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



I FOUND MYSELF LOOKING SQUARE INTO THEM BIG GRAY EYES. (Frontispiece)

TORCHY

BY
SEWELL FORD

AUTHOR OF
TRYING OUT TORCHY, ETC.

FRONTISPIECE BY
GEORGE BREHM



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TO MY
W. A. C.
AT WHOSE SUGGESTION THIS
CHRONICLE OF THE DOINGS OF TORCHY
CAME TO BE MADE

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TORCHY

CHAPTER I

GETTING IN WITH THE GLORY BE

Sure, I was carryin' the banner. But say, I ain't one of them kids that gets callouses on the hands doin' it. When I'm handed the fresh air on payday, I don't choke to death over it. I goes out and rustles for another job. And I takes my pick, too. Why not? It's just as easy.

This time I gets a bug that the new Octopus Buildin' might have been put up special for me. Anyway, it looked good from the outside, and I blows in through the plate glass merry go round. The arcade was all to the butterscotch, everything handy, from an A. D. T. stand to Turkish baths in the basement.

"Got any express elevators?" says I to the starter guy.

"Think of buying the buildin', sonny?" says he.

"There'd be room for you on the sidewalk if I did," says I. "But say, if you can tear your eyes off the candy counter queen long enough, tell me who's got a sign out this mornin'." 2

"They're going to elect a second vice-president of the Interurban to-day. Would that suit you?" says he, twistin' up his lip whisker and lookin' cute.

"Maybe," says I; "but I'd take a portfolio as head office boy if I knew where to butt in."

"Then chase up to 2146," says he. "You'll find 'em waitin' for you with a net. Here's your car. Up!" and before I knows it I has done the skyrocket act up to floor twenty-one.

Well say, you wouldn't have thought so many kids read the want ads. and had the courage to tackle an early breakfast. The corridor was full of 'em, all sizes, all kinds. It looked like recess time at a boys' orphan asylum, and with me against the field I stood to be a sure loser. I hadn't no more'n climbed out before they starts to throw the josh my way.

"Hey, Reddy, get in line! The foot for yours, Peachblow!" they yells at me.

And then I comes back. "Ah, flag it!" says I. "Do I look like I belonged in your class? Brush by, you three-dollar pikers, and give a salaried man a show!"

With that I makes a quick rush at 2146 and gets through the door before they has time to make a howl. The letterin' on the ground glass was what got me. It said as how this was the home office of the Glory Be Mining Company, and there was a string of high-toned names as long as your arm. But the minute I sizes up the inside exhibit I wasn't so anxious. I was lookin' for about a thousand feet of floor space; but all I could see was a couple of six by nines, includin' a clothes closet and a corner washbowl. There was a grand aggregation of two as an office force. One was a young lady key pounder, with enough hair piled on top of her head to stuff a mattress. The other was a long faced young feller with an ostrich neck and a voice that sounded like a squeaky door. 3

"Go outside!" says he, wavin' his hands and puttin' on a weary look. "Mr. Pepper can't see any of you until he has finished with the mail. Now run along."

"I can't," says I; "my feet won't let me. Is that the Pepper box in there?"

The door was open a foot or two; so I steps up to take a peek at the main squeeze. And say, the minute I sees him I knew he'd do. He wa'n't one of these dried up whiskered freaks, nor he wa'n't any human hog, with no neck and three chins. He was the kind of a gent you see comin' out of them swell cafés, and he looked like a winner, Mr. Belmont Pepper did. His breakfast seemed to be settin' as well as his coat collar, and you could tell with one eye that he wouldn't come snoopin' around early in the day, nor hang around the shop after five. Pepper has his heels up on the rolltop, burnin' a real Havana. That's the kind of a boss I likes. I lays out to connect, too. 4

"Say," says I to the long faced duck, "you hold your breath a minute and I'll be back!"

Then I steps outside, yanks the "Boy Wanted" sign off the nail, and says to the crowd good and brisk, just as though I come direct from headquarters:

"It's all over, kids, and unless you're waitin' to have a group picture taken you'd better hit the elevator."

Wow! There was call for another sudden move just then. I was lookin' for that, though, and by the time the first two of 'em struck the door I was on the other side with the key turned. Riot? Well say, you'd thought I'd pinched the only job in New York! They kicked on the door and yelled through the transom and got themselves all worked up.

The lady key pounder grabs hold of both sides of her table and almost swallows her tuttifrutti, the ostrich necked chap turns pea green, and Mr. Pepper swings his door open and sings out, real cheerful:

"Mr. Sweetwater, can't you get yourself mobbed without being so noisy about it? What's up, anyway?" 5

But Sweetwater wasn't a lightnin' calculator. He stands there with his mouth open, gawpin' at me, and tryin' to figure out what's broke loose; so I pushes to the front and helps him out.

"There's a bunch of also rans out there, Mr. Pepper," says I, "that don't know when to fade. They're just grouchy because I've swiped the job."

I was lookin' for him to sit up at that; but he don't. "What makes you think that you've got it!" says he.

"'Cause I'm in and they're out," says I. "Anyway, they're a lot of dopes, and a man like you wants a live one around. That's me. Where do I begin?" And I chucks the sign into a waste basket and hangs my cap on a hook.

Now, that ain't any system you can follow reg'lar. I don't often do it that way, 'cause I ain't any fonder of bein' thrown through a door than the next one. But this was a long shot and I was willin' to run the risk. That fat headed starter knew he was steerin' me up against a mob; so I was just achin' to squeeze the lemon in his eye by makin' good.

For awhile, though, I couldn't tell whether I was up in a balloon or let in on the ground floor. Mr. Pepper was givin' me the search warrant look-over, and I see he's one of these gents that you can't jar easy. I hadn't rushed him off his feet by my through the center play. There was still plenty of chance of my gettin' the low tackle.

"If I might ask," says he, smooth as a silk lid, "what is your name?"

"Ah, w'at's the use?" says I, duckin' my head. "Look at that hair! You might's well begin callin' me Torchy; you'd come to it."

He didn't grin nor nothin'; but only I see his eyes wrinkle a little at the corners. "Very well, Torchy," says he. "I suppose you have your references?"

"Nah, I ain't," says I. "But if you're stuck on such things I can get 'em. There's a feller down on Ann-st. that'll write beafts for a quarter a throw."

"So?" says he. "Then we'll pass that point. Why did you leave your last place?"

"By request," says I. "The stiff gives me the fire. He said I was too fresh."

"He was mistaken, I suppose," says Mr. Pepper. "You're not fresh, are you?"

"Well say, I ain't no last year's limed egg," says I. "If you're lookin' for somethin' that's been in the brine all winter, you'd better put the hook in again."

He rubs his chin at that. "Do you like hard work?" says he.

"Think I'd be chasin' up an office boy snap, if I did?" says I.

He takes a minute or so to let that soak in, knockin' his cigar ashes off on the rug in that careless way a man that ain't married does, and then he springs another.

"I presume that if you were left alone in the office occasionally," says he, "you could learn to run the business?"

"Nix, not!" says I. "When I plays myself for a confidential manager I wants to pull down more than four per. Givin' book agents the quick back up and runnin' errands is my strong points. For tips on the market and such as that I charges overtime."

Course, I'd figured it was all off by then, seein' as how I hadn't rung the bell at any crack. That's why I was so free with the hot air. Mr. Pepper, he squints at me good and hard, and then pushes the call button.

"Mr. Sweetwater," says he, "this young man's name is Torchy. I've persuaded him to assist us in running the affairs of the Glory Be Mining Company. Put him on the payroll at five a week, and then induce that mass meeting in the corridor to adjourn."

"Say," says I, "does that mean I'm picked?"

"You're the chosen one," says he.

"Gee!" says I. "You had me guessin', though! But you ain't drawn any blank. I'll shinny on your side, Mr. Pepper, as long's you'll let me—and that's no gust of wind, either."

And say, inside of three days I'd got the minin' business down to a science. Course it was a cinch. All I has to do is fold bunches of circulars, stick stamps on the envelopes, and lug 'em up to the general P. O. once a day. That, and chasin' out after a dollar's worth of cigars now and then for Mr. Pepper, and keepin' Sweetie jollied along, didn't make me round shouldered.

Sweetie was cut out for the undertakin' business, by rights. He took things hard, he did. Every tick of the clock was a solemn moment for him, and me gettin' a stamp on crooked was a case that called for a heart to heart talk. He used to show me the books he was keepin', and the writin' was as reg'lar as if it'd been done on a job press.

"You're a wonder, you are, Sweetie," says I; "but some day your hand is going to joggle, and there'll be a blot on them pages, and then you'll die of heart disease."

Miss Allen, the typewriter fairy, was a good deal of a frost. She was one of the kind that would blow her lunch money on havin' her hair done like some actress, and worry through the week on an apple and two pieces of fudge at noon. I never had much use for her. She called me just Boy, as though I wa'n't hardly human at all. She'd sit and pat that hair of hers by the hour, feelin' to see if all the diffrent waves and bunches was still there. It was a work of art, all right; but it

didn't leave her time to think of much else. I used to get her wild by askin' how the six other sisters was comin' on these days.

We didn't have any great rush of customers in the office. About twice a day some one would stray in; but gen'rally they was lookin' for other parties, and we didn't take in money enough over the counter to pay the towel bill. It had me worried some, until I tumbles that the Glory Be was a mail order snap.

All them circulars we sent out told about the mine. And say, after I'd read one of 'em I didn't see how it was we didn't have a crowd throwin' money at us. It was good readin', too, almost as excitin' as a nickel lib'ry. I'd never been right next to a gold mine before, and it got me bug eyed just thinkin' about it.

Why, this mine of ours was one that the Injuns had kept hid for years and years, killin' off every white man that stuck his nose into the same county. But after awhile a feller by the name of Dakota Dan turned Injun, got himself adopted by the tribe, and monkeyed around until he found the mine. It near blinded him the first squint he got of them big chunks of gold. The Injuns caught him at it and finished the business with hot irons. Then they roasted him over a fire some and turned him loose to enjoy himself. He was tougher'n a motorman, though. He didn't die for years after that; but he never said nothin' about the gold mine until he was nearly all in. Then he told his oldest boy the tale and gave him a map of the place, makin' him swear he'd never go near it. The boy stuck to it, too. He grew up and kept a grocery store, and it wa'n't until after he'd died of lockjaw from runnin' a rusty nail in his hand and the widow had sold out the store to a Swede that the map showed up. The Swede swapped the map to a soap drummer for half a dozen cakes of scented shaving sticks, and the drummer goes explorin'.

He had a soap drummer's luck. He didn't find any Injuns left. Most of 'em had died off and the rest had joined Wild West shows. The gold mine was there, though, with chunks of solid gold lyin' around as big as peach baskets. Mr. Drummer looks until his eyes ache, and then he hikes himself back East to get up a comp'ny to work the mine. He'd just made plans to build a solid gold mansion on Fifth-ave. and hire John D. Rockefeller for a butler, when he strays into one of these Gospel missions and gets religion so hard that he can't shake it. Then he sees how selfish it would be to keep all that gold for himself. "But how'll I divvy it?" says he. "And who with?"

Then he decides that he'll divide with ministers, because they'll use it best. So he gets up this Glory Be Mining Company, and hires Mr. Pepper to sell the stock at twenty-five cents a share to all the preachers in the country.

Blamed if it wa'n't straight goods! I looked on the letters we sent out, and every last one of 'em was to ministers. Talk about your easy money! This was like pickin' it off the bushes. Mr. Pepper shows 'em how they can put in fifty or a hundred dollars and in three or four years be pullin' out their thousands in dividends.

You'd thought they'd came a runnin' at a chance like that, wouldn't you? There we was givin' 'em a private hunch on a proposition that was all velvet. But say, only about one in ten ever hands us a comeback. It was enough to make a man turn the hose on his grandmother.

Course, a few of 'em did loosen up and send on real money. I used to stand around and pipe off the boss while he shucked the mail, and I could tell whether it was fat or lean by the time it took him to eat lunch. The days when I was sent out to cash five or six money orders, and soak away a bunch of checks, he'd call a cab at twelve-thirty and wouldn't come back until near four; but when there wa'n't much doin' he'd send out for a tray and put in the afternoon dictatin' names and addresses to Miss Allen.

Then there come a slack spell that lasted for a couple of weeks, and we didn't get hardly any mail at all, except from some crank out in Illinois that had splurged on a whole ten dollars' worth of shares, and wrote in about every other day wantin' to know when the dividends was goin' to begin comin' his way. I heard Miss Allen talkin' it over with Sweetie.

It was along about then that this duck from the post-office buildin' showed up. He comes gumshoein' around one noon hour, while I was all by my lonesome, and he asks a whole lot of questions that I'd forgot the answer to. I was tellin' the boss about him that night around closin' up time.

"I sized him up for one of them cheap skates from the Marshal's office," says I. "I didn't know what his game was and I wa'n't goin' to give up all I knew to him; so I tells him to call around tomorrow and you'll load him up with all the information his nut can hold. Was that right?"

Mr. Pepper seems to be mighty int'rested for awhile; but then he grins, pats me on the shoulder, and says: "That was just right, Torchy, exactly right. I couldn't have done it better myself."

But half an hour later, after Miss Allen has stuck her gum on the paperweight and skipped, and Sweetwater has slid out too, and just as I was gettin' ready to call it a day, Mr. Pepper calls me in on the rug.

"Torchy," says he, "during the brief period that we have been associated in business I have found your services very valuable and your society very cheering. In other words, Torchy, you're all right."

"There's a pair of us, then," says I. "You're as good as they make them, Mr. Pepper."

"Thanks, Torchy," says he, "thanks." Then he looks out of the window for a minute before he asks how I'd like a two-weeks' vacation with pay.

"Well," says I, "seein' as how Coney's froze up, and Palm Beach don't agree with my health, I'd just as soon put them two weeks in storage until July."

"I see," says he; "but the fact is, Torchy, I've had a sudden call to go West."

"Out to the Glory Be mine?" says I.

"You've guessed it," says he. "And I am taking this opportunity for releasing Sweetwater and Miss Allen."

"They ain't much use, anyway," says I. "But you wouldn't shut up the shop for fair, would you? Don't you want some one on hand to answer fool questions, or steer cranks off like that post-office guy that's comin' to-morrow? Unless you think I'd hook the rolltop or pinch the letterpress, you'd better leave me sittin' on the lid." 14

Well, sir, he seemed to take to that notion, and the next thing I knows I'm tellin him about my scheme of wantin' to save up enough dough to pay for a little bunch of them Glory Be stocks.

"It's a shame to waste all that good money on people that don't know a cinch when it's passed out to 'em," says I, "and I've been thinkin' that if I hung to the business long enough maybe I'd have a show to buy in."

Say, you couldn't guess what Mr. Pepper up and does then. He opens the safe, counts out a hundred shares of Glory Be common, and fills out the transfer to me right on the spot.

"Now, Torchy," says he, "it will cost you five weeks' salary to pay for these; but if I raise you a dollar a week and take it out a little at a time you'll never miss it. Anyway, you're a shareholder from now on."

Did you ever get rich all of a sudden, like that! You feel it first up and down the small of your back, and then it goes to your knees. I couldn't say a blamed word that was sensible. I don't know just what I did say, and I never come to until after Mr. Pepper'd finished up and gone, leavin' me with two-weeks' pay in my pocket, and a big envelope full of them Glory Be shares, all printed in gold and purple ink, with a picture of Dakota Dan in the middle. 15

I couldn't eat a bite of supper that night, and I puts in the evenin' readin' over them pamphlets we'd been sendin' out until I knew every word of it by heart. I'll bet I got up and hid them stocks in a dozen diff'rent places before mornin', and an hour before bankin' time I was sittin' on the steps of the Treasury Trust concern, waitin' to hire one of them steel pigeon-holes down in the vaults. After I'd got the envelope stowed away and tied the key around my neck with a string, I goes back to the office. Sweetie and Miss Allen was there, with their hammers goin'. They'd found their blue tickets and their week's pay and was just clearin' out.

"I'd been planning to make a change for the last two weeks," says Miss Allen. "I was looking for something like this."

"Me too," says Sweetie. "It's rough on Torchy, though."

"Say, don't you waste any sympathy on me," says I, "and don't let off any more knocks at Mr. Pepper. I won't stand for it!"

With that they snickers and does a slow exit. That leaves me runnin' the gold minin' business single handed; but me bein' one of the firm, as you might say, it was all right. I'd always had a notion that I'd be a plute some day; but honest, I wa'n't expectin' it so sudden. I was just tryin' to get used to it, when the door opens and in drifts that guy from the Marshal's office. 16

"Where's Mr. Belmont Pepper?" says he.

"Well," says I, "the last time I saw him he was headed west."

"Skipped out!" says the gent, doin' the foiled villyun stunt with his face.

"Skipped nothin'," says I. "Mr. Pepper's gone out to look after the mine."

"Oh, he's gone to the mine, has he?" says the duck. "See here, kid, I'm a United States Deputy Marshal. Don't you try to tell me any fairy stories, or you'll pull down trouble. We want your Mr. Pepper, and we want him bad! He's a crook."

Well say, it was a hot argument we had. He tries to tell me that this minin' business is all a bunko game, and that there's a paper out for the boss. Then he camps down in the private office and says he'll wait until Mr. Pepper shows up. He makes a stab at it, too, and a nice long wait he has. I stuck it out for two weeks with him, tryin' to beat it into his head that the Glory Be mine was a real gilt edged proposition. I'd have been there yet, only they comes and lugs off all the desks and things and makes me give up the keys. 17

Say, it was a tough deal, all right. It was some jay that stirred up all the muss, howlin' for his coin that he thought he'd lost. But look at the hole I'm in, after bein' so brash to Mr. Pepper about stayin' on the lid, and him lettin' me write my own valuation ticket! How do I square it with him when he comes back and finds I've stood around and seen him closed out?

Old Velvet Foot, the deputy, says if the boss comes back at all he'll be wearin' a diff'rent face and flaggin' under another name. But I know better. He's as square as a pavin' block. If he wa'n't, why was he distributin' Glory Be stocks among fool outsiders, instead of keepin' it in the fam'ly?

"Ah, brush your belfry!" says I. "Your mind needs chloride of lime on it."

But say, shareholder or not, I've got to plug the market for somethin' that'll pass with the landlady. I've been livin' on crullers and coffee for two days now, and that starter guy says if I don't quit hangin' around the arcade he'll have me pinched. I've wrote out a note to leave for Mr. Pepper, and I guess it's up to me to frisk another job.

You don't know where they want a near-plute as temp'rary office boy, do you?

CHAPTER II

A JOLT FOR PIDDIE

It's a case of "comin' up, up" with me. Sure as ever! Ain't I got stock in a gold mine? And now I'm in with the Corrugated Trust. Why, say, two moves more and I'll be first vice-president. There's only his door, and the general manager's, and then me.

I'm behind the brass rail, next to the spring water. When you have the front to push through the plate glass, you see me first. If I likes your looks, and your card reads right, maybe I gives you a peek at Mr. Piddie. Anyone that gets past Piddie's a bird. He's the Inside Brother, Keeper of the Seal, Watch on the Rhine, and a lot more. He draws down salary for bein' confidential secretary to the G. M.; but Con. Sec. don't half cover it. He keeps the run of everything, from what the last quarterly dividend was down to how many tubs of pins is used by the office force every month.

I'd never made good with Piddie in a month of Yom Kippurs if it hadn't been for Old Heavyweight, the main squeeze. Piddie had ten of us lined up for the elimination test, and was puttin' us through the catechism and the civil service, when in pads Mr. Ellins—you know, Hickory Ellins. Ever see our V. P.? Say, he uses up cloth enough in his vest to make me a whole suit.

He's a ripe old sport, with a complexion like an Easter egg, and a pair o' blinks that'd look a hole through a chilled steel vault. He runs us over without losin' step, sticks out a finger as he goes by, and says over his shoulder, "Piddie, take that one!"

Me, I was in range. Piddie made a bluff at goin' on with the third degree business; but the other entries begins to edge for the door. I was the one best bet; so what was the use? See what it is to have a thirty-two candle power thatch? He couldn't have missed me, less'n he'd been color blind. There's worse things can happen to you than red hair, all right.

Piddie was sore on me from the start, though. He'd made up his mind to tag a nice little mommer's boy, with a tow colored top and a girly voice. Them's the kind that forgets to bring back change and always has stamps to sell. Oh, I sized up Piddie for a two by four right at the get away; but I've been keepin' him jollied along just for the fun of it.

"J. Hemmingway Piddie" is the way he has it printed. Think of wastin' all them letters, when just plain Piddie is as good as seein' a strip of pingpong pictures of him! He's mostly up and down, Piddie is, like he'd been pulled out of a bundle of laths, and he's got one of these inquisitive noses that's sharp enough to file bills on.

Refined conversation is Piddie's strong hold. It bubbles out of him like steam out of the oatmeal kettle. Sounds that way, too. You know these mush eaters, with their, "Ah, I'm su-ah, quite su-ah, doncher know"? He's got that kind of lingo down to an art. I'll bet he could talk it in his sleep. I've heard 'em before; but I never looked to hold a sit. under one.

It's a privilege, though, bein' so close to Piddie. If I don't forget all the things he tells me, and follows 'em, I'll be made over new in a month more. He begins with my name. Torchy don't fit right with him. It might do for some places he didn't mention, but not for the home offices of the Corrugated Trust.

"Maybe you'd like Reginald better!" says I.

"But—er—aw—is that your baptismal name, my boy?" says he.

"Nix," says I. "I'm no Baptist. And, anyway, I couldn't give up my real name, cause I'm travelin' incog., and me noble relatives would be shocked if they knew I was really workin'. You can call me Torchy, or Reginald, whichever you think of first, and if you be careful to say it real nice maybe I'll come."

Every time I throws a jolt like that into J. Hemmingway, he looks kind of stunned and goes off to chew it over. But he gets even all right. Sometimes he'll take a whole forenoon to dig up somethin' he thinks is goin' to give me the double cross.

Most of his spare time, though, he puts in tellin' me about how I'm to behave when Mr. Robert comes back. For the first few days I had an idea Mr. Robert was the pulley that carried the big belt, and that when he stopped there was a general shut down. I got nervous watchin' for him. Then I rounds up the fact that he's Bob Ellins, who cuts more ice in the society columns than he does in the Wall Street notes.

Piddie has him down for a little tin god, all right, and that wa'n't such a fool move of Piddie's, either. Some day Hickory Ellins will have to quit and take the hot baths regular, and then Mr. Robert will get acquainted with an eight o'clock breakfast. See where Piddie comes in? He's takin' out insurance on his job. He needs it bad enough. If I ever get to think as much of a job as Piddie does of his, I'll have some one nail me to the office chair.

Rule No. 1 on my card was never to let anyone through the brass gate unless they belonged inside or had a special permit. Piddie wants to know if I've ever had any experience with that kind of work.

"Say, where do you think I've been!" says I. "Why, I did that trick for six months, shuntin' dopes away from the Sunday editor's door, and there was times when nothin' but a club would keep some of 'em out. Back to the bridge, Piddie! When I'm on the gate it's just as good as though you'd set the time lock."

Well, I'd been there over one payday and halfway to the next, when one mornin' about ten-thirty the door comes open with a bang, and in steps a husky young gent, swingin' one of these dinky, leather-covered canes, and lookin' like money from the mint. He didn't make any play to draw a card, same's they generally does; but steers straight for the brass gate, full tilt. I never says a word; but just as he reaches over to spring the catch and break in, I shoves my foot out and blocks it at the bottom, bringin' him up all standin'.

"Say, this ain't no ferryhouse," says I.

"Hello!" says he. "A new one, eh?"

"I ain't any Fourth-ave. antique," says I; "but I'm over seven. Was you wantin' to see anyone special?"

He seems to think that's a joke. "Why," says he, "I am Mr. Ellins."

"G'wan!" says I. "You ain't half of him."

That reaches his funnybone, too. "You're perfectly right, young man," says he; "but I happen to be his son. Now are you satisfied?"

"Nope," says I. "That bluff don't go either. If you was Mr. Robert I'd have been struck by lightnin' long 'fore this. You've got one more guess."

Just then I hears a gurgle, like some one's bein' choked with a chicken bone, and I squints around behind. There was Piddie, lookin' like the buildin' was fallin' down and tryin' to uncork some remarks.

"Ah, Piddie!" says the gent. "Perhaps you will introduce me to your new sentry and give me the password."

Well, Piddie did. He almost got on his hands and knees doin' it. And say, blamed if the duck wa'n't Mr. Robert, after all!

"Gee!" says I, "that was a bad break."

That didn't soothe Piddie, though. He used up the best part of an hour tryin' to tell me what an awful thing I'd gone and done.

"This ends you, young man!" he says. "You're as good as discharged this very moment."

"Is that all?" says I. "Why, by the way you've been takin' on I figured on nothin' less than sudden death. But if it's only bein' fired, don't you worry. I've had that happen to me so often that I get uneasy without it. If I should wear a stripe for every time the can's been tied to me, my sleeves would look like a couple of barber's poles. Cheer up, Piddie! Maybe they'll let you pick out somethin' that suits you better next time."

He couldn't get over it, though. Along about lunch time he comes out to me, as solemn as though he's servin' a warrant for homicide, and says that Mr. Robert will attend to my case now.

"Piddie," says I, givin' him the partin' grip, "you've been a true friend of mine. When you hear me hit the asphalt, send out for a chocolate ice cream soda and drown your sorrow."

Then I turns down a page in "Old Sleuth's Revenge" and goes to the slaughter.

Mr. Robert has just talked about three cylinders full of answers to the letters that's piled up while he's been gone, and as the girl goes out with the records he whirls around in the mahogany easy-chair and takes a good long look at me.

"If it comes as hard as all that," says I, "I'll write out my resignation."

"Mr. Piddie's been talking to you, I suppose?" says he.

"He's done everything but say mass over me," says I.

"Piddie is a good deal of an——" then he pulls up. "Where the deuce did he find you?"

"It wasn't him found me," says I; "it was a case of me findin' him; but if it hadn't been for your old man's buttin' in, that's all the good it would have done me."

"Ah!" says he. "That explains the mystery. By the way, son, what do they call you?"

"Guess," says I, and runs me fingers through it. "Just Torchy, and it suits me as well as Percival or Montgomery."

"Torchy is certainly descriptive," says he. "How long have you been doing office work?"

"Ever since I could lift a waste basket," says I.

"Are you ambitious?" says he.

"Sure!" says I. "I'm waitin' for some bank president to adopt me."

"You came in here expecting to be discharged, I presume?" says he.

"What, me?" says I. "Nah! I thought you was goin' to ask me over to the Caffy Martang for lunch."

For a minute or so after that he looks me straight in the eye, and I gives him the same. And say, for the kind, he ain't so worse. Course, I wouldn't swap him for Mr. Belmont Pepper, who's the only boss I ever had that I calls the real thing; but Mr. Robert would get a ratin' anywhere.

"Torchy," says he after a bit, "I'm inclined to think that you'll do. Have a chair."

"Don't I get the blue ticket, then?" says I.

"No," says he, "not until you do something worse than obey orders. Besides you're the cheekiest youth that has ever graced the offices of the Corrugated Trust, and once in awhile we have use for just such a quality. For instance, I am tempted to send you on a very important errand of my own. Wait a moment while I think it over."

"Time out!" says I.

Well say, I didn't know what was comin', he took so long makin' up his mind. But Mr. Robert ain't one of the kind to go off half cocked. He's got somethin' on his shoulders besides tailor's paddin', and when he sets the wheels to movin' you can gamble that he's gettin' somewhere. After awhile he slaps his knee and says:

"No, there isn't another person around the place who would know how to go about it. Torchy, I'm going to try you out!"

It wasn't anything like I'd ever been up against before. He hands me an express receipt and says he wants me to go over to Jersey City and get what that calls for without landin' in jail.

"You'll see a bundle done up in burlap somewhere around the express office," says he, "a big bundle. It looks like a side of veal; but it isn't. It's a deer, one that I shot four days ago up north. Torchy, did you know that it was illegal to shoot deer during certain months of the year?"

"You can be pinched for shootin' craps any time," says I.

"Really?" says he.

Then he goes on with his tale, givin' me all the partic'lars, so I wouldn't make any batty moves. And say, they can think up some queer stunts, hangin' around the club of an afternoon and lookin' out at Fifth-ave. through the small end of a glass. This was one of them real clubby dreams. It started by Mr. Robert countin' himself in on a debate that he didn't know the beginning of.

"When they asked me if I could do it, I said, 'Of course I can,'" says he, "and then I asked what it was."

The bunch had been gassin' about an old gun hangin' over the fireplace. It was one of these old-timers, like they tell about Daniel Boone's havin', in the Nickel Libr'ies, the kind you load with a stove poker. Flintlocks—that's it! They was wonderin' if there was anyone left that could take a relic like that out in the woods and hit anything besides the atmosphere. And the first thing Mr. Robert knows he has been joshed into bettin' a hatful of yellowbacks that he can take old Injun killer out and bring back enough deer meat to feed the crowd—and him knowin' no more about that sort of act than a one-legged man does about skatin'! They gives him two weeks to do it in.

That wa'n't the worst of it, though, accordin' to him. They passes the word around until everyone that knows him is on the broad grin. The joke is handed across billiard tables between shots, and is circulated around the boxes at the opera. It's the best ever; for Mr. Robert has never hunted anything livelier than a Welsh rabbit, after the show.

He's a boy that likes to make good, though. He never makes a brag; but he boxes up that old shootin' iron and drops out of sight. 'Way up in the woods somewhere he digs up an old b'gosh artist that was brought up with one of them guns in his hand, and he takes a private course. After he's used up a keg of powder shootin' at tin cans they start out to find where the deers roost. They find 'em, too. Mr. Robert is so rattled that he misses the one he aims at; but he bores a tunnel through another in the next lot.

Course, he thinks he's got a cinch then. He hustles to the nearest flag station and spends eight dollars sendin' telegrams to the bunch, invitin' 'em to a venison feed at the club. Then he has his game sewed up neat in meal bags and expressed to John Doe, Jersey City. See how cute he was? He'd heard about the game laws by that time; so he lays his plans to duck any trouble. But he hadn't counted on that gang tippin' off the Jersey game wardens, nor on their trailin' the baggage and express bundles with huntin' dogs.

"The dogs had smelled it out just as I came in to claim it," says he; "so all I could do was to keep my mouth closed, standing around and looking foolish until I got tired and came away. And that, Torchy, is the situation up to the present moment. My venison is under guard over in Jersey City, and if it isn't delivered at the club by six o'clock to-night I shall not only lose my bet, but have my life made miserable from cheap jokes for months to come. It occurred to me that if your wits were as bright as the hair that covers them, you might be able to help me out. What do you think?"

"Chee!" says I, scratchin' me bonfire, "I guess I'm down the coal chute. I've rescued locked-in typewriter girls from fire escapes, and lied the boss out of a family row; but I never tried my hand at kidnappin' enough meat for a dinner party. How about buyin' off the game sleuth?"

"He has been bought by the other side," says Mr. Robert. "He wouldn't dare to sell them out."

Well, I think some more thinks just as punky as that, and then we settles it that I'm to hike over and take a squint, anyway. I gets him to give me a line on what kind of a looker the warden was, and he throws me a couple of tens for campaign expenses. I was just stowin' away the green stuff as I goes through the outside office, and Piddie's eyebrows go up.

"They're goin' to let me finish out the week," says I. "Ain't they the gentle things?"

Then I skips out for the 23d-st. boat, leavin' Piddie with his mouth open, and Mr. Robert wrapped up with the idea that, some way or other, I'm goin' to talk that game cop into a dope dream and rescue the roast.

But, say, I didn't need to look twice at that snoozer to see that no line of hot air I had in stock would soften him up. He had an undershot jaw, a pair of eyes that saw both sides of the street at once, and a head like a choppin' block. He was sittin' right alongside of that burlap bundle, waitin' to spring his tin badge on some one.

"Do they send such things as that through without cratin'?" says I to a guy behind the chicken wire, jerkin' me thumb at Mr. Sleuth. "What's the label on him?"

"That's Mr. Hinkey Tolliver, special officer," says he. "Better look out or he'll break a hand grenade on that still alarm of yours."

"Ah, back to the blotter!" says I. "Who gave you any license to make funny cracks on my Mrs. Leslie Carter disguise?"

We swapped a few more like that, while I sizes up Hinkey, tryin' to map out a way to brace him. But it was a losin' proposition. He has one of them eyes nailed to what I wanted to take away and the other trained on the door, and you could tell by the way he held his jaw that nothin' short of an earthquake would jar him loose.

It was too much for me. If it hadn't been that Mr. Robert had put it up to me so flat, I'd have quit then. But I couldn't lay down with just a look; so I takes a turn around into the passenger waitin' room, battin' my head for a new line.

I guess it was kind of second sight that steers me over into the corner where there is an A. D. T. branch. I wa'n't lookin' for anyone I knew, seein' it's been so long since I wore the cap; but who should I pipe off, sittin' on the call bench, but Hunch Leary! And, say, between the time I'd give him the nod to come out, and his askin' how it was I'd shook the red stripe, I'd framed up the whole scheme. First I goes over to the girl under the blue bell and rings up Mr. Robert.

"Hello," says I, "this is Torchy."

"Good!" says he. "Have you got it?"

"Got nothin'!" says I. "You must think I'm a writ of habeas corpus. I want to know who was the gent that most likely tipped off your warden friend."

When I'd got that I asks the time of the next uptown boat, and makes a deal with one of them ferry hawks to back his chariot up near the express office door and be ready to make a swift move for the gangplank.

Then me and Hunchy fakes up this little billy ducks to Mr. Hinkey Tolliver, tellin' him to chase to the nearest 'phone and call up the gent that Mr. Robert had put me wise to.

It was worse'n playin' a three-ball combination for the side pocket, and I holds my breath while Hunch pokes his book at him and waits to see if there's any answer. Tolliver, he reads it over two or three times, first with one eye and then the other. One minute I thought he was goin', and the next he settles back like he'd made up his mind to balk. He squints at the burlap package, and then at the message, and all of a sudden he makes a break for the 'phone.

He hadn't begun movin' before I was up to the window with my receipt, callin' for 'em to get a hustle on, as Mr. Doe had run out of veal and had to have it in a hurry. Ever try to poke up one of them box jugglers? They took their time about it—and me lookin' for trouble every tick of the clock! But I got an O. K. on it after awhile, and for a quarter I hired a wagon helper to drag the bundle out and chuck it into the hansom. Then I climbs in and we made the boat just as the bell rang. She was pullin' out of the slip when Tolliver rushes out about as calm as a bulldog chasin' a tramp.

"Say," says the driver, climbin' down to take a look at the baggage, "who you got sewed in the sack!"

"Get on your perch!" says I. "Ain't you makin' extra money on this? And when you fetch up at the club, do it like you was used to stoppin' at such places."

It was a great ride that me and the deer meat had across town and up Fifth-ave. I'd stopped once to put Mr. Robert next; so he was waitin' for me out in front of the club, wearin' a grin that was better'n a breakfast food ad.

But that wa'n't anything to the look on Piddie when Mr. Robert shows up next mornin' and pats me on the back like I was one of his old Hasty Puddin' chums.

"Piddie," says I, "look what it is to be born handsome and lucky, all in one throw!"

CHAPTER III

MEETING UP WITH THE GREAT SKID

Next time you nabs me writin' a form sheet on any unknown, you can hang out the waste paper sign and send me to the scows. Look at the mess I makes of this here Mallory business! Why, first off I has him billed for a Percy boy that had strayed into the general office from the drygoods district. He had a filin' job in the bond room, and when he drew his envelope on Saturdays it must have set the Corrugated Trust back for as much as twelve D.

Course, I didn't pay no attention to him, until one noon I finds him in the next chair at the dairy lunch. He's got his mug of half white and half black, and his two corned beef splits, with plenty of mustard, and he's just squarin' off for a foodfest, when I squats down with two hunks of pie and all the cheese I could get at one grab.

"Hello, Algy!" says I. "Where's the charlotte russe and the cup of tea?"

"Beg pardon," says he; "were you speaking to me?"

"Sure," says I. "You didn't think I was makin' that crack at the armchair, did you? Maybe we ain't been introduced; but we're on the same payroll."

"Oh, yes," says he, "I remember now. You're the—the——"

"Go on, say it," says I. "I don't mind if it is red, and I lets anybody call me Torchy that wants to, even Willies."

"Well, now, that's nice of you," says he, sidetrackin' a bite to look me over. Then he grins.

Say, it was that open face movement that made me suspicious maybe he wa'n't one of the Algernon kind, after all. But he had most of the points, from the puff tie to the way he spoke. It wa'n't the hot potato dialect Piddie uses; but it leaned that way. If he'd been a real Willie boy, though, he'd gone up in the air, and maybe I'd got slapped on the wrist. His springin' that grin was a hunch for me to hold the decision.

"How long you been keepin' Corrugated stocks from goin' below par?" says I.

That stuns him for a minute, and then a light breaks. He throws another grin. "Oh, about a year," he says.

"Chee!" says I. "And they ain't put you on the board of directors yet?"

"I've managed to keep off so far," says he.

"Get a lift every quarter, though, I suppose?" says I.

"I'm getting the same salary I began with, if that's what you mean," says he, tacklin' another sandwich that had got past the meat inspectors.

"Yours must be fatter'n most of the Saturday prize packages they hand out in the general office, or you wouldn't have kept satisfied so long," says I.

He thinks that over for awhile, like it was a new proposition, and then he says, quiet and easy, "I'm not at all sure, you see, that I am satisfied."

"Why not chuck it then and make another grab?" says I. "It's good luck sometimes to shake the bag."

He swings his shoulders up at that,—and say, he's got a good pair, all right!—but he don't say a word.

"Ain't married the job, have you?" says I. "Or have you lost your nerve?"

"Perhaps it's a lack of nerve, as you suggest," says he, more as if he was talkin' to himself than anything else.

"Don't think you could connect with another, eh?" says I.

He shakes his head. "I'm not exactly proud of the fact," says he; "but I don't mind telling you in confidence that it required the combined efforts of my entire family and all my friends to get me into this job." 37

"Honest?" says I. "Chee! They picked a pippin for you, didn't they?"

"It's a star," says he.

"So's a swift kick from the bottom of a well," says I.

With that I shakes off the pie crumbs and takes a chase up around the Flatiron, to watch the kids collectin' cigar coupons and take a look at the folks from the goshfry-mighty belt shiverin' in the rubberneck buggies. Say, I never feel quite so much to home in this burg as when I watch them jays from the one-night stands payin' their coin to see things that I shut my eyes on every day.

When I gets back on the gate I tries to figure out this Mallory gent; but I can't place him. He's no Willie, and he's no dope, I can see that. With his age and general get-up, though, he ought to be pullin' out fifty or so a week. What's he been at all this time?

I was just curious enough to stroll over and take a look at him. He has his coat off, pluggin' away on the job and doin' the kind of work that I could learn to play with any time I had a day off. Not that I'm lookin' for it. Bein' head office boy suits me down to the ground. That's bein' somethin', even if they do pay you off with a five and a one. But if you're a live one you'll get tipped as much more. And you don't have cold chills up the spine every time the boss lugs down an after breakfast grouch. 38

Course, a duck like Mallory can't get in any such game; so he's got to dig away at the filin' case and wear his last summer's suit until Christmas. Diggin' and keepin' quiet seemed to be his only play. Just as though he'd ever win any medals by the way he stacked papers away in little pasteboard boxes!

He wins somethin' else, though. One day the general manager rushes into Mallory's corner after somethin' he wanted in a hurry, and by the time he'd found it he'd pied things from one end of the coop to the other. Mallory was just tryin' to straighten out the mess, when along comes Piddie, with that pointed nose of his in front. Piddie don't ask any questions; he throws a fit. Why, he had Mallory on the carpet for forty minutes by the clock, givin' him the grand roast, and the only time Mallory opens up to tell him how it was he shuts him off with a, "That is sufficient, Mr. Mallory! I am here to get results, not excuses. Is that quite clear?"

"Yes, sir," says Mallory.

Say, but he did it well! He looks that peanut headed snipe straight in the eye all the time after that and takes what's comin' to him without turnin' a hair. It was "Yes, Mr. Piddie," and "No, Mr. Piddie"; but nothin' else. And the cooler and politer he was, the wilder Piddie got. When I hears him tell Mallory that another such break will cost him his job, I was achin' to throw the letterpress at him and break him in two. I couldn't hardly wait for Mallory to shut the door before I let loose. 39

"Say, Piddie," says I, "if you don't think you'll sleep easy to-night unless you give some one the bounce, why not fire me? Go on, now; I'll make out a case for you. Tell 'em I said you howled around like a pup with a sore ear."

Piddie turns white and gives me the glassy eye—that's all. I couldn't tease a fire out of him with a box of matches.

But that didn't make up for the way he'd roughed Mallory. I was still sore over it at closin' time; so I lays for Mallory and asks him why he didn't risk the job and take a crack at Piddie's jaw.

He just laughs. "Oh," says he, "I couldn't pay him that compliment."

Was that a joke, yes? Blamed if I could tell. Anyway, it wa'n't sense. And there's where I had the front to put it straight up to Mallory about his bein' stranded in a place where he had to take such pin jabbin' as that.

"Say," says I, "is it hard luck, or a late start, or what?"

40

"I fancy a late start would cover it," says he.

"Not college?" says I.

"That's it," says he.

"Aw, fudge!" says I. "Honest, I didn't take you for one of them rah-rah boys. Well, if it's that ails you, you're up against it. I don't wonder you had to be jammed into a job with a flyin' wedge. Chee!"

I was sorry for him, though. Maybe it was somethin' he couldn't duck. Some of 'em I've known of couldn't. Oh, I've seen bunches of 'em, just turned out. Didn't we have more'n a dozen unloaded on us when me and Mr. Marshall was gettin' out the Sunday edition? And we didn't do a thing to 'em, either!

But it's a tough deal, after puttin' in all that time dodgin' the fool killer at some one else's expense, to be chucked into the grub game with nothin' but a lot of siss-boom yells for experience. I wouldn't have believed Mallory was that sort. Nice young feller, too. Never slung any of his Greek at me, nor flashed his college pins. Seemed to kind of like chinnin' to me at lunch; so I let him. You know how you'll get to gassin' and tellin' each other the story of your life. I lets out about Belmont Pepper and the minin' stocks he gave me, and Mallory drops hints about mother and sister, that was livin' off in Washington or somewhere with a brother that was in better luck. Mallory, he was doin' the hall bedroom act, livin' on that twelve per and keepin' out of sight of everyone he'd ever known until he'd made good. Guess he found it kind of a lonesome deal.

41

Once when I was extra flush I offers to blow him to a fam'ly circle seat at "The Bandit Queen"; but he says he thinks he'd better not go.

"Plannin' to have a spin in your new car?" says I.

"Hardly," says he.

"Well, how do you put in your off time, anyway?" says I.

And say, whatcher think? His programme is to light up the gas stove reg'lar after dinner and fill his head full of truck out of the trade monthlies and Wall Street columns, postin' himself on Corrugated business.

"Gettin' ready to give the old man a few private tips?" says I.

"Not until he asks for them," says he.

"Then you've got lots of time," says I. "But it's a punk way of enjoyin' yourself."

Maybe it was thinkin' about what a dead slow time he was havin' that gives me the cue to stir up that lovely mess, or perhaps it was because the thing was sprung on me so unexpected. It come one day when I was busy drawin' pictures of Piddie on the blotter. I hears a giggle, and squints up to see a pair that looked as if they'd just broke away from an afternoon tea. He was a husky youth in a frock coat, with a face like a full moon and a voice that didn't call for any megaphone. The other was a her, and she was a bundle of tuttifrutti, the kind you see floatin' by in sixty horsepower, all veils and furs and eyes.

42

"Hello, sonny," says he, swingin' up to the brass gate, wearin' a four-inch grin. "Where's the Great Skid?"

"Give it up," says I. "Have you tried the Zoo?"

"He-haw!" says he, with the stops all out and a forced draft on. "That's a good one, that is! But we haven't much time and we're looking for Skid. Where do you keep him?"

"Say," says I, "we've got a lot of freaks on tap; but we're just out of Skids. Anything else do?"

Then she comes to the front. "Don't be such a silly, Dicky!" says she. "It isn't likely they call him that here. Tell the young man it's Bert Mallory we wish to see."

"You're right, Sis, right as usual," says Dick. "It's Mallory we're looking for."

"Oh!" says I. "Mister Mallory?"

"There now, Dicky!" says she, pokin' him with her elbow and touchin' off another giggle. "Didn't I tell you?"

43

"He-haw!" says Dicky. "Mister Mallory, of course."

But I didn't feel he-hawy a bit; for it was up to me to tow Mallory's swell college chum and his sister in where the boy was jugglin' the file cases. And them lookin' for him to be sittin' in a swing chair with his name painted big on the door! That was when I dug up my fool thought.

"Cards!" says I. "I'll see if Mr. Mallory's got through consultin' with the general manager."

"Oh!" gurgles Sis. "Doesn't that sound business like, though? I suppose Skid—er—Mr. Mallory is quite a busy man, isn't he?"

"Busy," says I. "Say, you don't think he has all of us around here to play marbles, do you, miss?"

Sis, she gets mighty int'rested at that. "He's a very important man now, isn't he?" says she.

"Chee, yes!" says I. "He's I-double-it around here."

"Isn't that fine?" says Sis. "But I hope he can see us."

"Oh, I'll fix that all right," says I.

With that I slides through two doors and into Mr. Robert's room. He's still out to lunch, of course, it bein' only about two o'clock; so I unlocks the corridor door that he don't use and skips across into the general offices. 44

"Say," says I to Mallory, "you're wanted in the boss's office. No, not the old man's; Mr. Robert's. Skin into your coat and come along."

Never fazes him a bit. He just hunches his shoulders, knocks the dust off his hands, and trots after. When I gets him in there I tells him to wait a minute, and then I goes out through the right way and lugs in Dicky and sister.

Was it a surprise party? Well, say! Dicky lets out a roar, makes a plunge for him, hammers him on the back, works the pump handle, and talks a blue streak.

"Well, Skiddy, old man, here we are!" says he. "Thought you'd given us the shake for good, eh? But we heard you'd gone in with the Corrugated,—saw Blicky in Venice and he told us,—so when we came ashore we wired father to hold the car over one train for us while we hunted you up. Sis wouldn't let me come unless she could too. Here, Sis, it's your turn. Blaze ahead now and give the boy what you said you would. I'll turn my back."

I didn't, though. Was there any hangin' off about Sis? Not so you'd notice it. She just steps up and makes a grab for Mallory and—Aw, say! One like that must be good for chapped lips. If I'm ever handed one of them kind I won't wash it off for a month. It tickles Dicky most to death. 45

"He-haw!" says he, so's the window panes rattle. "She said she'd do it. And she did, didn't she, eh, Skid?"

Mallory couldn't prove an alibi. He was the worst rattled man I ever see, and as for blushin'—he got up a color like the lady heroine in a biff-bang drama. He acted as though he didn't know whether he was loopin' the loops or having a dream that was too good to be true. Once or twice he tried to unloosen some remarks; but Sis and Dicky was both talkin' to once and he never got a show. They was tellin' him how glad they was to see him again, and what a great man he was, and how Sis was comin' back to town next month for the rest of the season, and all that—when right in the middle of it the door opens and in comes Mr. Robert.

Say, I felt like a noon extra in a bunch of six o'clock editions. I'd balled things up lovely, I had! Why, the only times a general office hand ever gets a chance to stand on the Persian rug in the boss's office is just before he gets the run or is boosted into a five-figure salary. And here I has a twelve-dollar man usin' it like a public reception hall! It was what was goin' to happen to Mallory that gave me the shivers. 46

"Torchy," says Mr. Robert, "what's all this?"

"S-s-sh!" says I. "It's Old Home Day, and the lady is handin' out choc'late creams. Wait up; maybe it'll be your turn next."

"But, see here, I don't understand," says he. "Who are these persons, and why—"

"Ah, say!" says I. "Ain't you got any sportin' blood? Besides, I don't know the answer myself."

I could of kept that up just about one more round before I'd fell through a crack; but just as Mr. Robert was framin' up another conundrum Dicky turns around and spots him.

"Why, hello, Bob!" yells Dicky, as gentle as if he was hailin' someone across Broadway. "By Jove, though, I forgot all about you being in the Corrugated too! But of course you are. Sis and I just ran in a minute to look up Skid. Good old Skid! Great boy, eh, Bob?"

Mr. Robert takes a look over by the window at Mallory, who wasn't seein' a thing but Sis and wasn't hearin' anything but what she was sayin'—and she was sayin' a lot.

"Is—is that Skid?" says Mr. Robert.

"Oh, come along now, Bob," says Dicky, pokin' him in the vest playful. "You don't mean to say you don't know Skid Mallory, the Great Skid, best quarterback we ever turned out, the one that went through Harvard for forty-five yards, and that with a broken ankle? Don't know Skid? Why, say!" 47

"I take it all back," says Mr. Robert. "Of course I know him; but not so well as you do, Dicky. I wasn't one of the coaches, you know, and I haven't kept the run of the team for the last year or

two. But I'm glad to see the Great Skid. How the deuce does he happen to be up here, though?"

"He-haw!" says Dicky. "That's rich, that is? Shows how much you know of Corrugated affairs, Bob. Why, man alive, Skid's one of the chaps that's runnin' your old gent's trust. This is his office you're in now."

"Really!" says Mr. Robert. He takes another look at Mallory, who's deaf and dumb and blind to everything but Sis, and then he turns for a good hard look at me.

I grins kind of foolish and nods. Then I jumps behind Dicky and begins to wigwag over his shoulder for Mr. Robert to keep it up. I didn't know whether he would or not. I wa'n't sure but what he'd think I'd turned batty, by the motions I was goin' through; but he's a sport, Mr. Robert is. He didn't know what was on the card; but he takes a chance.

So Dicky waltzes him over to the pair by the window, and makes Mr. Robert and Mallory acquainted, and jollies 'em both, and all three of 'em talk football to Mallory, who blushes worse than ever and don't know which way to turn. They keep that up until Dicky pulls out his watch, grabs Sis by the arm, and hollers that they've got to make a break for the Washington Limited. Sis is shakin' good-by with both of 'em at once, when she thinks of somethin' funny.

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"Oh, Mr. Robert!" says she. "I want to know which of you is who here, don't you know. Is it you that works for Skid, or Skid that works for you?"

"Chee!" thinks I. "That upsets the soup kettle."

Mr. Robert looks at Mallory, and Mallory looks at him. There was no breakin' away; for she has hold of a hand apiece. Both of 'em makes a start; but Mr. Robert gets the floor. "Why," says he, "I guess we're both working for the Corrugated, only one of us works a little harder than the other."

"Ah!" says Sis, givin' Mallory a smile that was worth payin' money to see. "I thought so."

The next minute they makes a dash for an elevator goin' down, and that part of it was over. We'd worked the bluff all the way through, and Sis has lugged off the idea that Mallory was at the top of the bunch.

But there was Mr. Robert, waitin' to talk Dutch to us.

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Mallory he starts in to say that he's sorry for seemin' so cheeky; but that's about all he can say.

"Ah, cheese it!" says I, buttin' in. "What do you know about it? It was me put up the game, and if Mr. Robert had loafed another half an hour at the club like he usually does, there wouldn't have been any mix up. Say, you leave this to me."

Mallory didn't want to leave it like that; but Mr. Robert was holdin' the door open for him, so he couldn't do anything else. When we had it all to ourselves, the boss ranges me up in front of him for the court of inquiry session.

"Well?" says he, real solemn.

I takes all that in and gives him the wink. "Say," says I, "didn't I have my nerve with me, though?"

He kind of blinks at that; but it don't fetch him.

"Who's Dicky, your whisperin' friend?" says I.

"Nobody much," says he. "His father's a Senator."

"Well, say, now," says I, "you didn't want me to chase a Senator's son and a real swell girl like Sis off into a place like the general office reception room, did you! And wouldn't it have been a nice break if I'd let out that we was smotherin' the Great Skid under a twelve-dollar job?"

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"Was that why you had the impudence to appropriate my office?" says he.

"That was part of it," says I.

And that gives me an openin' to tell him the whole tale about Mallory, from the hall bedroom act to the way he'd been postin' himself.

"You think he's a valuable man, do you?" says Mr. Robert.

"Valuable!" says I. "Why, he's all the goods. What if he did learn to talk Greek once? He's forgettin' it, ain't he? And look at the way he stands up to trouble! Don't that show there's good stuff in him?"

"Well," says he, "what would you suggest?"

"Ah, say!" says I. "Couldn't you give a guess? Why, if I was you I'd fix it so that when Sis comes back to town she wouldn't find him on no kid's job. I'd give him a show to get his name painted on a door somewhere."

"Torchy," says he, punchin' the button for his secretary, "I shouldn't wonder if we did."

CHAPTER IV

FROSTING THE PROFESS

Chee! but I'm gettin' to be useful! Course, I don't figure out no awful slump in Corrugated stocks if I should get pettish some day and tell 'em they'd got to find a new office boy. That ain't the kind of shredded thought I'm feedin' on. I fit into a lot of places besides the chair behind the brass gate. Why, I have to put on a sub. three or four times a week, while I'm spreadin' myself out all over the lot.

It all come of their makin' me special messenger to the boss; for since old Mr. Ellins has been laid up with toothache in his knee joints they've been chasin' me up to the Fift'-ave. ranch, with mail, and blank bonds to be signed, and such truck. And that's how I came to get so thick with Marjorie.

I was waitin' in the front hall, pipin' off the gorgerifousness, when some one pushes in through the draperies L. U. E. and I'm discovered. And, say, she was a magnum, all right! You know the sort of pippins they pick out to hang up by a string in the fruit store window? Well, that was her style. Big? She'd fit close in a Morris chair! And she didn't look more'n eighteen or nineteen, either. For all her width, she was built on good lines, and if she'd been divided up right there'd been enough for a pair of as good lookers as you'd want to see.

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"O-o-o-o!" says she as she comes in. "See who's here!"

I never says a word, but just twists my toes around the chair legs and looks into my hat. Not that I'm any afraid of girls; but I wa'n't feelin' so much to home there as I do in some places, and I didn't want to make any break. But she wouldn't let it go at that.

"O-o-o-o!" says she again, and as I squints up at her I sees the reg-lar cut-up looks just bubblin' out.

"G'wan!" says I. "I ain't no curiosity."

"Oh, it is Torchy then, isn't it?" says she.

"You don't think this is a wig I'm wearin', do you?" says I. That's what I got to expect with hair like mine. The minute my description's given out everybody's on.

She giggles and says that Brother Robert's been telling her about me. "I'm Marjorie, you know," says she.

"Well," says I, lookin' her over careful, "you'll do."

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I meant it. Mr. Robert's only fair sized; but old man Ellins is a whale, and I was thinkin' of him when I said that Marjorie was up to specifications. She seems to think I've handed out a lump of butterscotch, though, and we gets real chatty.

I don't know what kind of fairy yarns Mr. Robert's been tearin' off at home about me; but from the start she treats me like I was one of the fam'ly. And Marjorie was just as nice as she was heavy. She didn't try to carry any dog; but just blazes ahead and spiels out the talk. I get next to the fact that she's just home from one of them swell boardin' schools, where they pump French and music into young lady plutesses at a dollar a minute, and throw in lessons on how to say "Home, François!" to the chaffeur. This was some kind of a vacation Marjorie was havin', and she was doin' her best to make every hour count.

Knowin' all that helped me to keep from bein' so much jarred by her next move. It was a couple of days after, on a Wednesday, and we'd got real well acquainted, when Marjorie spots me as I was headin' back for the office after leavin' some things for the boss.

"Torchy," says she, "where's Robert? What was he doing when you left?"

"Give it up," says I. "And, anyway, I ain't supposed to know."

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"I'll bet you do, though," says she. "Couldn't you guess?"

"If I did," says I, "I'd guess that he'd just made a run of ten or twelve and was pushin' up the buttons on the string."

"I don't know what that means," says she.

"Well," says I, "it means that maybe he's playin' billiards at the club."

"Oh, darn!" says she, real wicked.

It turns out that Brother Robert has said he'd take sister to the matinée that afternoon, and the date has got clean by him. She wants to go the worst way, too. Mother wasn't handy, Aunt May had the icebag on her head, and there wasn't anyone else within reach. Accordin' to the rules, there'd got to be some one.

"Torchy," says she, "I don't see why you couldn't take me, as well as anyone else."

"Thanks," says I, "but I don't want to earn my release that way. I've got 'em trained down to the office so they'll stand for a lot; but me ringin' in a matinée durin' business hours would sure break the spell."

"Oh, pshaw!" says she. "I can fix that part of it," and off she goes, up to see puppah.

If she'd come back and said the old man was havin' a fit on the floor, I wouldn't have been any surprised. But, say, Marjorie must have a pull accordin' to her weight; for inside of four minutes she comes skippin' down the front stairs, makin' the gas globes rattle and jigglin' the pictures on the wall.

"It's all right," says she. "Father says you're to telephone Mr. Piddie that you won't be back, and then you're to see that I get to the theater and home again without being kidnapped. I'll be ready in ten minutes."

It was a shame, though, that I missed seein' Piddie when he got the word. All I could hear was a gasp, like he'd been butted just above the belt, and then he hung up the receiver. I expect I'll send him to the nerve repair shop some day.

But you should have seen me and Marjorie sittin' on the broadcloth cushions and bein' carted down to the theater. I swelled up all I could; but at that I wa'n't much more'n a dot on the landscape. There's times when I feel real chesty and can hear my feet make a noise when I walk; but this wa'n't one of 'em. And when it came to paradin' down the middle row after the usher, with Marjorie puffin' behind, I felt like one of them dinky little river tugs towin' a floatin' grain elevator. I was lookin' for the house to let loose a "Ha-ha!" It didn't, though. They expect most anything to drift into them afternoon shows.

"Say, Miss Ellins," says I, after she'd squeezed herself into her place, pinned her feather lid up in front of her, and opened the choc'late creams, "I've been in such a dream I didn't look at the outside boards or get a programme. What's doin'—variety or a tumpy-tump show?"

"Why," says she, "this is Shakespeare's 'Romeo and Juliet.'"

"Z-z-z-zing!" says I. "Stung again! Who unloaded the tickets on you?"

What d'ye think, though? She'd picked this show out all by herself, put up real money for it—and that with two Injun drammers runnin' right on Broadway! Said she'd seen the same thing half a dozen times before, too. Aw, say! I couldn't get next to any such batty move as that. And when I thought how this was my first plunge into a two-dollar chair, it made me sore.

"Wake me up when it's all over," says I, and settles back for a real rest.

There's where I hung out the wrong number. That wa'n't any dope drammer at all. Course, Shakespeare don't know how to ring in burnin' flat houses, or mill explosions, or any real thrillers like that; but there's somethin' doin' in his pieces. There was in this one, anyway. It was quite some time before I got any glimmer of what it was all about; but before the first act was over I was sittin' up, all right.

"What do you think of her?" says Marjorie.

"The one with the Maxine Elliott eyes and the gushy voice?" says I. "Oh, I don't call her such a much; but if Romeo wants her as bad as he says he does, I hope it won't be a case of 'My pa won't let me.' But, say, what for did they kill off the only real live one they had, that Mr. Cuteo? Say, he was all to the good, and it was a shame to have him punctured so quick!"

The parts I liked, though, wa'n't the ones that Marjorie got herself worked up over. It was the balcony scene she'd come for. When they got to that she grips the seat in front and glues her eyes on them two that was swappin' the long, lingerin' breakaway tackles, and every once in awhile she heaves up a sigh like cuttin' out an airbrake.

After it was all over, and most everybody that counted had swallowed knockout drops, Marjorie gives me a sidelight on what's been runnin' through her head.

"I could do that," says she. "I just know I could!"

"Do what?" says I.

"Why, Juliet's part. I've been studying it for months, ever since our class gave it at school. They wouldn't give me a part then; but just you wait! I'll show them!"

"You're joshin'," says I.

Honest, I didn't think she meant it. She didn't say any more about it, and all the way home she was as quiet as a bale of hay.

That was the last I see of Marjorie for near a week. Then, one afternoon as I was goin' through Tinpan Alley on an errand, I sees the Ellins carriage pull up, and out she comes.

Now, say, I knew in a minute that wa'n't any place for Marjorie. The buildin' she goes into is one of them old five-story brownstones, where they sell wigs in the basement, costumes on the first floor, have a theatrical agency on the second, and give voice culture and such stuff above.

Among the other signs was one that read, "School of Dramatic Art, Room 9, Fifth Floor."

"Chee!" says I. "You don't suppose Marjorie's got it that bad, do you?"

First off I thinks I'll chase along and forget I'd seen anything at all. Then I thinks of what Mr. Robert would say if he knew, and I stops. Sure, I hadn't been called to play any Buttinsky part; but somehow I didn't feel right about stayin' out, so the first thing I knows I'm trailin' up the stairs. There wa'n't any need to do the sleuth act after Marjorie got started. Anyone on the floor could have heard it; for she was spoutin' the Juliet lines like a carriage caller, and whenever she made a rush to the footlights the floor beams creaked. It was enough to drag a laugh out of a hearse driver. And guess what the guy was tellin' her!

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"Great!" says he. "You're almost as good as Mary Anderson was at her best, and as for Marlowe, she can't touch you. Excellent, that last speech! What fire, what expression, what talent! Why, young woman, all you need is a Broadway production to sweep 'em off their feet! I'll arrange it for you. It means money, of course; but after the first cost—fame, nothing but fame!"

Now, how was that for a hot-air blast? Wouldn't that make a short ice crop if you let it loose up the Hudson?

But it wa'n't what he said, so much as how he was sayin' it, that got me int'rested. There's some voices you don't have to hear but once to remember a lifetime, an this was one of that kind. It was one of these husky baritones, like what does the coonsongs for the punky records they put into the music boxes at the penny arcades. That was as near as I could map it for a minute or so while I was tryin' to throw up the picture of the man behind the voice. And, then it hits me—Professor Booth McCallum!

Oh, skincho, what a front! Why, when I was on the Sunday editor's door the professor used to show up reg'lar with some new scheme for winnin' space. Talk about your self-acting press agents! He had the bunch shoved to the curb. All he had to bank on was a ten-minute turn at a 14th-st. continuous house, fillin' in between the trained pig and the strong lady; but he wanted as much type set about himself as if he'd been Dave Warfield.

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When he couldn't get next to anybody else, he used to give me the earache tellin' of the times when he played stock in one of Daly's road comp'nies, and how he had to quit because John Drew was jealous of him. Then he'd leave his stuff with me and I'd promise to sneak it into the dramatic notes the first time I found the forms unlocked.

And to think of a hamfatter like McCallum, who's come back from Buffalo on a brake beam so often that he always sleeps with one arm crooked around the bedpost, havin' the nerve to call himself a school of dramatic art! Course, I didn't think Marjorie was so easy as to fall for a fake like that. She must be stringin' him.

But the minute I see her come out I knew she'd swallowed the hook. I'd dropped back into the far end of the hall, where it was dark; but as she walks under the skylight I sees the pleased look on her face, like she was havin' a view of her lithographs on all the gold frames in the subway. I waits until McCallum shuts himself in to throw bouquets at his picture in the glass, and then I slips down just in time to catch Marjorie as she's climbin' into the carriage.

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"Is this the lady that's entered for the heavyweight Juliet championship?" says I, tryin' to break the news to her gentle.

It shook her up a good deal, just the same. Her face gets the color of an auction flag, and she jounces down on the seat in a way that makes the springs flat out like bed slats.

"Why, Torchy!" says she. "Where did you come from, and what do you mean?"

"Oh, I've taken out a butt-in license," says I. "I'm on, Miss Ellins. I wa'n't invited to the rehearsal; but I was there."

"Listening outside?" says she.

"Uh-huh," says I.

"Oh, Torchy!" says she. "Did you hear how lovely the professor talked of the way I did it?"

"About your havin' Julia Marlowe sewed in a sack? Sure thing," says I.

"But you mustn't tell anyone," says she.

"I wouldn't want the job," says I. "I can draw a diagram of the riot there'll be when mommer and popper get the bulletin."

"I don't care," says Marjorie. "They never want me to do anything. It's always, 'Oh, Marjorie, you're too big.' In summer I can't go bathing because they say I'm a sight in a bathing suit, and in winter they won't let me skate because they're afraid I'll break through. The boys won't dance with me, and the girls shut me out of basketball. But Professor McCallum has been perfectly dear. He said right away that I wasn't a bit too stout to be an actress. I'm not, either! Why, I weigh less than two hundred, with my jacket off; honest, I do! He liked my voice, too. And this was only my third lesson. Anyway, I'd just love to play Juliet, and I mean to do it!"

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Well, say, that was a proposition to give you a headache. I couldn't go runnin' to Mr. Robert or

the boss with any tales about Miss Marjorie. That ain't what I'm on the payroll for. But I couldn't let McCallum play a friend of mine for a good thing; so I just opens up on him.

"Why," says I, "he's a never was. Maybe he used to carry a spear, or play double-up parts on the haymow circuit; but that's about all. He's a common, everyday, free lunch frisker, Mac is. I used to know all about him when I was in the newspaper business; so this is a straight steer. He's just tollin' you along because he's had a dream that if he gets you real stuck on yourself you'll come across with two or three thousand for expenses and will be too tender-hearted to squeal afterwards. That's his game, and all you've got to do to queer it is to send him ten and say the folks object."

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That's about the way I put it, drawin' it as strong as I knew how. Does Marjorie see the point and heave up any thanks about my bein' her true friend? Not her! She calls me impid'nt and says she's got a good mind to box my ears right there. So it was up to me to calm her down.

"All right, Miss Marjorie," says I. "If I've said anything I can't prove, I'll take it back; but if you'll follow me upstairs again for a minute, and wait outside in the hall, I'll have a little talk with the professor that'll settle it one way or the other."

No, she wouldn't do it, and she didn't want me ever to speak to her again. I was too fresh, I was!

"Then I guess I'll have to send Mr. Robert up to engage seats for that Juliet stab of yours," says I, makin' a play to move off.

It was a bluff; but it fetched her. She was willin' to do 'most anything if I wouldn't tell Brother Robert; so back we goes up to the acting school on the top floor. I left her leanin' up against the wall, right near the open transom, and makes a break for McCallum.

He was right there, too. He's one of these short-legged, ham-faced gents that's almost as tall when he's sittin' down as when he's standin' up. A neck that takes a No. 18 turn-down collar goes with that. He has his hands in his pockets, an Egyptian joss-stick in his mouth, and he's straddlin' up and down, as satisfied with himself as if he'd just cashed a ticket on the right horse.

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"Hello, profess!" says I. "I spots your name on the sign; so I takes the foot elevator up to see how you're comin' on."

"Quite right, son," says he, "quite right."

He didn't need any whizz plane then to beat the Curtiss record. He was soarin', soarin,' and too busy with it to take much notice of me.

"You ain't been round to the office lately," says I, lettin' on I was still with the paper.

"No, son," says he; "but you can inform your dramatic man down there that if he wants an important piece of news he'd better come and see me," and with that he taps his chest like he was stunnin' the gallery.

"Thought you looked like happy days, professor," says I. "What's it like? You ain't been takin' on any swell pupils, have you?"

"Haven't I, though?" says he, stickin' his thumbs in his vest pockets and comin' up on his toes as if he was goin' to crow. "Haven't I?"

"Say, Mac," says I confidential, "that wasn't her I saw drivin' off in the private buggy as I come in, was it—the wide one?"

"That was her," says he, "the new Juliet."

"Juliet!" says I. "Aw, you're kiddin'! Honest, professor, do Juliets come as heavy as that?"

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Then he winks. I could see he was just bustin' to let it out to some one, and here was his chance. "Son," says he, "when young ladies have the price to pay for such luxuries as the cultivation of a dramatic talent that doesn't exist, size doesn't count. I've coached a Hamlet with lop ears and a pug nose, a Lady of Lyons that had a face you could chop wood with, and I guess I'm not going to draw the line at a Juliet whose father is president of a trust, even if she is something of a baby elephant!"

I heard the wall crack at that, and I suspected Marjorie'd got a shock.

"Can she act any?" says I.

"Act!" says he. "It's enough to make the angels weep to see her try. Imagine, my boy, a one hundred and thirty-pound Romeo trying to hug his way around a two hundred and fifty-pound Juliet! Why, we'd have to prop up the balcony with a structural iron pillar and——"

It was too bad to have the flow stopped, for he was enjoyin' himself; but just then the door was jerked open and in rushes Marjorie, her eyes blazin', her face white, and so mad she couldn't speak. As she looms up in the door, lookin' bigger'n ever, she was diggin' somethin' out of her handbag, somethin' shiny. It wa'n't anything but a silver purse; but the professor must have thought it was somethin' else, for he gives only one look. Then he throws up both hands, hollers "Don't shoot, don't shoot!" and makes a dive under a desk in the corner. The hole under that desk wa'n't built for divin' through; so McCallum wedges himself in there like a cork in a bottle,

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wavin' his legs in the air, and callin' for help.

"There!" says Marjorie, throwin' some bills on the floor. "That's for what I owe you, you horrid old fraud! Baby elephant, am I? Oh, you wretch!" With that she goes out and bangs the door behind her.

It was all me and the cornet artist next door could do to separate McCallum from the desk, and even when we worked him loose he didn't want to come out. When we'd got him into a chair, and he'd felt himself all over careful, he says to me:

"Torchy, how—how many times did she shoot?"

And when I gets back to the office Mr. Robert wants to know why I didn't let 'em know I was goin' all the way to Washington after them stamps.

"Chee!" says I, "but you're gettin' restless! Maybe you think I oughter travel by pneumatic tube? Huh!"

CHAPTER V

WHERE MILDRED GOT NEXT

There's nothin' wins out surer in this town of New York than puttin' up a good front. If you've got the fur coat and the goggles on your cap, you can walk or ride on a transfer, and folks'll take it as a cinch that your bubble's back in the garage bein' fitted with a new set of hundred-dollar tires. Why, just the smell of benzin on a suit you've had out to the cleaners will give 'em the dream, if you throw your chest out right.

Look at the way Mildred has us goin'. Maybe you don't know about Mildred. Say, I'll bet if you met up with her on Fift'-ave. you'd hold your breath till she got by and wonder whether she was a Vanderbilt or one of the Goulds! But she floats into the Corrugated Trust offices more or less reg'lar every day, just the same, and does her little stunt on the typewriter at so much per. Honest, when I sees her sailin' in mornin's, with all her swell drygoods on, I'm just as liable as not to half break my neck openin' the door for her. That's what I did the first time I saw her, when I was new on the gate.

"This way, lady," says I, and when she pikes right by and heads for the cloakroom I almost has a fit.

Maybe there's some hot ones down around Broad-st. that drives to business in cabs and pounds the keys durin' office hours; but for a genuine, mercerized near silk we stand ready to back Mildred against the field. She'd have an expert guessin', Mildred would. "Miss Morgan" is the way she figures on the payroll; but that never sounded rich enough for me.

It was the first week I was there that I begun to get a line on Mildred. One day the old man calls me in and hands me a letter that's been put on his desk for him to sign. He was plum color, Old Hickory was, so mad he could have chewed a file.

"Boy," says he, "take this into the main office, find out who M. M. is, and bring her in here. Anybody that can spell in that fashion I want to take a good look at."

Think of the shock I gets when Piddie tells me them letters stand for Mildred Morgan.

"Lady," says I, "I hates to say it, but the boss is waitin' to hand out a call-down to you. Don't you go to gettin' scared stiff, though; for the first cussword he lets go of I'll chuck a chair at him."

The smile I gets for that would have been worth half a dozen jobs. I was lookin' for her to go white and begin bitin' her upper lip, like they usually does; but she ain't that kind—not on your nameplate! She just peels off the sleeve protectors, sets her side combs in firm, gives her face a dab or so with the rabbit's foot, and starts along after me, with that new antelope walk of hers, as easy and pleased as if she'd been asked to come to the front and pour tea.

And she's got the costume the part calls for, mind you! They're the only clothes of the kind I ever see wore into this buildin'. I couldn't say what they was made of; but I know they're the button-up-the-back style, and that they stick to her as if they'd been put on by a paper-hanger. I guess you'd call Mildred a 1911 model. Anyway, she seems to bulge in the right places; though how anyone so long-waisted as that can get themselves into such a rig without callin' for help is somethin' I passes up.

Well, I tows her into the boss's office, feelin' as mean as a welsher. The old man has settled back in his chair, a cigar pointin' out of one corner of his mouth, and a letter in one fist. While I'm gone he's run across another, worse than the first, by the marks he's made on it, and he's got to the point where a thermometer slipped down the back of his neck would go off like a cap pistol.

"See here!" says he, growlin' it out grouchy, without lookin' up. "I'd like to have you run your eye over that, and then tell me where in thunder you learned to spell such s-u-t-c-h!"

"Why," says she, "I always spell it that way; don't you?"

"Don't I!" roars the old man. "Do you take me for a——"

Then he looks up. Well, say, you talk about your fadin' sunsets! Nothin' I ever see beat the way the boss lost his crushed raspb'rry face tint and bleached out salmon pink. "Why—why—er—are you sure this is some of your work, young woman?"

"Oh yes, indeed," says she, kind of gurgly and aristocratic and as sweet as pie, "that's mine. But you've made so many horrid marks on it that I shall have to do it all over again."

"Yes," says he, "I'm afraid that's so. But we have a way here, you know, of spelling explicit with a C instead of an S."

"Ruhhly?" says she. "How odd!"

"It's one of our fads, too," goes on the old man, "not to spell Corrugated g-a-i-t-e-d. We've simplified it by leaving out the I. Of course, we don't expect you to learn all these things at once; but pick 'em up as fast as you can. That—that's all. Thank you very much, Miss—er——What's the name?"

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"Morgan," says she, "Mildred Morgan."

"Ah," says the boss, "very much obliged, Mil—er—Miss Morgan," and before I could get to the door he has hopped up and opened it for her.

Then he turns around and sees me standin' there grinnin'. "Torchy," says he, "are there any more like that around the shop?"

"None that I ever saw," says I.

"Thank Heaven!" says he. "Send in one of the other kind."

"Want a real ripe one?" says I.

He does. And say, we got plenty of them. I picks out one with washed-out eyes, front teeth that sticks out, and no shape to speak of. She could make the typewriter do a double shuffle, though, and there couldn't anybody around the place sling out words faster'n she could take 'em down on her pad, or any she couldn't spell right the first crack. The old man fixes it that she's to go over Mildred's work with an ink eraser before it comes to him.

If Mildred knew about it, she never let on. Nothin' much bothered her. She'd come sailin' in any old time durin' the forenoon, lookin' as han'some as a florist's window and actin' as if she never heard of such a thing as a time clock. Piddie tackles her only once.

72

"Miss Morgan," says he, "business begins here at nine o'clock promptly."

"How absurd!" says Mildred, and Piddie don't get over the shock for an hour.

About the second week all hands took a vote that Mildred wa'n't much of a success as a typewriter artist and that she ought to be fired. The old man put it up to Mr. Robert, and Mr. Robert shoves it back at him. Then they both loaded it onto Piddie and cleared out. When they come back they asks him if he's done it.

"Well," says he, colorin' up, "not exactly."

Come to make him own up, he'd gone at the job so easy and had been so polite about it that Miss Morgan has time to head him off with a strike for more pay, and before he can back out he's promised to see what can be done.

"Couldn't you talk to her, Mr. Ellins?" says he.

"Great Scott, no!" says the boss. "Tell her she's raised, and let it go at that."

For awhile, though, Mildred cost the firm a lot more money than her salary, if you reckon up as worth anything the time a lot of two-by-four ink-slingers spent makin' goo-goo eyes at her. It was a losin' game all around. Mildred didn't seem to be pinin' for any such honors, and after they got well acquainted with the fact that she wouldn't stand for lunch invites, or bids to the theater, and didn't want to be walked home with by a perfect gent, they let up on that foolishness. It leaves 'em dizzy, though. There's pinheads on our gen'ral office staff who believes they never missed breakin' a heart before, and they can't figure out just what's the matter with the combination.

73

There was others, too, that couldn't place Mildred, until some one hints that maybe she's a sure enough swell whose folks had gone broke, and that she's picked out a typewriter job as a sort of trapdoor that would let her down out of sight and keep the meal ticket renewed.

After that Mildred is as much of a myst'ry as why folks live in Brooklyn. We was all wise to the main proposition, though, and it was funny to hear 'em all sayin' that they'd known it right along. Kind of set us up some, too, havin' a real ex-ice cutter like her right on the floor with us. All the other key pounders, that had been givin' her the stary eye at first, flops around and uses

the sugar shaker. There wasn't anything they wouldn't do for her, and they takes turns holdin' her jacket, so's to get a peek at the trademark on the inside of the collar.

But Piddie is the most pleased of any. He thinks he's right to home among carriage folks, and every time she comes near he bows and scrapes and begins to shoot off the "Aw, I'm suah's" and the "Don'tcher know's," until you'd think he was talkin' through a mouthful of hot breakfast food.

74

"Chee!" says I to him. "You act like you thought this was a five o'clock tea."

"I trust," says he, "I know a lady when I see one, and that I know how to treat her too."

"That's so," says I. "Too bad you wa'n't on the stage, Piddie, in one of them 'Me lu'd, the carriage waits' parts."

That gives me a cue, and the next time she sends me for supplies I says to him, "Mr. Piddie," says I, "the Lady Mildred presents her compliments and says she wants a new paste brush."

Gets him wild, that does; so I sticks to it. The others hears it and picks it up too, and she wa'n't called anything but Lady Mildred from that on. First thing I knew I'd said it to her face; but she never so much as looks surprised. You'd thought she'd been called Lady Mildred all her life.

"Who knows?" says Piddie. "Perhaps she has."

Honest, we was makin' up all kinds of pipe dreams about her, and believin' 'em as we went along. There was no findin' out from her what was so and what she wa'n't. She never gets real chummy with anyone; but keeps us jollied along about so much. It was dead easy. All she had to do was to throw a smile our way, and we was tickled for a week. Wasn't anyone around the place needed so much waitin' on as her; but no one ever minds. Gen'rally there was two or three on the jump for her, and others willin' to be.

75

Course, that don't include Mr. Robert. He seems to think Lady Mildred was some kind of a joke; but, then, I expect he sees so many stunners like her every night, knockin' around at dinner parties and such, that he gets tired lookin' at 'em. I'd been carryin' it against him, though, and maybe that's what put it into my nut to get so gay with Louie.

Louie's the gent in the leather leggin's and north-pole outfit that comes around after Mr. Robert every night with the machine. Say, it's a reg'lar rollin' bay window, that car of Mr. Robert's! I wouldn't mind havin' one of that kind taggin' around after me. But if I was pickin' a shover I'd pass Louie by. He wears his nose too high in the air and is too friendly with himself to suit me. There's a lot of them honk-honk boys just like him; but he's the only one I ever has a chance to get real confidential with. It's like this:

Mr. Robert says to me, "Torchy, if I'm not back by five o'clock, you may tell Louie when he comes that he needn't wait."

"Sure thing," says I.

Then, when Mr. Robert don't show up at closin' time, I chases down to the curb and sings out, "Hey, Frenchy, you tip huntin' ex-waiter! It's back to the garage for yours! And say! After you've run your old coal cart into the shed you can go let yourself out as a sign for a fur store. Ah, that's right. Nothin' doin' here. Skidoo!"

76

Always makes me feel better after I've handed Louie one like that—his ears turns such a lovely pink, specially when there's a crowd around. When I has time to chew it over I can think up some beauts. But this night I was goin' to tell you about I didn't have any warnin' at all. Mr. Robert was right in the middle of a heart-to-heart talk with a Pittsburg man, when five o'clock comes and the word is sent up that Louie has came.

"Tell him to come back in about half an hour," says Mr. Robert to me.

"Repeat at five-thirt'," says I, sliding out for the elevator.

It was an elegant afternoon,—for pneumonia,—slush and rain and ice-box zephyrs gallopin' up and down the street. Louie didn't look as though he was enjoyin' it any too much, for all his furs. I was just turnin' up my collar for a dash across the sidewalk and back, when out comes Lady Mildred in a raincoat that was a dream and carryin' a silver-handled umbrella such as you don't find on the bargain counters. And then I gets my funny thought.

77

"Carriage for you, miss," says I, grabbin' the rain tent and hoistin' it. "Right this way, miss."

Say, she's a dead game sport, Mildred is. Never stopped to ask any fool questions; but prances right out to the car, just as though she'd expected it to be there.

"Take the lady home, and be back after Mr. Robert in half an hour, Louie," says I, jerkin' open the door and handin' her in.

It was about then that I almost had heart failure. Stowed away in the further corner, as comfortable as if he was at the club, was Benny. I forget what the rest of his name is; Mr. Robert never calls him anything but Benny. They're chums from way back,—travel in the same push, live on the same block, and has the same ideas about killin' time. But that's as far as the twin description goes. Benny looks and acts about as much like Mr. Robert as a cream puff looks like

a ham sandwich. All Benny ever does is put on more fat and grow more cushions on the back of his neck. He's about five foot three, both ways, one of these rolypoly boys, with dimples all over him, pink and white cheeks, and baby-blue eyes. Oh, he's cute, Benny is; but the bashfullest forty-four fat that ever carried a cane, a reg'lar Mr. Shy Ann kind of a duck. He has a lisp when he talks too, and that makes him seem cuter'n ever.

About twice a week he drifts up to the brass gate and says to me, "Thay, thonny, whereth Bob?" Makes my mouth pucker up like I'd been suckin' a lemon, just to hear him. And if he sees one of the girls lookin' sideways at him he'll dodge behind a post.

There he was, though, and there was Mildred pilin' in alongside of him. She didn't give any sign of backin' out, and it was too late for me to hedge; so I ups and does the honors.

"Mr. Benny," says I, "Miss Morgan."

"Oh, I—I thay," splutters Benny, makin' a move to bolt, "perhaph I'd better——"

"Forget it!" says I, slammin' the door. "Ding, ding, Louie! Get a move on! If you don't fetch back here by five-thirt' you lose your job. See?"

Frenchy didn't need any urgin', though, and he has the wheels goin' round in no time at all. I watched the car for a couple of blocks and didn't see anything of Benny jumpin' out of the window; so I reckons that he's too scared to make the break. I had a picture of him, squeezin' himself up against the side of the tonneau, lookin' at his thumbs, and turnin' all kinds of colors.

"If it don't give him apoplexy, maybe it'll do him good," thinks I.

It was funny while it lasted; but when I thinks of what Mr. Robert'll say when the tale is doped out to him. I has a chill. First off I thought I'd go up and write out my resignation; but then I remembers how long it is since I've had the sport of bein' fired, and I makes up my mind to see the thing through.

I was lookin' to be called up on the carpet first thing next mornin', but it don't come. Mr. Robert never says a word all day long, nor the next, and by that time the thing was gettin' on my nerves. Then Benny bobs up, as usual. I has my eye peeled from the minute he opens the door. He don't look warlike or anything; but you never can tell about these fat men, so when he hits the gate I dodges behind the water cooler.

"Wha—w'ath the matter, thonny?" says he.

"G'wan!" says I.

"Ithn't Bob in?" says he.

"Go on in and tell Mr. Robert, if you want to," says I; "but don't look for any openin' to sit on me. No pancake act for mine!"

He just grins at that; but goes on into the office without makin' a single pass at me. Course, I was sure the riot act was due inside of an hour. But never a word. Nor Mildred don't have anything to say, either. It was like waitin' for a blast that don't go off.

Things went on that way for a couple of weeks, and I was forgettin' about it, when Piddie tells me one mornin' that Mildred's up and quit and nobody knows why. About an hour after that Mr. Robert sends for me.

"Torchy," says he, "I'm tracing out a mystery, and as you seem to know about everything that's going on, I'm going to ask you to help me out."

"Ah, say," says I, "w'at's the use stringin' out the agony? Benny's squealed, ain't he?"

"No," says Mr. Robert. "That's the point. Benny hasn't. All I've been able to get out of him is that a short time ago he met a very charming young woman—in my car."

"That's right," says I. "It was me put her in."

"Ah!" says Mr. Robert. "Now we're getting somewhere."

"Oh, you've hit the trail," says I.

"Well," says he, "who was she?"

"Why," says I, "the Lady Mildred."

"Whe-e-e-ew!" says Mr. Robert, through his front teeth. "Not the one that spells such with a T?"

"Ah, chee!" says I. "What's the odds how she spells, so long as she's got Lillian Russell in the back row? I didn't know your fat friend was in the car, anyway, and I thinks Frenchy might as well be cartin' her home in the rain as blockin' traffic on some side street. So I just loads her in and gives Louie the word. She never knew but what you had sense enough to do it yourself. Course, it was a fresh play for me to make; but I'll stand for it, and if Benny's feelin's was hurt, or yours was, you got an elegant show to take it out on me. Come on! Get out the can and the string!"

But you can't hustle Mr. Robert along that way. When he gets his programme laid out there ain't

any use to try any broad jumps. He wants to know all about Mildred, who she is, where she comes from, and what's her class.

"You can take it from me," says I, "that she's a star. She's been up in the top bunch too, I guess; anyone can see that. But so long as she's jumped the job, where's the sense in lookin' up her pedigree now?"

"Well," says Mr. Robert, "I am still more or less interested. You see, she and Benny are to be married next month."

"Honest?" says I.

"I have it from Benny himself," says he.

"Did Benny tell you how he worked up the nerve to make such a swift job of it?" says I.

He hadn't. Near as I could make out, Benny hadn't told much of anything.

"Well," says I, "he's picked a winner, ain't he?"

"That," says Mr. Robert, "is something I mean to find out."

And say, if you ever see that jaw of Mr. Robert's, you'll know he did. And she wa'n't an Astor or a Gould in disguise. She was just plain Miss Morgan, that had come on with her mother from Kansas City, or Omaha, or somewhere out there; put in six or eight months in a swell dressmaker's shop; learned how to make herself the kind of clothes that look like ready money; shuffled off her corn-belt accent; and then broke into the typewritin' game while she waited for somethin' better to turn up.

"And Benny was it, wa'n't he?" says I to Mr. Robert.

"With your help, Torchy," says he, "it appears that he was."

"Well," says I, "he needed the push, all right, didn't he!"

Fired? Me? Ah, quit your kiddin'! Why, they're tickled to death now, all of 'em. They're beginnin' to find out that Mildred's quite a girl, even if she ain't got a lot of fat-wad folks back of her.

And say, w'atcher think! Benny comes around here the other day wearin' a broad grin, lugs me out to his tailor's to have me taped for a whole outfit of glad rags, and says I've got to be one of the ushers at the weddin'. Wouldn't that sting you?

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CHAPTER VI

SHUNTING BROTHER BILL

Don't talk to me about weddin's! Sure, I've been mixed up in one. Maybe there was orange blossoms and so on; but all that's handed me is a bunch of lemon buds. Not that I'm carryin' any grouch. I might have known better'n to butt into any such doin's. Long as I stick to bein' head office boy, I knows who's what, and what's which, and anyone that thinks they can give me the double cross is welcome to a try; but when it comes to sittin' in at a wilt-thou fest I'm a reg'lar Cousin Zeke from the red-mitten belt.

Maybe I wouldn't have done so bad, though, if it hadn't been for Aunt Laura. And say, mark it up on the bulletin right here, she ain't my aunt! She's Benny's. I was tellin' you how I loaded Mildred, our lady typewriter that was, into Mr. Robert's car alongside of Bashful Benny, and what came of it, wa'n't I! And how Benny's so grateful that he says I've got to be one of the ushers?

Well, it was all goin' lovely, and the gen'ral office force has chipped in and bought 'em a swell weddin' present, and Benny's tailor has built me a pair of striped pants and a John Drew coat, and Mr. Mallory's been coachin' me how to act when I chase the folks into their seats, and Piddie's been loadin' me up with polite conversation to fire off whenever I gets a show, and everything's as gay around the shop as though the directors had voted an extra dividend—when I'm stacked up against Aunt Laura and it begins to cloud in the west.

Aunt Laura is all Benny can show up for a fam'ly, and after you got to know her you couldn't blame him for wantin' to start in on a new deal. She's one of them narrow-eyed old girls that can look through a keyhole without turnin' her head, and can dig up more suspicions in a minute than most folks would in a month. I'll bet if the angel Gabriel should show up and send in his card she'd make him prove who he was by playin' the horn.

It was a cinch she didn't mistake me for no angel, when Mr. Robert sends me up there to do an errand for Benny. I wa'n't callin' for no aunts, anyway, but just leavin' a note for Wilson—that's Benny's man—when this sharp-nosed old party comes rubberin' into the front hall.

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"Marie," says she to the girl, "what boy is this? Where did he come from? Who does he want to see? Don't you dare leave him alone for a minute!"

That last touch gets me in the short ribs. "Ah, say," says I, "do I look like a hallrack artist?"

"That'll do, young man!" says she. "You may not be as bad as you look; but I have my doubts."

"Same to you, ma'am, and many of 'em," says I.

"Mercy!" says she. "What impertinence!"

"Please, ma'am," says the girl, "Mr. Ellins sent him up, and I——"

"Oh!" says the old one. Then she gives me another look. "Boy," says she, "what's your name!"

"Torehy," says I. "Ain't it a snug fit?"

"Oh!" says she again, and with the soft pedal on. "You're Torchy, are you?"

"There ain't any gettin' away from a name like that," says I.

"Why," says she, doin' her best to call up a smile, "what a bright young man you are!"

"Specially on top," says I, throwin' a wink at Marie.

"Ye-es," says Aunt Laura, "I always did think that copper-red shade of hair was real pretty. Come right in, Torchy, while Marie gets you some cake and a cup of tea."

"I ain't turnin' the shoulder to any cake," says I; "but you can cut out the tea."

Well, say, inside of three minutes from the start I'm planted comf'table in one of the libr'y chairs, eatin' frosted cake with both hands, while Marie's off hustlin' up lemonade and fancy crackers.

Course, it was somethin' of a shock, such a quick shift as that. I ain't got a glimmer as to what Aunt Laura's end of the game was; but so long as the home-made pastry holds out I was as good as nailed to the spot. She seems to get a heap of satisfaction watchin' me eat, almost as much as though she was feedin' ground glass to her best enemy. You've seen that kind, that you can stand well enough until they begin to grin at you. Aunt Laura's bluff at smilin' was enough to make a cat get its back up, and you could tell she didn't really mean it, as well as if she'd said, "Now I'm goin' to give you an imitation of somebody that's pleased."

And all the time she was dealin' out a line of talk that was as smooth as wet asphalt. Most of it was hot air that she said Benny'd been givin' to her about me, and how sweet Mildred thought I was.

That should have been my cue; but I was too busy with the cake.

"Miss Morgan is such a dear girl, isn't she?" says Aunt Laura.

"Uh-huh," says I, pokin' in some frostin' that had lodged on the outside.

"You are quite well acquainted with her, aren't you?" says she.

"Um-m-m-m," says I.

"Let's see," goes on Aunt Laura, "what is it she did at the office!"

"Chickety-click, ding-g-g!" says I, makin' motions with my fingers.

"Oh, typewriting!" says she. "But I suppose she was very skillful at it?"

"Oh, she was a bird!" says I.

See what was happenin'? I was bein' pumped. It was more'n that too. Everything I knew about Mildred, and a lot I guessed at, was emptied out of me like she was usin' one of these vacuum cleaners on my head. When I gets to telling about the place out West where Mildred lived before she and her maw hit New York, Aunt Laura jumps up.

"Oh, I know some people who lived there once," says she. "I wonder if any of them knew Miss Morgan?"

With that she picks up the desk 'phone and gives a call. Did they know any Miss Morgans out there? Yes, Mildred Morgan. Really! A brother too? How interesting! Who was he, and what was he doing last? What! In the State penitentiary! That was enough for Aunt Laura. She hangs up the receiver and says to me:

"Boy, when you get back to the office tell Mr. Robert I want to see him. Come, you'd better be going now."

It was a case of "Here's your hat—what's your hurry!"

"Say," says I, "don't you go to swallowin' any tale about the Lady Mildred havin' a brother that's a crook. There's lots of Morgans besides her and J. P."

But all Aunt Laura does is hold the door open for me; so I beats it, feelin' about as chipper as

though I'd been turnin' State's evidence. The more I thinks of it, the cheaper I feels. Here I'd been playin' myself for Mr. Foxy Cute, and had let an old lemon squeezer like Aunt Laura wring me dry!

Just what she's got up her sleeve about the penitentiary business, I didn't know; but I wa'n't long in findin' out. Next day there was all kinds of a row. Aunt Laura has looked up the invitation list for the weddin', and, sure enough, among the also rans was a Mr. William Morgan, with a State penitentiary address. With that, and what she'd heard over the 'phone, Aunt Laura makes out a strong case. Was she goin' to stand by and see her only nephew marry into a family of jailbirds? Not if she could help it! So she calls in Mr. Robert and puts the layout before him.

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It looks like a bad mess, with Mildred on the toboggan; for Mr. Robert has said he'd see what could be done. He don't promise anything; but Benny's always been such a willin' performer that he guesses maybe he can talk him out of wantin' to get married. He didn't know Benny, though. These short, fat, dimpled boys are just the ones to fool you, and when it came to tellin' Benny about Brother Bill, that was doin' time, Benny works his lips at high speed sayin' that he don't believe it.

"Anyway," says Benny, "it ithn't Bill I'm marrying. I don't give a cuth for him. I'd juth ath thoon marry Mildred if her whole doothed family wath in jail."

"That settles it, Benny," says Mr. Robert. "If that's the way you feel. I'll stand by you."

Maybe Aunt Laura wa'n't wild, though, when she finds she can't block the game. I was handlin' the office switchboard the afternoon she calls Mr. Robert up to give him the rake-over, and the old girl warms up the wires until she near has the lightnin' arresters out of business. It comes out too that she's sore on Benny's bein' married because she sees the finish of her steady job as boss of the house on the avenue. She can't queer Mr. Robert though.

90

"Benny seems to have a clear idea as to just whom he wants to marry," says he, "and that's enough for me. If Miss Morgan has a brother in the penitentiary, and Benny doesn't mind, I'm sure I don't. I've known lots of fellows who wished their brothers-in-law were in the same place. Anyway, he'll not trouble us by showing up at the wedding, even if she did send him an invitation."

That's the kind of a sport Mr. Robert is. He's dead game, and when you've got him for a friend you'll know who to send for if you should ever get run in. So we goes along gettin' ready for the weddin' same's if nothin's happened. It's billed for a church hitch; but there ain't been any advertisin' done, so they don't expect any crowd. Look when they has it too—right at lunch time!

"Chee!" says I to Mr. Robert, who's running the thing, "you must be playin' for a frost. Now if you'd hire one of them Third-ave. halls and band, you might give 'em somethin' of a send-off; but it'll be hard to tell this racket from one of these noonday prayin' bees they has down in the wholesale crock'ry district."

Mr. Robert says that Benny bein' so bashful, and Mildred not knowin' many folks on East, they wanted to make it as quiet as they could.

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"It'll have a pantomime show beat to death on quiet," says I. "Put me on the door, will you, so's I can keep awake joshin' the sidewalk cop?"

Mr. Robert says he thinks that'll be a good place for me, as they ain't goin' to let anyone in without a ticket and I'm used to shuntin' cranks. But say, I'm so rattled when I get inside of that suit they sent around for me to wear that I don't know whether I'm goin' up or comin' down. Honest, that coat made me feel like I was wearin' a dress. I didn't mind the striped pants,—they was all to the good,—but them skirts flappin' around my knees was the limit.

Think I had the face to spring that outfit on the folks at the boardin' house? Never in a year! Why, some of them Lizzie girls rangin' the block would have guyed me out of the borough. I just folds the thing inside out over my arm, like it was some one's overcoat I was takin' around to have a button shifted, and when I gets to the church I slides up into the gallery and makes a quick change. Mr. Robert looks me over and says no one would guess it was me.

"I'm hopin' they don't," says I.

But as soon as the carriages begun comin' and I gets busy callin' for the seat checks, I forgets how I looks and stops huntin' for some place to stow my hands. It was a cinch job. There was only a few lady butt-ins that had strayed over from the shoppin' district and smelled out a free show.

92

"We're intimate friends of the bride," says a pair of 'em; "but we've forgotten our tickets."

"That's good, but musty. Butt out, please," says I.

Chee! but I ain't used up so much politeness since I can remember! It was wearin' them clothes did it, I guess.

Well, I was gettin' to feel real gay, for most everyone that was due was inside, and I hadn't made any breaks to speak of, and it was near time for the Lady Mildred to be floatin' in, when I pipes off a tall, husky-lookin' gent, with a funny black lid and an umbrella tucked under one arm, gawpin' up at the sign on the church.

"Tourist from Punk Hollow lookin' for the Flatiron Buildin'," says I to myself; but the next minute he comes meanderin' up the steps, fishin' a card out of his pocket. You can bet I plants myself in the door and calls for credentials!

But, say, he had the goods. There was the ticket, all right, with the name wrote on it, and it didn't need but one squint at the pasteboard for me to break into a cold sweat. It wa'n't anybody else but Mr. William Morgan!

"Say," says I, as hoarse as a huckster, "are you Brother Bill?"

"Why," says he, kind of surprised, but not half so stunned as I thought he'd be,— "why, I suppose I am."

You wouldn't have guessed it. Not that he didn't look the brother part; for he did. He went Mildred two or three inches better in height, and he had snappy black eyes and black hair like hers. The points that goes with a striped suit and the lock step was missin', though. But how you goin' to tell, in these times when our toniest fatwads is sittin' around the mahogany votin' to raise the price of chewin' gum to-day, and gettin' a free haircut to-morrow? There wa'n't any time for me to stand there guessin' whether he'd been pardoned, or had slid down the rain pipe. Somethin' had to be done, and done quick.

"Dodge in here and wait a minute," says I. "There's some word been left for you."

With that I sneaks down the side aisle and into the little cloakroom, where Mr. Robert was keepin' Benny's mind off'n what was comin' to him by makin' him count the geranium leaves in the carpet.

"Mr. Robert," says I, luggin' him off to one side, "you want to give up predictin' the future. Bill's come!"

"What Bill?" says he.

"The one from the rock pile, Brother Bill," says I.

"That's lovely!" says he.

"It's all of that," says I.

"I hope he's not wearing his uniform still," says Mr. Robert.

"Not on the outside," says I. "He looks like he'd pinched a minister's Monday suit somewhere. But it ain't the way he looks that's worryin' me; it's what he's liable to do any minute to put the show on the blink."

"That's so, Torchy," says he. "Can't we get him out of the way somehow?"

"It's a tough proposition," says I; "but if you'll put on a sub for me at the door, and give me leave to make any play that I happens to think of, I'll tackle it."

"Good!" says Mr. Robert. "And I'll make it worth a hundred to you to keep him away from here until it's all over."

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

As I skips back I grabs my hat out from under a rear seat and makes straight for Brother Bill. "Come on," says I. "She's waitin' for you now. We've got just half an hour to do it in."

Bill, he looks sort of jarred and reluctant; but I has him by the arm and is chasin' him down the steps before he can ask any dippy questions. First off I thought of runnin' him up the avenue until he's clean winded; but I see by the way he strikes out that it would take more lungs than I've got to do that.

There was a lot of weddin' cabs and such waitin' round the corner, though; so I steers him into the first one that has the apron up, jumps in after him, shoves up the door in the roof, and sings out:

"Beat it! This ain't any dream carnival you're hired for!"

"What number?" says the bone thumper.

For about two shakes I was up against it, and then the only place I could think of was Benny's house; so I give him that, and off we goes.

"But I say, young man," says Brother Bill, "I came on to go to the wedding."

"Sure," says I; "that'll be all right too. Didn't I tell you there was some word left for you?"

"Yes," says he, "I believe you did. Also you said something about her waiting——"

"Right again," says I. "She'll be tickled to death to see you too."

"Yes; but the wedding?" says he.

"That'll be there when we get back—maybe," says I. "You came on kind of unexpected, eh?"

"Yes," says he. "I didn't think I could get away at first; but I managed it."

"How'd you get out?" says I. "Was it a clean quit, or a little vacation?"

"Why—er—why," says he,— "yes, it was a—er—little vacation, as you say."

"Chee!" thinks I. "The nerve of him! Wonder if he sawed the bars, or sneaked out in a packin' case?" But, say, I couldn't put it to him straight. When I gets these bashful fits on I ain't any use.

"How long you been in?" says I.

"In?" says he. "Oh, I see! About five years."

"Honest?" says I.

Then I had another modest spell that won't let me ask him whether he'd been put away for givin' rebates, or grabbin' for graft. I knew it must have been somethin' respectable like that. Anyone could see he wa'n't one of your strong arms or till friskers.

I was just wishin' I knew how to work the force pump like Aunt Laura, when we pulls up at the horse block, and it was up to me to think of some new move.

"She's here, is she?" says Mr. William.

"You bet!" says I, wondering who he thought I meant. And then I gets that funny feelin' I gen'rally has when I takes the high jump. "Come on," says I. "We'll give her a surprise." 97

It wa'n't anything else. I knew she'd be to home, 'cause I'd heard she was too grouchy to go to the weddin' or have anything to do with it; so when Marie let us in I throws a tall bluff and says for her to tell Aunt Laura I've brought some one she wants to see very partic'lar.

"Why," says Mr. Morgan, "there's been some mistake, hasn't there! I know no such person. Why should she wish to see me?"

"Sh-h-h-h!" says I. "Maybe she'll feed you frosted cake. It's one of her tricks."

She didn't, though. She looked about as smilin' as a dill pickle when she showed up, and she opened the ball by askin' what I meant, bringin' strangers there.

"Well," says I, "you've been askin' a lot about him lately; so I thought I'd lug him around. This is Brother Bill."

"What!" says she, squealin' it out like I'd said the house was afire. "Not the brother of that—that Morgan girl?"

"Ask him," says I. "You're a star at that."

Then I takes a peek at Bill. And say, I was almost sorry I'd done it. For a party that'd just broke jail, he could stand the least I ever saw. He looks as mixed up and helpless as a lady that's took a seat in the smokin' car by mistake. I'd have helped him out then if I could have thought how. It was too late, though, and Aunt Laura was no quitter. 98

"How long is it," says she, jerkin' her head back and throwin' a look out of her narrow eyes that must have gone clear through him, "since you got out of the State penitentiary?"

"Why—why—er—er——" begins Brother Bill.

Then he has the biggest stroke of luck that ever came his way; for Marie pushes in with the silver plate and a card on it.

"Thank goodness!" says Aunt Laura, lookin' at the card. "The very person I need! Ask Dr. Wackhorn to step in here."

I thought he must be a germ chaser; but it was just a minister, a solid, prosperous lookin' old gent, with white billboards and a meat safe on him like a ten-dollar Teddy bear. He looks at Brother Bill, and Bill looks at him.

"Why, my dear William!" sings out the Doc, rushin' over with the glad hand out.

In two minutes it's all over. Dr. Wackhorn has introduced Bill as his ex-assistant, who's gone West and got himself a job as chaplain in a State prison, and Aunt Laura loses her breath tryin' to apologize to both of 'em at once. Think of that! We'd been playin' him for all kinds of a crook, and here he was a sure enough minister! 99

Well, I gets him back to the church just in time for the last curtain, so he can see what a stunner Mildred was in her canopy-top outfit. He's all right, Brother Bill is. Never gives me any call-down for shuntin' him off the way I did and makin' him miss most of the show. As I says to him afterward:

"Bill," says I, "that was one on me. But we did throw the hook into Aunt Laura some! What?"

CHAPTER VII

KEEPING TABS ON PIDDIE

Say, I thought I knew Piddie. If anybody'd asked me to pick a party for the Honest John act from among the crowd we got around the Corrugated Trust here, I'd made J. Hemmingway Piddie my one best bet. He's been with the concern ever since Old Hickory Ellins flim-flammed his partners out of their share of the business and took out a New Jersey chartered permit that allowed him to practice grand larceny.

If Piddie hadn't been a pinhead, he'd had his name on the board of directors years ago. But there ain't no use tryin' to make parlor comp'ny out of kitchen help; so Piddie's just trailed along, bein' as useful as he knew how, and workin' up from ten a week to one fifty a month, just as satisfied as if he was gettin' his per cent. of the profits.

What he does around the shop wouldn't turn anyone gray-headed; but he makes the most of it. He swells up more over orderin' a few office supplies than Mr. Robert would about signin' a million-dollar contract, and the way he keeps watch of the towels and soap and spring water you'd think our stock was fallin' below par, 'stead of payin' nine per cent, on common. Gen'rally Piddie don't handle anything but petty cash; but once in awhile, when no one else is handy, they chuck something big his way, and he never lets up until everyone knows all about it. You can tell how chesty he feels, just by his strut.

101

Well, there'd been a big rush on, and they was usin' Piddie more or less frequent, so I was gettin' used to his makin' a noise like a balloon, when one mornin' he come turkeyin' out to the brass gate and says to me:

"Torchy, call up 0079 Broad and get the opening on Blitzen."

"Sure," says I. "And if it touches seven-eighths don't you want to unload a couple of thousand shares?"

"When I have any further orders," says he, puffin' out his face, "you will get them!"

"Oh, slush!" says I. "Don't play so rough, Piddie."

I was onto him, all right. I've seen these hot-air plungers before. They follow up a stock for weeks, and buy and sell in six figures, and reckon up how they've hit the market for great chunks—but it's all under their lids. You can't spend pipe dreams, if you win; and if you lose, it don't shrink the size of your really truly roll. It's almost as satisfyin' as walkin' by the back door of a bakery when you're hungry. That kind of game is about Piddie's size, too. All it calls for is plenty of imagination, and he's got that by the bale. I was kind of glad to see him enjoyin' himself so innocent, and now and then I'd help along the excitement.

102

"Heard about how Morgan's tryin' to get hold of Blitzen?" I'd say, and Piddie would prick up his ears like a fox-terrier sightin' a rat.

"Who told you?" Piddie'd ask.

"Why," I'd say, "I got it straight from a delicatessen man that lives on the same block with a man that runs a hot dog cart in John-st. Don't want anything closer'n that, do you!"

Then Piddie'd look kind of foolish, and go off and call down some one good and hard, just to relieve his feelin's.

First thing I knew, though, Piddie was havin' star-chamber sessions with a seedy-lookin' piker that wore an actor's overcoat and a brunette collar that looked like it had been wished onto his neck about last Thanksgivin'. They'd get together in a corner of the reception room and whisper away for half an hour on a stretch. If it hadn't been Piddie, I'd put it down for a hard-luck tale with a swift touch for a curtain; but no one that ever took a second look at Piddie would ever waste their time tryin' a touch on him. So I guessed the gent was a bucketshop tout who was tryin' to interest Piddie in some kind of a deal.

103

Still, I couldn't get any picture of Piddie takin' a chance with real money. It wa'n't until I seen him walkin' around stary-eyed one day, and gettin' nervous by the minute, that I could believe he's really been rung in. He was goin' through all the motions, though, of a man that's shoved everything, win or lose, on the red, and it was a circus to keep tabs on him. He makes a bluff at bein' awful busy with the billbook; but he couldn't stay at the desk more'n three minutes at a spell. Inside of an hour I counted four times that he washed his hands and six drinks of water that he had.

"You'll be damp enough to need wringin' out, if you keep that up," says I.

"Keep what up?" says he. Honest, he was so rattled he didn't know whether he was usin' the roller towel or runnin' over the ticker tape. Half an hour before lunchtime he skips out and leaves word with me that maybe he'll be back late.

"All right," says I. "If the boss calls for you I'll tell him he'll have to shut down the shop until you blow in again."

Maybe you've seen symptoms like that in a hired man. It gen'rally means that there's somethin' doin' in ponies or margins, and that next payday is goin' to seem a long ways off. If I'd been asked to give a guess, I should have put it as about two hundred bucks that Piddie had thrown into the market. Anyway, it wa'n't enough to knock the props out of call-money quotations; so I was lettin' Piddie do all the worryin'.

104

He didn't show back at twelve-thirty, nor at twelve-forty-five. Some one else did, though. She was a nice little lady, one of the smooth-haired, big-eyed kind, as soft talkin' and as gentle actin' as the heroine in "No Weddin' Cake for Her'n," just before she gets to the weepy scenes. You could see by the punky mill'nery and the last season's drygoods that she'd just drifted in from Mortgagehurst, New Jersey. The little snoozer she has by the hand was a cute one, though. When he gets a glimpse of my sunset top piece he sings out:

"O-o-o-o, mama! Burny, burn!"

"Why, Hemmingway!" says she. "I am surprised. Naughty, naughty!"

"Don't worry, lady," says I. "The kid's got it dead right—it's one of them kind."

Then I wets my finger and shows him how it'll go "S-z-z!" when I touch it off. That gets a laugh out of little Hemmingway, and in a minute we're all good friends.

She's Mrs. Piddie, of course, and she's a brick. Say, how is it these two-by-fours can pull out such good ones so often? Why, if she'd been got up accordin' to this year's models, and could have thrown the front she ought to, she'd have been fit for a first-tier box at the grand op'ra.

105

"Chee!" thinks I. "Did she pick Piddie in the dark?"

She'd come in to drag him out shoppin' and hypnotize him into loosenin' up. It was a case of gettin' things for little Hemmingway.

"Me, I go have new s'oes, an' new coat wif pockets too," says he.

Say, they wins me, kids like that do. There's some I ain't got any use for, the kind brought up in hotels and boardin' houses that learn to play to the gallery before they can feed themselves, and others I could name; but clean, grinnin' youngsters, with big eyes that take in everything, they're good to have around. And, little Hemmy was a star. I got so int'rested showin' him things in the office that I clean forgot about Piddie and what he was up to.

"He will be back soon, won't he?" says Mrs. Piddie.

Now if you give me time I can slick up an answer so it'll sound like the truth and mean something else; but as an offhand liar I'm a frost. Somehow I always has to swaller somethin' before I can push out a cold dope. Course, I knew he'd got to be back before long; but I see right off that this wa'n't any day for a fam'ly reunion. Piddle wa'n't goin' to be any too sociable by dinner time that night, 'less'n he'd hit up the bucketshop, which the chances was against. So it was my turn to make a foxy play.

106

"He's due here before long, that's a fact," says I, "but there's no tellin'. You see, there's a big deal on, and Mr. Piddie's gone downtown, and——"

"Oh!" says Mrs. Piddle, her eyes shinin'. "Then he has some important business engagement?"

You couldn't help seein' how she had it framed up,—the whole Corrugated Trust and half of Wall Street holdin' its breath while hubby, J. Hemmingway Piddie, Esq., worked his giant intellect for the good of the country.

"That's it," says I. "I couldn't say pos'tive that he'd be as late as four o'clock; but——"

"Oh! then we'll not wait," says she, "Come, Hemmingway, we must go home."

"Don't I det my new s'oes?" says Hemmy.

There was a proposition for you! The kid was runnin' true to form and stickin' to the main line. No side issues for him! Pop might be a big man, and all that; but his size didn't cut much ice alongside of the new-shoes prospect. Things was beginnin' to look squally, and Mrs. Piddie's mouth corners was saggin' some, when I has a thought.

107

"Hold on," says I. "Maybe he's left a note or something for you."

See what it is to have a little wad stowed away in the southwest corner of your jeans? I slips through into the main office, gets one of the typewriter girls to address an envelope to Mrs. Piddie, jams a sawbuck into it, and comes out smilin'.

"Maybe this'll do as well as Pop himself," says I. "Feels like it had long green in it," and the last I heard of little Hemmy he was tellin' the elevator man about the "new s'oes" that was comin' to him.

"It's a fool way to lend out coin," thinks I; "but what's the diff? That kid's got his hopes set on bein' shod to-day, and Piddie's bound to make good sometime."

Piddie didn't look it, though, when he drifts in about one-thirty. If he'd had a load on his mind earlier in the day, he'd got somethin' more now. Just sittin' at the desk doin' nothin made the dew come out on his noble brow like it was the middle of August. He was too much of a wreck to stand any joshin'; so I let him alone, not even tellin' him about the fam'ly visit.

The first thing I knows he comes over to me, his jaw set firmer'n I ever see it shut before, and a kind of shifty look in his eyes. He hands me a letter and a package.

108

"Torchy," says he, "take these down to that address just as soon as you can. You've got to go quick. Understand?"

"Fourth speed, advanced spark, that's me!" says I, grabbin' my hat and coat. "Free track for the Piddie special! Honk, honk!" and I jams him up against the letterpress as I makes a rush for the door.

When I gets into the subway I sizes up the stuff I'm carryin'. Well say, it ain't often I gets real curious; but this was one of them times. I started in by rollin' a pencil under the envelope flap while the gum was moist. Not that I'd made up my mind to rubber; but just so's I could if I took the notion. And, sure enough, I got the notion, or it got me.

Chee! I near slid off the rattan seat when I reads that note. Guess I must have sat there, starin' bug-eyed and lookin' batty, from 14th to Wall. Do you know what that mush-head of a Piddie was at? He was givin' an order to bolster up Blitzen by buyin' up to a hundred thousand shares, and in the package was a bunch of gilt-edged securities to cover the margins.

Now wouldn't that jiggle the grapes on sister's new lid? Piddie, a narrow-gauge, dime-pinchin' ink-slinger, doin' the bull act like he was a sooty plute from Pittsburg! That's what comes of swallowin' the get-rich-fast bug.

109

Well, when I gets out at the Street I didn't have any programme planned. First I strolls down to the number on the letter and takes a look at the buildin'. That was enough. There was some good names on the hall directory; but most of 'em was little, two-room, fly-by-night firms, with a party 'phone for a private wire and a mail-order list bought off'm patent medicine concerns. The people Piddie was doin' business with was that kind.

Next I takes a walk around into Broad-st., where the mounted cops keep the big-wind bunch roped in so's they can't break loose and pinch the doorknobs off the Subtreasury. The ear-muff brigade was lettin' themselves out in fine style, tradin' in Ground Hog bonds, Hoboken gas, Moonshine preferred, and a whole lot of other ten-cent shares, as earnest as if they was under cover and biddin' on Standard Oil firsts.

While I was lookin' 'em over, wonderin' what to do next, I spots Abey Winowski on the fringe of the push. And say, it wa'n't so long ago that Abey was wearin' sky-blue pants and a Postal shield, trottin' out with messages from District Ten. But here he is, with a checked ulster and a five-dollar hat, writin' figures on a pad.

110

"Hello, Motzie!" says I. "How long since they lets the likes of you inside the ropes?"

"Hello, Torchy!" says he. "Got any orders?"

"I'm lined with 'em," says I. "What's good?"

"Blitzen," says he. "It's on the seesaw; but'll fetch fifty."

"Ain't it a wildcat?" says I.

"Just from the menagerie," says he. "Goin' to take a dollar flyer?"

"Guess I'll see what my brokers has to say first," says I.

With that I goes around to a little joint I knows of, where they has a board for unlisted stocks, and I sets back and watches the curves Blitzen was makin'. First she'd jump four or five points, and then she'd settle back heavy. The Curb was playin' tag with it; that was all, so far as I could see. Nice lot of Hungry Jakes to feed with int'rest-bearin' securities!

About fifteen minutes before the market closed I quit and moseyed along uptown, just killin' time and tryin' to figure out what ought to be done. Course, I didn't have any idea of playin' private detective and showin' Piddie up to Mr. Robert,—that's out of my line,—but I didn't like the scheme of just chuckin' the bonds back at him and let him get away with any bluff about my interferin' with something I didn't understand at all. Besides, if the returns showed that he'd have won on the deal, what was to hinder his tryin' the same trick again next time he got the chance? That wouldn't been a fair shake for the firm.

111

Say, I worked my thinker overtime that trip; but I couldn't dig up a thing that was worth savin' from the scrap basket, and when I strolled into the office just about closin' time I wa'n't any nearer to knowin' what to do than when I started.

Most everyone had left when I pushes through the gate and takes a peek into Piddie's office. He was there. And, say, for a speakin' likeness of a dropped egg that's hit the floor instead of the toast, he was it! He's slumped all over the desk, with his head in his hands, and his hair all mussed up, and his shoulders lopped. I always suspicioned he was built out with pneumatic pads, and blew himself up in the mornin' before he buttoned on the four-inch collar that kept his

chin up; but I didn't guess he had a rubber backbone. It was a case of fush with Piddie. He was all in. What I could see of his face had about as much color to it as a sheet of blottin' paper.

Layin' on the floor was a map of the whole disaster. It was a Wall Street extra, with a scarehead story of how Blitzen had kept 'em guessin' all day and then, in the last quarter of an hour of tradin', had gone bumpin' the bumps from twenty-eight down to almost nothin' at all. I didn't stop to read the whole thing; but I read enough to find out that Blitzen had gone soarin' on a false alarm, and that when the facts was give out right the balloon had took fire. And there was Piddie, still fallin'!

"Hello," says I. "You look like a boned ham that's in need of the acid bath and sawdust stuffin'. What's queered you so sudden?"

He jumps and tries to pull himself together when he first hears me; but after he finds who it is he goes to pieces again and flops back in the chair groanin'.

"Is it new mown hay of the lungs, or too many griddle cakes on the stomach?" says I.

But he only gasps and groans some more. Maybe I should of felt sorry for him; but, knowin' the sort of sprung kneed near crook he was, I didn't. He was scared mostly, and he was doin' all the sympathizin' for himself that was needed. All of a sudden he braces up and looks at his watch.

"Perhaps you didn't get there in time?" says he.

"With the letter and package?" says I. "Watcher take me for? Think I got mucilage on my shoes? I was there on time, all right."

"Oh, mercy!" says he. "Torchy, I'm a ruined man."

"You look it," says I; "but cheer up. You never was much account anyway; so there's no great harm done."

Then he begins to blubber, and leak brine, and take on like a woman with a sick headache. "It wasn't my fault," says he. "I was led into it. Torchy, tell them I was led into it! You'll believe that, won't you?"

"Cert," says I. "I'll make affidavit I seen 'em snap the ring in your nose. But what's it all about?"

"Oh, it's something awful that's happened to me," he wails. "It's too terrible to talk about. You'll know to-morrow. I sha'n't be alive then, Torchy."

"Ain't swallowed a buttonhook, have you?" says I.

Next he begins throwin' a fit about what's goin' to become of the missus and the kid. Say, I've been in at two or three acts like this before, and I gen'rally notice that at about such a stage they play that card, the wife and kid. Your real tough citizen don't, nor your real gent,—they shuts their mouths and takes what's comin' to 'em,—but Mr. Weakback has a sudden rush of mem'ry about the folks at home, and squeals like a pup with his tail shut in the door.

"Ah, say," says I, "cut it out! You ought to move up to Harlem and learn to pound the pipes. You're a healthy plunger, you are, sneakin' bonds out of the safe to stack up against a crooked game, and then playin' the baby act when you lose out! Come now, ain't that the awful thing that's happened to you?"

He couldn't have opened up freer if he'd been put through the third degree. I gets the story of his life then, with a handkerchief accomp'niment,—all about the house he's tryin' to buy through the buildin' loan, and the second-hand bubble he wants to splurge on 'cause the neighbors have got 'em, and how he was tipped off to this sure thing in Blitzen by a party that had always been a friend of his but couldn't get hold of the stuff to turn the trick himself. He put in all the fine points, even to the way he came to have a chance at the safe.

"If I could only put them back!" says he, sighin'.

"What then?" says I. "Next time I s'pose you'd swipe the whole series, wouldn't you?"

If you could have heard him tell how good he'd be you'd think practicin' a little crooked work now and then was the only sure way to learn how to keep straight.

"Piddie," says I, "I don't want to hurt your feelin's, but you act to me like a weak sister. If I was to do what the case calls for, this thing ought to go to the boss."

"Please don't, Torchy! Please don't!" says he, scrabblin' down on his hands and knees.

"Nix on that!" says I. "This is no carpet-layin' bee. I'm no squealer, anyway; besides, I had a little interview with Mrs. Piddie and the kid this noon, and after seein' them I can't rub it in like you deserve. What I've seen and heard I'm goin' to forget. Now sit up straight while I break the news to you gentle. I went down there to-day, just as you told me."

"Yes, I know," he groans, squirmin'.

"But I didn't like the looks of the joint; so I didn't dump the bonds. There they are. Now see they get back where you found 'em!"

Talk about your hallelujah praise meetin's! Piddie was havin' one, all by himself—when the

inside door opens and Mr. Roberts steps out of his office.

"I'll take care of those bonds, Mr. Piddie," says he.

Chee! what a stunner! Mr. Robert had been in there all the time, writin' private letters, and had took in the whole business.

Did he give Piddie the fire on the spot? Nah! Mr. Robert carries around a frigid portico; but he's got a warm spot inside. He says he's mighty sorry to hear how near Piddie'd come to goin' wrong; but he's glad it turned out the way it did, and if Piddie'll say how much they rung him in for on Blitzen he'll be happy to make good right there.

116

And how much do you guess? A pair of double X's! He'd worried himself near sick, worked himself up desp'rate, and had finished by doin' something that stood to get him put away for ten or fifteen years—all for forty bucks!

"Piddie," says I, "for a tinhorn, you're a wonder! But, say, when you get home to-night tell that kid of yours I want to see them new shoes of his before he gets the toes all stubbed out."

CHAPTER VIII

117

A WHIRL WITH KAZEDKY

Chee! W'atcher think? I ain't read an "Old Sleut" for more'n a week, and there's two murder myst'ries runnin' in the sportin' extras that I'm way behind on. You wouldn't guess it in a month, but I'm takin' a fall out of the knowledge game. Mr. Mallory says I'm part in the sixt' grade and part in the eight'.

"I believe it," says I; "my nut feels that way."

Honest, I'm stowin' away so much that I never knew before that I'm thinkin' of wearin' a leather strap around my head, same's these strong boys wears 'em on their wrists.

"Ah! w'at's the use?" says I. "Nobody's ever goin' to ask me what's four per cent of thoity thousand plunks, an' if I had that much I wouldn't farm it out for less'n six, anyway. And I don't see where this De Soto comes in. Sounds like he might have played first base for the Beanies; but he's been dead too long for that. What odds does it make if I don't know the capital of Nevada? I ain't lookin' for no divorce, am I?"

118

But there's no shakin' Mallory off. He's dug up a lot of kid school books for me, and I got 'em stowed away in the desk here, like this was P. S. 46, 'stead of the front office of the Corrugated Trust. And when I ain't takin' cards into the main squeezes, or answerin' fool questions over the 'phone, or chasin' out on errands for Piddie, I'm swallowin' chunks of information about the times when G. Wash. was buildin' forts in Harlem and makin' good for a continuous in front of the Subtreasury.

Course, it's a clean waste of time. Suppose I gets the run next week, could I win another head office boy job by spielin' off a mess of guff about a lot of dead ones? Nit, never! But Mallory's got the bug that it'll all come in handy to me sometime, and I'm doin' it just to keep him satisfied. We get together most every night in his room, and I has to cough up what I've got next to durin' the day. And say, when I've been soldierin', and try to run in a stiff bluff instead of the real goods, he looks as disappointed as if I'd done something real low down. So gen'rally I hits up the books when there's nothin' else doin'.

Mr. Robert's on. He comes in one mornin' and pipes off the 'rithmetic. "What's this, Torchy?" says he. "Studying?"

"Yep," says I. "When I went through Columbia College there wa'n't anybody there but the janitor; so I'm takin' a postprandial whirl at this number dope, and it's fierce."

119

"Whose idea?" says he.

"Mr. Mallory's," says I. "But I've laid it out flat to him that I draws the line at Greek. I'd never want to talk like them 23d-st. flower peddlers, not in a thousand years!"

Didn't tell you, did I, about Mallory's doin' the skyrocket act? After Mr. Robert gets next to the fact that Mallory's a two seasons' old football hero from his old college he yanks him out of that twelve-dollar-a-week filin' job and makes him a salaried gent, inside of two days.

"Which is something I owe chiefly to you, Torchy," says Mallory.

"Honk, honk!" says I. "Them's the kind of ideas that will get you run in for reckless thinkin'. You was winnin' all that when you did that sprint for goal your friend Dicky was tellin' about the other day. Now all you got to do is get up on your toes and make one or two touchdowns for old

Corrugated."

"I know," says he; "but I'm afraid that in this game I'm outclassed."

Honest, he was scared stiff; but he didn't let anyone but me see it. Even a little thing like goin' down to Wall Street and lookin' up some securities gets him rattled. He hadn't been gone more'n an' hour 'fore he calls me up on the 'phone and says some broker's clerk has asked him if our concern don't want to bid on P. O. privileges at seven-eighths. "What are P. O. privileges?" says Mallory.

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"Oh, tush!" says I. "And you let 'em hand you such a burry one? P. O. privileges is the right to lick stamps at the gen'ral post-office, and it's a gag them curb shysters has wore to a frazzle. You go back and tell that fresh paper-chewer we're only buyin' options on July snow removals preferred."

That's what comes of foolin' around at college. Mallory comes back lookin' like some one had sold him a billboard seat to a free window show.

But that was nothin' to the down-and-out slump I found him in next night, when I goes around for my writin' lesson and so on.

"Is it the *spino comeandgetus*," says I, "or has Miss Tuttifrutti sent back your Christmas card?"

"It's worse than either," says he, with his chin on the top button of his vest. "I guess I'm what you would call a false alarm, Torchy. I've been tried out and haven't made good."

"G'wan!" says I. "Everyone gets a lemon now and then. Some tries to swallow it whole, and chokes to death; others mixes 'em up with eggs and things, and knocks out a pie, with meringue on top. Draw us a map of how you fell off the scaffold."

121

Well, I jollied the hard luck tale out of him. It was a case of sendin' a boy with a pushcart to bring home a grand piano. The Old Man had done it. He's kind of sore on the way Mr. Robert lugged Mallory in by the hair, 'cause I heard him growlin' somethin' about makin' a kindergarten out of the Corrugated; so he springs this on him. He calls for Mallory and tells him there's a Russian gent down to the Waldorf that's come over to place a big Gover'nment contract.

"We've got to have a slice of that," says he. "Just you run down and get it for us." Like that, offhand, as if it was somethin' you could do anytime between lunch and one-thirty.

Near as I could make out, Mallory goes for it in his polite, standoff, after-you way, and the closest he gets to Russky is a minute with a cocky secretary that says his Excellency is very sorry, but he'll be too busy to see him this trip—maybe next time, about 1912, he'll have an hour off.

"And then you backs up the alley?" says I.

"There was nothing else for me to do," says Mallory. "He went off without giving me another chance."

"Say," says I, "if I had all your parlor manners, I'd organize an English holdin' comp'ny for 'em, so's not to be jacked up for bein' a monopoly. Why didn't you give him the low tackle and sit on his head until he promised to behave? Was that the only try you made?"

122

"No, I sent up my card twice after that," says he, "and it came back. So I've flunked. I think I'd better go down in the morning and resign."

Now wouldn't that rust you?

"Then here goes the books," says I, chuckin' 'em into the corner. "If doin' the knowledge stunt leaves you with a backbone like a piece of boiled spaghetti, I'm through."

That makes Mallory sit up as if I'd jabbed him with a pin. "Do I seem that way to you?" says he.

"You don't think you're givin' any weight-liftin' exhibition, do you?" says I.

He lets that trickle through for a minute or so, and then he comes back to life. "Torchy," says he, "you're right. I'm acting like a quitter. But I don't mean to let go just yet. Hanged if I don't try to see that man to-night, now, as quick as I can get down there! He's got to see me, by Jove!"

"There's more sense to that than anything else you've said in a week," says I. "Wish I could be there to hold your hat."

"Why not?" says he. "Come on. I may need fresh inspiration."

"Whatever I gives you'll be fresh, all right," says I; "but if I was you, and was goin' to butt into any Fifth-ave. hotel along about dinner-time, I'd wear the regalia. Yours ain't in on a ticket, is it?"

123

It wa'n't. Mallory had to go clear to the bottom of the trunk after it; but when he'd shook out the wrinkles and got himself inside the view was worth while. After he's blown up his op'ra hat and got out his stick you couldn't tell him from a three times winner.

"Chee!" says I. "You've got Silent Smith tied to a post. If you acts like you look, you don't need me."

He wouldn't have it that way, though. I'd got to go along and be ready to give him any points I thought of. We goes in a cab, too, in over the rubber mats to the carriage door, just like we'd come to hire the royal suite.

"The Baron Kazedky," says Mallory, shovin' his card across at the near plute behind the desk.

Then the cold wave begun comin' our way. Mister Baron was out. Nobody knew where he'd gone. He hadn't left any word. And he didn't receive callers after four P.M., anyway. Mallory was gettin' his breath after stoppin' them body blows, when I pushes in.

"Say, Sir Wally," says I, leanin' over towards the clerk and speakin' confidential, "lemme give you somethin' from the inside. If Kazedky misses seein' Mr. Mallory to-night, you'll be called up to-morrow to hear some Russian language that'll take all the crimp out of that Robert Mantell bang of yours. Now ring up one of them bench-warmers and show us the Baron!"

124

But, say, you might's well try bluffin' your way through the fire lines on a brass trunk check, "You'll find the manager's office two doors to the left, gentlemen," says he.

"Much obliged for nothin'," says I.

Course, there wa'n't any use registerin' a kick. Orders is orders, and we was on the wrong side of the fence. Mallory and I takes a turn through the corridors and past the main dinin'-room, where they keeps an orchestra playin' so's the got-rich-quick folks won't hear each other eat their soup.

We was tryin' to think up a new move. I was for goin' out somewhere and callin' for the Baron over the 'phone; but Mallory's got his jaw set now and says he don't mean to leave until he has some kind of satisfaction. He's kind of slow takin' hold; but when he gets his teeth in he's a stayer.

We knocks around half an hour, and nothin' happens. Then, just as we was pushin' through the mob into the Palm Room I runs into Whitey Buck. You know about Whitey, don't you? Well, you've seen his name printed across the top of the sportin' page that he runs. And say, Whitey's the smooth boy, all right! Him and me used to do some great old joshin' when I was on the Sunday editor's door.

125

"Hello, Whitey!" says I. "Who you been workin' for a swell feed now?"

"That you, Torchy?" says he. "Why, I took your head for an exit light. How's tricks?"

"On the blink," says I. "We're up against a freeze out, Mr. Mallory and me. You know Mallory, don't you?"

"What, Skid Mallory?" says he, takin' another look. "What a pipe! Why, say, old man, I want you the worst way. Got to hash up a full-page sympose knockin' reformed football, and if you'll take off a thousand-word opinion I'll blow you to anything on the bill of fare. Come on in here to a table while we chew it over. Torchy, grab a garçon. Sizzlin' sisters! but I'm glad to root you out, Skid!"

He was all of that; but it didn't mean anything more'n that Whitey sees an easy column comin' his way.

Mr. Mallory wa'n't so glad. "Sorry," says he, "but whatever football reputation I ever had I'm trying to live down."

"What!" says Whitey. "Trying to make folks forget the nerviest quarterback that ever pranced down the turf with eleven men after him? Don't you do it. Besides, you can't. Why, that run of yours through the Reds has been immortalized in a whole library of kid story books, and they're still grinding 'em out!"

126

Mallory turns the color of the candleshades and shakes his head. "You print any such rot as that about me," says he, "and I'll come down and wreck the office. I'm out of all that now, and into something that has opened my eyes to what sort of useless individual I am. Behold, Whitey, one of the unfit!"

Then Whitey wants to know all about it.

"It's nothing much," says Mallory, "only I've been sent out to do business with a Russian Baron, and I'm such a chump I can't even get within speaking distance of him."

"What Baron?" says Whitey. "Not Kazedky?"

"That's the identical one," says Mallory. "Don't happen to know him, do you?"

"I sure do," says Whitey. "Didn't he and I have a heart to heart session when that sporty Russian Prince was over here and got himself pinched at a prizefight? Kazedky was secretary of the legation then, and it was through me he got the story muffled."

"Wish you could find out where he is now," says Mallory.

"Don't have to," says Whitey; "I know. He's up in private dining-room No. 9. Been captured by a gang of Chamber of Commerce men, who are feeding him ruddy duck and terrapin and ten-dollar champagne. He's got a lot of steel contracts up his sleeve, you know, and——"

127

"Yes, I know," says Mallory; "but how can I get to see him?"

"Who are you with?" says Whitey.

"Corrugated Trust," says Mallory.

"Wow!" says Whitey, them skim-milk eyes of his gettin' big. "They wouldn't let you within a mile of him if they knew. But say, suppose I could lug him outside, would I get that football story?"

"You would," says Mallory.

"By to-morrow noon?" says he.

"Before morning, if you'll stay at the office until I get through here," says Mallory.

"Good!" says Whitey. "Come on! I'll snake him out of there if I have to drag him by the collar. But he's a fussy old freak, and I don't guarantee he'll stay more than a minute."

"That's enough," says Mallory. "He can talk French, I suppose?"

"What's the matter with English?" says Whitey. "Now let's see what kind of hot air I'll give him."

Whitey didn't say what it was he thinks up; but he was grinnin' all over his face when he leaves us outside of No. 9 and goes in where the corks was poppin'. It must have been a happy thought, though; for it wa'n't long before he comes out, towin' a dried-up little old runt with a full set of face lambrequins and a gold dog license hung round his neck from a red ribbon. He had his napkin in one hand and half a dinner roll in the other; so it didn't look like he meant to make any long stop. He was actin' kind of dazed, too, like he hadn't got somethin' clear in his mind, and he hung back as if he was expectin' some one to hand out a bomb. But Whitey rushes him right up to Mallory.

128

"Here's the chap, Baron!" says he. "I couldn't let you go back to Russia without shaking hands with the greatest quarterback America ever produced. Mr. Mallory, Baron Kazedky," and then he winks at Mallory, much as to say, "Now jump in!"

And say, Mallory was Johnny on the spot. He grabs Kazedky's flipper like it was a life preserver.

"I—I—really, gentlemen, there's some mistake," says the Baron. "A quarter what, did you say?"

"Oh," says Mallory, "that's some of Mr. Buck's tomfoolery—football term, you know."

"But I am not interested in football," says the Baron, tryin' to back towards the door, "not in the least."

129

"Me either," says Mallory, gettin' a new grip on him. "What I want to talk to you about is steel. Now, I represent the Corrugated Trust, and we——"

Well say, the old man himself couldn't have reeled it off better'n Mallory. Why, he had it as letter perfect as a panhandler does his tale about bein' in the hospital six weeks and havin' four hungry kids at home. I only hears the start of it; for as soon as he got well under way Mallory starts for the other end of the corridor, skatin' the little old Baron along with him like he was a Third-ave. clothing store dummy that was bein' hauled in at closin'-up time.

Whitey didn't even wait for the overture. The minute he hands Kazedky over he fades towards the elevator. There's nothin' for me to do but wait; so I picks out a red velvet chair and camps down on it to watch the promenade. That's what it was, too; for Mallory acts like he'd forgot everything he ever knew except that he's got to talk steel into the Baron. I guess it was steel he was talkin'! Every time he passes me I hear him ringin' in Corrugated, and drop forged, and a lot of things like that.

Mallory has a right-arm hook on Kazedky and is makin' motions with his left hand. Bein' so tall, he has to lean over to pump his speech into the old fellow's ear; but every now and then he gets excited and, 'stead of bendin' himself, he lifts the Baron clear off his feet.

130

About the third lap some of the gents from the private dinin'-room pokes their heads out to see what's happened to the guest of the evenin'. They saw, all right! They must have been suspicious, too; for they were lookin' anxious, and begun signaling him to break away.

The Baron didn't have no time for watchin' signals just then. He was busy tryin' to keep his feet on the floor. First I knew there was a whole gang at the door watchin' 'em, and they was talkin' over makin' a rush for the Baron and rescuin' him, I guess, when Mallory leans him up against the wall, hauls out a pad and a fountain pen, and hands the things to Kazedky. The Baron drapes bis napkin over one arm, stuffs the piece of roll into his mouth, and scribbles off somethin'.

When he's done that Mallory pockets the pad, leads the Baron back to his friends, shakes hands with him, motions to me, and pikes for the elevator. The last glimpse I has of Kazedky, he's bein' pulled into the private dinin'-room, with that half a roll stickin' out of his face like a bung in a beer keg.

131

"Well, Torchy," says Mallory to me, as the car starts down, "I got it!"

"Got what!" says I.

"Why, the contract," says he.

"Chee!" says I. "Is that all? I thought you was pullin' one of his back teeth."

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CHAPTER IX

DOWN THE BUMPS WITH CLIFFY

Say, if you read in the papers to-morrow about how the Chicago Limited was run on a siding and a riot call wired back to the nearest Chief of Police, you needn't do any guessin' as to what's happened. It'll be a cinch that Clifford's gettin' in his fine work; for the last I saw of him he was headed West, and where he is there's trouble.

But you mustn't tear off the notion that Clifford's a Mr. Lush, that goes and gets himself all lit up like a birthday cake and then begins to mix it. That ain't his line. He's one of the camel brand. The nearest he ever gets to red liquor is when he takes bottled grape juice for a spring tonic; but for all that he can keep the cops busier'n any thirsty man I ever saw.

First glimpse I gets of him was when I looks up from the desk and sees him tryin' to find a break in the brass rail. And say, there wa'n't any doubt about his havin' come in from beyond where they make up the milk trains. Not that he wears any R. Glue costume. From the nose pinchers, white tie, and black cutaway I might have sized him up as a cross between a travelin' corn doctor and a returned missionary; but the ear muffs and the umbrella and the black felt lid with the four-inch brim put him in the tourist class. He was one of your skimpy, loose-jointed parties, with a turkey neck that had a lump in front and wa'n't on good terms with the back of his coat collar. Two of his front teeth was set on a bias, givin' him one of these squirrel mouths that keeps you thinkin' he's just goin' to bite into an apple.

133

I watched him a minute or so without sayin' anything, while he was pawin' around for the gate sort of absent minded, and when I thinks it's about time to wake him up I sings out:

"Say, Profess, you're on the right side of the fence now; let it go at that."

"Ah—er—I beg pardon," says he.

"Well," says I, "that's a good start."

"I—er—I beg—" says he.

"You've covered that ground," says I. "Take a new lead."

That seems to rattle him more'n ever. He hangs his umbrella over one arm, peels off a brown woolen mitt, and fishes a card out of his inside pocket. "This is the—ah—Corrugated Trust Building, is it not?" says he.

"It is, yes," says I; "but the place where you cash in your scalper's book ticket is down on the third floor."

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"Oh!" says he. "Thank you very much," and he starts to trot out. He has his hand on the knob, when a new thought comes to him. He tiptoes back to the gate, pries off one of the ear muffs, and leans over real confidential. "I didn't quite understand," says he. "Did you say Cousin Robert's was the third door?"

"Chee!" says I. "Willie, take off the other one, so you can get a good healthy circulation through the belfry."

The words seemed to daze him some; but he tumbled to my motions and unstoppered his south ear.

"Now," says I, "what's this about your Cousin Bob? Where'd you lose him?"

Watcher think, though? I gets it out of him that he's come all the way from Bubble Creek, Michigan, and is lookin' for Mr. Robert Ellins. With that I lets him through, plants him in a chair, and goes in to the boss.

"Say," says I to Mr. Robert, "there's a guy, outside that's just floated in from the breakfast food belt and is callin' for Cousin Robert. Here's his card."

"Why, that must be Clifford!" says he.

"Then it's true, is it, the cousin business?" says I.

"Certainly it is, Torchy," says he. "Why not?"

135

"Oh, nothin'," says I. "I wouldn't have thought it, though."

"It isn't at all necessary," says Mr. Robert. "Bring him in at once."

"I guess I can spare him," says I. Then I goes back and taps Cousin Clifford on the shoulder. "Cliffy," says I, "you're subp@oelig;ned. Push through two doors and then make yourself right to home."

Course anyone's liable to have a freak cousin or so knockin' round in the background, and I s'pose it was a star play of Mr. Robert's, givin' the glad hand to this one; but if I'd found Clifford hangin' on my fam'ly tree I'd have felt like gettin' out the prunin' saw.

Maybe Mr. Robert was a little miffy because I hadn't been a mind reader and played Clifford for a favorite from the start. Anyway, he jumps right in to feature him, lugs him off to the club for lunch, and does the honors joyous, just as though this was something he'd been lookin' forward to for months.

I was beginnin' to think I'd made a wrong guess on Clifford, and the awful thought that maybe for once I'd talked too gay was just tricklin' through my thatch, when we gets our first bulletin. Cliffy was due back to the office about four-thirty, havin' gone off by his lonesome after lunch; but at a quarter of five he don't show up. It was near closin' time when Mr. Robert gets a 'phone call, and by the worried look I knew something was up.

136

"Yes," says he, "this is Robert Ellins. Yes, I know such a person. That's right—Clifford. He's my cousin. No, is that so? Why, there must be some mistake. Oh, there must be! I'll come up and explain. Yes, I'll sign the bail bond."

He didn't have a word to say when he turns around and catches me grinnin'; but grabs his hat and coat and pikes for the green lights.

There wa'n't any call for me to do any rubberin' next day, or ask any questions. It was all in the mornin' papers: how a batty gent who looked like a disguised second story worker had collected a crowd and blocked traffic on Fifth Avenue by standin' on the curb in front of one of the Vanderbilt houses and drawin' plans of it on a pad.

Course, he got run in as a suspect, and I guess Mr. Robert had his troubles showin' the desk sergeant that Clifford wa'n't a Western crook who was layin' pipes for a little jimmy work. Cliffy's architect tale wouldn't have got him off in a month, and if it hadn't been that Mr. Robert taps the front of his head they'd had Clifford down to Mulberry-st. and put his thumb print in the collection.

He was givin' it to 'em straight, though. Architectin' was what Cliffy was aimin' at. He'd been studying that sort of thing out in Michigan, and now he was makin' a tour to see how it was done in other places, meanin' to polish off with a few months abroad. Then, after he'd got himself well soaked in ideas, maybe he'd go back to Bubble Creek, rent an office over the bank, and begin drawin' front elevations of iron foundries and double tenements.

137

That's what comes of havin' rich aunts and uncles in the fam'ly, and duckin' real work while you wait for notice from the Surrogate to come on and take your share. It wa'n't a case of hustle with Clifford. I suspicioned that his bein' an architect was more or less of a fad; but he was makin' the most of it, there was no discountin' that. He'd laid out a week to put in seein' how New York was built, high spots and low, and he went at it like he was workin' by the piece.

Now, say, there ain't no special harm in goin' around town gawpin' at lib'ries and office buildin's and churches. 'Most anyone could have done it without bumpin' into trouble; but not Cliffy. It was wonderful how he dug up ructions—and him the mildest lookin' four-eyed gent ever let loose. And green! Say, what sort of a flag station is Bubble Creek, anyway?

Askin' fool questions was Cliffy's specialty. You see, he'd made out a list of buildin's he thought he wanted to take a look at; but he hadn't stopped to put down the street numbers or anything. And when he wants information does he hunt up a directory or a cop? Oh, no! He holds up anyone that's handy, from a white wings dodgin' trucks in the middle of Madison Square, to a Wall Street broker rushin' from 'Change out to a directors' meetin'. He seems to think anybody he meets knows all about New York, and has time to take him by the hand and lead him right where he wants to go, whether it's the new Custom House down town, or Grant's Tomb up on the drive. Throw downs don't discourage him any, either. Two minutes after he's been told to go chase himself he'll butt right in somewhere else and call for directions.

138

The worst of it was that he couldn't remember what he was told for more'n three minutes on a stretch. We found out these little tricks of Clifford's after he'd been makin' the office his headquarters for a couple of days.

First mornin' we started him out early for the Battery, to size up the Bowling Green Buildin' and the Aquarium. About noon he limps in with his hat all dirt and ashes up and down his back. From the description he gives we figure out that he's been somewhere up on Washington Heights and has got into an argument with a janitor that didn't like being rung up from the basement and asked how far it was to Whitehall-st.

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Well, we fixes him up, writes out all the partic'lars of his route on a card, and gives him a fresh send-off. It wa'n't more'n half an hour afterwards that I was out on an errand, and as I cut through 22d-st. back of the Flatiron I sees a crowd. Course, I pushes in to find out what was holdin' up all the carriages and bubbles that has to switch through there goin' north. Somehow I had a feelin' that it might be Clifford. And it was!

He was in the middle of the ring, hoppin' around lively and wavin' that umbrella of his like a sword. The other party was the pilot of a hansom cab that had climbed down off his perch and was layin' on with his whip.

I hated to disturb that muss; for I had an idea Cliffy was gettin' about what was comin' to him, and the crowd was enjoyin' it to the limit. But I see a couple of traffic cops comin' over from Broadway; so I breaks through, grabs Clifford by the arm, and chases him down the avenue, breathin' some hard but not much hurt.

"Chee!" says I, "but you're a wonder! Was you tryin' to buy an eight-mile cab ride for a quarter?"

"Why, no," says he. "I merely stopped the man to ask him where the nearest subway station was, and before I knew it he became angry. I'm sure I didn't know—"

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"That's the trouble with you, Cliffy," says I, "and if you don't get over it you'll be hurt bad. Where's that card we made out for you?"

"I—I must have lost that," says he.

"What you need is a guide and an accident policy," says I. "Better let me tow you back to the office, and you can talk it over with Mr. Robert."

He was willin'. He'd had enough for one day, anyhow.

By mornin' Mr. Robert has lost some of his joy over Cousin Clifford's visit. Come to find out, he'd never seen him before, and hadn't heard much about him, either. "Torchy," says he, "I shall be rather busy to-day; so I am going to put Cousin Clifford in your care."

"Ah, say!" says I. "Hand me an easier one. I couldn't keep him straight less'n I had him on a rope and led him around."

"Well, do that, then," says he, "anyway you choose. You may take the day off, show him the buildings he wants to see, keep him out of trouble, and don't leave him until you have him safe inside my house to-night. I'll make it right with you."

"Seein' it's you," says I, "I'll give it a whirl. But if Clifford wants to travel around town with me he's got to shake the ear pads."

Mr. Robert says he'll give him his instructions, and all that; but when it came to springin' the programme on Clifford he runs on a snag. Somewhere back of them squirrel teeth and under the soft hat there was a streak of mule. Cliffy balks at the whole business. He's a whole lot obliged, but he really don't care for comp'ny. Goin' around alone and not havin' his thoughts sidetracked by some one taggin' along is what he likes better'n anything else. He's always done it in Bubble Creek and never got into any trouble before—that is, none to speak of. But he'll promise to cut out janitors and cab drivers.

141

As for the ear muffs, he couldn't think of partin' with them. For years he's been puttin' them on the first of December and wearin' 'em until the last of March, and he'd feel lost without 'em, just the same as he would without the umbrella. Yes, he knew it wa'n't common; but that didn't bother him at all.

Right there I gets a new line on Clifford. He's one of these guys that throws a bluff at bein' modest; but when you scratch him deep you gets next to the fact that he's dead sure he's a genius and is anxious to prove it by the way he wears his clothes. There's a lot of that kind that shows themselves off every night at the fifty-cent table d'hôte places; but I never knew any of 'em ever came in from so far west as Bubble Creek.

Mr. Robert wa'n't on, though. He still freezes to the notion that Cousin Clifford's just a well-meanin', corn-fed innocent; so before he turns him loose again he gives him a lot of good advice about not gettin' tangled up with strangers. Cliffy smiles kind of condescendin' and tells Mr. Robert he needn't worry a bit.

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With that off he goes; but every time the telephone rings that forenoon me and Mr. Robert gets nervous. We don't hear a word from him, though, and by three o'clock we're hopin' for the best.

Then Aunt Julie shows up. She's a large, elegant old girl, all got up in Persian lamb and a fur hat with seven kinds of sealin' wax fruit on it. She's just in from Palm Beach, and she's heard that Brother Henry's boy is here on a visit.

"He was such a cute little dear when he was a baby!" says she.

"He's changed," says Mr. Robert.

"Of course," says Aunt Julie. "I do want to see if he's grown up to look like Henry, as I said he would, or like his mother. Where is he now, Robert?"

"Heaven only knows!" says he. "It would suit me best if he was on his way back to Michigan."

"Why, Robert!" says Aunt Julie. "And Clifford the only cousin you have in the world!"

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"One is quite enough," says he.

That gives her another jolt, and she starts to lay out Mr. Robert good, for givin' the frosty paw to

a relation that had come so far to see him. "I shall stay right here," says she, "until that poor, neglected young man returns, and then I shall try to make up for your heartless treatment."

Aunt Julie didn't have a long wait. She hadn't more'n got herself settled, when the elevator stops at our floor and there breaks loose all kinds of a riot in the hall. There was a great jabberin' and foot scuffin', and I could hear Dennis, that juggles the lever, forkin' out the assault 'n' batt'ry language in a brogue that sounded like rippin' a sheet.

"What's up now?" says Mr. Robert, pokin' his head out.

"Two to one that's Clifford!" says I.

There wa'n't any time to get a bet down, though; for just then the door slams open and we gets a view of things. Oh, it was Cluffy, all right! He was comin' in backwards, tryin' to wave off the gang that was follerin' him.

"Go away!" says he, pushin' at the nearest of 'em. "Please go away!"

"Ah, it's you should be goin' away, ye shark-faced baboon, ye!" says Dennis, hoppin' up and down in the door of the car. "You an' yer Polack friends may walk down, or jump out the winder; but divvle a ride do yez get in this illyvator again. Do ye mind that, now?"

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You couldn't blame him; for the bunch wa'n't fit for the ash hoist. They were Zinskis, about twenty of 'em, countin' women and kids. You didn't have to look at the tin trunks and roped bundles to know that they'd just finished ten days in the steerage. You could tell that by the bouquet. They didn't carry their perfume with 'em. It went on ahead, and they follered, backin' Cluffy clear in until he fetched up against the gate, and then jammin' in around him close. Chee! but they was a punky lot! They had jack lantern faces and garlic breaths, and they looked to know about as much as so many cigar store Injuns.

"Did you have your pick, Cluffy," says I, "or was this a job lot you got cheap?"

"Clifford," says Mr. Robert, "what in thunder is the meaning of this performance of yours?"

But Clifford just keeps on tryin' to work his elbows clear and looks dazed. "I don't know," says Cluffy, "truly I don't, Cousin Robert. They've been following me for an hour, and I've had an awful time."

"Maybe you've been makin' a noise like a wienerwurst," says I.

About that time Aunt Julie comes paddin' out. "Did I hear some one say Clifford?" says she.

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"You did," says Mr. Robert. "There he is, the one with the ear muffs. I haven't found out who the others are yet."

"Phe-e-e-ew!" says she, takin' one sniff, and with that she grabs out her scent bottle and runs back, slammin' the door behind her.

"Cluffy," says I, "you don't seem to be makin' much of a hit with your Ellis Island bunch."

"What I want to know," says Mr. Robert, "is what this is all about!"

But Clifford didn't have the key. All he knew was that when he started to leave the subway train they had tagged after, and that since then he hadn't been able to shake 'em. Once he'd jumped on a Broadway car; but they'd all piled in too, and the conductor had made him shell out a nickel for every last one. Another time he'd dodged through one of them revolvin' doors into a hotel, and four of 'em had got wedged in so tight it took half a dozen porters to get 'em out; but the house detective had spotted Clifford for the head of the procession and held him by the collar until he could chuck him out to join his friends.

"It was simply awful!" says he, throwin' up his hands.

And then I notices the rattan cane. After that it was all clear. "Where'd you cop the stick, Cluffy?" says I.

"Stick!" says he. "Why, bless me! I must have taken this instead of my umbrella. It belongs to that gentleman who sat next to me in the subway train. You see he was leaning back taking a nap in the corner, and I was trying to talk to him, and when I left I suppose I took his cane by mistake."

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"Well," says I, "the Zinskis goes with the cane."

It's a fact, too. Most all them immigrant runners carries rattans when they're herdin' gangs of imported pick artists around to the railroad stations. It's kind of a badge and helps the bunch to keep track of their leader. Most likely them Zinskis had had their eyes glued to that cane for hours, knowin' that it was leadin' 'em to a job somewheres, and they wa'n't goin' to let it get away.

"Gimme it," says I; "I'll show you how it works."

Sure enough, soon's I took it and started for the door the whole push quits eatin' cheese and bread out of their pockets and falls in right after me.

"Fine!" says Mr. Robert, grabbin' my hat and chuckin' it after me. "Go on, Torchy! Keep going!"

"Ah, say!" says I. "I ain't subbin' for Cliffy. This is his gang."

But Mr. Robert only grins and motions me to be on my way. "If you come back here before tomorrow morning," says he, "I'll discharge you on the spot."

Now wouldn't that bump you?

"All right," says I: "but this'll cost Cliffy just twenty."

"I'll pay it," says Mr. Robert.

"It's a whizz," says I, wavin' the cane. "Come on, you Sneezowskis! I'll show you where the one fifty per grows on bushes."

What did I do with 'em? Ah, say, it was a cinch! I runs 'em down seven flights of stairs, marches 'em three blocks up town, and then rushes up to a big stiff in a green and gold uniform that's hired to stand outside a flower shop and open carriage doors. He and me had some words a couple of months ago, because I butted him in the belt when I was in a hurry once.

"Here," says I, rushin' up and jammin' the cane into his hand, "hold that till I come back!" and before he has time to pipe off the bunch of Polackers that's come to a parade rest around us, I makes a dive in amongst the cars and beats it down Broadway.

Nah, I don't know what becomes of him, or the Zinskis either. All I know is that I'm twenty to the good, and that Cousin Clifford's been shipped back to Bubble Creek, glad to get out of New York alive. But, as I says to Mr. Robert, "What do you look for from a guy that buttons his ears up in flannel?"

CHAPTER X

BACKING OUT OF A FLUFF RIOT

They will turn up, won't they? Here I was only yesterday noontime loafin' through the arcade, when who should I get the hail from but Hunch Leary, with a bookful of rush messages and his cap down over his ears.

Now I ain't sayin' he's the toughest lookin' A. D. T. that ever sat on a call bench, for maybe I've seen worse; but with his bent-in nose, and his pop eyes, and that undershot jaw—well, he ain't one you'd send in to quiet a cryin' baby. Hunch didn't pose for that picture of the sweet youth on the blue signs outside the district offices. They don't pick him out for these theater-escort snaps, either.

Which shows how far you can go on looks, anyway; for, if I was going to trust my safety-vault key with anyone, it would be Hunch. Not that they'll ever use him to decorate any stained-glass window; but I never look for him to land on the rock pile.

Course, I don't see much of Hunch and the rest these days; but it ain't a case of dodgin' old friends on my part, so me and him hangs up against a radiator in the main corridor and talks it over. I wants to know if Stiff Miller is still manager down at No. 11 branch, and who's wearin' the red stripe yet; while Hunch he puts over a few polite quizzes as to how I'm gettin' on with the Corrugated people.

We hadn't been gassin' but five minutes or so, and there's ten more due on the clock before lunch hour is over, when I looks up to see our Mr. Piddie going by and givin' me the frown. I knew what that meant. It's another call-down. He has plenty of time to work up his case; for I takes the limit and don't hang up my hat until the life-insurance chimes has done their one-o'clock stunt. And I'm hardly settled behind the brass gate before Piddie is down on me with the old mushy-mouthed reproof.

"One is known," says he, "by the company one keeps."

"I'm no New Theater manager," says I. "What's the answer?"

"I observed you loitering in the lower corridor," says he. "That is all."

"Oh!" says I. "You seen me conversin' with Mr. Leary, eh?"

"Mr. Leary!" says Piddie, raisin' his eyebrows.

"Well, Hunch, then," says I. "Tryin' to get up a grouch because you wa'n't introduced? Don't take it hard. He's kind of exclusive, Mr. Leary is."

Piddie swallows that throat pippin of his two or three times before he can get a grip on his feelings enough to go on with the lesson of the day. "I merely wish to remark," says he, "that evil communications corrupt good manners."

"How about court Judges, then," says I, "and these slum missionaries'? G'wan, Piddie! Back to the copybook with your mottoes! I'm a mixer, I am! Would I be chinnin' here with you if I wa'n't?"

He sighs, Piddie does, and struts away to freeze the soul of some new lady typist by looking over her shoulder. As an act of charity, they ought to let Piddie fire me about once a month. He'll die of grief if he don't get the chance sometime.

And blamed if he don't come near gettin' his heart's desire before the day was over!

It all begins about three o'clock, when Piddie comes turkeyin' out of the telephone booth all swelled up with importance and signals me to come on the carpet.

"Torchy," says he, "I presume you know where the Metropolitan Building is?"

"They ain't moved it since lunchtime, have they?" says I.

"That will do!" says he. "Now listen very carefully."

You'd thought from his preamble that I was going to be sent up to regulate the clock, or see if the tower was still plumb; but all it simmers down to is that I'm to take a leather document case, hunt up Mr. Ellins, who's attendin' a directors' meetin' over there, and deliver some papers that he's forgot to have his private secretary lug along.

"And kindly refrain," he tacks on at the last, "from stopping to talk with any suspicious characters on the way."

"Say, Piddie," says I, "if I was you I'd have that printed on a card. Some day you're going to forget to rub that in."

Well, I hustles across the square, locates Old Hickory, and delivers the goods without droppin' 'em down a manhole or doin' any of the other awful things that Piddie would have warned me against if he'd had more time. I tucks the empty case under my arm and was for makin' a record trip back, just to surprise Piddie; but while I'm waitin' for that flossy lever juggler on the express elevator to answer my red-light signal I hears this riot break loose on the floor below.

And say, I wa'n't missin' any lively disturbance like that; for it listens like a mob scene from one of them French guillotine plays. Mostly it's female voices that floats up, and they was all tuned to the saw-filin' pitch. A pasty-faced young gent wearin' a green eye-shade and an office coat comes beatin' it up the marble steps, and I fires a question at him on the fly.

"Is it a gen'ral rough-house number," says I, "or have the suffragettes broke loose again?"

"You're welcome to find out for yourself," he pants, dashin' up another flight.

"Thanks for the invite," says I. "Guess I will."

And, say, talk about your mass plays around a shirtwaist bargain counter! Why, the corridor was full of 'em, all tryin' to rush the door of 1,323 at once. For a guess I should say that half the manicure artists, lady demonstrators, and cloak models between 14th and 34th was on the spot. Oh, they was a swell bunch, with more fur turbans and Marie Antoinette ringlets on view than you could see collected anywhere outside of Murray's!

They was sayin' things, too! I couldn't catch anything but odd words here and there; but the gen'ral drift of their remarks seems to be that someone has welshed on 'em. First off I thought it must be one of these skirt bucket-shops that has been closed out by the renting agent; but then I gets a look at the sign on the door and sees that it's the Peruvian Investment Company, which sounds like one of them common twenty per cent. a month games.

And it's a case of lockout, with the lady customers ragin' on the outside, and nobody knows what's takin' place behind the ground glass. That wa'n't excitin' enough to lure me from a steady job for long, though, unless some one was goin' to do more'n look desp'rate and talk spiteful.

"Ah, why not smash something?" I sings out. "Didn't any lady think to bring a brick in her vanity bag?"

A couple turns around and glares at me; but it encourages one to begin hammerin' on the glass with her near-gold purse, and just as I'm about to leave this turns the trick. The door swings open all of a sudden, and there stands a tall, well-built gent, with a green felt hat pushed back on his head, a five-inch cigar juttin' out of one corner of his mouth, and his thumbs stuck in the pockets of a sporty striped vest. On account of the curly brown Vandyke, he's kind of a foreign-lookin' party; but someway them smilin', wide-open eyes of his has a sort of familiar look.

For a high pressure storm center he seems mighty placid. As he throws open the door he steps back into the middle of the room, rests one elbow against the rail of a wired-in cashier's coop, and removes the cheroot so he can spring a comfortin' smile on the crowd. It's a brainy play. The rush line stops like it has gone up against a bridge pier, and then spreads out in a half-circle.

"Well, ladies," says he, "what can we do for you to-day?"

Do I know who it is then? Well, do I! Maybe it has been months since I've heard the voice, and maybe he does wear a set of face herbage that I'd never seen before; but I ain't one to forget the

only real A-1 classy boss I ever had; not that soon, anyway. It's Mr. Belmont Pepper, as sure as I've got a Titian thatch on my skull!

Do I linger? That's what! Why, I've been waitin' for him to show up again like a hired girl waits for Thursday afternoon. It's Mr. Pepper, all right; but it looks like he's been let in bad, for after one or two gasps in chorus that bunch of lady grouches gets their second wind and closes in on him with a whoop.

"Where's my dividends? I want to draw out my money! Say, you give me back my eighteen dollars, or I'll—You'll try your bunko game on me, will you? Hey! I've been waiting since noon to catch you, you—"

My! but they did have their hammers out! They called him everything that a lady could, and a few names that wa'n't so ladylike as they might have been. They shook things at him, and promised to do him all sorts of damage, from bringin' lawsuits to scratchin' his eyes out.

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Mr. Pepper, though, he goes on smokin' and smilin', now and then throwin' in a shoulder shrug just to hint that there wa'n't any use in his tryin' to get in a word until they was all through. He almost acts like he enjoyed being mobbed; but of course he knew better'n to choke off a lot of women before they'd had their say out. He just let 'em jaw along and get it out of their systems. Fin'lly he raises his hand, takes off the green lid, and bows graceful.

"Ladies," says he, "I fully sympathize with your impatience—fully."

"You look it, I don't think!" sings out a big blonde, shakin' her willow plumes energetic.

Mr. Pepper throws her a smile and spiels ahead. "You will be pleased to hear, however," says he, "that the board of directors, on the strength of cabled advices from our general manager in Peru, has just voted an extra dividend of ten per cent."

"When do we get it? Show us some money!" howls the kickers.

"I have been requested to announce," goes on Mr. Pepper, "that payments from this office will be resumed promptly at noon—on the first day of next month."

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Does that satisfy 'em? Not so you'd notice it. A bigger squawk than ever goes up, and the jam around Mr. Pepper begins to look like rush hour at the Hudson Terminal. They starts clawin' at his elbows, and grabbin' his coat, and when I notices one wild-eyed brunette reachin' for a hatpin I knew it was a case of me to the rescue or sendin' in an ambulance call.

Not that I had any notion what ought to be done in a case like this. I couldn't throw him a rope or shove out a plank; I ain't any expert woman trainer, either; but can I stand there with my mouth open and see an old friend get the hooks thrown into him by a class in hysterics? Not when the hookee happens to be one that once set me up as a stockholder in a gold mine. So I lets flicker with the first fool idea that comes into my head.

"Gangway!" I shouts out, wedgin' my way in among 'em and usin' my elbows. "Gangway for the bank messenger! Ah, don't shove, girls; he ain't the only man left in New York. One side for the real money bringer! One side now!" And by holdin' the leather case high up where they could all see it, and hittin' the line like Coy does when it's three downs with ten yards to go, I manages to get through without losin' many coat buttons.

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"Here you are, sir," says I, shovin' the case out to Mr. Pepper and givin' him the knowin' look. "City National. Cashier wants a receipt."

Does he need a diagram and a card of instructions? Trust Belmont Pepper! "Ah, this way," says he. "Pardon me a moment, ladies, only a moment. This way, young man." And almost before they know what has happened him and me are behind the partition with the gate locked.

"Let's see," says he, lookin' me over kind of puzzled, "it's—er—Torchy, isn't it?"

"There's the proof," says I, liftin' the cover off my danger signal.

"I might have known," says he, "that no one else could have put up so good a bluff on the spur of the—"

"Now that's all right, Mr. Pepper," says I; "but the bluff won't hold 'em long. What you want to do is get busy and make a noise like hundred-dollar bills. I don't know what the trouble is; but it looks like the genuine goods to me."

"Diagnosis correct," says he. "I'm boxed. Now if they were only men, I could—"

"Oh, sure!" says I. "But a bunch of nutty fluffs is diff'rent. They never know what they want or why they want it. Say, ain't you got another exit?"

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Mr. Pepper shakes his head. "No, son," says he; "but don't you worry about me. Your strategy thus far has been excellent; but I don't want you to get mixed up in this mess. Skip, Torchy, while the skipping is easy."

"Mr. Pepper," says I, "do I look like a quitter? I ain't forgot what you did about givin' me them Glory Be stocks, either, and I'm goin' to hang around here until this little private cyclone of yours blows over."

Mr. Pepper he looks at me a minute in that calm way of his, and then he shrugs his shoulders. "All right," says he.

Then we listens to the buzz outside. Some was explainin' to others how a bushel of money had just come in from the City National Bank, and some was insistin' that it was just a north-pole fake. It's a free-for-all debate with all rules in the discard. Then we hears one voice that's louder than the others calling out for a committee.

"We must organize!" she says. "Let's organize for action!"

"Ah!" observes Mr. Pepper. "Now for feminine tactics! That looks better."

A couple of minutes more and they've concluded to adjourn to the corridor. When they're all out and I can hear 'em down at the further end, I gives him the tip.

"Now's your chance!" says I. "Up one flight and you can get an express elevator. I'll show you." 159

Mr. Pepper don't like the idea, though, of doin' the gumshoe sneak. He hates to run away from any kind of a fight, specially a lot of women. He don't run, either; but after awhile he consents to walk out, and we strolls towards the steps dignified and easy.

It looked like a clean get-away for a minute, too; but I hadn't counted on their leavin' a picket to watch the elevator. She sees us and gives the alarm; so by the time we're up to the next floor the whole mob is after us, lettin' out the war cries as if it was a case of kidnappin'.

They struck the upper corridor just as I've got my finger on the button, and in the front ranks they're pushin' along the gray uniformed special cop that they've rung up from the first floor. Also who should step out into the midst of the riot but Old Hickory Ellins, just leavin' the directors' meeting. He goes purple-faced and bug-eyed, but before I can dodge out of sight of course he spots me. And that's the very minute when a couple of lady avengers points me and Mr. Pepper out to the cop and the pinch business is about to begin.

"Why, what's all the row about, Torchy?" says he. "And who is that with you?" He gets answers from the anvil chorus. 160

"That's the swindler!" they shouts. "That's Prentice Owens! He's the one that took our money, and the boy is one of the gang! Nab 'em, Mr. Officer, please nab 'em!"

"G'wan, you're a lot of flossy kikes!" I throws back at 'em.

"Torchy," says Mr. Ellins, "have you been up to any swindling game?"

"Honest, I ain't, Mr. Ellins," says I.

"I am inclined to believe that," says he; "but what about the other person? Is he a friend of yours?"

"Sure," says I. "And he's on the level too."

"He's Prentice Owens, is he?" says he.

"Nah," says I. "He's Mr. Belmont Pepper, he is, president of the Glory Be Mining Company. Why, I used to work for him! That aggregation of female dopes is full of prunes. Mr. Pepper's no crook."

"Hum!" says Old Hickory, rubbin' his chin. "A case of mistaken identity, eh? Officer, you know me, I suppose?"

"Yes, Mr. Ellins," says the special, jerkin' off his cap, "oh, yes, sir."

"Then drive these deluded women downstairs and tell them their mistake," says Old Hickory. "Come, Mr. Pepper. Come, Torchy. In with you!"

And inside of two shakes we're shootin' down a one hundred and fifty foot shaft with no stops until the ground floor. Not until we gets outside and Mr. Ellins jumps into his cab does Mr. Pepper say a word. 161

"Torchy," says he, "you're the real thing in the friendship line. I will admit that appearances are somewhat against me, but—"

"Ah, say!" I breaks in. "Don't I know you, Mr. Pepper? Do I have to see any books to know that you're playin' a straight game? It was a matter of needin' a little time, wa'n't it, and bein' rushed off your feet when you didn't expect the move? I could guess that much from the start. All I want to ask is, how's the mine gettin' on, the Glory Be, you know?"

He looks at his feet for a second or so and kind of flushes. Then he straightens up, looks me level between the eyes, and reaches out a hand to give me the brotherhood grip.

"Torchy," says he, "there is a mine, and the last I heard it was still there. Anyway, I'm dropping the investment business right here, and I'm going out to see what our property looks like. I'll let you know." With that he whirls and dashes off across the avenue.

"How is it," says Piddie when I gets back, "that it takes you an hour and a quarter to go four blocks?"

CHAPTER XI

RUNG IN WITH THE GOLD SPOONERS

On the level now, what's a he Cinderella? And if your boss called you a name like that, would you resign, or throw out your chest and strike for a raise? But, then, maybe it was only some of Mr. Robert's fancy joshin'. Anyway, I'd stand in line waitin' for a thing like that to happen again.

The way it begun was when I runs across this new girl in the filin' room and finds her sniffin' over one of the index cases. She's bitin' her lips to keep from doing it and she's red way up behind her ears; so I knows she's more mad than sorry. I could guess what's happened; for I'd just seen Piddie come out of there looking satisfied and important.

"Hello, sis!" says I. "Weepin' over your job so soon?"

"Shut up!" says she.

"Why, how pettish!" says I. "What was Piddie callin' you down for?"

"What's that to you?" says she. "Who are you, anyway?"

"Me?" says I. "Why, I'm the Corrugated's gen'ral grouch dispeller. I'm the official little ray of sunshine. See?" and I bobs my head so she can get a good view of my red thatch.

"Huh!" says she; but she can't help lettin' out a grin, so I sees the cure has begun.

"Don't you mind Piddie," says I. "He don't dare tie the can to you without reportin' higher up. He likes to make a noise like a watchdog, that's all. Next time you give him the merry chuckle."

And, honest, I'd done the same if she'd been wall-eyed and toggle-jointed, just for the sake of blockin' off his little game.

It wa'n't until a couple of days later, when she shoots over a casual flashlight look as I'm strollin' past, that I takes any partic'lar notice of what a Daisy Maizie she is. There's more or less class to her lines, all right, not to mention a pair of rollin' brown eyes. Course, I sends back the roguish wink, and by the end of the week we was callin' each other by our pet names.

Not that I'm entered reg'lar as a Percy boy, or that I takes this so serious as to miss any meals; but you know how it is. And what if she was a few years older? She seems to like it when I sing out, "Oh, you Theresa!" at her, and once she mussed up my hair when there wa'n't anybody lookin'. In fact, I was almost to the point of thinkin' that I'd been picked as somebody's honey boy when this Izzy Budheimer shows up as a late entry.

Izzy, he's a third assistant in the stock department, and on twelve a week he sports one of those striped green overcoats and a plush hat with the bow behind. Maybe he wouldn't be listed as a home destroyer; but he has a flossy way with him and he goes around a lot. About the second week I sees him and the new girl gettin' chummier and chummier, and, while she still has a jolly for me now and then, I knows I'm only a side issue. That's what hurt most. So what fool play must I make but go and plunge on a sixty-cent box of mixed choc'lates for her!

As luck would have it, Mr. Robert spots me comin' out of the 23d-st. candy shop with the package under my arm. You wouldn't think he'd notice a little clew like that, or pick me up on it; but he does.

"How now, Torchy?" says he. "Sweets to the sweet, eh?"

"Uh-huh," says I, and I guess I colors up some.

"What is the fair one's name?" says he.

"Tessie," says I.

"Ah!" says he. "Thus were they ever named: Tessie, Juliet, and Helen of Troy. They're all one. My envious sympathy, Torchy, and may the gods be kind!"

Which is only the brand of hot air Mr. Robert blows off whenever he has a good lunch under his vest and nothin' heavy on his mind. It don't mean anything at all.

"Troy!" says I. "Can it! This ain't for no up-State laundry hand. She comes from Eighth-ave."

Well, I stows the box away until closin' time, and then waits around the upper corridor for Tessie to show up. Izzy, he spots me and proceeds to improve the time by givin' me an earache about what an important party he is, how he expects to be jumped a notch soon, and about how much he makes nights on the outside, followin' up some checkroom snap or other.

"That's fine!" says I. "But won't you be late gettin' over to Grand-st.?"

Izzy was still explainin' how long it was since his folks moved to the West Side, and what swell things they had in the parlor, when Tessie floats out with her new spring lid and princess walkin' suit on. I'm just shovin' out the peace offerin' and gettin' ready to hand over my smoothest josh, when she brushes past like I was part of the wall decoration, squeals, "Oh, Mr. Budheimer!" and begins showin' Izzy some tickets for the grand annual benefit ball of the Shirtwaist Makers' Union, and tellin' him how she was sellin' 'em for her sister, and what a grand time it was goin' to be.

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"How much?" says Izzy, tryin' hard to choke it back, but losin' the struggle.

"Seventy-five for a double ticket," says Tessie. "That's the kind you want."

"Maybe I would yet, if I could get a partner," says he.

"Ain't that an awful sad case?" says Tessie. "Nobody's teased me very hard, either."

"You'll go with me, yes?" says Izzy.

"It's awful sudden," says she; "but a chance is a chance. Don't send a cab; the folks in the block might think I was putting on."

And me? Why, I don't show on the chart at all! Right under my nose she does it, and don't even give me a sideways glance.

"Pooh!" says I. "Pooh, pooh!"

"What a cute little fellah!" says Tessie to him as they crowds into the elevator with the rest of the push.

"Say," says I, making a jump for the grating, "you don't need to——"

"Next car!" sings out the Johnny Flip, slammin' the door. Now wa'n't that rubbin' it in?

"Coises!" says I. "Deep coises!" and walks down eleven flights with a temperature that would have got me condemned by any boiler inspector in the business. The candy? That goes to one of the pie-faced maids where I lives.

167

The nerve of that Izzy, though! In the mornin' he comes around just like nothin' had happened and wants to know if I'll sub. for him on his evenin' job the night he goes to the ball. To show I don't carry any grouch, I says I will; but he offers only half-pay and makes me agree to split the tips with him.

"I couldn't afford it, at that," says he, "only this is a kid session and the graft will be light."

It's this checkroom work of his, you know, at one of them swell Fifth-ave. joints where they have an extra night force on call for coming-out parties and dinner dances and the like. So, while him and Tessie is enjoyin' themselves with the lady shirtwaist makers, I'm standin' behind the counter wearin' a braided jacket, givin' out check coupons, and stowin' away hats and top-coats for Master Reginald and other buddin' sports of the younger set. Seems this is the final blowout of Miss Somebody's afternoon dancin' class, and no one was allowed inside unless Father had his name printed in bright red ink in the social register.

A hot lot of young gold spooners they was too; some of 'em not as old as me by a couple of years, and swellin' around in dinky Tuxes and white kids. One of 'em even hands me in a silver-headed cane.

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"Careful of that stick, my man," says he.

"Oh, sure!" says I. "Puppah'd be wild if anything happened to it, wouldn't he?"

And you should have heard the talk they had as they loaf around the cloakroom between the numbers,—all about the awful things they did at prep school, how they bunked the masters, and smuggled brandied peaches up to their rooms, and rough-housed durin' mornin' prayers. Almost made your blood run cold—not.

When they got to discussin' the girls, though, and sayin' how such a one was a "jolly sort," and others was "bloomin' rotters," it made me seasick and it was a relief when they took to whisperin' things I couldn't hear about the chaperons. After intermission they come sneakin' in by twos and threes to hit up their cigarettes.

It was about eleven-thirty and there was four or five of 'em in the cloakroom, puffin' away languid like real clubmen, when in drifts a young lady all in pink silk and gold net and hails one of the wicked bunch.

"Bobby," says she, "you ought to be ashamed of yourself!"

"Run on now, Vee," says he. "Told you when I asked you to come that I wasn't a dancing man, y'know."

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"Fudge!" says she, stampin' her foot. "You think it's smart to take that pose, don't you? Well, you wait!"

And, say, you talk about your haughty beauts! Why, she was a little the silkiest young queen I ever had a real close view of,—the slimmest feet and ankles, reg'lar cameo-cut face all tinted up natural like a bunch of sweet peas, and a lot of straw-colored hair as fine as cobwebs. She was a thoroughbred stunner, this Miss Vee was, and mad all over.

"I haven't been on the floor for four numbers," she goes on. "You just wait!"

"You wouldn't be cad enough to peach on us for smokin', would you?" says Bobby.

"Wouldn't I, though!" says she.

That starts a stampede. All but Bobby chucks away their cigarettes and beats it back to the ballroom. He turns sulky, though.

"Tell ahead," says he. "Who cares? And let's see you get any more dances!"

He's a pasty-faced, weak-jawed youth with a chronic scowl and a sullen look in his eyes. I should say he was sixteen maybe, and the young lady a year older. She grips her fan hard and stands there starin' at him. I'm so much int'rested in the case that the first thing I know I've butted in with advice.

"Ah, be nice, Claude!" says I. "Dance with the young lady. I would if I was you."

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And you can't guess how fussy a little remark like that gets Bobby boy. He almost swallows his cigarette from the jar he gets, being spoken to by a common cloakroom checker. First off he jumps up and stalks over to me real majestic and threatenin'.

"You—you—How dare you?" he splutters out.

"There, there!" says I. "Don't get bristle-spined over it. I wa'n't offerin' any deadly insult, and if it makes you feel as bad as all that I'll take it back."

"I—I'll have you dismissed!" he growls.

"Can't do it, Bobby," says I. "I'm no reg'lar tip-chaser. I'm here incog.—doing it for a lark, y'know. Back to your corner, now! There's a lady present."

He glares at me for a minute or so, and then turns on the queen in pink. "I hope you're satisfied, Vee," says he. "You would come in here, though! I can't help it if the attendants are insolent to you."

"Pooh!" says Miss Vee. "The young man was only taking my part."

"So?" sneers Bobbie. "I congratulate you on your new champion."

"He acts more like a gentleman than you do, at any rate!" she fires back at him.

"Does he?" says Bobby. "Then why don't you get him for a partner?"



"G'WAN!" SAYS I, "IT'S A FAIR SWAP."

"If you don't ask me for this next waltz, I will," says she, tossin' up her chin.

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"What a bluff!" says Bobby. "Well, Miss Vee, I'm not going to ask you. Now!"

Say, it was gettin' more or less personal by that time, and I was wonderin' just how the young lady was goin' to back out of the proposition that had been put up to her, when the first thing I know she's marchin' straight over to where I was.

"Will you give me this next waltz?" says she.

"Say," I gasps, "do you mean it?"

"Certainly I do," says she. "You can dance, can't you?"

"I don't know," says I; "but I can do an East Side spiel."

"Good!" says she. "I know how to do that too. Come on."

"In a minute," says I. "Just hold on until I borrow the young gentleman's evenin' coat."

"Wha—what's that?" snorts Bobby.

"You can be usin' mine for a smokin' jacket," says I. "Peel it off now, and let the fancy vest come along too!"

"I—I won't do it!" says Bobbie.

"Oh, yes, you will," says I, "or else you and me will be mixed up in a rumpus that'll bring the chaperons and special cops in here on the run," and with that I proceeds to shed the braided coat and my black vest.

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"You're insulting!" says Bobby, gettin' wild-eyed.

"G'wan!" says I. "It's a fair swap. I'll leave it to the young lady."

And when I'd sized her up for a thoroughbred I hadn't made any wild guess. There's a twinkle under them long eyelashes that's as good as a go-ahead signal.

"Of course," says she. "It was you who suggested him as a partner, anyway. And hurry, Bobby, there goes the waltz!"

"I—I——" he begins.

"Ah, shuck 'em!" says I, startin' for him hasty.

I expects it was the prospects of gettin' rung into a rough and tumble, and having to explain to mother, that changed Bobby's mind so sudden. At any rate, inside of a minute more I'm wearin' the pearl-gray waistcoat and the silk-faced tuxedo, and out I sails onto the shiny floor of the green and gold ballroom with somebody's pink-costumed heiress hangin' to my left arm.

"One-two-three; one-two-three——Now!" says she, countin' out the time so I shouldn't make any false start.

But, say, I didn't need that. Course, I'm no cotillion leader, and about all the dancin' I ever done was at chowder parties or in the Coney Island halls; but who couldn't keep step to a tune like "Yip-I-Addy" played by a twelve-piece goulash orchestra, specially with such a crackerjack partner as Miss Vee was?

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Could we spiel together? Why, say, we just floats along over the waxed maple boards like a pair of summer butterflies, pivotin' first one way and then the other, dodgin' in and out among the couples, and givin' an exhibition that had any other performance on the floor lookin' like a cripples' parade.

First it got into my heels, and then it goes to my head. I didn't know whether I was waltzin', or havin' a joy ride with some biplane shuffer. I wa'n't sayin' a word in the way of language; but Miss Vee keeps up a string of chatter and giggles that's enough for both. You'd thought to see us, I expect, that we was carryin' on a real, rapid-fire, smart-set dialogue, when all the while it was only her tellin' me how the diff'rent parties was actin' when they first spotted her on the floor with a ringer, and how the chaperons were squintin' at us through their lorgnettes, tryin' to make out who I was. And the greatest shock I ever had was when the music stopped and I fell about a mile down through rosy clouds.

"Wait!" says Miss Vee, squeezin' my arm. "There'll be an encore. My aunt's over there, and she's just wild; but it doesn't matter."

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"You're a good sport," says I, joinin' in the hand-clappin' to jog the orchestra into givin' us a repeat.

And just as they starts up the tune again I happens to glance up into the little visitors' balcony at the end of the ballroom. Who do you guess I sees watchin' us bug-eyed and open-mouthed? Why, Izzy Budheimer and Miss Tessie! See? They've broke away from the lady shirtwaisters durin' the supper hour so Izzy can give his new girl a glimpse of what a real swell dance is like. Maybe he planned on stoppin' in at the cloakroom too, and seein' if I was holdin' down the job proper.

Anyway, I can't blame him for doin' the open-face act when he discovers me out on the floor with the belle of the ball. But all I has time to do is send him up the chilly stare, and away we go again into another one-two-three dream—me and Miss Vee.

"I don't care what becomes of me," she hums over my shoulder.

"Me either," says I.

"Silly boy!" says she. "What's your name?"

"Just Torchy," says I, "after my hair."

"I think curly red hair is cute," says she.

"I could go hoarse sayin' things like that about you," says I.

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Maybe it was lucky, too, that this second installment was short, or I might have gone clean mushy; for the way she could look at me out of them big gray eyes of hers was—well, it was the real thing in thrills. The wind-up came just as we gets around near the cloakroom door and we stops.

"It was awfully good of you," says she.

"Gee!" says I. "Why, I could wear out all my old shoes doin' that, and if ever you need——"

"S-s-sh!" says she. "Here comes my aunt!"

Not waitin' for any further diagram of the situation, I makes a dash into the cloakroom, where I finds Izzy Budheimer gazin' puzzled at Bobby, who's sittin' tilted back in his shirt sleeves with the braided coat slung on the floor.

"Look here, Torchy!" begins Izzy. "What the——"

"On the job, Izzy, if you want to save it!" says I, wigglin' out of Master Bobby's expensive clothes and chuckin' 'em at him.

"But why—what——" says Izzy, tryin' again.

"Don't stop to ask fool questions of a busy society man," says I; "but jump into your uniform, get in your coop there, and prepare to put the timelock on your conversation works. In about a minute there'll be a delegation of old hens in here lookin' for a mysterious young gent with incendiary hair who has disappeared. Your cue is to look innocent and not know anything about it. See? If there's any explainin' to be done, let Bobby do it."

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"Oh, I say!" groans Bobby, jumpin' up, and by the time I've struck the bottom stair on my way out he's grabbed his overcoat and is beatin' it down to find his carriage.

How Miss Vee squared it with Auntie is a puzzle I never expect to find out the answer to; but I'll risk her. She's a pink queen, she is, and after that one waltz with her I can look cold-eyed at a row of Tessie girls stretchin' from here to the Battery!

CHAPTER XII

LANDING ON A SIDE STREET

177

It was a little matter between me and Mother Sykes that starts me off to hunt a new boardin' place. Lovely old girl, Mother Sykes is, one of the kind that calls everybody "Deary" and collects in advance every Saturday night. She's got one of them inquisitive landlady noses that looks like it was made for pryin' up trunk covers and pokin' into bureau drawers.

That don't bother me any, though. It's only when I misses my swell outfit, the one Benny had built for me to wear at his weddin', that I gets sore. Course, she'd only borrowed it for Pa Sykes to wear on a Sunday afternoon call, him bein' a little runt of a gent, with watery eyes and a red nose, that never does anything on his own hook. And if he hadn't denied it so brassy I shouldn't have called him down so hard, right in the front hall with half the roomers listenin'.

"Dreamed it, eh, did I?" says I. "Well, listen here, Sykesy! Next time I has an optical illusion of you paradin' out in any of my uniform, there'll be doin's before the Sergeant!"

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Then Mother Sykes rushes up from the kitchen and saves the fam'ly honor by throwin' an indignation fit. I don't know how long it lasted; but she was gettin' purple clear up under her false front when I slid out the door and left her at it. Next day I noticed the sign hung up; but I didn't know which sky parlor was vacant until I strolls in at five-fifteen Friday night and finds my things out in the hall and a new lodger in my room.

"Oh, well," says I, "what's a sudden move now and then to a free lance like me?"

And as there ain't anybody in sight to register my fond farewells with, I gathers up my suitcase and laundry bag, chucks the latchkey on the stand in the front hall, and beats it. Not until I'm three blocks away does I remember that all the cash I've got in my clothes is three quarters and a dime, which comes of my listenin' to Mallory's advice about soakin' my roll away in a bloomin' savings bank.

"Looks like I'd spend the night in a Mills hotel," says I, "unless I find Mallory and make a touch."

It was chasin' him up that fetches me over on the West Side and through one of them nice, respectable, private-house blocks just below 14th-st. You know the kind, that begin at Fifth-ave. with a double-breasted old brownstone, and end at Sixth with a delicatessen shop.

Well, I was moseyin' along quiet and peaceful, wonderin' how long since anything ever really happened in that partic'lar section, when all of a sudden I feels about a cupful of cold water strike me in the back of the neck.

"Wow!" says I. "Who's playin' me for a goat now?"

With that I turns and inspects the windows of the house I'd just passed, knowin' it must be some kid gettin' gay with the passersby. There's no signs of any cut-up concealed behind the lace curtains, though, and none of the sashes was raised. If it hadn't been for the way things had been comin' criss-cross at me, I suppose I'd wiped off my collar and gone along, lettin' it pass as a joke; but I wa'n't feelin' very mirthful just then. I'm ready to follow up anything in the trouble line; so I steps into the area, drops my baggage, shins up over the side of the front steps, and flattens myself against the off side of the vestibule door. Then I waits.

It ain't more'n a minute before I hears the door openin' cautious, and all I has to do is shove my foot out and throw my weight against the knob. Somebody lets out a howl of surprise, and in another minute I'm inside, facin' a twelve-year-old kid armed with a green tin squirt gun. He's one of these aristocratic-lookin' youngsters, with silky light hair, big dark eyes, and a sulky mouth. Also he's had somethin' of a scare thrown into him by being caught so unexpected; but some of his nerve is still left.

"You—you get out of here!" he snarls.

"Not until you've had a dose of what you handed me, sonny," says I. "Give it up now, Reggie boy!"

"I won't!" says he. "I—I'll have you thrown out!"

"You will, eh?" says I, makin' a rush for him.

"O-o-o-oh, Aunty, Aunty!" he squeals, dashin' down the hall.

Now, say, the way I was feelin' then, I'd have gone up against a whole fam'ly, big brothers included; so a little thing like a call for Aunty don't stop me at all. As he turns into the room on the left I'm only a jump behind, and all that fetches me up is when he does a dive behind an old lady in a big leather chair. She's a wide, heavy old party, with a dinky white cap on her white hair, and kind of a resigned, patient look on her face. Someway, she acts like she was more or less used to surprises like this; for she don't seem much excited.

"Why, Hadley!" she remarks. "Whatever is the matter now?"

"He—he chased me into the house!" whines Master Hadley from behind the chair.

"Did you?" says the old girl.

"Sure," says I. "He's too blamed fresh!"

"There, there!" says she. "You mustn't speak that way of Hadley. He is only a little boy, you know."

"Yes'm," says I.

"And he was only indulging in innocent play," she goes on. "Come, Hadley, untie me now. Please, Hadley!"

Say, I hadn't noticed it before, but the old girl is roped solid, feet and arms, to the chair legs, and it's clear that when nobody was goin' by for little Hadley to shoot at he'd been usin' Aunty for a target. The damp spots on the wall behind the chair and one or two on her dress showed that.

"I won't, unless you'll call Maggie and have her throw him out!" growls Hadley.

"Oh, come, Hadley, be a good boy!" coaxes Aunty.

"Sha'n't!" says Hadley. "And next time I'll shoot ink at you."

"Now, Hadley!" protests Aunty.

"Excuse me, lady," says I, "but it looks to me like there was something comin' to Hadley that I ought to tend to. This ain't on my account, either, but yours. Now watch. Hi, freshy!" and I makes another dash for him.

Well, he knows the lay of the land better'n I do, and he's quick on the dodge, so we has a lively time of it for a couple of minutes, him throwin' chairs in my way and hurdlin' sofas, Aunty beggin' us to quit and callin' for Maggie, and me keepin' right on the job. But at last I got him cornered. He makes a desp'rate duck and tries to butt me; but I catches his head under my arm and down he goes on the rug. I'd just yanked the squirt gun out of his hand and was emptyin' it down the back of his neck, with him hollerin' blue murder, and Aunty strugglin' to get loose, when the front door opens and in walks a couple of ladies, one old and the other young.

And, say, you talk about your excitin' tableaux! In about two shakes there's all kinds of excitement; for it seems one of the new arrivals is Hadley's mommer, and she proceeds to join the riot.

"Oh, my darling boy! My darling!" she sings out. "What is happening! He is being killed! Oh, he is being killed!"

"G'wan!" says I, gettin' up and exhibitin' the squirt gun. "I was only handin' him some of the same sport he's been dealin' out to others. It'll do him good."

"You—you young scoundrel!" says mommer. Then, turnin' to the old lady who came in with her, she gasps out, "Zenobia, telephone for the police!"

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It's the real thing, too, and no flossy bluff about the lady's grouch. She's a swell, haughty-lookin' party, and she acts like she was used to havin' her own way about things. So the prospects begin to look squally. Not that I'm one to curl up and shiver at sight of a cop. Give me plenty of room to do the hotfoot act, and I don't mind guyin' any of them pavement-pounders; but with me shut up in a house where I hadn't been invited in, and a bunch of excited females as witnesses against me, it's a diff'rent proposition. This was no time to weaken, though.

"Go ahead," says I. "Double six-O-four-two Gramercy; that's the green light number for this district. And Uncle Patrick'll be glad to see you. Tell him you got charges to make on his nephew. That'll tickle him to death. Maybe I'll have something to say when we all get there, too."

"What do you mean?" says Hadley's mother.

"Counter complaint, that's all," says I. "Your little darling soaked me first."

"It—it isn't true!" says she. "I don't believe it!"

And here Zenobia comes in with the soothin' advice. She's another whitehaired old lady, lookin' something like the one in the chair, only not so bulky and with more ginger about her. "Now, Sally," says she, "let's not talk of calling in the police over a trifle. Hadley doesn't appear to be hurt, and possibly he was somewhat at fault."

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"The idea!" says Sally. "Why, I saw this young ruffian pommeling him. And look! Martha is bound in her chair. He's a burglar!"

Oh, they had a great debate amongst 'em, Aunt Martha fin'lly admittin' it was just a little prank of Hadley's, her being roped down; but she was sure I had tried to murder him, just for nothing at all. Hadley says so too. In fact, he tells seven diff'rent yarns in as many minutes, each one makin' me out worse than the last.

"There!" says his mother. "Now, Zenobia, will you send for an officer?"

Nope, Zenobia wouldn't; anyway, not until she had more facts to go on. She don't deny that maybe I'm kind of a suspicious-lookin' character, and says it ain't been explained what I was doin' in there holdin' little Hadley on the rug; but she don't want to ring up the cops unless it's a clear case.

"You know, my dear," she winds up with, "Hadley is quite apt to get into trouble."

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"Zenobia Preble!" snorts Sally, her eyes blazin'. "And he your own flesh and blood! Come, precious, mother will take you home, and you shall never, never come to this house again!"

"There, Sally," begins Zenobia, "don't fly into a——"

"When my husband's mother chooses to insult me in her own home," says Sally, "I hope I have spirit enough to resent it!"

Say, she had that and some left over. Inside of two minutes she's hustled little Hadley into his things, and out they sails to her carriage, leavin' the makin's of a first-class fam'ly row all prepared.

In the meantime Zenobia is tyin' Aunt Martha loose, and I'm standin' around waitin' to see what's goin' to happen to me next. Course, I expects the third degree; but she begins with Martha.

"Now what mischief was Hadley up to this time?" she asks.

And Martha sticks to it that it was nothing at all. He merely found that old plant-sprayer and discovered that by unscrewing the nozzle it made a fine squirt gun. To be sure, she had asked him not to use the water from the goldfish globe; but he just would. Also he'd insisted on locking all the servants downstairs, and when she tried to amuse him in other ways he'd tied her to the chair.

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But it was just Hadley's innocent fun. He hadn't harmed anyone, even if he did squirt a little water on the postman and a delivery boy. She had not minded it herself, and no one had been rude to him until I'd come chasing in and handled him so rough. That was an outrage, and Martha thought I ought to get a life sentence for it.

"Humph!" says Zenobia, turnin' to me. "Now, young man, what have you got to say?"

"Ah, what's the use?" says I. "You've got the whole story now. I'd do the same again."

"Relying on the fact that your uncle is a police captain?" says she.

"Nah," says I. "That was hot air."

"There, Zenobia!" says Martha. "I told you he was a bad boy."

"Are you?" says Zenobia.

"Well," says I, "that all depends on how you size me up. I ain't in the crook class, nor I don't wear any Sunday-school medals, either."

"Who are you?" says she.

"Why, just Torchy," says I. "See—torch, Torchy," and I points to my sunset coiffure.

"But who are your parents?" she goes on.

"Don't own any," says I. "I'm a double orphan and rustlin' for myself."

"Where do you live?" says she.

"Why," says I, "I don't live anywhere just now. I'm movin'; but I don't know where to."

"I suppose that is either impudence or epigram," says she; "but never mind. Perhaps you will tell me where you work?"

"I don't work at all," says I. "I'm head office boy for the Corrugated Trust, and it's a cinch job."

"Indeed!" says she. "The Corrugated Trust? Let me see, who is at the head of that concern?"

"Say," says I, "you don't mean you never heard of Old Hickory Ellins or Mr. Robert, do you?"

She kind of smiles at that; but dodges makin' any answer.

"Well," says I, "do I get pinched, or just given the run? Either way, I've got some baggage down by the area door that ought to be looked after."

"Why, certainly, I will have it——" then she stops and looks me over sort of shrewd. "Suppose," she starts in again, "you go and get it yourself?"

"Sure!" says I, and it ain't until I'm outside that I sees this is just her way of tryin' me out; for I has a fine chance to beat it. "Nix!" thinks I. "I might as well see this thing through and get a decision." So back I goes with the suitcase and laundry bag. She hadn't even followed me to the door.

"Ah!" says she, lookin' up. "You weren't afraid to come back, then. Why?"

"Oh, I guess it was because I banked on your givin' me a square deal," says I.

That gets a grin out of her. "Thank you very much for the compliment," says she. "I may say that the inquisition is over. However, I should like to have you remain a little longer, if you care to. Won't you leave your things in the hall there? Your hat and overcoat too."

"Zenobia," says Martha, wakin' up, "surely you are not going to——"

"Precisely," says Zenobia. "I am going to ask him to stay for dinner with us. Will you?"

"Yep!" says I. "I never let any free eats get by me."

"But," gasps Martha, "you don't know who he is?"

"Neither does he know us," says Zenobia. "Torchy, I am Mrs. Zenobia Preble. This is my sister, Miss Martha Hadley. She is very good, I am very wicked, and we are both women of mature years. You will probably find our society rather dull; but the dinner is likely to be fairly good. Besides, I am feeling somewhat indebted to you."

"It's a go," says I, "if I can have a chance to wash up first."

"Of course," says she. Then she gives me a key and directions how to find a certain door on the third floor. "My son's quarters," she goes on, "that I have kept just as he left them twenty years ago. I shall expect you to make yourself quite at home there."

Do I? Why, say, it's a bach joint such as you might dream about: two rooms and bath across the front of the house, guns and swords and such knickknacks on the walls, a desk, a lot of books, and even a bathrobe and slippers laid out. Say, while I was scrubbin' off some of the inkstains and smoothin' down my hair with the silver-backed brushes I felt like a young blood gettin' ready for a party.

Then after awhile I strolls down to the lib'ry and makes myself to home some more. It's a comf'table place, with lots of big easy-chairs, nice pictures on the wall, and no end of bookshelves. The old ladies has cleared out, not even lockin' up any of the curios or sendin' a maid to watch me.

And when it comes to the feed—why, say, it's a reg'lar course dinner, such as you'd put up a

dollar for at any of these high-class table-dotted ranches. Funny old china they had too, and a big silver coffeepot right on the table. The only bad break I makes is just at the start, when I dives into the soup without noticin' that Aunt Martha has her head down and is mumblin' something about bein' thankful.

"Never mind," says Mrs. Preble. "We aren't included in this, anyway."

That begins the talk. I ain't put through the wringer, you understand, but just follows Zenobia while she goes from one thing to another, givin' her opinions of 'em and now and then callin' for mine. We got real chatty too, and once in awhile she stops to laugh real hearty, though I couldn't see where I'd got off any crack at all.

Near as I can make out, Zenobia is a lively old girl for her age. She's seen all the best Broadway shows, knows what's goin' on in town, and reads the papers reg'lar. Also it comes out that she don't follow the kind of programme you generally look for antiques to stick to. She ain't got any use for churches, charity institutions, society, or the suffragettes. All of which seems to shock Sister Martha, who don't say much, but only shudders now and then.

"You see, Torchy," says Zenobia, droppin' two lumps into her demitasse, "I am an unbeliever. I don't even believe in growing old. When I hear of other persons who have come to disbelieve in established things, no matter what, I send for them and find out all about it across the dinner table. We discuss art, religion, politics, goodness knows what. We denounce things, from the existing social order, to the tariff on stockings. My sister, who believes in everything as it is, usually takes a nap and snores."

"Zenobia!" says Martha.

"Oh, not in a disturbing way," says Zenobia. "And I'm sure I almost do the same whenever your friend the rector is here. Torchy, have you ever been talked to about your soul?"

"Once when I drifted into a mission a guy sprung that on me," says I.

"Yes?" says Zenobia. "What then?"

"I told him to go chase himself," says I.

Hearty chuckles from Zenobia, while Sister Martha turns pale and gasps.

Next thing I know I'm tellin' Mrs. Preble about my fallin' out with Mother Sykes, and how I guess I'd better be pikin' up to engage a thirty-cent room until I can draw on my reserve and locate a new boardin' place.

And, say, what do you guess that conversation leads up to? Well, it struck me all in a heap at the time, though I didn't let on; but I couldn't figure out the answer until I'd had a talk with Mr. Robert next day.

"Say, Mr. Robert," says I. "You don't happen to know an old party by the name of Zenobia Preble, do you?"

"I do," says he. "It isn't exactly an accident, either. She is a cousin of my father."

"Gee!" says I. "Cousin to the old—to the boss! Wh-e-ew!"

"Rather an original old lady, Zenobia," says Mr. Robert. "And I understand, from a talk I had with her over the 'phone early last evening, that she was arbitrating the case of a young man who was in some danger of arrest in her home. How did it come out, Torchy?"

"Ah, say, you're on, ain't you?" says I. "Well, it was a verdict for the defense, because I promised to do it again if I ever got the chance."

Mr. Robert grins. "That grandson of hers is certainly a holy terror," says he. "You and Zenobia parted friends, then?"

"Not yet," says I. "We ain't parted at all. I'm stayin' as a trial boarder."

"What!" says he, sittin' up. "Oh, I see. An experiment in practical sociology, eh?"

"Maybe that's it," says I. "Anyway, it depends on whether or not I can stand Aunt Martha."

And when I leaves Mr. Robert he still has his mouth open.

CHAPTER XIII

FIRST AID FOR THE MAIN STEM

Well, I ain't been adopted yet; but it's the next thing to it. Me and Zenobia are gettin' to

understand each other better every day. And, say, for a ripe old party, she's younger in her mind than lots of folks I know who ain't lived half so long. Maybe she did do her first travelin' up and down Broadway in a horse stage; but that ain't the way she wants to cover the ground now. What do you think she springs at the dinner table the other night? Says she's goin' to the next aviation meet and hire some one to take her up for an aëroplane ride.

"Why, Zenobia!" says Sister Martha, so shocked her white frizzes almost stand up and wiggle.

That's Martha's cue, all right. She don't seem to get used to Zenobia's ways, although they've been livin' together all these years. A genuine, consistent antique, Sister Martha is, who still likes to talk about the time when Horace Greeley ran for President. Accordin' to her conversation the last real sensation that came her way was when she went over to Brooklyn and heard Henry Ward Beecher preach.

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But even Martha ain't no worse when you get to know her. She's a harmless, well meanin' old soul, and I'm 'most beginnin' to believe she's pretty near as pious as she thinks she is. Anyway, it ain't any Sunday pose with her. She lugs her religion right through the week, holidays and all, and spreads it around even. I got it straight from Zenobia that Martha's even begun ringin' me into her goodnight prayers, along with the cook and the President.

Also Martha has started in on what she calls my moral trainin', which she dopes out as havin' been neglected somethin' shameful. Whenever Zenobia ain't around to interrupt, I get a Jonah story, or a Sampson and Delilah hair cuttin' yarn pumped into me, and if there ain't any cogs missin' in her scheme I ought to be buddin' a soul before long.

"Torchy," says she real solemn the other night, "I hope you do not use profane language. Do you?"

"Well," says I, "when I was on the Sunday editor's door I did used to think I could put over a few gingery ones; but since I've been with the Corrugated Trust I've kind of got out of practice."

"Ah!" says she, beamin'. "That is good, very good! Your associations are better; is that it?"

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"Mainly it's on account of Mr. Ellins," says I. "Maybe you never happened to hear him; but, say, you ought to be there some mornin' when he limps in with the gout in both feet and a hang-over grouch from the day before! Cuss! Why, after listenin' to him grow real enthusiastic once, I got discouraged. What's the use? thinks I."

Well, someway that gives Martha an awful jolt; for maybe you remember my tellin' how it turns out that her and Zenobia are second cousins to Old Hickory. She says how she's pained and mortified beyond words to learn that Mr. Ellins should allow his employees to hear him use such language.

"Ah, that's all right," says I. "As long as it ain't fired at 'em, nobody feels bad. Mostly they grins, except now and then a new lady typewriter who squirms and turns pale. He don't whisper when he's cussin', Mr. Ellins don't."

"Shocking!" says Sister Martha. "Does—does he do this often?"

"It all depends on how he's feelin'," says I; "but for the past week or ten days he's been at it pretty reg'lar. I expect he's been havin' a worse siege than usual."

Oh, me and Martha had a real heart to heart talk that night, and when I fin'lly goes up to my top floor suite I leaves her fannin' herself and gaspin' for breath. But she'd asked for facts, and I'd handed 'em over. How was I to guess what was goin' to be the follow up on that?

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Not expectin' anything more'n instructions about some errand or other, I ain't any disturbed when Piddie comes up to the gate desk right after lunch next day, lookin' as stern and solemn as if he'd been sent to read a warrant.

"Boy," says he, "Mr. Ellins, senior, wishes to see you in his private office!"

"Well, that ain't surprisin', is it, Piddie?" says I. "You don't suppose we can talk over big affairs like ours out here, do you? Keep your ear off the keyhole, too!" And with that I goes in chipper and cheerful.

The minute I gets through the last door, though, I feels the frost in the air. Mr. Ellins, he lets me wait long enough for the chill to strike in, while he signs a basketful of letters. Then he swings around in his swivel chair and proceeds to size me up through them gunmetal gray eyes of his. Say, it was like standin' in front of a searchlight and under a cold shower, all at once.

"So, young man!" says he. "You have been hearing me swear, eh?"

That's enough for me. Just from that I can sketch the whole plot. And it don't take me a month to figure out the line of talk I'm goin' to use. What's the sense in playin' for time when your blue ticket's all made out.

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"Heard you?" says I. "Think I wear my ears full of putty?"

"Huh!" he grunts. "And do I understand that you disapprove of my profanity?"

"Ah, who's been fillin' you up?" says I. "Why, you're an artist at it."

"Thanks," says he. "And I suppose you felt it your duty to inform my relatives of the fact? Very thoughtful of you, I'm sure."

"Don't mention it," says I.

"You—you're an impertinent young whelp!" says he, his cheeks gettin' purple and puffy.

"Ah, don't mind the frills," says I. "Get out the can. I'm fired, ain't I?"

"No!" he shouts, bangin' his fist down on the desk. "At least, not until I get through with you. What I want to know is why in blue belted blazes you did it!"

"Well," says I, "first off I guess it just naturally slipped out; then, when I saw what a hit I was makin' with Martha—why, I expect I sort of enjoyed givin' her the details."

Somehow, that seems to graze his funnybone, and he has a struggle to keep a grin out of his mouth corners. "Humph!" says he. "I—I'd like to have seen her then. So you went on to describe the general state of my health, did you?"

"It was you we was chattin' about," says I.

"Fascinating topic, I've no doubt," he growls; "but I hardly appreciate the attention. Understand?"

"That's breakin' on me gradual," says I.

"Fortunately for you, though," he goes on, "you didn't attempt to lie out of it. By the way, why didn't you?"

"And her just after givin' you the whole game over the 'phone?" says I. "Ah, say!"

"Young man," says he, shootin' over the quizzin' gaze, "either you are too blickety blinked fresh to keep, or else you're too keen to lose; hanged if I know which! But—er—well, I'll take a chance. You may go out and report to Mr. Piddie for duty."

"It'll near break his heart," says I.

It does, too. I expect from what he'd heard in the private office that he was figurin' on handin' me my hat as I was shot out and remarkin' that he knew all along it was comin' to me. Then there'd be a rollcall of new office boys, with him pickin' out one more to his taste than me. But no such luck for him.

"Cheer up, Piddie," says I. "I'll have the warden send you an invitation when they fin'ly get me right."

Course, I don't make any squeal at the house about my narrow escape; for I knew Martha only meant it for the best. Next day Mr. Ellins don't show up at the office at all, and that evenin' Martha is better posted on his condition than I am. She's been busy on the wire again, this time locatin' him at home.

"My poor cousin," says she, "is in a wretched state. He has been overworking, I fear, and seems to be a nervous wreck. That will account, I have no doubt, for his recent lapses into profanity. He feels rather ashamed of himself; but perhaps I should make allowances. What he needs is rest and quiet. Luckily, I happened to know just the place for him and was able to persuade him to go there at once. He started this afternoon."

It's called the Wesley Restorium, Martha says, and is run by an old friend of hers who used to be a missionary doctor in China. He's an awfully good man, and she's sure he'll help Mr. Ellins a lot. Besides, his place is only about fifty miles off, over in North Jersey; so Mr. Ellins could make the run easy in his limousine.

Well, that leaves only Mr. Robert, Piddie, and me to manage the Corrugated, and we was all bearin' up under the load well enough except Piddie; when along about two o'clock there's a long distance call from the Main Stem, and a few minutes later Mr. Robert sends out for me.

"Torchy," says he, "you seem to be elected. The governor wants you."

"Me?" says I.

"Yes," says Mr. Robert. "I don't exactly understand why. He is at a sanatorium, you know, and we had arranged to send up his private secretary with the important mail this afternoon; but he says he wants you. Says you're responsible for his being there—whatever that means."

"I'm on," says I. "When do I start?"

There's a train at three-thirty-four; so that gives me time to chase around to the house after a grip, then back to the office to gather up a bundle of late letters, and pike for Jersey City. And at that it's five o'clock before I'm landed at a little flag station umpteen miles beyond nowhere. My! but the north end of Jersey has some up and down to it, though! From what I'd heard I thought the State was all meadows; but here I am carted in a four-horse bus up the side of a hill that's twice as tall as the Metropolitan tower.

Say, I never saw so much country spread out all at once before—nothing but hills and trees, and no signs of houses anywhere. Made me so blamed lonesome lookin' at it that I had to shut my

eyes for a spell. And when we gets to the top there's a big shack like a new set of car barns, with hundreds of windows, and big wide veranda all around. It looks as homy and cheerful as the Art Museum. The lawn is full of rocks and stumps, and the few little flowerbeds that have been laid out looked lost and homesick.

Pacin' up and down the verandas, like animals in a cage, was about fifty people, and over at one end, all by himself, looms up Old Hickory, lookin' big and ugly and disgusted with life.

"Well!" he growls. "So you got here, eh? Hope you like it as well as I do. Bring that mail inside."

While he's more or less grouchy, he don't act any more like a nervous wreck than usual. I take it that he was some tired when he got up here night before; but that he cut out dinner and turned in for a good twelve-hour snooze instead. Then he's had a quiet day, and I judge he was a lot better already.

He's just got well into his letters, when an attendant guy in a white duck uniform steps in and taps him on the shoulder.

"Well?" says Old Hickory.

"Vesper service is beginning in the chapel, sir," says the gent.

"Let it begin, then," says Mr. Ellins.

"But," says the gent, "it is usual for guests to——"

"It isn't for me!" snaps Mr. Ellins. "You get out!"

And the gent got out.

We could hear 'em singin' hymns and so on for half an hour; but Mr. Ellins keeps right on goin' through his mail and makin' notes on the envelops until six o'clock, when a big gong rings.

"Thank heaven! Dinner!" says he. "Come on, Torchy; I'm hungry enough to eat a bale of hay!" Then he's hardly got into his chair in the dinin' room before he's snapping his fingers for a waiter. "Hey!" he sings out. "Bring me a dry Martini right away, and a pint of Château Yquem with the fish."

"Excuse me," says the waiter, "but there isn't anything like that on the bill of fare. If it's something to drink you want, you can order buttermilk, which is extra."

"Buttermilk!" snorts Old Hickory. "Say, where's the proprietor? Send him over here!"

He didn't have to call him twice; for the boss of the Restorium had heard the row and was glidin' our way as fast as his rubber heels would let him. He's a short legged, pop eyed, red faced party, wearin' cute white side whiskers, a black Prince Albert, and a minister's necktie.

"Gently, gently," says he, pattin' the air with his hands and puckering his mouth. "Remember to speak softly in the dining room."

"All right, Doc," says Mr. Ellins; "but I want a cocktail."

"Tut, tut, brother!" says the Doc, liftin' a warnin' finger and raisin' his eyebrows. "No intoxicating liquors served here, you know. Now a glass of nice buttermilk is just what——"

"Bah! Buttermilk!" snorts Hickory. "Think I come from a dairy?"

The Doc does his best to soothe him down and fin'ly persuades him to tackle his mutton broth without the Martini. It's a good enough feed; but kind of plain, about what you'd get in one of these Eighth-ave. joints, four courses for thirty-five cents. Mr. Ellins gets left again when he calls for a demitasse after the tapioca pudding. Nothing doing in the coffee line.

"Huh!" he grunts. "I suppose I may smoke, eh?"

"On the north veranda, from seven until eight-fifteen," says the waiter.

"Well, I'll be—blistered!" says Old Hickory.

While he's burnin' a couple of black perfectos out on the smoke reservation, I roams around the Restorium. It's furnished neat and simple, with lots of varnished woodwork and a few framed railroad photos on the walls. In the parlor was four or five groups of women in rockin' chairs, talkin' low and doin' fancy-work. Most of the men were tiptoein' up and down the veranda. They was a stoop shouldered, dyspeptic lookin' lot. Down in the basement in a place labeled "Recreation Room," a couple of checker games was in progress, and four gents was shovin' weights up and down the shuffleboard. Yes, it was a perfectly good place to be quiet in. I could guess why Hickory Ellins had begun to show signs of bein' restless. By eight o'clock he comes marchin' in and up to the office desk.

"Where's the billiard room?" says he.

"There is no billiard room, brother," says the Doc, steppin' to the front. "Here we have eliminated all of those things that might disturb our beautiful peace and quiet."

"Have, eh?" grunts Hickory. "Then where can I find three others to make up a bridge game?"

"Card playing," says the Doc, putting his thumb and forefingers together, "is not allowed in the Restorium."

"Sorrowing sisters by the sea!" remarks Mr. Ellins. "No billiards! No cards! Say, what the merry Mithridates do you think I'm going to do with myself from now until twelve o'clock, eh?"

"By referring to the rules of this establishment, Mr. Ellins," says the Doc, speakin' cold and reprov'in', "you will see that the general retiring hour is fixed at nine-thirty. At nine-forty-five the gas is all turned off."

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"What!" roars Hickory. "Think you're going to put me to bed at nine-thirty?"

"You are at liberty to sit up in the dark, if you choose," the Doc comes back at him. "Any guest who is dissatisfied with the manner in which the Restorium is conducted has the option of leaving."

"Well, say!" says Mr. Ellins, thumpin' the desk earnest, "I am dissatisfied! Buttermilk and vesper services! Huh! Do you suppose I've paid two weeks in advance for such a dose? Where's your 'phone?"

With that he calls up New York, gets his chauffeur on the wire, and orders him to have the car here first thing in the morning, even if he has to start before light.

"And what is more," says Mr. Ellins, walkin' back to the Doc, "I propose to buy the rest of this hill and open a real live hotel as close to your place as I can put it. There'll be something going on in it all the time, if I have to make everything free, and you can bet your last dollar the wine list will have something besides buttermilk on it! There'll be billiard tables, bowling alleys, a dance hall, and a brass band playing all night. I'll fix your beautiful peace and quiet for you!"

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The Doc, he smiles a kind of sanctified smile and points to the clock. "In just forty-five minutes," says he, "the lights go out."

That's all the satisfaction Mr. Ellins gets, too; so he takes me in tow and we beat it 'steen times around the verandas, him stating his opinions of restoriums in general, Cousin Martha in partic'lar, and now and then shootin' a sarcastic remark at me. But when he sees the other victims begin sneakin' off one by one he growls out:

"Well, son, I suppose they'll be locking us out if we don't follow suit. Get the keys to our rooms."

First off I thought I could have a great snooze; but it's such a blamed quiet place that I found myself wide awake, with my ear strained to see if I couldn't hear something. After an hour or so of that, I gets up and sits by the open window; but as there ain't any moon or any street lights, it's like starin' down a coalhole.

I was wondering if the country was always as black as that at night, and what would happen to anyone that strayed out into it, when all of a sudden I hears a window raised, and way down in the basement under the dining room I sees a bright light shinin' out. "Hello!" thinks I. "Some of the help must be bustin' the rules and regulations."

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By leanin' out and rubberin' I could look down into the room. And, say, the shock almost tumbled me out. For there's the Doc sittin' in his shirtsleeves with four other gents around a green topped table decorated with stacks of chips. The Doc is just dealin', and before the shade is pulled down again I had time to see him reach under the lower deck and haul up a decanter that might have been full of cold tea.

Well, say, I don't do a thing but hustle into my clothes and chase down the corridor to Mr. Ellins' room. Is he int'rested in the tale? He's all of that.

"Torchy," says he, "if you can lead me down to that game, I—I'll forgive you. Perhaps I'll do better than that."

I used up half a box of matches findin' the way; but at last we located the light comin' through the transom.

"Good work!" he whispers. "Now you go back to bed and enjoy a long night's rest."

Sure I did—not. I wouldn't have missed hearin' that exchange of happy greetin's for a farm. And the way the Doc chokes up and splutters tryin' to explain things was somethin' lovely. He was gettin' himself as twisted as a pretzel, when Old Hickory breaks in.

"That's all right, Doc," says he. "Innocent little relaxation. I understand perfectly. Now, what's the ante?"

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Well, after that the conversation wasn't so excitin'; nothing but, "I'll take three cards," or "Raise you two more blues." So I sneaks back and falls into the hay once more.

At breakfast Mr. Ellins shows up more smilin' and chipper than I'd ever seen him anywhere before. He puts away three soft boiled eggs, a couple of lamb chops, and two cups of coffee made special for him. The Doc he follows us out to the limousine.

"Sorry to have you go so soon, Mr. Ellins," says he, rubbin' one hand over the other, "very sorry indeed, sir. And—er—about those memoranda from my assistants. I will see that they are redeemed, you know."

"Those I O U's?" says Mr. Ellins. "Oh, you tell the boys I tore 'em up. Yours, too, Doctor. I had my fun out of the game. So long."

And for the next four miles Old Hickory don't do much but gaze out on the landscape and chuckle.

"Was that a bluff about buildin' that hotel?" says I after awhile.

"Well," says Mr. Ellins, "not exactly; but I think I shall present the Restorium with a pipe organ instead."

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CHAPTER XIV

IN ON THE OOLONG

Course it was a cinch; but Piddie ain't got done wonderin' yet how I did it. I can tell that by the puzzled way he has of lookin' me over when he thinks I ain't noticin'.

You see, we'd been havin' a quiet week at the Corrugated. This fine spell of weather has braced Old Hickory up until he almost forgets how he's cast himself for the great grouch collector. Things must have been runnin' smooth, too; for he can even read about the Return from Elba plans without chuckin' the mornin' paper into the waste basket and gettin' purple behind the ears.

Then, all of a sudden here the other afternoon, Piddie comes trottin' out of the private office all flustered up and begins pawin' excited through the big bond safe. He's hardly got started at that before there comes three rings on the buzzer for him, and he trots back to see what the old man wants now. Next there are hurry calls for the general auditor and the head of the contract department, and before Mr. Ellins gets through he's had every chief in the shop up on the carpet and put 'em through the third degree. Way out by my gate I could hear him layin' down the law to 'em, and they comes out lookin' wild and worried.

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Which don't get me excited any at all. I worked in the newspaper office too long and saw too many Sunday editions go to press for that. So when I hears him yell for me I don't jump over the desk and get goose flesh up the back. I keeps right on snappin' rubber bands at the spring water bottle until he's shouted a couple more times. Then I winks at the row of lady typists and strolls in, calm and easy.

"Yes, sir?" says I.

"See here, boy!" says he. "Do you happen by any chance to know where that son of mine might be found at this moment?"

"Mr. Robert?" says I. "Nix."

"No, of course you don't!" says Old Hickory, glarin' at me. "No one around this precious asylum for undeveloped cerebellums seems to know anything they ought to. Bah!"

"Yes, sir," says I.

"Don't grin at me that way!" he snaps. "Get out! No, stay where you are! If you don't know where Robert is, where do you think he might be found?"

"Tried any of his clubs?" says I.

He had, all of 'em. Also he'd had him paged through four hotel grill rooms and called up three brokers' offices.

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"Well, if he ain't havin' a late lunch, or playin' billiards, or watchin' the stock board, I give it up," says I. "Maybe you've noticed that Mr. Robert ain't been in many afternoons lately."

"Huh! Perhaps I haven't, though!" grunts Old Hickory. "But this time it is important that he should be here. Young man, you seem to have less wool on your wits than most of the office force; so I am going to confide to you that unless we find Robert before four-thirty o'clock this afternoon the Corrugated Trust Company will lose a lot of money."

"Oh, if it's a case of savin' the next dividend," says I, "I'll take another think. I expect you asked for him at the house?"

"He was there at one-fifteen and left twenty minutes later," says Mr. Ellins.

"Yes; but what kind of clothes was he wearin'?" says I.

"Clothes!" snorts out Old Hickory. "What the blithering——"

"Lemme ask his man," says I, grabbin' the desk 'phone. "Plaza—yes, Plaza, double O double

three sixty-one. Sure! You got it. Say, Mr. Ellins, that butler of yours don't burn the carpet movin' fast, does he? He must—Hello! I want to talk to Walters. Ah, never mind who I am, switch him on!" And inside of two minutes I have the report. "Frock coat and silk lid," says I. "See? Society date."

"Huh!" says the old man. "That settles it. He's tagging around after that young lady violinist again. Might have guessed; for since she's come back from Paris he has taken about as much interest in business as a cat does in astronomy. But to-morrow morning we'll—"

"Say," I breaks in, "if it's a case of young lady, why not locate her and then scout for Mr. Robert in the neighborhood? That ought to be easy."

"Think so?" says he. "Well, young man, you have my permission to tackle the job. Her name is Inez Webster. I don't know where she lives, or with whom she's staying; but she's somewhere in New York. Now, how will you begin?"

"By rubberin' at Mr. Robert's date pad," says I.

"Good!" says Old Hickory. "No one else thought of that," and he leads the way in and unlocks Mr. Robert's rolltop. "Now what do those scratches mean?"

"I. W. 2:15," says I, readin' it off. "The arrow points to Inez. He must be with her now."

"Wherever that is!" growls Mr. Ellins. "Go on."

"Say, lemme think a minute," says I, slippin' into the swing chair and doin' the Sherlock gaze at the desk.

"Oh, certainly!" says he, snappy and sarcastic. "Take a nap over it! Plenty of time!" and with that he pads back into his office and slams the door.

Now I didn't like pawin' through the pigeon-holes or drawers; but when I happens to glance at the waste basket I feels more at home. In a jiffy I has it dumped on the rug. There was an empty cigarette box, the usual collection of circulars, a dozen torn business letters, and so on. It looked like a hopeless hunt, too, until I runs across this invitation card announcin' that the Misses Pulsifer will be at home from two-fifteen until five-thirty. There's a Fort Washington Road address, and down in one corner it says "music." Also to-day's the day.

"Whoop!" says I, stowin' away the card. "Me for the Misses Pulsifers' on a long shot. Hey, Mr. Ellins!" I shouts, stickin' my head in the door. "Can I draw two bones for expense money? I'm on the trail."

"The blazes you are!" says he.

"Yep," says I. "Mebbe it's a false scent; but if I find him what's the message?"

"Just ask Robert," says he, "if it has occurred to him that those P. K. & Q. contract copies have got to be filed with the bonding company this afternoon. That's all."

"Right!" says I. "P. K. & Q. contracts. I'm off."

Ever get as far up into the northwest corner of the island as Fort Washington Road? Then you know how many blocks it is from the nearest subway station. Not havin' time for a half-hour stroll, I takes a Broadway express, jumps it at 157th, hunts up a taxi, and turns down the red flag.

"Now don't try zigzaggin' around to roll up mileage," says I to the shuffer; "but beat it straight there."

Some swell places up in that neck of Manhattan, what? Why, some of them folks has so much back yard they keep their own cow. When we rolls in through a pair of big stone gates I begin to suspect that the Misses Pulsifers was lady plutes for fair, and the size of the house had me stunned.

"I'm swell lookin' front door comp'ny, I am," thinks I, handin' over a dollar thirty to the taxi pirate and paradin' in across the red carpet. "Now what is it I tell the butler when he pushes out his tray?"

All the guard they has on the door, though, is a French maid, and when she starts to look me over suspicious I shoves the invitation card at her.

"Say, Marie," says I, "where's the doin's?"

"Pardon?" says she. "What you wish?"

"Ah, where do they keep the music?" says I.

"Ze musicale?" says she. "It is commence. S-s-s-sh!" and she points down the hallway.

"Yes, I was afraid I'd be late," says I. "Glad they didn't wait. I'll sneak into a back seat."

Did I? Well, say, I didn't know what I was runnin' into; for as I pushes through some draperies I finds myself on the side lines of the biggest herd of girls I ever saw collected in one room before. Why, there was rows and rows of 'em, all in white dresses, and the minute I steps in

about two hundred pairs of eyes revolves my way.

Talk about jumpin' into the limelight! I felt like I'd wandered out on the stage while the big scene was goin' on. Then comes the giggles, and business with the elbows of passin' the nudge along. They all forgets what's doin' up on the platform by the piano and pays strict attention to me. Blush? Say, I'll bet my ears ain't got back their reg'lar color yet!

Seemed like my feet was stuck to the floor, too. Maybe it was an hour I stood there, and maybe it was only a minute; but at last I takes one wild look around over that girl convention and then I backs out. I'd seen him, though. Way over by an open window on the other side was Mr. Robert, one of the four men in that whole crowd. So out the front door I rushes and then tiptoes around the veranda until I came to him.

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And he wa'n't gazin' around watchin' for casual butters-in. Not Mr. Robert! All he's seein' is the slim young lady standin' up on the platform with the violin tucked under her chin. You couldn't blame him much, either; for, while I ain't any judge of the sort of music she was teasin' out of the strings, I'll say this much: The way she was doin' it was well worth watchin'. The swing of that elbow of hers, and the Isadora Duncan sway of her shoulders as she hits the high notes sure did have some class to it. He's so busy followin' her motions that he don't even know when I leans in within six inches of him and whispers. So I has to give him the gentle prod.

"Eh!" says he, whirlin' around. "Why, what the—Torchy!"

"Uh-huh," says I. "Crawl out backwards, can't you?"

"Wha—what's that!" says he, whisperin' sort of husky.

"You got to do it," says I. "I was sent up special to get you."

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"Why, what's the matter?" says he.

"P. K. & Q. contracts," says I. "Did you file 'em yet?"

"By Jove, no!" he groans under his breath. "I—I forgot."

"Then it's a case of beat it," says I.

"But—but I can't!" says Mr. Robert. "I can't possibly leave now, right in the middle of——"

"That's so," says I. "She's lookin' this way now. But where'd you stow the contracts? Remember that, do you?"

"Why, of course," says he. "Third left hand drawer of my desk, in a document box."

"S enough!" says I. "I'll 'phone down and tell 'em. They'll fix it up. Don't move; she's lookin' your way again."

"Wait!" says he, behind his hand. "I must see you before you go back, after the concert is over. Wait for me in the garden."

"In the garden, Maud, it is," says I, and with that I slides back to the front entrance and gets Marie to lead me to the 'phone booth.

Well, I'd got the joint all sized up now. It's one of these swell boardin' schools for girls, where they take piano lessons and are exposed to French and the German measles. And, now my knees has quit wabblin' and I was safe out of the hall, I was almost glad I'd come up and give the young ladies such a treat. I couldn't help admirin' Mr. Robert's nerve, though; for he must have known what he was lettin' himself in for when he follows Inez up there. But when they get it that bad there's no tellin' how reckless they'll be.

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If it had been all the same to Mr. Robert, my next move would have been to get away from the spot as quick as my feet would let me; but so long as he'd assigned me a waiting part that's what it had to be. With Marie's help I finds the garden out at the back of the house and makes myself comf'table on a rustic seat. It's a flossy garden scene, all right, with winding paths, and flowerbeds, and cute little summer houses, and all sorts of bushes in bloom. Now and then I could hear music driftin' out, and when a piece was through the hand clappin' would commence, like a shower on a tin roof.

Say, it had sittin' behind the brass rail in the office beat to a froth, and I was enjoyin' it, lazy and comf'table, with my feet up on the bench and my head back; when all at once there's a big spasm of applause, the doors openin' on the back veranda are swung open, everybody starts chatterin' together, there's a swish and a rustle and a clatter of high heels; and the next thing I knew the whole blamed garden was full of 'em.

Girls! Say, all the fifty-seven varieties was represented,—tall ones, short ones, thin ones, plump ones, and plain fatties. There was aristocratic brunettes, and dimpled blondes, and every shade between. They ranged from fourteen up, and they sported all kinds of hair dressin', from double pleated braids to the latest thing in turban swirls. And there was little Willie, hemmed in by a twelve-foot wall on three sides and solid squads of girls on the fourth!

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First they began sailin' by in groups of twos and threes and fours, all givin' me the goo-goo stare and snickerin'. Honest, you'd thought I was some kind of a humorous curiosity, specially exhibited for the occasion. Ain't they the limit, though? And the whispered remarks they passed!

"Why, Madge! Aren't you just killing! Whose brother did you say you thought—Yes, and so curly, too!"

I try to forget that red thatch of mine most of the time; but this was no place to practice bein' absent minded. It didn't seem to make any difference whether I put my hat on or left it off, they were wise to the ruddy hair. All I could do was to squeeze myself into one corner of the seat and pretend not to notice 'em. What I wanted most was to stand up and holler for Mr. Robert. Why in blazes didn't he show up, anyway?

I'd been enjoyin' this gen'ral inspection stunt for four or five minutes, when maids begun circulatin' among the mob with trays of sandwiches and plates of chicken salad, and every last one of 'em stopped at my station.

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"No, thanks," says I. Think I wanted to give a food destroyin' performance before an audience like that? I was just wavin' away the fourth offer of picnic grub when I hears a little squeal come from a bunch of new recruits, and when I looks up to see what's happening now—well, you'd never guess. It's Miss Vee! You know, the pink and white queen I was tellin' you about meetin' at the swell dancin' class where I subbed for Izzie in the cloakroom and was invited out to join the merry throng.

She ain't got the ballroom costume on, of course; but I'd know them big gray eyes and that straw colored hair and that sweet pea complexion in any disguise. For a second she stands there gazin' at me sort of surprised and puzzled, like she didn't know whether to give me the nod or just put up her chin and sail by. If I could I'd looked the other way, so's to give her a chance to duck recognizin' me; but I couldn't do anything but stare back. And the next thing I knew she's comin' straight for me.

"Why, Torchy!" says she, sort of purry and confidential. "You!" And blamed if she wa'n't holdin' out both hands.

Well, say, you can't imagine what a difference that makes to me. It was like fallin' off a roof and landin' in a hammock. What did I care for that push of young lady fluffs then?

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"Sure thing, it's me," says I, grabbin' the hands before she could change her mind. "Say, have a seat, won't you, Miss Vee?"

"Oh, then you haven't forgotten?" says she.

"Me? Forget?" says I. "Say, Miss Vee, I'll keep right on rememberin' that spiel we had together until breathin' goes out of fashion—and then some! Gee! but I'm glad you happened along!"

"But how is it," says she, "that you—"

"Special commission," says I. "I'm waitin' here for Mr. Robert Ellins."

"Oh!" says she. "And have you had some salad and sandwiches?"

"No; but I'm ready for 'em now," says I. "That is, if—Say, you don't mind doin' this, do you?"

"Why should I?" says she.

"Oh, well," says I, "you see I ain't—well, I'm kind of outclassed here, and I didn't know but some of the other girls might—"

"Let them dare!" says Miss Vee, straightenin' up and glancin' around haughty. My! but she's a thoroughbred! There was one group standin' a little way off watchin' us; but that look of Miss Vee's scattered 'em as though she'd turned the hose on them. Next minute she was smilin' again. "You see," she goes on, sittin' close, "I'm not much afraid."

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"You're a hummer, you are!" says I, lookin' her over approvin'.

"There, there!" says she. "I see that you must have something to eat right away. Here, Hortense! There! Now you'll have a cup of tea, won't you?"

"Anything you pass out goes with me," says I, "even to tea."

It was my first offense in the oolong line, and, honest, I couldn't tell now how it tasted; but I knew all about how Vee handles a cup and saucer, though, and the way she has of lookin' at you over the rim. Say, she's the only girl I ever knew who could talk more'n a minute to a feller without the aid of giggles. There's some sense to what she has to say, too, and all the way you can tell whether she's joshin' or not is by watchin' her eyes. And me, I wa'n't losin' any tricks.

She tells me all about how she's been to school here ever since she was a little girl. Seems she's as shy on parents as I am; but she has an aunt that she lives with between school terms. This is her finishin' year, and as soon as the final doin's are over she and Aunty are due to sail for Europe.

"Coming back in September?" says I.

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"Oh, no indeed!" says she. "Perhaps not for two years."

"Gee!" says I.

"Well?" says she, and I finds myself lookin' square into them big gray eyes of hers.

"Oh, nothing," says I; "only—only it sounds a long ways off. And, say, you don't happen to have a spare photo, do you, maybe one taken in that dress you wore the night of the ball?"

"Silly!" says she. "But suppose I have?"

"Why," says I,— "why, I thought—well, say, it wouldn't do any harm to leave my new address, would it! That's the number, care of Mrs. Zenobia Preble."

"Zenobia!" says she. "Why, I know who she is. Do you live with——"

"I'm half adopted already," says I. "Bully old girl, ain't she? And say, Miss Vee——"

It was just about then I had the feelin' that some one was tryin' to butt in on this two-part dialogue of ours, and as I looks up, sure enough there's Mr. Robert, with his eyes wide and his mouth half open, watchin' us.

"Well, it's all over," says I. "Mr. Robert's waitin' for me. Good luck and—and——Oh, what's the use? Give my regards to Europe, will you? Good-by!" And with that we shakes hands and I breaks away.

"I don't wish to seem curious," says Mr. Robert, as we walks out to his cab, "but—er—is this something recent?"

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"Not very," says I. "We've met before."

"Then allow me," says he, "to congratulate you on your good taste."

"Thanks!" says I. "Same to you; and I ain't got so much on you at that, eh?"

We drops the subject there; but Mr. Robert seems so pleased over something or other that we'd gone twenty blocks before he remembers what brought me up.

"Oh, by the way," says he, "I suppose there'll be no end of row about my forgetting to send down those contracts. The Governor was wild, wasn't he?"

"He was wild, all right," says I, "without knowin' whether you'd forgot 'em or not."

"But when you 'phoned him," says Mr. Robert, "of course he——"

"Ah, say!" says I. "Do I look like a trouble hunter? I 'phoned Piddie—told him to sneak 'em out, send 'em down, and keep his mouth shut. All you got to do is act innocent."

Never mind the hot air Mr. Robert passes out after that. What tickles me most is the package that came for me yesterday by messenger. I finds it on my plate at dinner time; so both the old ladies was on hand when I opens it.

"Why, Torchy!" says Aunt Martha, lookin' at me shocked and scandalized. "A young lady's picture!"

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"Yep," says I. "Ain't she a dream, though?"

And, say, Martha'd been lecturin' me yet if it hadn't been for Zenobia breakin' in.

"Do remember, Martha," says she, "that you were not always sixty-three years old, and that once——Why, bless me! This must be Alicia Vernon's child. Is there a name on the back? There is! Verona Ashton Hemmingway, heiress to all that is left of poor Dick's fortune. She's a beauty, just like her mother."

"She's all of that," says I.

It didn't make any diff'rence to Aunt Martha who she was, though. She didn't think it right for young ladies to give away their pictures to young men. She was for askin' me how long I'd known Miss Vee, and——

"There, now, Martha," said Zenobia, "suppose we don't."

That's how it is I can guess who it was blew themselves for a corkin' big silver frame, and put Vee's picture in it, and stood it on my bureau. Course, Vee's on her way to foreign parts now, and there's no tellin' when she's comin' back. Besides, there ain't anything in it, anyway. But somehow that picture in the silver frame seems to help some.

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CHAPTER XV

BATTING IT UP TO TORCHY

Nobody had to point him out to me. I hadn't been holdin' down the chair behind the brass gate more'n two days before I knew who was the living joke on the Corrugated Trust Company's

force. It's Uncle Dudley, of course.

And, say, my coppin' that out don't go to prove I'm a Mr. Cute. Any mush-head could have picked him after one glimpse of the old vintage Prince Albert, the back number silk lid, and the white Chaunceys he wears on each side of his face. That get-up would be good for a quiet smile even over in Canarsie; but when you come to plant it in the midst of such a sporty aggregation as the Corrugated carries on the payroll—why, you've got the comic chuckles comin' over fast.

"Say, Piddie," says I the second morning, after watchin' it blow in, "who's the seed, eh?"

"That?" says Piddie. "Oh, that's old Dudley."

"Does he wear the uniform reg'lar," says I, "or is he celebratin' some anniversary?"

And Piddie almost allows himself to grin as he explains how that's the same costume Dudley has come down to work in every day for the last fifteen years.

"Well, it's a flossy outfit, all right," says I. "What is he, one of the directors?"

No, he wa'n't. He's some sort of subassistant auditor with a salary of eighteen per. You know the kind—one of these deadwood specimens that stand a show of gettin' the prunin' hook every time there's a shake-up. Most every office has a few of 'em, hangin on like last year's oak leaves in the park; but it ain't often they can qualify as comic supplements.

Not that Uncle Dudley tries to be humorous. He's the quietest, meekest old relic you ever saw, slidin' in soft and easy with his hat off, and walkin' almost as though he had his shoes in his hand. But the faded umbrella under one arm and the big buttonhole bouquet he always wears puts him in the joke book class without takin' the face lambrequins into account at all.

Can I let all that get by me without passin' out some josh? You can see me, can't you? Never mind all the bright and cunnin' remarks I sprung on Uncle Dudley now; but for awhile there I made a point of puttin' over something fresh every day. Why, it was a cinch!

All the comeback I ever got out of him, though, was that batty old smile of his, kind of sad and gentle, as if I was remindin' him of times gone by. And there ain't a lot of satisfaction in that, you know. Now, I can chuck the giddy persiflage at Piddie day in and day out, and enjoy doin' it, because it always gets him so wild. Also there's more or less thrill to slippin' the gay retort across to Old Hickory Ellins now and then, because there's a giddy chance of gettin' fired for it. But to rub it into a non-resister like Uncle Dudley—well, what's the use?

So after awhile I cut it out altogether, leavin' him for such amateur cut-ups as Izzy Budheimer and Flannel Haggerty to practice on. Then little by little me and old Dudley got more or less chummy, what with me steerin' him around to my fav'rite dairy lunch joint and all that. And, say, we must have been a great pair, sittin' side by side in the armchairs, puttin' away sweitzer sandwiches and mugs of chickory blend; him in his tall lid, and with his quiet, old timy manners, and me—well, I guess you get the tableau.

I used to like hearin' him talk, he uses such a soothin', genteel brand of conversation; nothing fancy, you know, but plain, straightaway goods. Mostly he tells me about his son, who's livin' out in California somewhere and is just branchin' out in the cement block buildin' business. Son is messin' in politics more or less too; mixin' it up with the machine, and gettin' the short end of the returns every trip. But it's on account of this reform stunt of his that the old gent seems to be so proud of him, not appearin' to care whether he ever got elected to anything or not.

He don't say so much about the married daughter that he lives with over in Jersey; but I don't think much about that until after I've let him tow me over to dinner once and met Son in Law Bennett. He's a flashy proposition, this young Mr. Bennett is, havin' an interest in a curb brokerage firm that rents window space on Broad-st. and has desk room down on William. Let him tell it, though, and, providin' some of his deals go through, he's goin' to have Morgan squealin' for help before the year is out.

And I find that at home Uncle Dudley is rated somewhere between the fam'ly cat and the front doormat. Mr. Bennett don't exactly gag the old man and lock him in the cellar. He ignores him when he can, and when he has to notice him he makes it plain that he's standin' the disgrace as well as he can.

"So you came over with the old sport, did you?" says Bennett to me. "Batty old duffer, eh? That comes of being a dead one for so long. Manages to hang on with the Corrugated, though, don't he? He'd better, too! I'm not running any old folks' home here."

But it wa'n't to show off how he stood with his son in law that Uncle Dudley had lugged me along. He'd got so used to bein' dealt out for a twospot that he didn't seem to mind. He didn't claim to be anything more even at the office.

It's his flower garden, out back of the house, that Uncle Dudley had got me 'way out there to see; and, while I ain't any expert on that line of displays, I should say this posy patch of his had some class to it. Anyway, seein' it, and findin' out how he rolls off the mattress at sunrise every mornin' to tend it, lets me in for a new view of him. It's this little garden patch and the son out West that makes life worth livin' for him, in spite of Son in Law Bennett.

"Say, Dudley," says I, "why don't you work a combination of the two; go out where you can raise

roses all winter, if the dope these railroad ads. sling out is straight, and be with your son too?"

"I—I can't do that, just yet," says he, sort of hesitatin'. "You see, he hasn't seen me for twelve years, and since then I have—er—well, I've been slipping backward. He doesn't know what a failure I've made of life, and if I gave up here and went on to him—why——"

"I'm on," says I. "He'd spot you for one of the down-and-outers. But you do get it rubbed in here good and plenty, don't you?"

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"From Bennett?" says he. "Oh, he is right, I suppose. He knows how useless I am. But we cannot all succeed, can we? Some of us must stay at the bottom and prop the ladder."

One thing about Uncle Dudley, he had no whine comin'. He takes it all meek and cheerful, and so far as I could make out he's most as useful around the office as a lot of others that gets chesty whenever they think what would happen to the concern if they should be sick for a week. Anyway, there's frequent calls for old Dudley to straighten out this or that; but somehow he never seems to get credit for bein' much more than a sort of a walkin' copybook that remembers what other people don't want to lumber up their valuable brains with. Maybe it's the white mud guards, or his habit of lettin' anyone boss him around, that keeps him down.

And I expect things would have gone on that way, until he either dropped out or got the blue envelope some payday, if it hadn't been for this lid liftin' business up at Albany. Course, you've read how they uncovered first one lot of grafters and then another, and fin'lly, with that last swipe of the muck rake, got the Corrugated rung into the mess? And, say, anyone would think, from some of the papers, that we was all a bunch of crooks down here, spendin' our time feedin' wads of hundred-dollar bills to the yellow dog. Maybe it don't stir up Mr. Robert some thorough, though!

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"Why," I heard him say to the old man, "it's a beastly outrage, that's what it is! All the fellows at the club are chaffing me about it, you know. And besides it's disturbing business frightfully. Look at the tumble our shares took yesterday! I say, Governor, we must send out a denial."

"Huh!" growls Old Hickory. "Who cares a blinkety blanked blank what they say we did? Let 'em prove it!"

Then the next day them checks was sprung on the investigatin' committee, and it looked as though they'd made out their case against the Corrugated. Perhaps there wa'n't doin's on the seventeenth floor that mornin'! Clear out where I sat I could hear the boss callin' for first one man and then another, and Piddie is turkeyin' in and out so excited he don't know whether he's on duty or runnin' bases. Once, when he stops to lean against the spring-water bottle and wipe his dewy brow, I slips up behind and taps him quick on the shoulder.

"Ye-e-e-es, sir!" says he, before he sees who it is.

"Never mind, Piddie," says I. "I was goin' to ask you 'Guilty or not guilty?' But what's the use? Anyone can see it was you that did it."

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"You—you impudent young sauce box!" he begins. "How dare you——"

"Ah, save that for the subpoena server," says I. "He'll be in here after you in a minute. And, say, my guess is that you'll get about ten years on the rockpile."

When the special directors' meetin' gets under way, though, and the big guns of the Corrugated law force got on the job, there was less noise and more electricity in the air. Honest, with all that tiptoein' and whisperin' and serious looks bein' passed around, I didn't even have the gall to guy one of the new typewriter girls. Kind of gets on your nerves, a thing of that kind does, and if a squad of reserves had marched in and pinched the whole outfit, I shouldn't have been so much surprised.

Right in the midst of it too there comes my three rings on the buzzer, and in I sneaks where they're holdin' the inquest. Say, they're all sittin' around the big mahogany directors' table, with the old man at the head, lookin' black and ugly, and grippin' a half smoked cigar butt between his teeth. I could see at a glance they hadn't thrown any scare into him yet. He was just beginning to fight, that's all.

"Boy," says he, "bring in Dudley."

"Yes, sir," says I.

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But, say, my heels dragged some as I went out. Course I didn't know what they wanted of the old boy; but it didn't look to be such a wild guess that they'd picked him to play the goat part. I finds him perched up on his stool, calm and serene, workin' away on the ledgers as industrious as if nothin' special was goin' on.

"Dudley," says I, "are you feelin' strong?"

"Why, Torchy," says he, "I am feeling about as usual, thank you."

"Well, brace yourself then," says I; "for there's rough goin' ahead. You're wanted in on the carpet."

"Me?" says he. "Mr. Ellins wants me?"

"Uh-huh," says I, "him and the rest of 'em. But don't let 'em put any spell on you. It's your cue now to forget the meek and lowly business. I know you ain't strong for bluffin' through a game; but for the love of soup put up a front to-day!"

Dudley, he only smiles and shakes his head. Then off he toddles, wearin' his old ink-stained office coat and even keepin' on the green eye-shade.

Well, I don't know how long they had him on the grill; but it couldn't have been more'n half an hour, for along about three o'clock I strolls into the audit department, and there's old Dudley back on his perch writin' away again.

"Say, are you it?" says I.



WE MUST HAVE BEEN A GREAT PAIR.

"Why, how is that?" says he.

"Did they tie anything to you?" says I. "You know—con you into takin' the blame, or anything like that?"

"Blame for what?" says he. "I don't believe I understand. But nothing of the sort was mentioned. I was merely given some instructions about my work."

"Oh!" says I. "That's all, eh? And you've gone right at it, have you?"

"No," says he. "The fact is, Torchy, I am writing out my resignation."

"What! Quittin'?" says I. "Say, don't you see what a hole that puts you in? Why, it makes you the goat for fair! If you do that you'll need bail inside of forty-eight hours—and you won't get it. Look here, Dudley, take my advice and tear that up."

"But I can't, Torchy," says he, "really, I can't."

"Why not?" says I. "You've got a couple of hands, ain't you? And what'll you do for another job if you chuck this one? Say, why in blazes are you so anxious to take your chances between Sing Sing and the bread line?"

He's there with the explanation, all right, and here's the way it stands: Uncle Dudley has been called on because his partic'lar double-entry trick is to keep the run of the private accounts. All they want him to do is to take descriptions of a couple of checks, dig up the stubs, and juggle his books so the record will fit in with a nice new set of transactions that's just been invented for the purpose.

"But what checks?" says I. "The five thousand plunkers to Mutt & Mudd?"

"Why, yes," says he. "How did you know?"

"Ah, how did I—Say, Dudley, ain't you been readin' the papers lately?" says I.

Would you believe it? He don't know any more about what's in the air than a museum mummy knows of Lobster Square. This little private cyclone that's been turnin' the office upside down ain't so much as ruffled his whiskers. Checks are checks to him, and these special trouble makers don't give him any chills up the back at all. He's been told, though, to use the acid bottle on his books and write in a new version.

"Well, why not do it?" says I. "What's that to you?"

"Why, don't you see," says he, "it would be making a false entry, and—I—I—Well, I've never done such a thing in my life, Torchy, and I can't begin now."

And, say, what do you know about that, eh? Just a piece of phony bookkeepin' that he don't even have to put his name to, his job gone if he don't follow orders, and him almost to the age limit anyway, with Son in Law Bennett ready to shove him on the street the minute he gets the sack!

"Do you mean it?" says I.

He puts his signature to the resignation and hands it over for me to read.

"Say, Dudley," says I, lookin' him up and down, "this listens to me like a bughouse play of yours; but I got to admit that you do it sporty. There's no ocher streak in you."

"I hoped you would understand," says he. "In the circumstances, it was all I could do, you see."

"What I see plainer'n anything else," says I, "is that if this goes through your career is bugged to the limit. When do you want this handed in?"

"As soon as possible," says he. "I suppose I ought to resign at once."

"Resign!" says I. "You'll be lucky if the old man don't have you chucked through the window. Better be waitin' down in the lower corridor when I spring this on Mr. Ellins."

Nothin' of that kind for Uncle Dudley, though. He starts straightenin' up his desk as I goes out, as calm as though he was house cleanin' for a vacation.

And while I'm tryin' to make up my mind how to deliver this document to the main stem and duck an ambulance ride afterwards, the directors' meetin' breaks up. So I finds Old Hickory alone in his private office and slips it casual on the pad in front of him.

"Here, what's this?" he snorts, callin' me back as he opens up the sheet. "Eh? Dudley! Resigns, does he! What, that dried up, goat faced, custard brained, old——Say, boy; ask him what the grizzly grindstones he means by——"

"I did," says I, "and, if you want to know, he's quittin' because he's too straight to cook up the books the way you told him."

"Cook up the books!" gasps Old Hickory, gettin' raspb'ry tinted in the face and displayin' neck veins like a truck horse. "He's been welshing, has he? Perhaps he'd like to turn State's witness? Well, by the great sizzling skyrockets, if that's his trick, I'll give him enough of——"

"Excuse me, Mr. Ellins," I breaks in, "but you're slippin' your clutch. Tricks! Why, he ain't even wise to what you want him to do it for. All he knows is that it's crooked, and he renigs on a general proposition. And, say, when a man's as straight as that, with the workhouse starin' him in the face, he's too valuable to lose, ain't he?"

"Wha-a-at?" gurgles Old Hickory.

"Besides," says I, hurryin' the words to get 'em all out before any violent scene breaks loose, "knowin' all he does about them Mutt & Mudd checks, and with what he don't know about the case, it wouldn't be hardly safe to have him roamin' the streets, would it? Now I leave it to you."

Say, I was lookin' Old Hickory right in the eye, ready to dodge the inkstand or anything else, while I was puttin' that over, and for a minute I thought it was comin' sure. But while he can get as hot under the collar as anyone I ever saw, and twice as quick, he don't go clear off his nut any of the time.

"Young man," says he, calmin' down and motionin' me to a chair, "as usual, you seem to be more or less well informed on this matter yourself. Now let's have the rest of it."

And just like that, all of a sudden, it's batted up to me. So I lets it come, with all the details about Uncle Dudley's frosty home life, and the reformer son out West that still thinks father is makin' good. He sits there and listens to every word too. Not that he comes in with the sympathetic sigh, or shows signs of being troubled by mist in the eye corners. He just throws in an occasional grunt now and then and drums his fat finger-tips on the chair arm.

"Huh!" says he. "Babes and sucklings! But I've had worse advice that has cost me a lot more. Well, I suppose an old fool like that is dangerous to have drifting around. But I don't want him here just now, either. Um-m-m! Where did you say this son of his lived?"

"Just out of Los Angeles," says I.

"All right," says Old Hickory. "Tell him he goes west Tuesday as traveling auditor to our second vice president. He'll bring up at Los Angeles about the middle of the month—and about that time it may happen that he'll be retired on full pay. But I'll keep this resignation, as a curiosity."

Now don't ask me to describe how old Dudley takes it; for when he gets the full partic'lars of the decision it near keels him over. And what part of it do you say tickles him most? That the books don't have to be juggled!

"It wasn't like Mr. Ellins to countenance an act of that sort, not in the least," says he, "and I am very glad that he has changed his mind."

"Say, Dudley," says I, "you're a wonder, you are."

And it was all I could do to keep from askin' him if he thought he owned the only bottle of ink

eradicator there was in New York.

Do I know who did fix up them entries? Well, by the nervous motions of a certain party next mornin', I could give a guess.

"Piddie," says I, "if they ever get you on the stand, you want to wear interferin' pads between your knees, so they won't hear the bones rattle."

CHAPTER XVI

THROWING THE LINE TO SKID

Say, this is twice I've been let in wrong on Skid Mallory. Remember him, don't you? Well, he's our young college hick that I helped steer up against Baron Kazedky when he landed that big armor plate order. Did they make Skid a junior partner for that, or paint his name on a private office door? Not so you'd notice it. Maybe they was afraid a sudden boost like that would make him dizzy. But they promotes him to the sales department and adds ten to his pay envelope. I was most as tickled over it as Mallory was, too.

"Didn't I tell you?" says I. "You're a comer, you are! Why, I expect in ten or a dozen years more you'll be sharin' in the semi-annuals and ridin' down to the office in a taxi."

"Perhaps I may, Torchy—in ten or a dozen years," says he, kind of slow and sober.

I could guess what he was thinking of then. It was the girl, that sweet young thing that Brother Dick towed in here along last winter, some Senator's daughter that Skid had got chummy with when he was doin' his great quarterback act and havin' his picture printed in the sportin' extras.

"How's that affair comin' on?" says I; for I ain't heard him mention her in quite some time.

"It's all off," says he, shruggin' them wide shoulders of his. "That is, there never was anything in it, you know, to begin with."

"Oh, there wa'n't, eh?" says I. "Forgot all about that picture you used to carry around in the little leather case, have you?"

Skid, he flushes up a bit at that, and one hand goes up to his left inside pocket. Then he laughs foolish. "It isn't I who have forgotten," says he.

"Oh-ho!" says I. "Well, I wouldn't have thought her the kind to shift sudden, when she seemed so ___"

But Mallory gives me the choke off sign, and as we walks up Broadway he gradually opens up more and more on the subject until I've got a fair map of the situation. Seems that Sis ain't exactly set him adrift without warnin'. He'd sort of helped cut the cable himself. She'd begun by writin' to him every week, tellin' him all about the lively season she was havin' in Washington, and how much fun she was gettin' out of life. She even put in descriptions of her new dresses, and some of her dance orders, and now and then a bridge score, or a hand painted place card from some dinner she'd been to.

And Skid, thinkin' it all over in the luxury of his nine by ten boudoir, got to wonderin' what attractions along that line he could hold out to a young lady that was used to blowin' in more for one new spring lid than he could earn in a couple of weeks.

"And orchids are her favorite flowers!" says he. "Ever buy any orchids, Torchy?"

"Not guilty," says I; "but they ain't so high, are they, that you couldn't splurge on a bunch now and then? What's the tariff on 'em, anyway?"

"At times you can get real nice ones for a dollar apiece," says he.

"Phe-e-e-ew!" says I. "She has got swell tastes."

"It isn't her fault," says he. "She's never known anything different."

So what does Skid do but slow up on the correspondence, skippin' an answer here and there, and coverin' only two pages when he did write. For one thing, he didn't have so much to tell as she did. I knew that; for I'd seen more or less of Mallory durin' the last few months, and I knew he was playin' his cards close to his vest.

Not that he was givin' any real lifelike miser imitation; but he didn't indulge in high priced café luncheons on Saturdays, like most of the bunch; he'd scratched his entry at the college club; and he was soakin' away his little surplus as fast as he got his fingers on it.

Course, that programme meant sendin' regrets to most of the invites he got, and spendin' his

evenin's where it didn't cost much to get in or out. One frivolous way he had of killin' time was by teachin' 'rithmetic to a class of new landed Zinskis at a settlement house over on the East Side.

"Ah, what's the use?" I used to tell him. "They'd learn to do compound interest on their fingers in a month, anyway, and the first thing you know you'll be payin' rent to some of 'em."

But he was pretty level headed about most things, I will say that for Mallory, specially the way he sized up this girl business. Seems at last she got the idea he was grouchy at her about something; and when he didn't deny, or come to the front with any reason—why, she just quit sendin' the billy ducks.

"So you're never going to see her any more, eh?" says I.

"Well," says he, "I supposed until within an hour or so ago that I never should. And then— Well, she's here, Torchy; came yesterday, and I presume she expects to see me to-night."

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"That's encouragin', anyway," says I.

But Mallory don't seem so much cheered up. It turns out that Sis is spendin' a few days with friends here, waitin' for the rest of the fam'ly to come on and sail for Europe. They're givin' a farewell dinner dance for her, and Skid is on the list.

The trouble is he can't make up his mind whether to go or stay away. One minute he's dead sure he won't, and the next minute he admits he don't see what harm there would be in takin' one last look.

"But, then," says Mallory, "what good would that do?"

"I know," says I. "There's a young lady friend of mine on the other side too. Say, Mallory, I guess we belong in the lobster class."

And when we splits up on the corner Skid has decided against the party proposition, and goes off towards his boardin' house with his chin down on his collar and his heels draggin'.

So I wa'n't prepared for the joyous smile and the frock coat regalia that Mallory wears when he blows into the office about ten-forty-five next forenoon. He's sportin' a spray of lilies of the valley in his lapel, and swingin' his silver topped stick, and by the look on his face you'd think he was hearin' the birdies sing in the treetops.

246

"Tra-la-la, tra-la-lee!" says I, throwin' open the brass gate for him. "Is it a special holiday, or what?"

"It's a very special one," says he, thumpin' me on the back and whisperin' husky in my ear. "Torchy, I'm married!"

"Wha-a-at!" I splutters. "Who to? When?"

"To Sis," says he, "half an hour ago."

"Eh?" says I. "Mean to say you've been and eloped with the Senator's daughter?"

"Eloped!" says he, as though he'd never heard the word before. "Why, no—er—that is, we just went out and—and—"

Oh, no, they hadn't eloped! They'd merely slid out of the ballroom about three A.M., after dancin' seventeen waltzes together, snuggled into a hansom cab, and rode around the park until daylight talkin' it over. Then she'd slipped back into the house, got into her travelin' dress while he was off changin' his clothes, met again at eight o'clock, chased down to City Hall after a license, and then dragged a young rector away from his boiled eggs and toast to splice 'em.

But Skid didn't call that elopin'. Why, Sis had left word with the butler to tell her friends all about it, and the first thing they did after it was over was to send a forty-word collect telegram to papa. And Mallory, he'd just dropped around to arrange with Old Hickory for a little vacation before they beat it for Atlantic City.

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"So that ain't elopin', eh?" says I. "I expect you'd call that a sixty-yard run on a forward pass, or something like that? Well, the old man's inside. Luck to you."

Mallory wa'n't on the carpet long, and when he comes out I asks how he made back.

"Oh, bully!" says he. "I'm to have ten days."

"With or without?" says I.

"Oh, I forgot to ask," says he.

Little things like bein' on the payroll or not wa'n't botherin' him then. He gives me a bone crushin' grip and swings out to the elevator in a rush; for he's been away from Sis nearly half an hour now.

Exceptin' a picture postcard or two, showin' the iron pier and a bathin' scene, I didn't hear from Mr. and Mrs. Mallory for more'n a week. And then one afternoon I gets a 'phone message from Skid, saying that they're all settled in a little flat up on Washington Heights and they'll be

pleased to have me come up to dinner.

"It's our very first dinner, you know," says he, "and Sis is going to get it all by herself. I suggested that we try the first one on you." 248

"That don't scare me any," says I. "I've lived on sinkers and pie too long to duck amateur cookin'. I'll be there."

I was on the grin all the afternoon too, thinkin' of the joshes I was goin' to hand him. At three minutes of closing time I was all ready to sneak out, with one eye on the clock and the other on Piddie, when in blows a ruby faced, thick waisted gent with partly gray hair, a heavyweight jaw, and a keen pair of twinklin' gray eyes. He looks prosperous and important, and he proceeds to act right to home.

"Boy," says he, pushin' through the gate, "is this the general office of the Corrugated Trust Company?"

"Yep," says I. "That's what it says on the door."

"There is employed here, I understand," he goes on, "a young man by the name of Mallory."

Say, I was wide awake at that. "Mallory?" says I. "I can find out. Did you want to see him on business?"

"It is a personal matter," says he. "Is he here?"

"Now, let's not rush this," says I. "My orders is to find out——"

"Very well," says the gent, "there is my card. And perhaps I should mention that I have the honor—er—I suppose, to be his father in law." 249

Say, and here I was, up against the Senator himself. Course it was my cue to shrivel up and do the low salaam; but all I can think of at the minute is to look him over and grin.

"Gee!" says I. "Then you're on his trail, eh?"

Maybe it was the grin fetched him; for them square mouth corners flickers a little and he don't throw any fit. "Evidently you are somewhat familiar with the circumstances," says he. "May I ask if you are sufficiently favored with the confidence of my new son in law to know where he and my—er—his wife happen, to be just now?"

"I admit it," says I; "but if you're thinkin' of springin' any hammer music on Skid, you can look for another party, for you won't get it out of me in a thousand years!"

"Ah!" says he. "I see Young Lochinvar has at least one champion. Allow me to state that my intentions are pacific. My wife and I merely wish, before sailing, to pay a formal call on our daughter and her new husband. Now if you could give me their address——"

"Why, say, Senator," says I, "if you ain't lookin' to start anything, I can do better. I'm going right up there myself this minute, and if Mrs.——" 250

"She is waiting downstairs in the cab," says he. "Nothing would suit us better."

And, say, maybe it wa'n't just what I should have done, but blamed if I could see how to dodge it when it's up to me that way. So it's me climbin' up on the front seat with the driver of a fancy hotel taxi, papa and mamma behind, and off rolls the surprise party.

Well, you know them cut rate apartment houses, with a flossy reception room, all marble slabs and burlap panels and no elevator. The West Indian at the telephone exchange says we'll find the Mallorys on the top floor back to the left. That meant four flights to climb, which might account for the lack of conversation on the way up. Mallory, with his coat off, his cuffs rolled back, and his face steamed up, answers the ring himself.

"Ah, that you, Torchy?" says he. "We were just wondering if you would——Why—er—ah——" and as he gets sight of the old couple out in the dark hall he breaks off sudden.

"It's all right," says I. "He's promised to give the peace sign. You know the Senator, don't you, Skid?"

"The Senator!" he gasps out.

"I believe I once had the pleasure of seeing Mr. Mallory," says the old boy, comin' to the front graceful. "Hope you will pardon the intrusion; but——" 251

Just then, though, Sis appears from the kitchen, her face all pink and white, and her sleeves pushed up past the dimples in her elbows. Under a thirty-nine-cent blue and white checked apron she's wearin' a lace party dress that was a dream. It's an odd combination; but most anything would look well on a little queen like her. She takes one look at Skid, another at the Senator, and then behind the old man she spies Mother.

Well, it's just a squeal from one, and a sigh from the other, and then they've made a rush to the center that wedges us all into that little three-foot hall like it was the platform of a subway car, and before anything more can be said they've gone to a fond clinch, each pattin' the other on the back and passin' appropriate remarks.

Somehow, I guess the Senator hadn't quite figured on this part of the programme. I expect his plan was to be real polite and formal, stay only long enough to let the young people know he could stand it if they could, and then back out dignified.

Whatever Mother might have meant to do when she started, it was all off from the minute Sis let out that squeal. And no sooner had we got ourselves untangled and edged sideways into the cute little parlor, than Mother announces how she means to stay right here until it's time to start for the steamer. Did some one say dinner! Good! She'll stay to dinner, then.

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At that Sis looks at Skid and Skid he looks at Sis. There was some real worry exchanged in them looks too; but young Mrs. Mallory ain't one to be stumped as easy as that.

"Oh, goody!" says she, clappin' her hands. "But, Mother, what is it you do to make dumplings puff out after you've dropped them in the lamb stew?"

"Dumplings! Lamb stew!" says Mother. "Gracious! Don't ask me, child. I haven't made any for years. Doesn't your cook know?"

"She doesn't," says Sis. "I am the cook, Mother."

Well, that was only the beginning of the revelations; for while Sis and Mother was strugglin' with the receipt book, the Senator was makin' a tour of inspection around the apartment. It didn't take him so long, either.

"Ahem!" says he to Mallory. "Very cozy, indeed; but—er—not exactly spacious."

"Four rooms and bath," says Mallory.

"Was—er—that the bathtub in there?" says the Senator, jerkin' his thumb at the bathroot door. "I fancied it might be—er—a pudding dish. Might I inquire what rent you pay for—er—all this?"

253

"Forty a month, sir," says Mallory.

"Ah! Economy, I see. Good way to begin," says he. "And if it is not too personal a question, your present salary is—"

"I'm getting twenty-five a week," says Skid, lookin' him straight between the eyes.

"Then you have a private income, I presume?" says the Senator.

"Well," says Mallory, "my aunt in Boston sends me fifty dollars every Christmas and advises me to invest my savings in Government bonds."

At that the Senator drops into a chair and whistles. "But—but how do you expect," he goes on, "to—to—Pardon me, but I am getting interested. I should like to know what was your exact financial standing when you had the imp—er—when you married my daughter?"

He gets it, down to the last nickel. Skid begins with what he had in the bank when they starts for Atlantic City, shows the hole that trip made in his funds, produces the receipts for furniture, and announces that, after punmlin' up a month's rent, there's something over seven dollars left in the treasury.

"Huh!" grunts the Senator. "Hence the lamb stew, eh? I don't wonder! So you and Sis have undertaken to live in a forty-dollar apartment on a twenty-five-dollar salary, have you?"

254

"That's what it looks like, sir," says Mallory.

"And who is the financial genius that is to manage this enterprise?" says he.

"Why," says Skid, "Mrs. Mallory, I suppose. We have agreed that she should."

"Sis, eh?" says the Senator, smilin' kind of grim. "Well, you have my best wishes for your success."

Skid he flushes some behind the ears; but he only bows and says he's much obliged. You couldn't blame him for feelin' cut up, either; for it's all clear how the Senator has doped out an appeal for help within thirty days, and is willin' to wait for the call. I'm no shark on the cost of livin' myself; but even I could figure out a deficit. There's a call to dinner just then, though, and we all gathers round the stew.

Anyway, it was meant for a lamb stew. The potatoes was some hard, the gravy was so thin you'd thought it had been put in from the tea kettle as an afterthought, and the dumplin's hadn't the puffin' out charm worked on 'em for a cent. But the sliced carrots was kind of tasty and went all right with the baker's bread if you left off the bargain butter. Sis she tried to laugh at it all; but her eyes got kind of dewy at the corners.

255

"Never mind, dear," says Mother. "I'll telegraph for our old Martha to come on and cook for you."

"Why, certainly," says the Senator. "She could sleep on the fire escape, you know."

And say, that last comic jab of his, and the effect it had on Mr. and Mrs. Mallory, kind of got under my skin. I got to thinkin' hard and fast, and inside of five minutes I stumbles onto an idea.

"Excuse me," says I to Skid; "but I guess I'll be on my way. I just thought of a date I ought to

keep."

And where do you expect I brings up? At the Ellins' mansion, down on the avenue. First time I'd ever been there out of office hours; but the maid says Mr. Ellins is takin' his coffee in the lib'ry and she'd see if he'd let me in. Ah, sure he did, and we gets right down to cases.

"Remember how that assistant general manager stiff of yours fell down on that public lands deal when you sent him to Washington last month?" says I.

Old Hickory chokes some on a swallow of black coffee he's just hoisted in; but he recovers enough to nod.

"Does he get the run?" says I.

"I neglected consulting you about it, Torchy," says he; "but his resignation has been called for."

"Filled the job yet?" says I.

"Fortunately, no," says he, and I knew by the way he squints that he thought he was bein' mighty humorous. "Possibly you could recommend his successor?"

"Yep, I could," says I. "Would it help any to have some one who was son in law to a Senator?"

"That," says Old Hickory, "would depend somewhat on which Senator was his father in law."

"Well," says I, "there's his card."

"Eh?" says he, readin' the name. "Why—who—"

"Mallory," says I. "You know—hitched last week. He's got the old boy up there to dinner now. Maybe he'll be taken on as the Senator's secretary if you don't jump in quick. He's a hustler, Mallory is. Remember how he skinned that big order out of Kazedky? And as an A. G. M. he'd be a winner. Well, does he get it?"

"Young man," says Old Hickory, catchin' his breath, "if my mental machinery worked at the high pressure speed yours does, I could—But I am not noted for being slow. I've done things in a hurry before. I can yet. Torchy, he does get it."

"When?" says I.

"To-morrow morning," says he. "I'll start him at five thousand."

"Whoop!" says I. "Say, you're a sport! I'll go up and deliver the glad news. Guess he needs it now as much as he ever will."

And, say, you should have seen the change of heart that comes over the Senator when he heard the bulletin. "Mallory, my boy," says he, "congratulations. And by the way, just remove that—er—imitation lamb stew. Then we'll all go down to some good hotel and have a real dinner."

CHAPTER XVII

TOUCHING ON TINK TUTTLE

"On your way, now, on your way!" says I; gazin' haughty over the brass gate. "No window cleanin' done here durin' office hours!"

"But," says the specimen on the other side, "I—I didn't come to clean the windows."

"Eh?" says I, sizin' up the blue flannel shirt, the old leather belt, and other marks of them pail and sponge artists. "Well, we don't want any sash cords put in, or wirin' fixed, or any kind of jobbin' done until after five. That's General Order No. 1. See?"

He nods in kind of a lifeless, unexcited way; but he don't make any motions towards beatin' it. "I—I—the fact is," he begins, "I wish to see some one connected with the Corrugated Trust Company."

"You've had your wish," says I. "I'm Exhibit A. For a profile view of me step around to the left. Anything more?"

He don't get peeved at this, nor he don't grin. He just keeps on bein' serious and calm. "If you don't mind," says he, "I should like to see one of the higher officials."

"Say, that's almost neat enough to win out," says I. "One of the higher officials, eh? How would the president suit you?"

"If I might see him, I'd like it," says he.

"Wha-a-a-at!" says I.

Honest, the nerve that's wasted on some folks is a shame. I had to sit up and give him the Old Sleuth stare at that. He's between twenty-five and thirty, for a guess; and, say, whatever he might have been once, he's a wreck now,—long, thin face, with the cheekbones almost stickin' through, slumped in shoulders, bony hands, and a three months' crop of mud colored hair stringin' damp over his ears and brushin' his coat collar. Why, he looked more like he ought to be sittin' around the waitin' room of some charity hospital, than tryin' to butt in on the time of one of the busiest men in New York.

"It's a matter that ought to go before the president," says he, "and if he isn't busy I'd like very much to——"

"Say, old scout," says I, "you got about as much chance of bein' let in to see Mr. Ellins as I have of passin' for a brunette! So let's come down to cases. Now what's it all about?"

He ain't makin' any secret of it. He wants the concern to make him a bid on an option he holds on some coal and iron lands. Almost comes to life tellin' me about that option, and for the first time I notice what big, bright, deep sunk eyes he's got. 260

"Oh, a thing of that kind would have to go through reg'lar," says I. "Wait; I'll call Mr. Piddie. He'll fix you up."

Does he? Well, that's what Piddie's supposed to be there for; but he don't any more'n glance at the flannel shirt before he begins to swell up and frown and look disgusted. "No, no, go away!" says he. "I've no time to talk to you, none at all."

"But," says the object, "I haven't had a chance to tell you——"

"Get out—you!" snaps Piddie, turnin' on his heel and struttin' off.

It ain't the way he talks to parties wearin' imported Panamas and sportin' walkin' sticks; but, then, most of us has our little fads that way. What stirred me up, though, was the rough way he did it, and the hopeless sag to the wreck's chin after he's heard the decision.

"Sweet disposition he's got, eh?" says I. "But don't take him too serious. He ain't the final word in this shop, and there's nobody gets next to the big wheeze oftener durin' the day than yours truly. Maybe I could get that option of yours passed on. Got the document with you?"

He had and hands it over. With that he drops onto the reception room settee and says he'll wait. 261

"Better not," says I; "for it might be quite a spell before I gets the right chance. We'll do this reg'lar, by mail. Now what's the name?"

"Tuttle," says he, "Tinkham J. Tuttle."

"They call you Tink for short, don't they?" says I, and he admits that they do. "All right," I goes on. "Now the address, Tink. Jersey, eh? Well, it's likely you'll hear from Mr. Ellins before the week's out. But don't get your hopes up; for he turns down enough propositions to fill a waste basket every day. Express elevator at No. 5. So long," and I chokes off Mr. Tuttle's vote of thanks by wavin' him out the door.

It's well along in the afternoon before I sees an openin' to drop this option in front of Old Hickory, grabbin' a minute when his desk is fairly clear, and slammin' it down just as though it had been sent in through Piddie.

"Delivered on," says I. "Wants rush answer by mail."

"Huh!" grunts Old Hickory, lightin' up a fresh Cassadora.

That's all I expected to hear of the transaction; so about an hour later, when Piddie comes out lookin' solemn and says I'm to report to Mr. Ellins, I don't know what's up. 262

"Is it a first degree charge, Piddie," says I, "or only for manslaughter?"

"I presume Mr. Ellins will discover what you have done," says he.

"Well, hope for the worst, Piddie," says I. "Here goes!"

And the minute I sees what Old Hickory has in front of him, I'm wise.

"Torchy," says he, givin' me the steely glitter out of them cold storage eyes of his, "Mr. Piddie seems to know nothing about this Michigan option."

"If he admits that much," says I, "it must be so. It's a record, though."

"What I want to know," goes on Mr. Ellins, "is how in blue belted blazes it got here. You brought it in, didn't you?"

"Yep," says I. "It was this way, Mr. Ellins: Piddie had it put up to him and wouldn't even hang it on the hook; but the guy that brings it looked so mournful that I butts in and takes a chance on passin' it along to you on my own hook."

"Oh, you did, eh?" he snorts.

"Sure," says I. "I got to do the fresh act once in a while, ain't I? Course, if you want a dead one on the gate, I can hand in my portfolio; but I thought all you had to do with punk options like this was to toss 'em in the basket and then have 'em fired back at——"

"Fire nothing back!" says Mr. Ellins. "Why, you lucky young rascal, we've been trying to get hold of this very property for eight months! And Piddie! Bah! Of all the pin-headed, jelly brained——"

"Second the motion," says I, springin' the joyous grin.

"That will do," says Old Hickory, catchin' himself up. "Just you forget Mr. Piddie and listen to me. Know this Tuttle person by sight, don't you?"

"Couldn't forget him," says I. "Want him on the carpet?"

"I do," says he. "Have him here at ten-thirty to-morrow morning. But find him to-night, and see that you don't open your head about this business to anyone else."

"I get you," says I, doin' the West Point salute. "It's me to trail and shut up Tuttle. He'll be here, if I have to bring him in an ambulance."

That's why I jumps out before closin' time and mingles with the Jersey commuters in a lovely hot ride across the meadows. It's a scrubby station where I gets off, too; one of these fact'ry settlements where the whole population answers the seven o'clock whistle every mornin'. There's a brick barracks half a mile long, where they make sewin' machines or something, and snuggled close up around it is hundreds of these four-fam'ly wooden tenements, gettin' the full benefit of the soft coal smoke and makin' it easy for the hands to pike home for a noon dinner. Say, you talk about the East Side double deckers; but they're brownstone fronts compared to some of these corporation shacks across the meadows!

Seventeen dirty kids led me to the number Tuttle gave me, and in the right hand first floor kitchen I finds a red faced woman in a faded blue wrapper fryin' salt pork and cabbage.

"Mrs. Tinkham Tuttle?" says I, holdin' my breath.

"No," says she, glancin' suspicious over her shoulder. "I'm his sister."

"Oh!" says I. "Is Tink around?"

"I don't know whether he is or not, and don't care!" says she.

"Much obliged," says I; "but I ain't come to collect for anything. Couldn't you give a guess?"

"If I did," says she, "I'd say he was over to the factory yard. That's where he stays most of the time."

It's half-past five; but the fact'ry's runnin' full blast, and I has to jolly a timekeeper and the yard boss before I locates my man. Fin'lly, though, they point out a big storage shed in one corner of the coal cinder desert they has fenced in so careful. The wide double doors to the shed are shut; but after I've hammered for a while one of 'em is slid back a few inches and Tuttle peeks out.

"Oh!" he gasps. "You! Say, are they going to take it? Are they?"

"Them's the indications," says I, "providin' it's all O. K. and your price is right."

"Oh, I'll make the price low enough," says he. "I'll sell out for two thousand, and it ought to be worth twice that. But two is all I need."

"Eh?" says I. "What kind of finance do you call that? Say, Tuttle, you know you can't work any 'phony deal on the Corrugated. Better give me the straight goods and save trouble."

"I will," says he. "Come in, won't you!"

With that he leads the way through the dark shed to a sort of workshop at the back, where there's a window. There's a tool bench, a little hand forge with an old coffee pot and a fryin' pan on it, and a cot bed not ten feet away.

"Campin' out here?" says I.

"I'm not supposed to," says he; "but the yard superintendent lets me. This is where I've lived and worked for nearly two years, and until you came a minute ago it was where I expected to end. But now it's different."

"It is?" says I. "How's that?"

Which is Tink Tuttle's cue to open up on the story of his life. It's a soggy, unexcitin' yarn, most of it. As I'd kind of guessed by the way he talked, he wa'n't just an ordinary fact'ry hand. He'd been through some high class scientific school up in Massachusetts, where he'd lived before his father lost his grip. Seems the old man was a crackerjack boss machinist; but he got to monkeyin' with fool inventions, drifted from place to place, got to be a lunger, and finally passed in. The last four years in the fact'ry here had finished him. Tink had worked there, too, and his sister had married one of the hands.

"It's the graveyard of the Tuttle family, this place is, I suppose," says Tink. "It got father, and it has almost got me. Some folks can breathe brass filings and carbon dioxid and thrive on it; but

we can't. So I gave up and hid myself away in here to work out one of my silly dreams. Last spring I caught a bad cold, and Sister sent me West. There we have an uncle. She thought the change of climate might help my cough. It didn't do a bit of good; but it was out there that I picked up this option. That was when I saw a chance of making my dream come true. You saw what I've been building, didn't you, as we came through?"

"I didn't notice," says I. "What is it, anyway?"



"TUT, TUT," SAYS THE BOSS OF THE RESTORIUM.

"Wait until I light the lantern," says Tuttle. "Now come. This way. Don't hit your head on those wings. There!"

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And, say, it's a wonder I could walk right by a thing of that kind without gettin' next, even if it was kind of dark. But all I needs now is one glimpse of the outlines.

"Oho!" says I. "A flyer! Say, every bughouse in the country is at work on one of them."

"I suppose so," says he. "I may be as big a fool as any of them, too; but I think I know what I'm doing. At any rate, I've put my last dollar into it. That's why my sister is so—Well, she thinks I am—"

"Yes, I suspicioned she was some sore on you," says I. "But what sort of a flyer is this, double or single winger?"

"It's a biplane," says Tuttle, "on the Farnham type, only an improved model."

"Of course it's improved," says I. "Tried her out yet!"

"Hardly," says he. "I couldn't buy an engine, you see. That's what I've been waiting for. Say, you really think the Corrugated will take that option, do you? If they only would!"

"You must be in a hurry to break your neck," says I.

Before I left, though, he'd shown me all over the thing, explained how it was goin' to work, and did his best to get me as excited as he was. Also I makes him give me the full details of how he come to get this option, and I advises him if he does manage to cash it in for two thousand, to take an ax to his flying machine and hike out for some lung preservin' climate where he'll have a chance to shake that cough.

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"Thanks," says he, grippin' my hand and chokin' up. "You—you've been mighty good to me. I'll remember it."

Course, I gives Mr. Ellins the whole tale in the mornin', about Tuttle and his bum air pumps, and his batty scheme of buildin' the flyer; but all that interests Old Hickory is the option and the price.

"Good work, Torchy," says he. "I've wired our Western agents to investigate, and if they report an O. K., Tuttle shall have his two thousand to do what he likes with."

It must have been two weeks later, and I'd almost forgot the case, when one mornin' I gets a note from Tinkham J., askin' me to come over to the shed as quick as I could. Well, I didn't know whether he was havin' a final spasm or not; but it seemed like I ought to go, so that night I does. I finds him waitin' for me at the yard gate. He don't look any worse than usual, either.

"Well," says I, "didn't the deal go through?"

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"It did," says he, pattin' me on the back. "Thanks to you, it did. The check came two days later,

and I've spent it all."

"What!" says I. "You don't mean to say you blew all that in on an engine for that blamed——"

"All but a few dollars that I put into oil and gasoline," says he. "But the machine is all hooked up, Torchy, and it works. Do you hear that? It works! I've been up!"

"Up?" says I.

"Not far," says he; "but enough to know what I can do. Started right here from the yard, just at daylight, and landed here again. I've told no one else, you know. Come in and see how smooth the engine works."

And it was just while he was gettin' ready to start the wheels that these two strangers butts in on us. One is a husky, red faced, swell dressed young sport, and the other is a tall, swivel eyed, middle aged gent dressed in khaki. They walks around the machine without payin' any attention to me or Tuttle.

"Well, what do you think of it, Captain?" says the young sport after a while.

The Captain, he shakes his head. "I can't tell positively," says he; "but these planes seem to me to be set entirely wrong. I never saw deflectors worked on that principle before, either. The theory may be good; but in a practical test——"

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"They say he's made flight, though," breaks in the young sport. "The night watchman saw him. Hey! You're the chap that built this aëroplane, aren't you?"

"Yes, sir," says Tuttle.

"And didn't you make a flight?" he wants to know.

"A short one," says Tuttle.

"That's enough for me," says the sport. "Say, you know who I am, don't you?"

"Oh, yes," says Tuttle. "At least, I ought to. You're Bradish Jones, Jr., one of the owner's sons."

"That's right," says young Mr. Jones. "And I know you. You're the son of old Tuttle, who used to be foreman of the machine shop when I was doing my apprentice work. Thought this little trick of yours was a secret, didn't you? But I heard about it. Lucky for you I did, too. I'm in the market. I don't care a hoot what the Captain says, either. I want a flyer, and I'm ready to take a chance on yours. What do you want for it?"

"Why," says Tuttle, "I don't believe I want to sell."

"What's that?" snaps Bradish. "Come, now! Don't try to bluff me! I'll admit I'm in a hurry. These Curtiss people have been holding me off for a month, and I want to begin flying right away. So name your price. How much?"

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But Tuttle, he only shakes his head.

"Oh, yes, you will," says Bradish. "Why, you've hardly a dollar to your name. You can't afford to own a flyer, even if you did build it. You know you can't. Now show me what it cost you, and I'll give you a thousand for your work and a hundred a week until I learn to manage the thing. Is it a go?"

"No!" says Tuttle, sharp and quick, them big eyes of his fairly blazin'. "This is my machine, and I'm going to fly it. I don't care how much money you've got. You've taken a sudden whim that you'd like to fly. It's been the one dream of my life. You've had your yachts and your racing cars. I've never had anything but hard work. My father wore himself out in your stinking old factory. I nearly did the same. But you can't rob me of this. You sha'n't, that's all!"

And for a minute them two stood there givin' each other the assault and batt'ry stare, without sayin' a word. A queer lookin' pair they made, too; this Bradish gent, big and beefy and prosperous, and Tink Tuttle, his greasy old coat hangin' loose on his skinny shoulders, and lookin' like he was on his way from the accident ward to the coroner's office.

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"Five thousand cash, then," growls Mr. Jones.

"Not if you said fifty!" Tink comes back at him.

"Bah!" says Bradish. "Why, I could have you and your machine thrown out in the road this minute. But I'll give you twenty-four hours to think it over. Remember, to-morrow night at six I'll be here with the money. Then it will be either sell or go. Come, Captain," and with that they pikes out.

"Say, Tink," says I, "you got him comin', all right, and if you don't get that five thousand you're no good."

"I know I'm no good," says Tuttle. "That's why I don't want his money."

"But see here, Tink," says I. "You ain't goin' to turn down an offer like that, are you?"

"I am," says he, "and I'll tell you why. It's because I know I'm no good and never would be any good, even if I could live, which I can't. Oh, I don't need any doctor to tell me how much longer

I've got. They gave me only three months over a year ago. I knew better. I knew I should hold out until I finished my flyer. Father didn't have anything like that to keep on for; so he went quicker. He didn't want to go, either. And it was awful to watch him, Torchy, just awful! But I'm not going to finish that way. No, not now," and he walks up to the machine and runs his hand loving along one of the smooth planes.

"How's that?" says I. "What are you drivin' at, Tink?"

"I can't tell you how I shall do it exactly," says he; "for I'm not sure. But I mean to go up once; way, way up, out over the ocean just at sunrise. Won't that be fine, eh? Just think! Sailing off up there into the blue; up, and up, and up; higher than anyone has ever dared to go before, higher and higher, until your gasoline gives out and you can't go any more!"

"Yes; but what then?" says I, beginnin' to feel some chilly along the spine.

"Why, that's enough, isn't it?" says he. "Anyway, it's all I ask. I'll call it all quits then."

"Ah, say, cut out the tragedy!" says I. "You give me the creeps, talkin' that rot! What you want to do is to go up for a short sail if you can, forget to try any Hamilton stunts, and then beat it back to collect that five thousand while the collectin's good. Say, when do you try her again?"

"At daylight to-morrow morning," says he.

"Gee!" says I. "I've got a notion to stick around and watch how you come out."

"No, don't," says he. "I—I'll let you know. Yes, honest I will. Goodnight and—good-by." He kept his word as well as he could, too. The postmark on the card was six A.M.; but I guess it must have been dropped in the box earlier than that. All it says is:

Twenty gallons in the tank, and I'm off at four o'clock. I shall go straight out to sea and then up, up. I've never been much good; but I mean to finish in style. T.
T.

Now, what would you say to a batty proposition like that? I couldn't tell whether it was a bluff, or what. And I waits four days before I had the nerve to go and see.

Sister says she ain't seen him since last Monday. And there was no flyer in the shed. Nobody around the place knew what had become of it, either.

Well, it's been two weeks since I got that postal. What do I think? Say, honest, I don't dare. But at night, when I'm tryin' to get to sleep, I can see Tink, sittin' in between all them wires and things, with the wheel in his hand, and them big eyes of his gazin' down calm and satisfied, down, down, down, and him ready to take that one last dip to the finish. And, say, about then I pull the sheets up over my eyes and shiver.

"Piddie," says I, "you got more sense than you look to have. Anyway, you know when to sidestep the nutty ones, don't you?"

CHAPTER XVIII

GETTING HERMES ON THE BOUNCE

Anybody might of thought, to see me sittin' there in the Ellins lib'ry, leanin' back luxurious in a big red leather chair lookin' over the latest magazines, that I'd been promoted from head office boy to heir apparent or something like that. I expect some kids would have stood on one leg in the front hall and held their breath; but why not make yourself to home when you get the chance? I knew the boss was takin' his time goin' through all them papers I'd brought up, and that when he finished he'd send down word if there was any instructions to go back.

That's how I come to get the benefit of all this mushy conversation that begins to drift out from the next room. First off I couldn't make out whether it was some one havin' a tooth plugged, or if it was a case of a mouse bein' loose at a tea party. Course, the squeals and giggles I could place as comin' from Miss Marjorie Ellins. Maybe you remember about Mr. Robert's heavyweight young sister that wanted to play Juliet once?

But who the other party was I didn't have an idea, except that from the "you-alls" she was usin' I knew she must hail from somewhere south of Baltimore.

Anyway, they seemed to be too much excited to sit down while they talked, and the first thing I knew they'd drifted into the lib'ry, their arms twined around each other in a reg'lar schoolgirl clinch, and the conversation just bubblin' out of 'em free.

Miss Marjorie was all got up classy in pink and white, and she sure does look like a wide, corn fed Venus. The other is a slim, willowy young lady with a lot of home grown blond hair, a cute

chin dimple, and a pair of big dark eyes with a natural rovin' disposition. And she's hobble skirted to the point where her feet was about as much use as if they'd been tied in a bag.

It was some kind of a long winded story she was tellin' very confidential, with Marjorie supplyin' the exclamation points.

"Really, now, was he, Mildred?" says Marjorie.

"'Deed and 'deedy, he was!" says Mildred. "Positively the handsomest man I ever saw! I thought I could forget him; but I couldn't, Madge, I couldn't! And only think, he is coming this very night, and not a soul knows but just us two!"

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"Excuse me," says I; "but I'm Number Three."

"Oh, oh!" they both squeals at once.

"Who—who's that?" whispers Mildred.

"Why it's only Torchy, from Papa's office," says Marjorie. "And oh, Mildred! He is the very one to help us! You will now, won't you, Torchy? Come, that's a dear!"

"Please do, Torchy!" says Mildred, snugglin' up on the other side and pattin' my red hair soothin'.

"Ah, say, reverse English on the tootsy business!" says I. "This ain't any heart-throb matinee. G'wan!"

"Why, Torchy!" says Marjorie, real coaxin' "I thought we were such good friends!"

"Well, I'm willin' to let it go that far," says I; "but don't try to ring in any folksy strangers. I'm here on business for the firm."

Just then too down comes the maid sayin' there wa'n't anything to go back; so I starts to beat it.

I didn't get far, though, with a hundred and ninety pound young lady blockin' the doorway.

"Torchy, you must help us!" says Marjorie. "There isn't anyone else we can ask. And you're always doing such clever things for Papa and Brother Bob!"

Say, it was a puffy lot of hot air she hands out; but I admit that after two or three more speeches like that, and with her promisin' to square anything Piddie might have to say about not comin' back, she had me goin'.

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"Well, what's the proposition?" says I.

"Let's tell him all, so he will understand just what he's to do," suggests Marjorie.

And, say, you should have heard them two, with me pinned in between 'em on the couch, givin' me the tale in a sort of chorus, both talkin' to once and beginnin' at different ends.

"It's such a romance!" squeals Marjorie.

"You see, he's coming to-night," says Mildred, "and nobody knows."

"Yes, I got that all down," says I; "but what's the first part? Who is he and where's he from?"

Well, it's some yarn, all right! Seems that Mildred was a boardin' school chum of Marjorie's who'd come up from Atlanta to spend the summer with friends in Newport. As a wind-up to the season they'd taken her on a yachtin' trip up the coast. Such a poky old trip, too! Nobody aboard but old married folks that played bridge all the time, and one bald headed bachelor who couldn't sit out in the moonlight with her unless he was wrapped up in a steamer rug.

So what was a girl with eyes like Mildred's to do, anyway? She was bein' bored to death, when, as luck would have it, something went wrong with the propeller shaft. The yacht was 'way up off the coast of Maine at the time, and the nearest place where it was safe to anchor was in the lee of a barren, dinky little island. And they stays there three whole days, while the crew tinkers things up below and the folks yawn their heads off.

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All but Millie. She got so desp'rate she rowed ashore all by herself. Accordin' to her description, that must have been a perfectly punk little island. It was all rock, except in a few spots where there was some scrub bushes and mangy grass. Plunk in the middle was an old shack of a house surrounded by lobster pots and racks of codfish spread out to dry, and she says it was the smelliest scenery she'd ever got real close to.

But Mildred was sore on the yacht and all the stupid folks on it; so she wanders out to windward of the worst smells, plants herself on the flattest rock she can find, and prepares to read. That's her pose when she looks up and discovers this male party with the sun kissed locks and the dreamy eyes standin' there gazin' at her curious.

"It wasn't Adonis that I called him," says Mildred. "Who was that stunning old Greek that we had the bust of in the school library, Madge?"

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"Hermes?" says Marjorie.

"That's it!" says Mildred. "He was a perfect Hermes; only his curly hair was all sun bleached,

and his face was tanned a lovely brown, and he had big, broad shoulders, and—and he was smoking a pipe."

"And about his eyes!" prompts Marjorie.

"Oh, they were perfectly stunning," says she, "real sea blue."

Well, anybody that ever read a midsummer fiction number could have supplied the next chapters. Here's the lovely city girl, the noble browed but unsuspectin' native, golden summer days, and no competition. Why, with a catchy title and a few mushy pictures it would make a lovely contribution to one of the leadin' thirty-five-centers, just as it stood. And Mildred knew her cue, all right. She trains them front row eyes of hers on him, opens up with a few lines of lively chatter, and inside of half an hour she has him sittin' picturesque at her feet, callin' him Hermes of the Lobster Pots, and otherwise workin' the siren spell.

"You must have flirted horribly with him," says Marjorie, sighin' deep and admirin'.

"What else could one do?" asks Mildred. "And it was such fun! I could get him to say hardly anything about himself; but he was a charming listener. He would sit and gaze at me in the most soulful, appreciative way. Poor chap!"

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He must have had her guessin' some at that; for she wa'n't dead sure whether he was a real native or not until the boss of the island shows up. He's a hump shouldered, leather faced, bushy browed old barnacle, with a Down East dialect that it was a dream to listen to, and it was only when Mildred heard Hermes call him Uncle Jerry that she could believe the two was any relation. Uncle Jerry didn't interfere, though He let 'em moon around on the rocks without disturbin' the game, and I judge from Millie's report that she wa'n't missin' any tricks.

Yet she's right there with the heartless behavior when the time comes, sailin' away with a gay laugh and leavin' her blue eyed young lobster man to yearn and mourn there on his smelly little island. Anyway, that's how she had it doped out.

And it wa'n't until weeks later, when she'd had her snapshots of him developed and printed, and got to summin' up the details in this case of Victim B-23, that she discovers how a few of her own heartstrings has been strained. Somehow she couldn't seem to tear them three August days completely off the calendar; and when the other chappies come buzzin' around, and she had a chance to frame 'em up alongside of this fish island hero, there wa'n't but one answer. It was Hermes for hers, every day in the week!

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There he was, though, out on that mussy rock; and here she was, visitin' in New York, leadin' the giddy life, and gettin' her gowns ready for the Horse Show. If Millie had passed out the heartaches casual along her former trails, here was where she gets at least one of 'em back on the rebound.

You can guess how bad an attack she had when she crosses all the new Reggie boys off her string and cooks up this scheme of sendin' for Hermes to come to her. Her excuse is that she wants Uncle Jerry to have the trip of his life by coming to the great city; but incident'lly she urges him to bring his blue eyed nephew along, and the check she sends is big enough to cover expenses for both. Bein' one of the impulsive kind, she does it the minute the notion strikes her; and two days later comes this postal from Uncle Jerry, sayin' how he was much obliged, and him and his nevy was takin' the boat for Bosting and expected to fetch up in New York sometime next afternoon by train.

"Which is now," says Mildred. "But of course I can't go to the Grand Central to meet him."

"Why not?" says I. "Why balk at a little thing like that when you've been doin' so well?"

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"Oh, but, Torchy," chimes in Marjorie, "you know you could do it so much better!"

And what with both of them coaxin', and stuffin' expense money into my pockets, the next thing I know I'm on my way down to where the Boston trains come in, and am campin' outside the gate. I nearly wore my eyes out, too, sizin' up the first trainload, and after an hour's wait I was gettin' dizzy keepin' track of the second lot, when all of a sudden I spots this old chap with the thick underbrush over his eyes and the sole leather complexion.

"Oh, you Uncle Jerry!" I sings out, takin' a chance and pushin' through the crowd with my hand out.

"Wall, how be ye?" says he, real hearty. "Don't remember seein' you afore; but I s'pose it's all right."

"Sure it is, old scout," says I. "If you're Uncle Jerry, I'm Miss Mildred's reception committee; but where's the nephew?"

"That's him," says he, jerkin' his thumb at a big, overgrown, tow haired yawp that's trailin' along in the rear luggin' a canvas valise.

"You don't mean to tell me that's Hermes?" says I.

"I dun'no 'bout any Hermes," says he; "but this is my sister's boy Jake, the only nephew I got, and, bein' as how Miss Mildred asked so special, I brought him along."

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Course, there's no accountin' for tastes, specially in a romantic young lady like her; but, if this was her idea of livin' Greek statuary, she sure was easy pleased. Why, of all the rough necked Rubes! He's one of these loose jawed, open mouthed, lop sided youths that walks like he was afraid of steppin' on his own feet, and looks about as much alive as a tin rabbit that can wiggle its ears when you pull a string. His hair and complexion was accordin' to specifications, I admit, and his eyes were as blue as a new set of lunch counter crockery; and if he was all Uncle Jerry could show in the nephew line, then he must be it.

"All right," says I. "It ain't me that's pickin' him. Now fall in line right behind me, and we'll work out where he won't get run down by baggage trucks or be mistaken by excursionists for a spray of autumn leaves."

"Young lady didn't come down to the train, hey?" says Uncle Jerry.

"No, it makes her kind of nervous to see the cars come in," says I. "You're due to meet her this evenin', Uncle, you and Hermes."

You see, accordin' to the plan, I was to stow the pair to some hotel, see that they was fed, keep 'em busy durin' the early part of the evenin', and round 'em up at a big society crush where Marjorie knew the folks well enough so she could ask favors. If Mildred had 'em come where she was visitin', there'd be no end of questions asked; but if she sort of ran across 'em by accident at a place where there was a crowd, and could have a few words with Hermes in some quiet corner, nobody would be the wiser.

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It was this last part of the programme I had in mind as I was sizin' up Jake's travelin' costume. And, say, how is it up there in the opodeldoc zone that they can get these high-water pant legs to fit so much like lengths of stovepipe? They was kind of a bilious brown and cut gen'rous in the seat; but, as far as real comic relief went, they wa'n't in it with the cute little short tailed cutaway that he sported above 'em. Honest, that coat was enough to make an eccentric song and dance artist green in the eyes! And you can believe me when I say I didn't lose any time in scootin' 'em down Fourth-ave. to a dollar a day house patronized by some of our swellest Texas buyers. My next move is to make a report over the 'phone.

"Yep, I got 'em both under lock and key," says I to Marjorie. "Trouble to pick em out? Ah, it was a pipe! Specimens like that ain't so common anyone could get mixed if they knew what day to look for 'em. Yes, the nephew's along, all right. His real name is Jake. Well, Hermes if you insist. But, say, ask Miss Mildred if she wants him delivered in the original package, or should I hire some open face clothes for him."

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The decision is that Hermes must come in a dress suit, and if he ain't got any with him Marjorie will send down one of Mr. Robert's old ones.

"Oh, I'm just dying to see him in evening clothes!" gushes Mildred over the wire. "I know he'll be perfectly splendid!"

"Maybe," says I. "Only don't forget the collar buttons and studs for the dress shirt."

Say, I won't dwell on the gay time I had tryin' to keep that pair out of sight until after dinner. Honest, if I'd been drivin' the monkey cage in a circus parade I'd felt a lot better; for every fresh gink that pipes off that vaudeville costume of Jake's has to have his say about it. At the hash house where I steers 'em up against a twenty-five-cent course dinner all the girl waiters got to gigglin' like they'd never seen a freak before.

It wouldn't have been so bad with just Uncle Jerry, for he's wearin' an old black whipcord that would pass in the dark, and, outside the rubber collar and the plated watch chain looped across his vest, he didn't have the crossroads tag on him very plain; but Jake might as well have had cowbells tied to him. Maybe I wa'n't some relieved too when we got back to the hotel and found this outfit that the girls had scraped together and sent down.

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"Now we'll fix you up for the theater and high society, Jake," says I. "By rights you ought to have some of that neck hemp sheared off; but I don't dare let a barber loose at you, for fear Mildred wouldn't know you after he got through. She raved a lot about that hair of yours, Jake."

"You go on now, Smarty!" says Jaky boy, grinnin' expansive. "Think I'm goin' to wear duds like them?"

"You do if you appear out again with me," says I. "So peel the butternut regalia and lemme see if I can harness you up in these."

"Hee-haw!" remarks Uncle Jerry. "Let him fix you up real harnsome, Jake."

Maybe that's what I did; but I wouldn't want to swear to it. Anyway, I got him into the dress shirt by main strength. That was the first struggle. Then, while Uncle Jerry held him gaspin' and groanin' on the floor, I buttoned the high collar on and fastened the white tie. Next we ended him up on his feet and pulled on the display vest and the long tailed coat.

"Ug-g-gh! It chokes somethin' awful!" says Jake, gettin' purple faced and panicky.

"Ah, close that pie gangway of yours and breathe natural for a minute!" says I. "There, you're feelin' better already. Come, pull them knobby wrists back up into your sleeves. This ain't no swimmin' lesson, you know. Say, you wear a dress suit like it was so much tin armor. What's the

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matter with you, anyway!"

"I—I don't know," says Jake, tryin' to stretch his head up like a turkey. "I don't like this."

"You look it," says I. "But think who's goin' to see you in it later! First off, though, you're goin' to a show with me. Come on, now; maybe you'll get used to bein' dressed up by eleven o'clock."

"Leven o'clock!" says Uncle Jerry. "Look here, Son, I ain't in the habit of stayin' up all night, remember. I'll be droppin' off to sleep for sartin'."

He don't, though. All through the play, which has been a two years' scream for Broadway, he sat as solemn as if he was on a coroner's jury in the presence of the remains. Play actin' was new to Uncle Jerry; but he wa'n't going to give himself away, and he was just as wide awake as anybody in the house.

With Jake it was diff'rent. I expect them washed out blue eyes of his had taken in so many new scenes since mornin' that they couldn't absorb any more. Anyway, he gets drowsy before the curtain goes up, and after he's twisted his neck until he's got it collar broken he settles back for a comf'table snooze. He looks so calm and peaceful I didn't have the heart to disturb him, and I only jabbed my elbows in his ribs when he got to tunin' up the nose music too loud. Besides, I was hopin' a little nap of two or three hours might leave him some refreshed and in better shape for exhibitin' to Miss Mildred. For the more I saw of Jake, the less I could understand how a real live one like Millie could stand for three days of him, even if she did, discover him on a desert island. And as for ravin' about him afterwards—well, you never can tell, can you?

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After the play it took Uncle Jerry shakin' on one side and me on the other to bring Jake back to life from his woodsawin' act.

"Ah, quit it and give the orchestra a chance!" says I. "And keep them elbows down! Don't try to stretch here; wait until you get back to the open fields for that. Yes, it's all over, and you're about to butt into society; so for Heaven's sake come out of the trance!"

Not havin' a stretcher handy, we drags him out to the curb, and I blows some more of my expense account against a taxi, which lands us safe and sound at this Fifth-ave. number up in the 70's. "Guests of Miss Marjorie Ellins," was to be the password, and the flunky in satin pants at the door seems to have been well posted.

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"Yes, sir; right this way, sir," says he, wavin' us down the hall and shootin' us into a little conservatory nook. "The gentlemen from Maine are to wait here, and you are to meet Miss Ellins at the foot of the grand staircase. She will be down in a moment, sir."

"I get you," says I, and, after cautionin' Jake to keep on his feet until I came back, I slips out and posts myself behind a potted palm where I could watch the early arrivals comin' down from the cloakrooms.

It wa'n't a long wait; for pretty soon down floats Mildred and Marjorie, all got up in flossy party dresses and fairly quiverin' with excitement.

"Oh, you dear boy!" gushes Millie. "And he is really here, is he? My splendid Hermes! Tell me, what did he have to say about it all?"

"Who, Jake?" says I. "Mostly he was beefin' about the way his neck ached from the collar."

"Isn't that just like a man!" says Marjorie.

"I don't care," says Mildred. "I am just crazy to see him once more. I want to look into his eyes and—"

"Then step lively," says I, "before they get glued up for good. Down this way. Here you are, in there among the palms! See, there's Uncle Jerry rubberin' around!"

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"Oh, yes!" squeals Millie, clappin' her hands. "Dear old Uncle Jerry! But—but, Torchy, where is—er—his nephew?"

"Eh?" says I. "Why, there on the bench, doin' the yawn act!"

"Wha-a-a-at!" gasps Millie, steppin' in for a closer look.

"Straight goods," says I. "That's Hermes the lobster picker."

"That!" says Mildred, shrinkin' back. "Never!"

"Huh!" says I. "I told him you wouldn't know him if he didn't keep that face cavity of his closed. He's been doin' that since eight o'clock. But he's the real article, serial number guaranteed by Uncle Jerry."

"No, no!" squeals Mildred, covering her face with her hands and backin' away. "There's been some dreadful mistake! That isn't my Hermes. He wasn't at all like that, I tell you, not at all!"

Well, we was grouped there in the hall holdin' our foolish debate, when this strange gent strolls by huntin' for some place to light up his cigarette. And just as one of us mentions Hermes again I notices him turn and prick up his ears. Next thing I knew, he's stepped over and is lookin' kind of smilin' and expectant at Mildred.

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"I beg pardon if I'm wrong," says he; "but isn't this the—er—ah—the young lady whom I had the pleasure of—"

But that's enough for Millie, just hearin' his voice. Down comes her hands off her face. "Oh, I knew it! I knew it!" she squeals. "Hermes!"

And, say, I don't know how that old Greek looked; but if he had the build and lines of this chap he sure was some ornamental. Anyway, the one we had with us would have been a medal winner in any kind of clothes. Also he had the light wavy hair and the dark blue eyes of Millie's description, with some of the vacation tan left on his cheeks.

Marjorie's the next to be heard from.

"Why, Mr. Brooke Hartley!" says she, stickin' out her hand.

"By Jove!" says he. "Bob Ellins' little sister, eh? Hello, Marjorie!"

"Then—then——" gasps Mildred, lookin' from one to the other kind of dazed, "then you aren't a lobster man, after all?"

"Nothing so useful as that, I'm afraid," says Hartley.

"But why were you there on that island?" she insists.

"Well," says he, "hay fever was my chief excuse. I pretend to paint marines, you know, and that's another; but really I suppose I was just being lazy and enjoying the society of Uncle Jerry."

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"But he isn't your uncle, truly?" says Mildred.

"Well," says Hartley, "it's a relationship I share with most of the summer people on that section of the Maine coast."

Then a light seemed to break on Mildred. She blushes to her eartips and hides her face in her hands once more. "Oh, oh!" she groans. "And I called you Hermes!"

"You did," says he. "And nothing ever tickled my vanity half so much. I've lived on that for the last two months. Please don't take it back!"

"I—I won't," says Millie, lettin' loose one of them rovin' glances at him sort of shy and fetchin'.

And, say, all tinted up that way, you could hardly blame him for grabbin' both her hands. Not knowin' what might happen next, I proceeds to break in.

"In the meantime," says I, "what'll you have done with this perfectly good nephew we've got on our hands back there on the bench?"

"That one!" says Millie. "Oh, I never want to see him again! Tell him to go away and—and go to bed."

"That'll be welcome news for Jaky, all right," says I.

CHAPTER XIX

WHEN MISS VEE THREW THE DARE

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Say, I guess I might as well tell it right out; for, from all I hear about myself, my dome must have a glass top that puts all the inside works on exhibition. There's Zenobia, for instance, who's my half-step-adopted aunt, as you might say. Now, she ain't one to sleuth around, or cross-examine, or anything like that; but what she's missed of this little affair that I ain't breathed a word of to anybody is more'n I've got the nerve to ask.

Course, it was her put that corkin' silver frame on Vee's picture in the first place. Just found it on my bureau, you know, and, without pumpin' me for any account of who and why, goes and unbelts reckless for the sterling decoration. A perfectly nice old girl, Zenobia is, if you ask me. More'n a year ago that was, and there hasn't been a word passed about that photo since.

Yes, it's been on the bureau all the time. Why not? When a young lady friend of yours is dragged off to Europe by her aunt, and sends you a stunnin' picture of herself for you to remember her by, you don't turn it face to the wall or chuck it in the ashcan, do you? Maybe two years it would be, she said, before she came back. It ain't so long to look over your shoulder at; but when you come to try squintin' ahead that far it's diff'rent. I tried it and gave it up. A whole lot can happen in two years; so what was the use? Besides, look who she is, and then think of all I ain't!

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Couldn't help seein' the picture there night and mornin', though, could I? Nothin' mushy about glancin' casual at it now and then, was there? You know I ain't got any too many friends,—not so many I has to have a waitin' list,—and outside of Zenobia and Aunt Martha, and here and there

one of the lady typewriters at the office that throws me a smile on and off, they're mostly men. And as for fam'ly, mother, or father, or sisters, or brothers, or real aunts—well, you know how I'm fixed. I'm the whole fam'ly myself.

So you see, when I looks at Miss Vee there, and thinks how nice she was to me them two times when we met by accident,—once at the dance where I was subbin' in the cloakroom, and again at the tea where I'd been sent to trail Mr. Robert—well, even if she hadn't been such a queen, I don't think I'd forgot her right away. Course, though, as for figurin' out why she ever noticed me at all, that's a myst'ry I had to pass up.

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Must have been soon after she went away that I begun sizin' up some critical the gen'ral style and get up of the party whose hair I was combin' and whose face I was washin' more or less reg'lar. Startin' with the collar, I discovered that mine gen'rally had saw edges, gaped in the middle, and got some soiled about the third day. From then on I've been particular about havin' a close front collar and puttin' on a fresh one every mornin', whether I need it or not. Next I got wise to the fact that one tie wouldn't last more'n six months without showin' signs of wear, and it wa'n't long before I had quite a collection hangin' over the gasjet. Up to then I didn't have the tooth powder habit very strong; but it's chronic with me now. See the result?

I didn't stop to give myself reasons for gettin' so finicky; but the one main fact loomin' up ahead seemed to be that some day or other Miss Vee would be comin' back, and that maybe I might be on hand to sort of—well, you know how you'll frame things up? I was to be vice president of the Corrugated by that time, most likely, and they'd be sendin' me abroad to look up important matters. That's how it was goin' to happen that I'd find out where Vee was stayin'. Not that I'd think of buttin' in on her and the aunt. Not much! Just remember I'd seen Aunty!

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No, I was to be on the steamer, leanin' over the rail careless, when they came aboard to go home. I was to be costumed all in gray. I don't know just why; but it looks kind of distinguished, specially if you've got gray hair. Not that I could count on my ruddy thatch frostin' up much in a couple of years; but somehow nothing but gray seemed to fill the bill. I'd planned on gettin' one of them gray tweed suits such as Mr. Robert wears back from London, and a long gray ulster that'd make me look tall, and a gray cloth hat to match, and gray gloves. Get the picture?

Well, there I am by the rail, lookin' sort of distinguished and bored and all that, when up comes Miss Vee and Aunty. All I could think of Vee wearin' was that pink silk affair she had on at the dance, which wouldn't be exactly what a young lady'd start out on an ocean trip with, would it?

She'd be some jarred at seein' me, it's likely; but I'd lift the gray lid real dignified, throw back the ulster so she'd get the full effect of the tweed suit, and shoot off some remark about how "one always meets one's most chawming friends when one travels." Then I'd be presented to the aunt; and after that was over, why it would be just a romp down the home stretch, with yours truly all the entry in sight. Simply a case of me and Vee promenadin' the deck by moonlight for hours and hours, and gettin' to be real old friends.

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But pipe dreams like that don't often come true, do they? I ain't got so far as ownin' a pair of gray gloves, and not a word has been said about makin' me vice president, when along comes this foreign picture postcard, showin' the Boss de Bologna on one side, and on the other this scribbled message:

We sail for home on the 10th. Rah! Rah! Count Schlegelhessen is coming over with us. He's a dear. V. A. H.

Jolted! Say, I was up and down so many times durin' the next few hours I'd most meet myself comin' and goin'. Miss Vee was on her way over! I'd bounce at that thought, and get all kind of warmed up inside. Count Schutzenfest is coming with her, and he's a dear! Bang! I'd strike bottom again, with a chilly feelin' under my vest.

Wa'n't anything more'n I might have looked for, of course. Aunty's one of the kind that would pick out a Count for Miss Vee, and there was plenty of Counts over there to be picked; but somehow I couldn't picture Vee goin' wild over one of them foreign ginks. It was clear she had, though. There it was on the postcard, "He's a dear!"

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"Huh!" thinks I. "Most of 'em are dear—at any price."

It wa'n't for hours, either, that I simmers down enough for the thought to strike me that I didn't have any special license to hold a court of inquiry over whether Miss Vee was comin' back with a Count or not. After that I had time to debate with myself whether I ought just to forgive and forget, goin' through life cold and sad; or if I should hide my busted heart the best way I could and pretend I didn't care.

Was there any use in my goin' down to the pier and standin' in the background to watch her come ashore with her dear Count? I could see myself! Oh, yes, I had it all doped out along them lines! As Robert Mantell would put it over, "She has went out of muh life for-r-r-rever." Ah yes! I could have stood for anything but one of them sausage Counts.

So I stows her picture away in the bottom bureau drawer, burns the postcard, and dodges Zenobia's eye when she looks at me curious. It was all over. Yet I knew to an hour when her steamer would dock, and the mornin' of the day it was due I rolls out of the feathers at six A.M. Just as natural as could be too, I gets out the new safety razor I'd had hid away for a couple of months past, and inside of fifteen minutes I'd had my first shave. Does that get by them keen

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eyes of Zenobia! Not for a minute!

"Ah!" says she, pattin' me sort of casual on one cheek as she comes down to breakfast.

That's all; but she not only takes in the shave, but the best blue serge suit I've put on, and the birthday tie, and the Sunday shoes. I only grins sheepish and slides out as soon as I can.

You see, accordin' to my plans, I wouldn't have gone near that steamer for any sum you could name. That being the case, it was odd I should call up the pier and find out if the boat was on time at Quarantine. Also it was some strange the way I opened up on Piddie.

"Say, Mr. Piddie," says I, "any prospects of an outside run for me to-day?"

"Not in the least," says he. "I suppose, though, you would like a chance to waste some of the company's time on the street?"

"Me?" says I. "Why, I'd hate it. I was only afraid I'd have to go, with all this inside work to be done."

"Humph!" says he. "You needn't fear. I shall see that nothing of the sort happens."

"Ah, you're a bird, you are!" says I.

"Perhaps," says Piddie.

"Then climb a tree and twitter," says I; for it made me grouchy to think I'd let a bonehead like him get a rise out of me.

The more I chewed it over, though, the stronger I was for breakin' loose about dockin' time. Maybe I didn't want to go to the pier; but if he was bent on throwin' the gate on me, that was another proposition. I got sorer and sorer and I was on the point of chuckin' the job at Piddie's head and walkin' out on my own hook, when who should come stormin' in, scowlin' and grumblin' to himself, but Mr. Robert. And he had a worse attack than I did.

"Torchy," says he, wheelin' around halfway to his office, "ring up Pier Umpty-nine and find out when that blasted steamer is due."

"The Kaiser boat?" says I. "She'll dock about two-forty-five."

"Eh?" says he, some startled. "Now, how the——Never mind, though. Sure about the time, are you?"

"Yep," says I.

"Dash it all!" says he. "That's Marjorie, though! Any word from the Consolidated Bridge people yet?"

"Not yet," says I, and slam goes his door.

Took me three minutes by the clock to dope out the combination too, which shows how gummed up my gears was. But when I'd fitted them two remarks together, about Marjorie and the bridge people, and had remembered the cablegram from Sister Marjorie sayin' how their party'd been broken up on account of sickness and she was comin' home alone—why, it was all like readin' it off a bulletin. Marjorie's arrivin' durin' business hours was likely to mess up the schedule. Course, if the bridge concern didn't send word——

I'd got to that point, when in drifts my old A. D. T. runnin' mate, Hunch Leary, draggin' his feet behind him and chewin' gum industrious. Now Hunch don't look like a tempter. He's plain homely, that's all. But comin' just as he did, with Piddie over there glarin' at me suspicious—well, I just had to do it.

"Sure I got blanks on me?" says Hunch. "Wot then?"

Right under Piddie's nose he fixes it up too, and waits while I takes the phony message in to Mr. Robert. It wa'n't such a raw one, either; not as if it had sent him off to wait at some hotel. "Will try to get around about two-thirty Trimble," was all it said. And how did we know Trimble wouldn't try, anyway?

"That settles it," says Mr. Robert, crumplin' the yellow sheet. "Torchy, you must do the family honors."

"Do which?" says I, with business of great surprise.

"Meet my sister Marjorie, see that she gets through the customs without landing in jail, and take her home in a taxi. Think you're equal to it, eh?" says he.

"I could make a stab," says I.

"I'll risk that much," says he.

And before there's any chance for a revise I've marched by Piddie with my tongue out and am pikin' towards the North River with a pier pass in one pocket and expense money in another, specially commissioned to meet the very steamer that's bringin' in Miss Vee and her Count. All of which shows how curious things will coincide if you use your bean a little to help 'em along.

Well, you know how it is waitin' in a push of people for a steamer. Everybody's excited and anxious and keyed up, ready to jump at every whistle, and stretchin' their necks for a peek down the river. It's as catchin' as the baseball fever when you're in a mob watchin' the scores posted. I finds myself actin' just as eager as any, and me only doin' messenger work.

Finally the boat shows up; but instead of sailin' in graceful and prompt, she shuts off steam and lays to out in the middle of the river, about as lifeless as a storage warehouse afloat, while a dozen or so dinky tugs begin pushin' and pullin' to get her somewhere near the pier. Then folks start makin' wild guesses as to which is their friends.

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"There's Uncle Fred, Willie!" squeals a fat woman next to me, proddin' me vigorous in the ribs.

"Not mine, ma'am," says I.

"Oh, excuse me," says she. "Why, there's Willie, over there. Hey, Willie! See Uncle Fred?"

It was that way all around me, and me not even doin' the wave act. After awhile though, I spots Marjorie. There was no doubt about it being her; for she looms up among that crowd along the rail like a prize Florida orange in a basket of lemons. It's plain Marjorie ain't lost any weight by her trip abroad, and she looks more like a corn fed Juliet than ever.

As she wa'n't expectin' me, but was huntin' for Brother Robert, I didn't see the sense in shoutin'. I went on lookin' over the rest of the passengers, sort of bracin' myself for any discovery I might make. Would they show up arm in arm, or with their heads close together, or how?

I'd looked the boat over from bow to stern and back again about three times before I happens to take another glance at Marjorie. And there, almost hid by one side of her, was a young lady in a white sailor hat with some straw colored hair showin' under the wide brim, and a pair of gray eyes that I couldn't mistake anywhere. It was Vee, all right; just as slim and graceful and classy as ever, with the same independent tilt to her chin, and the same Mayflower pink showin' in her cheeks.

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And, say, I want to tell you that about then I was glad I came! It didn't make any difference if there was half a dozen Counts, and a Duke and what not besides; just seein' her once more, even if I didn't get a chance to put over a word, was worth while. And right there I makes up my mind that, Count or no Count, I'm goin' to push to the front.

"Oh, you Miss Vee!" I megaphones through my hands, just as enthusiastic as anybody on the pier.

About the third call catches her ear. She sort of starts and gazes at the crowd kind of puzzled. There's such a mob, though, she don't pick me out. I could see her turn to Marjorie and say something, and then I gets wise to the fact that the four-eyed gent with the bristly hair and the half gray set of shavin' brush mustaches, standin' next to Marjorie, was one of their party. Miss Vee leans over and passes along some remark to him, and he shrugs his shoulders and says something that makes 'em both laugh.

"If that's the Count," thinks I, "he's a punk specimen."

A couple of minutes later the boat comes alongside and the passengers break away from the rail to get in line for the gangplank. As I'm there to welcome Miss Marjorie Ellins, I has to post myself near the E section, and inside of fifteen minutes she's all through havin' her suitcase and steamer trunk pawed over, and leavin' the hold baggage to be claimed later, we streams out to where I had a cab waitin'.

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"Is it all aboard, Miss Marjorie?" says I.

"Not yet," says she. "You see, I've asked Vee to come home with me for dinner—the girl I met on the steamer. You don't mind waiting, do you?"

Did I? Say, nobody would suspect it, I guess, by the grin I had on when she and Aunty and the four-eyed party comes trailin' out.

"Say, Miss Marjorie," says I, "is that Count Schutzenbund?"

"Schlegelhessen," says Marjorie, "and he's a perfect——"

"Yes, I've heard he was," says I. "Little antique, though, ain't he?"

"Why, he isn't forty!" says Marjorie. "And he's just too——"

There wa'n't time for any more bouquets, though; for the trio was too close. Must have been some of a surprise for Vee to see me waitin' there, and for a bit she don't seem to make out just who it is. That only lasts a second, though. Then them gray eyes of hers lights up, and them thin lips curls into a smile, and she holds out both hands in that quick way of hers.

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"Why, it's Torchy, isn't it?" says she, half laughin'.

"Uh-huh," says I, lettin' the grin spread wider. "Can't shake the name or the hair."

"Never try," says she. "Look, Aunty, here's Torchy!"

"Torchy?" says the wide old girl, inspectin' me doubtful through her lorgnette. "Why, Verona, I

don't remember—"

"Oh, yes, you do, Aunty," says Miss Vee. "Anyway, I've told you about him, and it's so jolly to have some one to meet us. Thank you, Torchy. Now let's see, Marjorie, how do we divide up? Aunty goes to her hotel—and—and where do you go, Count?"

"Me, I am—what you call—perplex," says the Count, and he sure looked it. "But where the young ladies go, there I will follow. *Hein?*"

He shrugs his shoulders again and puts on such a comical face that it's no wonder the girls giggled. And that one act maps out the Count for me. He's just one of them middle aged cut-ups that's amusin' to have around, if the sessions ain't too frequent. Follow the young ladies, would he? Say, there was only three inside seats to my taxi, and I hadn't planned on ridin' with the driver.

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"Lemme fix that for you, Count," says I. "Hey, Cabby!" and I whistles up a second taxi. "What's the number, ma'am?" I asks of Aunty. "Oh, Perzazzer hotel. Get that, Mr. Shuffer? Here you are, Count, right in here!"

"But is it that—er—the young ladies, you see," he protests. "I haf bromise myself the bleasure to —"

"Yes, that'll be all right too," says I. "They'll do the followin', though, about a block behind. In you go, now!" and I shoves him alongside of Aunty, shuts the door, and gives the startin' signal.

Maybe it was a nervy thing, shuntin' the Count off like that, and Marjorie seems sort of disappointed and dazed to find he ain't comin' with us, but by the twinkle in Miss Vee's eyes I guessed I hadn't overplayed my part. Anyway, we had a nice chatty ride on the way up, with Marjorie doin' most of the chattin'. Looked like that was going to be about as far as I'd figure too, for there wa'n't a chance of my gettin' a word in edgewise; but when we fetched up in front of the Ellins' house Miss Vee breaks in with delay orders.

"No, Marjorie," says she; "you first. Run in and see if it's all right; and if there isn't a dinner party on, or a houseful of guests, I'll come. No, I shall wait until you do."

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Course, she didn't plan it that way; but it gives me about six minutes that was all to the good.

"You didn't mind my sidetrackin' the Count, eh?" says I.

"It was lovely—and perfectly absurd!" says Vee. "You know he bores Aunty to death, and Aunty bores him. He had planned on meeting Marjorie's mother, too."

"Then I mussed things up, didn't I?" says I.

"I believe you did it purposely, you wretch!" says she, shakin' a finger at me.

"Who wouldn't?" says I. "See what I get by it!"

"Silly!" says she. "I've a mind to rumple those red curls."

"Go on," says I, takin' my hat off. "They'd wiggle for joy."

"Then I'll do nothing of the kind," says she. "You haven't even said you were glad to see me."

"I'm keepin' it a dead secret," says I. "What happened to Europe; was it on the fritz?"

"Poky," says she. "And they found out I was no musical genius, after all. Aunty's disgusted with me."

"She ought to take something for her taste," says I.

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"Oh!" says she, tiltin' her head on one side. "Then you still approve of me?"

"That's the only motto on my wall," says I, "only I put it stronger."

"Silly!" says she once more.

And then—well, I was watchin' the pink spread up her cheeks, and was sort of gazin' into them big gray eyes, and gen'rally takin' one of them long, lingerin' looks; and we was both leanin' back not so very far apart, with the slides of the cab shuttin' everything else out—and then all of a sudden I heard her sort of whisper "Well?"—and—and—Ah, say! With a pair of cherry ripers as close as that, what else was there to do?

"Why, Torchy!" says she, jumpin' away. "What made you dare—Quick, now, here comes Marjorie. Over on the front seat! And—and perhaps I shall see you again sometime."

"Your eyesight'll be bad if you don't, Vee," says I. "Good-by."

Just before the Ellins' front door closed behind her I caught the wave of a handkerchief; so I guess she can't be so awful mad. Ride back to the office? Say, I paid off the taxi and floated down Fifth-ave. as light as if it was paved with gas balloons.

"Huh!" grunts Mr. Robert, after I'd made my report. "Brought home a steamer friend, did she? Who did you say it was?"

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"Well, between you and me," says I, "it's Vee. You remember—the one at the girls' boardin' school tea party when——"

"Eh?" says he. "Ah, that one? Then it wasn't—er—exactly a hardship for you to meet this particular steamer, eh, Torchy?"

"Do I look it?" says I.

And Mr. Robert he winks back; for, as I happen to know, he's been there himself. It's that friendly wink though, that makes me remember puttin' up that game on him with the fake message, and somehow I felt cheap and mean. Here he was, treatin' me white and square, and I'd been handin' him a piece of fresh bunk.

"Mr. Robert," says I, standin' pigeontoed and flushin' up some, "you remember that message from the bridge people—Trimble, it was signed?"

"Oh, yes," says he. "He came, all right, about a quarter to three."

"Gee!" says I, and walks out.

For when things start comin' your way in clusters like that, what's the use tryin' to duck?

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