, Holland?"

"What do you suppose I am?" Geoffrey roared, and McVay, shaking his head went on with the work of clearing the table. He was very silent and abstracted and for the first time seemed to realise his position. When they had put away the last plate, Geoffrey said:

"Now come to the library. I am going to give you a pipe, confound you."

"A pipe! Why?"

"Because I want to give your sister something, and I think she would be more apt to take it."

"I'm afraid she is rather offended by the way you treated her little gift. As a matter of fact I was the person to be offended, for I had given her the pencil. A pretty little thing, singularly like one which you may have seen Mrs.—"

"Don't tell me where you took it from. I don't want to know. Come and get your pipe and mind you are grateful."

"A pipe," observed McVay thoughtfully. "I think I'll take that large meerschaum on the mantelpiece."

Geoffrey laughed. "I think you won't," he answered. "The best pipe I own! No, indeed, you'll take a horrid little one that won't draw. It will be just the thing for you."

"No," said McVay, "no. You must give me the big one. Otherwise I shall make it appear that you promised the other to me, and turned mean at the last moment. And I can do it, Holland." His little eyes gleamed at the thought. "I shall say, 'My dear fellow, I'm glad you changed your mind about the meerschaum; it was as you say, too handsome for a man in my position.' That will make her mad if anything will. You know she is not quite satisfied with the way you treat me, as it is."

This was quite true, and Geoffrey, remembering that the object of the gift was to please the girl, reluctantly agreed to part with his favourite pipe. The affair went off well. McVay affected to hesitate over accepting so handsome an offering, and Geoffrey pressed it upon him with a good grace.

As far as his present to the girl was concerned, he found himself less and less willing to make it in McVay's presence, and more and more unable to think of any way of getting rid of him except murder or the cedar-closet. His anxiety was rendered more acute by the fact that once

or twice he could not help suspecting that Cecilia, in spite of her anger, would have been glad of a few words alone with him, also.

Before very long she suggested that McVay should take her hat and coat upstairs for her.

"Certainly I will," cried Billy, springing up with alacrity, and was at the door before Holland's warning shout "*McVay*" stopped him.

"Let me take it up for your sister," he said warningly.

"Oh, not at all. Let *me*," replied McVay courteously.

"Couldn't hear of it," returned Geoffrey.

By this time they were both outside of the door, and Geoffrey closed it with a snap.

"You would, would you?" he said angrily.

"Now, Holland," said McVay as one who intends to introduce reason into an irrational confusion, "this is exactly a case in point. I am by nature a gallant man. I forgot all about your instructions."

"I wonder?" said Geoffrey.

"It was instinctive to do my sister the little favour she asked. Yes, and I doubt if I should have acted differently if your pistol had been at my head. She asked me. That was enough."

"I've warned you once."

"Holland, I think,—you'll excuse my telling you,—that you have a very unfortunate manner at times."

They went upstairs together and were descending when Geoffrey stopped, with his eyes on the grand piano which stood in the hall below them.

"Can you play?" he said.

McVay brightened at once. He had been looking a little glum since his last speech. "Yes," he answered, "I can. Well, I'm not a professional, you understand, but for an amateur I am supposed to have as much technique and a good deal more sentiment than most."

"I don't care *how* you play," said Holland. "There is a piano. Sit down and play, and *don't stop*."

"No, Holland, no," said the other with unusual firmness; "that I will not do. No artist would. Ask any one. It is impossible to play in public without practice. I have not touched the instrument for over a year."

"You can do all the practising you like here and now. You can play finger exercises for all I care. All I insist is that you should make a noise so that I'll know you are there."

"Well," said McVay yielding, "you must remember to make allowances. Not the best musician could sit down after a year ... however, I dare say it will come back to me quicker than to most people. You must make allowances for my lack of practice."

"There is only one thing I won't make allowances for, and that is your moving from that music stool."

He opened the piano, and McVay sat down waving his fingers to loosen the joints. He sat with his head on one side, as if waiting to discover which of the great composers was about to inspire him. Then he dropped lightly upon the notes, lifting his chin, as if surprised to find that an air of Schubert's was growing under his fingers. Geoffrey was astonished to find that he really was, as he said, something of an artist. He waited until he was fairly started and then returned to the library.

"Is that Billy?" said the girl. "It must be a great pleasure to him to have a piano again. He is so fond of music."

"He was not as eager to play as I to have him," said Geoffrey.

He came back quietly, and stood looking down at her for a moment. Then he said, stretching out his hand:

"I want my Christmas present."

"I have none to give you."

"You had."

"I've changed my mind."

"Why?"

For the first time she looked at him. "Mr. Holland," she said, "you must think me singularly unobservant. Do you suppose I don't see that you dislike my brother. You refused the pencil—you did refuse it plainly enough—because Billy had given it to me. I will not offer it to you again. I know that Billy sometimes does rub people up the wrong way, but I should think any one of any discernment could see that his faults are only faults of manner."

She said this almost appealingly, and Geoffrey unable to agree, turned with something like a groan, and resting his elbows on the mantelpiece, covered his face with his hands.

“Do you suppose that he does not see how you feel toward him? Are you by any chance assuming that he bears with your manner on account of his own comfort? You might at least be generous or acute enough to see that it is only for my sake that he exercises so much self-control. He does not want to make my position here more unendurable by quarrelling with you. It makes me furious to see what you force him to put up with, the way you speak to him, and look at him, as if he were your slave, or a disobedient dog. His self-control is wonderful. I admire him more than I can say.”

“And is my self-control nothing?” he asked, without moving his hands from his face.

“Yours? I don’t see any exercise of yours. Circumstances have put us at your mercy, you are rich and fortunate, and as insolent as you choose to be. Self-control? I don’t see any evidence of it.”

“No?” he said, and turning, looked at her with a violence that might have set her on the right track. Under his eyes she looked down and probably in the instant forgot all that she had been saying and feeling, for when he added: “I love you,” her hands moved toward his, and she made no resistance when he took her in his arms.

VII

McVay was left so long at the piano that he finally resorted to a series of discords in order to recall himself to Holland's mind. His existence, if he had only realised the fact, was so completely forgotten that he might have made his escape with a good half hour to spare before either of the others appreciated that the music had ceased. Not knowing this, however, he did not dare stop his playing for an instant, until sheer physical fatigue interfered. It was at this point that the discords began, and brought Geoffrey into the hall.

The disposal of McVay for the night was a question to which Geoffrey had given a great deal of thought. The cedar closet presented itself as a safe prison, but in the face of McVay's repeated assertions that the air had barely sufficed to support him during his former occupancy, it looked like murder to insist. Geoffrey finally, when bed-time came, locked him in a dressing-room off his own room. The window—the room was on the third floor—gave on empty space, and against the only door he placed his own bed, so that escape seemed tolerably difficult.

And to all other precautions, Geoffrey added his own wakefulness, although toward morning weariness triumphed over excitement and he fell asleep.

He was waked by an insistent knocking at his door, and he heard his name called by Cecilia. He sprang up and found her standing in the hall. She was wrapped in her sable coat, but shivering from cold or fear.

"There is some one getting into the house. I heard a window open and steps on the piazza, below my room. What can it be?"

Geoffrey flung himself past her. The instinct of the hunter joined to the obstinacy of his nature maddened him at the notion of McVay's escape. On the opposite side of the house there was a piazza and on the roof of this a neighbouring window opened. He threw it back and climbed out.

The snow had stopped, and the moon was shining, paling a little before the approaching dawn. Geoffrey could see a figure stealing quickly across the snow. There was no question of its identity. His revolver, which he had snatched from under his pillow and brought with him, he at once levelled on the vanishing form; his finger was on the trigger, when he felt a hand on his arm.

Leaning out of the window behind him the girl caught his arm. "Don't fire," she said. "Don't you see it is Billy?"

There was a pause—the fraction of a second, but momentous, for Geoffrey realised that all his threats to McVay had been idle, that with that touch on his arm he could not shoot.

Nevertheless he raised his voice and shouted thunderously: "McVay!"

The figure turned, hesitated, saw, perhaps, the gleam of the moon on steel and began to retrace his steps.

Steadily with the revolver still upon him he moved back to the house. Under the piazza he stopped and waved his hand.

"I'm afraid they got away from us, Holland. I did my best."

"There *was* a burglar then!" said the girl in the little whisper of recent fright.

"By Heaven, he shall not trouble you," returned Holland with more earnestness than seemed to be required. Then he left her and went down to meet McVay.

"You were just about half a second ahead of a bullet," he remarked, ushering him into the hall. To be caught and brought back is so ignominious a position that Geoffrey looked to see even McVay at a disadvantage, but looked in vain. The aspect worn was a particularly self-satisfied one.

"I was aware I took a risk," he answered; "I took it gladly for my sister's sake."

"For your sister's sake?"

"Yes, and yours. Be honest, Holland, what could be so great a relief to you as to find I had disappeared. You are too narrow-minded, too honourable, you would say, to connive at it, but you would be delighted to know that you need not prosecute me."

"If I shot you, I should be saved the trouble of prosecuting."

"But at what a cost! I refer to my sister's regard. No, no, the thing, if you had only been quick enough to see it, was for me to escape. It was a risk, of course, but a risk I gladly took for my sister's sake. I would take longer ones for her."

“Do you mean that?”

“Of course.”

“Then take this revolver and go out and shoot yourself.”

McVay looked very thoughtful. Then, he said gravely, “No, no, Holland. To take a risk is one thing,—to kill myself quite another. I have always had a strong prejudice against suicide. I think it a cowardly action. And it would be no help to you. She would not believe that I had committed suicide. She knows my views on the subject, and could imagine no motive. No, that would not do at all. I’m surprised at the suggestion. It is against my principles.”

“Your principles!” Geoffrey sneered. Nevertheless, he was not a little altered in opinion. It had been something of a shock to him to find that he could not shoot at the critical instant. It had shaken his faith in himself. He began to doubt if he would be capable of sending the man to state’s prison when Cecilia besought his pity. His own limitations faced him. He was not the relentless judge he had supposed himself. Yet on the other hand, the remembrance of Vaughan and the other men he was representing held him to his idea of justice. “Sit down,” he said suddenly turning to McVay, “and write me out a list of everything you have stolen in this neighbourhood and where it is and how it may be obtained. Yes, I know it is difficult, but you had better try to do it for on the completeness of your list depends your only chance of avoiding the law. If I can return all properly, perhaps—I have a mine in Mexico, a hell on earth, where you can go if you prefer it to penal servitude. There won’t be much difference, except for the publicity of a trial. I’ve a man there who, when I give him his orders, would infinitely rather shoot you than take any risk of your getting away. Which will you have?”

“Can you ask, Holland? Which will be easier for my sister?”

“Sit down and write your list, then.”

“An interesting occupation, mining,” observed McVay as he opened the portfolio. After this for a long time nothing was heard but the soft noise of the pencil and an occasional comment from the writer:

“A rare piece that. I parted with it absurdly low, but the dealer was a connoisseur—appealed to my artistic side.”

Things had gone on thus for perhaps an hour when a step sounded outside and the door bell rang. Both men jumped to their feet.

“My God, Holland,” said McVay, “if that is the police, keep your wits about you or we are lost.”

It was a revelation to Geoffrey to find how completely, as his alarm showed, he had cast in his interests with McVay’s. He stepped forward in silence and opened the door.

Not the police, but a man in plain clothes was standing there.

“I’m glad to see you safe, Mr. Holland,” he said. “There has been great anxiety felt for your safety. I am a detective working on the Vaughan and Marheim cases. I got word to come and look you up as you did not get back to the gardener’s cottage the night before last.”

“The snow detained me,” said Geoffrey slowly.

“Come in, come in, friend,” said McVay briskly. “You must be cold.”

It speaks well for the professional eye that the detective, after studying McVay for an instant, asked:

“I did not catch this gentleman’s name. Who is he?”

There was a barely perceptible pause. Then Geoffrey answered coolly: “That is the man you are after.”

“Are you crazy, Holland?” shouted McVay.

“What, the Vaughan burglar? You caught him without assistance?” Envy and admiration struggled on the detective’s countenance. “I must congratulate you, sir.”

Geoffrey allowed himself the luxury of a groan. “You needn’t,” he said; “I am no subject for congratulation. I can’t even prosecute him, confound him, for several reasons. We were at school together, and I can take no steps in the matter.”

“But I can,” said the detective; “indeed it is my duty to.”

“No,” said Geoffrey, “nor can you. This man cannot be sent to prison. Yes, I know, it is compounding a felony. Well, sit down, and we’ll compound it.”

“I could not agree to anything of the kind,” said the detective.

“I don’t see exactly what you can do about it.” Geoffrey was deliberate and very polite. “For reasons which I can’t explain, but which you would appreciate, leave me no choice. I have to save this man from jail. If you

intend to work against me, I shall simply let him escape at once. Don't draw your revolver, please. I prefer to be the only person with a weapon in my hand. He has made a list of all the things he has stolen, and I shall see that they are returned to their owners at any cost. Will you undertake to get him safely to a mine I own in Mexico? Once there he can't get away. It is forty-five miles from a railway. If you accomplish this, I will give you ten thousand to make up for the reward you didn't get,—five thousand down, and five thousand at the end of a year."

"I don't know what to say," said the man. "It sounds like a bribe."

"It is," said Geoffrey coolly.

"I never received such a proposition," returned the man.

"That scheme won't do, Holland," put in McVay. "Can't you see it lays you open to blackmail?"

"From you?" said Geoffrey. "I had thought of that, but you can't blackmail me at La Santa Anna, and if you get away and come close enough to blackmail me, I'll put you in prison without a moment's hesitation. I shall be in a position by that time to take care of the feelings of the other people concerned."

"You don't understand me," answered McVay; "I meant blackmail from this man."

"Oh," said Geoffrey civilly, "I am convinced he is not a blackmailer. And besides, he won't get his second five thousand for a year, and as I was saying to you, after a year I don't so much mind having the whole thing known. My reputation will stand it, I think, if yours and his will."

"I'm no blackmailer," said this detective. "If I accept, I'll be on the square."

"If you do, let me offer you a piece of advice," observed Geoffrey, "and that is not to take your eye off that man for a single instant. He is a slippery customer, and you run a fair chance of not seeing my money at all, if you give him the smallest loophole."

The detective considered McVay carefully from head to foot. Then he said gravely:

"Is there any way of getting to this place of yours by water? I don't see my way to taking this customer in a Pullman car. If he chooses to slip overboard from a boat, why no one would be any the worse, unless maybe the sharks."

"Very true," agreed Geoffrey amiably. "Fortunately you can get a steamer in New York."

It soon became apparent that the detective failed to see any good reason for declining so advantageous an offer as Geoffrey's, and they were presently deep in the discussion of their plans, McVay meanwhile studying the map with unfeigned interest in the situation of his future residence.

Cecilia, fortunately, gave them plenty of time for their arrangements, for she had fallen asleep again, after the alarm of the early morning, and the men must have been talking for two hours when she appeared at the library door.

She cast a look of surprise at the addition to their party and Geoffrey saw with a sort of paralysis that she was inclined to set him down as the burglar whose footsteps she had heard in the night. To prevent any betrayal of this opinion, Geoffrey advanced a few steps to meet her, although as he did so, he realised that he had nothing to answer when she asked, as of course she did ask: "Who is that?"

A sort of desperation, the cowardice that will sometimes attack the brave took hold of Geoffrey. He looked at her hopelessly and would perhaps in another instant have told her the truth, had not McVay, not the least disconcerted, taken the lead.

"This, Cecilia," he said exuberantly, laying his hand on the detective's shoulder, "is my old friend Picklebody,—Henderson Picklebody. You have heard his name often enough, and he, yours, too. Eh, Henderson, in the old Machita days?"

The detective, whose name was George P. Cook, was so taken up with his surprise at the apparition of a beautiful woman that he scarcely heard McVay. He began to guess something of the motives that led Holland to shield this offender against the law, nor had he ever found it unwise to yield to the whims of young millionaires.

Cecilia, who was too gentle or too politic to betray the fact that she heard the interesting name of Picklebody for the first time, remarked in a tone as cheerful as she could make it:

"I suppose that if Mr. Picklebody could get in we can get out now."

“Can and will,” rejoined McVay beamingly. “Hen comes as he has always come to his friends, as a rescuer.”

“I seem to require a great deal of rescuing,” said the girl, looking up at the monopolist in the art who had so far said nothing.

“Ah, but you don’t understand, my dear,” went on McVay ruthlessly cutting into the look which the lovers were exchanging; “You don’t yet understand how fortunate we are in our friends. Henderson did not, it is true, come to find me. It was the greatest coincidence his meeting me here. It seems that he and Holland are both interested in a mine in Mexico, and what do you think?” McVay paused and rubbed his hands; “Really, we have the kindest friends; they have been arranging between them to offer me a job down there. What do you think of that?”

Cecilia who had been trying to imagine any future after they left the shelter of the grey stone house, would have answered if she had been thoroughly candid that she thought Mexico was a terribly long distance away, but she only observed:

“How very kind of them. I am sure we shall like Mexico.”

“There, there, do you hear that? ‘We.’ Gentlemen,” cried McVay, throwing up his hands, “I cannot leave my sister alone,—deserted. Consider it all off.”

“Oh, I wasn’t to go?” asked Cecilia, looking up with more enthusiasm.

“My dear,” replied McVay, “I must own that I was base enough to consider a plan that would separate us. The mine, it seems, is no place for ladies. But we will think no more about it. I see by your manner that your feelings...”

“Dear Billy,” said the girl gently, “you must not give it up. You know that I can always go to the Lees, until—until I get a position. And nothing is so important as that you should have work that is satisfactory to you. Of course you must accept.”

“Did you ever hear anything so noble?” asked McVay. “Yes, I suppose I ought to accept. So they both tell me. I must go, mustn’t I, Hen?”

“Well, it looks like it would be better for you if you did,” replied the detective, who had fortunately his legitimate share of American humour.

“There is another point, Cecilia,” McVay went on, “if I do accept, I shall have to leave at once. When did you say, Hen?”

“Train to New York this afternoon,—steamer sails to-morrow.”

“Oh, dear. That’s very sudden,” said Cecilia.

“At a word from you, dear, I’ll give it up,” remarked McVay.

“No, no, of course not. I should never forgive myself. You must go. Perhaps it is all the better that I did not know beforehand. It saves me just that amount.”

“We’ve no time to lose,” remarked McVay briskly, “if we are going to try for that afternoon train. I suppose we can get a sleigh at the gardener’s, Holland, if we can struggle as far as that. Well, well, we must hurry off.”

It was McVay who urged on the preparations for departure, hurrying his sister, flitting about the house at such a rate that the detective, who was of a solider build, found it hard to keep up with.

Nor was it only physical agility that McVay required of the unfortunate man. Having overheard Geoffrey telling him that he was not to betray the real state of things before Miss McVay, under penalty of losing his money, McVay took special delight in making him look like a fool, calling upon him to remember happenings which existed only in McVay’s own fertile brain.

“What, Hen,” he would cry suddenly, “was the name of that pretty black haired girl you were so sweet on,—you know, the daughter of the canal-boat man.”

The detective, looking very much alarmed, would of course reply that he did not know what McVay was talking about.

“There, there,” McVay would reply soothingly patting him on the shoulder, “I’m not going into the story of the pink blanket. You can always trust to my discretion. But I would like just to remember her name. It was so peculiar,—a name I never heard before.”

The detective, who had been respectably married since he was twenty, found himself unable to remember any female names and finally in agony suggested “Mary.”

“Mary, my dear fellow, no; that was your friend the paper-girl. There is nothing very unusual about Mary, is there, Holland? No, the name I was trying to think of was Ethelberta. Now you remember, don’t you?”

“No, I don’t,” said the detective crossly, casting an appealing look at

Geoffrey.

"How sad that is," said McVay philosophically. "You don't even remember her name, and at one time—well, well."

Or again, he would exclaim brightly, studying the detective's countenance.

"Ah, Henderson, I see the mark of Sweeney's bullet has entirely gone. I was afraid it would leave a scar. Tell my sister that yarn. I think it would interest her."

"Yes, do, Mr. Picklebody," said the girl politely and McVay, when he had sufficiently tortured his victim, would at length launch out into a story himself. Miserable as the detective was under this sort of treatment, it soon appeared that McVay's ease and facility had made an impression on him, and that he looked at his prisoner with a sort of wondering admiration.

"Now, Holland, are we all ready? Cecilia, have you got your little bag?" he began when they were about to depart. "Holland, my dear fellow, don't think me interfering if I ask whether you have looked to all the doors and windows? Tramps and thieves are so apt to break into shut-up houses, and it would be such a pity if anything happened to any of your pretty things. Ah, what an expanse of snow. Beautiful, isn't it? You may talk about your tropical scenery, Hen, but we shan't see anything finer than this the world over. What a contrast the south will be though, eh, old man?" and, drawing the detective's arm through his, leaning heavily upon him meanwhile, McVay moved forward, talking volubly.

Cecilia and Geoffrey hesitated a moment looking up at the house that had seen such momentous changes in their lives.

"When we come back, it will be spring," said Geoffrey softly.

"Oh," said the girl in rather a shaky voice, "you like me well enough to ask me to stay again?"

"Well enough," said Geoffrey, "to ask you to stay forever."

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