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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK ON WITH TORCHY ***



[Frontispiece: "Well if I ever! Look where your shoulders come!" says Vee.]

ON WITH TORCHY

BY

SEWELL FORD

AUTHOR OF

TORCHY, TRYING OUT TORCHY, ODD NUMBERS, ETC., ETC.

ILLUSTRATIONS BY

FOSTER LINCOLN

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ON WITH TORCHY

CHAPTER I

CHANGING IT FOR VEE

Say, what's next to knowin' when you're well off? Why, thinkin' you are.

Which is a little nugget of wisdom I panned out durin' a chat I had not long ago with Mr. Quinn, that I used to work under when I was on the door of the Sunday sheet, three or four years back.

"Hail, Torchy!" says he, as we meets accidental on Broadway. "Still carrying the burning bush under your hat, aren't you?"

I grins good-natured at his old josh, just as I used to about twice a week regular, and admits that I am.

"You wa'n't lookin' for me to fade to an ash blond, was you?" says I.

"Ah!" says he. "I see the brilliance is not all on the outside. Well, what use are you putting it to? Who are you with now?"

"Same concern," says I. "Corrugated Trust."

"As First, or Second Vice President?" says he, cockin' his head on one side humorous.

"Add 'em together and multiply by three," says I, "then you'll be warm."

"I don't quite get the result," says he.

"Ever hear of an office-boy-de-luxe?" says I. "They don't print it on the letter-heads yet, or paint it on the ground-glass, but that's my real label. I'm the only one in New York, too."

Mr. Quinn chuckles and goes off shakin' his head. I expect he's disappointed that I've stuck so long in one shop without climbin' further up the ladder. That's what he was always preachin' at me, this ladder-climbin' advice. But say, hod carriers do that. Me for an express elevator when the time comes.

But meanwhile, with a couple of bosses like Old Hickory Ellins and Mr. Robert, it ain't so worse sittin' behind the brass rail. That's one reason I ain't changed. Also there's that little mine enterprise me and Mr. Robert's mixed up in, which ain't come to a head yet.

Then—well, then, there's Vee. Go on—hand me the jolly! And if you push me to it I'll admit I ain't any speedy performer at this "Oh, you!" game. Mr. Robert he thinks it's comic, when he has the kiddin' fit on, to remark chuckly, "Oh, I say, Torchy, have you seen Miss Vee lately?"

There's others too, that seems to get a lot of satisfaction shootin' the same thing at me, and they sort of snicker when I get pink in the ears. But, say, there's a heap of difference between pickin' peaches from an easy chair under the tree, and when you have to shin the garden wall and reach through the barbed wire ornament on top.

Course, I ain't comparin' anything—but there's Aunty. Dear old girl! Square as a brick, and about as yieldin'; good as gold too, but worth more per ounce than any coined at the mint; and as foxy in the mind as a corporation lawyer arguin' before the Rapid Transit Commission. Also I'm as welcome to Aunty's eyesight as Eugene V. Debs would be at the Union League Club—just about. That ain't any idle rumor, either, nor something that was hinted to me casual. It's first-hand information, hot off the bat.

"Boy," says she, glarin' at me through her gold lorgnette like I was some kind of insect specimen, "do I understand that you come here to see my niece?"

"Well," says I, "there's you and her—guess!"

"Humph!" she snorts indignant. "Then I wish you to know that your visits are most unwelcome. Is that quite clear?"

"I get the outline," says I. "But, you see——"

"No qualifications, absolutely none!" says she. "Good afternoon, young man. I shall not expect you to return."

"Oh, well, in that case," says I, sidlin' off, "why—I—I think I'll be goin'."

It was a smear, that's all. I felt about as thick through as a Saratoga chip, and not half so crisp. Encouragin' finish for an afternoon call that I'd been bracin' myself up to for weeks, wa'n't it? And from all I can gather from a couple of sketchy notes Vee gets about the same line of advice handed her. So there was a debate between her and Aunty. For I expect nobody can lay the law down flat to Vee without strikin' a few sparks from them big gray eyes.

But of course Aunty wins out in the end. It's a cinch, with everything on her side. Anyway, the next thing I knows about their plans is when I finds their names in the sailin' list, bound for the Big Ditch, with most everyone else that could get away. And I makes my discovery about three hours after the boat has left.

But that was in January. And I expect it was a fine thing for Vee, seein' the canal before it revised the geography, and dodgin' all kinds of grip weather, and meetin' a lot of new people. And if it's worth all that bother to Aunty just so anybody can forget a party no more important than me—why, I expect that's all right too.

But it's just like some folks to remember what they're ordered to forget. Anyway, I got bulletins now and then, and I was fairly well posted as to when Aunty landed back in New York, and where she unpacked her trunks. That helped some; but it didn't cut the barbed wire exactly.

And, say, I was gettin' some anxious to see Vee once more. Nearly two weeks she'd been home, and not so much as a glimpse of her! I'd doped out all kinds of brilliant schemes; but somehow they didn't work. No lucky breaks seemed to be comin' my way, either.

And then, here last Sunday after dinner, I just hauls out that church weddin' costume I'd collected once, brushes most of the kinks out of my red hair, sets my jaw solid, and starts to take a sportin' chance. On the way up I sketches out a scenario, which runs something like this:

A maid answers the ring. I ask if Miss Vee is in. The maid goes to see, when the voice of Aunty is heard in the distance, "What! A young gentleman asking for Verona? No card? Then get his name, Hortense." Me to the maid, "Messenger from Mr. Westlake, and would Miss Vee care

to take a short motor spin. Waiting below." Then more confab with Aunty, and five minutes later out comes Vee. Finale: Me and Vee climbin' to the top of one of them Riverside Drive busses, while Aunty dreams that she's out with Sappy Westlake, the chosen one.

Some strategy to that—what? And, sure enough, the piece opens a good deal as I'd planned; only instead of me bein' alone when I pushes the button, hanged if two young chappies that had come up in the elevator with me don't drift along to the same apartment door. We swap sort of foolish grins, and when Hortense fin'ly shows up everyone of us does a bashful sidestep to let the others go first. So Hortense opens on what looks like a revolvin' wedge. But that don't trouble her at all.

"Oh, yes," says she, swingin' the door wide and askin' no questions. "This way, please."

Looked like we was expected; so there's no ducking and while we're drapin' our hats on the hall rack I'm busy picturin' the look on Aunty's face when she singles me out of the trio. They was panicky thoughts, them.

But a minute later the plot is still further mixed by the sudden swishy, swirly entrance of an entire stranger,—a tall, thin female with vivid pink cheeks, a chemical auburn tint to her raven tresses, and long jet danglers in her ears. She's draped in what looks like a black silk umbrella cover with rows of fringe and a train tacked to it, and she wears a red, red rose coquettish over one ear. As she swoops down on us from the drawin' room she cuts loose with the vivacious chatter.

"Ah, there you are, you dear, darling boys!" says she. "And the Princess Charming is holding court to-day. Ah, Reggy, you scamp! But you did come, didn't you? And dear Theodore too! Brave, Sir Knights! That's what you all shall be,—Knights come to woo the Princess!"

Honest, for awhile there, as this bughouse monologue was bein' put over, I figured I've made a mistake in the floor, and had been let into a private ward. But as soon as I gets next to the Georgia accent I suspects that it ain't any case of squirrels in the attic; but just a sample of sweet Southern gush.

Next I gets a peek through the draperies at some straw-colored hair with a shell-pink ear peepin' from underneath, and I know that whatever else is wrong don't matter; for over there on the windowseat, surrounded by half a dozen young gents, is somebody very particular and special. Followin' this I does a hasty piece of scout work and draws a deep breath. No Aunty looms on the horizon—not yet, anyway.

With the arrival of the new delegates the admirin' semicircle has to break up, and the three of us are towed to the bay window by Vivacious Vivian.

"Princess," says she, makin' a low duck, "three other Knights who would do homage. Allow me first to present Mr. Reginald St. Claire Smith. Here Reggy. Also Mr. Theodore Braden. And next Mr.—Mr.—er——"

She's got to me. I expect her first guess was that I'd been dragged in by one of the other two; but as neither of 'em makes any sign she turns them black, dark-ringed lamps inquiren' on me and asks, "Oh, I'm sure I beg pardon, but—but you are——"

Now who the blazes was I, anyway? It all depended on how well posted she was, whether I should admit I was Torchy the Banished, or invent an alias on the spot.

"Why," says I, draggin' it out to gain time, "you see I'm a—that is, I'm a—a——"

"Oh, hello!" breaks in Vee, jumpin' up and holdin' out both hands just in the nick of time. "Why, of course, Cousin Eulalia! This is a friend of mine, an old friend."

"Really!" says Cousin Eulalia. "And I may call him——"

"Claude," I puts in, winkin' at Vee. "Call me just Claude."

"Perfectly lovely!" gushes Eulalia. "An unknown knight. 'Deed and you shall be called Claude—Sir Claude of the Golden Crest. Gentlemen, I present him to you."

We looks at each other sort of sheepish, and most of us grins. All but one, in fact. The blond string bean over in the corner, with the buttermilk blue eyes and the white eyebrows, he don't seem amused. For it's Sappy Westlake, the one I run on a siding once at a dance. Think of keepin' a peeve on ice all that time!

It's quite a likely lookin' assortment on the whole, though, all costumed elegant and showin' signs of bein' fairly well parlor broke.

"What's the occasion?" says I on the side to Miss Vee. "Reunion of somebody's Sunday school class?"

She gives me a punch and smothers a snicker, "Don't let Cousin Eulalia hear you say such a thing," says she.

We only had a minute; but from what she manages to whisper durin' the general chatter I makes out that this is a little scheme Eulalia'd planned to sort of launch Vee into the younger set. She's from Atlanta, Cousin Eulalia is, one of the best fam'lies, and kind of a perennial society belle that's tinkled through quite some seasons, but refuses to quit. Just now she's spendin' a month with Fifth-ave. friends, and has just discovered that Vee and her are close connected through a step-uncle marryin' a half-sister of Eulalia's brother-in-law, or something like that. Anyhow, she insists on the cousin racket, and has started right in to rush Vee to the front.

She's some rasher, Eulalia is, too. No twenty-minutes-to-or-after silences while she's conductin' affairs. Course, it's kind of frothy stuff to pass for conversation; but it bubbles out constant, and she blows it around impartial. Her idea of giving Cousin Vee a perfectly good time seems to be to have us all grouped around that windowseat and take turns shootin' over puffs of hot air; sort of a taffy-throwin' competition, you know, with Vee as the mark.

But Vee don't seem tickled to death over it. She ain't fussed exactly, as Eulalia rounds us up in a half-circle; but she colors up a little and acts kind of bored. She's some picture, though. M-m-m! And it was worth while bein' one of a mob, just to stand there watchin' her.

I expect the young college hicks felt a good deal the same about it as me, even if they was havin' hard work diggin' up appropriate remarks when Eulalia swings the arrow so it points to them. Anyway, they does their best to come up with the polite jolly, and nobody makes a break to quit.

It's durin' the tea and sandwich scramble, though, that Cousin Eulalia gets her happy hunch. Seems that Sappy Westlake has come forward with an invite to a box party just as Vee is tryin' to make up her mind whether she'll go with Teddy Braden to some cotillion capers, or accept a dinner dance bid from one of the other young gents.

"And all for Wednesday night!" says she. "How stupid of you, with the week so long!"

"But I'd planned this box party especially for you," protests Sappy.

"Oh, give someone else a chance, Westlake," cuts in Reggy. "That's the night of our frat dance, and I want to ask Miss Vee if—"

"What's this all about?" demands Eulalia, dancin' kittenish into the limelight. "Rivalry among our gallant knights? Then the Princess Charming must decide."

"Oh, don't, Cousin Eulalia," says Vee, wrinkl'n her nose the least bit. "Please!"

"Don't what?" says Eulalia, raisin' her long arms flutterin'. "My dear, I don't understand."

"Ah, she's hintin' for you to ditch the Princess stuff," I puts in. "Ain't that it?" and Vee nods emphatic.

Eulalia lets on that she don't know. "Ditch the—why, what can he mean by that?" says she. "And you are a Princess Charming; isn't she, boys?"

Course the bunch admits that she is.

"There, you see?" goes on Eulalia. "Your faithful knights acclaim you. Who says that the age of chivalry has passed? Why, here they are, everyone of them ready to do your lightest bidding. Now, aren't you, Sir Knights?"

It's kind of a weak chorus; but the ayes seem to have it. What other answer could there be, with Vee gazin' flushed and pouty at 'em over the tea urn?

"Really, Eulalia, I wish you wouldn't be so absurd," says Vee.

"My dear Cousin Verona," coos Eulalia, glidin' up and huggin' her impetuous, "how could anyone keep their heads straight before such absolutely distracting beauty? See, you have inspired them all with the spirit of chivalry. And now you must put them to the test. Name some heroic deed for each to perform. Begin with Reggy. Now what shall it be?"

"Fudge!" says Vee, tossin' her head. "I'll do nothing so perfectly mushy."

But Cousin Eulalia wa'n't to be squelched, nor have her grand scheme sidetracked. "Then I declare myself Mistress of the Lists," says she, "and I shall open the tournament for you. Ho, Trumpeter, summon the challengers! And—oh, I have it. Each of you Sir Knights must choose his own task, whatever he deems will best please our Princess Charming. What say you to that?"

There's a murmur of "Good business!" "Bully dope!" and the young gents begin to prick up their ears.

"Then this is how it stands," goes on Eulalia, beamin' delighted. "Between now and eight o'clock this evening each knight must do his valorous best to win the approval of our Princess. Hers it shall be to decide, the prize her gracious company for next Wednesday night. Come now, who enters the lists?"

There's some snickerin' and hangin' back; but fin'ly they're all in.

"All save the Unknown Knight," pipes up Eulalia, spottin' me in the rear. "How now, you of the Crimson Crest? Not showing the white feather, are you?"

"Me?" says I. "Well, I don't quite get the drift of the game; but if it'll make you feel any better, you can count me in."

"Good!" says she, clappin' her hands. "And while you are afield I must leave too—another tea, you know. But we all meet here again at eight sharp, with proof or plunder. Teddy, have you decided what to attempt?"

"Sure," says he. "Me to find the biggest box of candy that can be bought in New York Sunday evening."

"Oh, splendid!" gurgles Eulalia. "And you, Mr. Westlake?"

"Orchids," says Sappy. "Grandmother has dandy ones at her place up in Westchester, and I can make there and back in my roadster if I'm not pinched for speeding. I'm going to have a try, and maybe I'll have to steal the flowers too."

"There!" says Eulalia, pattin' him on the back. "That's a knightly spirit. But what of Crimson Crest? What will you do?"

"The game is to spring something on Miss Vee better'n what the others put over, is it?" says I.

"Precisely," says Eulalia, allowin' two of the young gents to help her on with her wraps. "Have you thought what your offering is to be?"

"Not yet," says I. "I may take a chance on something fresh."

They was all pilin' out eager by that time, each one anxious to get started on his own special fool stunt, so, while I was mixed up in the gen'ral push, with my hat in my hand and my coat over my arm, it didn't strike me how I could bolt the programme until I'm half crowded behind the open hall door. Then I gets a swift thought. Seein' I wouldn't be missed, and that Vee has her back to me, I simply squeezes in out of sight and waits while she says by-by to the last one; so, when she fin'ly shuts the door, there I am.

"Why, Torchy!" says she. "I thought you had gone."

"But it wa'n't a wish, was it?" says I.

"Humph!" says she, flashin' a teasin' glance. "Suppose I don't tell that?"

"My nerve is strong today," says I, chuckin' my hat back on the rack; "so I'll take the benefit of the doubt."

"But all the others have gone to—to do things that will please me," she adds.

"That's why I'm takin' a chance," says I, "that if I stick around I might—well, I'm shy of grandmothers to steal orchids from, anyway."

Vee chuckles at that. "Isn't Cousin Eulalia too absurd?" says she. "And since you're still here—why—well, let's not stand in the hall. Come in."

"One minute," says I. "Where's Aunty?"

"Out," says she.

"What a pity!" says I, takin' Vee by the arm. "Tell her how much I missed her."

"But how did you happen to come up today?" asks Vee.

"There wa'n't any happenin' to it," says I. "I'd got to my limit, that's all. Honest, Vee, I just had to come. I'd have come if there'd been forty Aunties, each armed with a spiked club. It's been months, you know, since I've had a look at you."

"Yes, I know," says she, gazin' at the rug. "You—you've grown, haven't you?"

"Think so?" says I. "Maybe it's the cut-away coat."

"No," says she; "although that helps. But as we walked in I thought you seemed taller than I. Let's measure, here by the pier glass. Now, back to back. Well, if I ever! Look where your shoulders come!"

"No more than an inch or so," says I, gazin' sideways at the mirror; and then I lets slip, half under my breath, a sort of gaspy "Gee!"

"Why the 'Gee'?" says she, glancin' over her shoulder into the glass.

"Oh, I don't know," says I; "only I don't mind bein' grouped like this, not a bit."

"Pooh!" says she, but still holdin' the pose.

"Seems to me," says I, "that Cousin Eulalia is a slick describer. That Princess Charming business ain't so wide."

"Silly!" says she. "Come and sit down."

She was steerin' for the windowseat; but I picks out a cozy little high-backed davenport and, reachin' for one of her hands, swings her into that. "Just room for two here," says I.

"But you needn't keep my hand," says she.

"No trouble," says I. "Besides, I thought I'd inspect what kind of a manicure you take of. M-m-m! Pretty fair, no hangnails, all the half-moons showin' proper, an——" I broke off sudden at that and sat starin' blank.

"Well, anything else?" says she.

"I—I guess not," says I, lettin' her hand slip. "You've chucked it, eh?"

"Chucked what?" says she.

"Nothing much," says I. "But for awhile there, you know, just for fun you was wearin' something of mine."

"Oh!" she flashes back. "Then at last you've missed it, have you?"

"With so much else worth lookin' at," says I, "is it a wonder?"

"Blarney!" says she, stickin' out her tongue.

"Did Aunty capture it?" says I.

Vee shakes her head.

"Maybe you lost it?" I goes on. "It wa'n't much."

"Then you wouldn't care if I had?" says she.

"I wanted you to keep it," says I; "but of course, after all the row Aunty raised over it, I knew you couldn't."

"Couldn't I, though?" says she, and with that she fishes up the end of a little gold neck chain from under some lace—and hanged if there ain't the ring!

"Vee!" says I, sort of tingly all over as I gazes at her. "Say, you're a corker, though! Why, I thought sure you'd——"

"Silly boy!" says she. "I'll just have to pay you for that. You will think horrid things of me, will you? There!"

She does things in a flash when she cuts loose too. Next I knew she has her fingers in what Eulalia calls my crimson crest and is rumplin' up all them curls I'd been so careful to slick back. I grabbed her wrists, and it was more or less of a rough-house scene we was indulgin' in, when all of a sudden the draperies are brushed back, and in stalks Aunty, with Cousin Eulalia trailin' behind.

"Ver-ona!" Talk about havin' a pitcher of cracked ice slipped down your back! Say, there was more chills in that one word than ever blew down from Medicine Hat. "What," goes on Aunty, "does this mean?"

"It—it's a new game," says I, grinnin' foolish.

"As old as Satan, I should say!" raps out Aunty.

"Why," squeals Cousin Eulalia gushy, "here is our Unknown Knight, the first to come back with his tribute! Let's see, what was it you said you were going to do? Oh, I know—take a chance on something fresh, wasn't it? Well?"

"Ye-e-es," says I. "And I guess I did."

"Trust him for that!" snorts Aunty. "Young man, at our last interview I thought I made it quite clear that I should not expect you to return?"

"That's right," says I, edgin' around her towards the door. "And you wa'n't, was you?"

Some glance she shot over; but it didn't prove fatal. And as I rides down I couldn't help

swappin' a wink with the elevator boy.

"Feelin' frisky, eh?" says he. "So was them other young guys. One of 'em tipped me a half."

"That kind would," says I. "They're comin' back. I'm escapin'."

But, say, who do you guess wins out for Wednesday night? Ah, rattle 'em again! Eulalia fixed it up. Said it was Vee's decision, and she was bound to stick by the rules of the game, even if they did have to throw a bluff to Aunty. Uh-huh! I've got three orchestra seats right in my pocket, and a table engaged for supper afterwards. Oh, I don't know. Eulalia ain't so batty, after all.

CHAPTER II

PULLING A SLEUTH STUNT

Trust Piddie for workin' up wild suspicions. Say, he can't find a stray sheet of scribblin' paper on the floor without pouncin' sleuthy on it and tryin' to puzzle out the hidden meanin'.

So when I get the buzzer call to Old Hickory's private office and finds him and the main stem waitin' in solemn conclave there, I guesses right off that Piddie's dug up a new one that he hopes to nail me with. Just now he's holdin' a little bunch of wilted field flowers in one hand, and as I range up by the desk he shoots over the accusin' glance.

"Boy," says he, "do you know anything about these?"

"Why, sure," says I. "They're pickled pigs' feet, ain't they?"

"No impudence, now!" says he. "Where did they come from?"

"Off'm Grant's Tomb, if I must guess," says I. "Anyway, I wouldn't think they was picked in the Subway."

And at this Old Hickory sniffs impatient. "That is quite enough comic diversion, young man!" he puts in. "Do you or don't you know anything about how those things happened to get on my desk?"

"Me?" says I. "Why, I never saw 'em before! What's the dope?"

"Huh!" he grunts. "I didn't think this was any of your nonsense: too tame. And I suppose you might as well know what's afoot. Tell him, Mr. Piddie."

Did you ever see a pinhead but what just dotes on springin' a sensation? Piddie fairly gloats over unloadin' it. "This," says he, holdin' up the wilted bunch, "is the unaccountable. For the fourth time flowers of this description have been mysteriously left on Mr. Ellins' desk. It is not done after hours, or during the night; but in broad day, sometimes when Mr. Ellins is sitting just where he is now, and by a hand unseen. Watch has been kept, yet no one has been detected; and, as you know, only a few persons have free access here. Still the thing continues. At regular periods these absurd bouquets appear on this desk, seemingly from nowhere at all. Hence this inquiry."

I'd heard Piddie spout a good many times before, but never quite so eloquent, and I expect I was gawpin' at him some dazed and admirin'.

"Well," says Old Hickory, squintin' sharp at me from under his bushy eyebrows, "what have you to offer?"

"It's by me," says I, shruggin' my shoulders.

"Oh, come now!" he goes on. "With that high tension brain of yours, surely you can advance some idea."

"Why," says I, "offhand I should say that some of them mushy lady typists out there might be smugglin' in floral tributes to you, Sir."

Old Hickory grins sarcastic. "Without going into the question of motive," says he, "that suggestion may be worth considering. What say, Mr. Piddie?"

"It might be that Miss Smicks," says Piddie. "She's quite sentimental, Sir, and I've thought at times she——"

"Stop!" roars Old Hickory, almost workin' up a blush. "Mr. Piddie, I am a fat, cross-grained old man, about as attractive personally as a hippopotamus. Great stuttering tadpoles! Can't you

think of anything but sappy romance? More likely someone wants a raise."

"Very true, Sir; I hadn't thought of that," chimes in Piddie. "Shall we call them all in, one at a time, Sir, and——"

"And what?" snaps Old Hickory. "Think I'm going to ask all those young women if they've been leaving flowers on my desk?"

"Couldn't you fake up some job for each one," says I, "and when they came in be wearin' the flowers conspicuous, and watch if they——"

"Bah!" breaks in Old Hickory. "What driveling tommyrot! Besides, I don't believe any of them had a hand in this. How could they? Why, I tell you, there wasn't a soul in this room between noon and twelve forty-five to-day; and yet, with me facing that door, these things appear right at my elbow. It—it's getting on my nerves, and, by the seven sizzling sisters, I want to know what it all means!"

"We could have in the detectives," suggests Piddie.

"If it was a bomb or an infernal machine, I might," says Mr. Ellins scornful; "but to trace a few dad-blistered flowers—no, thank you! It's foolish enough as it stands."

"But there is something behind all this, I'm sure," insists Piddie, "and if you will allow me to do it, I shall send at once for Dr. Rudolph Bingstetter."

"Who's he?" demands Old Hickory.

"A distinguished scientist who is a friend and neighbor of mine," says Piddie, swellin' up important. "He was formerly a dentist, I believe; but now he devotes himself to research and literature. He writes magazine articles on psychological phenomena, crime mysteries, and so on. Dr. Bingstetter has a wonderful mind, and is often called on to unravel baffling cases. It was only a few months ago that he successfully investigated a haunted house out our way and found——"

"But I'm not accusing ghosts of this," says Old Hickory.

"Of course not, Sir," says Piddie; "but I'm sure Dr. Bingstetter could find out just how those flowers come here. He's an extremely brilliant man, Sir, and I'm quite positive he could——"

"Well, well, send for him, then," says Old Hickory. "Only see that you keep still about it outside there, both of you. I don't care to have the whole office force chattering and snickering over this affair. Understand?"

You bet we did; for when the boss gets real peevish about anything it's not safe to get your signals mixed! I stands guard on the 'phone booth while Piddie was sendin' the message, and for once we plots away together real chummy.

"He's coming right over this afternoon," whispers Piddie, as he slides out of the booth. "You're to take him directly into Mr. Ellins' office,—a large, impressive looking man, you know, with a full round face and wearing eye-glasses."

Piddie forgets to mention the shiny frock coat and the forty-four-inch waist line; but for all that I spots him the minute he hits the brass gate, which he does about ten minutes before closin' time.

"Dr. Bingstetter?" says I cautious.

"I am he," is the answer.

"S-s-s-s-sh!" says I, puttin' a forefinger to my lips warnin'.

"S-s-s-s-sh!" echoes the Doc, tiptoein' through the gate.

Then up comes Piddie, walkin' on his toes too, and the three of us does a footpad sneak into Old Hickory's office. There wa'n't any wild call for me to stay as I knows of; but as long as no one threw me out I thought I'd stick around.

I must say too the Doc looked and acted the part. First off he sits there blinkin' wise behind his glasses, and not a sign on his big, heavy face as he listens to all Piddie and Mr. Ellins can tell him about the case. Also when he starts askin' questions on his own hook he makes a noise like a mighty intellect changin' gears.

"M-m-m-m!" says he, pursin' up his lips and studyin' the bouquet thoughtful. "Six ox-eyed daisies, four sprays of goldenrod, and three marshmallow blooms,—thirteen in all. And this is the fourth bunch. Now, the others, Mr. Ellins, they were not precisely like this one, were they?"

"Blessed if I know!" says Old Hickory. "No, come to think of it, they were all different."

"Ah, I thought so!" says the Doc, sort of suckin' in his breath satisfied. "Now, just what

flowers did the first one contain, I should like to know."

"Why, hang it all, man, I can't remember!" says Old Hickory. "I threw the things into the waste basket."

"Ah, that was careless, very careless," says the Doc. "It would have helped. One ought to cultivate, Mr. Ellins, the habit of accurately observing small details. However, we shall see what can be done with this," and once more he puckers his lips, furrows up his noble brow, and gazes steady at floral exhibit No. 4, turnin' it round slow between his fat fingers and almost goin' into a trance over it.

"Hadn't you better take a look around the offices," suggests Old Hickory, "examine the doors, and so on?"

"No, no!" says Bingstetter, wavin' away the interruption. "No bypaths. The trained mind rejects everything contributory, subordinate. It refuses to be led off into a maze of unsupported conjecture. It seeks only the vital, primogenitive fact, the hidden truth at the heart of things. And that is all here—here!"

Piddie leans forward for another look at the flowers, and wags his head solemn, I edges around for a closer view myself, and Old Hickory stares puzzled.

"You don't mean to say," says he, "that just by gazing at a few flowers you can——"

"S-s-s-sh!" breaks in the Doc, holdin' up a warnin' hand. "It is coming. I am working outward from the primal fact toward the objective. It is evolving, taking on definite proportions, assuming shape."

"Well, what's the result?" demands the boss, hitchin' restless in his chair.

"Patience, my dear Sir, patience," says the Doc soothin'. "The introduceductive method cannot be hurried. It is an exact process, requiring utmost concentration, until in the fullness of the moment— Ah, I have it!"

"Eh?" says Old Hickory.

"One moment," says the Doc. "A trifling detail is still missing,—the day of the week. To-day is Wednesday, is it not? Now, on what day of last week did you receive a—er—similar token?"

Old Hickory finally reckons up that it must have been last Wednesday.

"And the week before?" goes on the Doc. "The bunch of flowers appeared then on Wednesday, did it not?"

Yes, he was pretty sure it did.

"Ah!" says Bingstetter, settlin' back in his chair like it was all over, "then the cumulative character is established. And such exact recurrence cannot be due to chance. No, it has all been nicely calculated, carried out with relentless precision. Four Wednesdays, four floral threats!"

"Threats?" says Mr. Ellins, sittin' up prompt.

"You failed to read them," says the Doc. "That is what comes of neglecting minor details. But fortunately I came in time to decipher this one. Observe the fateful number,—thirteen. Note the colors here,—brown, golden, pink. The pink of the mallow means youth, the goldenrod stands for hoarded wealth, the brown for age. And all are bound together by wire grass, which is the tightening snare. A menacing missive! There will come another on Wednesday next."

"Think so?" says Old Hickory.

"I am positive," says the Doc. "One more. We will allude to it for the present, if you choose, as the fifth bouquet. And this fifth token will be red, blood red! Mr. Ellins, you are a marked man!"

"The blazes you say!" snorts Old Hickory. "Well, it won't be the first time. Who's after me now, though?"

"Five desperate men," says the Doc, countin' 'em off on his fingers. "Four have given evidence of their subtle daring. The fifth is yet to appear. He will come on Wednesday next, and then—he will find that his coming has been anticipated. I shall be here in person. Now, let me see—there is a room connecting with this? Ah, very well. Have three policemen in readiness there. I think it can be arranged so that our man will walk in among them of his own accord. That is all. Give yourself no uneasiness, Mr. Ellins. For a week you will be undisturbed. Until then, Sir, au revoir."

With that he bows dignified and motions Piddie to lead the way out. I slides out too, leavin' Old Hickory sittin' there starin' sort of puzzled and worried at the wall. And, honest, whether you took any stock in the Doc's yellow forecast or not, it listens kind of creepy. Course, with him usin' all that highbrow language, I couldn't exactly follow how he gets to it; but there's no denyin' that

it sounds mighty convincin'.

And yet—well, I can't say just what there was about Bingstetter that got me leery; but somehow he reminds me of a street faker or a museum lecturer. And it does seem sort of fishy that, just by gazin' at a bunch of flowers, he could dope out all this wild tale about five desp'rate men. Still, there was no gettin' away from the fact that he had hit it right about the bouquets appearin' reg'lar every Wednesday. That must mean something. But why Wednesdays? Now, what was there that happens on Wednesday that don't—

Say, you know how you'll get a fool hunch sometimes, that'll seem such a nutty proposition first off that you'll almost laugh at yourself for havin' it; and yet how it'll rattle around in your bean persistent, until you quit tryin' to get rid of it? Well, this one of mine strikes me about as I'm snugglin' down into the hay that night, and there was no gettin' away from it for hours.

I expect I did tear off a few chunks of slumber between times; but I was wide awake long before my regular hour for rollin' out, and after makin' three or four stabs at a second nap I gives it up, slips down for an early breakfast, and before eight A.M. I'm down in the basement of the Corrugated Buildin' interviewin' the assistant superintendent in his little coop of an office. I comes out whistlin' and lookin' wise. And that night after I'd made a trip over to Long Island across the Queensboro Bridge I looks wiser still. Nothin' to do until next Wednesday.

And when it comes it sure opens up like it's goin' to be a big day, all right! At first Old Hickory announces that he ain't goin' to have any cops campin' around in the directors' room. It was all blithering nonsense! Hadn't he lived through all sorts of warnin's before? And he'd be eternally blim-scuttled if he was goin' to get cold feet over a few faded flowers!

There was Piddie, though, with his say. His idea is to have the reserves from two precincts scattered all over the shop, and he lugs around such a serious face and talks so panicky that at last the boss compromises on havin' two of the buildin' specials detailed for the job. We smuggles 'em into the big room at eleven o'clock, and tells 'em to lay low until they gets the word. Next comes Bingstetter, blinkin' mysterious, and has himself concealed behind a screen in the private office. By that time Old Hickory is almost as nervous as anybody.

"Fine state of affairs, things are at now," he growls, "when a man isn't safe unless he has a bodyguard! That's what comes of all this political agitation!"

"Have no fear," says the Doc; "you will not receive the fifth bouquet. Boy, leave that door into the next room slightly ajar. He will try to escape that way."

"Ajar she is," says I, proppin' it open with a 'phone directory.

"'Tis well," says the Doc. "Now leave us."

I was goin' to, anyway; for at exactly noon I had a date somewhere else. There was a window openin' off the bondroom that was screened by a pile of cases, and out from that was an iron fire escape runnin' along the whole court side on our floor. I'd picked that window out as bein' a good place to scout from. And I couldn't have been better placed; for I saw just who I was expectin' the minute he heaves in sight. I'd like to have had one glimpse, though, of Old Hickory and the Doc and Piddie while they was watchin' and listenin' and holdin' their breath inside there. But I'm near enough when the time comes, to hear that chorus of gasps that's let loose at twelve-twenty-six exact.

"Ha!" says the Doc. "As I told you—a red rose!"

"Well, I'll be slam-whizzled!" explodes Old Hickory.

"But—but where did it come from?" pants Piddie. "Who—who could have—"

And that's just when little Willie, after creepin' cautious along the fire escape, gives his unsuspectin' victim the snappy elbow tackle from behind and shoves him into view.

"Here's your desperado!" says I, givin' my man the persuadin' knee in the small of his back. "Ah, scramble in there, Old Top! You ain't goin' to be hurt. In with you now!"

"Look out!" squeals Piddie. "Police, police!"

"Ah, can that!" I sings out, helpin' my prisoner through the window and followin' after. "Police nothin'! Shoo 'em back, will you? He's as harmless as a kitten."

"Torchy," calls Old Hickory, recoverin' his nerve a little, "what is the meaning of this, and who have you there?"

"This," says I, straightenin' my man up with a shoulder slap, "is the bearer of the fifth bouquet—also the fourth, and the third, and so on. This is Mr. Cubbins of the Consolidated Window Cleanin' Company. Ain't that right, eh, old sport?"

"'Enery Cubbins, Sir," says he, scrapin' his foot polite and jerkin' off his old cap.

"And was it you who just threw this thing on my desk?" demands Old Hickory, pointin' to the red rose.

"Meanin' no 'arm at all, Sir, no 'arm at all," says Cubbins.

"And do I understand that you brought those other flowers in the same way?" goes on Mr. Ellins.

"Not thinkin' you'd mind, Sir," says Cubbins; "but if there's henny hoffense given, I asks pardon, Sir."

And there couldn't be any mistakin' the genuine tremble in that weak, pipin' voice, or the meek look in them watery old eyes. For Cubbins is more or less of a human wreck, when you come to size him up close,—a thin, bent-shouldered, faded lookin' old party, with wispy, whitish hair, a peaked red nose, and a peculiar, whimsical quirk to his mouth corners. Old Hickory looks him over curious for a minute or so.

"Huh!" he grunts at last. "So you're the one, eh? But why the blue-belted blazes did you do it?"

All Cubbins does, though, is to finger his cap bashful.

"Well, Torchy," says Mr. Ellins, "you seem to be running this show. Perhaps you'll tell us."

"That's further'n I've got," says I. "You see, when I traced this floral tribute business down to a window washer, I——"

"In the name of all that's brilliant," breaks in Old Hickory, "how did you ever do that?"

"Why, I got to thinkin' about it," says I, "and it struck me that we had our glass cleaned every Wednesday, and if there was no way of anyone smugglin' flowers in through the doors, the windows was all there was left, wa'n't it? Also who's most likely to be monkeyin' around outside, fifteen stories up, but a window washer?"

"Ha!" says Old Hickory through his teeth. "And did you do that by the introduceductive process, may I ask?"

"No such bunk as that," says I. "Just used my bean, that's all. Then I got Mac, the assistant buildin' super, to put me wise as to who had the windows on our floor, and by throwin' a bluff over the 'phone I made the Consolidated people locate Mr. Cubbins for me. Found him putterin' round in his garden over in Astoria, and pumped more or less out of him; but when it come to gettin' him to explain why it was he'd picked you out, Mr. Ellins, as a mark for his bouquets, I fell down complete. Mr. Cubbins is English, as maybe you noticed by his talk, and he used to be a house painter before his health got so bad. Now he lives with his son-in-law, who tells me that the old gent——"

"E's a bit of a liar, my son-in-law is," pipes up Cubbins; "a bally Socialist, Sir, and I'm ashymed to s'y 'as 'ow 'e's fond of abusin' 'is betters. Thet's 'ow it all come abaht, Sir. Alw'ys tykin' on over the rich, 'e is; and 'e's most fond of s'yin' wrong things abaht you special, Sir; callin' you a bloodsucking predatory person, Sir, and himpolite nimes like thet. 'Ah, stow thet, Jimmy!!' says I. 'All bloomin' lies, they are. There ayn't a finer man lives than Mr. Ellins,' says I. 'Ow do you know?' says 'e. 'Ow?' says I. 'Don't I wash 'is hoffice windows?' But 'e keeps at it of evenin's, s'yin' as 'ow you do this and that, an' 'e fair talks me down, Jimmy does. But I know w'at I knows; so to relieve my feelin's a bit I've been bringin' you the flowers on the sly, Sir; meanin', as I says before, no 'arm at all, Sir."

"Well, I'll be dashed!" says Old Hickory, squintin' at Cubbins humorous. "So you think I'm a good man, eh?"

"I'm quite sure of it, Sir," says he. "As I was tellin' Jimmy only last night, 'W'y, at 'ome 'e'd be a Lord!' And so you would, Sir. But, as I sees it, you're just as much 'ere, Sir. You build things up, and keep things goin',—big things, such as the likes of me and Jimmy mykes our livin' from. And it ayn't just your money mykes you a gryte man; it's your brains and your big 'eart. I know w'at I knows, Sir, an' I 'opes as 'ow you'll tyke no hoffense at the flowers, Sir."

"Not a bit, Cubbins," says Old Hickory, smilin' grim. "In fact, that's a first rate idea of yours. We ought to have some sort of flowers here all the time. Got many left in your garden, have you, Cubbins?"

"Plenty, Sir," says Cubbins. "The roses'll be gone soon now, Sir; but there's golden glow, and hasters comin' on, and zinnias, and——"

"Then you're engaged, Cubbins," says Old Hickory, "to supply the office with fresh ones every day. When yours give out we'll have to buy some, I suppose. And you'll give up this window cleaning job at once. It's too dangerous. I can't afford to have the only man in the United States who holds a good opinion of me risking his neck like that."

"Thankee kindly, Sir," says Cubbins, beamin' grateful. "And we'll see w'at Jimmy 'as to s'y to

that, so we will!"

"Report that in full," says Old Hickory. "And, Mr. Piddie, see that Mr. Cubbins' name goes on the payroll from today. But, by the way, where is your distinguished friend, the scientific investigator?"

"Why—er—why——" says Piddie, flushin' up and swallowin' hard, "Dr. Bingstetter left a moment ago."

"Did, eh?" grunts Old Hickory. "He should have stayed awhile and allowed Torchy to give him a few pointers on evolving things from primal facts."

"Ye-e-e-es, Sir," says Piddie, his face all tinted up lovely.

Which winds up, as you might say, the Mystery of the Fifth Bouquet. But, believe me, there ain't any tamer party around the shop these days than this same J. Hemmingway Piddie. And if the old habits get to croppin' out any time, all I got to do is shut one eye, put my finger to my lips, and whisper easy, "Ah, go tell that to Doc Bungstarter!" That gets him behavin'.

And Cubbins, why—he's blossomed out in a new fall suit, and he stops at the desk every few days to tell me how he put it all over Jimmy the night before. So that was some stroke, what?

CHAPTER III

WHEN IRA SHOWED SOME PEP

It was good domework of Mr. Robert's to tip me off about this Higgins party, or there's no knowin' how hard a time he might have had gettin' through the brass gate. As it is, the minute I spots the watch chain and the round cuffs and the neck freckles, I sizes him up as the expected delegate from the fresh mackerel and blueberry pie district. One of these long, lanky specimens, he is, with a little stoop to his shoulders, ginger-colored hair and mustache, and a pair of calm, sea-blue eyes that look deep and serious.

I finds him pacin' deliberate up and down the waitin' room at eight-fifty-three A.M., which is two minutes ahead of my schedule for openin' the Corrugated for gen'ral business. His overcoat and a crumpled mornin' paper are on the bench; so I figures he's been there quite some time. Course, it might have been a stray Rube of most any name; but I thinks I'll take a chance.

"Mornin', Ira," says I.

"Howdy," says he, as natural as if this was a reg'lar habit of ours. Which puts it up to me to find out if I'm right, after all.

"Mr. Higgins, ain't it?" says I.

He nods.

"When did you get in?" says I.

"About six," says he.

"Come down by train or boat?" says I.

"Train," says he.

"You've had breakfast, I suppose?" I goes on.

Another nod. Oh, yes, for an economical converser, he was about the most consistent breath saver I ever tackled. You could easy go hoarse havin' a little chat with him. You'd need lots of time too; for after every one of my bright little sallies Ira looks me over in that quiet, thoughtful way of his, then counts fifty to himself, and fin'ly decides whether it'll be a grunt or just a nod. Gettin' information out of him was like liftin' a trunk upstairs one step at a time. I manages to drag out, though, that he'd been hangin' around ever since the buildin' was opened by the day watchman at seven o'clock.

"Well," says I, "Mr. Robert was lookin' for you to blow in today; but not quite so early. It'll be near ten before he shows up. Better come inside and have a comf'table chair."

He takes that proposition up with himself, fin'ly passin' on it favorable; and from then on he sits there, with never a move or a blink, watchin' solemn all the maneuvers that a battery of lady typists has to go through before settlin' down for a forenoon's work. I'll bet he could tell you too, a month from now, just how many started with gum, and which ones renewed their facial scenery

with dabs from the chamois.

So you can see why I was some relieved when Mr. Robert arrives and takes him off my hands. I knew from what he'd said the day before that he'd planned to have about a half-hour interview with Mr. Higgins; but when the noon hour struck: Ira was still there. At one-fifteen they goes out to lunch together, and at two-thirty they comes back. It's after four when Mr. Robert fin'lly comes out to the gate with his brow wrinkled up.

"Torchy," says he, "how is your bump of diplomacy today?"

"It's a dimple, I expect," says I.

"You're entirely too modest," says he. "Now, I remember several occasions when you have ___"

"Oh, I gen'rally have my nerve with me, if that's what you mean," says I.

"But I don't mean that," says he. "Perhaps finesse is the better word."

"It's all the same to me," says I. "If I've got it in stock, it's yours. What do I work it on?"

"Mr. Higgins," says he.

"Then score up a goose egg in advance," says I. "It would take a strong-arm hypnotizer to put the spell on Ira."

Mr. Robert grins. "Then you have already tested Mr. Higgins' conversational powers?" says he.

"Almost lost my voice gettin' him to say good mornin'," says I. "Say, you'd think he'd done all his talkin' by cable, at a dollar a word. Where'd he drift in from, anyway?"

"Boothbay Harbor," says Mr. Robert.

"Is that a foreign country," says I, "or a nickname for some flag station?"

"It's quite a lively little seaport, I believe," says Mr. Robert, "up on the coast of Maine."

"Oh, Maine!" says I. "Up there they're willin' to call a town anything that'll get a laugh. But what's the rest of the scandal?"

It wasn't any thrillin' tale, though. Seems Mr. Robert had gone into the yachtin' regattas as usual this last summer; but, instead of liftin' the mugs, as he'd been in the habit of doin', he'd been beat out by a new entry,—beat bad too. But he wouldn't be an Ellins if he let it go at that. Not much! His first move is to find out who built the Stingaree, and his next is to wire in an order to the same firm to turn out a sixty-footer that'll go her just one better. Not gettin' any straight answer to that, he sends word for the head of the yacht works to come on at his expense. Mr. Higgins is the result.

"But the deuce of it is," says Mr. Robert, "that, while I'm convinced he is the cleverest designer of racing yawls that we have in the whole country, and while he admits quite cheerfully that he can improve on this year's model, I can't get him to say positively that he will build such a boat for me."

"Yes, I should expect that would be more'n he'd let go of all in one day," says I.

"But, confound it all!" says Mr. Robert, "I want to know now. All I can get out of him, though, is that he can't decide for a while. Seems to have something or other on his mind. Now, if I knew what was bothering him, you see, I might—well, you get the point, Torchy. I'm going to leave it to you to find out."

"Me!" says I. "Gee! I ain't any thought extractor, Mr. Robert."

"But you have rather a knack of getting to the bottom of things," he insists, "and if I should explain to Mr. Higgins my regret at being unable to take him out to dinner, and should present you as my substitute for the evening—why, you might get some hint, you see. At least, I wish you'd try it."

"Bring him on, then," says I; "but it's like playin' a 30 to 1 shot. Oh, sure, a couple of tens'll be more'n enough for all the expense account we can cook up."

And you should have seen me towin' this Down East sphinx around town, showin' him the sights, and tryin' to locate his chummy streak. It was most like makin' a long distance call over a fuzzy wire; me strainin' my vocal chords bein' chatty, and gettin' back only now and then a distant murmur. It was Ira's first trip to a real Guntown, where we have salaried crooks and light up our Main-st. with whisky signs; but he ain't got any questions to ask or any comments to pass. He just allows them calm eyes of his to wander placid here and there over the passersby, almost like he was expectin' to see someone he knew, and takin' mighty little notice of anything in

partic'lar.

"That's the Metropolitan tower over there, Mr. Higgins," says I. "See the big clock?"

Ira takes one glance and nods his head.

"And here comes one of them new double-decker Broadway cars they're tryin' out," I goes on. "How's that?"

But no enthus'm from Ira. Must be a hot town, that Boothbay joint! Along about six-thirty I suggests that it's time for the big eats, and tries to sound him on his partic'lar fancy in the food line.

"Plate of fish chowder would suit me," says Ira after due contemplation.

"Fish what?" says I. "'Fraid we don't grow anything like that on Broadway. Nix on the shore dinner! You trust it to me, Mr. Higgins, and I'll steer you up against some appetite teasers that'll make you forget all the home cookin' you ever met."

With that I leads him to the flossiest French cafe I knew of, got him planted comf'table under an illuminated grape arbor, signals François-with-the-gold-chain-around-his-neck to stand by, and remarks casual, "Wine list for this gentleman. Cut loose, Mr. Higgins. This is on the boss, you know."

"What say?" says he, runnin' his eye over the book that the waiter holds out. "Rum? No, Sir!"

"Flit then, François," says I. "We're two dry ones."

And my hope of gettin' a tongue loosener into Ira goes glimmerin'. When it comes to tacklin' strange dishes, though, he was no quitter, followin' me from bouillabaisse to café parfait without battin' an eyelash, and me orderin' reckless from the card just to see what the things looked like.

I don't know whether it was the fancy rations, or the sporty crowd around us, or the jiggly music, or a combination of all three; but by the time I've induced Mr. Higgins to tackle a demitasse and light up a seven-inch Havana he mellows enough so that he's almost on the point of makin' a remark all by himself.

"Well," says I encouragin', "why not let it come?"

And it does. "By gorry!!" says he. "It's most eight o'clock. What time do the shows begin?"

"I was just go in' to mention that," says I. "Plenty of time, though. Anything special you'd like to see?"

"Why, yes," says he. And then, glancin' around cautious, he leans across the table and asks mysterious, "Say, where's Maizie Latour actin'?"

Honest, it comes out so unexpected he had me gaspin'. "Oh, you Boothbay ringer!" says I. "Maizie, eh? Now, who would have thought it? And you only landed this mornin'! Maizie—er—what was that again?"

"Latour," says he, flushin' up some and tryin' not to notice my josh.

"It's by me," says I. "Sounds like musical comedy, though. Is she a showgirl, or one of the chicken ballet?"

Ira shakes his head puzzled. "All I know," says he, "is that she's actin' somewhere in New York, and—and I'd like to find out where. I—I got to!" he adds emphatic.

"Then you ought to have said that before," says I, "and Mr. Robert would have put one of his chappy friends on the job. Sorry, but when it comes to chorus girls, I ain't—"

"Hold on!" he breaks in. "You're sort of jumpin' at things, Son. The fact is I—well, I guess I might's well tell you as anyone. I—I got to tell someone."

"Help!" thinks I. "The dam's goin' to give way."

"You see," he goes on, "it's like this: Nellie's an old friend of mine, and——"

"Nellie!" says I. "You just said Maizie."

"That's what I hear she goes by on the stage," says he. "She was Nellie Mason up to the Harbor."

"You don't mean it?" says I. "What was she doin' there?"

"She was table girl at the Mansion House," says he.

"Which?" says I. "Oh, dish juggler, eh? And now she's on the stage? Some jump for Nellie!"

But, honest now, Higgins, you don't mean to spring one of them mossy 'Way Down East drammers on me as the true dope? Come now, don't tell me you and she used to go to school together, and all that!"

No, it wa'n't quite on that line. She was only one of Boothbay's fairest daughters by adoption, havin' drifted in from some mill town—Biddeford, I think it was—where a weaver's strike had thrown her out of a job. She was half Irish and half French-Canadian, and, accordin' to Ira's description, she was some ornamental.

Anyway, she had the boys all goin' in no time at all. Ira was mealin' at the Mansion House just then, though; so he was in on the ground floor from the start. Even at that, how he managed to keep the rail with so much competition is more'n I can say; but there's something sort of clean and wholesome lookin' about him, and I expect them calm, sea-blue eyes helped along. Anyway, him and Nellie kept comp'ny there, I take it, for three or four months quite steady, and Ira admits that he was plumb gone on her.

"Well, what was the hitch?" says I. "Wouldn't she be Mrs. Higgins?"

"Guess she would if I had asked her," says he; "but I didn't get around to it quick enough. Fact is, I'd just bought out the boat shop, and I had fifteen or twenty men to work for me, with four new keels laid down at once, and—well, I was mighty rushed with work just then and——"

"I get you," says I. "While you was makin' up your mind what to say, some wholesale drug drummer with a black mustache won her away."

It's more complicated than that, though. One of the chambermaids had a cousin who was assistant property man with a Klaw & Erlanger comp'ny, and he'd sent on the tip how some enterprisin' manager was lookin' for fifty new faces for a Broadway production; and so, if Cousin Maggie wanted to shake the hotel business, here was her chance. Maggie wanted to, all right; but she lacked the nerve to try it alone. Now, if Nellie would only go along too—why——

And it happens this was one night when Ira had overlooked a date he had with Nellie, and that while he was doin' overtime at the boatworks Nellie was waitin' lonesome on the corner all dressed to go over to South Bristol to a dance. So this bulletin from the great city finds her in a state of mind.

"Course," says Maggie, "you got a feller, and all that."

"Humph!" says Nellie.

"And there's no tellin'," Maggie goes on, glancin' at her critical, "if your figure would suit."

"If they can stand for yours," says Nellie, "I guess I'll take a chance too. Come on. We'll take the early morning boat."

And they did. Ira didn't get the details until about a month later, when who should drift back to the Mansion House but Maggie. Along with two or three hundred other brunettes and imitation blondes, she'd been shuffled into the discard. But Nellie had been signed up first rattle out of the box, and accordin' to the one postcard that had come back from her since she was now flaggin' as Maizie Latour. But no word at all had come to Ira.

"If I'd only bought that ring sooner!" he sighs. "I've got it now, though. Bought it in Portland on my way down. See?" and he snaps open a white satin box, disclosin' a cute little pearl set in a circle of chip diamonds.

"That's real dainty and classy," says I.

"Ought to be," says Ira. "It cost me seventeen-fifty. But there's so blamed much to this place that I don't see just how I'm goin' to find her, after all."

"Ah, cheer up, Ira!" says I. "You've got me int'rested, you have, and, while I ain't any theatrical directory, I expect I could think up some way to—— Why, sure! There's a Tyson stand up here a few blocks, where they have all the casts and programmes. Let's go have a look."

It wa'n't a long hunt, either. The third one we looked at was "Whoops, Angelina!" and halfway down the list of characters we finds this item: "Sunflower Girls—Tessie Trelawney, Mae Collins, Maizie Latour——"

"Here we are!" says I. "And there's just time to get in for the first curtain."

Say, I expect you've seen this "Whoops, Angelina!" thing. Just punk enough to run a year on Broadway, ain't it? And do you remember there along towards the end of the first spasm where they ring in that "Field Flowers Fair" song, with a deep stage and a diff'rent chorus for each verse? Well, as the Sunflowers come on, did you notice special the second one from the right end? That's Maizie.

And, believe me, she's some queen! Course, it's a bunch of swell lookers all around, or they wouldn't be havin' the S.R.O. sign out so often; but got up the way she was, with all them yellow

petals makin' a sort of frame for her, and them big dark eyes rollin' bold and sassy, this ex-table girl from the Mansion House stands out some prominent.

"By gorry!" explodes Ira, as he gets his first glimpse. And from then on he sits with his eyes glued on her as long as she's on the stage.



[Illustration: "By gorry!" explodes Ira, as he gets his first glimpse.]

He had a good view too; for comin' late all I could get was upper box seats at three a throw, and I shoves Ira close up to the rail. That one remark is all he has to unload durin' the whole performance, and somehow I didn't have the heart to break in with any comments. You see, I wa'n't sure how he might be takin' it; so I waits until the final curtain, and then nudges him out of his dream.

"Well, how about it?" says I. "Ready to scratch your entry now, are you?"

"Eh?" says he, rousin' up. "Pull out? No, Sir! I—I'm going to give her a chance to take that ring."

"You are?" says I. "Well, well! Right there with the pep, ain't you? But how you goin' to manage it?"

"Why, I—I don't know," says he, lookin' blank. "Say, Son, can't you fix it for me some way? I—I want Nellie to go back with me. If I could only see her for a minute, and explain how it was I couldn't—"

"You win, Ira!" says I. "Hanged if there ain't Tucky Moller down there in an usher's uniform. He's an old friend of mine. We'll see what he can do."

Tucky was willin' enough too; but the best he can promise is to smuggle a note into the dressin' rooms. We waits in the lobby for the answer, and inside of five minutes we has it.

"Ain't they the limit, these spotlight chasers?" says Tucky. "She tells me to chuck it in the basket with the others, and says she'll read it to-morrow. Huh! And only a quarter tip after the second act when I lugs her in a bid to a cabaret supper!"

"Tonight?" says I. "Where at, Tucky?"

"Looney's," says he, "with a broker guy that's been buyin' B-10 every night for a week."

But when I leads Ira outside and tries to explain how the case stands, and breaks it to him gentle that his stock has taken a sudden slump, it develops that he's one of these gents who don't know when they're crossed off.

"I've got to see her tonight, that's all," says he. "What's the matter with our going to the same place?"

"For one thing," says I, "they wouldn't let us in without our open-faced clothes on. Got yours with you?"

"Full evenin' dress?" says Ira, with his eyes bugged. "Why, I never had any."

"Then it's by-by, Maizie," says I.

"Dog-goned if it is!" says he. "Guess I can wait around outside, can't I?"

"Well, you have got sportin' blood, Ira," says I. "Sure, there's nothin' to stop your waitin' if you don't block the traffic. But maybe it'll be an hour or more."

"I don't care," says he. "And—and let's go and have a glass of soda first."

Course, I couldn't go away and leave things all up in the air like that; so after Ira'd blown himself we wanders up to the cabaret joint and I helps him stick around.

It's some lively scene in front of Looey's at that time of night too; with all the taxis comin' and goin' and the kalsomined complexions driftin' in and out, and the head waiters coppin' out the five-spots dexterous. And every little while there's something extra doin'; like a couple of college hicks bein' led out by the strong-arm squad for disputin' a bill, or a perfect gent all ablaze havin' a debate with his lady-love, or a bunch of out-of-town buyers discoverin' the evenin' dress rule for the first time and gettin' peeved over it.

But nothin' can drag Ira's gaze from that revolvin' exit door for more'n half a minute. There he stands, watchin' eager every couple that comes out; not excited or fidgety, you understand, but calm and in dead earnest. It got to be midnight, then half past, then quarter to one; and then all of a sudden there comes a ripplin', high-pitched laugh, and out trips a giddy-dressed fairy in a gilt and rhinestone turban effect with a tall plume stickin' straight up from the front of it. She's one of these big, full-curved, golden brunettes, with long jet dangles in her ears and all the haughty airs of a grand opera star. I didn't dream it was the one we was lookin' for until I sees Ira straighten up and step out to meet her.

"Nellie," says he, sort of choky and pleadin'.

It's a misfire, though; for just then she's turned to finish some remark to a fat old sport with flat ears and bags under his eyes that's followin' close behind. So it ain't until she's within a few feet of Higgins that she sees him at all. Then she stares at him sort of doubtful, like she could hardly believe her eyes.

"Nellie," he begins again, "I've been wanting to tell you how it was that——"

"You!" she breaks in. And with that she throws her head back and laughs. It wa'n't what you might call a pleasant laugh, either. It sounds cold and hard and bitter.

That's the extent of the reunion too. She's still laughin' as she brushes by him and lets the old sport help her into the taxi; and a second later we're left standin' there at the edge of the curb with another taxi rollin' up in front of us. I notices that Ira's holdin' something in his hand that he's starin' at foolish. It's the satin box with the seventeen-fifty ring in it.

"Well," says I, as we steps back, "returns all in, ain't they?"

"Not by a long shot!" says Ira. "Dinged if I don't know someone that'll be glad to take a ring from me, and that's Maggie!"

"Whew!" says I. "Well, that's some quick shift. Then you ain't goin' to linger round with a busted heart?"

"Not much!" says Ira. "Guess I've played fool about long enough. I'm goin' home."

"That's gen'rally a safe bet too," says I. "But how about buildin' that boat for Mr. Robert?"

"I'll build it," says he; "that is, soon as I can fix it up with Maggie."

"Then it's a cinch," says I; "for you look to me, Ira, like one of the kind that can come back strong."

So, you see, I had somethin' definite to report next mornin'.

"He will, eh? Bully!" says Mr. Robert. "But why couldn't he have said as much to me yesterday? What was the trouble?"

"Case of moth chasin'," says I, "from the kerosene circuit to the white lights. But, say, I didn't know before that Broadway had so many recruitin' stations. They ought to put Boothbay Harbor on the map for this."

CHAPTER IV

TORCHY BUGS THE SYSTEM

Guess I ain't mentioned Mortimer before. Didn't seem hardly worth while. You know—there are parties like that, too triflin' to do any beefin' about. But, honest, for awhile there first off this young shrimp that was just makin' his debut as one of Miller's subslaves in the bondroom did get on my nerves more or less. He's a slim, fine-haired, fair-lookin' young gent, with quick, nervous ways and a habit of holdin' his chin well up. No boob, you understand. He was a live one, all right.

And it wa'n't his havin' his monogram embroidered on his shirt sleeves or his wearin' a walkin' stick down to work that got me sore. But you don't look for the raw rebuff from one of these twelve-dollar file jugglers. That's what he slips me, though, and me only tryin' to put across the cheery greetin'!

"Well, Percy," says I, seein' him wanderin' around lonesome durin' lunch hour, "is it you for the Folies today, or are you takin' a chance on one of them new automatic grub factories with me?"

"Beg pardon?" says he, givin' me that frigid, distant look.

"Ah, can the hauteur!" says I. "We're on the same payroll. Maybe you didn't notice me before, though. Well, I'm the guardian of the gate, and I'm offerin' to tow you to a new sandwich works that's quite popular with the staff."

"Thanks," says he. "I am lurching at my club." And with that he does a careless heel-spin, leavin' me stunned and gawpin'.

"Slap!" thinks I. "You will go doin' the little ray of sunshine act, will you? Lunchin' at his club! Now there's a classy comeback for you! Guess I'll spring that myself sometime. Score up for Percy!"

But I wa'n't closin' the incident at that, and, while in my position it wouldn't have been hardly the thing for me to get out the war club and camp on his trail,—him only a four-flushin' bond clerk,—I was holdin' myself ready for the next openin'. It comes only a few mornin's later when he strolls in casual about nine-thirty and starts to pike by into the cloakroom. But I had my toe against the brass gate.

"What name?" says I.

"Why," says he, flushin' up, "I—er—I work here."

"Excuse," says I, drawin' back the foot. "Mistook you for Alf Vanderbilt come to buy us out."

"Puppy!" says he explosive through his front teeth.

"Meanin' me?" says I. "Why, Algernon! How rough of you!"

He just glares hack over his shoulder and passes on for his session with Miller. I'll bet he got it too; for here in the Corrugated we don't stand for any of that nine-thirty dope except from Mr. Robert.

It's only the next week, though, that Mortimer pulls a couple more delayed entrances in succession, and I sure was lookin' to see him come out with a fresh-air pass in his hand. But it didn't happen. Instead, as I'm in Old Hickory's office a few days later, allowin' him to give me a few fool directions about an errand, in breaks Miller all glowin' under the collar.

"Mr. Ellins," says he, "I can't stand that young Upton. He's got to go!"

"That's too bad," says Old Hickory, shiftin' his cigar to port. "I'd promised his father to give the boy a three months' trial at least. One of our big stockholders, Colonel Upton is, you know. But if you say you can't——"

"Oh, I suppose I can, Sir, in that case," says Miller; "but he's worse than useless in the department, and if there's no way of getting him to observe office hours it's going to be bad for discipline."

"Try docking him, Miller," suggests Mr. Ellins. "Dock him heavy. And pile on the work. Keep him on the jump."

"Yes, Sir," says Miller, grinnin' at me' as he goes out.

And of course this throws a brighter light on Mortimer's case,—pampered son takin' his first whirl at honest toil, and all that. Then later in the day I gets a little private illumination. Mother arrives. Rather a gushy, talky party she is, with big, snappy eyes like Mortimer's, and the same haughty airs. Just now, though, she's a little puffy from excitement and deep emotion.

Seems Mother and Sister Janice are on their way to the steamer, billed to spend the winter abroad. Also it develops that stern Father, standin' grim and bored in the background, has ruled that Son mustn't quit business for any farewell lallygaggin' at the pier. Hence the fam'ly call. As the touchin' scene all takes place in the reception room, just across the brass rail from my desk, I'm almost one of the party.

"Oh, my darling boy!" wails Ma, pushin' back her veils and wrappin' him in the fond clinch.

"Aw, Mother!" protests Mortimer.

"But we are to be so far apart," she goes on, "and with your father in California you are to be all alone! And I just know you'll be forlorn and lonesome in that dreadful boarding house! Oh, it is perfectly awful!"

"Oh, quit it, Mother. I'll be all right," says Mortimer.

"But the work here," comes back Mother. "Does it come so hard? How are you to stand it? Oh, if you had only kept on at college, then all this wouldn't have been necessary."

"Well, I didn't, that's all," says Mortimer; "so what's the use?"

"I shall worry about you all the time," insists Mother. "And you are so careless about writing! How am I to know that you are not ill, or in trouble? Now promise me, if you should break down under the strain, that you will cable me at once."

"Oh, sure!" says Mortimer. "But time's up, Mother. I must be getting back. Good-by."

I had to turn my shoulder on the final break-away, and I thought the whole push had cleared out, when I hears a rustle at the gate, and here's Mother once more, with her eyes fixed investigatin' on me.

"Boy," says she, "are you employed here regularly?"

"I'm one of the fixtures, Ma'am," says I.

"Very well," says she. "I am glad to hear it. And you have rather an intelligent appearance."

"Mostly bluff, though," says I. "You mustn't bank too much on looks."

"Ah, but I can tell!" says she, noddin' her head and squintin' shrewd. "You have a kind face too."

"Ye-e-es?" says I. "But what's this cue for?"

"I will tell you, Boy," says she, comin' up confidential. "You see, I must trust someone in this matter. And you will be right here, where you can see him every day, won't you—my son Mortimer, I mean?"

"I expect I'll have to," says I, "if he sticks."

"Then you must do this for me," she goes on. "Keep close to him. Make yourself his friend."

"Me?" says I. "Well, there might be some trouble about that."

"I understand," says she. "It will be difficult, under the circumstances. And Mortimer has such a proud, reserved nature! He has always been that way. But now that he is thrown upon his own resources, and if you could once gain his confidence, he might allow you to—well, you'll try, won't you? And then I shall depend upon you to send word to me once every week as to how he looks, if he seems happy, how he is getting on in business, and so on. Come, do you promise?"

"Is this a case of philanthropy, or what?" says I.

"Oh, I shall see that you are well repaid," says she.

"That listens well," says I; "but it's kind of vague. Any figures, now?"

"Why—er—yes," says she, hesitatin'. "Suppose I should send you, say, five dollars for every satisfactory report?"

"Then I'm on the job," says I.

And in two minutes more she's left me the address of her London bankers, patted me condescendin' on the shoulder, and has flitted. So here I am with a brand new side line,—an assignment to be friendly at so much per. Can you beat that?

It wa'n't until afterwards, either, when I'm busy throwin' on the screen pictures of how that extra five'll fat up the Saturday pay envelope, that I remembers the exact wordin' of the contract. Five for every satisfactory report. Gee! that's different! Then here's where I got to see that Mortimer behaves, or else I lose out. And I don't waste any time plannin' the campaign. I tackles him as he strolls out thirty seconds ahead of the twelve o'clock whistle.

"After another one of them clubby lunches?" says I.

"What's that to you?" he growls.

"I'm interested, that's all," says I.

"Oh, no, you're not," says he; "you're just fresh."

"Ah, come now, Morty," says I. "This ain't no reg'lar feud we're indulgin' in, you know. Ditch the rude retort and lemme tow you to a joint where for—"

"Thanks," says Mortimer. "I prefer my own company."

"Gee! what poor taste!" says I.

And it looked like I'd gone and bugged any five-spot prospects with my first try.

So I lets Mortimer simmer for a few days, not makin' any more cracks, friendly or otherwise. I was about to hand in a blank report too, when one noon he sort of hesitates as he passes the desk, and then stops.

"I say," he begins, "show me that cheap luncheon place you spoke of, will you?"

It's more of an order than anything else; but that only makes this sudden shift of his more amusin'. "Why, sure," says I. "Soured on the club, have you?"

"Not exactly," says he; "but—well, the fact is, Father must have forgotten to send a check for last month's bill, and I'm on the board—posted, you know."

"Then that wa'n't any funny dream of yours, eh," says I, "this club business? Which is it, Lotos or the Union League?"

"It's my frat club, of course," says Mortimer. "And I don't mind saying that it's a deucedly expensive place for me to go, even when I can sign checks for my meals. I'm always being dragged into billiards, dollar a corner, and that sort of thing. It counts up, and I—I'm running rather close to the wind just now."

"What! And you gettin' twelve?" says I. "Why, say, some supports fam'lies on that. Takes managin', though. But I'll steer you round to Max's, where for a quarter you can—"

"A quarter!" breaks in Mortimer. "But—but that's more than I have left."

"And this only Wednesday!" says I. "Gee! but you have been goin' the pace, ain't you? What is the sum total of the reserve, anyway?"

Mortimer scoops into his trousers pockets, fishin' up a silver knife, a gold cigar clipper, and seventeen cents cash.

"Well, well!" says I. "That is gettin' down to hardpan! It's breakin' one of my business rules, but I see where I underwrite your lunch ticket for the next few days."

"You mean you're going to stake me?" says he. "But why?"

"Well, it ain't on account of your winnin' ways," says I.

"Humph!" says he. "Here! You may have this stickpin as security."

"Gwan!" says I. "I ain't no loan shark. Maybe I'm just makin' an investment in you. Come on to Max's."

I could see Mortimer's nose begin to turn up as we crowds in at a table where a couple of packers from the china store next door was doin' the sword swallowin' act. "What a noisy, messy place!" says he.

"The service ain't quite up to Louis Martin's, that's a fact," says I; "but then, there's no extra charge for the butter and toothpicks."

We tried the dairy lunch next time; but he don't like that much better. Pushin' up to the coffee urn with the mob, and havin' a tongue sandwich slammed down in front of him by a grub hustler that hadn't been to a manicure lately was only a couple of the details Mortimer shies at.

"Ah, you'll soon get to overlook little things like that," says I.

Mortimer shakes his head positive. "It's the disgusting crowd one has to mingle with," says he. "Such a cheap lot of—of roughnecks!"

"Huh!" says I. "Lots of 'em are pullin' down more'n you or me. Some of 'em are almost human too."

"I don't care," says he. "I dislike to mix with them. It's bad enough at the boarding house."

"None of the aristocracy there, either?" says I.

"They're freaks, all of them," says he. "What do you think—one fellow wears an outing shirt in to dinner! Then there's an old person with gray whiskers who—well, I can't bear to watch him. The others are almost as bad."

"When you get to know the bunch you won't mind," says I.

"But I don't care to know them," says Mortimer. "I haven't spoken to a soul, and don't intend to. They're not my kind, you see."

"Are you boastin', or complainin'?" says I. "Anyway, you're in for a lonesome time. What do you do evenin's?"

"Walk around until I'm tired, that's all," says he.

"That's excitin'—I don't think," says I.

Next he branches off on Miller, and starts tellin' me what a deep and lastin' grouch he'd accumulated against his boss. But I ain't encouragin' any hammer play of that kind.

"Stow it, Morty," says I. "I'm wise to all that. Besides, you ought to know you can't hold a job and come floatin' in at any old hour. No wonder you got in Dutch with him! Say, is this your first stab at real work?"

He admits that it is, and when I gets him to describe how he's been killin' time when he wa'n't in college it develops that one of his principal playthings has been a six-cylinder roadster, —mile-a-minute brand, mostly engine and gastank, with just space enough left for the driver to snuggle in among the levers on the small of his back.

"I've had her up to sixty-five an hour on some of those Rhode Island oiled stretches," says Mortimer.

"I expect," says I. "And what was it you hit last?"

"Eh?" says he. "Oh, I see! A milk wagon. Rather stiff damages they got out of us, with the hospital and doctor's bills and all that. But it was more the way I was roasted by the blamed newspapers that made Father so sore. Then my being canned from college soon after—well, that finished it. So he sends Mother and Sis off to Europe, goes on a business trip to California himself, closes the house, and chucks me into this job."

"Kind of poor trainin' for it, I'll admit," says I. "But buck up, Morty; we'll do our best."

"We?" says he, liftin' his eyebrows.

"Uh-huh," says I. "Me and you."

"What's it got to do with you? I'd like to know!" he demands.

"I've been retained," says I. "Never you mind how, but I'm here to pass out the friendly shove, coach you along, see that you make good."

"Well, I like your nerve!" says he, stoppin' short as we're crossin' Broadway. "A young mucker like you help me make good! Say, that's rich, that is! Huh! But why don't you? Come ahead with it, now, if you're such an expert!"

It was a dare, all right. And for a minute there we looked each other over scornful, until I decides that I'll carry on the friend act if I have to risk gettin' my head punched.

"First off, Mortimer," says I, "forgettin' what a great man you are so long as Father's payin' the bills, let's figure on just what your standin' is now. You're a bum bond clerk, on the ragged edge of bein' fired, ain't you?"

He winces some at that; but he still has a comeback. "If it wasn't for that bonehead Miller, I'd get on," he growls.

"Bah!" says I. "He's only layin' down the rules of the game; so it's up to you to follow 'em."

"But he's unreasonable," whines Mortimer. "He snoops around after me, finds fault with everything I do, and fines me for being a little late mornings."

I takes a long breath and swallows hard. Next I tries to strike the saintly pose, and then I unreels the copybook dope just like I believed it myself.

"He does, eh?" says I. "Then beat him to it. Don't be late. Show up at eight-thirty instead of nine. That extra half-hour ain't goin' to kill you. Be the last to quit too. Play up to Miller. Do things the way he wants 'em done, even if you have to do 'em over a dozen times. And use your bean."

"But it's petty, insignificant work," says Mortimer.

"All the worse for you if you can't swing it," says I. "See here, now—how are you goin' to feel afterwards if you've always got to look back on the fact that you begun by fallin' down on a twelve-dollar job?"

Must have got Mortimer in the short ribs, that last shot; for he walks all the rest of the way back to the Corrugated without sayin' a word. Then, just as we gets into the elevator, he unloosens.

"I don't believe it will do any good to try," says he; "but I've a mind to give it a whirl."

I didn't say so, but that was the first thing we'd agreed on that day. So that night I has to send off a report which reads like this:

Mortimer's health O. K.; disposition ragged; business prospects punk.

Hoping you are the same,

TORCHY.

It's a wonder Mortimer didn't have mental indigestion, with all that load of guilt-edged advice on his mind, and I wa'n't lookin' for him to lug it much further'n the door; but, if you'll believe me, he seems to take it serious. Every mornin' after that I finds his hat on the hook when I come in, and whenever I gets a glimpse of him durin' the day he has his coat off and is makin' a noise like the busy bee. At this it takes some time before he makes an impression on Miller; but fin'ly Morty comes out to me with a bulletin that seems to tickle him all over.

"What do you know?" says he. "When Miller was looking over some of my work to-day he breaks out with, 'Very good, Upton. Keep it up.'"

"Well, I expect you told him to chase himself, eh?" says I.

"No," says Mortimer. "I sprung that new scheme of mine for filing the back records, and perhaps he's going to adopt it."

"Think of that!" says I. "Say, you keep on, and you'll be presented with that job for life. But, honest, you don't find Miller such a fish, do you?"

"Oh, I guess he's all right in his way," says Mortimer.

"Then brace yourself, Morty," says I, "while I slip you some more golden words. Tackle that boardin' house bunch of yours. Ah, hold your breath while you're doin' it, if you want to, and spray yourself afterwards with disinfectant, but see if you can't learn to mix in."

"But why?" says he. "I can't see the use."

"Say, for the love of Pete," says I, "ain't it hard enough for me to press out all this wise dope without drawin' diagrams? I don't know why, only you should. Go on now, take it from me."

Maybe it was followin' my hunch, or maybe there wa'n't anything else for him to do, but blamed if this didn't work too. Inside of two weeks he gives me the whole tale, one day as we're sittin' in the armchairs at the dairy lunch.

"Remember my telling you about the fellow who wore the outing shirt?" says he. "Well, say, he's quite a chap, you know. He's from some little town out in Wyoming, and he's on here trying to be a cartoonist—runs a hoisting engine day times and goes to an art school evenings. How's that, eh?"

"Sounds batty," says I. "There's most as many would-be cartoonists as there are nutty ones tryin' to write plays for Belasco."

"But this Blake's going to get there," says Mortimer. "I was up in his room Sunday, and he showed me some of his work. Clever stuff, a lot of it. He's landed a couple of things already. Then there's old man McQuade, the one with the whiskers. Say, he's been all over the world,—Siberia, Africa, Japan, South America. Used to be selling agent for a mill supply firm. He has all his savings invested in an Egyptian cotton plantation that hasn't begun to pay yet, but he thinks it will soon. You ought to hear the yarns he can spin, though!"

"So-o-o?" says I.

"But Aronwitz is the fellow I'm traveling' around with most just now," goes on Mortimer enthusiastic. "Say, he's a wonder! Been over here from Hungary only six years, worked his way through Columbia, copping an A. M. and an A. B., and sending back money to his old mother right along. He's a Socialist, or something, and writes for one of those East Side papers. Then evenings he teaches manual training in a slum settlement house. He took me over with him the other night and got me to help him with his boys. My, but they're a bright lot of youngsters—right off the street too! I've promised to take a class myself."

"In what," says I, "table etiquette?"

"I'm going to start by explaining to them how a gasolene engine works," says Mortimer. "They're crazy to learn anything like that. It will be great sport."

"Mortimer," says I, "a little more of that, and I'll believe you're the guy that put the seed in succeed. Anyone wouldn't guess you was doin' penance."

"I feel that I'm really living at last," says he in earnest.

So in that next report to Mother, after I'd thanked her for the last check and filled in the usual health chart and so on, I proceeds to throw in a few extras about how Son was makin' the great discovery that most folks was more or less human, after all. Oh, I spread myself on that part of it, givin' full details!

"And if that don't charm an extra five out of the old girl," thinks I, "I miss my guess."

Does it? Well, say, that happy thought stays with me for about ten days. At times I figured the bonus might be as high as a fifty. And then one mornin' here comes a ruddy-faced old party that I spots as Colonel Upton. He calls for Mortimer, and the two of 'em has a ten-minute chat in the corridor. Afterwards Morty interviews Miller, and when he comes out next he has his hat and overcoat with him.

"So long, Torchy," says he. "I'm leaving."

"Not for good!" says I. "What's wrong?"

"Mother," says he. "In some way she's found out about the sort of people I've been going around with, and she's kicked up a great row, got Father on the cable, and—well, it's all off. I'm to travel abroad for a year or so to get it out of my system."

"Gee!" says I as he goes out to join the Colonel. "Talk about boobing a swell proposition! But that was too good to last, anyway. And, believe me, if I'm ever asked again to be friendly on a salary, I bet I don't overdo the thing."

CHAPTER V

BREEZING BY WITH PEGGY

He's a great old scout, Mr. Ellins. But he always knows where he wants to get off, all right. He don't whisper his ideas on the subject, either.

"Boy," says he the other mornin' as I answers the buzzer, "I am expecting two young persons to call this forenoon, two young wards of mine. Huh! Wards! As though I wasn't busy enough with my own affairs without— But never mind. Chandler is the name."

"Yes, Sir," says I. "Chandler. Rush 'em right in, shall I?"

"No!" snorts Old Hickory. "What I want you to do is to use a little sense, if you have any. Now, here! I have a committee meeting at ten; those K. & T. people will be here at ten-forty-five; and after that I can't say whether I'll be free or not. Of course I must see the young nuisances; but meantime I want to forget 'em. I am trusting to you to work 'em in when they'll be the least bother."

"Got you," says I. "Chink in with Chandlers. Yes, Sir. Anything more?"

"No. Get out!" he snaps.

Fair imitation of a grouch, eh? But you got to get used to Old Hickory. Besides, there was some excuse for his bein' peeved, havin' a pair of kids camp down on him this way. Course I was wise to the other details. Didn't I take their 'phone message to Mr. Robert only the day before, and send back the answer for 'em to come on?

Seems this was a case of a second cousin, or something like that, a nutty college professor, who'd gone and left a will makin' Mr. Ellins a guardian without so much as askin' by your leave. There was a Mrs. Chandler; but she don't figure in the guardianship. The youngsters had been in school somewhere near Boston; but, this bein' the holidays, what do they do but turn up in New York and express a wild desire to see dear old Guardy.

"Gee!" thinks I. "They don't know when they're well off."

For Old Hickory ain't got a lot of use for the average young person. I've heard him express his sentiments on that point. "Impudent, ill-mannered, selfish, spoiled young barbarians, the boys," says he, "and the girls aren't much better,—silly, giggling young chatterboxes!"

And the way I has it framed up, this was rather a foxy move of the young Chandlers, discoverin' their swell New York relations just as the holiday season was openin'. So I don't figure that the situation calls for any open-arm motions on my part. No, nothin' like that. I'm here to give 'em their first touch of frost.

So about eleven-fifteen, as I glances across the brass rail and sees this pair advancin' sort of uncertain, I'm all prepared to cause a drop in the mercury. They wa'n't exactly the type I had in mind, though. What I'd expected was a brace of high school cutups. But these two are older than that.

The young fellow was one of these big-boned, wide-shouldered chaps, with a heavy, serious look to his face, almost dull. I couldn't tell at first look whether he was a live wire or not. No such suspicions about the girl. She ain't what you'd call a queen, exactly. She's too tall and her face is too long for that. Kind of a cute sort of face, though, with rather a wide mouth that she can twist into a weird, one-sided smile. But after one look at them lively blue eyes you knew she wasn't walkin' in her sleep. It's my cue, though, to let 'em guess what nuisances they were.

"May I see Mr. Ellins?" says the young chap.

"Cards," says I.

He produces the pasteboards.

"Oh, yes!" I goes on. "The wards, eh? Marjorie Chandler, Dudley Winthrop Chandler. Well, you've picked out a busy day, you know."

"Oh, have we?" says Marjorie. "There, Dud! I was afraid we might. Perhaps we'd better not call, after all."

"Good!" says Dudley. "I didn't want to, anyway. We can just send in our cards and leave word that we—"

"Ah, can it!" says I. "Mr. Ellins is expectin' you; only he ain't a man you can walk in on casual."

"But really," puts in Marjorie, "it's just as well if we don't see him."

"Yes, and get me fired for not carryin' out instructions," says I. "My orders are to work you in when there's a chance."

"Oh, in that case," says Marjorie, "perhaps we had better wait. We don't wish to cause trouble for anyone, especially such a bright, charming young—"

"Nix on the josh," says I. "And have a seat while I skirmish."

"Very well, then," says she, screwin' her face up cunnin' and handin' me one of them crooked smiles.

Say, she pretty near had me goin' right from the start. And as I tiptoes into the boss's room I sees he ain't doin' anything more important than signin' letters.

"They're here," says I, "the wards. Is it all right to run 'em in now?"

He grunts, nods his head, and keeps on writin'. So I strolls back to the reception room.

"All right," says I. "I've fixed it up for you."

"Now, wasn't that sweet in you?" gurgles Marjorie, glancin' sideways at Brother. I couldn't

swear it was a wink, either; but it's one of them knowin' fam'ly looks, and she follows it up with a ripply sort of a giggle.

"That's right!" says I. "Have all the fun you want with me; but I'd warn you to ditch the mirth stuff while you're on the carpet. Mr. Ellins don't like it."

"How interesting!" says Marjorie. "Dudley, I hope you understand. We must ditch the mirth stuff."

They swaps another grin at that, and I have a suspicion I'm bein' kidded. Just for that too I decides to stick around while they're gettin' theirs from Old Hickory.

"This way," says I cold and haughty, as I tows 'em into the private office.

Mr. Ellins lets 'em stand there a minute or so without sayin' a word, and then he turns and looks 'em over deliberate. "Humph!" he grunts. "Thought you were younger."

"Yes, Sir," says Marjorie, "we—er—we were at one time."

Old Hickory shoots a quizzin' glance at her; but there ain't the ghost of a smile on her face.

"Huh!" says he. "I've no doubt. And I presume that in due course you'll be older. Having agreed on that, perhaps you will tell me what you're doing in New York?"

Marjorie starts in to give him the answer to that; but Dudley shakes his head at her and takes the floor himself. "You see, Sir," says he real respectful, "Mother's abroad this winter, and when we were asked to visit friends on Long Island we thought——"

"Amy abroad, is she?" breaks in Mr. Ellins. "How does that happen?"

"The Adamses took her with them to Egypt," says Dudley. "They are old friends of ours."

"Humph!" says Old Hickory. "Your mother must be rather popular?"

"Oh, everyone likes Mama," put in Marjorie. "She's asked around everywhere."

"Yes, yes, I've no doubt," says he. "As I remember her, she was rather a—but we won't go into that. Did you come to consult me about anything in particular?"

"No indeed," says Marjorie. "But you've been so good to bother about our affairs, and you've done such wonders with the little property poor Dad left, that we thought, as we were so near, we ought to——"

"We wanted," breaks in Dudley, "to call and thank you personally for your kindness. You have been awfully kind, Sir."

"Think so, do you?" says Mr. Ellins. "Well, is that all?"

"Yes," says Marjorie; "only—only—oh, Dud, I'm going to do it!" And with that she makes a rush, lets out a giggle or two, grabs Old Hickory in a perfectly good hug, and kisses him twice on his bald spot.

He don't even have a chance to struggle, and before he can get out a word it's all over and she has backed off, givin' him the full benefit of one of them twisty smiles. I was lookin' for him to blow up for fair at that. He don't though.

"There, there!" says he. "Not in the least necessary, you know. But if it was something you had to get out of your system, all right. So you've been visiting, eh? Now, what?"

"Why, Marjorie's going back to her school, Sir," says Dudley, "and I to college."

"Before the holidays are over?" says Mr. Ellins.

"Oh, we don't mind," says Marjorie. "We don't want to go home and open up the house; for we should miss Mother so much."

"Suppose you finish out your vacation with us, then?" suggests Old Hickory.

"Oh, thank you, Sir," says Dudley; "but we——"

"Mother wrote us, you see," breaks in Marjorie, "that we mustn't think of bothering you another bit."

"Who says you're a bother?" he demands. "At this time of year I like to have young folks around—if they're the right kind."

"But I'm not sure we are the right kind," says Marjorie. "I—I'm not very serious, you know; and Dud's apt to be noisy. He thinks he can sing."

At which Dudley gets fussed and Old Hickory chuckles.

"I'll take a chance," says Mr. Ellins. "If I'm to be your guardian, I ought to know you better. So you two trot right up to the house and prepare to stay the week out. Here, Torchy! 'Phone for the limousine. No, not a word, young woman! I haven't time to discuss it. Clear out, both of you! See you at dinner."

"There!" says Marjorie as a partin' shot. "I just knew you were an old dear!"

"Stuff!" protests Mr. Ellins. "'Old bear,' is more like it."

And me, I picks up a new cue. I escorts 'em out to the gen'ral office with all the honors. "I'll have that car down in a jiffy, Miss," says I.

"Oh, thank you," says Marjorie. "And if you think of anything we ought to ditch in the meantime—"

"Ah, what's the use rubbin' it in on me," says I, "after the way you put it over Mr. Ellins? I don't count. Besides, anybody that fields their position like you do has got me wearin' their button for keeps."

"Really?" says she. "I shall remember that, you know; and there's no telling what dreadful thing I may do before I go. Is there, Dud?"

"Oh, quit it, Peggy!" says he. "Behave, can't you?"

"Certainly, Brother dear," says she, runnin' her tongue out at him. Ever see anyone who could make a cute play of that? Well, Marjorie could, believe me!

Funny, though, the sudden hit them two seemed to make with Old Hickory. Honest, the few days they was around the house his disposition clears up like coffee does when you stir in the egg. I heard him talkin' to Mr. Robert about 'em, how well brought up and mannerly they was. He even unloads some of it on me, by way of suggestin' 'em as models. You'd most think he'd trained 'em himself.

Bein' chased up to the house on so many errands, I had a chance to get the benefit of some of this improvin' influence. And it was kind of good, I admit, to watch how prompt Dudley hops up every time any older party comes into the room; and how sweet Marjorie is to everybody, even the butler. They was just as nice to each other too,—Brother helpin' Sister on with her wraps, and gettin' down on his knees to put on her rubbers; while Marjorie never forgets to thank him proper, and pat him chummy on the cheek.

"Gee!" thinks I. "A sister like that wouldn't be so bad to have around."

Course, I knew this was comp'ny manners, exhibition stuff; but all the same it was kind of inspirin' to see. It's catchin' too. I even finds myself speakin' gentle to Piddie, and offerin' to help Mr. Ellins with his overcoat.

All of which lasts until here one afternoon, as I'm waitin' in the Ellins' lib'ry for some presents I'm to deliver, when the spell is shattered. I'd heard 'em out in the hall, talkin' low and earnest, and next thing I know they've drifted in where I am and have opened up a lively debate.

"Pooh!" says Marjorie. "You can't stop me."

"See here, Peggy!" comes back Dudley. "Didn't Mother say I was to look after you?"

"She didn't tell you to be so everlasting bossy," says Sister.

"I'm not bossy," comes back Dudley.

"You are so!" says she. "Old fuss budget! Stewcat!"

"Rattlehead!" says Dudley.

"Don't mind me," I breaks in. "I'm havin' my manners improved."

All that brings out, though, is a glance and a shoulder shrug, and they proceed with the squabble.

"Dud Chandler," says Marjorie determined, "I am going to drive the car today! You did yesterday for an hour."

"That's entirely different," says Dudley. "I'm used to it, and Henry said I might."

"And Henry says I may too—so there!" says Marjorie. "And you know I'm just crazy to try it on Fifth Avenue."

"You'd look nice, wouldn't you?" says Brother scornful. "A limousine!"

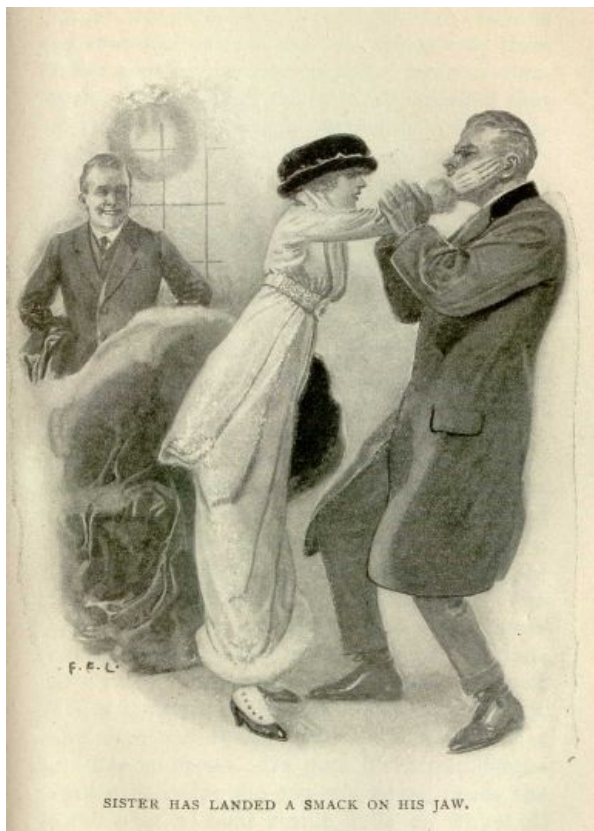
"But Bud Adams let me drive theirs; in Boston too," protests Marjorie.

"Bud Adams is a bonehead, then," says Dudley.

"Dudley Chandler," snaps Sister, her eyes throwin' off sparks, "don't you dare talk that way about my friends!"

"Huh!" says Brother. "If there ever was a boob, that Bud Adams is——"

Say, there's only a flash and a squeal before Sister has landed a smack on his jaw and has both hands in his hair. Looked like a real rough-house session, right there in the lib'ry, when there comes a call for me down the stairs from Mrs. Ellins. She wants to know if I'm ready.



[Illustration: Sister has landed a smack on his jaw.]

"Waitin' here, Ma'am," says I, steppin' out into the hall.

"And Marjorie and Dudley?" says she. "Are the dear young folks ready too?"

"I'll ask 'em," says I. And with that I dodges hack where they're standin' glarin' at each other. "Well," says I, "is it to be a go to a finish, or——"

"Come, Marjorie," says Dudley, "be decent."

"I—am going to do it!" announces Marjorie.

"Mule!" hisses Dudley.

And that's the status quo between these two models when we starts for the car. Marjorie makes a quick break and plants herself in front by the chauffeur, leavin' Brother to climb inside with me and the bundles. He grits his teeth and murmurs a few remarks under his breath.

"Some pep to that sister of yours, eh?" says I.

"She's an obstinate little fool!" says Dudley. "Look at that, now! I knew she would!"

Yep, she had. We're no sooner under way than the obligin' Henry slides out of his seat and lets Miss Marjorie slip in behind the wheel. She can drive a car all right too. You ought to see her throw in the high and go beatin' it down the avenue, takin' signals from the traffic cops at crossing, skinnin' around motor busses, and crowdin' out a fresh taxi driver that tried to hog a corner on her. Nothin' timid or amateurish either about the way she handled that ten-thousand-dollar gas wagon of Old Hickory's. Where I'd be jammin' on both brakes and callin' for help, she just breezes along like she had the street all to herself.

Meantime Brother is sittin' with both feet braced and one hand on the door, now and then sighin' relieved as we scrape through a tight place. But we'd been down quite a ways and was part way back, headed for Riverside Drive, and was rollin' along merry too, when all of a sudden

a fruit faker's wagon looms up out of a side street unexpected, there's a bump and a crash, and there we are, with a spokeless wooden wheel draped jaunty over one mud guard, the asphalt strewn with oranges, and interested spectators gatherin' gleeful from all quarters.

Looks like a bad mess too. The old plug of a horse is down, kickin' the stuffin' out of the harness, and a few feet off is the huckster, huddled up in a heap like a bag of meal. Course, there's a cop on the spot. He pushes in where Dudley is tryin' to help the wagon driver up, takes one look at the wreck, and then flashes his little notebook. He puts down our license number, calls for the owner's name, prods the wagon man without result, tells us we're all pinched, and steps over to a convenient signal box to ring up an ambulance. Inside of three minutes we're the storm center of a small mob, and there's two other cops lookin' us over disapprovin'.

"Take 'em all to the station house," says one, who happens to be a roundsman.

That didn't listen good to me; so I kind of sidles off from our group. It just struck me that it might be handy to have someone on the outside lookin' in. But at that I got to the station house almost as soon as they did. The trio was lined up before the desk Sergeant. Miss Marjorie's kind of white, but keepin' a stiff lip over it; while Dudley is holdin' one hand and pattin' it comfortin'.

"Well, who was driving?" is the first thing the Sergeant wants to know.

"If you please, Sir," speaks up Dudley, "I was."

"Why, Dudley!" says Peggy, openin' her eyes wide. "You know——"

"Hush up!" whispers Brother.

"Sha'nt!" says Marjorie. "I was driving, Mr. Officer."

"Rot!" says Dudley. "Pay no attention to her, Sergeant."

"Suit yourself," says the Sergeant. "I'd just as soon lock up two as one. Then we'll be sure."

"There! You see!" says Brother. "You aren't helping any. Now keep out, will you?"

"But, Dudley——" protests Marjorie.

"That'll do," says the Sergeant. "You'll have plenty of time to talk it over afterwards. Hospital case, eh? Then we can't take bail. Names, now!"

And it's while their names are bein' put on the blotter that I slides out, hunts up a pay station, and gets Mr. Robert on the 'phone. "Better lug along a good-sized roll," says I, after I've explained the case, "and start a lawyer or two this way. You'll need 'em."

"I will," says Mr. Robert. "And you'll meet me at the station, will you?"

"Later on," says I. "I want to try a little sleuthin' first."

You see, I'd spotted the faker's name on the wagon license, and it occurs to me that before any of them damage-suit shysters get to him it would be a good scheme to discover just how bad he was bunged up. So my bluff is that it's an uncle of mine that's been hurt. By pushin' it good and hard too, and insistin' that I'd got to see him, I gets clear into the cot without bein' held up. And there's the victim, snoozin' peaceful.

"Gee!" says I to the nurse, sniffin' the atmosphere. "Had to brace him up with a drink, did you?"

She smiles at that. "Hardly," says she. "He had attended to that, or he wouldn't be in here. This is the alcoholic ward, you know."

"Huh!" says I. "Pickled, was he? But is he hurt bad?"

"Not at all," says she. "He will be all right as soon as he's sober."

Did I smoke it back to the station house? Well, some! And Mr. Robert was there, talkin' to two volunteer witnesses who was ready to swear the faker was drivin' on the wrong side of the street and not lookin' where he was goin'.

"How could he," says I, "when he was soused to the ears?"

Course, it took some time to convince the Sergeant; but after he'd had word from the hospital he concludes to accept a hundred cash, let Dudley go until mornin', and scratch Marjorie's name off the book. Goin' back to the house we four rides inside, with Henry at the wheel.

"I'm awfully sorry, Dud," says Marjorie, snugglin' up to Brother, "but—but it was almost worth it. I didn't know you could be so—so splendid!"

"Stow it, Peggy," says Dudley. "You're a regular brick!"

"No, I'm not," says she. "And think what Mr. Ellins will say!"

"There, there!" says Mr. Robert soothingly. "You were not to blame. I will have someone see the fellow in the morning and settle the damage, however. There's no need to trouble Father about it, none in the least."

"Besides, Peggy," adds Dudley, "I'm the one the charge is made against. So butt out."

Looked like it was all settled that way too, and that Old Hickory's faith in his model wards wa'n't to be disturbed. But when we pulls up at the house there he is, just goin' up the front steps.

"Ah!" says he, beamin'. "There you are, eh? And how has my little Peggy been enjoying herself today?"

"Mr. Ellins," says she, lookin' him square in the eye, "you mustn't call me your Peggy any more. I've just hit a man. He's in the hospital."

"You—you hit someone!" gasps Old Hickory, starin' puzzled at her. "What with?"

"Why, with the car," says she. "I was driving. Dudley tried to stop me; but I was horrid about it. We had a regular fight over it. Then I coaxed Henry to let me, and—and this happened. Don't listen to Dudley. It was all my fault."

"Wow!" I whispers to Mr. Robert. "Now she's spilled the beans!"

Did she? Say, I wa'n't in on the fam'ly conference that follows, but I gets the result from Mr. Robert next day, after he's been to court and seen Dudley's case dismissed.

"No, the young folks haven't been sent away," says he. "In fact, Father thinks more of them than ever. He's going to take 'em both abroad with him next summer."

Wouldn't that smear you, though? Say, I wish someone would turn me loose with a limousine!

CHAPTER VI

GLOOM SHUNTING FOR THE BOSS

Trouble? Say, it was comin' seven diff'rent ways there for awhile,—our stocks on the slump, a quarterly bein' passed, Congress actin' up, a lot of gloom rumors floatin' around about what was goin' to happen to the tariff on steel, and the I Won't Workers pullin' off a big strike at one of our busiest plants. But all these things was side issues compared to this scrap that develops between Old Hickory and Peter K. Groff.

Maybe you don't know about Peter K.? Well, he's the Mesaba agent of Corrugated affairs, the big noise at the dirt end of the dividends. It's Groff handles the ore proposition, you understand, and it's his company that does the inter-locking act between the ore mines and us and the railroads.

Course, I can't give you all the details without pullin' down a subpoena from the Attorney-General's office, and I ain't anxious to crowd Willie Rockefeller, or anybody like that, out of the witness chair. But I can go as far as to state that, as near as I could dope it out, Peter K. was only standin' on his rights, and if only him and Mr. Ellins could have got together for half an hour peaceable-like things could have been squared all around. We needed Groff every tick of the clock, and just because he ain't always polite in statin' his views over the wire wa'n't any first-class reason for us extendin' him an official invitation to go sew his head in a bag.

Uh-huh, them was Old Hickory's very words. I stood by while he writes the message. Then I takes it out and shows it to Piddie and grins. You should have seen Piddie's face. He turns the color of green pea soup and gasps. He's got all the fightin' qualities of a pet rabbit in him, Piddie has.

"But—but that is a flat insult," says he, "and Mr. Groff is a very irascible person!"

"A which?" says I. "Never mind, though. If he's got anything on Old Hickory when it comes to pep in the disposition, he's the real Tabasco Tommy."

"But I still contend," says Piddie, "that this reply should not be sent."

"Course it shouldn't," says I. "But who's goin' to point that out to the boss? You?"

Piddie shudders. I'll bet he went home that night and told Wifey to prepare for the end of the

world. Course, I knew it meant a muss. But when Old Hickory's been limpin' around with a gouty toe for two weeks, and his digestion's gone on the fritz, and things in gen'ral has been breakin' bad—well, it's a case of low barometer in our shop, and waitin' to see where the lightnin' strikes first. Might's well be pointed at Peter K., thinks I, as at some Wall Street magnate or me. Course, Groff goes up in the air a mile, threatens to resign from the board, and starts stirrin' up a minority move that's liable to end most anywhere.

Then, right in the midst of it, Old Hickory accumulates his annual case of grip, runs up a temperature that ain't got anything to do with his disposition, and his doctor gives orders for him not to move out of the house for a week.

So that throws the whole thing onto me and Mr. Robert. I was takin' it calm enough too; but with Mr. Robert it's different. He has his coat off that mornin', and his hair mussed up, and he's smokin' long brunette cigars instead of his usual cigarettes. He was pawin' over things panicky.

"Hang it all!" he explodes. "Some of these papers must go up to the Governor for his indorsement. Perhaps you'd better take them, Torchy. But you're not likely to find him in a very agreeable mood, you know."

"Oh, I can dodge," says I, gatherin' up the stuff. "And what's the dope? Do I dump these on the bed and make a slide for life, or so I take out accident insurance and then stick around for orders?"

"You may—er—stick around," says Mr. Robert. "In fact, my chief reason for sending you up to the house is the fact that at times you are apt to have a cheering effect on the Governor. So stay as long as you find any excuse.

"Gee!" says I. "I don't know whether this is a special holiday, or a sentence to sudden death. But I'll take a chance, and if the worst happens, Mr. Robert, see that Piddie wears a black armband for me."

He indulges in the first grin he's had on for a week, and I makes my exit on that. The science of bein' fresh is to know where to quit.

But, say, that wa'n't all guff we was exchangin' about Old Hickory. I don't find him tucked away under the down comf'tables, like he ought to be. Marston, the butler, whispers the boss is in the lib'ry, and sort of shunts me in without appearin' himself. A wise guy, Marston.

For here's Mr. Ellins, wearin' a padded silk dressin' gown and old slippers, pacin' back and forth limpy and lettin' out grunts and growls at every turn. Talk about your double-distilled grouches! He looks like he'd been on a diet of mixed pickles and scrap iron for a month, and hated the whole human race.

"Well?" he snaps as he sees me edgin' in cautious.

"Papers for your O. K.," says I, holdin' the bunch out at arm's length.

"My O. K.?" he snarls. "Bah! Now what the zebra-striped Zacharias do they send those things to me for? What good am I, anyway, except as a common carrier for all the blinkety blinked aches and pains that ever existed? A shivery, shaky old lump of clay streaked with cussedness, that's all I am!"

"Yes, Sir," says I, from force of habit.

"Eh?" says he, whirlin' and snappin' his jaws.

"N-n-no, Sir," says I, sidesteppin' behind a chair.

"That's right," says he. "Dodge and squirm as if I was a wild animal. That's what they all do. What are you afraid of, Boy?"

"Me?" says I. "Why, I'm havin' the time of my life. I don't mind. It only sounds natural and homelike. And it's mostly bluff, ain't it, Mr. Ellins?"

"Discovered!" says he. "Ah, the merciless perspicacity of youth! But don't tell the others. And put those papers on my desk."

"Yes, Sir," says I, and after I've spread 'em out I backs into the bay window and sits down.

"Well, what are you doing there?" says he.

"Waiting orders," says I. "Any errands, Mr. Ellins?"

"Errands?" says he. Then, after thinkin' a second, he raps out, "Yes. Do you see that collection of bottles and pills and glasses on the table? Enough to stock a young drugstore! And I've been pouring that truck into my system by wholesale,—the pink tablets on the half-hour, the white ones on the quarter, a spoonful of that purple liquid on the even hour, two of the greenish mixtures on the odd, and getting worse every day. Bah! I haven't the courage to do it myself, but

by the blue-belted blazes if— See here, Boy! You're waiting orders, you say?"

"Uh-huh!" says I.

"Then open that window and throw the whole lot into the areaway," says he.

"Do you mean it, Mr. Ellins?" says I.

"Do I—yah, don't I speak plain English?" he growls. "Can't you understand a simple—"

"I got you," I breaks in. "Out it goes!" I don't drop any of it gentle, either. I slams bottles and glasses down on the flaggin' and chucks the pills into the next yard. I makes a clean sweep.

"Thanks, Torchy," says he. "The doctor will be here soon. I'll tell him you did it."

"Go as far as you like," says I. "Anything else, Sir?"

"Yes," says he. "Provide me with a temporary occupation."

"Come again," says I.

"I want something to do," says he. "Here I've been shut up in this confounded house for four mortal days! I can't read, can't eat, can't sleep. I just prowl around like a bear with a sore ear. I want something that will make me forget what a wretched, futile old fool I am. Do you know of anything that will fill the bill?"

"No, sir," says I.

"Then think," says he. "Come, where is that quick-firing, automatic intellect of yours? Think, Boy! What would you do if you were shut up like this?"

"Why," says I, "I—I might dig up some kind of games, I guess."

"Games!" says he. "That's worth considering. Well, here's some money. Go get 'em."

"But what kind, Sir?" says I.

"How the slithering Sisyphus should I know what kind?" he snaps. "Whose idea is this, anyway? You suggested games. Go get 'em, I tell you! I'll give you half an hour, while I'm looking over this stuff from the office. Just half an hour. Get out!"

It's a perfectly cute proposition, ain't it? Games for a heavy-podded old sinner like him, who's about as frivolous in his habits as one of them stone lions in front of the new city lib'ry! But here I was on my way with a yellow-backed twenty in one hand; so it's up to me to produce. I pikes straight down the avenue to a joint where they've got three floors filled with nothin' but juvenile joy junk, blows in there on the jump, nails a clerk that looks like he had more or less bean, waves the twenty at him, and remarks casual:

"Gimme the worth of that in things that'll amuse a fifty-eight-year-old kid who's sick abed and walkin' around the house."

Did I say clerk? I take it back. He was a salesman, that young gent was. Never raised an eyebrow, but proceeded to haul out samples, pass 'em up to me for inspection, and pile in a heap what I gives him the nod on. If I established a record for reckless buyin', he never mentions it. Inside of twenty minutes I'm on my way back, followed by a porter with both arms full.

"The doctor has come," says Marston. "He's in with Mr. Ellins now, Sir."

"Ob, is he?" says I. "Makes it very nice, don't it?" And, bein' as how I was Old Hickory's alibi, as you might say, I pikes right to the front.

"Here he is now," says Mr. Ellins.

And the Doc, who's a chesty, short-legged gent with a dome half under glass,—you know, sort of a skinned diamond with turf outfield effect,—he whirls on me accusin'. "Young man," says he, "do I understand that you had the impudence to—"

"Well, well!" breaks in Old Hickory, gettin' a glimpse of what the porter's unloading "What have we here? Look, Hirshway,—Torchy's drug substitute!"

"Eh?" says the Doc, starin' puzzled.

"Games," says Mr. Ellins, startin' to paw over the bundles. "Toys for a weary toiler. Let's inspect his selection. Now what's this in the box, Torchy?"

"Cut-up picture puzzle," says I. "Two hundred pieces. You fit 'em together."

"Fine!" says Old Hickory. "And this?"

"Ring toss," says I. "You try to throw them rope rings over the peg."

"I see," says he. "Excellent! That will be very amusing and instructive. Here's an airgun too."

"Ellins," says Doc Hirshway, "do you mean to say that at your age you are going to play with such childish things?"

"Why not?" says Old Hickory. "You forbid business. I must employ myself in some way, and Torchy recommends these."

"Bah!" says the Doc disgusted. "If I didn't know you so well, I should think your mind was affected."

"Think what you blamed please, you bald-headed old pill peddler!" raps back the boss, pokin' him playful in the ribs. "I'll bet you a fiver I can put more of these rings over than you can."

"Humph!" says the Doc. "I've no time to waste on silly games." And he stands by watchin' disapprovin' while Old Hickory makes an awkward stab at the peg. The nearest he comes to it is when he chucks one through the glass door of a curio cabinet, with a smash that brings the butler tiptoein' in.

"Did you ring, Sir?" says Marston.

"Not a blamed one!" says Mr. Ellins.

"Take it away, Marston. And then unwrap that large package. There! Now what the tessellated teacups is that!"

It's something I didn't know anything about myself; but the young gent at the store had been strong for puttin' it in, so I'd let it slide. It's a tin affair, painted bright green, with half a dozen little brass cups sunk in it. Some rubber balls and a kind of croquet mallet goes with it.

"Indoor golf!" says Old Hickory, readin' the instruction pamphlet. "Oh, I see! A putting green. Set it there on the rug, Marston. Now, let's see if I've forgotten how to putt."

We all gathers around while he tries to roll the balls into the cups. Out of six tries he lands just one. Next time he don't get any at all.

"Pooh!" says the Doc edgin' up int'rested. "Wretched putting form, Ellins, wretched! Don't tap it that way: sweep it along—follow through, with your right elbow out. Here, let me show you!"

But Hirshway don't do much better. He manages to get two in; but one was a rank scratch.

"Ho-ho!" cackles Old Hickory. "Isn't so easy as it looks, eh, Hirshway? Now it's my turn again, and I'm betting ten I beat you."

"I take you," says the Doc.

And blamed if Old Hickory don't pull down the money!

Well, that's what started things. Next I knew they'd laid out a regular golf course, drivin' off from the rug in front of the desk, through the double doors into the drawin' room, then across the hall into the music room, around the grand piano to the left, through the back hall, into the lib'ry once more, and onto the tin green.

Marston is sent to dig out a couple sets of old golf clubs from the attic, and he is put to caddyin' for the Doc, while I carries the bag for the boss. Course they was usin' putters mostly, except for fancy loffin' strokes over bunkers that they'd built out of books and sofa pillows. And as the balls was softer than the regulation golf kind, with more bounce to 'em, all sorts of carom strokes was ruled in.

"No moving the chairs," announces Old Hickory. "All pieces of furniture are natural hazards."

"Agreed," says the Doc. "Playing stimies too, I suppose?"

"Stimies go," says the boss.

Say, maybe that wa'n't some batty performance, with them two old duffers golfin' all over the first floor of a Fifth-ave. house, disputin' about strokes, pokin' balls out from under tables and sofas, and me and Marston followin' along with the bags. They got as excited over it as if they'd been playin' for the International Championship, and when Old Hickory loses four strokes by gettin' his ball wedged in a corner he cuts loose with the real golfy language.

We was just finishin' the first round, with the score standin' fourteen to seventeen in favor of the Doc, when the front doorbell rings and a maid comes towin' in Piddie. Maybe his eyes don't stick out some too, as he takes in the scene, But Mr. Ellins is preparin' to make a shot for position in front of the green and he don't pay any attention.

"It's Mr. Piddie, Sir," says I.

"Hang Mr. Piddie!" says Old Hickory. "I can't see him now."

"But it's very important," says Piddie. "There's someone at the office who——"

"No, no, not now!" snaps the boss impatient.

And I gives Piddie the back-out signal. But you know how much sense he's got.

"I assure you, Mr. Ellins," he goes on, "that this is——"

"S-s-s-st!" says I. "Boom-boom! Outside!" and I jerks my thumb towards the door.

That settles Piddie. He fades.

A minute later Old Hickory gets a lucky carom off a chair leg and holes out in nineteen, with the Doc playin' twenty-one.

"Ha, ha!" chuckled the boss. "What's the matter with my form now, Hirshway? I'll go you another hole for the same stake."

The Doc was sore and eager to get back. They wa'n't much more'n fairly started, though, before there's other arrivals, that turns out to be no less than two of our directors, lookin' serious and worried.

"Mr. Rawson and Mr. Dunham," announces the maid.

"Here, Boy!" says the boss, catchin' me by the elbow. "What was that you said to Mr. Piddie, —that 'Boom-boom!' greeting?"

I gives it to him and the Doc in a stage whisper.

"Good!" says he. "Get that, Hirshway? Now let's spring it on 'em. All together now—S-s-s-st! Boom-boom! Outside!"

Say, it makes a hit with the directors, all right. First off they didn't seem to know whether they'd strayed into a bughouse, or were just bein' cheered; but when they sees Old Hickory's mouth corners they concludes to take it as a josh. It turns out that both of 'em are golf cranks too, and inside of three minutes they've forgot whatever it was they'd come for, they've shed their coats, and have been rung into a foursome.

Honest, of all the nutty performances! For there was no tellin' where them balls would roll to, and wherever they went the giddy old boys had to follow. I remember one of 'em was stretched out full length on his tummy in the front hall, tryin' to make a billiard shot from under a low hall seat, when there's another ring at the bell, and Marston, with a golf bag still slung over his shoulder, lets in a square-jawed, heavy-set old gent who glares around like he was lookin' for trouble and would be disappointed if he didn't find it.

"Mr. Peter K. Groff," announces Marston.

"Good night!" says I to myself. "The enemy is in our midst."

But Old Hickory never turns a hair. He stands there in his shirt sleeves gazin' calm at this grizzly old minin' plute, and then I sees a kind of cut-up twinkle flash in them deep-set eyes of his as he summons his foursome to gather around. I didn't know what was coming either, until they cuts loose with it. And for havin' had no practice they rips it out strong.

"S-s-s-st! Boom-boom! Outside!" comes the chorus.

It gets Peter K.'s goat too. His jaw comes open and his eyes pop. Next he swallows bard and flushes red behind the ears. "Ellins," says he, "I've come fifteen hundred miles to ask what you mean by telling me——"

"Oh, that you, Groff?" breaks in the boss. "Well, don't interrupt our game. Fore! You, I mean. Fore, there! Now go ahead, Rawson. Playing eleven, aren't you?"

And Rawson's just poked his ball out, makin' a neat carom into the music room, when the hall clock strikes five.

"By Jove, gentlemen!" exclaims Doc Hirshway. "Sorry, but I must quit. Should have been in my office an hour ago. I really must go."

"Quitter!" says Mr. Ellins. "But all right. Trot along. Here, Groff, you're a golfer, aren't you?"

"Why—er—yes," says Peter K., actin' sort of dazed; "but I——"

"That's enough," says Old Hickory. "You take Hirshway's place. Dunham's your partner. We're playing Nassau, ten a corner. But I'll tell you,—just to make it interesting, I'll play you on the side to see whether or not we accept that proposition of yours. Is it a go?"

"But see here, Ellins," conies back Peter K. "I want you to understand that you or any other man can't tell me to sew my head in a bag without—"

"Oh, drop that!" says Old Hickory. "I withdraw it—mostly gout, anyway. You ought to know that. And if you can beat me at this game I'll agree to let you have your own way out there. Are you on, or are you too much of a dub to try it?"

"Maybe I am a dub, Hickory Ellins," says Peter K., peelin' off his coat, "but any game that you can play—er— Which is my ball?"

Well, it was some warm contest, believe me, with them two joshin' back and forth, and at the game time usin' as much foxy strategy as if they was stealin' railroads away from each other! They must have been at it for near half an hour when a maid slips in and whispers how Mr. Robert is callin' for me on the wire. So I puts her on to sub for me with the bag while I slides into the 'phone booth.

"Sure, Mr. Robert," says I, "I'm still on the job."

"But what is happening?" says he. "Didn't Groff come up?"

"Yep," says I. "He's here yet."

"You don't say!" says Mr. Robert. "Whe-e-ew! He and the governor having it hot and heavy, I suppose?"

"And then some," says I. "Peter K. took first round 12-17, he tied the second, and now he's trapped in the fireplace on a bad ten."

"Wha-a-at?" gasps Mr. Robert.

"Uh-huh," says I. "Mr. Ellins is layin' under the piano,—only seven, but stimied for an approach."

"In Heaven's name, Torchy," says Mr. Robert, "what do you mean? Mr. Groff trapped in the fireplace, father lying under the piano—why—"

"Ah, didn't Piddie tell you? The boob!" says I. "It's just golf, that's all—indoor kind—a batty variation that they made up themselves. But don't fret. Everything's all lovely, and I guess the Corrugated is saved. Come up and look 'em over."

Yep! Peter K. got the decision by slipping over a smear in the fourth, after which him and Old Hickory leans up against each other and laughs until their eyes leak. Then Marston wheels in the tea wagon full of decanters and club soda, and when I left they was clinkin' glasses real chummy.

"Son," says Old Hickory, as he pads into the office about noon next day, "I believe I forgot the usual caddie fee. There you are."

"Z-z-z-zing!" says I, starin' after him. Cute little strips of Treasury kale, them with the C's in the corners, aren't they? Well, I should worry!

CHAPTER VII

COMING IN ON THE DRAW

Nothin' like bein' a handy man around the shop. Here at the Corrugated I'm worked in for almost any old thing, from seein' that Mr. Ellins takes his gout tablets regular, to arrangin' the directors' room for the annual meeting and when it comes to subbin' for Mr. Robert—say, what do you guess is the latest act he bills me for? Art expert! Yep, A-r-t, with a big A!

Sounds foolish, don't it? But at that it wa'n't such a bad hunch on his part. He's a rash promiser, Mr. Robert is; but a shifty proposition when you try to push a programme on him, for the first thing you know he's slid from under. I suspicioned some play like that was comin' here the other afternoon when Sister Marjorie shows up at the general offices and asks pouty, "Where's Robert?"

"On the job," says I. "Session of the general sales agents today, you know."

"But he was to meet me at the Broadway entrance half an hour ago," says she, "and I've been sitting in the car waiting for him. Call him out, won't you, Torchy?"

"Won't do any good," says I. "He's booked up for the rest of the day."

"The idea!" says Marjorie. "And he promised faithfully he would go up with me to see those pictures! You just tell him I'm here, that's all."

There's more or less light of battle in them bright brown eyes of Marjorie's, and that Ellins chin of hers is set some solid. So when I tiptoes in where they're dividin' the map of the world into sellin' areas, and whispers in Mr. Robert's ear that Sister Marjorie is waitin' outside, I adds a word of warnin'.

"It's a case of pictures, you remember," says I.

"Oh, the deuce!" says Mr. Robert. "Hang Brooks Bladen and his paintings! I can't go, positively. Just explain, will you, Torchy?"

"Sure; but I'd go hoarse over it," says I. "You know Marjorie, and if you don't want the meetin' broke up I expect you'd better come out and face the music."

"Oh, well, then I suppose I must," says he, leadin' the way.

And Marjorie wa'n't in the mood to stand for any smooth excuses. She didn't care if he had forgotten, and she guessed his old business affairs could be put off an hour or so. Besides, this meant so much to poor Brooks. His very first exhibit, too. Ferdy couldn't go, either. Another one of his sick headaches. But he had promised to buy a picture, and Marjorie had hoped that Robert would like one of them well enough to—

"Oh, if that's all," puts in Mr. Robert, "then tell him I'll take one, too."

"But you can't buy pictures without seeing them," protests Marjorie. "Brooks is too sensitive. He wants appreciation, encouragement, you see."

"A lot I could give him," says Mr. Robert. "Why, I know no more about that sort of thing than—well, than—" And just here his eye lights on me. "Oh, I say, though," he goes on, "it would be all right, wouldn't it, if I sent a—er—a commissioner?"

"I suppose that would do," says Marjorie.

"Good!" says Mr. Robert. "Torchy, go with Marjorie and look at that lot. If they're any good, buy one for me."

"Wha-a-at!" says I. "Me buy a picture?"

"Full power," says he, startin' back towards the meetin'. "Pick out the best, and tell Bladen to send me the bill."

And there we're left, Marjorie and me, lookin' foolish at each other.

"Well, he's done a duck," says I.

"If you mean he's got himself out of buying a picture, you're mistaken," says she. "Come along."

She insists on callin' the bluff, too. Course, I tries to show her, all the way up in the limousine, how punk a performer I'd be at a game like that, and how they'd spot me for a bush leaguer the first stab I made.

"Not at all," says Marjorie, "if you do as I tell you."

With that she proceeds to coach me in the art critic business. The lines wa'n't hard to get, anyway.

"For some of them," she goes on, "you merely go 'Um-m-m!' under your breath, you know, or 'Ah-h-h-h!' to yourself. Then when I give you a nudge you may exclaim, 'Fine feeling!' or 'Very daring!' or 'Wonderful technic, wonderful!'"

"Yes; but when must I say which?" says I.

"It doesn't matter in the least," says Marjorie.

"And you think just them few remarks," says I, "will pull me through."

"Enough for an entire exhibit at the National Academy," says she. "And when you decide which you like best, just point it out to Mr. Bladen."

"Gee!" says I. "Suppose I pick a lemon?"

"Robert won't know the difference," says she, "and it will serve him right. Besides, poor Brooks needs the encouragement."

"Kind of a dub beginner with no backing is he?" says I.

Marjorie describes him different. Accordin' to her, he's a classy comer in the art line, with all kinds of talent up his sleeve and Fame busy just around the corner on a laurel wreath exactly his size. Seems Brooks was from a good fam'ly that had dropped their bundle somewhere along the road; so this art racket that he'd taken up as a time killer he'd had to turn into a steady job. He wa'n't paintin' just to keep his brushes soft. He was out to win the kale.

Between the lines I gathers enough to guess that before she hooked up with Ferdy, the head-achy one, Marjorie had been some mushy over Brooks boy herself. He'd done a full length of her, it appears, and was workin' up quite a portrait trade, when all of a sudden he ups and marries someone else, a rank outsider.

"Too bad!" sighs Marjorie. "It has sadly interfered with his career, I'm afraid."

"Ain't drivin' him to sign work, is it?" says I.

"Goodness, no!" says Marjorie. "Just the opposite. Of course, Edith was a poor girl; but her Uncle Jeff is ever so rich. They live with him, you know. That's the trouble—Uncle Jeff."

She's a little vague about this Uncle Jeff business; but it helps explain why we roll up to a perfectly good marble front detached house just off Riverside Drive, instead of stoppin' at one of them studio rookeries over on Columbus-ave. And even I'm wise to the fact that strugglin' young artists don't have a butler on the door unless there's something like an Uncle Jeff in the fam'ly.

From the dozen or more cars and taxis hung up along the block I judge this must be a regular card affair, with tea and sandwich trimmin's. It's a good guess. A maid tows us up two flights, though, before we're asked to shed anything; and before we lands Marjorie is gaspin' some, for she ain't lost any weight since she collected Ferdy. Quite a studio effect they'd made too, by throwin' a couple of servants' rooms into one and addin' a big skylight. There was the regulation fishnet draped around, and some pieces of tin armor and plaster casts, which proves as well as a court affidavit that here's where the real, sure-fire skookum creative genius holds forth.

It's a giddy bunch of lady gushers that's got together there too, and the soulful chatter is bein' put over so fast it sounds like intermission at a cabaret show. I'm introduced proper to Brooks boy and Wifey; but I'd picked 'em both out at first glimpse. No mistakin' him. He's got on the kind of costume that goes with the fishnet and brass tea machine,—flowin' tie, velvet coat, baggy trousers, and all, even to the Vandyke beard. It's kind of a pale, mud-colored set of face alfalfa; but, then, Brooks boy is sort of that kind himself—that is, all but his eyes. They're a wide-set, dreamy, baby-blue pair of lamps, that beams mild and good-natured on everyone.

But Mrs. Brooks Bladen is got up even more arty than Hubby. Maybe it wa'n't sugar sackin' or furniture burlap, but that's what the stuff looked like. It's gathered jaunty just under her armpits and hangs in long folds to the floor, with a thick rope of yellow silk knotted careless at one side with the tassels danglin' below her knee, while around her head is a band of tinsel decoration that might have been pinched off from a Christmas tree. She's a tall, willowy young woman, who waves her bare arms around vivacious when she talks and has lots of sparkle to her eyes.

"You dear child!" is her greetin' to Marjorie. "So sweet of you to attempt all those dreadful stairs! No, don't try to talk yet. We understand, don't we, Brooks? Nice you're not sensitive about it, too."

I caught the glare Marjorie shoots over, and for a minute I figured how the picture buyin' deal had been queered at the start; but the next thing I knew Brooks boy is holdin' Marjorie's hand and beamin' gentle on her, and she is showin' all her dimples once more. Say, they're worth watchin', some of these fluff encounters.

My act? Ah, say, most of that good dope is all wasted. Nobody seems excited over the fact that I've arrived, even Brooks Bladen. As a salesman he ain't a great success, I judge. Don't tout up his stuff any, or try to shove off any seconds or shopworn pieces. He just tells me to look around, and half apologizes for his line in advance.

Well, for real hand-painted stuff it was kind of tame. None of this snowy-mountain-peak or mirror-lake business, such as you see in the department stores. It's just North River scenes; some clear, some smoky, some lookin' up, some lookin' down, and some just across. In one he'd done a Port Lee ferryboat pretty fair; but there's another that strikes me harder. It shows a curve in the drive, with one of them green motor busses goin' by, the top loaded, and off in the background to one side the Palisades loomin' up against a fair-weather sunset, while in the middle you can see clear up to Yonkers. Honest, it's almost as good as some of them things on the insurance calendars, and I'm standin' gawpin' at it when Brooks Bladen and Marjorie drifts along.

"Well?" says he, sort of inquirin'.

"That must be one of the Albany night boats goin' up," says I. "She'll be turnin' her lights on pretty quick. And it's goin' to be a corkin' evenin' for a river trip. You can tell that by——"

But just here Marjorie gives me a jab with her elbow.

"Ow, yes!" says I, rememberin' my lines. "Um-m-m-m-m! Fine feelin'. Very darin' too, very! And when it comes to the tech stuff—why, it's there in clusters. Much obliged—er—that is, I guess you can send this one. Mr. Robert Ellins. That's right. Charge and send."

Maybe he wasn't used to makin' such quick sales; for he stares at me sort of puzzled, and when I turns to Marjorie she's all pinked up like a strawberry sundae and is smotherin' a giggle with her mesh purse. I don't know why, either. Strikes me I'd put it over kind of smooth; but as there seems to be a slip somewhere it's me for the rapid back-away.

"Thanks, that'll be all to-day," I goes on, "and—and I'll be waitin' downstairs, Marjorie."

She don't stop me; so I pushes through the mob at the tea table, collects my coat and lid, and slips down to the first floor, where I wanders into the drawin' room. No arty decorations here. Instead of pictures and plaster casts, the walls are hung with all kinds of mounted heads and horns, and the floor is covered with odd-lookin' skin rugs,—tigers, lions, and such.

I'd been waitin' there sometime, inspectin' the still life menagerie, when all of a sudden in from the hall rolls one of these invalid wheeled chairs with a funny little old bald-headed gent manipulatin' levers. What hair he has left is real white, and most of his face is covered with a thin growth of close-cropped white whiskers; but under the frosty shrubb'ry, as well as over all the bare space, he's colored up as bright as a bottle of maraschino cherries. It's the sort of sunburn a sandy complexion gets on; but not in a month or a year. You know? One of these blond Eskimo tints, that seems to go clear through the skin. How he could get it in a wheel chair, though, I couldn't figure out. Anyway, there wasn't time. Quick as he sees me he throws in his reverse gear and comes to a stop between the portières.

"Well, young man," he raps out sharp and snappy, "who the particular blazes are you?"

But, say, I've met too many peevish old parties to let a little jab like that tie up my tongue.

"Me?" says I, settin' back easy in the armchair. "Oh, I'm a buyer representin' a private collector."

"Buyer of what?" says he.

"Art," says I. "Just picked up a small lot,—that one with the Albany night boat in it, you know."

He stares like he thought I was batty, and then rolls his chair over closer. "Do I understand," says he, "that you have been buying a picture—here?"

"Sure," says I. "Say, ain't you on yet, and you right in the house? Well, you ought to get next."

"I mean to," says he. "Bladen's stuff, I suppose?"

"Uh-huh," says I. "And, believe me, Brooksy is some paint slinger; that is, fine feelin', darin' technic, all that sort of dope."

"I see," says he, noddin' his head. "Holding a sale, is he? On one of the upper floors?"

"Top," says I. "Quite a classy little studio joint he's made up there."

"Oh, he has, has he?" says the old boy, snappin' his eyes. "Well, of all the confounded—er—young man, ring that bell!"

Say, how was I goin' to know? I was beginnin' to suspect that this chatty streak of mine wa'n't goin' to turn out lucky for someone; but it's gone too far to hedge. I pushes the button, and in comes the butler.

"Tupper," says the old man, glarin' at him shrewd, "you know where the top-floor studio is, don't you?"

"Ye-e-es, Sir," says Tapper, almost chokin' over it.

"You'll find Mr. and Mrs. Bladen there," goes on old Grouchy. "Ask them to step down here for a moment at once."

Listened sort of mussy from where I sat, and I wa'n't findin' the armchair quite so comf'table. "Guess I'll be loafin' along," says I, casual.

"You'll stay just where you are for the present!" says he, wheelin' himself across the doorway.

"Oh, well, if you insist," says I.

He did. And for two minutes there I listens to the clock tick and watches the old sport's white whiskers grow bristly. Then comes the Bladens. He waves 'em to a parade rest opposite me.

"What is it, Uncle Jeff?" says Mrs. Bladen, sort of anxious. And with that I begins to piece out the puzzle. This was Uncle Jeff, eh, the one with the bank account?

"So," he explodes, like openin' a bottle of root beer, "you've gone back to your paint daubing, have you? And you're actually trying to sell your namby-pamby stuff on my top floor? Come now, Edith, let's hear you squirm out of that!"

Considerable fussed, Edith is. No wonder! After one glance at me she flushes up and begins twistin' the yellow silk cord nervous; but nothin' in the way of a not guilty plea seems to occur to her. As for Hubby, he blinks them mild eyes of his a couple of times, and then stands there placid with both hands in the pockets of his velvet coat, showin' no deep emotion at all.

"It's so, isn't it?" demands Uncle.

"Ye-e-es, Uncle Jeff," admits Edith. "But poor Brooks could do nothing else, you know. If he'd taken a studio outside, you would have wanted to know where he was. And those rooms were not in use. Really, what else could he do?"

"Mean to tell me he couldn't get along without puttering around with those fool paints and brushes?" snorts Uncle Jeff.

"It—it's his life work, Uncle Jeff," says Mrs. Bladen.

"Rubbish!" says the old boy. "In the first place, it isn't work. Might be for a woman, maybe, but not for an able-bodied man. You know my sentiments on that point well enough. In the second place, when I asked you two to come and live with me, there was no longer any need for him to do that sort of thing. And you understood that too."

Edith sighs and nods her head.

"But still he goes on with his sissy paint daubing!" says Uncle.

"They're not daubs!" flashes back Edith. "Brooks has been doing some perfectly splendid work. Everyone says so."

"Humph!" says Uncle Jeff. "That's what your silly friends tell you. But it doesn't matter. I won't have him doing it in my house. You thought, just because I was crippled and couldn't get around or out of these confounded four rooms, that you could fool me. But you can't, you see. And now I'm going to give you and Brooks your choice,—either he stops painting, or out you both go. Now which will it be?"

"Why, Sir," says Brooks, speakin' up prompt but pleasant, "if that is the way you feel about it, we shall go."

"Eh?" says Uncle Jeff, squintin' hard at him. "Do you mean it? Want to leave all this for—for the one mean little room I found you in!"

"Under your conditions, most certainly, Sir," says Brooks. "I think Edith feels as I do. Don't you, Edith?"

"Ye-e-es, of course," says Mrs. Bladen. Then, turnin' on Uncle Jeff, "Only I think you are a mean, hard-hearted old man, even if you are my uncle! Oh, you don't know how often I've wanted to tell you so too,—always prying into this, asking questions about that, finding fault, forever cross and snappish and suspicious. A waspish, crabbed old wretch, that's what you are! I just hate you! So there!"

Uncle Jeff winces a little at these last jabs; but he only turns to Brooks and asks quiet, "And I suppose those are your sentiments too?"

"Edith is a little overwrought," says Brooks. "It's true enough that you're not quite an agreeable person to live with. Still, I hardly feel that I have treated you just right in this matter. I shouldn't have deceived you about the studio. When I found that I couldn't bear to give up my work and live like a loafer on your money, I should have told you so outright. I haven't liked it, Sir, all this dodging and twisting of the truth. I'm glad it's over. Would you prefer to have us go tonight or in the morning?"

"Come now, that's not the point," says Uncle Jeff. "You hate me, too, don't you?"

"No," says Brooks, "and I'm sure Edith doesn't either."

"Yes I do, Brooks," breaks in Edith.

Brooks shrugs his shoulders sort of hopeless.

"In that case," says he, "we shall leave at once—now. I will send around for our traps later. You have been very generous, and I'm afraid I've shown myself up for an ungrateful ass, if not worse. Goodby, Sir."

He stands there holdin' out his hand, with the old gent starin' hard at him and not movin'. Fin'lly Uncle Jeff breaks the spell.

"Well, I'll be hanged!" says he. "Bladen, I didn't think it was in you. I took you for one of the milksop kind; which shows just how big a fool an old fool can be. And Edith is right. I'm a crazy, quarrelsome old wretch. It isn't all rheumatism, either. Some of it is disposition. And don't you go away thinking I've been generous, trying to tie you two young people down this way. It was rank selfishness. But you don't know how hard it comes, being shut up like this and able only to move around on wheels—after the life I've led too! I suppose I ought to be satisfied. I've had my share—nearly thirty years on the go, in jungle, forest, mountains, all over the globe. I've hunted big game in every—but you know all about that. And now I suppose I'm worn out, useless. I was trying to get used to it, and having you young folks around has helped a lot. But it hasn't been fair to you—not fair."

He sort of chokes up at the end, and his lower lip trembles some; but only for a second. He straightens up once more in his chair. "You must try to make allowances, Edith," he goes on. "Don't—don't hate the old wretch too hard!"

That got to her, all right. She' wa'n't gush all the way through, any more'n Uncle Jeff was all crust. Next thing he knew she was givin' him the fond tackle and sobbin' against his vest.

"There, there!" says he, pattin' her soothin'. "We all make our mistakes, old and young; only us old fellows ought to know better."

"But—but they aren't daubs!" sobs out Edith. "And—and you said they were, without even seeing them."

"Just like me," says he. "And I'm no judge, anyway. But perhaps I'd better take a look at some of them. How would that be, eh? Couldn't Tupper bring a couple of them down now?"

"Oh, may he?" says Edith, brightenin' up and turnin' off the sprayer. "I have wished that you could see them, you know."

So Tupper is sent for a couple of paintings, and Brooks chases along to bring down two more. They ranges 'em on chairs, and wheels Uncle Jeff into a good position. He squints at 'em earnest and tries hard to work up some enthusiasm.

"Ferryboats, sugar refineries, and the North River," says he. "All looks natural enough. I suppose they're well done too; but—but see here, young man, couldn't you find anything better to paint?"

"Where?" says Brooks. "You see, I was able to get out only occasionally without——"

"I see," says Uncle Jeff. "Tied to a cranky old man in a wheel chair. But, by George! I could take you to places worth wasting your paint on. Ever heard of Yangarook? There's a pink mountain there that rises up out of a lake, and on still mornings—well, you ought to see it! I pitched my camp there once for a fortnight. I could find it again. You go in from Boola Bay, up the Zambesi, and through the jungle. Then there's the Khula Klaht valley. That's in the Himalayas. Pictures? Why, you could get 'em there!"

"I've no doubt I could, Sir," says Brooks. "I've dreamed of doing something like that some day, too. But what's the use?"

"Eh?" says Uncle Jeff, almost standin' up in his excitement. "Why not, my boy? I could take you there, chair or no chair. Didn't I go in a litter once, halfway across Africa, when a clumsy Zulu beater let a dying rhino gore me in the hip? Yes, and bossed a caravan of sixty men, and me flat on my back! I'm better able to move now than I was then, and I'm ready to try it. Another year of this, and I'd be under the ground. I'm sick of being cooped up. I'm hungry for a breath of mountain air, for a glimpse of the old trails. No use taking my guns; but you could lug along your painting kit, and Edith could take care of both of us. We could start within a week. What do you say, you two?"

Brooks he looks over at Edith. "Oh, Uncle Jeff!" says she, her eyes sparklin'. "I should just love it!"

"I could ask for nothing better," says Brooks.

"Then it's settled," says Uncle Jeff, reachin' out a hand to each of 'em. "Hurrah for the long trail! We're off!"

"Me too," says I, "if that's all."

"Ah!" says Uncle Jeff. "Our young friend who's at the bottom of the whole of this. Here, Sir! I'm going to teach you a lesson that will make you cautious about gossiping with strange old men. Pick up that leopard skin at your feet."

"Yes, Sir," says I, holdin' it out to him.

"No, examine it carefully," says he. "That came from a beast I shot on the shores of Lake Tanganyika. It's the finest specimen of the kind in my whole collection. Throw it over your arm, you young scamp, and get along with you!"

And they're all grinnin' amiable as I backs out with my mouth open.

"What the deuce!" says Mr. Robert after lunch next day, as he gazes first at a big package a special messenger has just left, and then at a note which comes with it. "'The Palisades at Dusk'—five hundred dollars?"

"Gee!" I gasps. "Did he sting you that hard?"

"But it's receipted," says he, "with the compliments of Brooks Bladen. What does that mean?"

"Means I'm some buyer, I guess," says I. "Souvenir of a little fam'ly reunion I started, that's all. But you ain't the only one. Wait till you see what I drew from Uncle Jeff."

CHAPTER VIII

GLADYS IN A DOUBLE BILL

He meant well, Mr. Robert did; but, say, between you and me, he come blamed near spillin' the beans. Course, I could see by the squint to his eyelids that he's about to make what passes with him for a comic openin'.

"I hate to do it, Torchy," says he, "especially on such a fine afternoon as this."

"Go on," says I, "throw the harpoon! Got your yachtin' cap on, ain't you? Well, have I got to sub for you at a directors' meeting or what?"

"Worse than that," says he. "You see, Marjorie and Ferdy are having a veranda tea this afternoon, up at their country house."

"Help!" says I. "But you ain't billin' me for any such——"

"Oh, not exactly that," says he. "They can get along very well without me, and I shall merely 'phone out that Tubby Van Orden has asked me to help try out his new forty-footer. But there remains little Gladys. I'd promised to bring her out with me when I came."

"Ye-e-e-es?" says I doubtful. "She's a little joker, eh?"

"Why, not at all," says he. "Merely a young school friend of Marjorie's. Used to be in the kindergarten class when Marjorie was a senior, and took a great fancy to her, as little girls sometimes do to older ones, you know."

Also it seems little Gladys had been spendin' a night or so with another young friend in town, and someone had to round her up and deliver her at the tea, where her folks would be waitin' for her.

"So I'm to take her by the hand and tow her up by train, am I?" says I.

"I had planned," says Mr. Robert, shakin' his head solemn, "to have you go up in the machine with her, as Marjorie wants to send someone back in it—Miss Vee, by the way. Sure it wouldn't bore you?"

"Z-z-z-ing!" says I. "Say, if it does you'll never hear about it, believe me!"

Mr. Robert chuckles. "Then take good care of little Gladys," says he.

"Won't I, though!" says I. "I'll tell her fairy tales and feed her stick candy all the way up."

Honest, I did blow in a quarter on fancy pink gumdrops as I'm passin' through the arcade; but when I strolls out to the limousine Martin touches his hat so respectful that I gives him a dip into the first bag.

"Got your sailin' orders, ain't you, Martin?" says I. "You know we collect a kid first."

"Oh, yes, Sir," says he. "Madison avenue. I have the number, Sir." Just like that you know. "I have the number, Sir"—and more business with the cap brim. Awful bore, ain't it, specially right there on Broadway with so many folks to hear?

"Very well," says I, languid. Then it's me lollin' back on the limousine cushions and starin' haughty at the poor dubs we graze by as they try to cross the street. Gee, but it's some different when you're inside gazin' out, than when you're outside gawpin' in! And even if you don't have the habit reg'lar, but are only there just for the time bein', you're bound to get that chesty feelin' more or less. I always do. About the third block I can look slant-eyed at the cheap skates ridin' in

hired taxis and curl the lip of scorn.

I've noticed, though, that when I work up feelin's like that there's bound to be a bump comin' to me soon. But I wasn't lookin' for this one until it landed. Martin pulls up at the curb, and I hops out, rushes up the steps, and rings the bell.

"Little Miss Gladys ready?" says I to the maid.

She sort of humps her eyebrows and remarks that she'll see. With that she waves me into the reception hall, and pretty soon comes back to report that Miss Gladys will be down in a few minutes. She had the real skirt notion of time, that maid. For more'n a solid half-hour I squirms around on a chair wonderin' what could be happenin' up in the nursery. Then all of a sudden a chatter of goodbys comes from the upper hall, a maid trots down and hands me a suitcase, and then appears this languishin' vision in the zippy French lid and the draped silk wrap.

It's one of these dinky brimless affairs, with skyrocket trimmin' on the back, and it fits down over her face like a mush bowl over Baby Brother; but under the rim you could detect some chemical blonde hair and a pair of pink ears ornamented with pearl pendants the size of fruit knife handles. She has a complexion to match, one of the kind that's laid on in layers, with the drugstore red only showing through the whitewash in spots, and the lips touched up brilliant. Believe me, it was some artistic makeup!



[Illustration: Believe me, it was some artistic makeup!]

Course, I frames this up for the friend; so I asks innocent, "Excuse me, but when is little Miss Gladys comin'?"

"Why, I'm Gladys!" comes from between the carmine streaks.

I gawps at her, then at the maid, and then back at the Ziegfeld vision again. "But, see here!" I goes on. "Mr. Robert he says how——"

"Yes, I know," she breaks in. "He 'phoned. The stupid old thing couldn't come himself, and he's sent one of his young men. That's much nicer. Torchy, didn't he say? How odd! But come along. Don't stand there staring. Good-by, Marie. You must do my hair this way again sometime."

And next thing I know I'm helpin' her into the car, while Martin tries to smother a grin. "There you are!" says I, chuckin' her suitcase in after her. "I—I guess I'll ride in front."

"What!" says she. "And leave me to take that long ride all alone? I'll not do it. Come in here at once, or I'll not go a step! Come!"

No shrinking violet about Gladys, and as I climbs in I shakes loose the last of that kindergarten dope I'd been primed with. I'll admit I was some fussed for awhile too, and I expect I does the dummy act, sittin' there gazin' into the limousine mirror where she's reflected vivid. I was tryin' to size her up and decide whether she really was one of the chicken ballet, or only a high school imitation. I'm so busy at it that I overlooks the fact that she has the same chance of watchin' me.

"Well?" says she, as we swings into Central Park. "I trust you approve?"

"Eh?" says I, comin' out of the trance. "Oh, I get you now. You're waitin' for the applause. Let's see, are you on at the Winter Garden, or is it the Casino roof?"

"Now don't be rude," says she. "Whatever made you think I'd been on the stage?"

"I was only judgin' by the get-up," says I. "It's fancy, all right."

"Pooh!" says she. "I've merely had my hair done the new way. I think it's perfectly dear too. There's just one little touch, though, that Marie didn't quite get. I wonder if I couldn't—you'll not care if I try, will you?"

"Oh, don't mind me," says I.

She didn't. She'd already yanked out three or four hatpins and has pried off the zippy lid.

"There, hold that, will you?" says she, crowdin' over into the middle of the seat so's to get a good view in the mirror, and beginnin' to revise the scenic effect on her head. Near as I can make out, the hair don't come near enough to meetin' her eyebrows in front or to coverin' her ears on the side.

Meanwhile she goes on chatty, "I suppose Mother'll be wild again when she sees me like this. She always does make such a row if I do anything different. There was an awful scene the first time I had my hair touched up. Fancy!"

"I was wonderin' if that was the natural tint?" says I.

"Goodness, no!" says Gladys. "It was a horrid brown. And when I used to go to the seminary they made me wear it braided down my back, with a bow on top. I was a sight! The seminary was a stupid place, though. I was always breaking some of their silly rules; so Mummah sent me to the convent. That was better. Such a jolly lot of girls there, some whose mothers were great actresses. And just think—two of my best chums have gone on the stage since! One of them was married and divorced the very first season too. Now wasn't that thrilling? Mother is furious because she still writes to me. How absurd! And some of the others she won't allow me to invite to the house. But we meet now and then, just the same. There were two in our box party last night, and we had such a ripping lark afterward!"

Gladys was runnin' on as confidential as if she'd known me all her life, interruptin' the flow only when she makes a jab with the powder-puff and uses the eyebrow pencil. And bein' as how I'd been cast for a thinkin' part I sneaks out the bag of gumdrops and tucks one into the off side of my face. The move don't escape her, though.

"Candy?" says she, sniffin'.

"Sorry I can't offer you a cigarette," says I, holdin' out the bag.

"Humph!" says she. "I have smoked them, though. M-m-m-m! Gumdrops! You dear boy!"

Yes, Gladys and me had a real chummy time of it durin' that hour's drive, and I notice she put away her share of the candy just as enthusiastic as if she'd been a kid in short dresses. As a matter of fact, she acts and talks like any gushy sixteen-year-old. That's about what she is, I discovers; though I wouldn't have guessed it if she hadn't let it out herself.

But, say, she's some wise for her years, little Gladys is, or else she's a good bluffer! She had me holdin' my breath more'n once, as she opens up various lines of chatter. She'd seen all the ripe problem plays, was posted on the doin's of the Reno colony, and read the Robert Chambers stuff as fast as it came out.

And all the time she talks she's goin' through target practice with her eyes, usin' me as the mark. A lively pair of lamps Gladys has too, the big, innocent, baby-blue kind that sort of opens up wide and kind of invites you to gaze into the depths until you get dizzy. Them and the little, openin' rosebud mouth makes a strong combination, and if it hadn't been for the mural decorations I might have fallen hard for Gladys; but ever since I leaned up against a shiny letterbox once I've been shy of fresh paint. So I proceeds to hand out the defensive josh.

"Roll 'em away, Sis," says I, "roll 'em the other way!"

"Pooh!" says she. "Can't a person even look at you?"

"You're only wastin' ammunition," says I. "You can't put any spell on me, you know."

"Oh, really!" says she, rakin' me with a quick broadside. "Do you mean that you don't like me at all?"

"Since you've called for it," says I, "I'll admit I ain't strong for these spotlight color schemes, specially on kids."

"Kids!" she sputters. "I think you're perfectly horrid, so there!"

"Stick to it," says I. "Makes me feel better satisfied with myself."

"Redhead!" says she, runnin' her tongue out.

"Yes, clear to the roots," says I, "and the tint didn't come out of a bottle, either."

"I don't care," says she. "All the girls do it."

"Your bunch, maybe," says I; "but there's a few that don't."

"Old sticks, yes," says she. "I'm glad you like that kind. You're as bad as Mummah."

"Is that the worst you can say of me?" says I. "How that would please Mother!"

Oh, sure, quite a homelike little spat we had, passin' the left handers back and forth—and inside of five minutes she has made it all up again and is holdin' out her hand for the last gumdrop.

"You're silly; but you're rather nice, after all," says she, poutin' her lips at me.

"Now quit that," says I. "I got my fingers crossed."

"Fraid cat!" says she. "But here's the house, and we're frightfully early. Now don't act as though you thought I might bite you. I'm going to take your arm."

She does too, and cuddles up kittenish as we lands at the porte cochère. I gets the idea of this move. She's caught a glimpse of a little group over by the front door, and she wants to make a showy entrance.

And who do you guess it is we finds arrangin' the flower vases? Oh, only Marjorie and Miss Vee. Here I am too, with giddy Gladys, the imitation front row girl, clingin' tight to my right wing. You should have seen Vee's eyebrows go up, also Marjorie's stare. It's a minute or so before she recognizes our little friend, and stands there lookin' puzzled at us. Talk about your embarrassin' stage waits! I could feel my face pinkin' up and my ears tinglin'.

"Ah, say," I breaks out, "don't tell me I've gone and collected the wrong one!"

At that there comes a giggle from under the zippy lid.

"Why, it's Gladys!" says Marjorie. "Well, I never!"

"Of course, you dear old goose!" says Gladys, and rushes to a clinch.

"But—but, Gladys!" says Marjorie, holdin' her off for another inspection. "How you have—er—grown up! Why, your mother never told me a word!"

"Oh, Mummah!" says she, indicatin' deep scorn. "Besides, she hasn't seen me for nearly two days, and—well, I suppose she will fuss, as usual, about the way I'm dressed. But I've had a perfectly glorious visit, and coming up in the car with dear Torchy was such sport. Wasn't it, now?" With which she turns to me.

"Was it?" says I, and I notices both Vee and Marjorie gazin' at me int'rested.

"Of course," says Gladys, prattlin' on, "we quarreled all the way up; but it was all his fault, and he—oh, phsaw! Here come my dear parents."

Takin' Gladys as a sample, you'd never guessed it; for Mother is a quiet, modest appearin' little party, with her wavy brown hair parted in the middle and brushed back low. She's wearin' her own complexion too, and, while she's dressed more or less neat and stylish, she don't sport ear dangles, or anything like that. With Father in the background she comes sailin' up smilin', and it ain't until she gets a peek under the mush-bowl lid that her expression changes.

"Why, Gladys!" she gasps.

"Now, Mummah!" protests Gladys peevish. "For goodness sake don't begin—anyway, not here!"

"But—but, my dear!" goes on Mother, starin' at her shocked. "That—that hat! And your hair! And—and your face!"

"Oh, bother!" says Gladys, stampin' her high-heeled pump. "You'd like to have me dress like

Cousin Tilly, I suppose?"

"But you know I asked you not to—to have that done to your hair again," says Mother.

"And I said I would, so there!" says Gladys emphatic.

Mother sighs and turns to Father, who is makin' his inspection with a weary look on his face. He's just an average, stout-built, good-natured lookin' duck, Father is, a little bald in front, and just now he's rubbin' the bald spot sort of aimless.

"You see, Arthur," says Mother. "Can't you do something?"

First Father scowls, and then he flushes up. "Why—er—ah—oh, blast it all, Sallie, don't put it up to me!" says he. Then he pulls out a long black cigar, bites the end off savage, and beats it around the corner.

That was a brilliant move of his; for Mother turns out to be one of the weepy kind, and in a minute more she's slumped into a chair and is sobbin' away. She's sure she don't know why Gladys should do such things. Hadn't she forbid her to use so much rouge and powder? Hadn't she asked her not to wear those hideous ear jewels? And so on and so on, with Gladys standin' back poutin' defiant. But, say, when they get too big to spank, what else can Father and Mother do?

Fin'lly Vee seems to have an idea. She whispers it into Marjorie's ear, slips into the house, and comes back with a hand mirror and a damp washcloth, which she proceeds to offer to Gladys, suggestin' that she use it.

"Indeed I sha'n't!" says Gladys, her big eyes flashin' scrappy. "I shall stay just as I am, and if Mother wants to be foolish she can get over it, that's all!" And Gladys switches over to a porch chair and slams herself into it.

Vee looks at her a minute, and then bites her upper lip like she was keepin' back some remarks. Next she whispers again to Marjorie, who passes it on to Mother, and then the three of 'em disappears in the house, leavin' Gladys poutin' on one side of the front door, and me in a porch swing on the other waitin' for the next act.

Must have been ten minutes or more before the two plotters appears again, chattin' away merry with Mother, who's between 'em. And, say, you should have seen Mother! Talk about your startlin' changes! They'd been busy with the make-up box, them two had, and now Mother's got on just as much war paint as Daughter—maybe a little more. Also they've dug up a blond transformation somewhere, which covers up all the brown hair, and they've fitted her out with long jet earrings, and touched up her eyebrows—and, believe me, with all that yellow hair down over her eyes, and the rouged lips, she looks just like she'd strayed in from the White Light district!

You wouldn't think just a little store hair and face calcimine could make such a change in anybody. Honest, when I tumbles to the fact that this sporty lookin' female is only Mother fixed up I almost falls out of the swing! That's nothin' to the jolt that gets to Gladys.

"Mother!" she gasps. "Wha—what have you been doing?"

"Why, I've been getting ready for the tea, Gladys," says she.

"But—but, Mother," says Gladys, "you're never going to let people see you like that, are you?"

"Why not, my dear?" says Mother.

"But your face—ugh!" says Gladys.

"Oh, bother!" says Mother. "I suppose you'd like to have me look like Aunt Martha?"

Gladys stares at her for awhile with her eyes wide and set, like she was watchin' somethin' horrible that she couldn't turn away from, and then she goes to pieces in a weepin' fit of her own. Nobody interferes, and right in the midst of it she breaks off, marches over to a wicker porch table where the mirror and washcloth had been left, props the glass up against a vase, and goes to work. First off she sheds the pearl earrings.

At that Mother sits down opposite and follows suit with her jet danglers.

Next Gladys mops off the scenic effect.

Marjorie produces another washcloth, and Mother makes a clean sweep too.

Gladys snatches out a handful of gold hairpins, destroys the turban twist that Marie had spent so much time buildin' up, and knots 'er hair simple in the back.

Mother caps this by liftin' off the blond transformation.

And as I left for a stroll around the grounds they'd both got back to lookin' more or less nice and natural. They had gone to a close clinch and was sobbin' affectionate on each other's shoulders.

Later the tea got under way and went on as such things generally do, with folks comin' and goin', and a buzz of chin music that you could hear clear out to the gate, where I was waitin' with Martin until we should get the signal to start back.

I didn't know just how it would be, but I suspected I might be invited to ride in front on the home trip. I'd made up my mind to start there, anyway. But, say, when the time comes and Vee trips out to the limousine, where I'm holdin' the door open and lookin' sheepish, I takes a chance on a glance into them gray eyes of hers. I got a chill too. It's only for a second, though. She was doing her best to look cold and distant; but behind that I could spot a smile. So I changes the programme.

"Say," says I, followin' her in and shuttin' the door, "wa'n't that kid Gladys the limit, though?"

"Why," says she, givin' me the quizzin' stare, "I thought you had just loads of fun coming up."

"Hearing which cruel words," says I, "our hero strode moodily into his castle."

Vee snickers at that. "And locked the haughty maiden out in the cold, I suppose?" says she.

"If it was you," says I, "I'd take the gate off the hinges."

"Silly!" says she. "Do you know, Gladys looked real sweet afterward."

"I'll bet the reform don't last, though," says I. "But that was a great scheme of yours for persuadin' her to scrub off the stencil work. There's so many of that kind nowadays, maybe the idea would be worth copyrightin'. What do you think, Vee?"

Never mind the rest, though. We had a perfectly good ride back, and up to date Aunty ain't wise to it.

Of course by next mornin' too Mr. Robert has forgot all about the afternoon before, and he seems surprised when I puts in an expense bill of twenty-five cents.

"What's this for?" says he.

"Gumdrops for little Gladys," says I, and as he forks over a quarter I never cracks a smile.

Wait until he hears the returns from Marjorie, though! I'll give him some string to pay up for that kindergarten steer of his. Watch me!

CHAPTER IX

LATE RETURNS ON POPOVER

"Well?" says I, keepin' my feet up on the desk and glancin' casual over the brass rail. "What's your complaint, Spaghetti?"

It's a wrong guess, to begin with; but I wa'n't even takin' the trouble to place him accurate. He's some kind of a foreigner, and that's enough. Besides, from the fidgety way he's grippin' his hat in both hands, and the hesitating sidlin' style he has of makin' his approach, I figured he must be a stray that had got the wrong number.

"If—if you please, Sir," says he, bowin' elaborate and humble, "Mr. Robert Ellins."

"Gwan!" says I. "You read that on the floor directory. You don't know Mr. Robert."

"But—but if you please, Sir," he goes on, "I wish to speak with him."

"You do, eh?" says I. "Now, ain't that cute of you? Think you can pick out any name on the board and drift in for a chat, do you? Come now, what you peddlin'—dollar safety-razors, bullpups, or what?"

He ain't a real live wire, this heavy-faced, wide-shouldered, squatty-built party with the bumper crop of curly black hair. He blinks his big, full eyes kind of solemn, starin' at me puzzled, and about as intelligent as a cow gazin' over a fence. An odd lookin' gink he was, sort of a cross between a dressed up bartender on his day off and a longshoreman havin' his picture taken.

"Excuse," says he, rousin' a little, "but—but it is not to peddle. I would wish to speak with Mr.

Robert Ellins."

"Well, then, you can't," says I, wavin' towards the door; "so beat it!"

This don't make any more impression than as if I'd tried to push him over with one finger. "I would wish," he begins again, "to speak with——"

"Say, that's all on the record," says I, "and the motion's been denied."

"But I——" he starts in once more, "I have——"

Just then Piddie comes turkeyin' over pompous and demands to know what all the debate is about.

"Look what wants to see Mr. Robert!" says I.

"Impossible!" says Piddie, takin' one look. "Send him away at once!"

"Hear that?" says I to Curlylocks. "Not a chance! Fade, Spaghetti, fade!"

The full force of that decision seems to penetrate his nut; for he gulps hard once or twice, the muscles on his thick throat swells up rigid, and next a big round tear leaks out of his off eye and trickles down over his cheek. Maybe it don't look some absurd too, seein' signs of such deep emotion on a face like that.

"Now, none of that, my man!" puts in Piddie, who's as chicken hearted as he is peevish. "Torchy, you—you attend to him."

"What'll I do," says I, "call in a plumber to stop the leak?"

"Find out who he is and what he wants," says he, "and then pack him off. I am very busy."

"Well," says I, turnin' to the thick guy, "what's the name?"

"Me?" says he. "I—I am Zandra Popokoulis."

"Help!" says I. "Popo—here, write it on the pad." But even when he's done that I can't do more than make a wild stab at sayin' it. "Oh yes, thanks," I goes on. "Popover for short, eh? Think Mr. Robert would recognise you by that?"

"Excuse, Sir," says he, "but at the club he would speak to me as Mike."

"Oh, at the club, eh?" says I. "Say, I'm beginnin' to get a glimmer. Been workin' at one of Mr. Robert's clubs, have you?"

"I am his waiter for long time, Sir," says Popover.

Course, the rest was simple. He'd quit two or three months ago to take a trip back home, havin' been promised by the head steward that he could have his place again any time inside of a year. But imagine the base perfidy! A second cousin of the meat chef has drifted in meanwhile, been set to work at Popover's old tables, and the result is that when Mike reports to claim his job he gets the cold, heartless chuck.

"Why not rustle another, then?" says I.

You'd thought, though, to see the gloomy way he shakes his head, that this was the last chance he had left. I gather too that club jobs are fairly well paid, steadier than most kinds of work, and harder to pick up.

"Also," he adds, sort of shy, "there is Armina."

"Oh, always!" says I. "Bunch of millinery in the offing. It never fails. You're her steady, eh?"

Popover smiles grateful and pours out details. Armina was a fine girl, likewise rich—oh, yes. Her father had a flower jobbin' business on West 28th-st.—very grand. For Armina he had ideas. Any would-be son-in-law must be in business too. Yet there was a way. He would take in a partner with two hundred and fifty dollars cash. And Mr. Popokoulis had saved up nearly that much when he'd got this fool notion of goin' back home into his head. Now here he was flat broke and carryin' the banner. It was not only a case of goin' hungry, but of losin' out on the fair Armina. Hence the eye moisture.

"Yes, yes," says I. "But the weeps won't help any. And, even if Mr. Robert would listen to all this sad tale, it's ten to one he wouldn't butt in at the club. I might get a chance to put it up to him, though. Suppose you drop in to-morrow sometime, and I'll let you know."

"But I would wish," says Popover, "to speak with——"

"Ah, ditch it!" I breaks in weary. "Say, you must have been takin' militant lessons from Maud Malone. Look here! If you're bound to stick around and take a long chance, camp there on the

bench. Mr. Robert's busy inside, now; but if he should get through before lunch—well, we'll see. But don't go bankin' on anything."

And it was a lovely sample of arrested mental anguish that I has before me for the next hour or so,—this Popokoulis gent, with his great, doughy face frozen into a blank stare, about as expressive as a half-baked squash pie, his eyes fixed on the opposite wall, and only now and then a spasm in his throat showin' that he was still thinkin' an occasional thought.

Course, Piddie discovers him after a while and demands pettish, "That person still here! Who is he?"

"Club waiter with a mislaid job," says I.

"What!" says Piddie. "A waiter? Just a common waiter?"

I couldn't begin to put in all the deep disgust that Piddie expresses; for, along with his fondness for gettin' next to swell people, he seems to have a horror of mixin' at all with the common herd. "Waiters!" he sniffs. "The scum of mankind. If they had a spark of courage, or a gleam of self respect, or a teaspoonful of brains, they wouldn't be waiters. Bah!"

"Also I expect," says I, "if they was all noble specimens of manhood like us, Sherry's and Rector's would have to be turned into automatic food dispensaries, eh?"

"No fear!" says Piddie. "The lower classes will always produce enough spineless beings to wear aprons and carry trays. Look at that one there! I suppose he never has a thought or an ambition above——"

Bz-z-z-zt! goes the buzzer over my desk, and I'm off on the jump for Mr. Robert's room. I wa'n't missin' any of his calls that mornin'; for a partic'lar friend of mine was in there—Skid Mallory. Remember Skid, the young college hick that I helped find his footin' when he first hit the Corrugated? You know he married a Senator's daughter, and got boosted into an assistant general manager's berth. And Skid's been making good ever since. He'd just come back from a little trip abroad, sort of a delayed weddin' tour, and you can't guess what he'd pulled off.

I'd only heard it sketched out so far, but it seems while him and young Mrs. Mallory was over there in Athens, or some such outlandish place, this late muss with the Turks was just breakin' loose. Skid he leaves Wifey at the hotel one mornin' while he goes out for a little stroll; drifts down their Newspaper Row, where the red ink war extras are so thick the street looks like a raspberry patch; follows the drum music up as far as City Hall, where the recruits are bein' reviewed by the King; listens to the Greek substitute for "Buh-ruh-ruh! Soak 'em!" and the next thing he knows he's wavin' his lid and yellin' with the best of 'em.

It must have stirred up some of that old football fightin' blood of his; for he'd organized a regular cheerin' section, right there opposite to the royal stand, and was whoopin' things up like it was fourth down and two to go on the five-yard line, when all of a sudden over pikes a Colonel or something from the King's staff and begins poundin' Skid on the back gleeful.

It's a young Greek that used to be in his engineerin' class, back in the dear old college days. He says Skid's just the man he wants to come help him patch up the railroad that the Turks have been puttin' on the blink as they dropped back towards headquarters. Would he? Why, him bein' railroad construction expert of the Corrugated, this was right in his line! Sure he would!

And when Mrs. Mallory sees him again at lunchtime he's all costumed as a Major in the Greek army, and is about to start for the scene of atrocities. That's Skid, all over. He wasn't breathin' out any idle gusts, either. He not only rebuilds their bloomin' old line better'n new, so they can rush soldiers and supplies to the front; but after the muss is all over he springs his order book on the gover'nment and lands such a whackin' big contract for steel rails and girders that Old Hickory decides to work day and night shifts in two more rollin' mills.

Course, since it was Mr. Robert who helped me root for Skid in the first place, he's tickled to death, and he tells me confidential how they're goin' to get the directors together at a big banquet that evenin' and have a reg'lar lovefeast, with Skid at the head of the table.

Just now I finds Mr. Robert pumpin' him for some of the details of his experience over there, and after I lugs in an atlas they sent me out for, so Skid can point out something on the map, I just naturally hangs around with my ear stretched.

"Ah, that's the place," says Skid, puttin' his finger on a dot, "Mustapha! Well, it was about six miles east from there that we had our worst job. Talk about messes! Those Turks may not know how to build a decent railroad, but believe me they're stars at wrecking a line thoroughly! At Mustapha they'd ripped up the rails, burned the ties, and blown great holes in the roadbed with dynamite. But I soon had a dozen grading gangs at work on that stretch, and new bridges started, and then I pushed on alone to see what was next.

"That was when I got nearest to the big noise. Off across the hills the Turks were pounding away with their heavy guns, and I was anxious for a look. I kept going and going; but couldn't find any of our people. Night was shutting in too, and the first thing I knew I wasn't anywhere in

particular, with nothing in sight but an old sheep pen. I tried bunking there; but it wasn't restful, and before daylight I went wandering on again. I wanted to locate our advance and get a cup of coffee.

"I must have gone a couple of miles farther, and it was getting light, when a most infernal racket broke loose not one hundred yards ahead. Really, you know, I thought I'd blundered into the midst of a battle. Then in a minute the noise let up, and the smoke blew away, and there, squatting behind a machine gun up on the side of a hill, was one lone Greek soldier. Not another soul in sight, mind you; just this absurd, dirty, smoke-stained person, calmly feeding another belt of cartridges into his gun!

"'Hello!' says I. 'What the deuce are you doing here?'—'Holding the hill, Sir,' says he, in good United States. 'Not all alone?' says I. He shrugs his shoulders at that. 'The others were killed or hurt,' says he. 'The Red Cross people took them all away last night,—Lieutenant, Sergeant, everyone. But our battery must keep the hill.' 'Where's the rest of the advance, though?' says I. 'I don't know,' says he. 'And you mean to say,' says I, 'you've been here all night with the Turkish artillery hammering away at you?' 'They are bad shots, those Turks, very bad,' says he. 'Also they send infantry to drive me away, many times. See! There come some more. Down there! Ah-r-r-r! You will, will you?' And with that he turns loose his big pepperbox on a squad that had just started to dash out of a ravine and rush him. They were coming our way on the jump. Scared? Say, if there'd been anything to have crawled into, I'd have been in it! As there wasn't, I just flattened myself on the ground and waited until it was all over.

"Oh, he crumpled 'em up, all right! He hadn't ground out one belt of cartridges before he had 'em on the run. But I want to tell you I didn't linger around to see how the next affair would turn out. I legged it back where I'd come from, and by nine o'clock I was behind our own lines, trying to find out what sort of campaign this was that left one machine gun to stave off the whole Turkish army. Of course no one knew anything very definite. The best guess was that our advance had been swung off for a flank movement, and that this particular one-man battery had been overlooked. I don't even know whether he was picked up again, or whether the Turks finally got him; but let me tell you, talk as much about your gallant Bulgarians as you like, some of those little Greeks were good fighters too. Anyway, I'll take off my hat any day to that one on the hill."

"Gee!" I breaks out. "Some scrapper, what?"

At which Mr. Robert swings around and gives me a look. "Ah!" says he. "I hadn't realized, Torchy, that we still had the pleasure of your company."

"Don't mention it," says I. "I was just goin' to—er—by the way, Mr. Robert, there's a poor scrub waitin' outside for a word with you, an old club waiter. Says you knew him as Mike."

"Mike?" says he, looking blank.

"His real name sounds like Popover," says I. "It's a case of retrievin' a lost job."

"Oh, very well," says Mr. Robert. "Perhaps I'll see him later. Not now. And close the door after you, please."

So I'm shunted back to the front office, so excited over that war story that I has to hunt up Piddie and pass it on to him. It gets him too. Anything in the hero line always does, and this noble young Greek doin' the come-one-come-all act was a picture that even a two-by-four imagination like Piddie's couldn't fail to grasp.

"By Jove, though!" says he. "The spirit of old Thermopylae all over again! I wish I could have seen that!"

"As close as Skid did?" says I. "Ah, you'd have turned so green they'd taken you for a pickled string bean."

"Oh, I don't pretend to be a daredevil," admits Piddie, with a sudden rush of modesty. "Still, it is a pity Mr. Mallory did not stay long enough to find out the name of this unknown hero, and give it to the world."

"The moral of which is," says I, "that all heroes ought to carry their own press agents with 'em."

We'd threshed it all out, Piddie and me, and I'd gone back to my desk some reluctant, for this jobless waiter was still sheddin' his gloom around the reception room, and I was just thinkin' how it would be to put a screen in front of him, when Mr. Robert and Skid comes out arm in arm, swappin' josh about that banquet that was to be pulled off.

"Of course you'll come." Mr. Robert is insistin'. "Only a few directors, you know. No, no set speeches, or anything like that. But they'll want to hear how you came to get that big order, and about some of the interesting things you saw over there, just as you've told me."

I had hopped up and was holdin' the gate wide open, givin' Skid all the honors, and Mr. Robert was escortin' him out to the elevator, when I notices that this Popover party has got his

eye on the boss and is standin' right where he's blockin' the way.

"Hey, Poppy!" says I in a stage whisper. "Back out! Reverse yourself! Take a sneak!" But of all the muleheads! There he stands, grippin' his hat, and thinkin' only of that lost job.

"All right," Skid is saying; "but remember now, no floral tributes, or gushy introductions, or sitting in the spotlight for me at this—er—er— Well, as I'm a living mortal!" He gets this last out after a gasp or two, and then stops stock still, starin' straight in front of him.

"What is it?" says Mr. Robert. "What's up?" And we sees that Skid Mallory has his eyes glued to this waiter shrimp.

"In the name of all that's good," says he, "where did you come from?"

You can't jar Popover, though, by any little thing like that. When he gets an idea in his dome it's a fixture there. "I would wish to speak," says he, "with Mr. Ellins."

"Yes, yes, another time," says Mr. Robert hasty.

"But see here!" says Skid, still gazin' steady. "Don't you remember me? Take a good look now."

Popover gives him a glance and shakes his head. "Maybe I serve you at the club, Sir," says he.

"Club be blowed!" says Skid. "The last time I saw you you were serving a machine gun, six miles east of Mustapha. Isn't that so?"

"Oh, Mustapha!" says Popover, his eyes lightin' up a little. "On the hill just beyond where the bridge was blown up? You came at the night's end. Oh, yes!"

"I knew it!" exclaims Skid. "I'd have bet a thousand—same curly hair, same shoulders, same eyes. Ellins, here's that lone hero I was telling you about. Here!"

"But—hut that's only Mike," says Mr. Robert, gazin' from one to the other. "Used to be a waiter at the club, you know."

"I don't care what he used to be," says Skid, "or what he is now, I want to shake hands with him."

Popover he pinks up and acts foolish about swappin' grips; but Skid insists.

"So you beat 'em out in the end, did you?" Skid goes on. "Just naturally put it all over that whole bunch of Turks, didn't you? But how did it happen?"

"I don't know," says Popover, fingerin' his hat nervous. "I am very busy all the time, and—and I have nothing to eat all night. You see, all other Greek soldiers was hurt; and me, I must stay to keep the Turks from the hill. Very busy time, Sir. And I am not much for fight, anyway."

"Great Scott!" says Skid. "He says he's not much for—but see here, how did it end?"

Popover gives a shoulder shrug. "Once more they run at me after you go," says he, "and then come our brave Greek General with big army and chase Turks away. And the Captain say why am I such big fool as to stay behind. That is all I know. Three weeks ago I am discharged from being soldier. Now I come back here, and I have no more my good job. I am much sorry."

"Think of that!" breaks out Skid. "Talk about the ingratitude of Republics! Why, England would have given him the Victoria Cross for that! But can't something or other be done about this job of his?"

"Why, certainly," says Mr. Robert. "Here, let's go back into my office."

"Hey, Popover," says I, steerin' him respectful through the gate. "Don't forget to tell them about Armina too."

And as the three of 'em streams in, with the waiter in the middle, I turns to find Piddie gazin' at the sight button-eyed.

"Wa'n't you sayin' how much you'd like to see the lone hero of the hill?" says I. "Well, take a good look. That's him, the squatty one. Uh-huh. Mike, alias Popover, who quit bein' a waiter to fight for his country, and after he'd licked all the Turks in sight comes pikin' back here to hunt around for his tray again. Say, all of 'em ain't such scum, are they?"

It was a great old banquet too; for Skid insists that if they must have a conquerin' hero to drink to Mr. Popokoulis is the only real thing in sight. Mike wouldn't stand for a seat at the table, though; so they compromised by havin' him act as head waiter. Skid tells the story just the same, and makes him stand out where they can all see him. There was some cheerin' done too. Mr. Robert was tellin' me about it only this mornin'.

"And you've got him his old place at the club, eh?" says I.

"No," says he. "I've arranged to buy out a half interest in a florist's shop for Mr. Popokoulis."

"Oh!" says I. "Backin' him for the Armina handicap, eh? It ought to be a cinch. Some chap, that Popover, even if he was a waiter, eh? It's tough on Piddie, though. This thing has tied all his ideas in double bow-knots."

CHAPTER X

MERRY DODGES A DEAD HEAT

Somehow I sensed it as a kind of a batty excursion at the start. You see, he'd asked me offhand would I come, and I'd said "Sure, Bo," careless like, not thinkin' any more about it until here Saturday afternoon I finds myself on the way to spend the week-end with J. Meredith Stidler.

Sounds imposing don't it? But his name's the weightiest part of J. Meredith. Course, around the Corrugated offices we call him Merry, and some of the bond clerks even get it Miss Mary; which ain't hardly fair, for while he's no husky, rough-neck specimen, there's no sissy streak in him, either. Just one of these neat, finicky featherweights, J. Meredith is; a well finished two-by-four, with more polish than punch. You know the kind,—fussy about his clothes, gen'rally has a pink or something in his coat lapel, hair always just so, and carries a vest pocket mirror. We ain't got a classier dresser in the shop. Not noisy, you understand: quiet grays, as a rule; but made for him special and fittin' snug around the collar.

Near thirty, I should guess Merry was, and single, of course. No head of a fam'ly would be sportin' custom-made shoes and sleeve monograms, or havin' his nails manicured reg'lar twice a week. I'd often wondered how he could do it too, on seventy-five dollars a month.

For J. Meredith wa'n't even boss of his department. He just holds down one of the stools in the audit branch, where he has about as much show of gettin' a raise as a pavin' block has of bein' blown up Broadway on a windy day. We got a lot of material like that in the Corrugated,—just plain, simple cogs in a big dividend-producin' machine, grindin' along steady and patient, and their places easy filled when one wears out. A caster off one of the rolltop desks would be missed more.

Yet J. Meredith takes it cheerful. Always has a smile as he pushes through the brass gate, comin' or goin', and stands all the joshin' that's handed out to him without gettin' peevis. So when he springs this over-Sunday invite I don't feel like turnin' it down. Course, I'm wise that it's sort of a charity contribution on his part. He puts it well, though.

"It may be rather a dull way for you to pass the day," says he; "but I'd like to have you come."

"Let's see," says I. "Vincent won't be expectin' me up to Newport until later in the season, the Bradley Martins are still abroad, I've cut the Reggy Vanderbilts, and—well, you're on, Merry. Call it the last of the month, eh?"

"The fourth Saturday, then," says he. "Good!"

I was blamed near lettin' the date get past me too, when he stops me as I'm pikin' for the dairy lunch Friday noon. "Oh, I say, Torchy," says he, "ah—er—about tomorrow. Hope you don't mind my mentioning it, but there will be two other guests—ladies—at dinner tomorrow night."

He seemed some fussed at gettin' it out; so I catches the cue quick. "That's easy," says I. "Count me out until another time."

"Oh, not at all," says he. "In fact, you're expected. I merely wished to suggest, you know, that—er—well, if you cared to do so, you might bring along a suit of dark clothes."

"I get you," says I. "Swell comp'ny. Trust me."

I winks mysterious, and chuckles to myself, "Here's where I slip one on J. Meredith." And when I packs my suitcase I puts in that full evenin' regalia that I wins off'm Son-in-Law Ferdy, you remember, in that real estate deal. Some Cinderella act, I judged that would be, when Merry discovers the meek and lowly office boy arrayed like a night-bloomin' head waiter. "That ought to hold him for a spell," thinks I.

But, say, you should see the joint we fetches up at out on the south shore of Long Island that afternoon. Figurin' on a basis of seventy-five per, I was expectin' some private boardin' house where Merry has the second floor front, maybe, with use of the bath. But listen,—a clipped privet

hedge, bluestone drive, flower gardens, and a perfectly good double-breasted mansion standin' back among the trees. It's a little out of date so far as the lines go,—slate roof, jigsaw work on the dormers, and a cupola,—but it's more or less of a plute shack, after all. Then there's a real live butler standin' at the carriage entrance to open the hack door and take my bag.

"Gee!" says I. "Say, Merry, who belongs to all this?"

"Oh! Hadn't I told you?" says he. "You see, I live with my aunt. She is—er—somewhat peculiar; but—"

"I should worry!" I breaks in. "Believe me, with a joint like this in her own name, I wouldn't kick if she had her loft full of hummin' birds. Who's next in line for it?"

"Why, I suppose I am," says J. Meredith, "under certain conditions."

"Z-z-zin'!" says I. "And you hangin' onto a cheap skate job at the Corrugated!"

Well, while he's showin' me around the grounds I pumps out the rest of the sketch. Seems butlers and all that was no new thing to Merry. He'd been brought up on 'em. He'd lived abroad too. Studied music there. Not that he ever meant to work at it, but just because he liked it. You see, about that time the fam'ly income was rollin' in reg'lar every month from the mills back in Pawtucket, or Fall River, or somewhere.

Then all of a sudden things begin to happen,—strikes, panics, stock grabbin' by the trusts. Father's weak heart couldn't stand the strain. Meredith's mother followed soon after. And one rainy mornin' he wakes up in Baden Baden, or Monte Carlo, or wherever it was, to find that he's a double orphan at the age of twenty-two, with no home, no cash, and no trade. All he could do was to write an S. O. S. message back to Aunt Emma Jane. If she hadn't produced, he'd been there yet.

But Aunty got him out of pawn. Panics and so on hadn't cleaned out her share of the Stidler estate—not so you'd notice it! She'd been on the spot, Aunt Emma had, watchin' the market. Long before the jinx hit Wall Street she'd cashed in her mill stock for gold ballast, and when property prices started tumblin' she dug up a lard pail from under the syringa bush and begun investin' in bargain counter real estate. Now she owns business blocks, villa plots, and shore frontage in big chunks, and spends her time collectin' rents, makin' new deals, and swearin' off her taxes.

You'd most thought, with a perfectly good nephew to blow in some of her surplus on, she'd made a fam'ly pet of J. Meredith. But not her. Pets wasn't in her line. Her prescription for him was work, something reg'lar and constant, so he wouldn't get into mischief. She didn't care what it brought in, so long as he kept himself in clothes and spendin' money. And that was about Merry's measure. He could add up a column of figures and put the sum down neat at the bottom of the page. So he fitted into our audit department like a nickel into a slot machine. And there he stuck.

"But after sportin' around Europe so long," says I, "don't punchin' the time clock come kind of tough?"

"It's a horrible, dull grind," says he. "Like being caught in a treadmill. But I suppose I deserve nothing better. I'm one of the useless sort, you know. I've no liking, no ability, for business; but I'm in the mill, and I can't see any way out."

For a second J. Meredith's voice sounds hopeless. One look ahead has taken out of him what little pep he had. But the next minute he braces up, smiles weary, and remarks, "Oh, well! What's the use?"

Not knowin' the answer to that I shifts the subject by tryin' to get a line on the other comp'ny that's expected for dinner.

"They're our next-door neighbors," says he, "the Misses Hibbs."

"Queens?" says I.

He pinks up a little at that. "I presume you would call them old maids," says he. "They are about my age, and—er—the truth is, they are rather large. But really they're quite nice,—refined, cultured, all that sort of thing."

"Specially which one?" says I, givin' him the wink.

"Now, now!" says he, shakin' his head. "You're as bad as Aunt Emma. Besides, they're her guests. She asks them over quite often. You see, they own almost as much property around here as she does, and—well, common interests, you know."

"Sure that's all?" says I, noticin' Merry flushin' up more.

"Why, of course," says he. "That is—er—well, I suppose I may as well admit that Aunt Emma thinks she is trying her hand at match-making. Absurd, of course."

"Oh-ho!" says I. "Wants you to annex the adjoinin' real estate, does she?"

"It—it isn't exactly that," says he. "I've no doubt she has decided that either Pansy or Violet would make a good wife for me."

"Pansy and Violet!" says I. "Listens well."

"Perhaps their names are hardly appropriate; but they are nice, sensible, rather attractive young women, both of them," insists Merry.

"Then why not?" says I. "What's the matter with the Hymen proposition?"

"Oh, it's out of the question," protests J. Meredith, blushin' deep. "Really I—I've never thought of marrying anyone. Why, how could I? And besides I shouldn't know how to go about it,—proposing, and all that. Oh, I couldn't! You—you can't understand. I'm such a duffer at most things."

There's no fake about him bein' modest. You could tell that by the way he colored up, even talkin' to me. Odd sort of a gink he was, with a lot of queer streaks in him that didn't show on the outside. It was more or less entertainin', followin' up the plot of the piece; but all of a sudden Merry gets over his confidential spasm and shuts up like a clam.

"Almost time to dress for dinner," says he. "We'd best be going in."

And of course my appearin' in the banquet uniform don't give him any serious jolt.

"Well, well, Torchy!" says he, as I strolls into the parlor about six-thirty, tryin' to forget the points of my dress collar. "How splendid you look!"

"I had some battle with the tie," says I. "Ain't the bow lopsided?"

"A mere trifle," says he. "Allow me. There! Really, I'm quite proud of you. Aunty'll be pleased too; for, while she dresses very plainly herself, she likes this sort of thing. You'll see."

I didn't notice any wild enthusiasm on Aunty's part, though, when she shows up. A lean, wiry old girl, Aunty is, with her white hair bobbed up careless and a big shell comb stickin' up bristly, like a picket fence, on top. There's nothin' soft about her chin, or the square-cut mouth, and after she'd give me one glance out of them shrewd, squinty eyes I felt like she'd taken my number,—pedigree, past performances, and cost mark complete.

"Howdo, young man?" says she, and with out wastin' any more breath on me she pikes out to the front door to scout down the drive for the other guests.

They arrives on the tick of six-forty-five, and inside of three minutes Aunty has shoed us into the dinin' room. And, say, the first good look I had at Pansy and Violet I nearly passed away. "Rather large," Merry had described 'em. Yes, and then some! They wa'n't just ordinary fat women; they was a pair of whales,—big all over, tall and wide and hefty. They had their weight pretty well placed at that; not lumpy or bulgy, you know, but with them expanses of shoulder, and their big, heavy faces—well, the picture of slim, narrow-chested Merry Stidler sittin' wedged in between the two, like the ham in a lunch counter sandwich, was most too much for me. I swallows a drink of water and chokes over it.

I expect Merry caught on too. I'd never seen him so fussed before. He's makin' a brave stab at bein' chatty; but I can tell he's doin' it all on his nerve. He glances first to the right, and then turns quick to the left; but on both sides he's hemmed in by them two human mountains.

They wa'n't such bad lookers, either. They has good complexions, kind of pleasant eyes, and calm, comfortable ways. But there was so much of 'em! Honest, when they both leans toward him at once I held my breath, expectin' to see him squeezed out like a piece of lead pipe run through a rollin' machine.

Nothin' tragic like that happens, though. They don't even crowd him into the soup. But it's an odd sort of a meal, with J. Meredith and the Hibbs sisters doin' a draggy three-handed dialogue, while me and Aunty holds down the side lines. And nothin' that's said or done gets away from them narrow-set eyes, believe me!

Looked like something wa'n't goin' just like she'd planned; for the glances she shoots across the table get sharper and sourer, and finally, when the roast is brought in, she whispers to the butler, and the next thing J. Meredith knows, as he glances up from his carvin', he sees James uncorkin' a bottle of fizz. Merry almost drops his fork and gawps at Aunty sort of dazed.

"Meredith," says she, snappy, "go on with your carving! Young man, I suppose you don't take wine?"

"N-n-no, Ma'am," says I, watchin' her turn my glass down. I might have chanced a sip or two, at that; but Aunty has different ideas.

I notice that J. Meredith seems to shy at the bubbly stuff, as if he was lettin' on he hated it.

He makes a bluff or two; but all he does is wet his lips. At that Aunty gives a snort.

"Meredith," says she, hoistin' her hollow-stemmed glass sporty, "to our guests!"

"Ah, to be sure," says Merry, and puts his nose into the sparkles in dead earnest.

Somehow the table chat livens up a lot soon after that. It was one of the Miss Hibbs askin' him something about life abroad that starts Merry off. He begins tellin' about Budapest and Vienna and a lot more of them guidebook spots, and how comf'table you can live there, and the music, and the cafes, and the sights, gettin' real enthusiastic over it, until one of the sisters breaks in with:

"Think of that, Pansy! If we could only do such things!"

"But why not?" says Merry.

"Two women alone?" says a Miss Hibbs.

"True," says J. Meredith. "One needs an escort."

"Ah-h-h-h, yes!" sighs Violet.

"Ah-h-h, yes!" echoes Pansy.

"James," puts in Aunty just then, "fill Mr. Stidler's glass."

Merry wa'n't shyin' it any more. He insists on clickin' rims with the Hibbs sisters, and they does it real kittenish. Merry stops in the middle of his salad to unload that old one about the Irishman that the doctor tried to throw a scare into by tellin' him if he didn't quit the booze he'd go blind within three months. You know—when Mike comes back with, "Well, I'm an old man, and I'm thinkin' I've seen most everything worth while." Pansy and Violet shook until their chairs creaked, and one of 'em near swallows her napkin tryin' to stop the chuckles.

In all the time I've known J. Meredith I'd never heard him try to spring anything comic before; but havin' made such a hit with this one he follows with others, robbin' the almanac regardless.

"Oh, you deliciously funny man!" gasps Pansy, tappin' him playful on the shoulder.

Course, it wa'n't any cabaret high jinks, you understand. Meredith was just limbered up a little. In the parlor afterwards while we was havin' coffee he strings off quite a fancy line of repartee, fin'lly allowin' himself to be pushed up to the piano, where he ripples through a few things from Bach and Beethoven and Percy Moore. It's near eleven o'clock when the Hibbs sisters get their wraps on and Merry starts to walk home with 'em.

"You might wait for me, Torchy," says he, pausin' at the door.

"Nonsense!" says Aunt Emma Jane.

"Time young people were in bed. Good night, young man."

There don't seem to be any chance for a debate on the subject; so I goes up to my room. But it's a peach of a night, warm and moony; so after I turns out the light I camps down on the windowseat and gazes out over the shrubby towards the water. I could see the top of the Hibbs house and a little wharf down on the shore.

I don't know whether it was the moonlight or the coffee; but I didn't feel any more like bed than I did like breakfast. Pretty soon I hears Merry come tiptoein' in and open his door, which was next to mine. I was goin' to hail him and give him a little josh about disposin' of the sisters so quick; but I didn't hear him stirrin' around any more until a few minutes later, when it sounds as if he'd tiptoed downstairs again. But I wasn't sure. Nothin' doin' for some time after that. And you know how quiet the country can be on a still, moonshiny night.

I was gettin' dopy from it, and was startin' to shed my collar and tie, when off from a distance, somewhere out in the night, music breaks loose. I couldn't tell whether it was a cornet or a trombone; but it's something like that. Seems to come from down along the waterfront. And, say, it sounds kind of weird, hearin' it at night that way. Took me sometime to place the tune; but I fin'lly makes it out as that good old mush favorite, "O Promise Me." It was bein' well done too, with long quavers on the high notes and the low ones comin' out round and deep. Honest, that was some playin'. I was wide awake once more, leanin' out over the sill and takin' it all in, when a window on the floor below goes up and out bobs a white head. It's Aunty. She looks up and spots me too.

"Quite some concert, eh?" says I.

"Is that you, young man?" says she.

"Uh-huh," says I. "Just takin' in the music."

"Humph!" says she. "I believe it's that fool nephew of mine."

"Not Merry?" says I.

"It must be," says she. "And goodness knows why he's out making an idiot of himself at this time of night! He'll arouse the whole neighbourhood."

"Why, I was just thinkin' how classy it was," says I.

"Bah!" says Aunty. "A lot you know about it. Are you dressed, young man?"

I admits that I am.

"Then I wish you'd go down there and see if it is Merry," says she. "If it is, tell him I say to come home and go to bed."

"And if it ain't?" says I.

"Go along and see," says she.

I begun to be sorry for Merry. I'd rather pay board than live with a disposition like that. Down I pikes, out the front door and back through the shrubby. Meantime the musician has finished "Promise Me" and has switched to "Annie Laurie." It's easy enough to get the gen'ral direction the sound comes from; but I couldn't place it exact. First off I thought it must be from a little summer house down by the shore; but it wa'n't. I couldn't see anyone around the grounds. Out on the far end of the Hibbs's wharf, though, there was somethin' dark. And a swell time I had too, buttin' my way through a five-foot hedge and landin' in a veg'table garden. But I wades through tomatoes and lettuce until I strikes a gravel path, and in a couple of minutes I'm out on the dock just as the soloist is hittin' up "Believe Me, if All Those Endearing Young Charms." Aunty had the correct dope. It's Merry, all right. The first glimpse he gets of me he starts guilty and tries to hide the cornet under the tails of his dress coat.

"No use, Merry," says I. "You're pinched with the poultry."

"Wha-a-at!" says he. "Oh, it's you, is it, Torchy? Please—please don't mention this to my aunt."

"She beat me to it," says I. "It was her sent me out after you with a stop order. She says for you to chop the nocturne and go back to the hay."

"But how did she— Oh, dear!" he sighs. "It was all her fault, anyway."

"I don't follow you," says I. "But what was it, a serenade?"

"Goodness, no!" gasps J. Meredith. "Who suggested that?"

"Why, it has all the earmarks of one," says I. "What else would you be doin', out playin' the cornet by moonlight on the dock, if you wa'n't serenadin' someone?"

"But I wasn't, truly," he protests. "It—it was the champagne, you know."

"Eh?" says I. "You don't mean to say you got stewed? Not on a couple of glasses!"

"Well, not exactly," says he. "But I can't take wine. I hardly ever do. It—it goes to my head always. And tonight—well, I couldn't decline. You saw. Then afterward—oh, I felt so buoyant, so full of life, that I couldn't go to sleep. I simply had to do something to let off steam. I wanted to play the cornet. So I came out here, as far away from anyone as I could get."

"Too thin, Merry," says I. "That might pass with me; but with strangers you'd get the laugh."

"But it's true," he goes on. "And I didn't dream anyone could hear me from here."

"Why, you boob," says I, "they could hear you a mile off!"

"Really?" says he. "But you don't suppose Vio—I mean, the Misses Hibbs could hear, do you?"

"Unless it's their habit to putty up their ears at night," says I.

"But—but what will they think?" he gasps breathless.

"That they're bein' serenaded by some admirin' friend," says I. "What's your guess?"

"Oh—oh!" says Merry, slumpin' down on a settee. "I—I had not thought of that."

"Ah, buck up!" say I. "Maybe you can fake an alibi in the mornin'. Anyway, you can't spend the night here. You got to report to Aunty."

He lets out another groan, and then gets on his feet. "There's a path through the bushes along here somewhere," says he.

"No more cross country work in full dress clothes for me," says I. "We'll sneak down the Hibbs's drive where the goin's easy."

We was doin' it real sleuthy too, keepin' on the lawn and dodgin' from shadow to shadow, when just as we're passin' the house Merry has to stub his toe and drop his blamed cornet with a bang.

Then out from a second story window floats a voice: "Who is that, please?"

Merry nudges me in the ribs. "Tell them it's you," he whispers.

"Why, it's—it's me—Torchy," says I reluctant.

"Oh! Ah!" says a couple of voices in chorus. Then one of 'em goes on, "The young man who is visiting dear Meredith?"

"Yep," says I. "Same one."

"But it wasn't you playing the cornet so beautifully, was it?" comes coaxin' from the window.

"Tell them yes," whispers Merry, nudgin' violent.

"Gwan!" I whispers back. "I'm in bad enough as it is." With that I speaks up before he can stop me, "Not much!" says I. "That was dear Meredith himself."

"Oh-oh!" says the voices together. Then there's whisperin' between 'em. One seems urgin' the other on to something, and at last it comes out. "Young man," says the voice, smooth and persuadin', "please tell us who—that is—which one of us was the serenade intended for?"

This brings the deepest groan of all from J. Meredith.

"Come on, now," says I, hoarse and low in his ear. "It's up to you. Which?"

"Oh, really," he whispers back, "I—I can't!"

"You got to, and quick," says I. "Come now, was it Pansy?"

"No, no!" says he, gaspy.

"Huh!" says I. "Then Violet gets the decision." And I holds him off by main strength while I calls out, "Why, ain't you on yet? It was for Violet, of course."

"Ah-h-h-h! Thank you. Good night," comes a voice—no chorus this time: just one—and the window is shut.

"There you are, Merry," says I. "It's all over. You're as good as booked for life."

He was game about it, though, Merry was. He squares it with Aunty before goin' to bed, and right after breakfast next mornin' he marches over to the Hibbses real business-like. Half an hour later I saw him strollin' out on the wharf with one of the big sisters, and I knew it must be Violet. It was his busy day; so I says nothin' to anybody, but fades.

And you should have seen the jaunty, beamin' J. Meredith that swings into the Corrugated Monday mornin'. He stops at the gate to give me a fraternal grip.

"It's all right, Torchy," says he. "She—she'll have me—Violet, you know. And we are to live abroad. We sail in less than a month."

"But what about Pansy?" says I.

"Oh, she's coming with us, of course," says he. "Really, they're both charming girls."

"Huh!" says I. "That's where you were when I found you. You're past that point, remember."

"Yes, I know," says he. "It was you helped me too, and I wish in some way I could show my ____"

"You can," says I. "Leave me the cornet. I might need it some day myself."

CHAPTER XI

THE PASSING BY OF BUNNY

It's a shame the way some of these popular clubmen is bothered with business. Here was Mr. Robert, only the other day, with an important four-cue match to be played off between four-thirty and dinnertime; and what does the manager of our Chicago branch have to do but go and muss up the schedule by wirin' in that he might have to call for headquarters' advice on that Burlington order maybe after closin' time.

"Oh, pshaw!" remarks Mr. Robert, after he's read the message.

"The simp!" says I. "Guess he thinks the Corrugated gen'ral offices runs night and day shifts, don't he?"

"Very well put," says Mr. Robert. "Still, it means rather a big contract. But, you see, the fellows are counting on me for this match, and if I should— Oh, but I say, Torchy," he breaks off sudden, "perhaps you have no very important engagement for the early evening?"

"Me?" says I. "Nothing I couldn't scratch. I can shoot a little pool too; but when it comes to balk line billiards I expect I'd be a dub among your crowd."

"Refreshing modesty!" says Mr. Robert. "What I had in mind, however, was that you might wait here for the message from Nixon, while I attend to the match."

"Oh, any way you choose," says I. "Sure I'll stay."

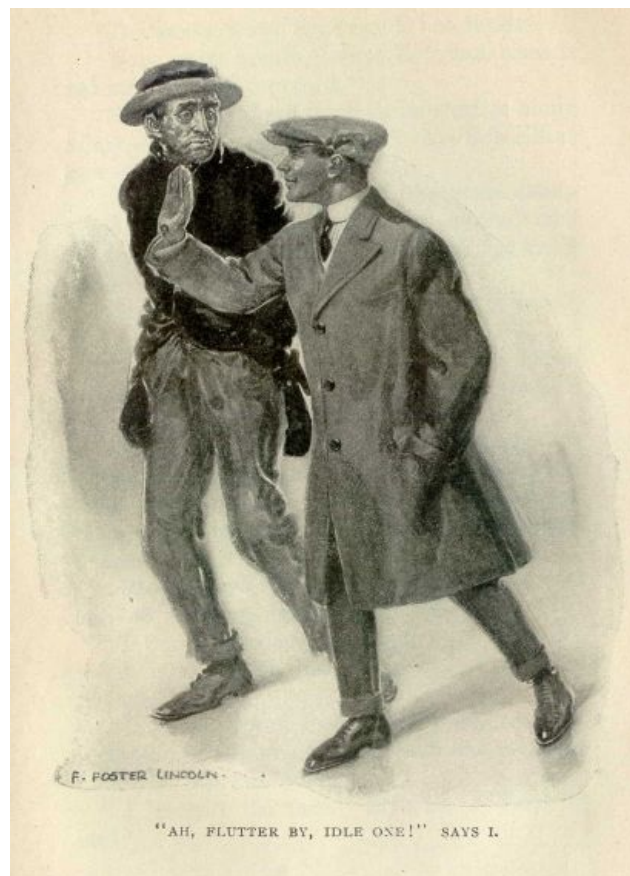
"Thanks," says he. "You needn't wait longer than seven, and if it comes in you can get me on the 'phone and— No, it will be in code; so you'd best bring it over."

And it wa'n't so much of a wait, after all, not more'n an hour; for at six-fifteen I've been over to the club, had Mr. Robert called from the billiard room, got him to fix up his answer, and am pikin' out the front door with it when he holds me up to add just one more word. Maybe we was some conspicuous from Fifth-ave., him bein' still in his shirt sleeves and the steps bein' more or less brilliant.

Anyway, I'd made another start and was just gettin' well under way, when alongside scuffs this hollow-eyed object with the mangy whiskers and the mixed-ale breath.

"Excuse me, young feller," says he, "but—"

"Ah, flutter by, idle one!" says I. "I'm no soup ticket."



[Illustration: "Ah, flutter by, idle one!" says I.]

"But just a word, my friend," he insists.

"Save your breath," says I, "and have it redistilled. It's worth it."

"Thanks," he puffs out as he shuffles along at my elbow; "but—but wasn't that Bob Ellins you were just talking to?"

"Eh?" says I, glancin' at him some astonished; for a seedier specimen you couldn't find up and down the avenue. "What do you know about him, if it was?"

"More than his name," says the wreck. "He—he's an old friend of mine."

"Oh, of course," says I. "Anyone could tell that at a glimpse. I expect you used to belong to the same club too?"

"Is old Barney still on the door?" says he.

And, say, he had the right dope on that. Not three minutes before I'd heard Mr. Robert call the old gink by name. But that hardly proved the case.

"Clever work," says I. "What was it you used to do there, take out the ashes."

"I don't wonder you think so," says he; "but it's a fact that Bob and I are old friends."

"Why don't you tackle him, then," says I, "instead of botherin' a busy man like me? Go back and call him out."

"I haven't the face," says he. "Look at me!"

"I have," says I, "and, if you ask me, you look like something the cat brought in."

He winces a little at that. "Don't tell Bob how bad it was, then," says he. "Just say you let me have a fiver for him."

"Five bucks!" says I. "Say, I'm Mr. Robert's office boy, not his bank account."

"Two, then?" he goes on.

"My, but I must have the boob mark on me plain!" says I.

"Couldn't you spare a half," he urges, "just a half, to get me a little something to eat, and a drink, and pay for a bed?"

"Oh, sure!" says I. "I carry a pocketful of halves to shove out to all the bums that presents their business cards."

"But Bob would give it back to you," he pleads. "I swear he would! Just tell him you gave it to —to—"

"Well?" says I. "Algernon who?"

"Tell him it was for Melville Slater," says he. "He'll know."

"Melly Slater, eh?" says I. "Sounds all aright. But I'd have to chew it over first, even for a half. I have chances of gettin' stung like this about four times a day, Melly. And, anyway, I got to file a message first, over at the next corner."

"I'll wait outside," says he.

"That's nice of you," says I. "It ain't any cinch you'll connect, though."

But as I dashes into a hotel where there's a blue sign out he leans up against a window gratin', sort of limp and exhausted, and it looks like he means to take a sportin' chance.

How you goin' to tell, anyway? Most of 'em say they've been thrown out of work by the trusts, but that they've heard of a job in Newark, or Bridgeport, or somewhere, which they could get if they could only rustle enough coin to pay the fare. And they'll add interestin' details about havin' a sick wife, or maybe four hungry kids, and so on.

But this rusty bunch of works has a new variation. He's an old friend of the boss. Maybe it was partly so too. If it was—well, I got to thinkin' that over while the operator was countin' the words, and so the next thing I does is to walk over to the telephone queen and have her call up Mr. Robert.

"Well?" says he, impatient.

"It's Torchy again," says I. "I've filed the message, all right. But, say, there's a piece of human junk that I collected from in front of the club who's tryin' to panhandle me for a half on the strength of bein' an old chum of yours. He says his name's Melville Slater."

"Wha-a-at!" gasps Mr. Robert. "Melly Slater, trying to borrow half a dollar from you?"

"There's no doubt about his needin' it," says I. "My guess is that a half would be a life saver to

him just now."

"Why, it doesn't seem possible!!" says Mr. Robert. "Of course, I haven't seen Melly recently; but I can't imagine how— Did you say he was still there?"

"Hung up on the rail outside, if the cop ain't shooed him off," says I.

"Then keep him there until I come," says Mr. Robert. "If it's Melly, I must come. I'll be right over. But don't say a word to him until I get there."

"Got you," says I. "Hold Melly and keep mum."

I could pipe him off through the swing door vestibule; and, honest, from the lifeless way he's propped up there, one arm hangin' loose, his head to one side, and that white, pasty look to his nose and forehead—well, I didn't know but he'd croaked on the spot. So I slips through the cafe exit and chases along the side street until I meets Mr. Robert, who's pikin' over full tilt.

"You're sure it's Melly Slater, are you?" says he.

"I'm only sure that's what he said," says I. "But you can settle that soon enough. There he is, over there by the window."

"Why!" says Mr. Robert. "That can never be Melly; that is, unless he's changed wonderfully." With that he marches up and taps the object on the shoulder. "I say," says he, "you're not really Melly Slater, are you?"

There's a quick shiver runs through the man against the rail, and he lifts his eyes up cringin', like he expected to be hit with a club. Mr. Robert takes one look, and it almost staggers him. Next he reaches out, gets a firm grip on the gent's collar, and drags him out into a better light, twistin' the whiskered face up for a close inspection.

"Blashford!" says he, hiss'n' it out unpleasant. "Bunny Blashford!"

"No, no!" says the gent, tryin' to squirm away. "You—you've made a mistake."

"Not much!" says Mr. Robert. "I know those sneaking eyes of yours too well."

"All right," says he; "but—but don't hit me, Bob. Don't."

"You—you cur!" says Mr. Robert, holding him at arm's length and glarin' at him hostile.

"A ringer, eh?" says I.

"Worse than that," says Mr. Robert, "a sneaking, contemptible hound! Trying to pass yourself off for Melly, were you?" he goes on. "Of all men, Melly! What for?"

"I—I didn't want you to know I was back," whines Bunny. "And I had to get money somehow, Bob—honest, I did."

"Bah!" says Mr. Robert. "You—you—"

But he ain't got any such vocabulary as old Hickory Ellins has; so here, when he needs it most, all he can do is express his deep disgust by shakin' this Bunny party like a new hired girl dustin' a rug. He jerks him this way and that so reckless that I was afraid he'd rattle him apart, and when he fin'lly lets loose Bunny goes all in a heap on the sidewalk. I'd never seen Mr. Robert get real wrathy before; but it's all over in a minute, and he glances around like he was ashamed.

"Hang it all!" says he, gazin' at the wreck. "I didn't mean to lay my hands on him."

"He's in punk condition," says I. "What's to be done, call an ambulance?"

That jars Mr. Robert a lot. I expect he was so worked up he didn't know how rough he was handlin' him, and my suggestin' that he's qualified Bunny for a cot sobers him down in a minute. Next thing I knows he's kneelin' over the Blashford gent and liftin' his head up.

"Here, what's the matter with you?" says Mr. Robert.

"Don't! Don't strike me again," moans Bunny, cringin'.

"No, no, I'm not going to," says Mr. Robert. "And I apologize for shaking you. But what ails you?"

"I—I'm all in," says Bunny, beginnin' to snuffle. "Don't—don't beat me! I—I'm going to die; but—but not here, like—like this. I—I don't want to live; but—but I don't want to finish this way, like a rat. Help me, Bob, to—to finish decent. I know I don't deserve it from you; but—but you wouldn't want to see me go like this—dirty and ragged? I—I want to die clean and—and well dressed. Please, Bob, for old time's sake?"

"Nonsense, man!" says Mr. Robert. "You're not going to die now."

"Yes, I am, Bob," says Bunny. "I—I can tell. I want to, anyway. I—I'm no good. And I'm in rotten shape. Drink, you know, and I've a bad heart. I'm near starved too. It's been days since I've eaten anything—days!"

"By George!" says Mr. Robert. "Then you must have something to eat. Here, let me help you up. Torchy, you take the other side. Steady, now! I didn't know you were in such a condition; really, I didn't. And we'll get you filled up right away."

"I—I couldn't eat," says Bunny. "I don't want anything. I just want to quit—only—not like this; but clean, Bob, clean and dressed decent once more."

Say, maybe you can guess about how cheerin' it was, hearin' him say that over and over in that whiny, tremblin' voice of his, watchin' them shifty, deep-set eyes glisten glassy under the light. About as comfortin' a sight, he was, as a sick dog in a corner. And of all the rummy ideas to get in his nut—that about bein' dressed up to die! But he keeps harpin' away on it until fin'ly Mr. Robert takes notice.

"Yes, yes!" says the boss. "We'll attend to that, old man. But you need some nourishment in you first."

So we drags him over to the opposite corner, where there's a drugstore, and got a glass of hot milk under his vest. Then I calls a taxi, and we all starts for the nearest Turkish bath joint.

"That's all, Torchy," says Mr. Robert. "I won't bother you any more with this wretched business. You'd best go now."

"Suppose something happens to him?" says I. "You'll need a witness, won't you?"

"I hadn't thought of that," says he.

"There's no tellin'," says I. "Them coroners deputies are mostly boneheads. I'd better stay on the job."

"I know of no one I'd rather have, Torchy," says he.

Course, he was stretchin' it there. But we fixes it up that while Bunny is bein' soaked out I'll have time to pluck some eats. Meanwhile Mr. Robert will 'phone his man to dig out one of his old dress suits, with fixin's, which I'm to collect and have waitin' for Blashford.

"Better have him barbered some too, hadn't I?" says I.

"A lot," says Mr. Robert, slippin' me a couple of tens for expenses. "And when he's all ready call me at the club."

So, take it all around, I has quite some busy evenin'. I stayed long enough to see Bunny wrapped in a sheet and helped into the steam-room, and then I hustles out for a late dinner. It's near nine-thirty before I rings Mr. Robert up again, and reports that Bunny would pass a Board of Health inspection now that he's had the face herbage removed, that he's costumed proper and correct, and that he's decided not to die immediate.

"Very well," says Mr. Robert. "What does he want to do now?"

"He wants to talk to you," says I.

"The deuce he does!" says Mr. Robert. "Well, I suppose we might as well have it out; so bring him up here."

That's how it happens I'm rung in on this little club corner chat; for Mr. Robert explains that whatever passes between 'em it might be as well to have someone else hear.

And, say, what a diff'rence a little outside upholstery can make, eh? The steamin' out had helped some, I expect, and a couple more glasses of hot milk had braced him up too; but blamed if I'd expect just a shave and a few open-face clothes could change a human ruin into such a perky lookin' gent as this that leans back graceful against the leather cushions and lights up one of Mr. Robert's imported cigarettes. Course, the eye hollows hadn't been filled in, nor the face wrinkles ironed out; but somehow they only gives him a sort of a distinguished look. And now that his shoulders ain't slumped, and he's holdin' his chin up once more, he's almost ornamental. He don't even seem embarrassed at meetin' Mr. Robert again. If anyone was fussed, it was the boss.

"Well?" says he, as we gets settled in the cozy corner.

"Seems natural as life here; eh, Bob?" says Bunny, glancin' around approvin'. "And it's nearly four years since I—er—"

"Since you were kicked out," adds Mr. Robert. "See here, Bunny—just because I've helped you out of the gutter when I thought you were half dead, don't run away with the idea that I've either forgotten or forgiven!"

"Oh, quite so," says he. "I'm not asking that."

"Then you've no excuse," goes on Mr. Robert, "for the sneaking, cowardly way in which you left little Sally Slater waiting in her bridal gown, the house full of wedding guests, while you ran off with that unspeakable DeBrett person?"

"No," says Bunny, flippin' his cigarette ashes off jaunty, "no excuse worthy of the name."

"Cad!" says Mr. Robert.

Bunny shrugs his shoulders. "Precisely," says he. "But you are not making the discovery for the first time, are you? You knew Sally was far too good for me. Everyone did, even Brother Melly. It couldn't have been much of a secret to either of you how deep I was with the DeBrett too. Yet you wanted me to go on with Sally. Why? Because the governor hadn't chucked me overboard then, because I could still keep up a front?"

"You might have taken a brace," says Mr. Robert.

"Not I!" says Bunny. "Anyway, not after Trixie DeBrett got hold of me. The trouble was, Bob, you didn't half appreciate her. She had beauty, brains, wit, a thousand fascinations, and no more soul than a she boa constrictor. I was just a rabbit to her, a meal. She thought the governor would buy her off, say, for a couple hundred thousand or so. I suppose he would too, if it hadn't been for the Sally complication. He thought a lot of little Sally. And the way it happened was too raw. I don't blame him, mind you, nor any of you. I don't even blame Trixie. That was her game. And, by Jove! she was a star at it. I'd go back to her now if she'd let me."

"You're a fool!" snorts Mr. Robert.

"Always was, my dear Bob," says Bunny placid. "You often told me as much."

"But I didn't think," goes on Mr. Robert, "you'd get as low as—as tonight—begging!"

"Quite respectable for me, I assure you," says Bunny. "Why, my dear fellow, during the last few years there's been hardly a crime on the calendar I shouldn't have committed for a dollar—barring murder, of course. That requires nerve. How long do you suppose the few thousands I got from Aunt Eunice lasted? Barely six months. I thought I knew how to live rather luxuriously myself. But Trixie! Well, she taught me. And we were in Paris, you know. I didn't cable the governor until I was down to my last hundred-franc note. His reply was something of a stinger. I showed it to Trixie. She just laughed and went out for a drive. She didn't come back. I hear she picked up a brewer's son at Monte Carlo. Lucky devil, he was!

"And I? What would you expect? In less than two weeks I was a stowaway on a French liner. They routed me out and set me to stoking. I couldn't stand that, of course; so they put me to work in the kitchens, cleaning pots, dumping garbage, waiting on the crew. I had to make the round trip too. Then I jumped the stinking craft, only to get a worse berth on a P. & O. liner. I worked with Chinese, Lascars, coolies, the scum of the earth; worked and ate and slept and fought with them. I crawled ashore and deserted in strange ports. I think it was at Aden where I came nearest to starving the first time. And I remember the docks at Alexandria. Sometimes the tourists threw down coppers for the Arab and Berber boys to scabble for. It's a pleasant custom. I was there, in that scrabbling, cursing, clawing rabble. And when I'd had a good day I spent my coppers royally in a native dance-hall which even guides don't dare show to the trippers.

"Respectability, my dear Bob, is all a matter of comparison. I acquired a lot of new standards. As a second cabin steward on a Brazos liner I became quite haughty. Poverty! You don't know what it means until you've rubbed elbows with it in the Far East and the Far South. Here you have the Bowery Mission bread line. That's a fair sample, Bob, of our American opulence. Free bread!"

"So you've been in that, have you?" asks Mr. Robert.

"Have I?" says Bunny. "I've pals down there tonight who will wonder what has become of me."

Mr. Robert shudders. And, say, it made me feel chilly along the spine too.

"Well, what now?" says Mr. Robert. "I suppose you expect me to find you some sort of work?"

"Not at all," says Bunny. "Another of those cigarettes, if you don't mind. Excellent brand. Thanks. But work? How inconsiderate, Bob! I wasn't born to be useful. You know that well enough. No, work doesn't appeal to me."

Mr. Robert flushes up at that. "Then," says he, pointin' stern, "there's the door."

"Oh, what's the hurry?" says Bunny. "This is heaven to me, all this,—the old club, you know, and good tobacco, and—say, Bob, if I might suggest, a pint of that '85 vintage would add just the finishing touch. Come, I haven't tasted a glass of fizz since—well, I've forgotten. Just for auld lang syne!"

Mr. Robert gasps, hesitates a second, and then pushes the button. Bunny inspects the label critical when it's brought in, waves graceful to Mr. Robert, and slides the bottle back tender into the cooler.

"Ah-h-h!" says he. "And doesn't Henri have any more of those dainty little caviar canapes on hand? They go well with fizz."

"Canapes," says Mr. Robert to the waiter. "And another box of those gold-tipped Russians."

"*À vous!*" says Bunny, raisin' a glassful of bubbles and salutin'. "I'm as thirsty as a camel driver."

"But what I'd like to know," says Mr. Robert, "is what you propose doing."

"You, my dear fellow," says Bunny, settin' down the glass.

"Truly enterprising!" says Mr. Robert. "But you're going to be disappointed. In just ten minutes I mean to escort you to the sidewalk, and then wash my hands of you for good."

Bunny laughs. "Impossible!" says he. "In the first place, you couldn't sleep tonight, if you did. Secondly, I should hunt you up tomorrow and make a nuisance of myself."

"You'd be thrown out by a porter," says Mr. Robert.

"Perhaps," says he; "but it wouldn't look nice. I'd be in evening clothes, you see. The crowd would know at once that I was a gentleman. Reporters would come. I should tell a most harrowing tale. You'd deny it, of course; but half the people would believe me. No, no, Bob! Three hours ago, in my old rags, you might have kicked me into the gutter, and no one would have made any fuss at all. But now! Why, it would be absurd! I should make a mighty row over it."

"You threaten blackmail?" says Mr. Robert, leanin' towards him savage.

"That is one of my more reputable accomplishments," says Bunny. "But why force me to that? I have quite a reasonable proposal to submit."

"If it has anything to do with getting you so far away from New York that you'll never come back, I'll listen to it," says Mr. Robert.

"You state the case exactly," says Bunny. "In Paris I got to know a chap by the name of Dick Langdon; English, you know, and a younger son. His uncle's a Sir Something or Other. Dick was going the pace. He'd annexed some funds that he'd found lying around loose. Purely a family affair; no prosecution. A nice youth, Langdon. We were quite congenial.

"A year or so ago I ran across him again, down in Santa Marta. He was wearing a sun helmet and a white linen suit. He said he'd been shipped down there as superintendent of a banana plantation about twenty miles back from the port. He had half a hundred blacks and as many East Indian coolies under him. There was no one else within miles. Once a month he got down to see the steamer load and watch the white faces hungrily. I was only a cabin steward leaning over the rail; but he was so tickled to see me that he begged me to quit and go back to the plantation with him. He said he'd make me assistant superintendent, or permanent guest, or anything. But I was crazy to see New York once more. I wouldn't listen. Well, I've seen New York, seen enough of it to last a lifetime. What do you say?"

"When could you get a steamer?" asks Mr. Robert.

"The Arapequa sails at ten in the morning," says Bunny eager. "Fare forty-eight dollars one way. I could go aboard now. Dick would hail me as a man and a brother. I'm his kind. He'd see that I never had money enough to get away. I think I might possibly earn my keep bossing coolies too. And the pulque down there helps you to forget your troubles."

"Torchy," says Mr. Robert, "ask Barney to call a cab."

"And, by the way," Bunny is sayin' as I come back, "you might chuck in a business suit and a few white flannels into a grip, Bob. You wouldn't want me to arrive in South America dressed like this, would you?"

"Very well," says Mr. Robert. "But what I'm most concerned about is that you do arrive there."

"But how do you know, Mr. Robert," says I next mornin', "that he will?"

"Because I locked him in his stateroom myself," says he, "and bribed a steward not to let him out until he could see Barnegat light over the stern."

"Gee!" says I. "That's one way of losin' a better days' proposition. And in case any others like him turns up, Mr. Robert, have you got any more old dress suits?"

"If I have," says he, "I shall burn them."

CHAPTER XII

THE GLAD HAIL FOR TORCHY

I'll say this for Aunty: She's doin' her best. About all she's omitted is lockin' Vee in a safety deposit vault and forgettin' the combination.

Say, you'd most think I was as catchin' as a case of measles. I wish it was so; for once in awhile, in spite of Aunty, Vee gets exposed. That's all the good it does, though. What's a few minutes' chat with the only girl that ever was? It's a wonder we don't have to be introduced all over again. That would be the case with some girls. But Vee! Say, lemme put you wise—Vee's different! Uh-huh! I found that out all by myself. I don't know just where it comes in, or how, but she is.

All of which makes it just so much worse when she and Aunty does the summer flit. Course, I saw it comin' 'way back early in June, and then the first thing I know they're gone. I gets a bulletin now and then,—Lenox, the Pier, Newport, and so on,—sometimes from Vee, sometimes by readin' the society notes. Must be great to have the papers keep track of you, the way they do of Aunty. And it's so comfortin' to me, strayin' lonesome into a Broadway movie show of a hot evening to know that "among the debutantes at a tea dance given in the Casino by Mrs. Percy Bonehead yesterday afternoon was Miss Verona Hemmingway." Oh, sure! Say, how many moves am I from a tea dance—me here behind the brass rail at the Corrugated, with Piddie gettin' fussy, and Old Hickory jabbin' the buzzer?

And then, just when I'm peevish enough to be canned and served with lamb chops, here comes this glad word out of the State of Maine. "It's nice up here," says she; "but awfully stupid. VEE." That's all—just a picture postcard. But, say, I'd have put it in a solid gold frame if there'd been one handy.

As it is, I sticks the card up on the desk in front of me and gazes longin'. Some shack, I should judge by the picture,—one of these low, wide affairs, all built of cobblestones, with a red tile roof and yellow awnin's. Right on the water too. You can see the waves frothin' almost up to the front steps. Roarin' Rocks, Maine, is the name of the place printed underneath.

"Nice, but stupid, eh?" says I confidential to myself. "That's too bad. Wonder if I'd be bored to death with a week or so up there? I wonder what she'd say if——"

B-r-r-r-r! B-r-r-r-r-r! That's always the way! I just get started on some rosy dream, and I'm sailin' aloft miles and miles away, when off goes that blamed buzzer, and back I flop into this same old chair behind the same old brass rail! All for what? Why, Mr. Robert wants a tub of desk pins. I gets 'em from Piddie, trots in, and slams 'em down snappy at Mr. Robert's elbow.

"Eh?" says he, glancin' up startled.

"Said pins, dintcher?" says I.

"Why—er—yes," says he, "I believe I did. Thank you."

"Huh!" says I, turnin' on my heel.

"Oh—er—Torchy," he adds.

"Well?" says I over my shoulder.

"Might one inquire," says he, "is it distress, or only disposition?"

"It ain't the effect of too much fresh air, anyway," says I.

"Ah!" says he, sort of reflective. "Feeling the need of a half holiday, are you?"

"Humph!" says I. "What's the good of an afternoon off?"

He'd just come back from a two weeks' cruise, Mr. Robert had, lookin' tanned and husky, and a little later on he was goin' off on another jaunt. Course, that's all right, too. I'd take 'em oftener if I was him. But hanged if I'd sit there starin' puzzled at any one else who couldn't, the way he was doin' at me!

"Mr. Robert," says I, spunkin' up sudden, "what's the matter with me takin' a vacation?"

"Why," says he, "I—I presume it might be arranged. When would you wish to go?"

"When?" says I. "Why, now—tonight. Say, honest, if I try to stick out the week I'll get to be a grouch nurser, like Piddie. I'm sick of the shop, sick of answerin' buzzers, sick of everything!"

It wasn't what you might call a smooth openin', and from most bosses I expect it would have won me a free pass to all outdoors. But I guess Mr. Robert knows what these balky moods are himself. He only humps his eyebrows humorous and chuckles.

"That's rather abrupt, isn't it?" says he. "But perhaps—er—just where is she now, Torchy?"

I grins back sheepish. "Coast of Maine," says I.

"Well, well!" says he. "Then you'll need a two weeks' advance, at least. There! Present this to the cashier. And there is a good express, I believe, at eight o'clock tonight. Luck to you!"

"Mr. Robert," says I, choky, "you—you're I-double-It with me. Thanks."

"My best regards to Kennebunk, Cape Neddick, and Eggemoggen Reach," says he as we swaps grips.

Say, there's some boss for you, eh? But how he could dope out the symptoms so accurate is what gets me. Anyhow, he had the answer; for I don't stop to consult any vacation guidebook or summer tours pamphlet. I beats it for the Grand Central, pushes up to the ticket window, and calls for a round trip to Roaring Rocks.

"Nothing doing," says the guy. "Give you Bass Rocks, Seal Rocks, or six varieties of Spouting Rocks; but no Roaring ones on the list. Any choice?"

"Gwan, you fresh Mellen seed!" says I. "You got to have 'em. It says so on the card," and I shoves the postal at him.

"Ah, yes, my young ruddy duck," says he. "Postmarked Boothbay Harbor, isn't it? Bath for yours. Change there for steamer. Upper's the best I can do for you—drawing rooms all gone."

"Seein' how my private car's bein' reupholstered, I'll chance an upper," says I. "Only don't put any nose trombone artist underneath."

Yes, I was feelin' some gayer than a few hours before. What did I care if the old town was warmin' up as we pulls out until it felt like a Turkish bath? I was bound north on the map, with my new Norfolk suit and three outing shirts in my bag, a fair-sized wad of spendin' kale buttoned into my back pocket, and that card of Vee's stowed away careful. Say, I should worry! And don't they do some breezin' along on that Bar Harbor express while you sleep, though?

"What cute little village is this?" says I to Rastus in the washroom next mornin' about six-thirty A. M.

"Pohtland, Suh," says he. "Breakfast stop, Suh."

"Me for it, then," says I. "When in Maine be a maniac." So I tackles a plate of pork-and on its native heath; also a hunk of pie. M-m-m-m! They sure can build pie up there!

It's quite some State, Maine. Bath is several jumps on, and that next joint—— Say, it wa'n't until I'd changed to the steamer and was lookin' over my ticket that I sees anything familiar about the name. Boothbay! Why, wa'n't that the Rube spot this Ira Higgins hailed from? Maybe you remember,—Ira, who'd come on to see Mr. Robert about buildin' a new racin' yacht, the tall, freckled gink with a love affair on his mind? Why, sure, this was Ira's Harbor I was headed for. And, say, I didn't feel half so strange about explorin' the State after that. For Ira, you know, is a friend of mine. Havin' settled that with myself, I throws out my chest and roams around the decks, climbin' every flight of stairs I came to, until I gets to a comfy little coop on the very top where a long guy wearin' white suspenders over a blue flannel shirt is jugglin' the steerin' wheel.

"Hello, Cap!" says I. "How's she headin'?"

He ain't one of the sociable kind, though. You'd most thought, from the reprovin' stare he gives me, that he didn't appreciate good comp'ny.

"Can't you read?" says he.

"Ah, you mean the Keep-Out sign? Sure, Pete," says I; "but I can't see it from in here."

"Then git out where you can see it plainer," says he.

"Ah, quit your kiddin'!" says I. "That's for the common herd, ain't it? Now, I—— Say, if it'll make you feel any better, I'll tell you who I am."

"Say it quick then," says he. "Are you Woodrow Wilson, or only the Secretary of the Navy?"

"You're warm," says I. "I'm a friend of Ira Higgins of Boothbay Harbor."

"Sho!" says he, removin' his pipe and beginnin' to act human.

"Happen to know Ira?" says I.

"Ought to," says he. "First cousins. You from Boston?"

"Why, Cap!" says I. "What have I ever done to you? Now, honest, do I look like I—but I'll forgive you this time. New York, Cap: not Brooklyn, or Staten Island or the Bronx, you know, but straight New York, West 17th-st. And I've come all this way just to see Mr. Higgins."

"Gosh!" says he. "Ira always did have all the luck."

Next crack he calls me Sorrel Top, and inside of five minutes we was joshin' away chummy, me up on a tall stool alongside, and him pointin' out all the sights. And, believe me, the State of Maine's got some scenery scattered along the wet edge of it! Honest, it's nothin' but scenery,—rocks and trees and water, and water and trees and rocks, and then a few more rocks.

"How about when you hit one of them sharp ones?" says I.

"Government files a new edge on it," says he. "They keep a gang that does nothin' else."

"Think of that!" says I. "I don't see any lobsters floatin' around, though."

"Too late in the day," says he. "'Fraid of gittin' sunburned. You want to watch for 'em about daybreak. Millions then. Travel in flocks."

"Ye-e-es?" says I. "All hangin' onto a string, I expect. But why the painted posts stickin' up out of the water?"

"Hitchin' posts," says he, "for sea hosses."

Oh, I got a bunch of valuable marine information from him, and when the second mate came up he added a lot more. If I hadn't thought to tell 'em how there was always snow on the Singer and Woolworth towers, and how the East Side gunmen was on strike to raise the homicide price to three dollars and seventy-five cents, they'd had me well Sweeneyed. As it was, I guess we split about even.

Him findin' Boothbay Harbor among all that snarl of islands and channels wasn't any bluff, though. That was the real sleight of hand. As we're comin' up to the dock he points out Ira's boatworks, just on the edge of the town. Half an hour later I've left my baggage at the hotel and am interviewin' Mr. Higgins.

He's the same old Ira; only he's wearin' blue overalls and a boiled shirt with the sleeves rolled up.

"Roarin' Rocks, eh?" says he. "Why, that's the Hollister place on Cunner Point, about three miles up."

"Can I get a trolley?" says I.

"Trolley!" says he. "Why, Son, there ain't any 'lectric cars nearer'n Bath."

"Gee, what a jay burg!" says I. "How about a ferry, then?"

Ira shakes his head. Seems Roarin' Rocks is a private joint, the summer place of this Mr. Hollister who's described by Ira as "richer'n Croesus"—whatever that might mean. Anyway, they're exclusive parties that don't encourage callers; for the only way of gettin' there is over a private road around the head of the bay, or by hirin' a launch to take you up.

"Generally," says Ira, "they send one of their boats down to meet company. Now, if they was expectin' you——"

"That's just it," I breaks in, "they ain't. Fact is, Ira, there's a young lady visitin' there with her aunt, and—and—well, Aunty and me ain't so chummy as we might be."

"Just so," says Ira, noddin' wise.

"Now my plan was to go up there and kind of stick around, you know," says I, "sort of in the shade, until the young lady strolled out."

Ira shakes his head discouragin'. "They're mighty uppish folks," says he. "Got 'No Trespass' signs all over the place—dogs too."

"Hellup!" says I. "What am I up against? Why don't Aunty travel with a bunch of gumshoe guards and be done with it?"

"Tell you what," says Ira, struck by a stray thought, "if lookin' the place over'll do any good, you might go out with Eb Westcott this afternoon when he baits. He's got pots all around the point."

That don't mean such a lot to me; but my middle name is Brodie. "Show me Eb," says I.

He wa'n't any thrillin' sight, Eb; mostly rubber hip boots, flannel shirt, and whiskers. He could have been cleaner. So could his old tub of a lobster boat; but not while he stuck to that partic'lar line of business, I guess. And, say, I know now what baitin' is. It's haulin' up lobster pots from the bottom of the ocean and decoratin' 'em inside with fish—ripe fish, at that. The scheme is to lure the lobsters into the pot. Seems to work too; but I guess a lobster ain't got any sense of smell.

"Better put on some old clothes fust," advised Eb, and as I always like to dress the part I borrows a moldy suit of oilskins from Ira, includin' one of these yellow sea bonnets, and climbs aboard.

It's a one-lunger putt-putt—and take it from me the combination of gasolene and last Tuesday's fish ain't anything like *Eau d'Espagne!* Quite different! Also I don't care for that jumpy up and down motion one of these little boats gets on, specially after pie and beans for breakfast. Then Eb hands me the steerin' ropes while he whittles some pressed oakum off the end of a brunette plug and loads his pipe. More perfume comin' my way!

"Ever try smokin' formaldehyde?" says I.

"Gosh, no!" says Eb. "What's it like?"

"You couldn't tell the difference," says I.

"We git tin tags off'm Sailor's Pride," says Eb. "Save up fifty, and you git a premium."

"You ought to," says I, "and a pension for life."

"Huh!" says Eb. "It's good eatin' too, Ever chaw any?" and he holds out the plug invitin'.

"Don't tempt me," says I. "I promised my dear old grandmother I wouldn't."

"Lookin' a little peaked, ain't you!" says he. "Most city chaps do when they fust come; but after 'bout a month of this——"

"Chop it, Eb!" says I. "I'm feelin' unhappy enough as it is. A month of this? Ah, say!"

After awhile we begun stoppin' to bait. Eb would shut off the engine, run up to a float, haul in a lot of clothesline, and fin'lly pull up an affair that's a cross between a small crockery crate and an openwork hen-coop. Next he'd grab a big needle and string a dozen or so of the gooey fish on a cord. I watched once. After that I turned my back. By way of bein' obligin', Eb showed me how to roll the flywheel and start the engine. He said I was a heap stronger in the arms than I looked, and he didn't mind lettin' me do it right along. Friendly old yap, Eb was. I kept on rollin' the wheel.

So about three P. M., as we was workin' our way along the shore, Eb looks up and remarks, "Here's the Hollister place, Roarin' Rocks."

Sure enough there it was, almost like the postcard picture, only not colored quite so vivid.

"Folks are out airin' themselves too," he goes on.

They were. I could see three or four people movin' about on the veranda; for we wa'n't more'n half a block away. First off I spots Aunty. She's paradin' up and down, stiff and stately, and along with her waddles a wide, dumpy female in pink. And next, all in white, and lookin' as slim and graceful as an Easter lily, I makes out Vee; also a young gent in white flannels and a striped tennis blazer. He's smokin' a cigarette and swingin' a racket jaunty. I could even hear Vee's laugh ripple out across the water. You remember how she put it too, "nice, but awfully stupid." Seems she was makin' the best of it, though.

And here I was, in Ira's baggy oilskins, my feet in six inches of oily brine, squattin' on the edge of a smelly fish box tryin' to hold down a piece of custard pie! No, that wa'n't exactly the rosy picture I threw on the screen back in the Corrugated gen'ral offices only yesterday. Nothing like that! I don't do any hoo-hooin', or wave any private signals. I pulls the sticky sou'wester further down over my eyes and squats lower in the boat.

"Look kind o' gay and festive, don't they?" says Eb, straightenin' up and wipin' his hands on his corduroys.

"Who's the party in the tennis outfit?" says I.

"Him?" says Eb, gawpin' ashore. "Must be young Hollister, that owns the mahogany speed boat. Stuck up young dude, I guess. Wall, five more traps to haul, and we're through, Son."

"Let's go haul 'em, then," says I, grabbin' the flywheel.

Great excursion, that was! Once more on land, I sneaked soggy footed up to the hotel and

piked for my room. I shied supper and went to the feathers early, trustin' that if I could get stretched out level with my eyes shut things would stop wavin' and bobbin' around. That was good dope too.

I rolled out next mornin' feelin' fine and silky; but not so cocky by half. Somehow, I wa'n't gettin' any of the lucky breaks I'd looked for.

My total programme for the day was just to bat around Boothbay. And, say, of all the lonesome places for city clothes and a straw lid! Honest, I never saw so many yachty rigs in my life,—young chaps in white ducks and sneakers and canvas shoes, girls in middie blouses, old guys in white flannels and yachtin' caps, even old ladies dressed sporty and comf'table—and more square feet of sunburn than would cover Union Square. I felt like a blond Eskimo at a colored camp meetin'.

As everyone was either comin' from or goin' to the docks, I wanders down there too, and loafes around watchin' the steamers arrive, and the big sailin' yachts anchored off in the harbor, and the little boats dodgin' around in the choppy water. There's a crisp, salty breeze that's makin' the flags snap, the sun's shinin' bright, and take it altogether it's some brilliant scene. Only I'm on the outside peekin' in.

"What's the use?" thinks I. "I'm off my beat up here."

Fin'lly I drifts down to the Yacht Club float, where the launches was comin' in thick. I must have been there near an hour, swappin' never a word with anybody, and gettin' loner by the minute, when in from the harbor dashes a long, low, dark-colored boat and comes rushin' at the float like it meant to make a hydroplane jump. At the wheel I gets sight of a young chap who has sort of a worried, scared look on his face. Also he's wearin' a striped blazer.

"Young Hollister, maybe," thinks I. "And he's in for a smash."

Just then he manages to throw in his reverse; but it's a little late, for he's got a lot of headway. Honest, I didn't think it out. And I was achin' to butt into something. I jumped quick, grabbed the bow as it came in reach, shoved it off vigorous, and brought him alongside the fenders without even scratchin' the varnish.

"Thanks, old chap," says he. "Saved me a bad bump there. I—I'm greatly obliged."

"You're welcome," says I. "You was steamin' in a little strong."

"I haven't handled the Vixen much myself," says he. "You see, our boatman's laid up,—sprained ankle,—and I had to come down from the Rocks for some gasolene."

"Oh! Roarin' Rocks?" says I.

"Yes," says he. "Where's that fool float tender?"

"Just gone into the clubhouse," says I. "Maybe I could keep her from bumpin' while you're gone."

"By Jove! would you?" says he, handin' over a boathook.

Even then I wasn't layin' any scheme. I helps when they puts the gas in, and makes myself generally useful. Also I'm polite and respectful, which seems to make a hit with him.

"Deuced bother," says he, "not having any man. I had a picnic planned for today too."

"That so?" says I. "Well, I'm no marine engineer, but I'm just killin' time around here, and if I could help any way—"

"Oh, I say, but that's jolly of you," says he, "I wonder if you would, for a day or so? My name's Hollister, Payne Hollister."

He wasn't Payne to me. He was Joy. Easy? Why, he fairly pushes me into it! Digs a white jumper out of a locker for me, and a little round canvas hat with "Vixen" on the front, and trots back uptown to buy me a swell pair of rubber-soled deck shoes. Business of quick change for yours truly. Then look! Say, here I am, just about the yachtiest thing in sight, leanin' back on the steerin' seat cushions of a classy speed boat that's headed towards Vee at a twenty-mile clip.

CHAPTER XIII

AUNTY FLAGS A ROSY ONE

Lemme see, I was headed out of Boothbay Harbor, Maine, bound for Roarin' Rocks, wa'n't I? Hold the picture,—me in a white jumper and little round canvas hat with "Vixen" printed across the front, white shoes too, and altogether as yachty as they come. Don't forget young Mr. Payne Hollister at the wheel, either; although whether I'd kidnapped him, or he'd kidnapped me, is open for debate.

Anyway, here I was, subbin' incog for the reg'lar crew, who was laid up with a sprained ankle. All that because I'd got the happy hail from Vee on a postcard. It wa'n't any time for unpleasant thoughts then; but I couldn't help wonderin' how soon Aunty would loom on the horizon and spoil it all.

"So there's a picnic on the slate, eh?" I suggests.

Young Mr. Hollister nods. "I'd promised some of the folks at the house," says he. "Guests, you know."

"Oh, yes," says I, feelin' a little shiver flicker down my spine.

I knew. Vee was a guest there. So was Aunty. The picnic prospects might have been more allurin'. But I'd butted in, and this was no time to back out. Besides, I was more or less interested in sizin' up Payne Hollister. Tall, slim, young gent; dark, serious eyes; nose a little prominent; and his way of speakin' and actin' a bit pompous,—one of them impatient, quick-motioned kind that wants to do everything in a minute. He keeps gettin' up and starin' ahead, like he wa'n't quite sure where he was goin', and then leanin' over to squint at the engine restless.

"Just see if those forward oil cups are full, will you?" says he.

I climbs over and inspects. Everything seems to be O. K.; although what I don't know about a six-cylinder marine engine is amazin'.

"We're slidin' through the water slick," says I.

"She can turn up much faster than this," says he; "only I don't dare open her wide."

I was satisfied. I could use a minute or so about then to plot out a few scenarios dealin' with how a certain party would act in case of makin' a sudden discovery. But I hadn't got past picturin' the cold storage stare before the Hollister place shows up ahead, Payne throttles the Vixen down cautious, shoots her in between a couple of rocky points, and fetches her up alongside a rope-padded private float. There's some steps leadin' up to the top of the rocks.

"Do you mind running up and asking if they're ready?" says Payne.

"Why, no," says I; "but—but who do I ask?"

"That's so," says he. "And they'll not know who you are, either. I'll go. Just hold her off."

Me with a boathook, posin' back to for the next ten minutes, not even darin' to rubber over my shoulder. Then voices, "Have you the coffee bottles?"—"Don't forget the steamer rugs."—"I put the olives on the top of the sandwiches."—"Be careful when you land, Mabel dear."—"Oh, we'll be all right." This last from Vee.

Another minute and they're down on the float, with Payne Hollister explainin', "Oh, I forgot. This is someone who is helping me with the boat while Tucker's disabled." I touches my hat respectful; but I'm too busy to face around—much too busy!

"Now, Cousin Mabel," says young Hollister, "right in the middle of that seat! Easy, now!"

A squeal from Mabel. No wonder! I gets a glimpse of her as she steps down, and, believe me, if I had Mabel's shape and weight you couldn't tease me out on the water in anything smaller'n the Mauretania! All the graceful lines of a dumplin', Mabel had; about five feet up and down, and 'most as much around. Vee is on one side, Payne on the other, both lowerin' away careful; but as she makes the final plunge before floppin' onto the seat she reaches out one paw and annexes my right arm. Course that swings me around sudden, and I finds myself gazin' at Vee over Payne Hollister's shoulders, not three feet away.

"Oh!" says she, startled, and you couldn't blame her. I just has to lay one finger on my lips and shake my head mysterious.

"All right!" sings out Payne, straightenin' up. "Always more or less exciting getting Cousin Mabel aboard; but it's been accomplished. Now, Verona!"

As he gives her a hand she floats in as light as a bird landin' in a treetop. I could feel her watchin' me curious and puzzled as I passes the picnic junk down for Hollister to stow away. Course, it wa'n't any leadin'-heavy, spotlight entrance I was makin' at Roarin' Rocks; but it's a lot better, thinks I, than not bein' there at all.

"Oh, dear," sighs Mabel, "what a narrow, uncomfortable seat!"

"Is it, really?" asks Vee. "Can't it be fixed someway, Payne?"

"Lemme have a try?" says I. With that I stuffs extra cushions around her, folds up a life preserver to rest her feet on, and drapes her with a steamer rug.

"Thanks," says she, sighin' grateful and rewardin' me with a display of dimples. "What is your name, young man?"

"Why," says I, with a glance at Vee, "you can just call me Bill."

"Nonsense!" says Mabel. "Your name is William."

"William goes, Miss," says I; and as she snuggles down I chances a wink Vee's way. No response, though. Vee ain't sure yet whether she ought to grin or give me the call-down.

"Cast off!" says Payne, and out between the rocks we shoot, with Aunty and Mrs. Hollister wavin' from the veranda. Anyway, that was some relief. This wa'n't Aunty's day for picnickin'.

She didn't know what she was missin', I expect; for, say, that's good breathin' air up off Boothbay. There's some life and pep to it, and rushin' through it that way you can't help pumpin' your lungs full. Makes you glow and tingle inside and out. Makes you want to holler. That, and the sunshine dancin' on the water, and the feel of the boat slicin' through the waves, the engine purrin' away a sort of rag-time tune, and the pennants whippin', and all that scenery shiftin' around to new angles, not to mention the fact that Vee's along—well, I was enjoyin' life about then. Kind of got into my blood. Everything was lovely, and I didn't care what happened next.

Me bein' the crew, I expect I should have been fussin' around up front, coilin' ropes, or groomin' the machinery. But I can't make my eyes behave. I has to turn around every now and then and grin. Mabel don't seem to mind.

"William," says she, signalin' me, "see if you can't find a box of candy in that basket."

I hops over the steerin' seat back into the standin' room and digs it out. Also I lingers around while Mabel feeds in a few pieces.

"Have some?" says she. "You're so good-natured looking."

"That's my long suit," says I.

Then I see Vee's mouth corners twitching and she takes her turn. "You live around here, I suppose, William?" says she.

"No such luck," says I. "I come up special to get this job."

"But," puts in Mabel, holdin' a fat chocolate cream in the air, "Tucker wasn't hurt until yesterday."

"That's when I landed," says I.

"Someone must have sent you word then," says Vee, impish.

"Uh-huh," says I. "Someone mighty special too. Sweet of her, wa'n't it?"

"Oh! A girl?" asks Mabel, perkin' up.

"*The* girl," says I.

"Tee-hee!" snickers Mabel, nudgin' Vee delighted. "Is—is she very nice, William? Tell us about her, won't you?"

"Oh, do!" says Vee, sarcastic.

"Well," says I, lookin' at Vee, "she's about your height and build."

"How interesting!" says Mabel, with another nudge. "Go on. What kind of hair?"

"Never was any like it," says I.

"But her complexion," insists Mabel, "dark or fair?"

"Pink roses in the mornin', with the dew on," says I.

"Bravo!" says Mabel, clappin' her hands. "And her eyes?"

"Why," says I, "maybe you've looked down into deep sea water on a still, gray day? That's it."

"She must be a beauty," says Mabel.

"Nothing but," says I.

"I hope she has a nice disposition too," says she.

"Nope," says I, shakin' my head solemn.

"Humph! What's the matter with that?" says Vee.

"Jumpy," says I. "Red pepper and powdered sugar; sometimes all sugar, sometimes all pepper, then again a mixture. You never can tell."

"Then I'd throw her over," says Vee.

"Honest, would you?" says I, lookin' her square in the eye.

"If I didn't like her disposition, I would," says she.

"But that's the best part of her to me," says I. "Adds variety, you know, and—well, I expect it's about the only way I'm like her. Mine is apt to be that way too."

"Why, of course," comes in Mabel. "If she was as pretty as all that, and angelic too——"

"You got the idea," says I. "She'd be in a stained glass window somewhere, eh?"

"You're a silly boy!" says Vee.

"That sounds natural," says I. "I often get that from her."

"And is she living up here?" asks Mabel. "Visiting," says I. "She's with her——"

"William," breaks in Vee, "I think Mr. Hollister wants you."

I'd most forgot about Payne; for, while he's only a few feet off, he's as much out of the group as if he was ashore. You know how it is in one of them high-powered launches with the engine runnin'. You can't hear a word unless you're right close to. And Payne's twistin' around restless.

"Yes, Sir?" says I, goin' up and reportin'.

"Ask Miss Verona if she doesn't want to come up here," says he. "I—I think it will trim the boat better."

"Sure," says I. But when I passes the word to Vee I translates. "Mr. Hollister's lonesome," says I, "and there's room for another."

"I've been wondering if I couldn't," says Vee.

"You can," says I. "Lemme help you over."

Gives me a chance for a little hand squeeze and another close glimpse into them gray eyes. I don't make out anything definite, though. But as she passes forward she puckers her lips saucy and whispers, "Pepper!" in my ear. I guess, after all, when you're doin' confidential description you don't want to stick too close to facts. Makin' it all stained glass window stuff is safer.

I goes back to Mabel and lets her demand more details. She's just full of romance, Mabel is; not so full, though, that it interferes with her absorbin' a few eats now and then. Between answerin' questions I'm kept busy handin' out crackers, oranges, and doughnuts, openin' the olive bottle, and gettin' her drinks of water. Reg'lar Consumers' League, Mabel. I never run a sausage stuffin' machine; but I think I could now.

"You're such a handy young man to have around," says Mabel, after I've split a Boston cracker and lined it with strawb'ry jam for her; "so much better than Tucker."

"That's my aim," says I, "to make you forget Tucker."

Yes, I was gettin' some popular with Mabel, even if I was in wrong with Vee. They seems to be havin' quite a chatty time of it, Payne showin' her how to steer, and lettin' her salute passin' launches, and explainin' how the engine worked. As far as them two went, Mabel and me was only so much excess baggage.

"Why, we're clear out beyond Squirrel!" exclaims Mabel at last. "Ask Payne where we're going to stop for our picnic. I'm getting hungry."

"Oh, yes," says Payne, "we must be thinking about landing. I had planned to run out to Damariscove; but that looks like a fog bank hanging off there. Perhaps we'd better go back to Fisherman's Island, after all. Tell her Fisherman's."

I couldn't see what the fog bank had to do with it—not then, anyway. Why, it was a peach of a day,—all blue sky, not a sign of a cloud anywhere, and looked like it would stay that way for a week. He keeps the Vixen headed out to sea for awhile longer, and then all of a sudden he circles short and starts back.

"Fog!" he shouts over his shoulder to Mabel.

"Oh, bother!" says Mabel. "I hate fog. And it is coming in too."

Yes, that bank did seem to be workin' its way toward us, like a big, gray curtain that's bein' shoved from the back drop to the front of the stage. You couldn't see it move, though; but as I watched blamed if it don't creep up on an island, a mile or so out, and swallow it complete, same as a picture fades off a movie screen when the lights go wrong. Just like that. Then a few wisps of thin mist floats by, makin' things a bit hazy ahead. Squirrel Island, off to the left, disappears like it had gone to the bottom. The mainland shore grows vague and blurred, and the first thing we know we ain't anywhere at all, the scenery's all smudged out, and nothin' in sight but this pearl-gray mist. It ain't very thick, you know, and only a little damp. Rummy article, this State of Maine fog!

Young Hollister is standin' up now, tryin' to keep his bearin's and doin' his best to look through the haze. He slows the engine down until we're only just chuggin' along.

"Let's see," says he, "wasn't Squirrel off there a moment ago?"

"Why, no," says Vee. "I thought it was more to the left."

"By Jove!" says he. "And there are rocks somewhere around here too!"

Funny how quick you can get turned around that way. Inside of three minutes I couldn't have told where we were at, any more'n if I'd been blindfolded in a cellar. And I guess young Hollister got to that condition soon after.

"We ought to be making the south end of Fisherman's soon," he observes.

But we didn't. He has me climb out on the bow to sing out if I see anything. But, say, there was less to see than any spot I was ever in. I watched and watched, and Payne kept on gettin' nervous. And still we keeps chuggin' and chuggin', steerin' first one way and then the other. It seemed hours we'd been gropin' around that way when—

"Rocks ahead!" I sings out as something dark looms up. Payne turns her quick; but before she can swing clear bang goes the bow against something solid and slides up with a gratin' sound. He tries backin' off; but she don't budge.

"Hang it all!" says Payne, shuttin' off the engine. "I guess we're stuck."

"Then why not have the picnic right here?" pipes up Mabel.

"Here!" snaps Payne. "But I don't know where we are."

"Oh, what's the difference?" says Mabel. "Besides, I'm hungry."

"I want to get out of this, though," says Payne. "I mean to keep going until I know where I am."

"Oh, fudge!" says Mabel. "This is good enough. And if we stay here and have a nice luncheon perhaps the fog will go away. What's the sense in drifting around when you're hungry?"

That didn't seem such bad dope, either. Vee sides with Mabel, and while Payne don't like the idea he gives in. We seem to have landed somewhere. So we carts the baskets and things ashore, finds a flat place up on the rocks, and then the three of us tackles the job of hoistin' Mabel onto dry land. And it was some enterprise, believe me!

"Goodness!" pants Mabel, after we'd got her planted safe. "I don't know how I'm ever going to get back."

We didn't, either; but after we'd spread out five kinds of sandwiches within her reach, poured hot coffee out of the patent bottles, opened the sardines and pickles, set out the cake and doughnuts, Mabel ceases to worry.

Payne don't, though. He swallows one sandwich, and then goes back to inspect the boat. He announces that the tide is comin' in and she ought to float soon; also that when she does he wants to start back.

"Now, Payne!" protests Mabel. "Just when I'm comfortable!"

"And there isn't any hurry, is there?" asks Vee.

I wa'n't so stuck on buttin' around in the fog myself; so when he asks me to go down and see if the launch is afloat yet, and I finds that she can be pushed off easy, I don't hurry about tellin' him so. Instead I climbs aboard and develops an idea. You see, when I was out with Eb Westcott in his lobster boat the day before I'd noticed him stop the engine just by jerkin' a little wire off the spark plug. Here was a whole bunch of wires, though. Wouldn't do to unhitch 'em all. But along the inside of the boat is a little box affair that they all lead into, with one big wire leadin'

out. Looked kind of businesslike, that one did. I unhitches it gentle and drapes it over a nearby screwhead. Then I strolls back and reports that she's afloat.

"Good!" says Payne. "I'll just start the engine and be tuning her up while the girls finish luncheon."

Well, maybe you can guess. I could hear him windin' away at the crankin' wheel, windin' and windin', and then stoppin' to cuss a little under his breath.

"What's the matter?" sings out Mabel.

She was one of the kind that's strong on foolish questions.

"How the blazes should I know?" raps back young Hollister. "I can't start the blasted thing."

"Never mind," says Mabel cheerful. "We haven't finished the sandwiches yet."

Next time I takes a peek Payne has his tool kit spread out and is busy takin' things apart. He's getting' himself all smeared up with grease and oil too. Pity; for he'd started out lookin' so neat and nifty. Meanwhile we'd fed Mabel to the limit, got her propped up with cushions, and she's noddin' contented.

"Guess I'll do some exploring" says I.

"But I've been wanting to do that this half-hour," says Vee.

"Well, let's then," says I.

"Go on," says Mabel, "and tell me about it afterward."

Oh, yes, we explores. Say, I'm a bear for that too! You have to go hand in hand over the rocks, to keep from slippin'. And the fog makes it all the nicer. We didn't go far before we came to the edge. Then we cross in another direction, and comes to more edge.

"Why, we're on a little island!" says Vee.

"Big enough for us," says I. "Here's a good place to sit down too." We settles ourselves in a snug little corner that gives us a fine view of the fog.

"How silly of you to come away up here," says Vee, "just because—well, just because."

"It's the only wise move I was ever guilty of," says I. "I feel like I had Solomon in the grammar grade."

"But how did you happen to get here—with Payne?" says she.

"Hypnotized him," says I. "That part was a cinch."

"And until to-day you didn't know where we were, or anything," says she.

"I scouted around a bit yesterday afternoon," says I. "Saw you too."

"Yesterday!" says she. "Why, no one came near all the afternoon; that is, only a couple of lobstermen in a horrid, smelly old boat."

"Uh-huh," says I. "One was me, in disguise."

"Torchy!" says she, gaspin'. And somehow she snuggles up a little closer after that. "I didn't think when I wrote," she goes on, "that you would be so absurd."

"Maybe I was," says I. "But I took it straight, that part about it bein' stupid up here. I was figurin' on liftin' the gloom. I hadn't counted on Payne."

"Well, what then?" says she, tossin' her chin up.

"Nothin'," says I. "Guess you were right, too."

"He only came the other day," says Vee; "but he's nice."

"Aunty thinks so too, don't she?" says I.

"Why, yes," admits Vee.

"Another chosen one, is he?" says I.

Vee flushes. "I don't care!" says she. "He is rather nice."

"Correct," says I. "I found him that way too; but ain't he—well, just a little stiff in the neck?"

That brings out a giggle. "Poor Payne!" says Vee. "He is something of a stick, you know."

"We'll forgive him for that," says I. "We'll forgive Mabel. We'll forgive the fog. Eh?" Then my arm must have slipped.

"Why, Torchy!" says she.

"Oh!" says I. "Thought you were too near the edge." And the side clinch wa'n't disturbed.



[Illustration: Then my arm must have slipped—and the side clinch wa'n't disturbed.]

Some chat too! I don't know when we've had a chance for any such a good long talk as that, and we both seemed to have a lot of conversation stored up. Then we chucked pebbles into the water, and Vee pulls some seaweed and decorates my round hat. You know? It's easy killin' time when you're paired off right. And the first thing we knows the fog begins to lighten and the sun almost breaks through. We hurries back to where Mabel's just rousin' from a doze.

"Well?" says she.

"It's a tiny little island we're on," says Vee.

"Nice little island, though," says I.

"Hey!" sings out Payne, pokin' his head up over the rocks. "I've been calling and calling."

"We've been explorin'," says I. "Got her fixed yet?"

"Hang it, no!" growls Payne, scrubbin' cotton waste over his forehead. "And the fog's beginning to lift. Why, there's the shore, and—and—well, what do you think of that? We're on Grampus Ledges, not a mile from home!"

Sure enough, there was Roarin' Rocks just showin' up.

"Now if I could only start this confounded engine!" says he, starin' down at it puzzled.

By this time Vee and Mabel appears, and of course Mabel wants to know what's the matter.

"I'm sure I can't tell," says Payne, sighin' hopeless.

"Wirin' all right, is it?" says I, climbin' in and lookin' scientific. And—would you believe it?—I only paws around a minute or so before I finds a loose magneto connection, hooks it up proper, and remarks casual, "Now let's try her."

Pur-r-r-r! Off she goes. "There!" exclaims Mabel. "I shall never go out again unless William is along. He's so handy!"

Say, she stuck to it. Four days I was chief engineer of the Vixen—and, take it from me, they was perfectly good days. No more fog. No rain. Just shoolin' around in fair weather, makin' excursions here and there, with Vee trippin' down to the dock every day in a fresher and newer yachtin' costume, and lookin' pinker and sweeter every trip.

Course, as regards a certain other party, it was a case of artistic dodgin' for me between times. You got to admit, though, that it wa'n't a fair test for Aunty. I had her off her guard. Might have been diff'rent too, if she'd cared for motorboatin'. So maybe I got careless. I remember once passin' Aunty right in the path, as I'm luggin' some things up to the house, and all I does is to hoist the basket up on my shoulder between me and her and push right along.

Then here the last morning just as we got under way for a run to Damariscotta, she and Mrs. Hollister was up on the cliff seein' us off. All the rest was wavin'; so just for sport I takes off my hat and waves too, grinnin' humorous at Vee as I makes the play. But, say, next time I looks back she's up on the veranda with the fieldglasses trained on us. I keeps my hat on after that. My kind of red hair is prominent enough to the naked eye at almost any distance—but with fieldglasses! Good night!

It was a day for forgettin' things, though. Ever sailed up the Scotty River on a perfect August day, with the sun on the green hills, a sea breeze tryin' to follow the tide in, and the white gulls swingin' lazy overhead? It's worth doin'. Then back again, roundin' Ocean Point about sunset, with the White Islands all tinted up pink off there, and the old Atlantic as smooth as a skatin' rink as far out as you can see, and streaked with more colors than a crazy cubist can sling,—some peaceful picture.

But what a jar to find Aunty, grim and forbidding waitin' on the dock. She never says a word until we'd landed and everyone but me had started for the house. Then I got mine.

"Boy," says she icy, "take off that hat!"

I does it reluctant.

"Humph!" says she. "William! I thought so." That's all; but she says it mighty expressive.

The programme for the followin' day included a ten o'clock start, and I'd been down to the boat ever since breakfast, tidyin' things up and sort of wonderin'. About nine-fifteen, though, young Hollister comes wanderin' down by his lonesome.

"It's all off," says he. "Miss Verona and her aunt have gone."

"Eh?" says I, gawpin'. "Gone?"

"Early this morning," says he. "I don't quite understand why; something about Verona's being out on the water so much, I believe. Gone to the mountains. And—er—by the way, Tucker is around again. Here he comes now."

"He gets the jumper, then," says I, peelin' it off. "I guess I'm due back on Broadway."

"It's mighty good of you to help out," says Payne, "and I—I want to do the right thing in the way of—"

"You have," says I. "You've helped me have the time of my life. Put up the kale, Hollister. If you'll land me at the Harbor, I'll call it square."

He don't want to let it stand that way; but I insists. As I climbs out on the Yacht Club float, where he'd picked me up, he puts out his hand friendly.

"And, say," says I, "how about Miss Vee?"

"Why," says he, "I'm very sorry she couldn't stay longer."

"Me too," says I. "Some girl, eh?"

Payne nods hearty, and we swaps a final grip.

Well, it was great! My one miscue was not wearin' a wig.

CUTTING IN ON THE BLISS

We thought it was all over too. That's the way it is in plays and books, where they don't gen'rally take 'em beyond the final clinch, leavin' you to fill in the bliss *ad lib*. But here we'd seen 'em clear through the let-no-man-put-asunder stage, even watched 'em dodge the rice and confetti in their dash to the limousine.

"Thank goodness that's through with!" remarks Mother, without makin' any bones of it.

Course, her reg'lar cue was to fall on Father's neck and weep; but, then, I expect Mrs. Cheyne Ballard's one of the kind you can't write any form sheet for. She's a lively, bunchy little party, all jump and go and jingle, who looks like she might have been married herself only day before yesterday.

"I hope Robbie knows where she put those trunk checks," says Father, at the same time sighin' sort of relieved.

From where I stood, though, the guy who was pushin' overboard the biggest chunk of worry was this I-wilt boy, Mr. Nicholas Talbot. He'd got her at last! But, z-z-z-zingo! it had been some lively gettin'. Not that I was all through the campaign with him; but I'd had glimpses here and there.

You see, Robbie's almost one of the fam'ly; for Mr. Robert's an old friend of the Ballards, and was bottle holder or something at the christenin'. As a matter of fact, she was named Roberta after him. Then he'd watched her grow up, and always remembered her birthdays, and kept her latest picture on his desk. So why shouldn't he figure more or less when so many others was tryin' to straighten out her love affairs? They was some tangled there for awhile too.

Robbie's one of the kind, you know, that would have Cupid cross-eyed in one season. A queen? Well, take it from me! Say, the way her cheeks was tinted up natural would have a gold medal rose lookin' like it come off a twenty-nine-cent roll of wall paper. Then them pansy-colored eyes! Yes, Miss Roberta Ballard was more or less ornamental. That wa'n't all, of course. She could say more cute things, and cut loose with more unexpected pranks, than a roomful of Billie Burkes. As cunnin' as a kitten, she was.

No wonder Nick Talbot fell for her the first time he was exposed! Course, he was half engaged to that stunnin' Miss Marian Marlowe at the time; but wa'n't Robbie waverin' between three young chaps that all seemed to be in the runnin' before Nick showed up?

Anyway, Miss Marlowe should have known better than to lug in her steady when she was visitin'. She'd been chummy with Robbie at boardin' school, and should have known how dangerous she was. But young Mr. Talbot had only two looks before he's as strong for Robbie as though it had been comin' on for years back. Impetuous young gent that way he was too; and, bein' handicapped by no job, and long on time and money, he does some spirited rushin'.

Seems Robbie Ballard didn't mind. Excitement was her middle name, novelty was her strong suit, and among Nick's other attractions he was brand new. Besides, wa'n't he a swell one-stepper, a shark at tennis, and couldn't he sing any ragtime song that she could drum out? The ninety-horse striped racin' car that he came callin' in helped along some; for one of Robbie's fads was for travelin' fast. Course, she'd been brought up in limousines; but the mile in fifty seconds gave her a genuine thrill.

When it come to holdin' out her finger for the big solitaire that Nick flashed on her about the third week, though, she hung back. The others carried about the same line of jew'lry around in their vest pockets, waitin' for a chance to decorate her third finger. One had the loveliest gray eyes too. Then there was another entry, with the dearest little mustache, who was a bear at doin' the fish-walk tango with her; not to mention the young civil engineer she'd met last winter at Palm Beach. But he didn't actually count, not bein' on the scene.

Anyway, three was enough to keep guessin' at once. Robbie was real modest that way. But she sure did have 'em all busy. If it was a sixty-mile drive with Nick before luncheon, it was apt to be an afternoon romp in the surf with the gray-eyed one, and a toss up as to which of the trio took her to the Casino dance in the evenin'. Mother used to laugh over it all with Mr. Robert, who remarked that those kids were absurd. Nobody seemed to take it serious; for Robbie was only a few months over nineteen.

But young Mr. Talbot had it bad. Besides, he'd always got about what he wanted before, and this time he was in dead earnest. So the first thing Mother and Father knew they were bein' interviewed. Robbie had half said she might if there was no kick from her dear parents, and he wanted to know how about it. Mr. Cheyne Ballard supplied the information prompt. He called Nick an impudent young puppy, at which Mother wept and took the young gent's part. Robbie blew in just then and giggled through the rest of the act, until Father quit disgusted and put it square up to her. Then she pouted and locked herself in her room. That's when Mr. Robert was sent for; but she wouldn't give him any decision, either.

So for a week there things was in a mess, with Robbie balkin', Mother havin' a case of nerves,

Father nursin' a grouch, and Nick Talbot mopin' around doleful. Then some girl friend suggested to Robbie that if she did take Nick they could have a moonlight lawn weddin', with the flower gardens all lit up by electric bulbs, which would be too dear for anything. Robbie perked up and asked for details. Inside of an hour she was plannin' what she would wear. Late in the afternoon Nick heard the glad news himself, through a third party.

First off the date was set for early next spring, when she'd be twenty. That was Father's dope; although Mother was willin' it should be pulled off around Christmas time. Nick, he stuck out for the first of October; but Robbie says:

"Oh, pshaw! There won't be any flowers then, and we'll be back in town. Why not week after next?"

So that's the compromise fin'ly agreed on. The moonlight stunt had to be scratched; but the outdoor part was stuck to—and believe me it was some classy hitchin' bee!

They'd been gone about two weeks, I guess, with everybody contented except maybe the three losers, and all hands countin' the incident closed; when one forenoon Mother shows up at the general offices, has a long talk with Mr. Robert, and goes away moppin' her eyes. Then there's a call for Mr. Cheyne Ballard's downtown number, and Mr. Robert has a confab with him over the 'phone. Next comes three lively rings for me on the buzzer, and I chases into the private office. Mr. Robert is sittin' scowlin', makin' savage jabs with a paper knife at the blotter pad.

"Torchy," says he, "I find myself in a deucedly awkward fix."

"Another lobbyist been squealin'?" says I.

"No, no!" says he. "This is a personal affair, and—well, it's embarrassing, to say the least."

"Another lobbyist been squealin'?" says I.

"It's about Roberta," says he.

"What—again?" says I. "But I thought they was travelin' abroad?"

"I wish they were," says he; "but they're not. At the last moment, it seems, Robbie decided she didn't care for a foreign trip,—too late in the season, and she didn't want to be going over just when everyone was coming back, you know. So they went up to Thundercaps instead."

"Sounds stormy," says I.

"You're quite right," says he. "But it's a little gem of a place that young Talbot's father built up in the Adirondacks. I was there once. It's right on top of a mountain. And that's where they are now, miles from anywhere or anybody."

"And spoony as two mush ladles, I expect," says I.

"Humph!" says he, tossin' the brass paper knife reckless onto the polished mahogany desk top. "They ought to be, I will admit; but—oh, hang it all, if you're to be of any use in this beastly affair, I suppose you must be told the humiliating, ugly truth! They are not spooning. Robbie is very unhappy. She—she's being abused."

"Well, what do you know!" says I. "You don't mean he's begun draggin' her around by the hair, or—"

"Don't!" says Mr. Robert, bunchin' his fists nervous. "I can't tell. Robbie hasn't gone into that. But she has written her mother that she is utterly wretched, and that this precious Nick Talbot of hers is unbearable. The young whelp! If I could only get my hands on him for five minutes! But, blast it all! that's just what I mustn't do until—until I'm sure. I can't trust myself to go. That is why I must send you, young man."

"Eh?" says I, starin'. "Me? Ah, say, Mr. Robert, I wouldn't stand any show at all mixin' it with a young husk like him. Why, after the first poke I'd be—"

"You misunderstand," says he. "That poke part I can attend to very well myself. But I want to know the worst before I start in, and if I should go up there now, feeling as I do, I—well, I might not be a very patient investigator. You see, don't you?"

"Might blow a gasket, eh?" says I. "And you want me to go up and scout around. But what if I'm caught at it—am I peddlin' soap, or what?"

"A plausible errand is just what I've been trying to invent," says he. "Can you suggest anything?"

"Why," says I, "I might go disguised as a lone bandit who'd robbed a train and was—"

"Too theatrical," objects Mr. Robert.

"Or a guy come to test the gas meter," I goes on.

"Nonsense!" says he. "No gas meters up there. Forget the disguise. They both know you, remember."

"Oh, well," says I, "if I can't wear a wig, then I expect I'll have to go as special messenger sent up with some nutty present or other,—a five-pound box of candy, or flowers, or—"

"That's it—orchids!" breaks in Mr. Robert. "Robbie expects a bunch from me about every so often. The very thing!"

So less'n an hour later I'm on my way, with fifty dollars' worth of freak posies in a box, and instructions to stick around Thundercaps as long as I can, with my eyes wide open and my ears stretched. Mr. Robert figures I'll land there too late for the night train back, anyway, and after that I'm to use my bean. If I finds the case desp'rate, I'm to beat it for the nearest telegraph office and wire in.

"Poor little girl!" is Mr. Robert's closin' remark. "Poor little Robbie!"

Cheerful sort of an errand, wa'n't it, bein' sent to butt in on a Keno curtain raiser? Easy enough workin' up sympathy for the abused bride. Why, she wa'n't much more'n a kid, and one who'd been coddled and petted all her life, at that! And here she ups and marries offhand this two-fisted young hick who turns out to be bad inside. You wouldn't have guessed it, either; for, barrin' a kind of heavy jaw and deep-set eyes, he had all the points of a perfectly nice young gent. Good fam'ly too. Mr. Robert knew two of his brothers well, and durin' the coo campaign he'd rooted for Nick. Then he had to show a streak like this!

"But wait!" thinks I. "If I can get anything on him, he sure will have it handed to him hot when Mr. Robert arrives. I want to see it done too."

You don't get to places like Thundercaps in a minute, though. It's the middle of the afternoon before I jumps the way train at a little mountain station, and then I has to hunt up a jay with a buckboard and take a ten-mile drive over a course like a roller coaster. They ought to smooth that Adirondack scenery down some. Crude stuff, I call it.

But, say, the minute we got inside Thundercaps' gates it's diff'rent—smooth green lawns, lots of flowerbeds, a goldfish pool,—almost like a chunk of Central Park. In the middle is a white-sided, red-tiled shack, with pink and white awnings, and odd windows, and wide, cozy verandas,—just the spot where you'd think a perfectly good honeymoon might be pulled off.

I'm just unloadin' my bag and the flowerbox when around a corner of the cottage trips a cerise-tinted vision in an all lace dress and a butterfly wrap. Course, it's Robbie. She's heard the sound of wheels, and has come a runnin'.

"Oh!" says she, stoppin' sudden and puckerin' her baby mouth into a pout. "I thought someone was arriving, you know." Which was a sad jolt to give a rescuer, wa'n't it?

"Sorry," says I; "but I'm all there is."

"You're the boy from Uncle Robert's office—Torchy, isn't it?" says she.

"It is," says I. "Fired up with flowers and Mr. Robert's compliments."

"The old dear!" says she, grabbin' the box, slippin' off the string and divin' into the tissue paper. "Orchids, too! Oh, goody! But they don't go with my coat. Pooh! I don't need it, anyway." With that she, sheds the butterfly arrangement, chuckin' it casual on the steps, and jams the whole of that fifty dollars' worth under her sash. "There, how does that look, Mr. Torchy?" says she, takin' a few fancy steps back and forth.

"All right, I guess," says I.

"Stupid!" says she, stampin' her double A-1 pump peevish. "Is that the prettiest you can say it? Come, now—aren't they nice on me?"

"Nice don't cover it," says I. "I was only wonderin' whether orchids was invented for you, or you for orchids."

This brings out a frilly little laugh, like jinglin' a string of silver bells, and she shows both dimples. "That's better," says she. "Almost as good as some of the things Bud Chandler can say. Dear old Bud! He's such fun!"

"He was the gray-eyed one, wa'n't he?" says I.

"Why, yes," says she. "He was a dear. So was Oggie Holcomb. I wish Nick would ask them both up."

"Eh?" says I. "The also rans? Here?"

"Pooh!" says she. "Why not? It's frightfully dull, being all alone. But Nick won't do it, the old bear!"

Which reminds me that I ought to be scoutin' for black eyes, or wrist bruises, or finger marks on her neck. Nothin' of the kind shows up, though.

"Been kind of rough about it, has he?" says I.

"He's been perfectly awful!" says she. "Sulking around as though I'd done something terrible! But I'll pay him up. Come, you're not going back tonight, are you?"

"Can't," says I. "No train."

"Then you must play with me," says she, grabbin' my hand kittenish and startin' to run me across the yard.

"But, see here," says I, followin' her on the jump. "Where's Hubby?"

"Oh, I don't know," says she. "Off tramping through the woods with his dog, I suppose. He's sulking, as usual. And all because I insisted on writing to Oggie! Then there was something about the servants. I don't know, only things went wrong at breakfast, and some of them have threatened to leave. Who cares? Yesterday it was about the tennis court. What if he did telegraph to have it laid out? I couldn't play when I found I hadn't brought any tennis shoes, could I? Besides, there's no fun playing against Nick, he's such a shark. He didn't like it, either, because I wouldn't use the baby golf course. But I will with you. Come on."

"I never did much putting," says I.

"Nor I," says she; "but we can try."

Three or four holes was enough for her, though, and then she has a new idea. "You rag, don't you?" says she.

"Only a few tango steps," says I. "My feet stutter."

"Then I'll show you how," says she. "We have some dandy records, and the veranda's just right."

So what does she do but tow me back to the house, ring up a couple of maids to clear away all the rugs and chairs, and push the music machine up to the open window.

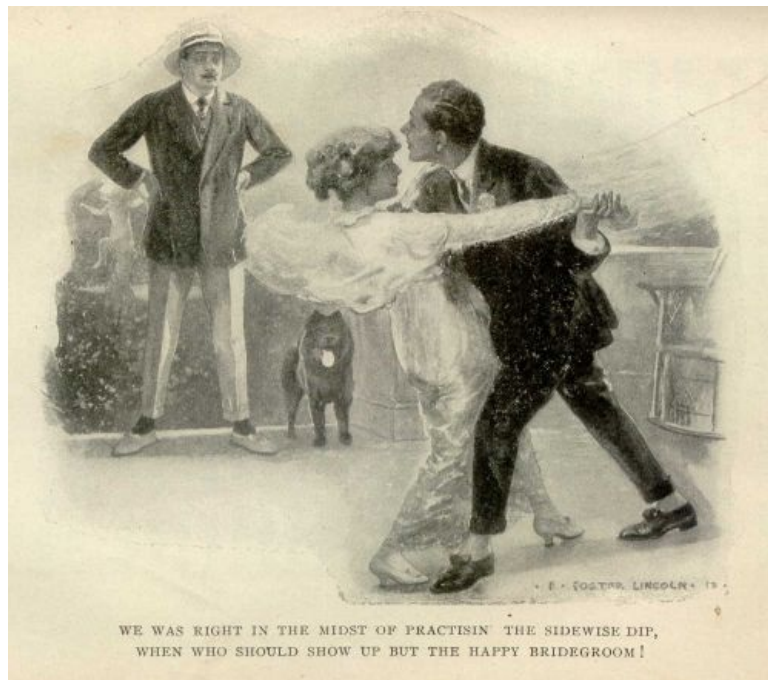
"Put on that 'Too Much Mustard,' Annette," says she, "and keep it going."

Must have surprised Annette some, as I hadn't been accounted for; but a little thing like that don't bother Robbie. She gives me the proper grip for the onestep,—which is some close clinch, believe me!—cuddles her fluffy head down on my necktie, and off we goes.

"No, don't try to trot," says she. "Just balance and keep time, and swing two or three times at the turn. Keep your feet apart, you know. Now back me. Swing! There, you're getting it. Keep on!"

Some spieler, Robbie; and whether or not that was just a josh about orchids bein' invented for her, there's no doubt but what ragtime was. Yes, yes, that's where she lives. And me? Well, I can't say I hated it. With her coachin' me, and that snappy music goin', I caught the idea quick enough, and first I knew we was workin' in new variations that she'd suggest, doin' the slow toe pivot, the kitchen sink, and a lot more.

We stopped long enough to have tea and cakes served, and then Robbie insists on tryin' some new stunts. There's a sidewise dip, where you twist your partner around like you was tryin' to break her back over a chair, and we was right in the midst of practisin' that when who should show up but the happy bridegroom. And someway I've seen 'em look more pleased.



[Illustration: We was right in the midst of practisin' the sidewise dip, when who should show up but the happy bridegroom!]

"Oh, that you, old Grumpy?" says young Mrs. Talbot, stoppin' for a minute. "You remember Torchy, from Uncle Robert's office, don't you? He came up with some orchids. We're having such fun too."

"Looks so," says Nick. "Can't I cut in?"

"Oh, bother!" says Robbie. "No, I'm tired now."

"Just one dance!" pleads Nick.

"Oh, afterward, perhaps," says she. "There! Just look at those silly orchids! Aren't they sights?" With that she snakes 'em out and tosses the wilted bunch careless over the veranda rail. "And now," she adds, "I must dress for dinner."

"You've nearly two hours, Pet," protests Nick. "Come to the outlook with me and watch the sunset."

"It's too lonesome," says Robbie, and off she goes.

It should have happened then, if ever. I was standin' by, waitin' for him to cut loose with the cruel words, and maybe introduce a little hair-draggin' scene. But Nick Talbot just stands there gazin' after her kind of sad and mushy, not even grindin' his teeth. Next he sighs, drops his chin, and slumps into a chair. Honest, that got me; for it was real woe showin' on his face, and he seems to be strugglin' with it man fashion. Somehow it seemed up to me to come across with a few soothin' remarks.

"Sorry I butted in," says I; "but Mr. Robert sent me up with the flowers."

"Oh, that's all right," says he. "Glad you came. I—I suppose she needed someone else to—to talk to."

"But you wouldn't stand for invite the leftovers on your honeymoon, eh?" I suggests.

"No, hang it all!" says he. "That was too much. She—she mentioned it, did she?"

"Just casual," says I. "I take it things ain't been goin' smooth gen'rally?"

He nods gloomy. "You were bound to notice it," says he. "Anyone would. I haven't been able to humor all her whims. Of course, she's been used to having so much going on around her that this must seem rather tame; but I thought, you know, that when we were married—well, she doesn't seem to realize. And I've offered to take her anywhere,—to Newport, to Lenox, to the White Mountains, or touring. Three times this week we've packed to go to different places, and then she's changed her mind. But I can't take her back to Long Island, to her mother's, so soon, or ask a lot of her friends up here. It would be absurd. But things can't go on this way, either. It—it's awful!"

I leaves him with his chin propped up in his hands, starin' gloomy at the floor, while I wanders out and pipes off the sun dodgin' behind the hills.

Later on Robbie insists on draggin' me in for dinner with 'em. She's some dream too, the way she's got herself up, and lighted up by the pink candleshades, with them big pansy eyes sparkling and the color comin' and goin' in her cheeks—say, it most made me dizzy to look. Then to hear her rattle on in her cute, kittenish way was better'n a cabaret show. Mostly, though, it's aimed at me; while Nick Talbot is left to play a thinkin' part. He sits watchin' her with sort of a dumb, hungry look, like a big dog.

And it was a punk dinner in other ways. The soup was scorched somethin' fierce; but Robbie don't seem to notice it. The roast lamb hadn't had the red cooked out of it; but Robbie only asks what kind of meat it is and remarks that it tastes queer. She has a reg'lar fit, though, because the dessert is peach ice-cream with fresh fruit flavorin'.

"And Cook ought to know that I like strawberry better," says she.

"But it's too late for strawberries," explains Nick.

"I don't care!" pouts Robbie. "I don't like this, and I'm going to send it all back to the kitchen." She does it too, and the maid grins impudent as she lugs it out.

That was a sample of the way Robbie behaved for the rest of the evenin',—chatterin' and laughin' one minute, almost weepin' the next; until fin'lly she slams down the piano cover and flounces off to her room. Nick Talbot sits bitin' his lips and lookin' desp'rate.

"I'm sure I don't know what to do," says he half to himself.

At that I can't hold it any longer. "Say, Talbot," says I, "before we get any further I got to own up that I'm a ringer."

"A—a what!" says he, starin' puzzled.

"I'm supposed to be here just as a special messenger," says I; "but, on the level, I was sent up here to sleuth for brutal acts. Uh-huh! That's what the folks at home think, from the letters she's been writin'. Mr. Robert was dead sure of it. But I see now they had the wrong dope. I guess I've got the idea. What you're up against is simply a spoiled kid proposition, and if you don't mind my mixin' in I'd like to state what I think I'd do if it was me."

"Well, what?" says he.

"I'd whittle a handle on a good thick shingle," says I, "and use it."

He stiffens a little at that first off, and then looks at me curious. Next he chuckles. "By Jove, though!" says he after awhile.

Yes, we had a long talk, chummy and confidential, and before we turns in Nick has plotted out a substitute for the shingle programme that he promises to try on first thing next morning I didn't expect to be in on it; but we happens to be sittin' on the veranda waitin' for breakfast, when out comes Robbie in a pink mornin' gown with a cute boudoir cap on her head.

"Why haven't they sent up my coffee and rolls?" she demands.

"Did you order them, Robbie?" says Nick.

"Why no," says she. "Didn't you?"

"No," says Nick. "I'm not going to, either. You're mistress of the house, you know, Robbie, and from now on you are in full charge."

"But—but I thought Mrs. Parkins, the housekeeper, was to manage all those things," says she.

"You said yesterday you couldn't bear Mrs. Parkins," says Nick; "so I'm sending her back to town. She's packing her things now. There are four servants left, though, which is enough. But they need straightening out. They are squabbling over their work, and neglecting it. You will have to settle all that."

"But—but, Nick," protests Robbie, "I'm sure I know nothing at all about it."

"As my wife you are supposed to," says Nick. "You must learn. Anyway, I've told them they needn't do another stroke until they get orders from you. And I wish you'd begin. I'd rather like breakfast."

He's real calm and pleasant about it; but there's somethin' solid about the way his jaw is set. Robbie eyes him a minute hesitatin' and doubtful, like a schoolgirl that's bein' scolded. Then all of a sudden there's a change. The pout comes off her lips, her chin stops trembling and she squares her shoulders.

"I'm—I'm sorry, Nicholas," says she. "I—I'll do my best." And off she marches to the kitchen.

And, say, half an hour later we were all sittin' down to as good a ham omelet as I ever tasted.

When I left with Nick to catch the forenoon express, young Mrs. Talbot was chewin' the end of a lead pencil, with them pansy eyes of hers glued on a pad where she was dopin' out her first dinner order. She would break away from it only long enough to give Hubby a little bird peck on the cheek; but he seems tickled to death with that.

So it wa'n't any long report I has to hand in to Mr. Robert that night.

"All bunk!" says I. "Just a case of a honeymoon that rose a little late. It's shinin' steady now, though. But, say, I hope I'm never batty enough to fall for one of the butterfly kind. If I do—good night!"

CHAPTER XV

BEING SICCED ON PERCEY

Maybe it ain't figured in the headlines, or been noised around enough for the common stockholders to get panicky over it, but, believe me, it was some battle! Uh-huh! What else could you expect with Old Hickory Ellins on one side and George Wesley Jones on the other? And me? Say, as it happens, I was right on the firin' line. Talk about your drummer boys of '61—I guess the office boy of this A. M. ain't such a dead one!

Course I knew when Piddie begins tiptoein' around important, and Mr. Robert cuts his lunchtime down to an hour, that there's something in the air besides humidity.

"Boy," says Old Hickory, shootin' his words out past the stub of a thick black cigar, "I'm expecting a Mr. Jones sometime this afternoon."

"Yes, Sir," says I. "Any particular Jones, Sir?"

"That," says he, "is a detail with which you need not burden your mind. I am not anticipating a convention of Joneses."

"Oh!" says I. "I was only thinkin' that in case some other guy by the same names should——"

"Yes, I understand," he breaks in; "but in that remote contingency I will do my best to handle the situation alone. And when Mr. Jones comes show him in at once. After that I am engaged for the remainder of the day. Is that quite clear?"

"I'm next," says I. "Pass a Jones, and then set the block."

If he thought he could mesmerize me by any such simple motions as that he had another guess. Why, even if it had been my first day on the job, I'd have been hep that it wa'n't any common weekday Jones he was expectin' to stray in accidental. Besides, the minute I spots that long, thin nose, the close-cropped, grizzly mustache, and the tired gray eyes with the heavy bags underneath, I knew it was George Wesley himself. Ain't his pictures been printed often enough lately?

He looks the part too, and no wonder! If I'd been hammered the way he has, with seventeen varieties of Rube Legislatures shootin' my past career as full of holes as a Swiss cheese, grand juries handin' down new indictments every week end, four thousand grouchy share-holders howlin' about pared dividends, and twice as many editorial pens proddin' 'em along——well, take it from me, I'd be on my way towards the tall trees with my tongue hangin' out!

Here he is, though, with his shoulders back and a sketchy, sarcastic smile flickerin' in his mouth corners as he shows up for a hand-to-hand set-to with Old Hickory Ellins. Course it's news to me that the Corrugated interests and the P., B. & R. road are mixed up anywhere along the line; but it ain't surprisin'.

Besides mines and rollin' mills, we do a wholesale grocery business, run a few banks, own a lot of steam freighters, and have all kinds of queer ginks on our payroll, from welfare workers to would-be statesmen. We're always ready to slip one of our directors onto a railroad board too; so I takes it that the way P., B. & R. has been juggled lately was a game that touches us somewhere on the raw. Must be some kind of a war on the slate, or Old Hickory'd never called for a topline like George Wesley Jones to come on the carpet. If it had been a case of passin' the peace pipe, Mr. Ellins would be goin' out to Chicago to see him.

"Mr. Jones, Sir," says I, throwin' the private office door wide open so it would take me longer to shut it.

But Old Hickory don't intend to give me any chance to pipe off the greetin'. He just glances casual at Mr. Jones, then fixes them rock-drill eyes of his on me, jerks his thumb impatient over

his shoulder, and waits until there's three inches of fireproof material between me and the scene of the conflict.

So I strolls back to my chair behind the brass rail and winks mysterious at the lady typists. Two of 'em giggles nervous. Say, they got more curiosity, them flossy key pounders! Not one of the bunch but what knew things was doin'; but what it was all about would have taken me a week to explain to 'em, even if I'd known myself.

And I expect I wouldn't have had more'n a vague glimmer, either, if it hadn't been for Piddie. You might know he'd play the boob somehow if anything important was on. Say, if he'd trotted in there once durin' the forenoon he'd been in a dozen times; seein' that the inkwells was filled, puttin' on new desk blotters, and such fool things as that. Yet about three-fifteen, right in the middle of the bout, he has to answer a ring, and it turns out he's forgotten some important papers.

"Here, Boy," says he, comin' out peevish, "this must go to Mr. Ellins at once."

"Huh!" says I, glancin' at the file title. "Copy of charter of the Palisades Electric! At once is good. Ought to have been on Mr. Ellins's desk hours ago."

"Boy!" he explodes threatenin'.

"Ah, ditch the hysterics, Peddie!" says I. "It's all right now I'm on the job," and with a grin to comfort him I slips through Mr. Robert's room and taps on the door of the boss's private office before blowin' in.

And, say, it looks like I've arrived almost in time for the final clinch. Old Hickory is leanin' forward earnest, his jaw shoved out, his eyes narrowed to slits, and he's poundin' the chair arm with his big ham fist.

"What I want to know, Jones," he's sayin', "is simply this: Are your folks going to drop that Palisades road scheme, or aren't you?"

Course, I can't break into a dialogue at a point like that; so I closes the door gentle behind me and backs against the knob, watchin' George Wesley, who's sittin' there with his chin down and his eyes on the rug.

"Really, Ellins," says he, "I can't give you an answer to that. I—er—I must refer you to our Mr. Sturgis."

"Eh?" snaps old Hickory. "Sturgis! Who the syncopated sculping is Sturgis?"

"Why," says Mr. Jones, "Percey J. Sturgis. He is my personal agent in all such matters, and this—well, this happens to be his pet enterprise."

"But it would parallel our proposed West Point line," says Mr. Ellins.

"I know," says G. Wesley, sighin' weary. "But he secured his charter for this two years ago, and I promised to back him. He insists on pushing it through too. I can't very well call him off, you see."

"Can't, eh?" raps out Old Hickory. "Then let me try. Send for him."

"No use," says Mr. Jones. "He understands your attitude. He wouldn't come. I should advise, if you have any proposal to make, that you send a representative to him."

"I go to him," snorts Mr. Ellins, "to this understrapper of yours, this Mr. Percey—er—"

"Sturgis," puts in George Wesley. "He has offices in our building. And, really, it's the only way."

Old Hickory glares and puffs like he was goin' to blow a cylinder head. But that's just what Hickory Ellins don't do at a time like this. When you think he's nearest to goin' up with a bang, that's the time when he's apt to calm down sudden and shift tactics. He does now. Motionin' me to come to the front, he takes the envelope I hands over, glances at it thoughtful a second, and then remarks casual:

"Very well, Jones. I'll send a representative to your Mr. Sturgis. I'll send Torchy, here."

I don't know which of us gasped louder, me or George Wesley. Got him in the short ribs, that proposition did. But, say, he's a game old sport, even if the papers are callin' him everything from highway robber to yellow dog. He shrugs his shoulders and bows polite.

"As you choose, Ellins," says he.

Maybe he thinks it's a bluff; but it's nothing like that.

"Boy," says Old Hickory, handin' back the envelope, "go find Mr. Percey J. Sturgis, explain to

him that the president of the P., B. & R. is bound under a personal agreement not to parallel any lines in which the Corrugated holds a one-third interest. Tell him I demand that he quit on this Palisades route. If he won't, offer to buy his blasted charter. Bid up to one hundred thousand, then 'phone me. Got all that?"

"I could say it backwards," says I. "Shake the club first; then wave the kale at him. Do I take a flyin' start?"

"Go now," says Old Hickory. "We will wait here until five. If he wants to know who you are, tell him you're my office boy."

Wa'n't that rubbin' in the salt, though? But it ain't safe to stir up Hickory Ellins unless you got him tied to a post, and even then you want to use a long stick. As I sails out and grabs my new fall derby off the peg Piddie asks breathless:

"What's the matter now, and where are you off to?"

"Outside business for the boss," says I. "Buyin' up a railroad for him, that's all."

I left him purple in the face, dashes across to the Subway, and inside of fifteen minutes I'm listenin' fidgety while a private secretary explains how Mr. Sturgis is just leavin' town on important business and can't possibly see me today.

"Deah-uh me!" says I. "How distressin'! Say, you watch me flag him on the jump."

"But I've just told you," insists the secretary, "that Mr. Sturgis cannot——"

"Ah, mooshwaw!" says I. "This is a case of must—see? If you put me out I'll lay for him on the way to the elevator."

Course with some parties that might be a risky tackle; but anyone with a front name like Percey I'm takin' a chance on. Percey! Listens like one of the silky-haired kind that wears heliotrope silk socks, don't it? But, say, what finally shows up is a wide, heavy built gent with a big, homespun sort of face, crispy brown hair a little long over the ears, and the steadiest pair of bright brown eyes I ever saw. Nothing fancy or frail about Percey J. Sturgis. He's solid and substantial, from his wide-soled No. 10's up to the crown of his seven three-quarter hat. He has a raincoat thrown careless over one arm, and he's smokin' a cigar as big and black as any of Old Hickory's.

"Well, what is it, Son?" says he in one of them deep barytones that you feel all the way through to your backbone.

And this is what I've been sent out either to scare off or buy up! Still, you can't die but once.

"I'm from Mr. Ellins of the Corrugated Trust," says I.

"Ah!" says he, smilin' easy.

Well, considerin' how my knees was wabblin', I expect I put the proposition over fairly strong.

"You may tell Mr. Ellins for me," says he, "that I don't intend to quit."

"Then it's a case of buy," says I. "What's the charter worth, spot cash?"

"Sorry," says he, "but I'm too busy to talk about that just now. I'm just starting for North Jersey."

"Suppose I trail along a ways then?" says I. "Mr. Ellins is waitin' for an answer."

"Is he?" says Percey J. "Then come, if you wish." And what does he do but tow me down to a big tourin' car and wave me into one of the back seats with him. Listens quiet to all I've got to say too, while we're tearin' uptown, noddin' his head now and then, with them wide-set brown eyes of his watchin' me amused and curious. But the scare I'm tryin' to throw into him don't seem to take effect at all.

"Let's see," says he, as we rolls onto the Fort Lee ferry, "just what is your official position with the Corrugated?"

I'd planned to shoot it at him bold and crushin'. But somehow it don't happen that way.

"Head office boy," says I, blushin' apologizin'; "but Mr. Ellins sent me out himself."

"Indeed?" says he. "Another of his original ideas. A brilliant man, Mr. Ellins."

"He's some stayer in a scrap, believe me!" says I. "And he's got the harpoon out for this Palisades road."

"So have a good many others," says Mr. Sturgis, chucklin'. "In fact, I don't mind admitting that I am as near to being beaten on this enterprise as I've ever been on anything in any life. But

if I am beaten, it will not be by Mr. Ellins. It will be by a hard-headed old Scotch farmer who owns sixty acres of scrubby land which I must cross in order to complete my right of way. He won't sell a foot. I've been trying for six months to get in touch with him; but he's as stubborn as a cedar stump. And if I don't run a car over rails before next June my charter lapses. So I'm going up now to try a personal interview. If I fail, my charter isn't worth a postage stamp. But, win or lose, it isn't for sale to Hickory Ellins."

He wa'n't ugly about it. He just states the case calm and conversational; but somehow you was dead sure he meant it.

"All right," says I. "Then maybe when I see how you come out I'll have something definite to report."

"You should," says he.

That's where we dropped the subject. It's some swell ride we had up along the top of the Palisades, and on and on until we're well across the State line into New York. Along about four-thirty he says we're most there. We was rollin' through a jay four corners, where the postoffice occupies one window of the gen'ral store, with the Masonic Lodge overhead, when alongside the road we comes across a little tow-headed girl, maybe eight or nine, pawin' around in the grass and sobbin' doleful.

"Hold up, Martin," sings out Mr. Sturgis to the chauffeur, and Martin jams on his emergency so the brake drums squeal.

What do you guess? Why Percey J. climbs out, asks the kid gentle what all the woe is about, and discovers that she's lost a whole nickel that Daddy has given her to buy lolly-pops with on account of its bein' her birthday.

"Now that's too bad, isn't it, little one?" says Mr. Sturgis. "But I guess we can fix that. Come on. Martin, take us back to the store."

Took out his handkerchief, Percey did, and swabbed off the tear stains, all the while talkin' low and soothin' to the kid, until he got her calmed down. And when they came out of the store she was carryin' a pound box of choc'late creams tied up flossy with a pink ribbon. With her eyes bugged and so tickled she can't say a word, she lets go of his hand and dashes back up the road, most likely bent on showin' the folks at home the results of the miracle that's happened to her.

That's the kind of a guy Percey J. Sturgis is, even when he has worries of his own. You'd most thought he was due for a run of luck after a kind act like that. But someone must have had their fingers crossed; for as Martin backs up to turn around he connects a rear tire with a broken ginger ale bottle and—s-s-s-sh! out goes eighty-five pounds' pressure to the square inch. No remark from Mr. Sturgis. He lights a fresh cigar and for twenty-five minutes by the dash clock Martin is busy shiftin' that husky shoe.

So we're some behind schedule when we pulls up under the horse chestnut trees a quarter of a mile beyond in front of a barny, weather-beaten old farmhouse where there's a sour-faced, square-jawed old pirate sittin' in a home made barrel chair smokin' his pipe and scowlin' gloomy at the world in gen'ral. It's Ross himself. Percey J. don't waste any hot air tryin' to melt him. He tells the old guy plain and simple who he is and what he's after.

"Dinna talk to me, Mon," says Ross. "I'm no sellin' the farm."

"May I ask your reasons?" says Mr. Sturgis.

Ross frowns at him a minute without sayin' a word. Then he pries the stubby pipe out from the bristly whiskers and points a crooked finger toward a little bunch of old apple trees on a low knoll.

"Yon's my reason, Mon," says he solemn. "Yon wee white stone. Three bairns and the good wife lay under it. I'm no sae youthful mysel'. And when it's time for me to go I'd be sleepin' peaceful, with none o' your rattlin' trolley cars comin' near. That's why, Mon."

"Thank you, Mr. Ross," says Percey J. "I can appreciate your sentiments. However, our line would run through the opposite side of your farm, away over there. All we ask is a fifty-foot strip across your—"

"You canna have it," says Ross decided, insertin' the pipe once more.

Which is where most of us would have weakened, I expect. Not Mr. Sturgis.

"Just a moment, Friend Ross," says he. "I suppose you know I have the P., B. & R. back of me, and it's more than likely that your neighbors have said things about us. There is some ground for prejudice too. Our recent stock deals look rather bad from the outside. There have been other circumstances that are not in our favor. But I want to assure you that this enterprise is a genuine, honest attempt to benefit you and your community. It is my own. It is part of the general policy of the road for which I am quite willing to be held largely responsible. Why, I've had this project for

a Palisades trolley road in mind ever since I came on here a poor boy, twenty-odd years ago, and took my first trip down the Hudson. This ought to be a rich, prosperous country here. It isn't. A good electric line, such as I propose to build, equipped with heavy passenger cars and running a cheap freight service, would develop this section. It would open to the public a hundred-mile trip that for scenic grandeur could be equaled nowhere in this country. Are you going to stand in the way, Mr. Ross, of an enterprise such as that?"

Yep, he was. He puffs away just as mulish as ever.

"Of course," goes on Percey, "it's nothing to you; but the one ambition of my life has been to build this road. I want to do for this district what some of our great railroad builders did for the big West. I'm not a city-bred theorist, nor a Wall Street stock manipulator. I was born in a one-story log house on a Minnesota farm, and when I was a boy we hauled our corn and potatoes thirty miles to a river steamboat. Then the railroad came through. Now my brothers sack their crops almost within sight of a grain elevator. They live in comfortable houses, send their children to good schools. So do their neighbors. The railroad has turned a wilderness into a civilized community. On a smaller scale here is a like opportunity. If you will let us have that fifty-foot strip——"

"Na, Mon, not an inch!" breaks in Ross.

How he could stick to it against that smooth line of talk I couldn't see. Why, say, it was the most convincin', heart-throbby stuff I'd ever listened to, and if it had been me I'd made Percey J. a present of the whole shootin' match.

"But see here, Mr. Ross," goes on Sturgis, "I would like to show you just what we——"

"Daddy! Daddy!" comes a pipin' hail from somewhere inside, and out dances a barefooted youngster in a faded blue and white dress. It's the little heroine of the lost nickel. For a second she gawks at us sort of scared, and almost decides to scuttle back into the house. Then she gets another look at Percey J., smiles shy, and sticks one finger in her mouth. Percey he smiles back encouragin' and holds out a big, friendly hand. That wins her.

"Oh, Daddy!" says she, puttin' her little fist in Percey's confidential. "It's the mans what gimme the candy in the pitty box!"

As for Daddy Ross, he stares like he couldn't believe his eyes. But there's the youngster cuddled up against Percey J.'s knee and glancin' up at him admirin'.

"Is ut so, Mon?" demands Ross husky, "Was it you give the lass the sweeties?"

"Why, yes," admitted Sturgis.

"Then you shall be knowin'," goes on Ross, "that yon lassie is all I have left in the world that I care a bawbee for. You've done it, Mon. Tak' as much of the farm as you like at your own price."

Well, that's the way Percey J. Sturgis won out. A lucky stroke, eh? Take it from me, there was more'n that in it. Hardly a word he says durin' the run back; for he's as quiet and easy when he's on top as when he's the under dog. We shakes hands friendly as he drops me uptown long after dark.

I had all night to think it over; but when I starts for Old Hickory's office next mornin' I hadn't doped out how I was goin' to put it.

"Well, what about Percey?" says he.

"He's the goods," says I.

"Couldn't scare him, eh?" says Old Hickory.

"Not if I'd been a mile high," says I. "He won't sell, either. And say, Mr. Ellins, you want to get next to Percey J. The way I look at it, this George Wesley Jones stiff ain't the man behind him; Percey is the man behind Jones."

"H-m-m-m-m!" says Old Hickory. "I knew there was someone; but I couldn't trace him. So it's Sturgis, eh? That being so, we need him with us."

"But ain't he tied up with Jones?" says I.

"Jones is a dead dog," says Old Hickory. "At least, he will be inside of a week."

That was some prophecy, eh? Read in the papers, didn't you, how G. Wesley cables over his resignation from Baden Two Times? Couldn't stand the strain. The directors are still squabblin' over who to put in as head of the P., B. & R.; but if you want to play a straight inside tip put your money on Percey J. Uh-huh! Him and Old Hickory have been confabbin' in there over an hour now, and if he hadn't flopped to our side would Mr. Ellins be tellin' him funny stories? Anyway, we're backin' that Palisades line now, and it's goin' through with a whoop.

Which is earnin' some int'rest on a pound of choc'lates and a smile. What?

CHAPTER XVI

HOW WHITY GUNKED THE PLOT

I knew something or other outside of business was puttin' hectic spots in Old Hickory's disposition these last few days; but not until late yesterday did I guess it was Cousin Inez.

I expect the Ellins family wasn't any too proud of Cousin Inez, to start with; for among other things she's got a matrimonial record. Three hubbies so far, I understand, two safe in a neat kept plot out in Los Angeles; one in the discards—and she's just been celebratin' the decree by travelin' abroad. They hadn't seen much of her for years; but durin' this New York stopover visit she seemed to be makin' up for lost time.

About four foot eight Cousin Inez was in her French heels, and fairly thick through. Maybe it was the way she dressed, but from just below her double chin she looked the same size all the way down. Tie a Bulgarian sash on a sack of bran, and you've got the model. Inez was a bear for sashes too. Another thing she was strong on was hair. Course, the store blond part didn't quite match the sandy gray that grew underneath, and the near-auburn frontispiece was another tint still; but all that added variety and quantity—and what more could you ask?

Her bein' some pop-eyed helped you to remember Inez the second time. About the size of hard-boiled eggs, peeled, them eyes of hers was, and most the same color. They say she's a wise old girl though,—carries on three diff'rent business propositions left by her late string of husbands, goes in deep for classical music, and is some kind of a high priestess in the theosophy game. A bit faddy, I judged, with maybe a few bats in her belfry.

But when it comes to investin' some of her surplus funds in Corrugated preferred she has to have a good look at the books first, and makes Cousin Hickory Ellins explain some items in the annual report. Three or four times she was down to the gen'ral offices before the deal went through.

This last visit of hers was something diff'rent, though.

I took the message down to Martin, the chauffeur myself. It was a straight call on the carpet. "Tell Cousin Inez the boss wants to see her before she goes out this afternoon," says I, "and wait with the limousine until she comes."

Old Hickory was pacin' his private office, scowlin' and grouchy, as he sends the word, and it didn't take any second sight to guess he was peeved about something. I has to snicker too when Cousin Inez floats in, smilin' mushy as usual.

She wa'n't smilin' any when she drifts out half an hour later. She's some flushed behind the ears, and her complexion was a little streaked under the eyes. She holds her chin up defiant, though, and slams the brass gate behind her. She'd hardly caught the elevator before there comes a snappy call for me on the buzzer.

"Boy," says Old Hickory, glarin' at me savage, "who is this T. Virgil Bunn?"

Almost had me tongue-tied for a minute, he shoots it at me so sudden. "Eh?" says I. "T. Virgil? Why, he's the sculptor poet."

"So I gather from this thing," says he, wavin' a thin book bound in baby blue and gold. "But what in the name of Sardanapalus and Xenophon is a sculptor poet, anyway?"

"Why, it's—it's—well, that's the way the papers always give it," says I. "Beyond that I pass."

"Humph!" grunts Old Hickory. "Then perhaps you'll tell me if this is poetry. Listen!

"Like necklaces of diamonds hung
About my lady sweet,
So do we string our votive area
All up and down each street.
They shine upon the young and old,
The fair, the sad, the grim, the gay;
Who gather here from far and near
To worship in our Great White Way.'

"Now what's your honest opinion of that, Son? Is it poetry?"

"Listens something like it," says I; "but I wouldn't want to say for sure."

"Nor I," says Mr. Ellins. "All I'm certain of is that it isn't sculpture, and that if I should read any more of it I'd be seasick. But in T. Virgil Bunn himself I have an active and personal interest. Anything to offer?"

"Not a glimmer," says I.

"And I suppose you could find nothing out?" he goes on.

"I could make a stab," says I.

"Make a deep one, then," says he, slippin' over a couple of tens for an expense fund.

And, say, I knew when Old Hickory begins by unbeltin' so reckless that he don't mean any casual skimmin' through club annuals for a report.

"What's the idea?" says I. "Is it for a financial rating or a regular dragnet of past performances?"

"Everything you can discover without taking him apart," says Old Hickory. "In short, I want to know the kind of person who can cause a fifty-five-year-old widow with grown sons to make a blinkety blinked fool of herself."

"He's a charmer, eh?" says I.

"Evidently," says Mr. Ellins. "Behold this inscription here, 'To dear Inez, My Lady of the Unfettered Soul—from Virgie.' Get the point, Son? 'To dear Inez!' Bah! Is he color blind, or what ails him? Of course it's her money he's after, and for the sake of her boys I'm going to block him. There! You see what I want?"

"Sure!" says I. "You got to have details about Virgie before you can ditch him. Well, I'll see what I can dig up."

Maybe it strikes you as a chesty bluff for a juvenile party like me to start with no more clew than that to round up in a few hours what a high-priced sleuth agency would take a week for. But, say, I didn't stand guard on the Sunday editor's door two years with my eyes and ears shut. Course, there's always the city and 'phone directories to start with. Next you turn to the Who book if you suspect he's ever done any public stunt. But, say, swallow that Who dope cautious. They let 'em write their own tickets in that, you know, and you got to make allowances for the size of the hat-band.

I'd got that far, discovered that Virgie owned up to bein' thirty-five and a bachelor, that he was born in Schoharie, son of Telemachus J. and Matilda Smith Bunn, and that he'd once been president of the village literary club, when I remembers the clippin' files we used to have back on Newspaper Row. So down I hikes—and who should I stack up against, driftin' gloomy through the lower lobby, but Whity Meeks, that used to be the star man on the Sunday sheet. Course, it wa'n't any miracle; for Whity's almost as much of a fixture there as Old Gluefoot, the librarian, or the finger marks on the iron pillars in the press-room.

A sad example of blighted ambitions, Whity is. When I first knew him he had a fresh one every Monday mornin', and they ranged all the way from him plannin' to be a second Dicky Davis to a scheme he had for hookin' up with Tammany and bein' sent to Congress. Clever boy too. He could dash off ponies that was almost good enough to print, dope out the first two acts of a play that was bound to make his fortune if he could ever finish it, and fake speeches that he'd never heard a word of.

When he got to doin' Wall Street news, though, and absorbed the idea that he could stack his little thirty per against the system and break the bucketshops—well, that was his finish. Two killings that he made by chance, and he was as good as chained to the ticker for life. No more new rosy dreams for him: always the same one,—of the day when he was goin' to show Sully how a cotton corner really ought to be pulled off, a day when the closin' gong would find him with the City Bank in one fist and the Subtreasury in the other. You've met that kind, maybe. Only Whity always tried to dress the part, in a sporty shepherd plaid, with a checked hat and checked silk socks to match. He has the same regalia on now, with a carnation in his buttonhole.

"Well, mounting margins!" says he, as I swings him round by the arm. "Torchy! Whither away? Come down to buy publicity space for the Corrugated, have you?"

"Not in a rag like yours, Whity," says I, "when we own stock in two real papers. I'm out on a little private gumshoe work for the boss."

"Sounds thrilling," says he. "Any copy in it?"

"I'd be chatterin' it to you, wouldn't I?" says I. "Nix! Just plain fam'ly scrap over whether Cousin Inez shall marry again or not. My job is to get something on the guy. Don't happen to have

any special dope on T. Virgil Bunn, the sculptor poet, do you?"

Whity stares at me. "Do I?" says he.

"Say!" Then he leads me over between the 'phone booth and the cigar stand, flashes an assignment pad, and remarks, "Gaze on that second item, my boy."

"Woof! That's him, all right," says I. "But what's a bouillabaisse tea?"

"Heaven and Virgil Bunn only know," says Whity. "But that doesn't matter. Think of the subtle irony of Fate that sends me up to make a column story out of Virgie Bunn! Me, of all persons!"

"Well, why not you?" says I.

"Why?" says Whity. "Because I made the fellow. He—why, he is my joke, the biggest scream I ever put over—my joke, understand? And now this adumbrated ass of a Quigley, who's been sent on here from St. Louis to take the city desk, he falls for Virgie as a genuine personage. Not only that, but picks me out to cover this phony tea of his. And the stinging part is, if I don't I get canned, that's all."

"Ain't he the goods, then?" says I. "What about this sculptor poet business?"

"Bunk," says Whity, "nothing but bunk. Of course, he does putter around with modeling clay a bit, and writes the sort of club-footed verse they put in high school monthlies."

"Gets it printed in a book, though," says I. "I've seen one."

"Why not?" says Whity. "Anyone can who has the three hundred to pay for plates and binding. 'Sonnets of the City,' wasn't it? Didn't I get my commission from the Easy Mark Press for steering him in? Why, I even scratched off some of those things to help him pad out the book with. But, say, Torchy, you ought to remember him. You were on the door then,—tall, wide-shouldered freak, with aureole hair, and a close cropped Vandyke?"

"Not the one who wore the Wild West lid and talked like he had a mouthful of hot oatmeal?" says I.

"Your description of Virgie's English accent is perfect," says Whity.

"Well, well!" says I. "The mushbag, we used to call him."

"Charmingly accurate again!" says Whity. "Verily beside him the quivering jellyfish of the salt sea was as the armored armadillo of the desert. Soft? You could poke a finger through him anywhere."

"But what was his game?" says I.

"It wasn't a game, my son," says Whity. "It was a mission in life,—to get things printed about himself. Had no more modesty about it, you know, than a circus press agent. Perfectly frank and ingenuous, Virgie was. He'd just come and ask you to put it in that he was a great man—just like that! The chief used to froth at the mouth on sight of him. But Virgie looked funny to me in those days. I used to jolly him along, smoke his Coronas, let him take me out to swell feeds. Then when they gave Merrow charge of the Sunday side, just for a josh I did a half-page special about Virgie, called him the sculptor poet, threw in some views of him in his studio, and quoted some of his verse that I'd fixed up. It got by. Virgie was so pleased he wanted to give a banquet for me; but I got him to go in on a little winter wheat flier instead. He didn't drop much. After that I'd slip in a paragraph about him now and then, always calling him the sculptor poet. The tag stuck. Other papers began to use it; until, first thing I knew, Virgie was getting away with it. Honest, I just invented him. And now he passes for the real thing!"

"Where you boobed, then, was in not filin' copyright papers," says I. "But how does he make it pay?"

"He doesn't," says Whity. "Listen, Son, and I will divulge the hidden mystery in the life of T. Virgil Bunn. Cheese factories! Half a dozen or more of 'em, up Schoharie way. Left to him, you know, by Pa Bunn; a coarse, rough person, I am told, who drank whey out of a five-gallon can, but was cute enough to import Camembert labels and make his own boxes. He passed on a dozen years ago; but left the cheese factories working night shifts. Virgie draws his share quarterly. He tried a year or two at some Rube college, and then went abroad to loiter. While there he exposed himself to the sculptor's art; but it didn't take very hard. However, Virgie came back and acquired the studio habit. And you can't live for long in a studio, you know, without getting the itch to see yourself in print. That's what brought Virgie to me. And now! Well, now I have to go to Virgie."

"Ain't as chummy with him as you was, I take it?" says I.

Whity shrugs his shoulders disgusted. "The saphead!" says he. "Just because we slipped up on a few stock deals he got cold feet. I haven't seen him for a year. I wonder how he'll take it? But you mentioned a Cousin Inez, didn't you?"

I gives Whity a hasty sketch of the piece, mentionin' no more names, but suggestin' that Virgie stood to connect with an overgrown widow's mite if there wa'n't any sudden interference.

"Ha!" says Whity, speakin' tragic through his teeth. "An idea! He's put the spell on a rich widow, has he? Now if I could only manage to queer this autumn leaf romance it would even up for the laceration of pride that I see coming my way tonight. Describe the fair one."

"I could point her out if you could smuggle me in," I suggests.

"A cinch!" says he. "You're Barry of the City Press. Here, stick some copy paper in your pocket. Take a few notes, that's all."

"It's a fierce disguise to put on," says I; "but I guess I can stand it for an evenin'."

So about eight-thirty we meets again, and' proceeds to hunt up this studio buildin' over in the East 30's. It ain't any bum Bohemian ranch, either, but a ten-story elevator joint, with clipped bay trees on each side of the front door. Virgie's is a top floor suite, with a boy in buttons outside and a French maid to take your things.

"Gee!" I whispers to Whity as we pushes in. "There's some swell mob collectin', eh?"

Whity is speechless, though, and when he gets his breath again all he can do is mumble husky, "Teddy Van Alstyne! Mrs. Cromer Paige! The Bertie Gardiners!"

They acted like a mixed crowd, though, gazin' around at each other curious, groupin' into little knots, and chattin' under their breath. Bein' gents of the press, we edges into a corner behind a palm and waits to see what happens.

"There comes Cousin Inez!" says I, nudgin' Whity. "See? The squatty dame with the pearl ropes over her hair."

"Sainted Billikens, what a make-up!" says Whity.

And, believe me, Cousin Inez was dolled for fair. She'd peeled for the fray, as you might say. And if the dinky shoulder straps held it was all right; but if one of 'em broke there'd sure be some hurry call for four yards of burlap to do her up in. She seems smilin' and happy, though, and keeps glancin' expectant at the red velvet draperies in the back of the room.

Sure enough, exactly on the tick of nine, the curtains part, and in steps the hero of the evenin'. Dress suit? Say, you don't know Virgie. He's wearin' a reg'lar monk's outfit, of some coarse brown stuff belted in with a thick rope and open wide at the neck.

"For the love of beans, look at his feet!" I whispers.

"Sandals," says Whity, "and no socks! Blessed if Virgie isn't going the limit!"

There's a chorus of "Ah-h-h-h's!" as he steps out, and then comes a buzz of whispers which might have been compliments, and might not. But it don't faze Virgie. He goes bowin' and handshakin' through the mob, smilin' mushy on all and several, and actin' as pleased with himself as if he'd taken the prize at a fancy dress ball. You should have seen Cousin Inez when he gets to her!

"Oh, you utterly clever man!" she gushes. "What a genuine genius you are!"

"Dear, sweet lady!" says he. "It is indeed gracious of you to say so."

"Help!" groans Whity, like he had a pain.

"Ah, buck up!" says I. "It'll be your turn soon."

I was wonderin' how Virgie was goin' to simmer down enough to pass Whity the chilly greetin'; for he's just bubblin' over with kind words and comic little quips. But, say, he don't even try to shade it.

"Ah, Whity, my boy!" says he, extendin' the cordial paw. "Charming of you to look me up once more, perfectly charming!"

"Rot!" growls Whity. "You know I was sent up here to do this blooming spread of yours. What sort of fake is it, anyway?"

"Ha, ha! Same old Whity!" says Virgil, poundin' him hearty on the shoulder. "But you're always welcome, my boy. As for the tea—well, one of my little affairs, you know,—just a few friends dropping in—feast of reason, flow of wit, all that sort of thing. You know how to put it. Don't forget my costume—picked it up at a Trappist monastery in the Pyrenees. I must give you some photos I've had taken in it. Ah, another knight of the pencil?" and he glances inquirin' at me.

"City Press," says Whity.

"Fine!" says Virgie, beamin'. "Well, you boys make yourselves quite at home. I'll send Marie over with cigars and cigarettes. She'll help you to describe any of the ladies' costumes you may care to mention. Here's a list of the invited guests too. Now I must be stirring about. *Au revoir*."

"Ass!" snarls Whity under his breath. "If I don't give him a roast, though,—one of the veiled sarcastic kind that will get past! And we must find some way of queering him with that rich widow."

"Goin' to be some contract, Whity, believe me!" says I. "Look how she's taggin' him around!"

And, say, Cousin Inez sure had the scoopnet out for him! Every move he makes she's right on his heels, gigglin' and simperin' at all his sappy speeches and hangin' onto his arm part of the time. Folks was nudgin' each other and pointin' her out gleeful, and I could easy frame up the sort of reports that had set Old Hickory's teeth on edge.

T. Virgil, though, seems to be havin' the time of his life. He exhibits some clay models, either dancin' girls or a squad of mounted cops, I couldn't make out which, and he lets himself be persuaded to read two or three chunks out of his sonnets, very dramatic. Cousin Inez leads the applause. Then, strikin' a pose, he claps his hands, the velvet curtains are slid one side, and in comes a French chef luggin' a tray with a whackin' big casserole on it.

"*Voilà!*" sings out Virgie. "The bouillabaisse!"

Marie gets busy passin' around bowls and spoons, and the programme seems to be for the guests to line up while Virgie gives each a helpin' out of a long-handled silver ladle. It smells mighty good; so I pushes in with my bowl. What do you guess I drew? A portion of the tastiest fish soup you ever met, with a lobster claw and a couple of clams in it. M-m-m-m!

"He may be a punk poet," says I to Whity; "but he's a good provider."

"Huh!" growls Whity, who seems to be sore on account of the hit Virgie's makin'.

Next thing I knew along drifts Cousin Inez, who has sort of been crowded away from her hero, and camps down on the other side of Whity.

"Isn't this just too unique for words?" she gushes. "And is not dear Virgil perfectly charming tonight?"

"Oh, he's a bear at this sort of thing, all right," says Whity, "this and making cheese."

"Cheese!" echoes Cousin Inez.

"Sure!" says Whity. "Hasn't he told you about his cheese factories? Ask him."

"But—but I understood that—that he was a poet," says she, "a sculptor poet."

"Bah!" says Whity. "He couldn't make his salt at either. All just a pose!"

"Why, I can hardly believe it," says Cousin Inez. "I don't believe it, either."

"Then read his poetry and look at his so called groups," goes on Whity.

"But he's such a talented, interesting man," insists Inez.

"With such an interesting family too," says Whity, winkin'.

"Family!" gasps Cousin Inez.

"Wife and six children," says Whity, lyin' easy.

"Oh—oh!" squeals Inez in that shrill, raspy voice of hers.

"They say he beats his wife, though," adds Whity.

"Oh!—oh!" squeals Inez, again, higher and shriller than ever. I expect she'd been more or less keyed up before; but this adds the finishin' touch. And she lets 'em out reckless.

Course, everyone stops chatterin' and looks her way. No wonder! You'd thought she was havin' a fit. Over rushes Virgil, ladle in hand.

"My dear Inez!" says he. "What is it? A fishbone?"

"Monster!" she bowls. "Deceiver! Leave me, never let me see your face again! Oh—oh! Cheese! Six children! Oh—oh!" With that she tumbles over on Whity and turns purple in the face.

Say, it was some sensation we had there for a few minutes; but after they'd sprinkled her face, and rubbed her wrists, and poured a couple of fingers of brandy into her, she revives. And the first thing she catches sight of is Virgie, standin' there lookin' puzzled, still holdin' the soup ladle.

"Monster!" she hisses at him. "I know all—all! And I quit you forever!"

With that she dashes for the cloakroom, grabs her opera wrap, and beats it for the elevator. Course, that busts up the show, and inside of half an hour everybody but us has left, and most of 'em went out snickerin'.

"I—I don't understand it at all," says Virgie, rubbin' his eyes dazed. "She was talking with you, wasn't she, Friend Whity? Was it something you said about me?"

"Possibly," says Whity, "I may have mentioned your cheese factories; and I'm not sure but what I didn't invent a family for you. Just as a joke, of course. You don't mind, I hope?"

And at that I was dead sure someone was goin' to be slapped on the wrist. But, say, all Virgie does is swallow hard a couple of times; and then, as the full scheme of the plot seems to sink in, he beams mushy.

"Mind? Why, my dear boy," says he, "you are my deliverer! I owe you more than I can ever express. Really, you know, that ridiculous old person has been the bane of my existence for the last three weeks. She has fairly haunted me, spoiled all my receptions, and—disturbed me greatly. Ever since I met her in Rome last winter she has been at it. Of course I have tried to be nice to her, as I am to everyone who—er—who might help. But I almost fancy she had the idea that I would—ah—marry her. Really, I believe she did. Thank you a thousand times, Whity, for your joke! If she comes back, tell her I have two wives, a dozen. And have some cigars—oh, fill your pockets, my boy. And here—the photos showing me in my monk's costume. Be sure to drop in at my next tea. I'll send you word. Good night, and bless you!"

He didn't push us out. He just held the door open and patted us on the back as we went through. And the next thing we knew we was down on the sidewalk.

"Double crossed!" groans Whity. "Smothered in mush!"

"As a plotter, Whity," says I, "you're a dub. But if you gunked it one way, you drew a consolation the other. At this stage of the game I guess I'm commissioned by a certain party to hand over to you a small token of his esteem."

"Eh?" says Whity. "Twenty? What for?"

"Ah, go bull the market with it, and don't ask fool questions!" says I.

Say, it was a perfectly swell story about Virgie's bouillabaisse function on today's society page, double-column half-tone cut and all. I had to grin when I shows it to Mr. Ellins.

"Were you there, young man?" says he, eyin' me suspicious.

"Yep!" says I.

"I thought so," says he, "when Cousin Inez came home and began packing her trunks. I take it that affair of hers with the sculptor poet is all off??"

"Blew up with a bang about ten-thirty P. M.," says I. "Your two tenspots went with it."

"Huh!" he snorts. "That's as far as I care to inquire. Some day I'm going to send you out with a thousand and let you wreck the administration."

CHAPTER XVII

TORCHY GETS A THROUGH WIRE

First off, when I pipes the party in the pale green lid and the fuzzy English topcoat, I thought it was some stray from the House of Lords; but as it drifts nearer to the brass rail and I gets a glimpse of the mild blue eyes behind the thick, shell-rimmed glasses, I discovers that it's only Son-in-law Ferdy; you know, hubby to Marjorie Ellins that was.

"Wat ho!" says I. "Just in from Lunnon?"

"Why, no," says Ferdy, gawpin' foolish. "Whatever made you think that?"

"Then it's a disguise, is it?" says I, eyin' the costume critical.

"Oh, bother!" says Ferdy peevish. "I told Marjorie I should be stared at. And I just despise being conspicuous, you know! Where's Robert?"

"Mr. Robert ain't due back for an hour yet," says I. "You could catch him at the club, I expect."

"No, no," protests Ferdy hasty. "I—I wouldn't go to the club looking like this. I—I couldn't stand the chaff I'd get from the fellows. I'll wait."

"Suit yourself," says I, towin' him into Mr. Robert's private office. "You can shed the heather wrap in here, if you like."

"I—I wish I could," says he.

"Wha-a-at!" says I. "She ain't sewed you into it, has she? Anyhow, you don't have to keep it buttoned tight under your chin with all this steam heat on."

"I know," says Ferdy, sighin'. "I nearly roasted, coming down in the train. But, you see, it—it hides the tie."

"Eh?" says I. "Something else Marjorie picked out? Let's have a peek."

Ferdy blushes painful. "It's awful," he groans, "perfectly awful!"

"Not one of these nutty Futurist designs, like a scrambled rainbow shot full of pink polliwogs?" says I.

"Worse than that," says Ferdy, unbuttonin' the overcoat reluctant. "Look!"

"Zowie! A plush one!" says I.

Course, they ain't so new. I'd seen 'em in the zippy haberdashers' windows early in the fall; but I don't remember havin' met one out of captivity before. And this is about the plushiest affair you could imagine; bright orange and black, and half an inch thick.

"Whiffo!" says I. "That is something to have wished onto you! Looks like a caterpillar in a dream."

"That's right," says Ferdy. "It's been a perfect nightmare to me ever since Marjorie bought it. But I can't hurt her feelings by refusing to wear it. And this silly hat too—a scarf instead of a band!"

It's almost pathetic the way Ferdy holds the lid off at arm's length and gazes indignant at it.

"Draped real sweet, ain't it?" says I. "But most of the smart chappies are wearin' 'em that way, you know."

"Not this sickly green shade, though," says Ferdy plaintive. "I wish Marjorie wouldn't get such things for me. I—I've always been rather particular about my hats and ties. I like them quiet, you understand."

"You would get married, though," says I. "But, say, can't you do a duck by changing after you leave home?"

Seems the idea hadn't occurred to Ferdy. "But how? Where?" says he, brightenin' up.

"In the limousine as you're drivin' down to the station," says I. "You could keep an extra outfit in the car."

"By Jove!" says Ferdy. "Then I could change again on the way home, couldn't I? And if Marjorie didn't know, she wouldn't—"

"You've surrounded the plot of the piece," says I. "Now go to it. There's a gents' furnisher down in the arcade."

He's halfway out to the elevator before it occurs to him that he ain't responded with any grateful remarks; so back he comes to tell how much obliged he is.

"And, Torchy," he adds, "you know you haven't been out to see baby yet. Why, you must see little Ferdinand!"

"Ye-e-es, I been meanin' to," says I, maybe not wildly enthusiastic. "I expect he's quite a kid by this time."

"Eleven months lacking four days," says Ferdy, his face beamin'. "Wait! I want to show you his latest picture. Really wonderful youngster, I tell you."

So I has to inspect a snapshot that Ferdy produces from his pocketbook; and, while it looks about as insignificant as most of 'em, I pumps up some gushy remarks which seem to make a hit with Ferdy.

"Couldn't you come out Sunday?" says he.

"Fraid not," says I. "In fact, I'm booked up for quite a spell."

"Too bad," says Ferdy, "for we're almost alone now,—only Peggy and Jane—my little nieces, you know—and Miss Hemmingway, who——"

"Vee?" says I, comin' straight up on my toes. "Say, Ferdy, I think I can break away Sunday, after all. Ought to see that youngster of yours, hadn't I? Must be mighty cute by now."

"Oh, he is," says Ferdy; "but if you can't come this week——"

"Got to," says I. "'Leven months, and me never so much as chucked him under the chin once! Gee! how careless of me!"

"All right, Sunday next," says Ferdy. "We shall look for you."

That was throwin' in reverse a little sudden, I admit; but my chances of gettin' within hailin' distance of Vee ain't so many that I can afford to overlook any bets. Besides, up at Marjorie's is about the only place where I don't have to run the gauntlet goin' in, or do a slide for life comin' out. She'll shinny on my side every trip, Marjorie will—and believe me I need it all!

Looked like a special dispensation too, this bid of Ferdy's; for I wanted half an hour's private chat with Vee the worst way just then, to clear up a few things. For instance, my last two letters had come back with "Refused" scratched across the face, and I didn't know whether it was some of Aunty's fine work, or what. Anyway, it's been a couple of months now that the wires have been down between us, and I was more or less anxious to trace the break.

So Sunday afternoon don't find me missin' any suburban local. Course, Ferdy's mighty intellect ain't suggested to him anything about askin' me out for a meal; so I has to take a chance on what time to land there. But I strikes the mat about two-thirty P. M., and the first one to show up is Marjorie, lookin' as plump and bloomin' a corn-fed Venus as ever.

"Why, Torchy!" says she, with business of surprise.

"Uh-huh," says I. "Special invite of Ferdy's to come see the heir apparent. Didn't he mention it?"

"Humph! Ferdy!" says Marjorie. "Did you ever know of him remembering anything worth while?"

"Oh, ho!" says I. "In disgrace, is he?"

"He is," says Marjorie, sniffin' scornful. "But it's nice of you to want to see baby. The dear little fellow is just taking his afternoon nap. He wakes up about four, though."

"Oh, I don't mind waitin' a bit," says I. "You know, I'm crazy to see that kid."

"Really!" says Marjorie, beamin' delighted. "Then you shall go right up now, while he is——"

"No," says I, holdin' up one hand. "I might sneeze, or something. I'll just stick around until he wakes up."

"It's too bad," says Marjorie; "but Verona is dressing and——"

"What!" says I. "Vee here?"

"Just going," says Marjorie. "Her aunty is to call for her in about an hour."

Say, then was no time for wastin' fleetin' moments on any bluff. "Say, Marjorie," says I, "couldn't you get her to speed up the toilet motions a bit and shoo her downstairs? Don't say who; but just hint that someone wants to see her mighty special for a few moments. There's a good girl!"

Marjorie giggles and shows her dimples. "I might try," says she. "Suppose you wait in the library, where there's a nice log fire."

So it's me for an easy chair in the corner, where I can watch for the entrance. Five minutes by the clock on the mantel, and nothing happens. Ten minutes, and no Vee. Then I hears a smothered snicker off to the left. I'd got my face all set for the cheerful greetin' too, when I discovers two pairs of brown eyes inspectin' me roguish, through the parted portières. And neither pair was any I'd ever seen before.

"Huh!" thinks I. "Nice way to treat guests!" and I pretends not to notice. I've picked up a magazine and am readin' the pictures industrious, when there's more snickers. I scowls, fidgets around some, and fin'lly takes another glance. The brown eyes are twinklin' mischievous, all four of 'em.

"Well," says I, "what's the joke? Shoot it!"

At that into the room bounces a couple of girls, somewhere around ten and twelve, I should

judge; tall, long-legged kids, but cute lookin', and genuine live wires, from their toes up. They're fairly wigglin' with some kind of excitement.

"We know who you are!" singsongs one, pointin' the accusin' finger.

"You're Torchy!" says the other.

"Then I'm discovered," says I. "How'd you dope it out?"

"By your hair!" comes in chorus, and then they goes to a panicky clinch and giggles down each other's necks.

"Hey, cut out the comic relief," says I, "and give me a turn. Which one of you is Peggy?"

"Why, who told you that?" demands the one with the red ribbon.

"Oh, I'm some guesser myself," says I. "It's you."

"Pooh! I bet it was Uncle Ferdinand," says she.

"Good sleuth work!" says I. "He's the guy. But I didn't know he had such a cunnin' set of nieces. Most as tall as he is, ain't you, Peggy?"

But that don't happen to be the line of dialogue they're burnin' to follow out. Exchangin' a look, they advance mysterious until there's one on each side of me, and then Peggy whispers dramatic:

"You came to see Miss Vee, didn't you?"

"Vee?" says I, lookin' puzzled. "Vee which?"

"Oh, you know, now!" protests Jane, tappin' me playful.

"Sorry," says I, "but this is a baby visit I'm payin'. Ask Uncle Ferdinand if it ain't."

"Humph!" says Peggy. "Anyone can fool Uncle Ferdy."

"Besides," says Jane, "we saw a picture on Vee's dressing table, and when we asked who it was she hid it. So there!"

"Not a picture of me, though," says I. "Couldn't be."

"Yes, it was," insists Jane.

"A snapshot of you," says Peggy, "taken in a boat."

I won't deny that was some cheerful bulletin; but somehow I had a hunch it might be best not to let on too much. Course, I could locate the time and place. I must have got on the film durin' my stay up at Roarin' Rocks last summer.

"In a boat!" says I. "Of all things!"

"And Vee doesn't want anyone to know about it," adds Jane, "specially her aunty."

"Why not?" comes in Peggy, lookin' me straight in the eye.

"Very curious!" says I, shakin' my head. "What else did Vee have to say about me?"

"M-m-m-m!" says Peggy. "We can't tell."

"We promised not to," says Jane.

"You're a fine pair of promisers!" says I. "I expect you hold secrets like a wire basket holds water."

"We never said a word, did we, Peggy?" demands Jane.

"Nope!" says Peggy. "Maybe he's the one Vee's aunty doesn't like."

"Are you?" says Jane, clawin' my shoulder excited.

"How utterly thrillin'!" says I. "Say, you're gettin' me all tittered up. Think it's me Aunty has the war club out for, do you?"

"It's someone with hair just like yours, anyway," says Peggy.

"Think of that!" says I. "Does red hair throw Aunty into convulsions, or what?"

"Aunt Marjorie says it's because you—that is, because the one she meant isn't anybody," says Jane. "He's poor, and all that. Are you poor?"

"Me?" says I. "Why—say, what is this you're tryin' to pull off on me, impeachment proceedings? Come now, don't you guess your Aunt Marjorie'll be wantin' you?"

"No," says Peggy. "She told us for goodness sake to run off and be quiet."

"What about this Miss Vee party, then?" says I. "Don't she need you to help her hook up?"

"We just came from her room," says Peggy.

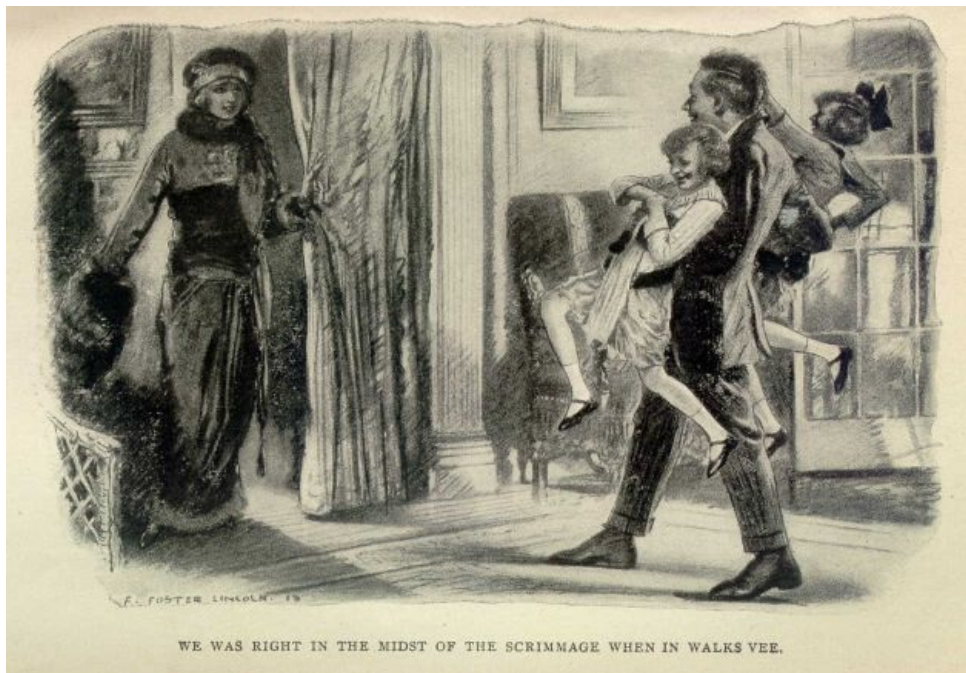
"She pushed us out and locked the door," adds Jane.

"Great strategy!" says I. "Show me a door with a key in it."

"Pooh!" says Peggy. "You couldn't put us both out at once."

"Couldn't I?" says I. "Let's see."

With that I grabs one under each arm, and with the pair of 'em strugglin' and squealin' and rough housin' me for all they was worth, I starts towards the livin' room. We was right in the midst of the scrimmage when in walks Vee, with her hat and furs all on, lookin' some classy, take it from me. But the encouragin' part of it is that she smiles friendly, and I smiles back.



[Illustration: We was right in the midst of the scrimmage when in walks Vee.]

"Well, you found someone, didn't you, girls?" says she.

"Oh, Vee, Vee!" sings out Peggy gleeful. "Isn't this Torchy?"

"Your Torchy?" demands Jane.

I tips Vee the signal for general denial and winks knowin'. But, say, you can't get by with anything crude on a pair of open-eyed kids like that.

"Oh, I saw!" announces Jane. "And you do know him, don't you, Vee?"

"Why, I suppose we have met before?" says she, laughin' ripply. "Haven't we, Torchy?"

"Now that you mention it," says I, "I remember." And we shakes hands formal.

"Came to see the baby, I hear," says Vee.

"Oh, sure!" says I. "Maybe you could tell me about him first, though, if we could find a quiet corner."

"Oh, we'll tell you," chimes in Peggy. "We know all about Baby. He has a tooth!"

"Say," says I, wigglin' away from the pair, "couldn't you go load up someone else with information, just for ten minutes or so?"

"What for?" says Jane, eyin' me suspicious.

"We'd rather stay here," says Peggy decided.

I catches a humorous twinkle in Vee's gray eyes as she holds out her hands to the girls.

"Listen," says she confidential. "You know those hermit cookies you're so fond of? Well, Cook made a whole jarful yesterday. They're in the pantry."

"I know," says Jane. "We found 'em last night."

"The Glue Sisters!" says I. "Now see here, Kids, I've just thought of a message I ought to give to Miss Vee."

"Who from?" demands Peggy.

"From a young chap I know who thinks a lot of her," says I. "It's strictly private too."

"What's it about?" says Jane.

Which was when my tactics gave out. "Say, you two human question marks," says I, "beat it, won't you?"

No, they just wouldn't. The best they would do for me was to back off to the other side of the room, eyes and ears wide open, and there they stood.

"Go on!" whispers Vee. "What was it he wanted to say?"

"It was about a couple of notes he wrote," says I.

"Yes?" says Vee. "What happened?"

"They came back," says I, "without being opened."

"Oh," says Vee, "those must have been the ones that——"

"Vee, Vee!" breaks in Peggy from over near the window. "Here comes your aunty."

"Good night, nurse!" says I.

"Tell him it's all right," says Vee hasty. "He might send the next ones in care of Marjorie; then I'll be sure of getting them. By-by, Peggy. Don't squeeze so hard, Jane. No, please don't come out, Torchy. Goodby."

And in another minute I'm left to the mercy of the near-twins once more. I camps down in the easy chair again, with one on each side, and the cross examination proceeds. Say, they're a great pair too.

"Didn't Vee want you to go out 'cause her aunty would see you?" asks Peggy.

"There!" says I. "I wonder?"

"I'm glad she isn't my aunty," says Jane. "She looks too cross."

"If I was Vee's aunty," puts in Peggy, "I wouldn't be mad if she did have your picture in a silver frame."

"Honest?" says I. "How's that?"

"'Cause I don't think you're so awful horrid, even if you aren't anybody," says Peggy. "Do you, Jane?"

"I like him," says Jane. "I think his hair's nice too."

"Well, well!" says I. "Guess I got some gallery with me, anyway. And how does Vee stand with you?"

"Oh, she's just a dear!" says Peggy, clappin' her hands.

"M-m-m-m!" echoes Jane. "She's going to take us to see Maude Adams next Wednesday too."

"Huh!" says I, indicatin' deep thought. "So you'll see her again soon?"

"I wish it was tomorrow," says Jane.

"Mr. Torchy," says Peggy, grabbin' me impulsive by one ear and swingin' my face around, "truly now, aren't you awfully in love with Vee?"

Say, where do they pick it up, youngsters of that age? Her big brown eyes are as round and serious as if she knew all about it; and on the other side is Jane, fairly holdin' her breath.

"Whisper!" says I. "Could you two keep a secret?"

"Oh, yes!" comes in chorus.

"Well, then," says I, "I'm going to hand you one. I think Vee is the best that ever happened."

"Oh, goody!" exclaims Peggy. "Then you do love her awfully! But why don't you——"

"Wait!" says I. "When I get to be a little older, and some bigger, and after I've made heaps and heaps of money, and have a big, black automobile——"

"And a big, black mustache," adds Peggy.

"No," says I. "Cut out the miracles. Call it when I'm in business for myself. Then, if somebody'll only choke off Aunty long enough, I may—well, some fine moonlight night I may tell her all about it."

"Oh!" gasps Jane. "Mayn't we be there to hear you do it?"

"Not if I can bar you out," says I.

"Please!" says Peggy. "We would sit just as still and not—— Oh, here's Aunt Marjorie. Aunty, what do you think? Mr. Torchy's been telling us a secret."

"There, there, Peggy," says Marjorie, "don't be silly. Torchy is waiting to see Baby. Come! He's awake now."

Yep, I had to do the inspection act, after all. And I must say that most of these infant wonders look a good deal alike; only Ferdinand, Jr., has a cute way of tryin' out his new tooth on your thumb.

Goin' back towards the station I meets Ferdy, himself, trampin' in lonesome from a long walk, and lookin' mighty glum.

"Of all the gloom carriers!" says I. "What was it let you in bad this time?"

"You ought to know," says he.

"For why?" says I.

"Oh, fudge!" says he. "I suppose you didn't put me up to that silly business of changing neckties!"

"Chinked it, did you?" says I. "But how?"

"If you must know," says he, "I forgot to change back on my way home, and Marjorie's still furious. She simply won't let me explain, refuses to listen to a word. So what can I do?"

"A cinch!" says I. "You got a pair of livin' dictaphones in the house, ain't you? Work it off on Peggy and Jane as a secret, and you'll have your defense on record inside of half an hour. Cheer up, Ferdy. Ishkabibble!"

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK ON WITH TORCHY ***

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